

**Same Frame, New Picture:  
Changing Gender, Ethnic and Cultural  
Representation in Hollywood Genre Cinema**

**Volume I**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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## **Summary**

This thesis contributes to the study of the Hollywood genre film form by investigating the potential of a recognizably genre-based, popular film to tend toward the disestablishment of those retrogressive gender, ethnic and cultural representations frequently encoded in Hollywood genre cinema, where those representations tend to reproduce traditional cultural stereotype. To that end, this study engages in a close analysis of six Hollywood genre films, released between 2000 and 2015. Each of the six films studied conforms to an identifiable genre idiom, while appearing to interrogate key structuring tropes of its genre. Drawing on the results of this close analysis, the study concludes by deriving a set of potential strategies toward the construction of a film that is recognizably popular and genre-based, that tends actively toward the disestablishment of traditionally stereotypical gender, ethnic and cultural representation. Predicated on that set of strategies, the study produces an outcome in the form of an original screenplay, presented as an Appendix to this thesis. The screenplay delivers the narrative and formal pleasures of a genre film, while disestablishing some more stereotypical gender, ethnic and cultural tropes frequently reproduced in the genre idiom.

The backdrop to this study is the advent of the cyber-powered public sphere, where a rise in European and American tolerance for ideological precepts associated with the radical right has led to a concomitant increase in the open articulation of gender, ethnic and socio-cultural exclusion. The same digital technology has prompted a noticeable increase in the production of high-quality narrative fiction, the digital dissemination of which currently forms almost forty per cent of global internet traffic. This cyber-landscape is now on the cusp of

further transformation, as major digital distribution platforms shift focus to the production and dissemination of the Hollywood genre film.

Wheeler Dixon has outlined the conditions of digitally-delivered, 'instant access' narrative fiction, exploring its impact on the dissemination of film, long-form screen drama and literature. Trisha Dunleavy has explored the increase in complex, digitally-delivered long-form narrative drama, and Chuck Tryon has profiled the shifting parameters of film production and distribution in the new digital sphere. However, few scholars have investigated what opportunities a potential renaissance in Hollywood genre film might offer in the digital sphere. Of course, scholars including Judith Hess Wright, Laura Mulvey, Robin Wood, Slavoj Zizek and Jacques Rancière contend that Hollywood genre film is organized around the reproduction of the very power asymmetries this study seeks to disestablish, namely those power asymmetries rooted in the reproduction of exclusionary cultural stereotype, and therefore by definition cannot work against them, regardless of the means of dissemination. It is the contention of this study that genre film does indeed tend to reproduce such power asymmetries, but that genre film is not defined by its reproduction of those power asymmetries, but rather is demonstrably capable of recoding them.

In support of this proposition, this study examines six genre films selected from the oeuvre of three directors: Kathryn Bigelow, Jane Campion and Ang Lee. The study is divided into six chapters, each profiling a single film. Identifying the film's generic provenance, each chapter outlines the conventions that structure the genre's contemporary iterations. The film is then examined relative to those conventions by focussing on three constitutive elements: its construction of

protagonist, its presentation of gender and ethnic relations, and its expression of cultural context.

The study concludes that all six films use a specific set of strategies whereby their constitutive elements signal familiar genre tropes, before recoding, inverting or reframing those tropes to carry counter-generic meaning, disestablishing stereotypical gender, ethnic and / or cultural representation. However, the study concludes that such reconfiguring with respect to one thematic area can reproduce retrogressive, stereotypical representation in another. These conclusions inform the study's outcome, the original screenplay *Sea Fever*, presented as an Appendix in Volume II. Deploying the strategies identified above, the screenplay *Sea Fever* is structured so as to deliver the pleasures of the Hollywood genre film form, while reconfiguring its familiar tropes to disestablish retrogressive, exclusionary and stereotypical gender, ethnic and cultural representations. Since completion of this research, the screenplay has attracted international production finance. Principal photography was completed in November 2018. The film stars Connie Nielsen and Dougray Scott, and is scheduled for global release at the end of 2019.

## **Acknowledgements**

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I extend my gratitude to the Dean of Graduate Studies at Trinity College Dublin for permitting me to pursue my professional career as a BAFTA-winning director and screenwriter, while preparing this study.

During the period of my research, I have benefitted greatly from incisive cross-disciplinary discussion with my sisters, Professor Niamh Hardiman and Professor Orla Hardiman. I continue to benefit daily from Adam May's exceptional insight, as well as from the insights of Tailte and Naoise May. Finally I am deeply grateful to my parents, Rosaleen and Tom Hardiman, for their continued and unwavering confidence in me and in this project.

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## PREFACE

My intention in undertaking this project is to integrate my longstanding interest in theoretical analysis with my professional practice as a BAFTA-winning director and screenwriter. In short, my intention is to unify my theoretical interests with my creative practice.

I came to this research already fully engaged with the network of US and European film and television drama production. I have written and directed with Dreamworks, Disney and Paramount, and I have made television dramas with Netflix, Amazon and BBC. My experience of the contemporary film and television drama industry suggests it can be almost exclusively focussed on honing commercially and critically successful screen storytelling, focussing on the ‘how’ of a narrative; this may entail some compromise with the need to have due regard to broader cultural resonances, or what might be described as the ‘why’ of a narrative.

Drawing on my academic training, and motivated by my continued interest in interrogating my own film-making practice, I determined to address precisely this tension between the ‘how’ and the ‘why’. I set out to create an analytical framework that can serve as the basis for a more conscious, reflective form of popular film making. Specifically, my aim was to make possible the creation of a screen story that is cognisant of its potential impact within the broader cultural context, but that avoids any semblance of tendentiousness, thus retaining its potency as a popular dramatic form. My aim served to challenge my own skills as a screen storyteller (analysing the ‘how’ aspect of my practice) as much as to challenge my skills as an academic (interrogating the ‘why’ of my practice).

This approach, structured by the discipline of the PhD thesis form, offers a valuable opportunity to integrate close academic investigation with disciplined

creative practice. The fusion of academic analysis and professional creative practice resulted in my original screenplay *Sea Fever*, which forms the Appendix to this study. *Sea Fever* won several major prizes internationally before going into production in September 2018. Co-financed through the US, Ireland and Sweden, *Sea Fever* stars Connie Nielsen and Dougray Scott, and is scheduled for global release in late 2019.

## INTRODUCTION

This study explores the potential of a film to provide the pleasures of popular, genre-based Hollywood cinema, while at the same time interrogating and disestablishing limiting, stereotypical gender, ethnic and cultural representations frequently encoded in the tropes of Hollywood genre cinema. To that end, the study engages in a close analysis of six Hollywood genre films released between 2000 and 2015. All six adhere to the precepts of their chosen genre, yet all six contain elements that might be understood as disestablishing or upending certain limiting gender, ethnic or cultural representations typical of their genre. The study concludes by deriving a set of strategies from the analysis of those six films. This set of strategies offers a potential route toward a progressive popular genre film form that tends toward the disestablishment of limiting, stereotypical gender, ethnic and cultural ideations. The strategies thus identified inform the outcome of this study, an original, genre-based screenplay, presented in a separate volume as an Appendix to this work. The original screenplay, titled *Sea Fever*, presents as a genre thriller fused with coming-of-age elements. It offers the pleasures of popular genre cinema, while offering a non-stereotypical representation of gender and ethnicity, thereby reframing normative gender and ethnically-based power asymmetries.

This study emerges in the context of recent shifts in the cultural and political landscape. The US and Europe have seen the emergence of a potent new political and social discourse over the last years. In the US, political leadership has demonstrated its power in framing popular debates, precipitating a sharp

rightward shift in the sphere of publicly permissible expression known as the Overton window - that domain of consensus determining acceptable norms of political discourse.<sup>1</sup> This consensus has shifted, as Daniel Drezner observes, such that it now tolerates open expressions of gender, ethnic and socio-cultural discrimination not previously countenanced as part of mainstream discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Matt Seaton posits the view that:

Trump's attacks on 'political correctness' were a dog-whistle to all forms of 'outgrouping': nationalisms, anti-immigrant sentiments, Islamophobia and white identity politics have all been given permission and empowered.<sup>3</sup>

Annie Kelly posits the view that the newly mobilized constituency identified by Seaton is 'inspired and defined by a discourse of anxiety about traditional white masculinity.' Kelly characterises this discourse as valorizing a reassertion of white male individuality, expressed through 'a hostile rejection of liberal-left

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Marsh, "The Flaws of the Overton Window Theory," *New Republic* October 27, 2016. URL: <https://newrepublic.com/article/138003/flaws-overton-window-theory> (accessed January 1, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 130. See also Sandra Hawken Diaz, "#FHRITP is not simply a vulgar prank, it's sexual harassment," *The Huffington Post* May 13, 2015. URL: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/sandra-hawken-diaz/soccer-mom-fhritp\\_b\\_7272562.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/sandra-hawken-diaz/soccer-mom-fhritp_b_7272562.html) (accessed June 26th 2016); Michael Moyd and Yuliya Komska, "Donald Trump is changing our language. We need a vocabulary of resistance," *The Guardian* January 17, 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/17/resist-donald-trump-vocabulary-resistance-rhetoric> (accessed December 30, 2017); Joe Weisenthal, "Donald Trump, the First President of our Post-Literate Age," *Bloomberg* November 29, 2016. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-11-29/donald-trump-the-first-president-of-our-post-literate-age> (accessed September 24, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Matt Seaton, "An American populist in the White House," *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture* Vol. 65, No. 65 (2017): 10-22, 16-17. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 8, 2018)

discourse.’<sup>4</sup> Citing Trump’s slogan, ‘Make America Great Again,’ Kelly sees this reassertion as rooted in an imagined past, where traditional gender dynamics and ethnic homogeneity are understood as a desirable route ‘back’ to stability.<sup>5</sup>

In Europe, the political and social sphere is increasingly shaped by similar forces. As Gabriella Lazaridis, Giovanna Campani and Annie Benveniste describe, since 2014 we have witnessed a notable rise in support for extreme-right parties including the Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party), the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (the Freedom Party of Austria), Marine LePen’s Front National in France, as well as Germany’s Alternativ für Deutschland.<sup>6</sup> Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin describe Brexit as a similar expression of neo-conservative nationalist identity, tinged with a desire for return to a similarly mythic, lost and perfect past of regulated sex roles and monoethnic population.<sup>7</sup>

Understood in the European context as evoking A.D. Smith’s ‘metaphoric kinship,’<sup>8</sup> or what Debora Golden calls the ‘family-writ-large,’<sup>9</sup> Lazaridis et al see the revived European far right as explicitly patriarchal and ethnocentric, formed

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<sup>4</sup>Annie Kelly, “The alt-right: reactionary rehabilitation for white masculinity: US alt-right extremism is a logical consequence of mainstream neo-conservatism,” *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture* Vol. 66 (2017): 68-78, 69. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 11, 2018)

<sup>5</sup>Kelly, 70

<sup>6</sup> Gabriella Lazaridis, Giovanna Campani and Annie Benveniste (ed.s), *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe: Populist Shifts and ‘Othering’* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 4

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, “Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided,” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 28, No. 1 (2017):17-30, 19. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 8, 2018); see also Robert Ford, Matthew J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 190

<sup>8</sup> A. D. Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 79

<sup>9</sup> Debora Golden, “A National Cautionary Tale: Russian Women Newcomers to Israel Portrayed,” *Nations and Nationalism* Vol. 9 No. 1 (2003): 83-104, 85. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00086> (accessed January 1, 2018)

in ideological opposition to the extension of rights to women, ethnic minorities and to LGBT people.<sup>10</sup> As in the US, Toril Aalberg and her colleagues note that discredited cultural anxieties around gender and ethnicity have reemerged in Europe as not just articulable but actively defensible.<sup>11</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, then, this reframing of debates regarding the ascription and transmission of power means we cannot assume a popular will toward descriptive or substantive inclusion of those who are disenfranchised on the basis of gender, ethnicity or cultural identity.

Perhaps integral to this political transformation is the efflorescence of digital media distribution systems. The public sphere's extension into cyberspace initially prompted some thinkers to posit utopian visions of a digitally-powered deliberative democracy, of the kind advanced by Nicholas Negroponte in his examination of digital communications,<sup>12</sup> as well as by Yochai Benkler in his analysis of open-source digital economies.<sup>13</sup> This comprehension of the extended public sphere proposes a borderless, egalitarian space where everyone is afforded a voice, emphasizing its potential to reinvigorate a set of traditional media viewed

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<sup>10</sup>Gabriella Lazaridis, Giovanna Campani and Annie Benveniste (ed.s), *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe: Populist Shifts and 'Othering'* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 10

<sup>11</sup> Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carl Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck and Claes De Vreese, *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2017); Pekka Räsänen and Antti Kuovo, "Linked or divided by the Web? Internet use and sociability in four European countries," *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007): 219–241. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691180701307461> (accessed January 6, 2018); Lazaridis, Campani and Benveniste, 1-24

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

<sup>13</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)

as culturally homogeneous.<sup>14</sup>

Recent experience offers a different comprehension of digitally enhanced public spaces. The democratic notion of the *agora*,<sup>15</sup> or public space where cultural ideas are interrogated via what the philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes as uninflected ‘traffic in commodities and news,’<sup>16</sup> has been subject to increasingly polarized attacks on its very structures.<sup>17</sup> We have witnessed misinformation sweep across millions of screens in seconds, most particularly misinformation that serves to amplify the forms of reactionary cultural preconceptions described above.<sup>18</sup> These preconceptions give rise to the formation of what Kazys Varnelis defines as digitally-driven ‘cultural bubbles.’<sup>19</sup> Within these homogeneous bubbles, ‘like-minded people are deliberating with greater ease and frequency with one another,’ Cass R. Sunstein notes, ‘without hearing

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Juliet E. Carlisle and Robert C. Patton, “Is social media changing how we understand political engagement? An analysis of Facebook and the 2008 Presidential election,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4, (2013): 883–895. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1065912913482758> (accessed January 6 2018)

<sup>15</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Burger (trans.), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 3; Katharine. S. Willis, *Netspaces: Space and Place in a Networked World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 91

<sup>16</sup> Habermas: 1989, 15

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Herf, “Is Donald Trump a fascist?” *American Interest* March 7, 2016. URL <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/03/07/is-donald-trump-a-fascist/> (accessed December 24, 2017)

<sup>18</sup> Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2015): 208–220. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917> (accessed December 26 2018); J. David Cisneros and Thomas K. Nakayama, “New media, old racisms: Twitter, Miss America, and cultural logics of race,” *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2015): 108–127. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2015.1025328> (accessed September 6 2016); Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Kazys Varnelis, *Networked Publics* (Boston: MIT Press 2012), 146

contrary views.’<sup>20</sup> In other words, subjective socio-cultural positions are increasingly uncritically reaffirmed, as Matthew Getzkwow suggests, such that they become more deeply entrenched.<sup>21</sup>

Greg Goldberg proposes that this process of entrenchment serves further to denigrate and devalue any attempted intervention by those already culturally coded as excluded from participation in the public sphere.<sup>22</sup> As a result of this phenomenon, Danah Boyd theorizes an increasingly networked society as one whose organizing power asymmetries, founded in asymmetrical binary ideations of normal/deviant such as male/female, white/non-white, straight/LGBT, are subject not to increasing levels of democratization, as posited by Negroponte,<sup>23</sup> but rather to decreasing levels of deliberative challenge and debate.<sup>24</sup> In other words, if Kelly is correct and neo-conservative discourses are already ‘dominant in much of the political and cultural mainstream,’<sup>25</sup> then we may see an escalating pattern of discourse that normalizes the devaluing of female, ethnically non-white

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<sup>20</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 69

<sup>21</sup> A broader discussion of the ways in which the cyber-sphere appears to facilitate the denigration and ‘othering’ of certain gender, ethnic and cultural identities is beyond the scope of this thesis. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Matthew Getzkwow, *Polarization in 2016* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2016), 20; Greg Goldberg, “Rethinking the public/virtual sphere: The problem with participation,” *New Media & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2011): 739–754. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258173681\\_Rethinking\\_the\\_publicvirtual\\_sphere\\_The\\_problem\\_with\\_participation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258173681_Rethinking_the_publicvirtual_sphere_The_problem_with_participation) (accessed January 6, 2018); and Zizi Papacharissi (ed.). *Networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites* (New York: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>22</sup> Goldberg, 739–754.

<sup>23</sup> See Negroponte, Benkler

<sup>24</sup> Danah Boyd, “Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications,” in Zizi Papacharissi (ed.). *Networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites*, 39-58 (New York: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>25</sup> Kelly, 69



or non-heterosexual contributors, as Goldberg proposes.<sup>26</sup>

This study is predicated on what I see as a potential counter-measure to this unfolding social and political context. Helen Tiffin observes that a cultural product intended to act as a counter-measure or counter-discourse, when explicitly and precisely placing itself against a given cultural norm, serves to some degree to reinforce that norm by virtue of its own consciously contrary positioning. In other words, a film that presents itself primarily as an ‘anti-racist’ or ‘feminist’ narrative runs the risk of further problematizing and delimiting the experience of people of colour and women, by virtue of rendering their experience solely within the context of their cultural ‘othering’. Tiffin argues for the ‘exposure and erosion’ of limiting and stereotypical cultural ideation through a more open disinterring of the ontologies and epistemological systems structuring binary cultural conceptions of the in-group and the ‘other’.<sup>27</sup> It is with this analysis in mind that I propose a cultural counter-measure that, to use Tiffin's phrase, ‘consumes and erodes’ cultural bias, rather than making that bias the focus of the cultural product.<sup>28</sup> This counter-measure is built on three related concepts: digital distribution platforms’ newly emergent focus on the Hollywood genre film form, the cross-cultural appeal of Hollywood genre film’s pleasures, and the relation between those aesthetic pleasures and the potential development of political and social empathy.

Turning first to digital distribution platforms, Trisha Dunleavy and Dean DeFino identify the advent of cyber-connectivity as triggering a renewed popular

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<sup>26</sup> Goldberg, 739-754

<sup>27</sup>Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse”, *Kunapipi*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1987: 17-32. URL: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1705&context=kunapipi>

<sup>28</sup> Tiffin, 32

appetite for screen fiction.<sup>29</sup> Such is the appetite for digitally-delivered screen fiction that Netflix is now the largest source of internet traffic, as Chuck Tryon notes,<sup>30</sup> accounting for almost forty per cent of global streaming activity.<sup>31</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon observes that Netflix's primary business is the production and distribution of ambitious, high-budget, Hollywood-style dramas.<sup>32</sup> He quotes Steve Jobs' remarks in 2010, when Jobs observed that the digital revolution had moved away from 'dancing cats or wacky skateboard accidents,' revealing audiences' preference for 'Hollywood movies and TV shows ... They don't want amateur hour.'<sup>33</sup> While Netflix and its competitors are expanding into non-English language content, produced by and for European and Middle-Eastern countries, my professional experience suggests that this content is likely to be predicated on the same set of Hollywood-style aesthetics and narrative structures that have proven so successful for Netflix's long-form English-language content to date.<sup>34</sup>

In the efflorescence of long-form drama streamed through Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and their competitors, Lindsey Conlin and her colleagues observe discrete cultural constituencies coalescing around particular expressions of long-form

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<sup>29</sup> Trisha Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Dean J. DeFino, *The HBO Effect* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

<sup>30</sup> Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 20

<sup>31</sup> Eric Limer, "Netflix Generates More Traffic Than the Entire Global Internet," *Popular Mechanics* March 28, 2016. URL: <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/a20138/netflix-interview-wired-traffic-exceeds-internet-capacity/> (accessed December 31, 2017)

<sup>32</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Streaming: Movies, Media and Instant Access* (University of Kentucky, 2013), 102

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Streaming: Movies, Media and Instant Access* (University of Kentucky, 2013), 103

<sup>34</sup> I draw this conclusion on the basis professional discussions I have had with senior executives at Netflix, Amazon and HBO Europe.

drama, in a fashion that might be mapped onto those cultural bubbles identified by Varnelis.<sup>35</sup> This potential adherence to cultural bubbles is echoed in Sidneyeve Matrix's analysis of teenage online viewing habits.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the digital revolution in screen fiction may be understood as exhibiting features confluent with the kind of developing socio-political polarization identified by Goldberg, Boyd, Gentzkow and others.

However, the landscape of digitally distributed screen fiction is on the cusp of further transformation. It appears that a phenomenon dubbed 'peak television,' whereby a surfeit of long-form drama begins to diminish demand, may be taking hold.<sup>37</sup> In this context, digital distributors are beginning to move toward the feature film form. There is already significant evidence that Netflix and its competitors are shifting some focus (and significant finance) from long-form drama toward the Hollywood genre feature film form.<sup>38</sup> In 2018, for example, Netflix plans to triple its investment in feature film, hosting the release of some

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<sup>35</sup> Lindsey Conlin, Andrew C. Billings and Lauren Averset, "Time-Shifting vs. Appointment Viewing: The Role of Fear of Missing Out within TV Consumption Behaviors," *Communication & Society* Vol. 29 No. 4 (2016): 151–162. URL: [https://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/en/resumen.php?art\\_id=597](https://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/en/resumen.php?art_id=597) (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>36</sup> Sidneyeve Matrix, "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2014): 119-138. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 8, 2018)

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Bernstein, "TV OD: have we reached Peak Television?" *The Guardian* July 24 2017 URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jul/24/tv-od-peak-the-get-down-sense8-girlboss> (accessed December 31, 2017); Ian Leslie, "Watch it while it lasts: our golden age of television," *The Financial Times* April 13 2017, URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/68309b3a-1f02-11e7-a454-ab04428977f9> (accessed December 31, 2017)

<sup>38</sup> Hamza Shaban, "Netflix's next move is to disrupt Hollywood's biggest money maker," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2017. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/07/18/after-shaking-up-tv-netflix-is-gunning-for-movie-theaters/?utm\\_term=.103fc428b564](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/07/18/after-shaking-up-tv-netflix-is-gunning-for-movie-theaters/?utm_term=.103fc428b564); Mike Fleming Jr, "Scott Stuber To Lead Netflix's Feature Film Foray," *Deadline Hollywood* March 14, 2017. URL: <http://deadline.com/2017/03/scott-stuber-netflix-feature-film-universal-pictures-1202043095/> (accessed December 31, 2017)

eighty newly produced works, more than half of which can be classed as premiere Hollywood genre films.<sup>39</sup> Over the next years, then, we may expect a significantly increased level of interest in the Hollywood genre film form within the digitally enhanced public sphere.

This brings us to the second concept on which this study is predicated, that of the Hollywood genre film form's cross-cultural appeal. In their overview of American cinema, Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen and Peter Haas reveal that audiences typically approach genre films not according to their political or cultural affiliations, but according to the fantasies enacted by those genres.<sup>40</sup> While those fantasies may be coloured by certain socio-political undercurrents, genre film appears to appeal to a viewership that cannot be categorized according to conventional, left/right, progressive/conservative sensibilities.

This phenomenon may be rooted in the Hollywood genre film form's fusion of those two divergent forms of aesthetic enjoyment identified by Thomas Armstrong and Brian Detweiler-Bedell. Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell divide aesthetic enjoyment into 'calm pleasures' and 'exhilarated pleasures.'<sup>41</sup> Mapping their definitions onto a Hollywood genre film form, we might understand such a film as predicated on a set of familiar tropes, articulated to facilitate immediate and easy

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<sup>39</sup> Todd Spangler, "Netflix Plans to Release 80 Original Films in 2018," *Variety*, October 16 2017. URL: <http://variety.com/2017/digital/news/netflix-80-films-release-2018-ted-sarandos-1202591430/> (accessed December 31, 2017)

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Haas, Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 14

<sup>41</sup> See Thomas Armstrong and Brian Detweiler-Bedell, "Beauty as an Emotion: The Exhilarating Prospect of Mastering a Challenging world," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2008): 305-359, 312. URL: <http://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2008-17010-001> (accessed March 27, 2018)

comprehension. This is what Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell define as ‘calm pleasure.’ At the same time, a Hollywood genre film might be understood as presenting a level of narrative and formal innovation that provokes some cognitive challenge and excitement. This is what Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell refer to as ‘exhilarated pleasure.’ The balance of these two forms of aesthetic pleasure produces a cocktail of easy comprehension and cognitive challenge, such that, as Todd Berliner observes, ‘Hollywood filmgoers do not enjoy this or that genre: they tend to enjoy genre itself.’<sup>42</sup>

The Hollywood genre film form, then, might be understood as a form of mass communication whose combination of familiar and challenging aesthetic pleasures can traverse deepening social, cultural and economic divides.<sup>43</sup> If that is the case, and if the Hollywood genre film form is to be distributed digitally over the coming period by new players like Netflix, we might anticipate that the form could traverse those mutually exclusive ‘cultural bubbles’ that serve increasingly to inform the socio-political outlook of cyber-connected citizens.

Berliner points out that ‘Hollywood makes the most widely successful pleasure-giving artworks the world has ever known. More than any other historical mode of art, Hollywood has systematised the delivery of aesthetic pleasure.’<sup>44</sup> This comprehension of the Hollywood genre film form’s aesthetic pleasure brings me to the third tenet of my proposal. This concerns the connection between aesthetic pleasure and the potential development of empathy. In her

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<sup>42</sup> Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), 186

<sup>43</sup> Haas, Christensen and Haas, 15

<sup>44</sup> Berliner, 3

exploration of art and social justice, Martha Nussbaum points to the aesthetic pleasures of a narrative as prompting the development of empathy with figures that mainstream culture might view as ‘other.’<sup>45</sup> This aesthetically-prompted extension of empathy, Nussbaum argues, can be understood as a precondition for the extension of political and social equality to that figure, and thereby to real citizens who bear a similarity to that figure.<sup>46</sup> In his book on the nature of aesthetic experience, Richard Etlin advances a related argument, making the point that ‘works of art speak directly to a deeply rooted understanding about the nature of being and of human relationships in a way that is indissolubly tied to aesthetic experience.’<sup>47</sup> In other words, both philosophers posit the view that pleasurable aesthetic experience can permit a form of unanticipated perspective-taking, such that the aesthetic work might offer an experience of different subjectivity, uninhibited by any preconceived ideation.

Marjorie Levinson takes this position a step further when she argues that such aesthetic perspective-taking can serve to disestablish ‘explicit, ideational structures,’ such as unified forms of social and cultural stereotype, by ‘setting against these unified forms an array of particulars.’<sup>48</sup> Richard Rorty argues for the political value of this mechanism of disestablishment, proposing that the pleasures

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<sup>45</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 66

<sup>46</sup> Nussbaum, 90

<sup>47</sup>Richard A. Etlin, *In Defense of Humanism: Value in the Arts and Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8

<sup>48</sup> Marjorie Levinson, “Posthumous Critique” in Nicholas B Direks (ed.), *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 258

of ‘sad and sentimental stories,’<sup>49</sup> for instance, can serve to disestablish culturally dominant comprehensions of status and power, as viewers ‘imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed.’<sup>50</sup>

Extending these arguments to ‘the most widely successful pleasure-giving artworks the world has ever known,’<sup>51</sup> it is conceivable that the Hollywood genre film might offer just such an opportunity through its aesthetic pleasures to disestablish explicit, ideational structures so as to extend subjectivity to those cultural contributors whose voices are increasingly devalued. Or to paraphrase Raymond Williams, it is possible that a Hollywood genre film could be constructed not just as reflective of our ideational structures but also potentially constitutive of these structures.<sup>52</sup>

Berliner roots the popularity of (successful) Hollywood genre films in the pleasure evoked by clear and thematically unified narrative and formal presentation. Referencing David Bordwell,<sup>53</sup> he asserts that this clarity permits ‘easy’ decoding of the films’ narrative and forms an integral part of the aesthetic pleasures they offer.<sup>54</sup> But this ease of decoding might be understood as indicative of genre film’s adherence to a dominant set of cultural norms. There is a cohort of scholarship, stretching from the early 1970s into the current period, which views

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality” in Obrad Savic (ed.), *The Politics of Human Rights*, 167 - 185 (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 172

<sup>50</sup> Rorty, 179

<sup>51</sup> Berliner, 3

<sup>52</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29

<sup>53</sup> David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 4-17

<sup>54</sup> Berliner, 51-73

Hollywood genre film as intrinsically structured through those norms, such that it cannot be separated from them. This thinking might be understood as drawing in particular on Louis Althusser's conception of the ways in which dominant cultural ideology is reproduced through popular culture.<sup>55</sup> This view of Hollywood genre film comprehends the form as intrinsically expressive of the kind of repressive ideation Annie Kelly holds to be increasingly prevalent within contemporary mainstream discourses.<sup>56</sup>

Writing from this theoretical perspective, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's seminal 1971 essay contends that the Hollywood genre film must inevitably reproduce those dominant ideological power structures.<sup>57</sup> Fredric Jameson extends this perspective, writing in the 1980s, arguing that genre film routinely engages social and political anxieties only to suppress them, offering 'an optical illusion of social harmony' rooted in oppressive and exclusionary practices.<sup>58</sup> During the same period, Laura Mulvey argues that Hollywood genre narrative cinema cannot but promulgate an 'ideology of representation' predicated on a Lacanian drive to ensure masculine supremacy and feminine absence.<sup>59</sup> The 1990s sees Douglas Kellner suggest that Hollywood genre film manages social anxieties, soothing and alleviating the rough edges of history while preventing

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<sup>55</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader Vol. 1*. (London: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006), 360-346

<sup>56</sup> Annie Kelly, "The alt-right: reactionary rehabilitation for white masculinity: US alt-right extremism is a logical consequence of mainstream neo-conservatism," *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture* 66 (2017): 68-78, 70. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 8, 2018)

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Luc Comolli, and Paul Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," *Screen*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1, 1971), 27-38. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/12.1.27> (accessed January 8, 2018)

<sup>58</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 26

<sup>59</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (London: Palgrave, 1989), 26



real political transformation.<sup>60</sup> Robin Wood continues to articulate this view in the 2000s. In his expanded and revised overview of modern Hollywood cinema, he argues that Hollywood genre films cannot but affirm hegemonic beliefs and values, since the aesthetic pleasure they provoke is in and of itself ‘culturally determined, a product of our social conditioning,’ such that it is ‘imperative that our pleasure be spoiled’ since Hollywood genre cinema can be understood as intrinsically ‘extremely reactionary.’<sup>61</sup> Film scholars as diverse as Gerald Mast (in the 1980s),<sup>62</sup> Barbara Klinger (in the 1990s)<sup>63</sup> Todd Berliner and Robert Rosenstone (in the 2000s),<sup>64</sup> amongst others, have articulated counter-arguments to this perspective. Nonetheless, it remains a persistent train of thought within film scholarship, with prominent, contemporary cultural thinkers including Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek continuing to identify Hollywood cinema as intrinsically ideologically repressive.<sup>65</sup>

This form of analysis suggests a Hollywood genre cinema that stimulates ‘calm pleasure’ through the delivery of stories that serve primarily to support a familiar, dominant set of cultural ideations. While this analysis can be borne out by

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 74

<sup>61</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond: Expanded and Revised* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 146

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Gerald Mast, *Movies in our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982)

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994)

<sup>64</sup> Berliner, 133-184; Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film* (Harlow: Pearson Education 2006)

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek’s polemic film *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (Sophie Fiennes, 2012), or Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Gregory Elliott (trans), (London and New York: Verso, 2009)

numerous examples, such proof by induction does not necessarily prove that the corollary is true. In other words, if Hollywood genre film most frequently serves to support a dominant set of cultural ideations, it does not necessarily follow that it can only serve to support a dominant set of cultural ideations. Berliner makes a similar point when he suggests that the tenet whereby ‘a film’s complicity in dominant ideology leads to its popularity has become so established in film scholarship since the 1960s that proponents take it as a matter of course, without questioning the mechanism by which a film’s *ideology* delivers pleasure’ (my italics).<sup>66</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this study to engage individually with those scholars’ systems of thought. However Judith Hess Wright’s seminal 1974 essay on genre and the *status quo* might be seen as reflecting a number of theorists in asserting a view of genre film as exclusively structured toward serving the interests of a ruling class. Hollywood genre films routinely raise the spectre of real economic and social conflicts,<sup>67</sup> she suggests, but:

[g]enre films address these conflicts and resolve them in a simplistic and reactionary way. Genre films have three significant characteristics that make such resolutions seem possible and even logical. First, these films never deal directly with present social and political problems; second, all of them are set in the nonpresent. Westerns and horror films take place in the past; science fiction films, by definition, take place in a future time. The gangster film takes place in a social structure so separate from the contemporary structure in which it appears to be taking place that its actual time and place become irrelevant. Third, the society in which the action takes place is very

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<sup>66</sup> Berliner, 135

<sup>67</sup>Judith Hess Wright, “Genre Films and the Status Quo,” in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader IV*, 60-68 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 60

simple and does not function as a dramatic force in the films - it exists as a backdrop against which the few actors work out the central problem the film presents.<sup>68</sup>

Wright makes a substantive case for the corrosive and retrogressive gender, ethnic and cultural representations structurally encoded in the tropes of Hollywood genre cinema. Taking Wright's argument as an example of this kind of thinking, it is therefore of value to examine her points one by one.

Her first point contends that genre film never deals directly with current social and political problems. While it is true that the form does not often deal with present social and political problems, it is not accurate to say that it never does so. Many genre war films, as Robert Eberwein argues, are explicitly constructed through present social and political problems.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Hollywood genre spy thrillers frequently invoke social and political problems as part of their diegesis. That is not to say that genre war films or thrillers deal directly with present social and political problems in a way that serves to disestablish stereotype and cultural myth in relation to the origins of those problems. It is simply to assert that Wright is incorrect in making the observation that genre films do not deal directly with such problems *per se*.

Wright's second argument suggests that the Hollywood genre film can only operate in a simplistic and reactionary way because it constructs 'nonpresent' worlds. I understand this to mean that a Hollywood genre film might take place in a parallel world that does not obey the same laws of propriety, politics or physics

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<sup>68</sup>Hess Wright, 61

<sup>69</sup> Robert Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 14-41

as our own. It is undoubtedly true that Hollywood genre film frequently sets its narrative in such a parallel world. While this alternative reality frequently reinforces, as Wright suggests, the socio-political *status quo* of the real world, it does not appear to be intrinsic to its form that it should do so. Such a presentation could equally be understood as permitting a form of Brechtian alienation, where Brechtian alienation is understood as that narrative strategy whereby a parallel world is presented in order to promote the disestablishment by aesthetic means of dominant social and cultural ideations.<sup>70</sup> This familiar device of alienation or ‘making strange’ in order to demonstrate an injustice or inequality was described by early twentieth century Russian literary theorist Victor Shklovsky as ‘the essence of all art.’<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the presentation of a parallel world as metaphorical critique of current social and political concerns is an aesthetic strategy whose antecedents stretch back through Orwell’s *Animal Farm* to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.<sup>72</sup> Along with such aesthetic pleasures as its formal presentation might afford, such a parallel world naturally includes within itself the possibility whereby imaginative distance permits the disestablishment of dominant cultural ideation by means of fresh perspective-taking.

Similarly, situating a cinematic story in the past does not cut it off from metaphorical resonance with the present. As Rosenstone notes, ‘[h]istory in film becomes what it most centrally is: a process of changing social relationships

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<sup>70</sup> Anthony Squiers, *An Introduction to the Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht: Revolution and Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 62

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in John Willett, (ed. and trans.), *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91

<sup>72</sup> George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* was first published in London by Secker and Warburg in 1945. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* was first published in London by Benjamin Motte in 1726.

where political and social questions... are interwoven.’<sup>73</sup> In other words, a historical drama is perforce a parallel world, where the same opportunities for Brechtian alienation remain open. Given that this strategy of creating a parallel fantasy / historical world predates popular cinema and is used outside the bounds of popular cinema, it cannot be understood as inhering uniquely in Hollywood genre film. And given that the strategy in itself permits the critique of dominant social and cultural ideations, it cannot be understood as a predicate to a restrictive ‘simplistic and reactionary way’ of expressing narrative. Here again, I am not suggesting that Hollywood genre film routinely engages in disestablishing the dominant *status quo* through its fantasy or historical presentations. Rather, I am positing the view that there is nothing within the construction or presentation of a coherent, effective genre-based historical narrative that *a priori* prevents the deployment of such a strategy of disestablishment. For these reasons, it appears that Wright’s second argument may not be sustainable.

Wright’s final argument points to the society in which the Hollywood genre film’s action takes place, suggesting that it is simple and does not function as a dramatic force within the film. As Berliner notes, one of the conditions of the Hollywood genre film is its narrative clarity.<sup>74</sup> It is possible that the drive toward narrative clarity prevents the evocation of particularly complex social structures. However it might be argued that the drive toward narrative clarity does not necessarily offer an obstacle to the disestablishment of dominant cultural ideation.

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Vision of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1995), 61

<sup>74</sup> Berliner, 51-73

There appears no primary reason why the reflection of complex social webs of interaction should be invariably necessary in order to disestablish dominant ideations, particularly with respect to the framing of gender, ethnic and cultural identity. It could be argued that the narrative microcosm of a genre film like *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017), for example, presents through simplified social structures a racist society that can be understood as a dramatic force, effectively disestablishing those normative cultural ideations associated with black masculinity. More broadly, the work of Barbara Klinger on the Hollywood genre melodrama might equally offer an example of a genre where society is routinely presented as an actively oppressive dramatic force.<sup>75</sup> In this light, it appears that Wright's third argument may not be tenable, at least with respect to some Hollywood genre forms.

Hollywood genre film, then, despite those repressive conventions identified by scholars like Wright and others, can be understood as a popular form capable of supporting counter-normative expression. Or to put it another way, there appears no reason why a Hollywood genre film might not remain recognizably a genre film and 'easy' to view, while also presenting as counter-intuitive, provocative and challenging.<sup>76</sup>

This study can thus be understood as proposing a potential cultural counter-measure to a rightward shift evident in contemporary public discourse, by exploiting the cross-cultural properties, and counter-hegemonic possibilities, of a newly emergent, digitally disseminated Hollywood genre film. In pursuit of this

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<sup>75</sup> Klinger 1994, 157

<sup>76</sup> Berliner, 3

end, this study seeks to establish a set of strategies, predicated on constitutive story elements outlined below, whereby a Hollywood genre film might remain popular and aesthetically pleasurable, yet act as a means to disestablish those exclusionary, stereotypical ideations underpinning contemporary public discourse with respect to gender, ethnicity and / or cultural representation.

Before approaching the six films in this study, it is necessary to outline some of the defining terms I employ. First of all, let us unpack what is meant in this context by the phrase ‘Hollywood film’ as well as by the terms ‘genre’ and ‘culture.’ For the purposes of this study, I define a Hollywood film as a set of formal and narrative practices that originate in popular American cinema. To paraphrase Maltby, it is commercial in its intention, expressive in its form and seeks to articulate clear, emotive story meanings to its broad, cross-cultural, transnational viewership, by means of a set of stable, uniquely successful practices.<sup>77</sup> The six films I propose to examine are all definable as Hollywood films in these terms. In addition, they are definable as Hollywood films in that they are financed in whole or in part, and were distributed globally, by one of the six Hollywood ‘majors.’ These six ‘majors’ are identified as 21st Century Fox, Columbia Pictures, Disney, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios and Warner Brothers.<sup>78</sup> The six ‘majors’ may be characterized by the scale of their globalized production and distribution networks: in other

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2003), 2, 5

<sup>78</sup> See Ronald V. Betteg & Jeanne Lynn Hall, *Big Media, Big Money: Cultural Texts and Political Economics* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 59–108; Paul McDonald & Janet Wasko (ed.s), *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2008), 13–42; Edward Jay Epstein, *The Big Picture: Money And Power in Hollywood* (New York: Random House 2006), 14–19, 82, 109, 133.

words, they deliver popular film to the multiplexes.<sup>79</sup> 'Genre' is a term essential to this study. After E.D. Hirsch, and the later work by Steve Neale, I propose to define cinematic genre as a cultural nexus of norms, expectations and conventions that inform and surround a given work.<sup>80</sup> As Neale observes, this nexus is constantly shifting, with the boundaries of one genre dissolving into another over time.<sup>81</sup> In this comprehension of genre, any given film may adhere to its own selection of elements taken from an identifiable array of tropes and conventions, adopting a sufficiency of those elements so as to be recognisably within the ambit of a given genre, while departing from a sufficiency of that genre's conventions so as to be different from previous iterations of the same genre. Robert Stam neatly defines this balance of convention and innovation when he describes Hollywood genre film as 'an instrument of simultaneous standardization and differentiation.'<sup>82</sup> For the purposes of this study, then, it may be assumed that a genre film includes a selection of defined dramatic and formal elements that designate it as falling within a particular generic idiom. However while a collection of repetitive patterns, conventions and tropes must be present for a film to be recognisably a genre film, there appears to be no particular pattern,

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<sup>79</sup> The focus of cyber-distributor Netflix to date has been in the arena of long-form drama, so Netflix cannot be included in this list of the 'big six' film producer-distributors. However, Netflix's incipient turn toward the Hollywood genre film form suggests that the next years may see this company characterized as a major producer-distributor of Hollywood genre film in the vein of the longstanding 'big six' listed above.

<sup>80</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 74; Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute 1980), 20

<sup>81</sup> See Steve Neale's observation on *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903), a film once viewed as a thriller and now regarded as a Western, in Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge 2000), 188

<sup>82</sup> Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000), 126



convention or trope that can be identified as essential to any given genre.

This study is predicated on the classification of its six films according to their genre. Of course a film may adhere to one genre idiom, but borrow or combine elements from a second genre. To avoid a reductive generic analysis, the analytical framework developed by Rick Altman proves useful.<sup>83</sup> In Altman's comprehension, a film's generic elements may be divided into two distinct categories: semantics and syntax. A film's semantics may be understood as relating to the narrative thrust of the film. Its syntax relates to the tropes and forms through which the narrative is laid out. By viewing selected work through a semantic as well as a syntactic lens, it is possible to achieve a more productive analysis of its blend of thematic polarities, expressive tropes and formal conventions.<sup>84</sup> Altman's dichotomy offers the additional advantage of recognizing certain genre elements as imbued with a thematic coding, to the degree that this thematic coding can be transposable, via this element, into another genre's cultural nexus.

Altman's approach has limitations when applied to less clearly defined genres, such as romantic melodrama or *film noir*, where the defining set of tropes and conventions appears particularly broad and its boundaries particularly porous. In addition, Altman's approach is almost exclusively literary in its focus on narrative construction, with little attention given to the formal construction of the film through image, gesture, sound and montage. In other words, Altman's approach to

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<sup>83</sup> Rick Altman, "A Semantic / Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.s), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, 179-190 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000)

<sup>84</sup> Altman, 184

genre is valuable, but must be augmented by additional analytical tools, most especially in relation to the formal construction of the films in question, where the cultural nexus of genre might be deeply inscribed.

A full investigation into potential definitions of ‘culture’ is a project so broad as to be beyond the scope of this work. Tyler provides a point of departure for current usage in defining culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society.’<sup>85</sup> Gramsci takes this definition of culture and argues for its containing a set of values and interests that he sees as definitive of society’s dominant group, offering the term ‘cultural hegemony’ as defining those norms and desires of a culture’s more privileged members, seen as ‘natural’ and accepted by those more disenfranchised.<sup>86</sup> Saïd develops this theory of culture further, positing a ‘hegemonic,’ homogeneous narrative, defined by a specific set of cultural ideations, which diminishes or erases those outside a defined circle of economic, gender and ethnic privilege.<sup>87</sup> To use Homi Bhabha’s terms, culture is the mechanism by which we understand and discriminate between the privileges accorded different subjects.<sup>88</sup> The term ‘cultural ideation’ stems from the understanding of culture as outlined above. It refers to a specific formulation of ideas and concepts that contains within itself a nexus of projected

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<sup>85</sup> Edward Burnett Tyler, *Primitive Cultures* (London: Bradbury, Evans and Co., 1871), 16

<sup>86</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “Culture and Ideological Hegemony,” in Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman (ed.s), *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, 47-54 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53

<sup>87</sup> Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 25

<sup>88</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London : Routledge, 1994), 114

values and attributes. This nexus can be understood as coalescing around individuals or groups on the basis of an arbitrary unifying condition.

On the basis of these definitions, this study makes a close analysis of six individual Hollywood genre films. The six films are selected on the basis of three defining criteria. Each film adheres to a single recognizable genre or to a clear combination of two recognizable genres. Each film is considered ‘successful’ critically and commercially. Each film appears to be ‘easy’ to view, while also disestablishing some defining tropes of its genre that can be characterized as reproducing limiting cultural stereotype in relation to gender, ethnic and / or cultural representation. On the basis of these three criteria, all six films can be understood as successful iterations of the Hollywood genre film form that nonetheless produce some meanings that do not adhere to stereotypical and exclusionary cultural norms.

The study focuses on one film per chapter. Opening with an overview of the genre to which the film in question adheres, the study identifies the key tropes of that genre before analyzing the film’s selective reinforcement of some tropes, and its selective reframing of other key tropes. While works like Ken Danzyger and Jeff Rush’s *Alternative Scriptwriting*, or Linda Aronson’s *The Twenty-First Century Screenplay*, offer an incisive set of tools with which to interrogate the conventions of genre-based screenplay construction,<sup>89</sup> the intention of this study is not exclusively to investigate the screenplay structure of these works. Rather, the intention of this study is to investigate the films in question through a broader

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<sup>89</sup> Ken Danziger and Jeff Rush *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules* (Oxford: Focal Press, 2007); Linda Aronson *The Twenty-First Century Screenplay* (Crow’s Nest NSW Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2010)

conception of narrative meaning production that includes the script alongside formal cinematic elements that may equally be producers of meaning, such as image construction, montage, sound design and casting.

The study is predicated on a trifold comprehension of narrative meaning production, drawn from the analysis of story and meaning proposed Yanna B. Popova. Rooted in developments in narrative psychology and cognitive science, Popova's recent work on story posits that aesthetic pleasure is derived from the construal of meaning, where meaning is understood as derived from a comprehension of causality, established through the interplay between three primary elements:

- a unified, identifiable subject position
- a definable set of transforming social relations
- a coherently realized story world.<sup>90</sup>

Mapping these three primary elements onto the specifics of visual and auditory meaning production within the Hollywood genre film form, this study analyses each film's construal of narrative meaning in relation to its genre antecedents with respect to:

- the construction of protagonist
- the presentation of gender, ethnic and sexual relations
- the expression of cultural and political story context.

Drawing on the findings of these six analyses, this study concludes by identifying a set of formal and narrative strategies toward the construction of

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<sup>90</sup> Yanna B. Popova, *Stories, Meaning and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 13-120

protagonist, gender and ethnic relations, and cultural context, where such strategies retain the pleasures of Hollywood genre cinema, while tending toward the disestablishment of retrogressive ideation. The outcome of this study is an original screenplay, predicated on the set of strategies identified, presented in a separate volume as an Appendix to this work.

In selecting films to include in this study, I have sought out works produced since the turn of the millennium. All six works were recognized on release as delivering the specific pleasures associated with their chosen genre. All six deliver the clarity identified by Berliner as necessary to ensure the ‘easy’ pleasures of Hollywood genre cinema. All six have been elsewhere identified as reframing certain organizing principles of power ascription, using strategies not typically associated with the traditions and norms of that genre. Some of these films achieved great commercial success, others achieved moderate success. However all six might be comprehended as touchstones or reference points for subsequent works in their genre.<sup>91</sup>

I have selected two films each from three globally successful directors of Hollywood genre cinema: Kathryn Bigelow, Jane Campion and Ang Lee. The complex question of authorship in relation to the directors behind these films is outside the bounds of this study, which focuses not on the ‘auteur,’ but on the

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<sup>91</sup> Finding six films that conformed to the specific criteria outlined above was a process not without challenge. I considered many works that were definitively genre-based and that definitively worked against gender and ethnic stereotype, such as Karyn Kusama’s *Aeon Flux* (2005), or the Wachowski siblings’ *Jupiter Ascending* (2015), but these films failed to meet the criterion of critical and commercial success. Similarly, I considered films that interrogated gender and ethnic stereotype and were critically and commercially successful, for instance Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016), or Lisa Cholodenko’s *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), but such films fail to adhere sufficiently closely to a recognizable set of genre tropes, rendering them unsuitable for inclusion.

merits of each work as an independent cultural entity. However, in an industry context where Caucasian men form ninety-five per cent of the directors of the nine hundred most prominent Hollywood genre films of the last decade,<sup>92</sup> it is perhaps notable that none of these three directors is a Caucasian man. Two of these three directors are female, two are from continents other than Europe and North America. In noting these attributes, it is not the intention of this study to fall into an essentialist analysis whereby the sex and ethnicity of a director is interpreted as in any way relevant to the subject, tone or tenor of their work.

The first two films I examine are directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Bigelow's educational formation is as a fine artist. Her first short film, *Set-Up*, is an experiment in form; 'I was interested in what worked, what got your adrenaline going,' she states.<sup>93</sup> After assisting the editorial staff at influential semiotics journal *Semiotext(e)*, Bigelow made her first narrative feature, *The Loveless*, in 1981. It is a film about outsiders, rooted in the genre conventions of melodrama. In the same year, she assisted in making the radical feminist *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1981).<sup>94</sup> Her early thrillers, *Near Dark* (1987), *Blue Steel* (1989) and *Point Break* (1991), might be read as marking a sustained narrative interest in

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<sup>92</sup> Stacy L. Smith, Mark Choueiti and Katherine Pieper, "Inequality in 900 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT and Disability from 2007-2016," *The Annenberg Foundation, USC Annenberg School for Communications and Journalism* (July 2017), 18. URL: [https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/Dr\\_Stacy\\_L\\_Smith-Inequality\\_in\\_900\\_Popular\\_Films.pdf](https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/Dr_Stacy_L_Smith-Inequality_in_900_Popular_Films.pdf) (accessed December 26, 2017)

<sup>93</sup> Kenneth Turan, "Gender Bender," in Peter Keough (ed.), *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 45

<sup>94</sup> Richard Brody, "The Political Science Fiction of "Born in Flames,"" *The New Yorker*, February 19, 2016. URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-political-science-fiction-of-born-in-flames> (accessed November 30 2017)

the outsider and in socially mediated constructions of gender.<sup>95</sup> The only woman thus far to have been awarded a Best Director Oscar, Bigelow has operated consistently within the arena of Hollywood genre film-making over her extensive career.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, her work is formally inventive, characterized by expressive cinematography, rapid narrative pacing and visceral scenes of violent action.<sup>97</sup> These combined interests can be seen to inform the films under discussion in this study's opening chapters.

The first chapter deals with Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Examining *The Hurt Locker* in the context of specific contemporary Hollywood war films, the chapter argues that the film's protagonist oscillates between the genre-normative reluctant, rescuing hero and a profoundly counter-generic, hysterical, unstable figure who effectively undercuts any ideation of heroism. Equally, *The Hurt Locker* is revealed as countering hegemonic ideation through the sudden, violent dispatch of otherwise familiar genre characters. In contrast to these counter-normative strategies, the chapter references examples from contemporary Hollywood war cinema to reveal how *The Hurt Locker* reproduces genre norms relating to 'the enemy,' reinforcing repressive norms whereby Iraqi figures are presented as a pathologized, unknowable 'other.' This conformism is demonstrated as extending to the *The Hurt Locker*'s generic approach to its diegetic world, where the political and cultural origins of the Iraq war form an

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<sup>95</sup> Sean Redmond, *Kathryn Bigelow* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), advance draft digital copy.

<sup>96</sup> Jermyn, Deborah and Sean Redmond, *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 6

<sup>97</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in American Genre Films* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 195-216

uninflected, uninterrogated diegetic backdrop. The chapter concludes that *The Hurt Locker* produces an ambiguous blend of conformity and confrontation relative to its genre antecedents, whereby the film can be comprehended as disestablishing ideational norms of war and the war hero, while at the same time reproducing certain genre-typical hegemonies of depoliticized soldierly suffering.

The second chapter explores Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Beginning with an analysis of where the film sits relative to the war genre, the spy thriller genre and the conventions of the Western, the chapter demonstrates how *Zero Dark Thirty*'s semantic presentation as a spy thriller belies underpinning genre structures rooted in the Western. Citing examples of that genre, the chapter traces how *Zero Dark Thirty* refocuses contemporary events through the lens of a familiar Western foundational narrative. With reference to specific Westerns, the chapter outlines how *Zero Dark Thirty* invokes and then upends a familiar trope in presenting a virtuously violent, mythic hero as female. Moving through a predominantly male professional world, the film reconfigures its protagonist's femaleness to act as a marker of her conformity to the conventions of the Western 'lone hero.' However, like *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s gender reconfiguration is not reflected in its approach to ethnic and cultural difference. The film is revealed as reproducing normative ideations of the threatening 'other,' aligning it with examples of Western genre cinema featuring unnamed, threatening Native American people. In a structure reminiscent of *The Searchers*, however, the protagonist is presented as containing within herself aspects of the film's 'other,' potentially destabilizing the genre-based demonization of the film's



diegetic ‘enemy.’ But in an extension of normative ‘othering,’ the chapter outlines how *Zero Dark Thirty* reproduces Western ideological conventions of manifest destiny, depoliticizing American military intervention, and potentially legitimating CIA torture practices. Nonetheless, the chapter identifies *Zero Dark Thirty* as deploying genre conventions of the revisionist Western to offer an implicit critique of the ideological trope of justifiable, revenge-based violence - and by extension, its real-life enactment in the pursuit and destruction of Osama Bin Laden. The chapter concludes that the film effectively reframes conventions of the spy thriller and the Western myth with reference to gender ideation, but oscillates between reaffirming and interrogating genre conventions of ‘othering’ and of manifest destiny in relation to its framing of the story’s cultural and political context.

The next two chapters focus on films directed by Jane Campion. Oscar-winning screenwriter and director Jane Campion is a native New Zealander with a significant body of independent films in her oeuvre. Campion’s commercial success with *The Piano* (1993) led her to make three films financed through Hollywood, two of which can be characterized as Hollywood genre films, both of which are under discussion here. Campion’s work has consistently circled around questions of women, desire and agency.<sup>98</sup> Not directly defined by a campaigning feminist viewpoint, her cinema could nonetheless be characterized as a cinema for women, constructed explicitly around feminine subjectivity.<sup>99</sup> Her work has been defined as privileging the body, developing a “poetic of the inner sense” as Muriel

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<sup>98</sup> Hilary Radner, *The New Woman’s Film: Femme-Centric Movies for Smart Chicks* (New York and London: Routledge 2017), 202

<sup>99</sup> Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner, “Introduction,” in Alistair Fox, Hilary Radner and Irene Bessiere (ed.s), *Cinema, Nation, Identity: Jane Campion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), xii

Andrin describes it.<sup>100</sup> These characteristics are in evidence in the two films under discussion here.

Chapter Three is an analysis of Campion's *In The Cut*. The chapter argues that the film embraces key tropes of *film noir* while effectively overturning conventional ideations associated with the *noir* erotic thriller. In its construction of protagonist, the chapter traces the chief tropes of the *noir* hero through comparison with specific examples of the genre, revealing *In The Cut*'s reframing of those tropes to express a feminine form of sexual anxiety. Offering examples of the erotic thriller as a vehicle for gendered masculine anxieties around sex and death, the chapter profiles *In The Cut* as a narrative that gives form to feminine anxieties around sex and death. The chapter demonstrates how the film harnesses the *noir* trope to twinning, producing divergent forms of masculinity as well as divergent forms of femininity, making a spectacle of its male nudity and valorizing a kind of non-compliant female desire. With respect to the film's diegetic world, the chapter profiles the film's tendency toward a form of ethnic 'othering,' thematically linking the black body with urban decay, deviance and excessive sexuality, in a form that appears consonant with dominant conventions of *noir*. The chapter concludes that *In The Cut* reframes dominant genre ideations of female abjection, recoding tropes of the genre to articulate feminine desire and agency, but reproduces genre convention regarding ethnic 'othering.' In this way, the film can be seen as subject to an internal tension between its radical gender subtext and its relative genre conformity to ideations of ethnic difference.

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<sup>100</sup> Muriel Andrin, "Her-Land: Jane Campion's Cinema, or Another Poetic of the Inner Sense," in Fox, Radner and Bessiere, 27-39

Chapter Four positions *Bright Star* as a film structured through recognisable tropes of the costume romantic biopic. Citing specific genre examples, the chapter argues that *Bright Star*'s actively desiring protagonist is spared genre-typical levels of feminine suffering. It profiles the film's thematic polarity of masculinity, tracing how this polarity serves to valorize counter-generic masculine passivity. The chapter traces the film's interrogation of dominant conventions in its presentation of story world, demonstrating how the film upends conventional power asymmetries operating between domestic arts and high culture, the bourgeoisie and bohemia, the demotic and the aristocratic. The chapter concludes that *Bright Star* harnesses tropes of its genre romance and recodes them to mount an explicit critique of gender and class ideations underpinning the genre's own conventions.

The final two films are directed by Ang Lee. Lee is a Taiwanese film maker who has worked within the bounds of Hollywood genre cinema for ten of his last eleven feature films as director. After making three films centred on cultural conflicts of Eastern people in (to varying degrees) Western situations, Lee entered English language cinema with a costume melodrama adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), whose great success led to his ongoing relationship with Hollywood. Lee's films tend toward an exploration of identity, culture and tradition, often examining the uneasy border between freedom and responsibility. He is widely regarded as a master of cinematic visual form, often coupled with a distinct paring back of dialogue.<sup>101</sup> The two films under discussion here offer

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<sup>101</sup> Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Ang Lee: The Other Side of the Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2-10

examples of both his thematic focus and his formal preoccupations.

The fifth chapter identifies Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) as a fantasy martial arts film fused with a coming-of-age genre narrative. The only non-English-language film under discussion, it is included here in that it conforms to the three definitions of this study. Although the film is financially structured through eight separate companies, the lead producer, financial co-ordinator and creative force behind the film is LA-based Good Machine, James Schamus' and Ted Hope's commercial venture that is subsumed into Universal Pictures just after *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* emerges. In addition to its LA origination, *Crouching Tiger* is written in English by the established Hollywood screenwriter James Schamus, after which it is translated into Mandarin for production purposes. It is directed by established Hollywood director Ang Lee. The narrative mechanisms driving the film, as I shall demonstrate in the chapter, match those defining Hollywood film mechanisms as defined by Maltby: it produces clear, emotive story meanings that are comprehensible to a broad, cross-cultural, transnational viewership, by means of a set of stable, uniquely successful practices.<sup>102</sup> It is a film that inhabits a clear, recognisable fantasy martial arts genre, an idiom with significant Hollywood genre antecedents in the years preceding its emergence. Its narrative is structured to conform closely to the familiar pleasures of Hollywood genre. In these key respects, the film can be understood as a Hollywood genre film.

This chapter demonstrates how *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* fuses fantasy

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<sup>102</sup> Maltby, 2, 5

martial arts genre semantics with the syntax of the Hollywood coming-of-age film to produce a challenging adventure that disinters restrictive hegemonic tropes of gender, ethnic and cultural identity. Referencing other works in the genre, the chapter argues that the film's protagonist embodies a multivalent set of thematic polarities, including fantasy martial arts dichotomies around desire and discipline as well as coming-of-age dichotomies associated with authenticity and social integration. In the context of other genre works, the chapter outlines how the film disestablishes structuring conventions of masculine mastery and feminine subordination, thereby destabilizing fundamental assumptions of the fantasy martial arts idiom. The chapter identifies *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* implicit interrogation of ideations surrounding the ethnic 'other' through its genre-based fantasy terrain, where 'alien' Chineseness becomes a form of added production value, and where a concomitant fantasy 'Chinese' subjectivity is created. The chapter concludes that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* strategies create a productive ambiguity, harnessing familiar genre tropes to upend the conventions around the martial arts master-protagonist, to disestablish limiting forms of ethnic 'othering,' as well as to interrogate gender asymmetries with respect to the cultural transmission of power and prestige.

The final chapter positions Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as a fusion of two diverse cinematic genre forms, the Western and the romantic melodrama. Comparing the film with other examples in the romantic melodrama idiom, the chapter demonstrates how *Brokeback Mountain* reproduces the genre-normative suffering subject. However the film draws equally on the Western convention of

the hyper-masculine, stoic cowboy. The film's fusion of romantic melodrama and Western protagonist is revealed as producing an epic sensibility, raising its love story to a quasi-mythic level. This quasi-mythic quality is underscored by the film's invocation of Western thematic ideations linking the wilderness with masculinity, effectively imbuing the hyper-masculine cowboy and his wilderness with homoerotic meaning. However, this ideation creates a corollary reinforcing normative Western tropes of domesticated, delimited femininity, conforming to traditional ideations of femaleness common to the Western. Although the film features only white cast members, the chapter argues that *Brokeback Mountain* can be understood as invoking the same patterns of xenophobic dehumanization used to reinforce the 'othering' of Native American peoples in its presentation of socially-mandated, homophobic violence, thereby substituting gay men for the ethnic 'other' within the film's narrative world. Emphasizing cultural surveillance, the film invokes the cinematic male body as a site of erotic display, before reconfiguring it as a site of brutal social punishment. The chapter concludes that *Brokeback Mountain*'s conformity to the conventions of the romantic melodrama results in a familiar, culturally dominant ideation of gay men as abject, isolated and suffering. In addition, its invocation of Western thematic polarities results in a devaluing of feminine identity. However, the film's radical recoding of the trope of the mythic Western hero, in tandem with its adherence to Hollywood genre conventions of melodrama, produces a mainstream film that successfully reframes gay masculine desire as the stuff of epic Hollywood romance.

The Conclusion draws together the results of these six analyses, demonstrating

how each film invokes clear structural and thematic precepts of its chosen genre, offering the familiar, ‘calm pleasures’ of that genre. The Conclusion identifies how, once these ‘calm pleasures’ are established, each film then harnesses and recodes specific generic tropes to carry counter-generic meanings regarding gender, ethnic and/or cultural relations. By these means, each film appears to offer the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of cognitive challenge, destabilizing hegemonic ideations, through the deployment of recalibrated, familiar-but-different generic elements. In the case of *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, this strategy results in a structurally-encoded ambiguity, allowing the films to produce more than one set of meanings. In the case of *In The Cut*, *Bright Star* and *Brokeback Mountain*, the strategy delivers the pleasures of genre while valorizing one form of divergent subjectivity, but reinforcing hegemonic ideation with reference to another form of divergent subjectivity.

With regard to the construction of protagonist, *The Hurt Locker* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* both reveal themselves as interrogating hegemonic ideation through their unstable, multivalent protagonists. *Zero Dark Thirty* and *In The Cut* disrupt the conventions of their genre by ascribing to female protagonists those qualities associated with the conventional genre hero. *Brokeback Mountain* echoes *Zero Dark Thirty* in its reframing of the Western hero’s subject position, while *Bright Star* disestablishes dominant generic ideation by presenting its romantic heroine as a serious artist with full narrative agency, who, along with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*’s protagonist, is permitted to escape into a figurative, if not literal, state of liberation.

On gender dynamics, *The Hurt Locker* undermines conventions of fraternal soldierly support while *Zero Dark Thirty* employs gender prejudice as a strategy to amplify the mythic, lone-hero status of its protagonist. *In The Cut* and *Bright Star* both harness the *noir* genre trope of ‘twinning’ to interrogate genre norms around masculinity. *Brokeback Mountain* recodes key gender norms of the Western, whereas *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* explicitly interrogates the damage inflicted on women and men by traditional gender-based power asymmetries.

When it comes to ethnic stereotype, *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *In The Cut* appear to conform to their respective genre tropes of the ‘other.’ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, however, can be understood as immersing its viewership in an entirely Chinese subjectivity, such that Western ideations of the ‘other’ are afforded no position.

*The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* offer a story world that conforms closely to their genre’s conventions. By contrast, *In The Cut* reframes its genre’s conventions of scopophilic sexual display by shifting the cultural position of the imagined viewer from masculine to feminine. *Bright Star* and *Brokeback Mountain* both invert their genre’s structuring power asymmetries, while *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* disestablishes its entire genre paradigm through a sustained interrogation of those underpinning economies of gender-based power.

Together, this set of strategies offers a potential route toward the production of a popular, genre film that offers the ‘easy’ pleasures of the form, while disestablishing those retrogressive gender, ethnic and cultural representations



structurally encoded in certain tropes of Hollywood genre cinema. The outcome of this conclusion is an original screenplay that deploys these strategies, presented in a separate volume as an Appendix to this work. Titled *Sea Fever*, the screenplay centres around a marine biologist whose research takes her aboard a deep-sea fishing trawler. The film traces her struggle to save the crew when an unknown, lethal parasite infects the trawler's fresh water supply, pitting survival against real-world economic and ecological risk.

With respect to genre, the film harnesses those strategies evident in all six films when it clearly signals its adherence to the norms that structure its chosen genre, provoking a set of generic expectations through the reproduction of familiar elements. Like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* and *Brokeback Mountain*, the film is rooted in two different genre idioms, fusing the semantic conventions of the thriller with the syntax of a coming-of-age drama. Like all six films in this study, it delivers on structural genre expectation in producing the pleasures of a high-octane, high-stakes thriller narrative, as well as the pleasures of a coming-of-age struggle to find an authentic place in a small community. Echoing strategies found in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Crouching Tiger* and *Brokeback Mountain*, *Sea Fever*'s dual generic provenance produces multivalent sets of thematic polarities. One set aligns along the genre thriller dichotomy, pitting personal risk against the broader risk to the group / society. The second set aligns with a typical coming-of-age dichotomy, where the drive toward an authentic self is positioned against a restrictive social order. Once its genre provenance is established, *Sea Fever* deploys those strategies that emerge from

the preceding analysis with respect to protagonist, gender and ethnic representation and cultural expression in the following ways.

In the construction of its protagonist, the film deploys a strategy analogous to that found in *The Hurt Locker* when it undermines the genre trope of the lonely hero by presenting a central figure who oscillates between generically heroic and damaged behaviour. Echoing a strategy found in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the protagonist inhabits a narrative space where her gender is rendered irrelevant, and is thereby normalized, rather than problematized according to thriller genre norms. In an extension of the same strategy, the film avoids any genre-typical problematization of gendered sexuality by presenting its female protagonist as not seeking romantic fulfilment. Equally, the film references a related strategy found in *Bright Star*, where its central figure is presented as relatively powerless within her social milieu, but is ascribed powerful agency through demonstrations of her expertise. In a strategy analogous to that deployed in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and in *Bright Star*, the film's ending sees its protagonist meet a figurative liberation, where no literal liberation is possible.

The study produces a set of strategies toward the disestablishment of gender and ethnic relations, deployed in *Sea Fever* in the following ways. Like the strategy employed by *The Hurt Locker*, *Sea Fever* features apparently genre-typical characters whose generic provenance is implicitly interrogated through shocking moments of misperception, unexpected emotional outbursts and unanticipated death. In a strategy parallel to that deployed in *In The Cut* and in *Bright Star*, the screenplay deploys the *noir* thriller trope of 'twinning.' In this

case, each 'twin' inhabits a position on the semantic polarity between isolation / connection; magical thinking / rational detachment, predicated on a semantic polarity in the construction of their masculinity. Drawing on the strategy deployed by *In The Cut* and by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the protagonist's dramatic catharsis positions her as in possession of full narrative agency to the story's end.

In seeking to counter normative, repressive ethnic representation, the film deploys a set of strategies informed not only by the successful reframing of ethnicity achieved by films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but also by an intention to avoid the reproduction of ethnic ideation evident in films like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *In The Cut*. With this in mind, *Sea Fever* deploys a strategy that valorizes the integrated trans-national, ethnically diverse crews working the North Atlantic fishing grounds. Its *dramatis personae* includes Irish, Scandinavian and Arab figures, none of whose characteristics are diegetically tied to their ethnic origin. In a strategy contrary to the conventions of *noir*, as expressed in *In The Cut*, the people of colour in the film are not defined or thematized according to their ethnicity. This strategy is emphasized in that one of the film's constructed 'twins' is Arabic, but his ethnic difference does not form any aspect of his 'twinning.' In a strategy echoing *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the film's second Arab figure is not thematically or editorially aligned with this first figure, except through a shared knowledge of Arabic. Equally, the film's Scandinavian figure is not characterized by his ethnic or cultural difference, but rather by complex, layered characterization.

With respect to the expression of cultural context, the screenplay harnesses strategies drawn from the preceding analysis in the following ways. It establishes its genre credentials through the delivery of satisfying generic spectacle, just as *The Hurt Locker* does, as well as by meeting its bifurcated genre expectation in the manner of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and of *Brokeback Mountain*. Like the strategy found in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the screenplay deploys a structured social critique through two authority figures. The film's heroic captain is initially positioned as safe, wise and authoritative, but is increasingly revealed as flawed, burdened and destabilizing, a strategy that offers an implicit interrogation of the way in which authority is conventionally ascribed and transmitted.

Drawing on the 'othering' strategies at work in *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *In The Cut*, the screenplay resists the 'othering' of its narrative threat by rendering it non-human and by rendering its threat incidental rather than deliberate. Like the strategy employed by *Zero Dark Thirty*, the protagonist in this film is positioned as containing within herself aspects of the film's central threat, further limiting its potential 'othering.' In contrast to *Zero Dark Thirty's* and *The Hurt Locker's* failure to examine the broader socio-political conditions of their respective diegeses, the frame of reference of this screenplay includes a strategy provoking the consideration of larger social, economic and political concerns, in that these concerns are positioned as constitutive of the film's narrative threat. In particular, the film explores the increasing marginalization and impoverishment of small, coastal communities, pitting the economic and existential desperation of

individual fishing women and men against the long-term sustainability of the deep seas and the urgency of ecological protection.

In this way, the film can be understood as clearly signalling its adherence to genre convention, before deploying key strategies that serve to disestablish repressive gender, ethnic and cultural representation frequently encoded in the tropes of its chosen genre. By these means, the film delivers the ‘calm pleasures’ of a fast-paced, high-tension thriller, while producing the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of cognitive challenge regarding broader socio-political questions.

As I observed at the beginning of this chapter, the US and Europe are currently experiencing a potent new iteration of particularly reactionary forms of cultural ideation. Open expressions of gender, ethnic and cultural discrimination are an increasingly acceptable part of mainstream discourse. It is with this climate in mind that I begin my research into the potential of a set of strategies whereby a popular genre film might present as pleasurable and cross-culturally accessible, yet tend toward the disestablishment of those repressive ideations.

## 1. *THE HURT LOCKER*: A WAR HERO / HYSTERIC

This chapter examines Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* in relation to structuring genre norms as they appear in recent, related Hollywood war films, demonstrating how *The Hurt Locker* oscillates between a conformist and confrontational relation to the contemporary Hollywood war film genre. The chapter begins by outlining the development of the most relevant genre idioms in contemporary Hollywood war cinema, tracing a relation between those idioms and the socio-political climate through which they emerge.

The chapter then isolates those idioms relating to the construction of protagonist, demonstrating how *The Hurt Locker*'s Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) is strategically presented as both the genre-normative figure of the reluctant hero and as a hysterical, unstable neurotic. Demonstrating how the film invokes the conventions of the contemporary war film's 'captive narrative,' the chapter details how *The Hurt Locker* deploys a narrative strategy such that James' experience avoids catharsis. Focussing on the genre tropes surrounding gender and ethnic relations, *The Hurt Locker* is revealed as countering genre norms through the strategic disestablishment of apparently genre-typical characters, while nonetheless conforming closely to genre norms in its pathologizing of the enemy 'other.' This conformism extends into the film's presentation of its political context. The chapter identifies the *The Hurt Locker*'s narrative strategy as largely disconnected from the political and cultural origins of the conflict that forms its diegetic backdrop, a strategy that is in line with the dominant conventions of Hollywood genre war cinema. The chapter concludes that *The Hurt Locker* is an

ambiguous blend of conformity and confrontation relative to its genre antecedents, offering productive strategies regarding the disestablishment of hegemonic gender and cultural ideations around war and the war hero, while at the same time supporting certain politically expedient, genre-typical ideations of depoliticized soldierly suffering.

Released in 2008, *The Hurt Locker* is set in a contemporary Baghdad that American forces were still struggling to control. The film unfolds as a tense, episodic narrative depicting the dangerous work of a three-man US army bomb disposal squad, giving primary attention to Sergeant James, the squad's bomb disposal expert. The film's title reflects its focus on the damaged, driven Sergeant James: the 'hurt locker,' as Jochen Schuff notes, is a US army slang term for that psychological state whereby a soldier feels himself locked out from life as a result of trauma.<sup>1</sup> The film operates a confined narrative that takes place within a short timeframe and deals exclusively with the experience of James and his two squad members.

In examining *The Hurt Locker*, it is important first to trace the development of key war film genre conventions in operation at the time of its release. These Hollywood conventions are best understood as emerging from the cultural and political shock of the Vietnam War. I begin therefore with a brief overview of the emergence of those ideational norms, tracing their development over the four decades leading up to the release of *The Hurt Locker*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jochen Schuff, "Pornographie der Paranoia und Professionalität der Pathologie," Jochen Schuff and Martin Seel (ed.s), *Erzählungen und Gegenerzählungen: Terror und Krieg im Kino des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2016), 53

## Genre Context: From Protest to Patriotism

War, as Carl von Clausewitz famously quipped, is the continuation of politics by other means.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Hollywood war cinema cannot but be linked to broader political concerns of its day. And indeed it is possible to trace across the recent decades of Hollywood war cinema a tendency toward the reflection, figurative or literal, conscious or unconscious, of broader contemporary political discourses around military and foreign policy in the US. Identified by Susan Jeffords, amongst others,<sup>3</sup> this phenomenon is particularly notable in the thematic shifts that have occurred in Hollywood war cinema subsequent to the US withdrawal from Vietnam.

Prior to Vietnam, Hollywood film tends to justify, explain and encourage American war efforts in explicitly ideological and patriotic terms. A typical example of the period might be *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941). Made during World War II, ideological certainty forms a prominent part of *Sergeant York's* narrative focus. The soldier hero is structured unambiguously as fighting for his political ideas and the ideals of his homeland. Such overt emphasis on political philosophy and patriotism is traceable in Hollywood war films right up to and including the Korean conflict.

Vietnam proved a seismic shift in US public discussion around war, military engagement and the state. It prompted a concomitant shift in Hollywood's reflection of those discussions. John Wayne's triumphalist *The Green Berets*

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<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War Vol. 1*, Col. J.J. Graham (trans.) (London: Keegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1918), 75

<sup>3</sup> Susan Jeffords, "Rape and the New World Order," *Cultural Critique* Vol. 19 (1991): 203–15. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354314> (accessed December 20, 2017)



(1968) may be the only popular, Hollywood film to offer a straightforwardly patriotic, ideological take on Vietnam. Vietnam films made after *The Green Berets* might be divided into two waves, although not precisely those identified by Gilbert Adair in the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In the first wave, we might include films like *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). These films mark a distinctive departure from the heroic mode of *The Green Berets*. These films are driven by vulnerable, damaged male protagonists who might be understood as the diametric opposite of the kind of valorous masculinity emblemized by John Wayne. They are presented as sensitive men who have been physically, psychically and emotionally shattered by their war experience, as Paula Willoquet-Maricondi observes.<sup>5</sup> Thematically, these films tend to reflect a broader cultural movement toward anti-militarist, even pacifist political views, powered by a deep suspicion of established US political and military structures. In keeping with their themes of alienation, these films can be defined formally by their rejection of propulsive narrative drive, prioritizing character, tone and atmosphere in a looser, more episodic structure.

This wave of films is followed in the early 1980s by an opposing, second wave of Vietnam films, marked by what Willoquet-Maricondi calls a ‘prolonged and concerted effort on the part of official America to reverse the old verdict on Vietnam.’<sup>6</sup> This second wave can be seen as embodying a revisionist desire to re-

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<sup>4</sup> See Gilbert Adair, *Vietnam on Film: from The Green Berets to Apocalypse Now* (Michigan: Proteus, 1981)

<sup>5</sup> Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, “Full-Metal-Jacketing, or Masculinity in the Making,” *Cinema Journal* Vol. 33 (1994): 5-21, 6. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225514> (accessed December 28, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

fight the war on screen, this time with an unconquerable, hyper-masculine action hero. These Vietnam films find expression in works like *Rambo* Parts 1 and 2 (Ted Kotcheff, 1982 and Sylvester Stallone, 1985), *Uncommon Valour* (Ted Kotcheff, 1985) and *Missing in Action* Parts 1 and 2 (Joseph Zito, 1984 and Lance Hool, 1985).

If the protagonists of *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now* can be understood as alienated and damaged, the protagonists of this new wave are presented as driven and indomitable. The hero in these films is defined by a formal display of the masculine body at its most muscular, hardened and unassailable, as evinced in the bodily display of actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, or Jean-Claude Van Damme. The spectacle of muscle-bound hyper-masculinity which defines these films leads Jeffords to coin the phrase ‘hard bodies.’<sup>7</sup> Thematically, these films appear to refract through their narratives something of Ronald Reagan’s confrontational, uncompromising approach to international relations. This thematic structure supports the films’ formal presentation of fast-paced, high-octane plotting with minimal characterization.

Drawing on a specific cultural myth of American prisoners of war left behind in Vietnam,<sup>8</sup> the narrative of these films is typically structured around an extraordinary feat of rescue. Thomas Doherty calls this plot structure the ‘extraction narrative’; Stahl identifies the same plot shape as a ‘captivity

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hardbodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey : Rutgers University Press, 1994), 24

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of this cultural myth and its origins, see Roger Stahl, “Why We ‘Support the Troops’: Rhetorical Evolutions,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 4, (Winter 2009): 533-570, 537-8. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/365216> (accessed December 19, 2017)

narrative.<sup>9</sup> The narrative form is not an innovation: Doherty argues that it can be traced at least as far back as World War II to works like *Objective, Burma!* (Raoul Walsh, 1945).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Roger Stahl identifies the same story form stretching back to Puritan anxieties around Indian kidnapping.<sup>11</sup> In this context, we might understand the captivity narrative as born out of a specifically American cultural imagination, where the rescuing soldier is analogous to the American frontiersman, pitted against the dark forces of savagery. This analogy recalls some of the defining themes of Reagan's rhetoric, identified by Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones as positioning America as set apart, carrying the beacon of freedom and democracy.<sup>12</sup> Here again, we might surmise that Hollywood cinema's genre themes and ideations appear refractive of contemporary political discourse.

Despite their pro-military, pro-violence themes, these films retain one thematic element from their more pacifist antecedents. Like those earlier films, this wave of Hollywood war cinema is characterized by a profound distrust of secular state authority structures. The protagonists of these films are typically hidebound or betrayed by organs of the US state. As Jeffords notes, these films most frequently place the blame for US failure in Vietnam 'with senators, Central Intelligence Agency agents and bureaucrats who assisted in its negotiations and public

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 541

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Doherty, "The New War Movies as Moral Rearmament," in Robert Eberwein (ed.), *The War Film*, 214-222 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 216 - 218

<sup>11</sup> Stahl, 541

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "Reagan's Strategy for the Cold War and the Evil Empire Address," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* Vol. 19, No. 3 (2016): 427-463, 445. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/638219> (accessed January 15, 2018)

relations.’<sup>13</sup> These agencies are typically depicted as insufficiently strong-willed, exhibiting what we might term a ‘feminine’ weakness which forces the film’s hyper-masculine protagonist to act alone.

A markedly similar theme of governmental disregard informs the Vietnam works which comprise a further strand of Hollywood war cinema of the same period, exemplified by works like Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986), Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and Brian de Palma’s *Casualties of War* (1989). The protagonists of these works are predominantly young, naïve men who appear alienated from their mission: ideals of patriotism or military honour are presented as illusory or irrelevant. Instead, these protagonists are predominantly motivated by interpersonal loyalty. Thematically, the battle here has moved from a propulsive drive toward victory over a defined, evil enemy to a simple fight for life. These films offer what Patricia Aufderheide calls ‘an emotional drama of embattled individual survival.’<sup>14</sup> Formally, these films are structured most frequently as coming-of-age narratives. They are often peopled by a distinctive set of characters who drive a narrative of struggle to adapt to a largely uncaring or actively corrupt military hierarchy. ‘We didn’t fight the enemy,’ the protagonist of *Platoon* concludes, ‘we fought ourselves and the enemy was us.’

From the alienation of *Apocalypse Now* through the pugilistic vendetta of *Rambo* to the existential struggle of *Platoon*, post-Vietnam Hollywood war

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Jeffords, “Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male,” *Feminist Studies* Vol. 14 (1988): 525-543. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178063> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, “Good Soldiers,” in Mark Crispin Miller (ed.), *Seeing through Movies* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 86

cinema could be understood as tracing an unrelentingly nihilistic path. However the 1990s sees a wave of cinema which reverses this trend. Key to this reversal is the revival of World War II as a narrative landscape. World War II, as A. Susan Owen contends, is attractive as a Hollywood military setting in that it offers an apparent moral simplicity.<sup>15</sup> The Allies' unassailable 'rightness' in fighting Fascism lends its war stories an ethical clarity unavailable in later, more contentious wars. War films of the late 1990s and early 2000s begin to present afresh the uninflected figure of the hero in a World War II setting, with *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) and *Pearl Harbour* (Michael Bay, 2001) emblematic of this shift. Indeed, this form of vulnerable-but-heroic World War II protagonist in a captivity narrative continues to appear as a frequent genre form, animating films right up to the recent captivity narrative *par excellence*, *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017).

*Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbour* present what could be termed the pre-Vietnam cinematic hero-protagonist: an ethically committed, courageous leader fighting in a justifiable conflict.<sup>16</sup> These films are not a simple re-iteration of the tropes found in works like *Sergeant York*, however. In those early post-war films,

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<sup>15</sup> See A. Susan Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol. 19 (2002), 249–82. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393180216565> (accessed December 24, 2017)

<sup>16</sup> *Pearl Harbour* is notable in that the film's financial structure includes Japanese investment, a factor which may have softened the film's presentation of a Japanese 'enemy'. An investigation of the shifting financial landscape behind large-budget film making is beyond the scope of this research, but new economic exigencies mean that high-budget features are now routinely internationally co-financed, and international sales are as - if not more - important to a large-budget production than are US sales. This financial environment may be a driving factor in the thematic shift from the kind of ideological or overtly nationalist subtexts present in earlier Hollywood films of the genre to the more recent appearance of themes and subtexts focussed exclusively on the emotional plight of the individual soldier.

soldier protagonists fight because they are committed to their country; to freedom, democracy and so on. *Saving Private Ryan*'s soldier-protagonist can be seen as typical of this new wave of cinema in that he is not presented as fighting for ideological reasons. Instead, like the protagonist of *Rambo* or *Platoon*, he fights in order to rescue his fellow soldiers.

Like many protagonists in this new iteration of war film, *Saving Private Ryan*'s Captain John Miller (played by vulnerable everyman Tom Hanks), is presented as a wounded, suffering subject. He bears some similarity to Martin Sheen's Willard, the soldier-philosopher of *Apocalypse Now*, in that he is a man struggling to overcome his own existential terror. But unlike Willard, Captain Miller's narrative is structured to permit him to act with uninflected heroism when he selflessly rescues his fellow soldiers. In this respect, then, we might understand this new war hero as an amalgam of existential crisis, as embodied by earlier figures like Willard, and the impetus toward rescue, as embodied by the 'hardbodied' heroes of the 1980s, but situated in a pre-Vietnam political context that permits moral certainty. In this way, protagonists of these films are most frequently structured as suffering, honourable, self-sacrificing and stoic, as Kelly Wilz notes.<sup>17</sup>

Having appeared first in World War II narratives, these vulnerable, wounded, moral heroes and their captivity narratives made their way into Hollywood war films set in more contemporary scenarios. They can be found driving the narratives of films as diverse as *Rules of Engagement* (William Friedkin, 2000), *Behind Enemy Lines* (John Moore, 2001) and *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott,

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<sup>17</sup> Kelly Wilz, "Richard's Story: The Present Referent in *In the Valley of Elah*," *Global Media Journal* Vol. 8, No. 15 (2009):1. URL: <http://elib.tcd.ie/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/213035579?accountid=14404> (accessed January 15, 2018)

2001), but perhaps the captivity narrative of *We Were Soldiers* (Randall Wallace, 2002) is most emblematic of this emerging trope. That film might be seen as marking the final Hollywood elision of broader political critiques of Vietnam, as Philippa Gates notes, since its suffering hero explicitly gives his life in a moral bid to extricate his trapped fellow soldiers from the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

This figure is conventionally defined by his yearning to return to a feminine home populated by waiting wives, daughters, mothers and sisters. While a few war films of the mid-1990s explore the ‘anomaly’ of female combatants, most notably *Courage Under Fire* (Edward Zwick, 1996) and *G.I. Jane* (Ridely Scott, 1997), the advent of this new, morally simplified protagonist appears to have precipitated a reversion to traditional gender norms. As Janet S. Robinson notes, femininity in this wave of films is most typically presented in extremely traditional terms: the woman is positioned as in the kitchen washing dishes (*Saving Private Ryan*), or standing inside the screen door receiving the devastating news (*We Were Soldiers*).<sup>19</sup>

This iteration of war cinema may eschew the nihilism of *Apocalypse Now*, the hyper-masculinity of *Rambo*, and the fatalism of *Platoon*, but thematically its narratives are nonetheless filtered through a similar lens of political alienation, albeit developed in a different direction. Where earlier protagonists are presented as alienated from the political philosophies behind their conflict, the soldier-hero

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<sup>18</sup> Philippa Gates, “‘Fighting the Good Fight’: The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Vol. 22 (2005): 297-310, 306. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200590475788> (accessed January 15, 2018)

<sup>19</sup> Janet S. Robinson, “The Gendered Geometry of War in Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*,” in Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Jakub Kazecki (ed.s), *Heroism and Gender in War Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 154

in this form of popular war cinema simply does not ask why he is fighting. Janet Rasmussen and Sharon Downey argue that this trend began with the ‘hard body’ films of the 1980s. They see Hollywood war cinema as having been assiduous ever since in seeking to uncouple any link between individual soldiers’ experience and the broader ethics of American military involvement.<sup>20</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point to the recent discourses of the American public sphere as consistently neglecting the political roots of American military presence overseas, offering this context for the recent lack of political engagement in contemporary Hollywood war cinema.<sup>21</sup> Another possibility might be the toxic spectre of Vietnam, as suggested by Dana Cloud, where amoral US military behaviour in that arena risks undermining any narrative proposition of a moral US military mission.<sup>22</sup>

Whichever reason is accurate, the fact remains that contemporary Hollywood films have developed a convention whereby war is an *a priori* condition with no causative connection to the suffering soldier. Indeed, the trope of generalized, unexplained war has become so common as to be almost a defining feature of the genre. Despite the arguably morally defensible backdrop of American engagement in Bosnia (*Behind Enemy Lines*) or in Mogadishu (*Black Hawk Down*), there is little evidence in these films of what Francis Fukuyama calls America’s ‘end of

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<sup>20</sup> Karen Rasmussen and Sharon Downey, “Dialectical Disorientation in Vietnam War Films: Subversion of the Mythology of War,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. 77 (1991), 176 - 95. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335639109383951> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>21</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 7

<sup>22</sup> Dana Cloud, “Operation Desert Comfort,” in Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz (ed.s), *Seeing through the Media: The Persian Gulf War, Communications, Media, and Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 155–157



history' mission to secure liberal democracy in unstable nations.<sup>23</sup> These films are in some senses solipsistic American stories, where a 'foreign' backdrop of conflict functions simply to produce the necessary narrative tension. Peri-millennial Hollywood narratives of the vulnerable, heroic soldier, then, can be understood as conspicuous in avoiding any engagement with the political origins of their diegetic conflict.

As the 2000s progress, this genre configuration appears with increasing frequency in the move toward dramatizing the two Gulf Wars. Linking Hollywood cinema back to broader American political debate, Jeffords points to a developing idiom of political rhetoric specific to the Gulf Wars which can be understood as a form of depoliticized captivity narrative. Such political rhetoric may have served further to amplify the popularity of the form in Hollywood war cinema at this time, or perhaps Hollywood cinema's focus on the captivity narrative served to promote its use as a rhetorical device in the political sphere.<sup>24</sup> Either way, films featuring the suffering, heroic protagonist in a depoliticized captivity narrative have become so common that Frank Joseph Wetta and Martin A. Novelli have named the trend 'new patriotism.'<sup>25</sup> These films provide what A. Susan Owen calls 'a way home' for American war cinema.<sup>26</sup> Eliding the messy confusion of politics and ideologies, the modern Hollywood war film, armed with

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<sup>23</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992)

<sup>24</sup> Jeffords 1991, 203–15

<sup>25</sup> Frank Joseph Wetta, and Martin A. Novelli, "Now A Major Motion Picture': War Film and Hollywood's New Patriotism," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (July 2003), 861-862. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/44304> (accessed December 24th 2017)

<sup>26</sup> Owen, 249

‘new patriotism,’ conjures simple, humane stories which provide what Doherty calls ‘the consolation of closure and the serenity of moral certainty,’<sup>27</sup> or what Cynthia Weber sees as the moral character with a moral mission.<sup>28</sup>

Apparently anti-military Gulf War films like *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005) and *Stop-Loss* (Kimberley Pearce, 2007) can be understood as variations on this captivity narrative, positioning the suffering, ethical protagonist as essentially held captive by his own military. However, the majority of Hollywood war films’ captive or captivity narratives involve the recovery of US soldiers from an enemy, most frequently non-Caucasian. Films like *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Black Hawk Down* lay down the template for Gulf War narratives when they pit their soldier-protagonists against unknowable ‘foreign’ aggressors whose motivations are obscure. The narrative form in play in these films, then, is self-reflexive. American soldiers rescue American soldiers from an evil ‘other,’ where the nature of this ‘other’ and the conditions which precipitate military conflict remain unexamined.

It is in the context of these self-reflexive screen narratives, with conflict in Iraq still heated, that *The Hurt Locker* emerges. The film was released in the wake of three Hollywood war films by high profile film makers, all of which focus on suffering American soldiers in the context of the second Iraq war. *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007) and *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Pierce, 2007) focus on traumatized, damaged young soldiers in

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 271

<sup>28</sup> Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 56

morality tales that can be understood as rooted in the captivity narrative described above. All three fared poorly at the box office and received mixed critical responses. *The Hurt Locker* could be viewed in similar terms: it focuses on a trio of traumatized, damaged young men trapped in a recognizable form of the captivity narrative. It was even scripted by Mark Boal, the original writer of *In The Valley of Elah*. But *The Hurt Locker* performed far better than its immediate predecessors. Critically lauded and commercially successful, the film resulted in Kathryn Bigelow becoming the first woman to win the Best Director Oscar. It won Boal the Best Screenplay Oscar. It was heralded as ‘the most skilful and emotionally involving picture yet made about the [Iraq] conflict’<sup>29</sup> and ‘the best and most insightful anti-war film about Iraq.’<sup>30</sup> It is my contention that *The Hurt Locker* achieved its cross-political critical and commercial success by means of a strategic invocation of contemporary Hollywood genre conventions around narrative tension, the threat of the alien ‘other’ and the depoliticization of war, while undercutting its own genre conformity by means of direct confrontation with the trope of the suffering, heroic soldier and the dominant ideation of soldiers as brothers-in-arms. The film’s most profound confrontation with its generic forbears is perhaps in the construction of its protagonist, the multivalent Sergeant James.

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Lane, “Anxiety Tests,” *The New Yorker* June 29, 2009. URL: [www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/06/29/090629crici\\_cinema\\_denby#ixzz1O8XcTxoT](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/06/29/090629crici_cinema_denby#ixzz1O8XcTxoT) (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>30</sup> Peter Bradshaw, ‘The Hurt Locker,’ *The Guardian* August 28th 2009. URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/aug/28/the-hurt-locker-review> (accessed January 14, 2018)

## **Enduring / Enjoying War: The Multivalent Protagonist**

In its construction of protagonist, I argue that *The Hurt Locker* deploys a narrative strategy whereby this figure oscillates between appearing as a dynamic hero and as a dysfunctional hysteric. I demonstrate how the film explicitly contrasts its protagonist against a genre-normative predecessor, before revealing him as neurotically fixated. I identify this neurotic figure as familiar from both post-war and first-wave post-Vietnam cinema, before outlining how *The Hurt Locker* formulates a unique strategy to position him as oscillating between genre-normative hero and reckless risk-taker.

*The Hurt Locker* opens with a quotation from Christopher Hedges, a former war correspondent for the *New York Times*: ‘The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug.’ This observation can be understood as referring to the film’s central figure, Sergeant William James. In a break with generic form, Sergeant James is introduced only after ten minutes of screen time. This delayed introduction permits *The Hurt Locker* first to present his diegetic predecessor. Played by Hollywood A-list actor Guy Pearce, this soldier is introduced *in media res*, attempting to defuse a bomb, protected by his two squad members. Pearce performs a character familiar from recent Hollywood war cinema: a simple, kind, cautious soldier who struggles with his fear in order valiantly to protect his brothers-in-arms. It is something of a shock when his character is abruptly blown up eight minutes into the film’s running time. Sergeant James is his replacement. In this way, James is presented as entering a zone of extreme danger, and explicitly as entering the character part of the generically-

familiar, vulnerable, heroic leader.

The film quickly establishes James as significantly different from his predecessor. He approaches his work with a focus that excludes any thought of his fellow soldiers. He breaches safety protocol. He is uncommunicative. He endangers his squad through reckless decision making. However, in spite of these limitations, James is presented as a courageous and accomplished bomb disposal expert. His focus is emphasized in a scene where he reveals a box under his bed. The box contains a collection of fuses and wires, mementos of bombs he has defused. He assesses the craftsmanship of one bomb-maker over another, recognising their style through his repeated encounters with their work. In a kind of fantasy relation, James is presented as experiencing his bomb disposal work as a game in which he is pitted against invisible opponents, a game he feels compelled to win. As the film progresses, James' narrow professional and emotional focus is demonstrated as blinding him to the risk he presents to his fellow squad members. If the 'new patriot' hero is marked by his drive to protect and support his fellow soldiers, then *The Hurt Locker's* Sergeant James offers a direct, counter-generic antithesis to this figure, putting his fellow soldiers in harm's way in order to pursue his desire to 'win the game.'

The film's emphasis on Sergeant James as driven to 'win' over and over again recalls the comprehension of war as a potent and lethal addiction, suggested by Hedges' quote at the film's the outset. In the Lacanian psychoanalytic language deployed by scholars like Judith Fehrer-Guhrewich, Sergeant James might be

understood as a classic exemplar of neurotic desire.<sup>31</sup> Driven by the pleasure principle, monomaniacally focussed, James could be read as caught up in what we might describe as a signifying chain, compelled to run risk after risk, to defuse bomb after bomb. His neurotic desire appears self-renewing: the film positions him as constantly unsatisfied, in continual need of the next risk, with nothing else in his experience capable of assuaging his longing for the ‘high’ he receives from bomb disposal.

*The Hurt Locker*’s narrative strategy supports this comprehension of James’ compulsion as never-ending in that it comprises loosely linked, almost interchangeable moments of high tension. The cumulative effect of these episodes is to create a form with no definable beginning, middle, or end. Thus the film can be viewed as a series of endless, risky repetitions. This formal repetition is emphasized by the use of a screen caption at various points in the film, counting down the number of days remaining in James’ tour of duty. When James returns to Iraq at the film’s close, the screen caption simply restarts, identifying 365 days until completion of this tour of duty. Beyond the film’s diegesis, then, *The Hurt Locker* suggests there is simply more repetition, on and on until James is finally killed by one of the devices he attempts to defuse. The depiction of James as caught in a cycle of continuous compulsion may more accurately reflect the lived experience of professional soldiers than the genre’s typical output. It recalls Edward Saïd’s observation that modern warfare is by its nature ‘tautological and

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Fehrer-Guhrewich, “A Lacanian Approach to the Logic of Perversion,” in Jean-Michel Rabaté, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, 191-207 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192

circular in character.’<sup>32</sup>

The film includes an interlude that might appear redolent of cathartic war cinema, where James conducts a daring rescue of one of his squad members. Yet here, too, the presentation of the protagonist is in marked contrast to the dominant narrative structures of contemporary war cinema. In films like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*, the suffering hero achieves a satisfying catharsis by delivering his fellow-soldiers from harm. But James’ heroic rescue is quickly deflated, as the film strategically reminds us that it was necessary because of James’ own reckless endangerment. In this way, the rescue produces no catharsis, but rather renders more explicit the cyclical nature of the soldier’s predicament. This strategic denial of narrative catharsis results in *The Hurt Locker* withholding meaning from James’ compulsion and, by extension, his platoon’s suffering. This strategy can be understood as undermining the figure of the moral, courageous hero, offering in its place a figure burdened by a particular form of pathology, whose trauma endangers those around him.

This presentation of the deracinated soldier, caught up in compulsion and unable return home, is not a new figure to war cinema. During World War II and in its direct aftermath, genre film featuring the deracinated, war-addicted soldier was not uncommon. Recalling what Willard Walter Waller contends is a pathology emerging from the soldier’s sustained exposure to intense camaraderie and clear threat,<sup>33</sup> films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) and *Blue*

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Saïd, “Permission to Narrate” *Journal of Palestinian Studies* Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring 1984): 27 - 48, 36. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2536688> (accessed January 1, 2018)

<sup>33</sup> Willard Walter Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1944), 31

*Skies* (Stuart Heisler, 1946) are structured around sympathetically portrayed, war-addicted figures. In these films, made directly after World War II, the soldier protagonist's desire to return to war is presented as heroic, his hankering for the simplicities of conflict as understandable and rational.

Editorial sympathy for the war addict appears to vanish from Hollywood cinema in the aftermath of Vietnam, yet the figure does not entirely disappear from the canon. Sergeant James' pathologically-inflected antecedents can be found in first-wave post-Vietnam films like *Apocalypse Now*. The young men on that film's boat crew yearn to go home, but commanding officer Willard observes 'I've been back there and I know it doesn't exist any more.' Willard's deracination is close to that of General Kurtz in the same film, whose letter to his wife declares: 'Sell the house. Sell the car. Sell the kids. Find someone else. Forget it. I'm never coming back.' As Geoff King observes, both Kurtz and Willard are unable to form any kind of relationship to civilians or civilian life.<sup>34</sup> In positioning such a figure as its protagonist, *The Hurt Locker* could be seen as strategically re-asserting an older cinematic perspective, running counter to the contemporary genre Hollywood ideation of war as an ordeal from which the heroic soldier yearns to be delivered.

The film contextualizes Sergeant James' pathology within the broader military in one short interlude. After a particularly cavalier episode of bomb disposal, the film introduces Sergeant James' commanding officer, Colonel Reed (David Morse). The film sets up a moment whereby it may be possible for James' team to

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<sup>34</sup> Geoff King, "Seriously Specular: 'Authenticity' and 'Art' in the War Epic," in David J. Slocum, (ed.) *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, 287-302 (London: Routledge, 2006), 299



address their fears over Sergeant James' recklessness. However, the film immediately reverses this narrative expectation when Colonel Reed addresses James directly, describing him approvingly as a 'wild man.' He understands James' value to the overall military project and lauds James' achievements, identifying his actions not as reckless, but as explicitly heroic. This strategy whereby the army names James' dysfunction as heroism implicitly suggests that this behaviour is familiar to the army, and, by extension, that it may be the only kind heroism there is. Indeed, as the film progresses, one of his own squad begins to name James' pathology as courage, lauding him as a hero in just the manner of the Colonel. By these means, the film positions James as something very different from the dominant trope of the suffering soldier. In being named as 'courageous' and 'heroic,' the character begins to shimmer from hero into dysfunction and back, depending on which character observes him. This narrative strategy offers a profound challenge to the dominant genre ideation of the contemporary soldier hero.

The *The Hurt Locker* does not entirely resist the presentation of its protagonist as a genre-typical suffering soldier hero. The film's promotional poster features Sergeant James alone, seen from above. In his hand is a set of cables, connected to five unexploded devices. The devices form a circle around him. The bombs are only semi-uncovered from the surrounding dusty ground, they have clearly been buried until the soldier lifted the connecting cables to discover them. It is an image of intense vulnerability. The overhead angle creates a sense of Sergeant James as small, almost childlike. His face is occluded by his helmet, allowing us

to imagine him as an everyman. His stance emphasizes his vulnerability: shoulders slumped, his other arm hanging loosely. The choice to surround him with bombs (rather than position him in a dynamic relation to them, for instance) further emphasizes the danger and vulnerability of his situation. This image aligns remarkably closely with the promotional posters for *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down*, two of this period's most successful Hollywood genre war films. In all three posters, the soldier-hero is presented as abject; an imperilled figure. All three posters occlude the soldier's face: he is a depersonalized emblem, haunted by threat. All three indicate a narrative of captivity, isolation and fear in a desolate landscape. All three bear close similarity to what Kenon Breazeale identifies as the dominant description of the American soldier in the Gulf: 'ill-trained and ill-provisioned boy and girl scouts wandering lost in the desert.'<sup>35</sup> In this way, *The Hurt Locker's* poster can be understood as a strategy designed to emphasize its conformity to the dominant Hollywood genre trope of the soldier-hero as suffering captive.

As a protagonist, then, *The Hurt Locker* can be understood as deploying a narrative strategy that serves explicitly to contrast Sergeant James with his more genre-normative predecessor, thereby throwing into dramatic relief James' neurotic fixations. Drawing on figures familiar from both post-war and first-wave post-Vietnam cinema, Sergeant James is positioned as oscillating between the kind of genre-typical vulnerable, heroic protagonist who drives the cinema of 'new patriotism,' and the disturbing pathology of post-Vietnam protagonists like

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<sup>35</sup> Kenon Breazeale, "Bringing the War Back Home: Consuming Operation Desert Storm," *Journal of American Culture* Vol. 17 (1994), 33. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1994.00031.x> (accessed January 16, 2018)

*Apocalypse Now*'s Willard. As David Denny puts it, 'through one lens, we see Sergeant James as a war hero, exemplifying what a war hero looks like in this new war against terror; and yet, shifting the gaze just a bit, we see instead a zombie, occupying the undead, spectral landscape of an atonal world.'<sup>36</sup> The film's strategy of oscillation between genre-normative ideation and profoundly counter-normative challenge serves to underscore its genre pleasures, while effectively interrogating hegemonic ideations of the reluctant hero. This strategy of narrative oscillation is extended beyond Sergeant James and into those figures surrounding him, most notably the two men who form his squad, as I shall argue in the next section.

### **Identity and Alterity: 'Us' and 'Them'**

In the *The Hurt Locker*'s approach to gender and social relations, I contend that the film deploys a strategy of apparent genre-conformity, before confounding generic expectation with unexpected moments of profound violence and death. By contrast, I identify the film as deploying a predominantly genre-normative strategy in its presentation of the ethnic 'other,' thereby supporting a dominant ideation of the Islamic enemy as shadowy, pathological and alien.

*The Hurt Locker* explicitly problematizes gender by means of two strategies: making explicit the hyper-competitiveness of male-only enclaves, and displaying the subsequent sense of deracination on homecoming. Sergeant James' hyper-competitive desire to 'win' against his anonymous foes recalls footage of

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<sup>36</sup> David Denny, "On The Politics of Enjoyment: A Reading of *The Hurt Locker*," *Theory & Event* Volume 14, Issue 1, (2011). Accessed September 1st 2016 Stable URL: <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/423101>

American pilots on CNN during the second Gulf War, jubilantly recounting their bombing raids in terms of baseball and football metaphors. Lynda Boose connects those pilots' behaviour to a specific form of problematic masculinity, a dysfunctional mode of solipsistic competitiveness which is amplified by the relatively sex-segregated environment of active duty in a war zone.<sup>37</sup> *The Hurt Locker*'s specifically reflects this view when its soldiers point to their exclusively masculine environment as creating an artificial zone of competitive behaviour. In this way, the film might be understood as problematizing the masculinity of its characters in a manner atypical of the genre.

The gendered nature of Sergeant James' relations is rendered most sharply in scenes where he returns home to the US. As Debra White-Stanley observes, the film supports the idiom's typical gendered opposition between the home front as female and the battle zone as male, perpetuating the genre convention that war is something that happens to men, far from home.<sup>38</sup> As is typical of the genre, James' wife is presented as a home-maker, pictured within the domestic space, taking care of their young child. In these scenes, the film demonstrates James's masculine, war-induced dysfunction as rendering him unable to engage with his wife or his child. When forced to enter the coded-feminine environment of a large supermarket, James is depicted as panicked, alienated and unable to function. The film thus presents James as a character who can exist only in the male-only war

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<sup>37</sup> Lynda Boose, "Techno-Muscularity and the 'Boy Eternal': From the Quagmire to the Gulf," David J. Slocum, (ed), *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), 282

<sup>38</sup> Debra White-Stanley, "I Don't Know How She Lives with This Kitchen the Way It Is: Military Heroism, Gender and Race in *Brothers*," in Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Jakub Kazecki (ed.s), *Heroism and Gender in War Films*, 153-172 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 136

zone, and for whom the 'feminized' world of wife and child triggers alienation and existential horror. This strategic linkage of problematic masculinity with post-conflict alienation offers a profound challenge to the more comforting, contemporary captive narratives from *Saving Private Ryan* to *Stop-Loss*.

In his overview of the Hollywood war film, Robert Eberwein identifies a number of character tropes as typical of contemporary iterations of the genre.<sup>39</sup> These include the figure of the young recruit - a naïve young man who matures as a result of his experiences; the newly married or recent father who is killed in a skirmish and the (solitary) soldier of ethnic or racial difference. Eberwein further identifies as typical of the genre a certain divergence of social class among the soldiers. This divergence is presented as potentially divisive, only to be bridged by the development of brotherly feeling in the group.

*The Hurt Locker* initially presents Specialist Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) in the image of the genre-typical young recruit. Eldridge is constructed as almost paralyzed by fear and in need of strong, masculine support.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with generic form, Eldridge seeks this support from his leader, Sergeant James. As the film progresses, Eldridge continues to conform to genre norms when he develops a hero-worship of James. He takes on Colonel Reed's comprehension of James as heroic, and strives to emulate his bravery. In response, James appears supportive and compassionate to Eldridge in his moments of abject terror. Like ingénus before him in *Black Hawk Down*, *We Were Soldiers* and others, Eldridge's choice to emulate his squad leader ends in disaster when he is briefly captured by Iraqi

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 11

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, 12

insurgents and shot in the leg. Eldridge's screen departure sees him air lifted from the war zone, in a scene directly reminiscent of *Black Hawk Down*. James is structured in this moment as the genre-typical caring superior, offering hope and support to his wounded protégé. However here, the generic pattern is subverted. Rather than react with courage and gratitude, Eldridge explodes with rage. He accuses James of reckless monomania, describes him as 'an adrenaline junkie' and blames him for the needless injury which Eldridge has sustained.

Second squad member Sergeant Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) appears to inhabit a number of Eberwein's tropes simultaneously. He is the only named African American in the film, in accordance with Eberwein's observation of a particular genre norm whereby only one named character is non-Caucasian.<sup>41</sup> Sanborn also functions as part of the intra-squad class difference identified by Eberwein. Early in the film, Sanborn insults Sergeant James by means of his class, accusing him of being an 'ignorant redneck.' Later in the film, Sanborn mutates into a version of Eberwein's family man when he develops an urgent desire to become a father and integrate into a family-based community. However this last presentation is undercut by an inflection suggesting that Sanborn's desire to be a father is hysterically-founded, the result of chronic, profound stress. Sanborn further escapes Eberwein's tropes in his construction as a cool professional, the embodiment of how the job should be done, as a contrast to James' cavalier approach and Eldridge's paralyzing anxiety.

As noted above, one ideational norm of the contemporary Hollywood war film

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 11

is the soldiers' loyalty to one another. This loyalty provides the unifying mechanism of films as diverse as *Rambo*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Three Kings* and the new century's *Behind Enemy Lines*, *We Were Soldiers* and *Black Hawk Down*. So when *The Hurt Locker* places Eldridge and Sanborn as increasingly at odds with protagonist James, the film diverges significantly from generic norms. The lack of brotherly feeling is made explicit early in *The Hurt Locker*, as Sanborn toys with the advisability of 'accidentally' killing James, rather than allow James to continue risking the lives of his team. The one scene of boyish drinking and playful fighting between James and his subordinate Sanborn flickers between genuine rage and its playful, sublimated mask. Read from this perspective, *The Hurt Locker* offers a bleak account of soldier's lives, actively demolishing the genre idiom of developing fraternal loyalty.

Formally, however, *The Hurt Locker* supports a sense of the soldiers' reliance on one another. The film delivers pared-back tension through technically sophisticated camerawork and stunts, emphasizing a sense of on-the-spot peril. *The Hurt Locker* is filmed with multiple cameras to privilege a 'soldier's eye view' of the action, offering the pleasure of immersive cinema reminiscent of *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*, *We Were Soldiers* and others. In opting for a slightly unsteady image, the film achieves a 'documentary' effect, which adds a formal weight to its characterizations by virtue of its verisimilitude.<sup>42</sup>

But a formal 'soldier's eye view' on screen tends toward the presentation of its figures and their objects as to some degree heroic. As Bernd Hüppauf observes,

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<sup>42</sup> For a fuller discussion of this continuum between 'art' and 'authenticity,' see King

‘even films with an alleged anti-war commitment can be seen with equal justification as examples of a fascination with images of modern warriors, war technology, death, killing and mass destruction.’<sup>43</sup> As an illustration of this conundrum, *Jarhead* presents its soldiers lustily cheering a screening of *Apocalypse Now*, as if it were a depiction of soldierly derring-do. Indeed, war and cinema might be understood as linked by a structural homology which results in the ‘complete destruction of traditional fields of perception. ... [where] war is cinema and cinema is war,’ as Paul Virilio puts it.<sup>44</sup> This assertion recalls Roland Barthes, whose notion of the punctum proposes that death inheres in the photographed image, making war the inevitable subject for cinema, and a glorification of death its inevitable subtext.<sup>45</sup>

In offering its distinctively aestheticized visual evocation of the soldiers’ experience in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker* speaks to just this kind of visceral fascination with war and its objects. Its imagistic, non-verbal presentation lends the film the kind of ambiguity Hüppauf identifies: the elegantly crafted images cannot but confer a seductive heroic status on its soldier figures, quite independent of anything suggested through the narrative. I have already outlined how the dominant Hollywood genre ideation of war is at present defined by a ‘new patriotism,’ where the audience venerates suffering hero soldiers and their instruments of war. In this context, aestheticizing soldier’s experience of war makes problematic any attempt to construct meaning counter to that dominant

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<sup>43</sup> Bernd Hüppauf, “Experiences of Modern Warfare and the Crisis of Representation,” in David J. Slocum, (ed.), *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, 57-67, (London: Routledge, 2006), 57

<sup>44</sup> Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*, Trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1999), 26

<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 96



ideation, since the power of the image might be understood as automatically working against such a reading.

At the same time, *The Hurt Locker* limits the conventional pleasures with which it seduces its spectators. With the success of *Saving Private Ryan*, subsequent war films have tended to privilege the kind of visceral imagery of soldiers' pain which proved effective in that work. Films like *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Black Hawk Down* are defined by their close engagement with the soldiers' gruesome physical suffering. *The Hurt Locker* avoids this kind of imagery altogether. The film aligns with *Jarhead* in this regard: in terms of its imagery, it is a film that privileges its characters' isolation, tension and existential anxiety over any visceral display of their bodies. This strategy denies the pleasures of looking associated with Jeffords' 'hard body' fetishism, and denies any dubious pleasures of looking related to bodily mutilation. In this respect, *The Hurt Locker's* formal presentation of its characters might be seen as deviating from the dominant tropes of Hollywood war film.

Perhaps one of the film's most counter-generic innovations is in its use of cast. In the cultural nexus of Hollywood genre film, well-known actors operate as a mechanism of narrative organization. The relative fame and material success of an actor is an effective signal of narrative direction. We see a famous face, and we comprehend that character as important in narrative terms. *The Hurt Locker* exploits this cultural trope when it places renowned actor Guy Pearce in a pivotal position in its opening scene. When Pearce's character dies in the film's first few minutes, narrative organization appears to unravel, with no single figure clearly

identifiable as the film's subject.

Similarly, Ralph Fiennes appears later in the film's narrative. Fiennes' soldier is structured as a responsible professional - a grown up in a field of boys - who has the capacity to lead the squad out of danger. This characterization, coupled with the narrative intent signalled by Fiennes' renown as an actor, anticipates a certain narrative trajectory. Fiennes' quick dispatch once again confounds genre expectation. This technique points up normally implicit relations between screen narrative and capital investment in the form of 'star' performers, destabilizing an accepted grammar of Hollywood genre cinema.

In relation to its presentation of American soldiers, then, we might conclude that *The Hurt Locker* conjures specific war film tropes in the narrative presentation of its characters, only to confound the expectations associated with those tropes as the story progresses. Furthermore, the film presents its three key soldier figures as disunited, offering a radically different view from the generic band-of-brothers motif typically structuring the Hollywood war film. Formally, the film conforms to genre norms in its presentation of a sensorially thrilling 'soldier's eye view' of the action, but resists the genre-typical presentation of visceral horror. Perhaps most boldly, the film subverts genre expectation in relation to the economically-predicated 'star' system which underpins Hollywood film. In all of these respects, then, *The Hurt Locker* can thus be understood as creating a critical slippage in genre ideational norms.

With respect to the presentation of ethnic alterity, Hollywood war cinema has developed a generic norm whereby the non-white, enemy 'other' is most

frequently presented as a formless threat with little motivation or humanity. Robert Eberwein identifies two conventional exceptions to this rule. These are the convention of the plucky young child, often marked for a poignant death, and the convention of the guiltless enemy civilian caught up in the fighting, whose ethical behaviour marks them as different from the otherwise faceless mass.

*The Hurt Locker* invokes the first of Eberwein's stock genre characters in the form of Beckham, the cheeky young Iraqi boy who sells DVDs to James at the army base. Beckham recalls Short Round in *The Steel Helmet* (Sam Fuller, 1951), an enthusiastic youngster whose idealism and vulnerability permit the protagonist a moment of tenderness. According to Eberwein's genre rules, this figure typically finds a grisly end, which must then be avenged by the film's suffering protagonist. *The Hurt Locker* invokes this trope when it presents Sergeant James as forming a playful relationship with Beckham. In a genre-typical way, Beckham is afforded subjectivity by virtue of being named and given humorous, characterful dialogue. When Beckham disappears, James searches for him. He finds the booby-trapped corpse of a young boy in a terrorist safe house. It seems Beckham has met a genre-typical gruesome end. Prompted by a feverish desire to avenge the child's death, James enters a fugue state in a quasi-hallucinatory sequence. Only after some minutes is it revealed that the dead boy is not Beckham. Beckham's death turns out to be a fantasy, an unfulfilled genre expectation which James misrecognizes. Invoking this genre expectation, then subverting it, might be read as drawing attention to the fantasy nature of James' - and by extension the viewer's - relationship with Beckham in the first place. In this way, *The Hurt Locker* can be understood to point up by conscious disestablishment a convention

of the genre.

In contrast to the disestablishment of this genre trope, Eberwein's guiltless civilian appears almost unmediated in *The Hurt Locker*. In direct alignment with convention, *The Hurt Locker*'s Baghdad college professor can be read along the same lines as the 'good' German in *Saving Private Ryan*, the resourceful Iraqi father in *Three Kings*, the terrified Mogadishu mother in *Black Hawk Down* and the female Kuwaiti motorist in *Jarhead*. Like those figures, *The Hurt Locker*'s professor is presented as a benign but powerless victim of circumstance, a nameless figure with little agency in a situation of maximum peril, designed to throw the protagonist into sympathetic relief.

Aside from these two generically-rooted figures, however, there are many unnamed enemy figures populating the bombed out streets of *The Hurt Locker*'s Baghdad. Jack Shaheen identifies a marked tendency toward dehumanization and 'othering' in Hollywood genre war cinema's portrayal of Arabs and Arabic culture.<sup>46</sup> Films like *Black Hawk Down* and *Rules of Engagement* might be seen as particularly egregious in this context - indeed, *Rule of Engagement* specifically identifies Arab children as threatening, positioning them as legitimate targets of US marine fire.<sup>47</sup>

In *The Hurt Locker*'s opening minutes, a distant Arab man dials numbers into a mobile and causes the film's most salient character to die unexpectedly. Having established that insurgents are everywhere, the film never again presents an

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<sup>46</sup> Jack Shaheen, *Real Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2009), 171

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 192-193

insurgent directly on screen. Instead, their handiwork is discovered by the three-man platoon as they move from bomb site to bomb site. These discoveries define the absent insurgents as capable of savage aggression with no ethical limit. They include randomly placed landmines, a bomb in a child's corpse, an innocent man padlocked into a cage rigged with explosives. In this way, insurgents in *The Hurt Locker* are presented as engaging in such extreme and debauched acts, apparently without context or motivation, that they evoke the spectre of insanity.

Aside from the absent but always-imminent insurgents, the film offers two specific occasions where US soldiers engage with unnamed, incomprehensible Arabs. The first occurs during James' encounter with the genre trope of the college professor and fluent English speaker. This character has the effect of forcing James to confront his own hysteria, and is not presented as dangerously 'other.' But James' panicked confusion is once more triggered by the appearance in the same scene of a woman in hijab. Her masked features and her screaming, unsubtitled Arabic align with the trope Shaheen identifies, whereby Arabic people are depicted as dangerously enraged, incoherent and incomprehensible.<sup>48</sup> The scene's narrative subjectivity underscores this analysis, in that the encounter is articulated through James, with an emphasis placed on his neurotic terror rather than that of the citizens whose home he has invaded.

The essential unknowability of Arab people to the US soldiers is underscored again in a short, brutal sequence involving squadron psychiatrist Colonel Cambridge (Christian Camargo). Cambridge joins the squad for a day in an effort

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, 172

to assuage the chronic anxiety of Specialist Eldridge. As Sergeant James attempts to defuse a device, his team provides protective cover. Cambridge engages politely with a local man and his donkey, unsuccessfully urging the man to leave the area. Cambridge is quickly surrounded by other men, all blank in affect, all speaking Arabic. The scene is suffused with potential threat. In answer to a question, Cambridge states that he is from New York or 'The Big Apple.' Looks of incomprehension prompt him to mime eating an apple. There is a further pregnant pause devoid of understanding, until one of his interlocutors states simply 'I am from Iraq.' This interlude offers the audience a neat mimesis of ideological context: an imperialist assumption of cultural familiarity and sympathy is met by a blunt assertion of identity and difference on the other. Just moments after this exchange, Cambridge is killed by an explosive buried nearby. The film leaves open whether his interlocutors are complicit in his death by holding him in conversation until they are ready to detonate the device. Regardless of this narrative uncertainty, the scene underscores the film's construction of Arab aggression as nowhere and everywhere, unknowable and lethal.

It's clear from these examples that *The Hurt Locker*'s narrative does not extend any kind of meaningful subjectivity to Arab people. Even those Iraqis who are singled out from the shadowy mass of potential aggressors do not rise beyond the level of genre tropes identified by Eberwein and by Shaheen. Formally, the film supports this narrative of 'othering' through its visual articulation of Baghdad. The city is presented as a chaotic, abstracted, sun-bleached bomb site of overexposed sand, blasted, debris-littered alleyways and naked open squares. Desaturated,

high-contrast cinematography reminiscent of *Three Kings* emphasizes the target-like nature of anyone moving through these bright, blank spaces, while rendering threatening the unfathomably deep shadows. The soldiers move through the bright sunlight, while the city's denizens move through the shadows. Iraqis are filmed either soft focus and close to the lens or else in long shot, where the atmospheric heat makes their image shimmer and destabilize. They have no individuality, their faces are obscured by distance. Their actions are blurry, inscrutable and suspect, half-occluded by rooftops and doorways. In this way, the soldiers are visually structured as targets on a bright plane while the Iraqis are structured as potential assailants, lurking in the dark.

*The Hurt Locker* is unusual in Hollywood genre cinema in that there is little extradiegetic music. Musical score is usually employed to prompt the audience into a desired emotional response. Here, the soundscape is an indivisible part of the soldier's perspective. The city's eerie silence is juxtaposed with the harsh rip of explosion and gunfire. The soldier's abject incomprehension of Arabic makes even the most casual interaction fraught with tension and anxiety, again contributing to a profound sense of alienation from the perceived enemy. When taken together, the film's predominantly genre-normative narrative presentation of its Arabic figures, its formal presentation of the soldiers in bright space and the Iraqis in shadow, along with its stark lack of supporting musical score combine to support a generically consistent view of the enemy other. To a large extent, Arabs remain unknowable and threatening within the film's diegesis, in conformity with the dominant tropes of recent Hollywood war cinema, and supporting the broader

culturally hegemonic ideation of Islamic people as alien, unknowable and threatening.

It is clear, then, that *The Hurt Locker*'s approach to gender and social relations sees it deploy a strategy of apparent genre-conformity, before confounding generic expectation with unexpected moments of deracination, violence and death. In contrast to the film's challenging approach to gender and social relations, the film appears to adopt a more genre-normative strategy in its presentation of the ethnic 'other,' supporting a hegemonic articulation of the Islamic enemy as shadowy, pathological and alien.

### **Cultural Context: War as a Form of Weather**

When it comes to cultural context, I argue that *The Hurt Locker*'s strategy is to conform to contemporary genre war film norms in two key respects. Firstly, it presents war as a depoliticized constant, without apparent cause or meaning. Secondly, it presents its soldier characters as having no deliberative responsibility with regard to the conflict. However, I argue that the brief appearance in the film of the squad's military superior is representative of a strategy whereby the genre construction of soldierly heroism is implicitly linked with a structurally-sanctioned, racist 'othering.' Similarly, I argue that the film's form delivers on genre expectation regarding the thrills of conflict, while also undermining genre norms around the pleasures of spectacle, positioning the film on a fault line between conforming to conventional genre ideations at the same time as confronting them.



*The Hurt Locker* presents the American military presence in Baghdad as an *a priori* condition. As we have seen, Hollywood war films from the 1980s onwards have typically severed any causative link between the soldier's experience and the broader ethics of American military engagement.<sup>49</sup> Contemporary Hollywood war cinema can be viewed as orbiting almost exclusively around the ethically anodyne theme of rescue, limiting its focus to small-scale missions and colouring its narrative with the heroism of the vulnerable, suffering American soldier.<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere in *The Hurt Locker*'s narrative is there any reference to the reasons why American soldiers are in Iraq. In focussing on a bomb disposal squad, the film effectively filters out the more controversial aspects of American involvement in Iraq, such as prisoner abuse or unlawful killing. The focus on bomb disposal positions the film firmly within the captivity narrative. The three soldiers work for what might be seen as an unassailable moral good: the defusing of potentially lethal devices which threaten Iraqis as much as American soldiers.

The high tension scene of bomb disposal at the film's opening clearly positions the soldiers at the very outset as endangered. This narrative strategy recalls the Omaha Beach landing scene which opens *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as the high tension opening scene of *Black Hawk Down*. The narrative trend of evoking danger before the introduction of character in such films can be read as promoting 'patriotic identification,' as Barbara A. Biesecker puts it.<sup>51</sup> In other words,

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<sup>49</sup> Rasmussen & Downey, 176 - 95

<sup>50</sup> For a full discussion of this phenomenon, see Stahl

<sup>51</sup> Barbara A. Biesecker, "Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. 88 (2002): 393-409, 396. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335630209384386> (accessed December 19, 2017)

immediate narrative immersion in danger suspends potential questions regarding the broader political context by forcing immediate sympathy for the endangered group. This narrative strategy may serve as an effective smoke screen, perhaps masking a broader concession on the part of Hollywood war films that ‘engaging in military conflict has lost all political justification,’ as Robert Anderson notes.<sup>52</sup> Its effect is to push offstage any broader moral questions before the narrative begins.

*The Hurt Locker*’s opening, then, might be understood as delivering its war context as a chronic condition which exists independently and apart from its imperilled soldiers. It is a state from which the viewer is invited to hope the soldiers will be delivered. It is a state which is, in G. Thomas Goodnight’s terms, almost akin to a natural disaster,<sup>53</sup> an uncontrollable state of existence like weather. *The Hurt Locker*’s use of this strategy could be understood as what Stahl calls ‘deflection’: a narrative strategy which uses spectacle to alleviate any incipient ideological dissent, rushing into narrative tension and thereby ensuring an unthinking acceptance of the political status quo, behind that tension.<sup>54</sup> It is significant, in this context, that when Sergeant James’ civilian life is depicted as utterly disconnected from his military life. The film presents no overlap between the civilian, deliberative world and James’ military experience. This profound bifurcation between civilian and military supports the positioning of the war

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<sup>52</sup> Robin Anderson, *A Century of Media, A Century of War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 219

<sup>53</sup> G. Thomas Goodnight, “The Personal, Technical, and Public Spheres of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* Vol. 18 (1982):198-210, 226. URL: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00028533.2012.11821771> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>54</sup> Stahl, 535

veteran as an emblem of veneration, as Andrew J. Bacevich notes, rather than as a citizen invested with any level of democratic or political accountability with respect to his actions.<sup>55</sup>

*The Hurt Locker*'s transfer of emphasis away from political and ideological causes of conflict has the effect of a form of category shift with respect to the film's enemy. If ideology is no longer at issue in the narrative, then the enemy cannot be constructed as ideologically opposed. If the defusing of bombs is an absolute good, then the enemy can only be rendered as absolutely evil, maniacal, or even pathological. The work of the soldiers is thus transformed from political and ideological into a job of policing: their work becomes the containment of the enemy's pathology. In this way, the film effectively positions its soldiers as heroic, self-sacrificing, unassailably moral.<sup>56</sup> Writer Mark Bowden defines the work of his American soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* in just these terms, defining their engagement overseas as 'the sacrifices that soldiers make so the rest of us can be safe ... It's ugly and it's terrible, but we have these very brave young men who do this.'<sup>57</sup>

Yet *The Hurt Locker* includes a short scene that unmistakably operates as a criticism of the absolute moral authority otherwise ascribed to its military figures.

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<sup>55</sup> For a fuller discussion of the increasing divide between civilian and soldier, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 108

<sup>56</sup> For a fuller discussion of the medicalization of the enemy, see Rosalind C. Morris, "Images of Untranslatability in the US War on Terror," *Interventions* Vol. 6 (2004): 401–23. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369801042000280041> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Kim Masters, "Against the Tide, Two Movies Go to War," *New York Times*, November 4, 2001. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/style/noticed-against-the-tide-two-movies-go-to-war.html> (accessed December 19, 2017)

The screen introduction of Colonel Reed (David Morse) sees him discuss an injured Iraqi man with his army medic. The medic indicates to Reed that the Iraqi lying before him has sustained a ‘survivable wound,’ if he can be moved to hospital within a certain time limit. Hardly glancing at the victim, the Colonel responds ‘He won’t make it.’ The medic protests, causing Reed to repeat his damning judgment. Reed is thus structured as willing to behave amorally and leave an injured Arabic man to die. Reed’s behaviour might be read as positioning him along the lines of genre-typical military superiors from *Apocalypse Now* to *Platoon*: an emblem of the suspect military and state hierarchies who are responsible for the plight of the suffering soldier. However a few moments later, this narrative positioning is subverted when the Colonel praises James in front of his squad. In choosing to allow an Arab man to die, then singling out the dysfunctional James as heroic, Reed is structured not just as corrupt, but as corrupting the very concept of the suffering, courageous hero. In this way, *The Hurt Locker* could be understood as making an implicit connection between entrenched American military racism and a generically-founded conception of courage. By aligning army corruption with James’ apparent courage, *The Hurt Locker* upends a narrative trope that has been in play since *Apocalypse Now*.

In formal terms, the conflict in Iraq has seen the development of a certain kind of television news and documentary coverage that can be defined by its slippage between information and spectacle. This slippage is emblemized in the *New York Times* promotion of its Iraq coverage as ‘offer[ing] the American public and

the world at large a front row seat,<sup>58</sup> as if the conflict were an event to be displayed for the pleasure of spectators. This formal approach reinforces the ‘war as a force of nature’ ideation. Reality documentaries like *Baghdad ER* (Jean Alpert, Matthew O’Neill, 2006) offer the war as a ‘natural’ context from which to generate scopophilic excitement. Elegantly shot and edited, the documentary offers one life-or-death emergency after another. In presenting their content by these means, documentaries like *Baghdad ER* run the risk of decontextualizing human suffering from its political and social causes, transforming the events of war into a kind of short attention span video sensation for a YouTube public, or ‘emotional pornography’<sup>59</sup> as Jill Godmilow dubs it, or what Seltzer refers to as ‘wound culture.’<sup>60</sup>

In its tight focus on life-or-death situations, the interchangeable repetition of life-or-death moments and in the immediate, handheld aesthetic of its cinematography, *The Hurt Locker’s* form clearly references these kinds of live coverage and reality documentaries. Yet the film pulls back from the emotive, scopophilic satisfaction offered by documentaries like *Baghdad ER* by retaining a ruthlessly pared-back aesthetic. The resultantly bare cinematic form can be read as offering a ‘front row seat,’ turning the war into entertainment, yet serving to

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<sup>58</sup> Ralph Blumenthal and Jim Rutenberg, “Journalists Are Assigned,” *The New York Times* August 18, 2003. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/18/international/middleeast/18MEDI.html> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>59</sup> quoted in Pat Aufderheide, “Your Country, My Country: How Films About The Iraq War Construct Publics,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Volume 48, Number 2 (Fall 2007): 56-65, 60. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220584> (accessed March 27, 2018)

<sup>60</sup> For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, see Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring 1997): 3 - 26. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778805> (accessed December 19, 2017)

minimize sentiment and spectacle.

When it comes to political context, then, *The Hurt Locker*'s narrative can be said to conform in two key ways to contemporary genre war film norms. It presents war as an apolitical, constant state, without offering any causative political or ideological context. It positions its soldier protagonists as victims with no deliberative responsibility for their situation. Nonetheless, the Colonel Reed figure could be read as opening up a space whereby the genre construction of soldierly heroism is implicitly linked with a structurally-sanctioned, racist 'othering.' Equally, the film's form supports the culture of acceptance around war as a 'state of nature,' while at the same time undermining genre norms around the pleasures of spectacle. Read in this way, the film seems situated on a fault line between conforming to conventional genre ideations at the same time as confronting them.

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting in this section that *The Hurt Locker* is the only successful Hollywood war film of the last twenty years to have been produced independently of the Pentagon's Hollywood Liaison Office. This is in contrast to other apparently anti-war Hollywood films like *Jarhead* and *Three Kings*, as well as *Black Hawk Down*, *We Were Soldiers*, *Saving Private Ryan* and others.<sup>61</sup> While the film reproduces many of genre norms pertaining to war as a 'state of nature,' its independence may have helped to preserve those small, countervailing moments that interrupt its reproduction of generic convention.

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<sup>61</sup> For a full discussion of the US state's involvement in and inflection of mainstream war cinema, see David L. Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004)

## **Conclusion: Between Conformism and Confrontation**

In this chapter, I argued that *The Hurt Locker* strategically invokes contemporary Hollywood genre conventions around the heroic soldier, the threat of the alien ‘other’ and the depoliticization of war, while undercutting its own genre conformity by means of direct confrontation with the trope of the suffering, heroic soldier, a problematizing of gender, the disestablishment of the ideation of soldiers as brothers-in-arms, and the military recognition of heroism. In this section, I conclude that *The Hurt Locker* appear strategically to deploy the kind of ambiguous protagonist and episodic narrative found in early post-Vietnam works like *Apocalypse Now*, while engaging the high-octane formal tensions of ‘hard-body’ cinema of the 1980s, as well as harnessing elements of the contemporary ‘captive narrative.’ These strategies combine to make *The Hurt Locker* a multivalent war film that both reproduces and profoundly recodes its genre’s dominant conventions.

The film constructs its protagonist James as a genre-typically traumatized, vulnerable soldier who acts courageously, yet also as a counter-generic figure who is pathologically neurotic; a figure whose toxic addiction to risk endangers his own squad. His counter-normative narrative amplifies his neurosis through its episodic, repetitious and anti-heroic construction. This presentation is supported by a pared back aesthetic, the absence of musical score and an emphasis on diegetic sound, all of which serve to construct a perspective on the soldier’s experience that works against dominant genre norms of heroic catharsis. Yet in terms of its form, *The Hurt Locker* might equally be said to lean toward a

presentation of its protagonist that supports dominant tropes of the imperilled, suffering soldier.

In terms of its portrayal of the protagonist's supporting platoon, *The Hurt Locker* explicitly problematizes the male-only enclave in relation to hyper-competitiveness and subsequent social deracination. The film features a number of war-film characters identified elsewhere as genre staples. However, the film subverts genre expectation in relation to these characters as the narrative progresses, revealing the artifice of their construction by brusquely dispatching them at an unexpected moment. In similar terms, the film can be understood as disestablishing an unspoken genre convention in its strategy of casting to undercut generic expectation, laying bare the normally unstated relationship between capital and Hollywood screen narrative, as well as evoking a sense of chaos that is atypical of the genre.

*The Hurt Locker* further contradicts dominant tropes in its presentation of the three squad members as utterly devoid of brotherly loyalty. However despite this disestablishment of putative soldierly unity, the film flips into a conformist relation to the genre-typical war film in offering a 'soldier's eye view' that privileges the dominant trope of the depoliticized, suffering soldier over any sense of Iraqi subjectivity. Indeed, the film's emphasis on in-the-moment, high-octane, tense and thrilling set pieces might be seen as further embracing generic convention, in that it could be read as referencing that neo-conservative 1980s form of war cinema, which privileges just such formal constructions.

With regard to the film's presentation of 'the enemy,' it's clear that subjective



Arab experience is not presented by *The Hurt Locker* narrative. Rather, Iraqis are positioned as dangerously ‘other’: primarily displayed as unknowable, threatening, shadowy. Iraqi insurgents are never directly seen, but their decontextualized violent strategies are presented as not just hostile but verging on the pathological. Similarly, the film’s use of cinematography and design creates a world where the Iraqis are positioned as incontrovertibly other, conforming to genre ideations of the ‘enemy’ as unknowable, mad and shadowy. In this respect, the film can be understood as reproducing damagingly stereotypical cultural ideations of Arab men as inherently disordered.

In its approach to political context, *The Hurt Locker* is perhaps at its most conformist. Like other recent Hollywood war films, *The Hurt Locker* presents the Iraqi conflict as an apolitical event, a ‘state of nature’ which remains unaddressed within the diegesis. In its focus on a bomb disposal squad, *The Hurt Locker* conforms to the comfortable morality of the captivity narrative. This conformity is further underscored when James returns home to America, where his civilian life is positioned as utterly disconnected from his military existence, with no overlap between the deliberative civilian domain and his war experience. However, the film offers Colonel Reed as a destabilizing perspective. Reed’s casual disregard for an injured Iraqi, combined with his praise of James’ heroism, offers a space in which the film reframes founding assumptions regarding corruption and courage.

The film’s formally elegant mise-en-scene risks falling into a trap whereby any narrative meaning is occluded by the visual pleasures of war and its objects. However *The Hurt Locker* succeeds in limiting its conformity to contemporary

Hollywood tropes by avoiding any display of visceral imagery through wounds or mutilation, thus denying its audience the spectacle of either the ‘hard body’ or the suffering body.

It is clear from this analysis that *The Hurt Locker* is a film that shifts between a conformist and confrontational relation to contemporary Hollywood war films. Ultimately it may be this shifting instability which renders the film’s counter-generic moments so unexpected and thereby so powerful. In this sense, the film aligns with older American war cinema like *Apocalypse Now*, whose distinctive formal components create similarly unstable readings, as Frank Tomasulo has observed.<sup>62</sup> King might as easily be talking about *The Hurt Locker* when he calls *Apocalypse Now* an ‘ambiguous blend of narrative components and hallucinatory spectacle [that] serve[s] two purposes rather well. It [gives] the film the aura of serious ‘artistic’ respectability while courting audiences by avoiding a commitment to any one political perspective on the war.’<sup>63</sup>

*The Hurt Locker*, then, can be understood as a film that offers what Thomas Armstrong and Brian Detweiler-Bedell call the ‘calm pleasures’ of clarity and easy familiarity in relation to its stable, genre-typical presentation of a high-tension narrative, featuring the genre-normative enemy ‘other’ and a typically depoliticized war-as-weather diegesis. Alongside these ‘calm pleasures,’ the film can be seen as challenging its viewership with what Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell call ‘exhilarated pleasures,’ including the profound destabilization of

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Tomasulo, “The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar film,” in Lina Dittmar and Gene Michaud (ed.s), *Fram Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War and American Film*, 145-159 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 149

<sup>63</sup> King, 298

generic ideations around the suffering soldier-hero and the nature of war.<sup>64</sup> In this way, the film could be seen as navigating an internal tension between its genre-normative elements and its challenging, oppositional, counter-normative elements, producing two kinds of aesthetic pleasure. *The Hurt Locker* might thus be understood as strategically conceding to certain conventional ideations around ethnicity and politics, in order to create a sufficiently stable genre forum within which to interrogate dominant ideations around heroism and catharsis. In other words, the film accedes to a cross-political, genre-based Hollywood viewership by a strategy of invoking and supporting specific, retrogressive forms of hegemonic ideation, such that it can simultaneously interrogate and disestablish other forms of hegemonic ideation. For these reasons, the film can be seen successfully to disestablish repressive representations of heroic masculinity, but it cannot be said to disestablish repressive representations of femininity, of ethnic alterity or of political deliberation. The question therefore remains as to whether it might be possible to retain a sufficiency of genre elements to assure a film's generic 'calm pleasures,' while disestablishing those damaging, retrogressive ideations that *The Hurt Locker* retains.

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<sup>64</sup> See Thomas Armstrong and Brian Detweiler-Bedell, "Beauty as an Emotion: The Exhilarating Prospect of Mastering a Challenging world," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2008): 305-359, 312. URL: <http://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2008-17010-001> (accessed March 27, 2018)

## 2. *ZERO DARK THIRTY*: A LONESOME HERO IN A SPY THRILLER

Fresh from the success of *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* is the second feature film from the creative team of screenwriter Mark Boal and director Kathryn Bigelow. Released a short eighteen months after the events it stages, the film deals with the US hunt for Osama Bin Laden, covering the decade from 2001 until Bin Laden's killing in Abbottabad in 2011.

If *The Hurt Locker* comprises three figures in a single city over a short span of time, *Zero Dark Thirty* might be read almost as the converse. A complex story of many players, the film spans continents, compressing ten years of politics into the microcosm of one ninety-minute drama. Its narrative unfolds through the experience of fictional CIA operative Maya, played by Jessica Chastain. Maya is a composite of several women whom Boal encountered over the course of preparatory research with the CIA, as Thomas Elsaesser notes.<sup>1</sup> The film positions Maya at a number of pivotal, real-world events, including the 2005 London bombings, the 2008 Marriott Hotel Islamabad bombing and the 2009 Camp Chapman bombing in Afghanistan, as well as witnessing Barack Obama declare 'America does not torture' in January 2009. The film ends with Maya overseeing the US Marines as they find and kill Osama Bin Laden.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how *Zero Dark Thirty*'s surface presentation as a spy thriller belies underpinning genre strategies that are clearly rooted in the Western idiom, enmeshing real-world, modern events into a familiar genre-Western narrative of American cultural foundation. I define how the film deploys

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Genre-Hybridisierung als (parapraktische) Interferenz: *Zero Dark Thirty*," in Jochen Schuff and Martin Seel (ed.s), *Erzählungen und Gegenerzählungen: Terror und Krieg im Kino des 21. Jahrhunderts*, 71-100 (Frankfurt / New York: Campus Verlag GmbH 2016), 71

Western genre conventions to present its protagonist as an ethical, albeit vengeful, civilizing force of necessary violence, reconfiguring her femaleness in a predominantly male professional world as a marker of her conformity to the Western 'lone hero' trope. Like *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* is revealed as conforming to hegemonic ideations of the Islamic 'other' as threatening and unknowable, with the proviso of harnessing a Western genre trope whereby the protagonist contains within herself something of that alien other. I demonstrate how *Zero Dark Thirty* invokes the spectre of manifest destiny to align the events of 9/11 with the kind of 'unprovoked' attacks that befall white settlers in the genre Western. By means of this genre-based strategy, I outline how *Zero Dark Thirty* effectively conforms to dominant American political discourse in depoliticizing American military intervention, and even in part in legitimating the CIA's use of torture. However, I identify how the film's closing moments appear to throw into question its earlier invocation of that mythic foundational ideology that animates the genre Western, offering an implicit critique of generic 'othering' as well as of the generic conception of justifiable, revenge-based violence. On this basis, I conclude that *Zero Dark Thirty* offers significant strategies toward the reframing of gender ideation within the context of the spy thriller and the syntactic Western, while largely reproducing unexamined those generic ideations pertaining to ethnic difference, as well as offering an ambivalent engagement with the political conditions of its diegesis.

## Genre Context: A Spy Western

In outlining *Zero Dark Thirty*'s relation to its genre underpinnings, I begin by demonstrating how *Zero Dark Thirty* diverges significantly from those genres with which it is most often associated, the war story and the spy story, before establishing its close affinity with the Western. Critics have disagreed over where *Zero Dark Thirty* sits in genre terms. Michael Boughn comprehends it as a war film, seeing it in the context of Bigelow's earlier *The Hurt Locker* (2008).<sup>2</sup> Michael Atkinson describes *Zero Dark Thirty* as an iteration of the coming-of-age war film, where a new recruit transforms from reluctant ingénue to experienced professional.<sup>3</sup> Examples of this idiom might include *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941), *Saving Private Ryan* (Stephen Spielberg, 1998) and *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001). As I demonstrated in the last chapter, and as Philippa Gates has observed, contemporary war films typically position their protagonist as vulnerable, moving through the course of the narrative toward an uninflected heroism.<sup>4</sup> But an examination of *Zero Dark Thirty* reveals that the opening scene is perhaps the only moment where Maya might be understood in these terms. In this scene, she is introduced to techniques of torture. But her reluctance to engage, discussed later in this chapter, is fleeting at best. From that moment onward, Maya

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Boughn, "The War on Art and *Zero Dark Thirty*," *Cineaction* No. 91 (Spring 2013): 19-26, 19, 22. URL: <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-346142601/the-war-on-art-and-zero-dark-thirty> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Michael Atkinson, "Duty Calls." *Sight and Sound* (February 2013): 30-33. URL: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/duty-calls-zero-dark-thirty> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> Philippa Gates, "'Fighting the Good Fight': The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Vol. 22 (2005): 297-310, 306. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200590475788> (accessed December 19, 2017)

is presented as driven, unafraid and relentlessly focussed on her mission. It is difficult to interpret her cinematic and narrative presentation as that of a vulnerable soldier. However even if Maya is a driven, self-possessed protagonist from the outset, *Zero Dark Thirty* might still be understood as adhering to the paradigm of the captivity narrative, demonstrated in the previous chapter as an animating principle of contemporary Hollywood war cinema.<sup>5</sup> After all, Maya's goal can be understood as the protection / rescue of her community. However two difficulties arise in positioning *Zero Dark Thirty* in these terms.

Firstly, as we saw in the previous chapter, recent war films are typically organized around a narrative objective of protecting endangered soldiers.<sup>6</sup> In *The Hurt Locker*, for instance, the soldiers' precarious circumstances and their desire to escape those circumstances are the organizing principle around which the film is built. Within *Zero Dark Thirty*, the protection of soldiers or CIA agents is an indirect goal; the primary narrative objective is the detection and murder of Osama Bin Laden. Neither Maya nor her colleagues are positioned as routinely in danger. Indeed, during a single sequence where Maya's boss and then Maya

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<sup>5</sup> See, amongst others, Susan Jeffords, "The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties," in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner & Ava Preacher Collins (ed.s), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, 196-208 (New York: Routledge, 1993)

Roger Stahl, "Why We 'Support the Troops': Rhetorical Evolutions," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Winter 2009): 533-570, 541. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/365216> (accessed December 19, 2017); Frank Joseph Wetta, and Martin A Novelli. "'Now A Major Motion Picture': War Film and Hollywood's New Patriotism," *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 67, No. 3 (July 2003), 861- 882. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 15, 2018); Gail

McGregor, "Cultural Studies and Social Change: The War Film as Mens Magic, and Other Fictions About Fictions," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Summer, 1993): 271-302, 286. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3340879> (accessed December 30, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Examples include *Saving Private Ryan* (Stephen Spielberg, 1998), *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001), *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005) and Bigelow's own *The Hurt Locker*.

herself are briefly endangered, the CIA moves them immediately to another continent.

Secondly, as was determined in the previous chapter, Hollywood war films are typically organized around the dichotomy of war versus home, where the protagonist is presented relative to their desire (or otherwise) to escape war and return home. *Zero Dark Thirty* is not construct around this semantic polarity. Maya does not yearn to go home, nor does the film construct her as suffering from a psychological inhibition with regard to home, such as that afflicting Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker*. For these reasons, then, *Zero Dark Thirty* cannot be said to adhere to the contemporary war film's captivity narrative in any meaningful sense. Thus it is difficult to position *Zero Dark Thirty* within the conventions of the contemporary Hollywood war film paradigm.

Critics like David Denby see *Zero Dark Thirty* as 'the ultimate procedural,'<sup>7</sup> identifying it as part of the spy thriller genre. Thomas Schatz defines this genre as including the heroic characterization of government agents in pursuit of enemies of the state.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary examples of the genre might include *Argo* (Ben Affleck, 2012), a film valorizing CIA operatives in a hostile Islamist landscape; *A Most Wanted Man* (Anton Corbijn, 2014), where a spy struggles to unmask an al-Qaeda sympathiser; *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier Spy* (Thomas Alfredson, 2011), where the spy-hero detects a hidden evil-doer amongst his superiors, or television's *24* (Robert Cochran, Joel Surnow, 2001 - 2010), where spies use torture to elicit

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<sup>7</sup> David Denby, "Zero Dark Thirty," *The New Yorker*, December 24, 2012, URL: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/24/dead-reckoning-6> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 243-245



crucial information to prevent a series of (frequently Islamist) threats.

*Zero Dark Thirty* might appear to conform to the conventions of this genre, in that the film concerns a clearly defined mission to catch and kill an enemy of the state. Maya uses strategies familiar to those spy thrillers: torture, phone tapping, masquerade, aerial surveillance. She might be described as the kind of subtly noble figure Wesley Britton traces in his overview of the genre.<sup>9</sup> She might equally be understood as the kind of spy protagonist identified by John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg: a ‘puzzle-solving, code-deciphering, character-analyzing’ figure; a character whose genre typically forces her into conflict with her own organization.<sup>10</sup> But while Maya’s character might seem to align with typical protagonists of the genre, she does not appear to possess the distinctive skills in fighting, technical wizardry and disguise which Timothy Melley, as well as Cawelti and Rosenberg, notes as typically displayed by the genre’s spy heroes.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s defining elements do not appear to sit easily with the spy film’s organizing tropes. Unlike the nemesis figures defined by Britton, Osama Bin Laden plays no active role in the film’s narrative progression.<sup>12</sup> Nor does he align with the manichean figures whose nefarious will toward domination

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<sup>9</sup> Wesley Britton, *Onscreen and Undercover: The Ultimate Book of Movie Espionage* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2006), 70

<sup>10</sup> John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 69-70, 176

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Melley, “Covert Spectacles and the Contradictions of the Democratic Security State,” *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer 2014): 61-82. URL: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/stw/summary/v006/6.1.melley.html> (accessed December 30, 2017); Cawelti and Rosenberg, 44, 50, 61, 88, 127

<sup>12</sup> Britton, 128, 233

is identified by Cawelti and Rosenberg as a genre norm.<sup>13</sup> In addition, *Zero Dark Thirty* features no romantic subplot, no gratuitous ‘cliffhanger’ moment and only a very minor ‘ticking time bomb’ element - three narrative components that Melley identifies as most definitive of the spy thriller.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the film privileges the frustrating, slow and frequently fruitless labour of information gathering.

However, it is possible that the film’s lack of similarity to spy genre constructions may relate to its female protagonist. Philippa Gates, Kathleen Gregory Klein, Hilary Neroni, Rosie White and others profile the female-driven spy thriller as a specific sub-genre with its own, separate set of conventions. Recent Hollywood works in this idiom include *Salt* (Philip Noyce, 2010), *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017), *Red Sparrow* (Francis Lawrence, 2018) and the upcoming *The Rhythm Section* (Reed Morano, 2019). However *Zero Dark Thirty* cannot be said to organize its narrative around the problematic specifics of Maya’s sex, in the manner identified by Gates, and demonstrated in a film like *Red Sparrow*.<sup>15</sup> Nor does Maya end the narrative folded back into traditional femininity, in the genre idiom described by Hilary Neroni, Kathleen Gregory Klein and Rosie White, amongst others, and referenced in works like *Atomic Blonde*.<sup>16</sup> Maya is not presented as sexualized or sexually alluring, an attribute

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<sup>13</sup> Cawelti and Rosenberg, 57-58, 128, 137, 145

<sup>14</sup> Melley, 61-82

<sup>15</sup> Philippa Gates, “The Meritorious Melodrama: Film Noir with a Female Detective,” *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Autumn 2009): 24-39, 24. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/271056> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>16</sup> Hilary Neroni, *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 29, 149-162; Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 5, 42, 174; Rosie White, *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge 2007), 4

Klein suggests as a frequent feature of the genre, and exemplified by all four works mentioned above.<sup>17</sup>

Linda Mizejewski profiles a subgroup of recent female Hollywood spies who sport masculine forms of dress and behaviour, permitting them a less sexualized narrative.<sup>18</sup> This paradigm fits more closely with *Zero Dark Thirty*'s presentation of Maya. However, Mizejewski sees these figures as routinely caught between traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine concerns.<sup>19</sup> An example might be television's *Homeland* (Alex Gansa, Howard Gordon, 2011-2016), where the narrative drive might be understood as rooted in just such a gendered conflict between the personal and the professional. But *Zero Dark Thirty* cannot be understood as organized around thematic polarities of the personal / emotional and the professional / intellectual, in the manner suggested by Mizejewski.

Overall, it appears that *Zero Dark Thirty* bears some narrative relation to the forms of a spy thriller, in that it tells the story of a CIA agent in pursuit of an Islamic terrorist. However the film does not follow the genre's most prominent structural precepts in that the spy protagonist has no exceptional skills, there is no manichean nemesis who actively engages with the spy and seeks to dominate or defeat her, there is no romantic subplot, there are no cliffhangers. And when compared to the particular idioms associated with the subgenre of female-driven spy films, it fails to display any of the most prominent, identifiable genre markers: the film does not revolve around Maya's problematic sex, her sex is not a factor in

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<sup>17</sup> Klein 1995, 174

<sup>18</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 97, 133-134

<sup>19</sup> Mizejewski, 23, 86, 146, 171

the film's plotting, she is not displayed as conspicuously sexual through costume or behaviour, she is not folded back into a more conventional form of femininity by the story's close, nor is her central struggle articulated through thematic polarities of the personal / emotional versus the professional / intellectual.

Despite its surface presentation as a spy thriller, then, *Zero Dark Thirty* bears scant relation to the most dominant tropes of that genre. If we examine the film's narrative construction, its closest antecedent becomes clearly visible. The film opens with recordings of the emergency services on the morning of the 9/11 attack. The distressing recordings create the impetus for what follows: Maya's decade-long, arduous struggle to chase down and murder Osama Bin Laden, the author of that atrocity. The film might therefore be described most simply as the story of a focused protagonist in pursuit of revenge. It is in this context of primal revenge that the film explores Maya's use of morally questionable techniques, her relentless zeal, her ruthless focus. Viewed from this perspective, Maya's objective and the structural expression of her quest align most closely not with Hollywood war films or spy thrillers, but with the Western.

Alex Vernon observes that *Zero Dark Thirty* conforms to the classical elements of a Western,<sup>20</sup> and Michael Wood calls *Zero Dark Thirty* a Western revenge drama which is 'clean, elegant, relentless.'<sup>21</sup> On examination, the broad narrative structure of *Zero Dark Thirty* bears similarity to that of films like *The Searchers*

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<sup>20</sup> Alex Vernon, "Spectator-Citizen-Soldier: History, Genre, and Gender in *The Hurt Locker*," *MSF Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Summer 2017), 373-4. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2017.0027> (accessed January 3, 2018)

<sup>21</sup> Michael Wood, "At the Movies: *Zero Dark Thirty*," *London Review of Books* Vol. 35 No. 4, February 21, 2013, 19. URL: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n04/michael-wood/at-the-movies> (accessed December 30, 2017)

(John Ford, 1956) and the more recent *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992). Like those two films, it is organized around an initial crime, which prompts the lone hero into a long and arduous chase, culminating in a morally ambiguous act of revenge.<sup>22</sup>

The Western narrative typically takes place at a pivotal moment of foundation, often explicitly the foundation of a state, a town or other mechanism of legal governance. In this respect, it is a genre which can be understood, according to John Cawelti, David Lusted and other scholars, as depicting the formation of a certain mythic, unifying and specifically American identity.<sup>23</sup> As Richard Slotkin famously declares, ‘the Western *is* history’ (my italics).<sup>24</sup> Despite the obvious differences in historical period and mise-en-scène, it is possible to conceive of *Zero Dark Thirty* in similar terms. The film is set in the recent past, but it is nonetheless structured around what might be understood as a pivotal moment of American identity, a transformational socio-political event and its aftermath which has profoundly affected American cultural discourse.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999), 7-8, 63, 101, 146; David Lusted, *The Western*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 128-130, 136-139, 144-148; Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural history of the Genre's First Half-Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24, 114, 182, 293; Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1977), 16, 190-191; Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand, “Western Values, or the People’s Homer: *Unforgiven* as a Reading of the Iliad,” *Poetics Today* Vol. 18 No. 4 (1997): 533-569, 536. URL: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Introduction%3a+Homer%3b+analysis+and+influence.-a0189706371> (accessed December 19, 2017); Robert B. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford on Political Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 5-8; Barry Langford, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 1 (2003): 26-35, 27. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/396082> (accessed December 29, 2017)

<sup>24</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 278

André Bazin famously describes the Western as ‘made up solely of unalloyed myth,’<sup>25</sup> and scholars like J.J. Clauss, Scott Simmon and Martin M. Winkler describe the genre as offering a narrative with little verisimilitude, defining it as a form that is essentially mythic and self-referential.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, *Zero Dark Thirty* might seem a very different order of film from the Western. It purports to represent in an uninflected manner the events of recent history. Bigelow has gone so far as to call it a ‘reported film,’ and Boal has remarked ‘I don’t want to play fast and loose with history.’<sup>27</sup> Yet, as Hayden White observes, any historical retelling on film is always a form of mythologizing.<sup>28</sup> By its nature, *Zero Dark Thirty* is forced to reposition and re-present its history to fit its narrative form. As a work of dramatic fiction, it puts order on chaotic events, representing a formative American experience through dramatic catharsis. The Western can be comprehended as staging putatively foundational American moments in an interstitial space between history and myth. In this sense, it can be understood as reflective of an American ‘social imaginary,’ defined by John B. Thompson as ‘the

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<sup>25</sup> André Bazin, “The Western: or the American Film par excellence,” in H. Gray (trans.), *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2. 140-48, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971, 2005), 143

<sup>26</sup> J. J. Clauss, “Descent into Hell: Mythic Paradigms in *The Searchers*,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* Vol. 27 No. 3 (1999): 2–17. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249038575\\_Descent\\_into\\_Hell\\_Mythic\\_Paradigms\\_in\\_The\\_Searchers](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249038575_Descent_into_Hell_Mythic_Paradigms_in_The_Searchers) (accessed December 29, 2017); Simmon, 196; Martin M. Winkler, “Tragic Features in John Ford’s *The Searchers*,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, 118 - 147 (Oxford University Press: 2001); Martin M. Winkler, “Homer’s *Iliad* and John Ford’s *The Searchers*,” in A. M. Eckstein and P. Lehman (ed.s), *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western*, 145–70 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004)

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Michael Cieply and Brooks Barnes, “Bin Laden Film’s Focus Is Facts, Not Flash,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2012. URL: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/24/movies/zero-dark-thirty-by-kathryn-bigelow-focuses-on-facts.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/24/movies/zero-dark-thirty-by-kathryn-bigelow-focuses-on-facts.html?_r=0) (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>28</sup> Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in Angus Fletcher (ed.), *The Literature of Fact, Selected Papers from the English Institute*, 816-819 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 33

creative and symbolic dimension of the social world'<sup>29</sup> or to use another lexicon, what Jürgen Habermas defines as an 'interpretive system that guarantees social identity.'<sup>30</sup> In a similar fashion, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s staging of a far more recent foundational American event might be understood as operating in an interstitial space between recorded history and fictionalized myth-making.

*Zero Dark Thirty* is clearly not a film set in Monument Valley during the 1850s. It presents its action in a fully-realized, closely observed simulacrum of contemporary reality. One might argue that for this reason, it cannot be aligned with genre-Western cinema. But recalling Rick Altman's dissection of cinematic semantics and syntax,<sup>31</sup> I propose that *Zero Dark Thirty* presents as a Hollywood spy film, but clearly expresses its narrative using a definable system of tropes familiar from the Western. To use Altman's terminology, the film's semantics are rooted in the spy film, yet its syntax conforms closely to that of a genre Western.

The Western as a genre comprises a vast array of interconnected works, running from the birth of cinema and *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) up to *Hostiles* (Scott Cooper, 2017), released at the time of writing. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to conduct a full overview of the wealth of theory relating to this array of works. In the following discussion of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s relation to Western genre tropes, I limit my frame of reference to Westerns from the period 1948 to 1964, using as specific examples those films identified as key

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<sup>29</sup> John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 6

<sup>30</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* Thomas McCarthy (trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 15

<sup>31</sup> Rick Altman, "A Semantic / Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.s), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, 179-190 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000)

works by scholars of the genre including Scott Simmon, Richard Slotkin, Jane Tompkins and Will Wright. These works include *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), *Rio Grande* (John Ford, 195), *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Howard Hawks, 1962) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (John Ford, 1964).<sup>32</sup> The last three films have been identified by theorists like Lee Clark Mitchell and David Lusted as ‘revisionist’ forms of Hollywood Western,<sup>33</sup> where previously accepted economies of power are interrogated through the narrative. There are some legitimate grounds for according Hawks’ and Ford’s films a more revisionist agenda, however they are included for the purpose of this study in that their thematic and syntactic structures adhere closely to the other Westerns under discussion.

Having established the genre antecedents of *Zero Dark Thirty*, I demonstrate below how the film deploys productive strategies toward the reframing of gender ideation within the context of the spy thriller and the syntactic Western, while tending to reproduce hegemonic ideations of ethnic difference and to maintain an ambivalence regarding its political perspective. I examine the film’s referencing and reframing of Western genre conventions through those three constitutive elements of cinematic story outlined in the Introduction, beginning with its construction of protagonist.

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<sup>32</sup> Simmon, 193-197; Slotkin, 366, 379-404; Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48, 114; Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1977), 32, 34

<sup>33</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 261; David Lusted, *The Western* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 243. Revisionist works in this idiom include films like *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), *The Long Riders* (Walter Hill, 1980) and *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992).



## **The Lone Agent**

*Zero Dark Thirty*'s Maya bears close comparison to those genre tropes typical of the Western protagonist, specifically with respect to her embodiment of a genre-typical dichotomy of civilization versus savagery, her outsider status and her superior character attributes and abilities.

Turning first to the theme of civilization versus savagery, perhaps John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) offers one of the genre's most thematically ambiguous protagonists in the form of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne). Ethan takes a long and arduous journey to locate the Comanche chief Scar, whom he intends to kill, in order to exact revenge for the destruction of a settlers' farm and the kidnap of a child. In these terms, Ethan could be understood as a figure pursuing the broader thematic project of 'civilizing' the West. Nonetheless, the film presents him as subject to ethically questionable behaviour at certain prominent moments. Clint Eastwood's career might equally be seen as founded on the portrayal of cowboy figures who serve to civilize their environment through ethically questionable, often violent means. This convention, featuring the violent hero as a figure who serves to usher in civilization, leads Gail McGregor to describe a certain kind of Western protagonist as an 'anti-social, unredeemable, unapologetic killer-hero'<sup>34</sup> whose revenge-based victory is frequently tainted by what C.J. Perry sees as a moral ambiguity.<sup>35</sup> In this way, as Arthur M. Eckstein, Richard Slotkin and other

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<sup>34</sup> Gail McGregor, "The technomyth in transition: Reading American popular culture," *Journal of American Studies* Vol. 21 No. 3 (1987): 387-409, 282. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27554890> (accessed December 30, 2017)

<sup>35</sup> C.J. Perry, "The Evolution of the Western Genre," *Slate Magazine* 6th March 2015. URL: <http://www.filmslatemagazine.com/the-evolution-of-the-western-genre/> (accessed December 31, 2017)

scholars note, the Western genre conventionally presents the civilizing force of developing American national identity as inextricably entwined with a questionable brutality.<sup>36</sup> This moral ambivalence, as Jim Kitses observes, is structured around a thematic connection between civilisation and savagery, the law and summary justice.<sup>37</sup>

In *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya's task is to avenge a crime against civilized values. She engages in profoundly ethically questionable strategies of kidnap and torture in pursuit of her objective. In this way, her actions could be read as defending civilisation through acts of savagery; defending the rule of law by administering summary justice. *Zero Dark Thirty's* protagonist, then, can be understood as embodying a central narrative dichotomy of the Western.

In addition to his moral ambiguity, the Western hero is frequently characterized as an outsider, a quasi-unknowable figure who is not woven into the social fabric. Louis D. Giannetti and Scott Eyman describe the Western hero as 'the outsider who is both estranged from society and dependent on it.'<sup>38</sup> Patrick McGee identifies this figure as marked by a lack of emotional or social hinterland. *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), for example, offers its eponymous character no backstory, context or even surname.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Ethan Edwards is presented as

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<sup>36</sup> Arthur M. Eckstein, "Darkening Ethan: John Ford's *The Searchers* from Novel to Screenplay to Screen," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 38 No.1 (Autumn 1998): 3-24, 4. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225733> (accessed December 29, 2017); Slotkin, 463

<sup>37</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 1-26, 44, 236-256; Schatz 1981, 48

<sup>38</sup> Louis D. Giannetti and Scott Eyman, *Flashback: A Brief History of Film*, (Boston: Pearson Education / Allyn & Bacon, 2001), 167

<sup>39</sup> Patrick McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 5

outside family and domestic space in *The Searchers*, alone in a wide landscape, at a distance from his social group.

Like Shane, *Zero Dark Thirty* gives Maya no last name. The film offers only one detail regarding her history: she has worked on nothing but the hunt for Bin Laden since leaving school. This detail serves not so much to fill in emotional and social background as to emphasize Maya's focus on her objective. She works alone, unencumbered by family or friendship. Her isolation is carried through in the film's formal, visual presentation of Maya. In visual constructions reminiscent of *The Searchers*' Ethan Edwards, she is most frequently framed alone. As the story progresses, she inhabits either empty landscapes or she is positioned as distanced from her grouped colleagues. Her isolation is particularly evident in the film's final sequence, where she is presented as standing alone on an airfield, overseeing the departure and successful return of the Navy Seals who have been tasked with killing Bin Laden. Maya is thus presented through the film as a focussed, dedicated loner, just like her Western forebears.

The centrality of myth in the formation of the Western often finds its reflection in a diegetic mythologizing of its lone central figure. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* presents its townsfolk as in awe of outsider Tom Doniphon. Similarly, *The Searchers*' Ethan Edwards is worshipped by Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter) and *Shane* sees its hero worshipped by the child Joey (Brandon deWilde). This trope of diegetic hero-worship is also evident in *Zero Dark Thirty* when a young CIA operative declares her admiration, adding that she wishes to be just like Maya. And following the idiom of a diffident Western hero, Maya is too focussed

on her work even to look at the young woman.

Related to this idea of the mythologized outsider is Kitses' description of the Western hero as embodying an imperilled community's need for 'strong leadership and sacrifice.'<sup>40</sup> Kristen Day describes typical heroes of the genre as 'natural leaders who demonstrate physical and mental superiority, ... demonstrate a self-restraint that helps them successfully navigate situations where others fail.'<sup>41</sup> This conception of the disciplined 'strong man,' a natural leader whose ingenuity is necessary to protect the imperilled community, is a repeating trope of the Western, suggesting it may form a central part of American foundation mythology, or what John B. Thompson terms the American 'social imaginary.'<sup>42</sup> Indeed, this mythic figure could even be said to bear some resemblance to the self-description of the current American president, who not infrequently characterizes himself as an outsider who is smart, strong and tough enough to protect his putatively imperilled society.<sup>43</sup>

Here again, *Zero Dark Thirty* appears to conform to a Western genre norm. The film presents three separate bomb attacks, serving to emphasize the imperilled nature of the community around Maya. Maya is then differentiated from her colleagues by her superior understanding. She demonstrates superior insight into

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<sup>40</sup> Kitses 2004, 140

<sup>41</sup> Kristen Day, "What Makes a Man to Wander?: The Searchers as a Western Odyssey," *Arethusa*, Vol. 41 No. 1 (Winter 2008):11-49, 15 URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/232477> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>42</sup> John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 6

<sup>43</sup> For an example, see Kevin D. Williamson, "From Ritual to Bromance," *The National Review*, August 4, 2017. URL: <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/450169/donald-trumpstough-guy-image-problem-washington> (accessed December 31, 2017)

al-Qaeda in comparison to her colleague Jessica (Jennifer Ehle). She resists the urge to socialize. She resists the pull of sexual desire. In addition, Maya is presented as possessing greater insight than her three superiors, bringing her into conflict with them such that one remarks ‘it’s her against the world.’ Here again, Maya appears to conform to the genre-typical figure of the leader who is tough, intellectually superior and ready to sacrifice herself for her imperilled community.

In *The Searchers*, it is clear that protagonist Ethan Edwards feels a deep antipathy toward the Comanche. Nevertheless, the film presents him as intimately acquainted with their language, practices and religious rituals. He articulates his enmity and his ease with Comanche culture when he shoots out the eyes of a corpse, explaining: ‘By what that Comanch’ believes, ain’t got no eyes, he can’t enter the spirit land.’<sup>44</sup> Ethan’s extremism in this instance might equally be read as a form of identification. Winkler makes this explicit, suggesting that ‘Ethan is ... in many ways like an Indian himself.’<sup>45</sup> Eckstein notes that Ethan’s knowledge of the Comanche positions him in that film as possessing both the traits of the killer-hero and of the manichean villain.<sup>46</sup>

As *Zero Dark Thirty* progresses, Maya displays a similar familiarity with the culture and practices of her nemesis. Her comprehension of Arabic naming systems surpasses her superior, Dan’s. She begins to wear a headscarf in Islamic fashion. At one point, Maya explains to Jessica that al-Qaeda operatives are motivated by a sense of themselves as holy warriors. After Jessica’s death, Maya

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<sup>44</sup> Day, 20

<sup>45</sup> Winkler, 126

<sup>46</sup> Eckstein, 11

confides in a fellow agent that she believes she has been ‘spared’ in order to complete the task of destroying Bin Laden. This statement makes clear that Maya has developed what might be seen as an irrational or even hysterical understanding of herself as a holy warrior. This is born out in Maya’s unswerving faith in her own conviction, even in the face of CIA uncertainty. By the time she meets the military unit who will undertake the raid on Bin Laden’s compound, Maya has acceded to a level where she sees herself in quasi-spiritual leadership terms, telling the soldiers ‘you’re going to kill [Bin Laden] *for me*’ (my italics). Estranged from social norms, narrowly focussed on her objective, inhabiting the same codes and practices as her foes, Maya can be read as a nomadic, ascetic warrior, willing to subsist far from home, willing to strip away material comfort and willing to commit any act to complete her mission, whatever its physical or ethical cost.

The cost of such mythic status in a Western, of course, is that the protagonist must disappear at the close of the narrative. So *The Searchers* closes with Ethan beyond the threshold of the film’s domestic space. Similarly, Shane rides off into the sunset alone. In these films, the hero is positioned as delivering a civilized world to which he is denied access because of his acts of savagery. However, as Robert Pippin notes, each of these exclusions brings with it a pang of regret: the passing of the mythologized hero from the story’s world is coded to elicit a sense of tragedy.<sup>47</sup>

At the close of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya is framed in a formal, symmetrical shot

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<sup>47</sup> Pippin, 89

with the body bag containing the remains of Osama Bin Laden. Filmed from below eye-height, the shot codes her as both isolated and victorious. The film offers only this fleeting moment of victory, however. The next shot reveals Maya alone in a large military aircraft. In a formally constructed close-up, with a net positioned directly behind her. It's as if she's been caught in her own trap. Asked where she wishes to go, Maya has no answer. She is alone, she has no home, no friends, no apparent future. In the final moment of the film, Maya begins to cry. On one level, this sequence can be understood as a genre-normative ending: Maya must leave the world she has delivered. Yet it is markedly different in tone from the elegiac ending of a film like *Shane*. Maya is pictured in a passive pose. She remains literally and figuratively contained within the CIA's apparatus. She doesn't ride off into the sunset. And unlike *Shane*, there is no pang of regret at her heroic departure. No-one cries for her. Instead, Maya cries for herself. This is a very different comprehension of the mythic hero's narrative destination. It suggests in Maya a certain emotional bankruptcy. Read in this fashion, the film's final moment presents a darker vision of the hero as deracinated, lost, inconsolable. This moment constitutes a break with what we might term classical Western generic forms, an unstable moment reminiscent of later forms of the Western genre, whereby previously accepted cultural enmities are interrogated, and the moral costs of potentially unwarranted revenge weigh heavily. In this respect, *Zero Dark Thirty's* presentation of Maya in this manner could be comprehended as suggesting a reappraisal of the moral costs of her contemporary form of revenge.

In concluding this section, then, we may observe that Maya aligns with many of the key tropes associated with the Western hero. The film appears to position her as actively heroic through the invocation of a set of genre tropes including an oscillation between civilization and savagery, outsider status, single-mindedness, superior insight and the awe in which she is held by junior colleagues. All of these elements serve to code Maya as a classic Western genre hero.

But the film's ending undercuts the otherwise heroic construction of Maya. The ethical and emotional cost of Maya's self-abnegation is presented in clear visual terms through a final close-up depicting her devastation, isolation and grief. In this moment the film appears to invoke later, revisionist constructions that implicitly challenge the mythic, heroic moral code of the killer-hero. In this way, the film could be read as delivering a final, somewhat unexpected, critique of genre norms as they relate to the mythic American hero. To put it in another way, we might comprehend *Zero Dark Thirty* as invoking a familiar, genre-based clarity in its presentation of Maya as conforming to established tropes of the genre Western, before effectively subverting those tropes in its final moments. This comprehension of Maya, however, is incomplete without a full appraisal of her counter-generic nature by virtue of her femaleness. Maya's femaleness is perhaps particularly resonant in that the film invokes the pleasures of the genre Western, a form that can be understood as explicitly focussed on gender - as well as on ethnicity - in its articulation of thematic polarities.



## **Femininity, Ethnicity and the ‘Other’**

*Zero Dark Thirty*'s strategy of gender relations, I argue, conforms to normative thematic polarities encoded in the Western. While Maya's femaleness runs counter to the normative Western idiom of the masculine mythic hero, I contend that she is nonetheless a modern embodiment of that figure. The film even employs a strategy to reframe Maya's professional, sex-based marginalization such that it underscores her status as the outsider hero. With respect to ethnicity, I argue that *Zero Dark Thirty* reproduces discredited strategies of ethnic 'othering' familiar from the Western to depersonalize its Islamic 'other,' conforming to normative genre ideations in this respect much more closely.

Turning first to gender, theorists as diverse as Kitses, Mitchell, Slotkin, Simmon, Tompkins and Wright all identify the genre Western's most prominent feature as its emphasis on the supremacy of white, heterosexual masculinity,<sup>48</sup> as routinely performed by actors like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.<sup>49</sup> Related to this form of masculinity is a concomitant symbolic marginalization of femaleness. Langford and Tompkins, amongst others, note that the Western routinely symbolically aligns its women not just with domesticity, but with triviality, mundanity and obedience.<sup>50</sup> If female characters inflect the plot at all, as Michael S. Kimmel and Gail McGregor note, their narrative positioning is frequently to

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<sup>48</sup> Kitses 2004, 168, 203; Simmon, 118; Slotkin, 153; Lee Clark Mitchell, 4, 8-9, 27, 117, 183, 260; Tompkins, vii, 5-8; Wright, 1

<sup>49</sup> Pippin, 18, 160

<sup>50</sup> Langford 2003, 28; Tompkins, 17, 40, 42, 143, 144

placate, domesticate and regulate the spectacle of violent masculine impulse.<sup>51</sup> The Western then, might be understood as predicated on a thematic dichotomy where autonomy, violence and a necessary savagery are coded masculine, as against a femininity defined by community, deliberation and obedience.

*Zero Dark Thirty* raises the question of gender in its first moments. The film opens with a scene of torture, presenting Maya as a masked, neutrally dressed observer. At the moment Maya removes her mask and reveals her femaleness, the torturer Dan (Jason Clarke) asks if she would rather withdraw from the scene. Given its proximity to the film's revelation of Maya's femaleness, Dan's question seems to infer a gender subtext. Maya immediately violates typical Western gender codes when she chooses to remain in the torture chamber, positioning herself as complicit in the abuse taking place there.

Through the film, Maya continues to oversee brutal violence against US prisoners. When Dan warns Maya at one point not to be 'the last one left holding a dog collar,' in what is clearly a reference to the practices made infamous by US military officer Lynndie England,<sup>52</sup> we may understand Maya as participating in the worst excesses of abuse. *Zero Dark Thirty*, then, does not structure Maya's sex as a signifying determinant in relation to violence or domination, setting the film at odds with a prominent trope of the genre Western. This is not to say that Maya's sex is rendered entirely unproblematic within the film's diegesis. During a torture

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<sup>51</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," in Harry Brod (ed.), *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, 121-154 (Allen and Unwin, Boston: 1987), 121-154; McGregor 1987, 294.

<sup>52</sup> Emma Brockes, "What Happens in War Happens," *The Guardian* January 3, 2009. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/03/abu-ghraib-lyndie-england-interview> (accessed December 19, 2017)

scene where Dan strips bare his victim Ammar (Reda Kateb), Dan explicitly makes Maya's femaleness a source of humiliation for his prisoner. The camera privileges Maya's discomfort in this moment, rendering her - momentarily - structurally aligned with Ammar. The film explores this potential alignment when Ammar appeals directly to Maya for help. However Maya rejects his appeal to their common position, explicitly affirming her complicity with Dan's violence over Ammar's victimhood. It is perhaps significant that this moment marks Maya's initiation into the skills necessary to inflict torture. In this encounter and its aftermath, Maya might be seen to embody Angela Carter's conception of the Sadeian woman. Carter defines this figure as asserting cultural power by rejecting the traditional signs and signifiers of femininity and aligning herself with dominant, coded-masculine forces of subjugation.<sup>53</sup> In this way, *Zero Dark Thirty* might be understood as positioning Maya as a coded-masculine figure, according to the Western social imaginary.

The film's handling of Maya's relation to her CIA superiors can be read as inflected by an interrogation of gender norms, exemplified by three encounters. In the first, her CIA chief in Islamabad dismisses her with a patronizing gesture that could be read as gendered. Maya counters the dismissal with rage, asserting that she 'understands al-Qaeda' better than he. Her assertion is then explicitly born out by the film's events when Maya's predictions prove right and her superior is forced to leave Islamabad. Similarly, Maya's CIA superior in Washington sidelines Maya in what could be read as a gendered manner. Again, Maya's

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<sup>53</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 2006), 8-10

response is indignant rage: she conducts an extended war of attrition against him, emphasizing the superiority of her insight and drive over his. Later in the film, Maya attends an important meeting at CIA headquarters, where she is ordered to sit in a corner. The only woman present, she is explicitly, figuratively and literally marginalized. Maya asserts herself directly and unexpectedly in the ensuing men-only conversation, introducing herself as the ‘motherfucker’ whose discoveries have prompted the meeting in the first place. The film’s use of violent, coded-masculine language at this moment recalls Maya’s violent, coded-masculine cruelty toward Ammar earlier in the film. Through these three encounters, *Zero Dark Thirty* sets up a potential victim position for its protagonist through encounters of gender-based discrimination, only to have her slip from her position by means of a startling assertion of dominance. Through her actions, Maya is presented as the potentially violent, dominant figure who knows best, even as she remains an outsider. In this way, the film could be read as reframing Maya’s gender-based outsider status so as to present it as further evidence of her genre-typical lone hero status.

Maya’s lone hero status is thrown into even sharper relief by Jessica (Jennifer Ehle), Maya’s colleague and fellow female operative. Against Maya’s coded-masculine costume of dark trousers and jackets, Jessica is costumed in more brightly coloured skirts and dresses. Jessica’s concerns are presented as emotional as well as professional. In a key exchange at the Islamabad Marriott, Jessica encourages Maya to ‘be social,’ to drink wine and to ‘hook up’ with Dan. Immediately afterward, the al-Qaeda bomb attack of 2009 takes place. Maya

rescues Jessica from the ensuing carnage when she finds a route out of the building. Directly juxtaposing Jessica's behaviour with the Marriot bomb serves to link Jessica's emotional focus with the danger of al-Qaeda. This linkage of Jessica with danger is made even more explicit later in the film, when Jessica engages emotionally with a new informant. She bakes him a cake and behaves in a trusting manner, permitting him unchecked into Camp Chapman. Here again, Jessica's emotion precipitates an al-Qaeda bomb attack, this time resulting in her death.

With regard to gender, we might infer from these examples that *Zero Dark Thirty* reproduces Western thematic polarities that link masculinity with autonomy, violence and a necessary savagery; while linking femininity with community, emotional connection and vulnerability. In just this way, the film connects Jessica's genre-feminine trait of emotional engagement with vulnerability, such that her feminine trait leads directly to her violent death at the hands of al-Qaeda. However, *Zero Dark Thirty* diverges significantly from the Western idiom when it depicts a female character as unproblematically embodying the masculine pole of this thematic dichotomy. Maya is consistently presented as the dominant, driven, violent, mythic lone hero of the piece. Where the genre Western conventionally marginalizes its female figures both socially and narratively, *Zero Dark Thirty* structures Maya's social marginalization as part of her heroic status, itself a structuring element of her narrative centrality.

Alongside gender, the Western is a genre where ethnicity is also coded into conventional thematic polarities. If the woman is aligned with domesticity,

emotion and vulnerability, the non-White or Native American figure can be understood as typically aligned with savagery, chaos and threat. Indeed, Native Americans in the genre Western of the period under discussion are routinely presented as what Ken Nolley calls ‘a savage presence set in opposition to the advance of American civilization.’<sup>54</sup> With a few notable exceptions, Tompkins describes Native Americans in Westerns of the period as menacing ‘props, bits of local colour, textural effects.’<sup>55</sup> Seen as a threatening group in films like *Red River* and *Rio Grande*, Native Americans are frequently positioned as ‘unknowable and menacing Others,’ as Daniel Bernardi puts it.<sup>56</sup> This form of depersonalized depiction leads Scott Simmons and Steve Neale, amongst others, to observe that nothing is so consistent in the Western genre as its racism.<sup>57</sup>

Richard Maltby identifies the genre’s endemic racism as one of the reasons for its fall into relative abeyance since the mid-1970s. He sees the emergence of a consensus toward the extension of human rights to people of colour as responsible for this shift, where ‘the classical imperial narrative of heroic repression ... can no longer be told.’<sup>58</sup> Maltby may be right when he identifies the reasons for the genre

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<sup>54</sup> Ken Nolley, “The Representation of Conquest: John Ford and the Hollywood Indian (1939-1964),” in Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor (ed.s), *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, 73-90 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 80

<sup>55</sup> Tompkins, 4

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Bernardi and Michael Green, *Race in American Film: Voices and Visions that Shaped a Nation* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood, 2017), 742

<sup>57</sup> Simmon, 3-15; Steve Neale, “Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-War ‘Pro-Indian’ Westerns,” in Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pierson (ed.s), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, 8-28 (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 21

<sup>58</sup> Richard Maltby, “A Better Sense of History: John Ford and the Indians,” in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (ed.s), *The Movie Book of the Western*, 34-49 (London: Cassell, 1996), 49

Western's fall from popularity, but it is worth investigating whether those 'classical imperial narratives' have indeed disappeared, or whether, in Altman's terms, the syntax of such racism has merely migrated from the Western semantic form to the spy thriller semantic form.

If we compare the Native Americans of the classical Western with Islamic people in *Zero Dark Thirty*, we find certain alignments in terms of representation. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of Islamabad creates a palpable sense of threat through shots of nameless Pakistani men, seen from afar, using forms which are typical of certain genre Westerns, where the 'other' is presented as what Nolley calls 'a savage presence set in opposition to the advance of American civilization.'<sup>59</sup> Maya is subject to two attacks that serve to underscore Pakistani people as alien and inexplicable, in the much the same way in which Native Americans are presented in films like *Rio Grande*.<sup>60</sup> In one, crowds of Pakistanis bang on Maya's car windows, shouting incomprehensible slogans and waving signs. The protesters' signs are in Arabic, not in Punjabi or English, despite the film's Pakistani location; an oversight that may perhaps be understood as an indication of the film's generalizing approach to its Islamic figures.

Similarly, the Arabic detainees whom Maya interrogates or whose interrogation she watches on monitors remain nameless, interchangeable and unknowable. The unknowability of Arabic men is further emphasized when Maya examines a wall of suspects, all of Arabic or central-Asian extraction. The film makes explicit its depersonalization of these men when the plot turns on the difficulty of telling

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<sup>59</sup> Nolley, 80

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 84

them apart from one another. And in another parallel with Western depictions of unknowable Native Americans, *Zero Dark Thirty* presents a group of local men in long-shot, just as the US Navy Seals attack Bin Laden's Pakistani compound. In a scene reminiscent of the tone of *Rio Grande*, local Pakistani men are depicted in silhouette, seen from afar, unresponsive to any communication, a shadowy menace which inspires fear in the soldiers.

It's clear that the semantics of the story landscape here are different from those of the Western, but the syntactic presentation of an unknowable, undifferentiated, threatening group appears markedly similar. In these respects, then, the representations of Islamic peoples in *Zero Dark Thirty* might be said to align with those Western representations of Native Americans as they appear in films of the period under discussion.

The genre Western of the period in question does occasionally feature a clear, defined Native American character in the form of an antagonist. This is a figure whom Pippin characterizes as an incarnation of 'anarchistic violence.'<sup>61</sup> *The Searchers*, for instance, features a central, narratively absent Native American called Scar, who is responsible for the violent destruction of a white family.<sup>62</sup> Here again, we find *Zero Dark Thirty* provides a parallel incarnation. Osama Bin Laden is presented as the absent, almost passive inspiration for three separate, lethal explosions in the film. Through its direct narrative link between Maya's quest to discover his whereabouts and these three chaotic, devastating events, *Zero Dark Thirty* can be understood as implicitly positioning Bin Laden as the

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<sup>61</sup> Pippin, 89

<sup>62</sup> Day, 14



author of Pippin's 'anarchistic violence.' Distinct from the active antagonist of a spy thriller, this is a figure whose initial act, preceding the film's action, is structured as sufficient to trigger an ongoing, destabilizing threat to civilized, American cultural values.

In contrast to its presentation of Arabic people, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s final act introduces a set of new characters in the form of a Navy Seals squad. These men are led by an amiable soldier played by Joel Edgerton. Despite their late appearance in the film's running time, this group is afforded an interlude of small talk, allowing them humour and individuality. Four of the squad members are even given character names.

Positioned low, the camera implicitly presents this group of soldiers as possessed of an heroic aspect. Further close-ups emphasise their youth, their beauty, their playfulness. In one key scene, the film positions Maya alone, watching the soldiers play affectionately with one another. Her reverie is interrupted by a call confirming that the Seals are to attack Bin Laden's compound. The film's relation to the young men shifts palpably, as actor Jessica Chastain performs Maya's concern for the soldiers' safety. In this sequence, *Zero Dark Thirty* might be said to collapse into the form of a captivity narrative, retaining a formal 'soldier's eye view,' with a strong emphasis on the men's fear. This privileging of the soldier's subjectivity is in sharp contrast to the film's treatment of its Arabic figures.

*Zero Dark Thirty* does offer certain countervailing moments, however. A senior white CIA officer, referred to as The Wolf (Fredric Lehne), is shown at Muslim

prayer. His religious practice appears to be structured into the film with the express intention of disrupting expectation. Similarly, during the attack on Bin Laden's compound, the camera finds a young Muslim girl, wide-eyed with terror. Lit by a torch, the cinematography bestows a subjective individuality on her in her abject fear. The women in the compound are afforded similar close-up frames emphasising their confusion and fear, although none is named or given the level of humanity afforded the Navy Seals.

To summarize, the film's presentation of gender relations conforms to normative thematic polarities that code as masculine values like independence, suspicion and violence, and that code as feminine values like interdependence, emotional connection and vulnerability. While Maya's femaleness runs counter to normative Western generic ideations of the masculine mythic hero, in almost every other respect, she aligns closely with that masculine hero figure. Her femaleness is however recognized within the film's diegesis, in that she is depicted as occasionally marginalized by her community on the basis of her sex. The film then effectively reframes Maya's sex-based marginalization to position that marginalization as part of her status as mythic, outsider hero.

With respect to ethnicity, *Zero Dark Thirty* might be read as conforming to normative ideations much more closely. Bin Laden is presented as the uninflected locus of genre-Western violent threat: he could be seen as a manifestation of the genre's unknowable and dangerous 'other.' In the same way, the film's Pakistani and Arabic figures remain largely undifferentiated and unnamed. By contrast, the film allows its US soldiers full subjectivity against a structured threat by unknown

and unknowable Pakistani men, women and children. In this respect, *Zero Dark Thirty* appears to use contemporary semantics to articulate the same kind of discredited race-based syntax identified as typical of classical Westerns. However the film's 'othering' of Arabic and Islamic people is occasionally disrupted in visual terms. The display of a senior CIA official at Muslim prayer inserts a counter-normative figure. And the visual presentation of frightened women and children in the Bin Laden compound can be understood as muddying founding generic structural oppositions of 'us' and 'them.' However, the film appears to reinforce just these structural oppositions in its presentation of the cultural conditions within which the story takes place.

### **Cultural Context: Manifest Destiny and Virtuous Violence**

*Zero Dark Thirty's* engagement with the broader politics surrounding its narrative terrain can be understood through a twofold analytical focus. Firstly, an examination of the film's presentation of those events surrounding the US's illegal invasion of Pakistan reveals its conformity to dominant ideological positions associated with Western genre conventions, most particularly to the ideology of manifest destiny. Secondly, an analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty's* presentation of torture reveals a broad adherence to genre Western conventions of white victimhood as against unalloyed threat from Native Americans / 'others.'

Slotkin describes the genre-typical Western as conforming to an American myth of Western settlement known as manifest destiny.<sup>63</sup> Manifest destiny could

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<sup>63</sup> Slotkin, 12

be defined as an ideology ascribing the inalienable - even divine - right of colonial settlers to expand into new territories unimpeded.<sup>64</sup> Kristen Day notes that the logic behind manifest destiny reflects a worldview whereby violence and aggression is projected exclusively onto the colonized, with colonization becoming a means of bestowing civilization and culture on lands previously savage and dangerous.<sup>65</sup> This reasoning sees Western cinematic mythology perform the ideological 'rope trick' of making Native Americans responsible for instigating what Slotkin calls a 'savage war of extermination' on white settlers, despite the fact that it was white settlers who encroached on Native American territory and decimated their population.<sup>66</sup>

An uncontested manifest destiny backdrop could be read as implicit in the narrative conditions of *Zero Dark Thirty*. The American military presence in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East is positioned as an *a priori* set of circumstances that is not interrogated or questioned within the film's diegesis. In addition, manifest destiny appears to be in play with regard to Maya's objective to kill Bin Laden. The film opens at a point where Maya has already been tasked with finding and killing the al-Qaeda leader. Her objective is never interrogated by any character or indeed by any implicit formal means. Rather, Maya's goal of murder is presented as moral, rational and unproblematic.

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<sup>64</sup> For a fuller discussion of the concept of manifest destiny, see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3; Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: the Idea of America's Millennial Role* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 91; Trevor B. McCrisken, "Exceptionalism: Manifest Destiny," in Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns and Fredrik Logevall (ed.s), *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy Vol. 2* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 68

<sup>65</sup> Day, 38

<sup>66</sup> Slotkin, 12-13

This unproblematic assertion of moral murder could be read as rooted in the sense of injury occasioned by the horrors of 9/11. As Joanna Eagle points out, American culture has consistently derived a certain sense of identity from occasions of apparent injury, vulnerability and loss. For example, President Bush's simple promise 'we will not forget,' uttered on the first anniversary of 9/11, resonates with previous, historical American assertions of manifest destiny such as 'Remember the Alamo,' or 'Remember Pearl Harbour.'<sup>67</sup>

This sense of injury might be understood as the impetus toward a similar ideological rope trick to that involved in the logic of manifest destiny. *Zero Dark Thirty* conducts just such a rope trick when it presents Mark Strong's CIA chief George as informing Maya and her team that al-Qaeda is winning this 'war.' His evidence is that his 'kill list' contains more names than there are CIA operatives in the room. Even within the diegesis, this appears a strange comparison. Nonetheless, it serves to conjure an emotional sense of the US as outnumbered and outgunned, engaged in defending against just the kind of 'savage war of extermination' Slotkin sees as projected onto the Native American nation. George's order 'Bring me people to kill' is presented in this context as an unproblematic and acceptable response by the CIA to an exterminatory danger apparently presented by al-Qaeda.

*Zero Dark Thirty* presents its breach of Pakistani airspace by US Navy Seals in similar terms, couching it as part of a legitimate, defensive strategy designed to protect the humanized, characterful Seals. As a corollary, the Pakistani military

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<sup>67</sup> Jonna Eagle, *Imperial Affects: Sensational Melodrama and the Attractions of American Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 2-3

response to this US invasion is effectively delegitimized within the diegesis, presented as a threat and a ticking clock against which the Seals' escape is timed. However, the same sequence does undercut some of the expectations we might associate with manifest destiny in that it presents as anticlimactic the moment of Osama Bin Laden's death. The tense, subjective sequence of the Navy Seals' raid ends with a killing that appears almost accidental. It is presented devoid of bloodlust or emotional release, referenced verbally rather than presented as cinematic spectacle. This strategy denies the dubious pleasures of looking in relation to bodily mutilation, and might be read as marking a resistance in the film to the triumphalist emotional logic that inheres in manifest destiny ideology.

Turning to the question of *Zero Dark Thirty's* handling of torture, the film's presentation of this practice bears significant relation to genre conventions of the Western. Films like *Red River*, *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* are notable in refusing to resolve a central tension between the savagery of the amoral, mythic hero and the more deliberative nature of democratizing, progressive forces. Thus *Red River* leaves open whether to privilege Dunson's violent, autocratic, charismatic hero (John Wayne) or the more consensus-oriented, ethically-driven Matthew Garth (Montgomery Clift).<sup>68</sup> *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* offers the same dichotomy, played out between John Wayne's gunslinger Tom Doniphon, coded as representing values of violence and summary justice as against Jimmy Stewart's Ransom Stoddard, coded as representing democracy and the rule of law.<sup>69</sup> The latter film presents Tom

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<sup>68</sup> Pippin, 40

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 89-90

Doniphon's amoral murder of Liberty Valance as a heroic act of self-sacrifice, an act which is necessary in order to usher in Stoddard's reign of democratic order.<sup>70</sup> Doniphon is thus rendered a tragic figure, a character whose charismatic, 'moral' violence Pippin sees as 'a deeply held American fantasy.'<sup>71</sup>

The figure of Maya, as we have seen, bears a close resemblance to those mythic, violent heroes epitomized by Thomas Dunson, Ethan Edwards and Tom Doniphon. She is isolated, amoral, self-sacrificing. As the film progresses, *Zero Dark Thirty* positions Maya explicitly against a genre-typical counter force of obstructive, slow-to-action Washington advisors. Thus, when a defence advisor in *Zero Dark Thirty* resists Maya's drive to attack Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, he defends his position by describing President Obama as a 'thoughtful, rational guy.' In this moment *Zero Dark Thirty* can be understood as aligning its fictional Obama with Western figures like Matthew Garth and Ransom Stoddard: figures who champion consensus, democracy and the rule of law. However in the moral universe of the Western, these figures are understood to rely implicitly on the brutish, amoral support of a Thomas Dunson or Tom Doniphon. In just this way, *Zero Dark Thirty* can be read as suggesting that Maya's violence is justified because it protects Obama's rule of law, but that Obama's rule of law in itself is an impediment to Maya's justified violence. This genre-rooted tension is most clearly articulated in the film's engagement with torture.

*Zero Dark Thirty* is unequivocal in its presentation of Maya as a torturer. Although it resists presenting any direct imagery of her abuses, she is present

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, 97

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 53

when Dan tortures Ammar near the film's beginning, and her practices are referenced numerous times through dialogue and through scenes of aftermath. Bigelow and Boal have asserted the necessity of presenting torture as part of their film, using the argument of *Zero Dark Thirty* as a 'reported film.'<sup>72</sup> But as a Hollywood genre film, *Zero Dark Thirty* is subject to the conditions of mainstream narrative fiction: it cannot but ascribe a moral valency to the events it presents.

In this context, Aryeh Neier observes that *Zero Dark Thirty* 'foster[s] the acceptance of torture.'<sup>73</sup> Steve Coll argues that it 'may well affect the unresolved public debate about torture, to which the film makes a distorted contribution.'<sup>74</sup> Indeed, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s claim as a 'reported film' so outraged three US senators that they wrote an open letter to the head of the CIA. Their concern was not that the film depicts CIA operatives engaged in torture. By the time of the film's release, the CIA policy of 'enhanced interrogation' was already widely known, widely castigated and had been discontinued for several years. Rather, the senators took issue with what they read as the film's presentation of torture as valid, in that it leads to the discovery of Osama Bin Laden.<sup>75</sup>

This question of whether *Zero Dark Thirty* presents torture as valid is a question that was of such cultural and political urgency at the time of its release

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Cieply and Brooks

<sup>73</sup> Aryeh Neier, "Between Dignity and Human Rights," *Dissent* Vol. 60, No. 2 (Spring 2013): 60-65, 65. URL: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/dss/summary/v060/60.2.neier.html> (accessed December 31, 2017)

<sup>74</sup> Steve Coll, "Zero Dark Thirty," *New York Review of Books* Feb 7, 2013. URL: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/02/07/disturbing-misleading-zero-dark-thirty/> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*



that it exercised the highest levels of American government. Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Dianne Feinstein and the two senior members of the Armed Services Committee, Democrat Carl Levin and Republican John McCain, together describe *Zero Dark Thirty* as having ‘the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner.’<sup>76</sup> CIA director Michael Morel agreed, warning that ‘[t]he film creates the strong impression that the enhanced interrogation techniques...were the key to finding Bin Laden,’ an impression he believed to be false.<sup>77</sup> Michael Hayden, the last CIA director to work under the Bush presidency, weighed in on the debate, defending the film and arguing that information elicited through the ‘enhanced interrogation of detainees’ in Guantanamo proved vital to the CIA search for Osama Bin Laden.<sup>78</sup>

As I have demonstrated, *Zero Dark Thirty* is not so much an unmediated journalistic report of events as it is a fictional, mythologized re-presentation of those events in accordance with a set of specific genre-based ideations. Its semantic surface of verisimilitude masks a cathartic syntax made from recognizable Western tropes, rooted in the American social imaginary. The question that *Zero Dark Thirty* codes into its presentation of torture is indeed a central question of US policy with regard to torture. It also the question posed by Westerns such as *Red River*: It is the question of whether savagery can ever be understood as necessary, or whether it is always an egregious moral transgression.

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Mark Bowden, “*Zero Dark Thirty* Is Not Pro-Torture,” *The Atlantic* January 3, 2013. URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/zero-dark-thirty-is-not-pro-torture/266759/> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>78</sup> Coll

And it is my contention that *Zero Dark Thirty* bears comparison with *Red River* in that it is more equivocal in how it addresses this question than Feinstein or McCain permit.

As noted earlier, *Zero Dark Thirty* opens with a black screen, over which play authentic audio recordings of emergency calls made during the 9/11 attacks. The film's first image is of Ammar, who is tied up, bloodied and bruised, *in media res* as he is tortured by the American CIA agent, Dan. By the conventions of cinematic montage, the narrative implication is that the former recordings have led to the latter torture. The camera is positioned above Ammar and below Dan, rendering Dan a brutal power and Ammar a helpless, wounded victim. The scene prompts a certain emotional confusion. Coming directly after the distressing 9/11 recordings, the scene might be seen as an articulation of righteous anger and revenge. Dan's anger is palpable, yet the cinematography subverts emotional engagement and creates an implicit sympathy for Ammar. A close-up of actor Jessica Chastain structures a certain reluctance into Maya's actions, but she nonetheless actively participates in Ammar's waterboarding. Maya pulls off her black mask and reveals her face to her captive, an action which can be read as indicating her toughness and amorality. This scene appears to be carefully constructed in order to balance two potential readings: one favouring the torture victim, but another tending toward a valorization of 'toughness.'

Further scenes present Maya assisting Dan in sexually humiliating Ammar, depriving him of sleep through the blasting of loud music and confining him in a box. Moreover, throughout his torture, *Zero Dark Thirty's* diegesis emphasizes

that Ammar does not offer reliable information. Indeed, as his suffering increases, so his resistance appears to harden. Maya's first autonomous act is to create an alternative to torture in the hope of eliciting information from Ammar. She offers him a comfortable meal, returning to him a sense of dignity. Significantly, it is at this juncture that Ammar proffers the vital clue which precipitates the film's narrative action. These two sequences, when taken together, might suggest that the film is structured to document abusive practices, but with a bias against their efficacy. In this respect, the film appears to adhere to the tenets of later Westerns like John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), where the moral balance is tipped toward a comprehension of the white settlers as engaged in unwarranted violence.

And yet the film presents Maya as increasingly comfortable with torture techniques as the film progresses. She threatens a high-level Arab prisoner, she interrogates another detainee by encouraging a soldier to slap him at intervals. Although it is not shown, through dialogue the film makes clear that Maya has been involved in even more degraded forms of torture. Dan, Maya's boss and the film's most emblematic figure of CIA torture policy, is presented in several visceral scenes as an efficient and dispassionate torturer. As the political landscape around him shifts from the Bush to the Obama administration, so the figure of Dan transforms from a torturer in jeans to a suited Washington CIA executive. The film permits him regret at being responsible for what he sees as dirty but necessary work, but his ethical conduct is not questioned or interrogated within the diegesis, and he suffers no editorial retribution for his actions.

In line with this apparent tacit approval of the CIA's techniques, *Zero Dark*

*Thirty* presents a view of CIA operatives as unified in their commitment to torture. In this respect, the film does not appear to reflect the intense moral controversy that reportedly raged within the organization in relation to ‘enhanced interrogation.’ CIA operative Ali H. Soufan recalls many conflicts within the Agency, quoting one operative as declaring ‘[t]here are the Geneva Conventions on torture. It’s not worth losing myself for this.’<sup>79</sup> A senior Pentagon lawyer risked his career in an attempt to stop the practice from spreading to the military.<sup>80</sup> And after some years of internal strife, the CIA finally abandoned the practice of water boarding over concerns that it constitutes a war crime. It is notable that the film does not include any such controversy.

The film extends this apparently favourable view of torture when it presents the shift from Bush to Obama as marking an arid period in Maya’s search. Clues dry up, frustrated CIA operatives feel unable to move forward. George, Maya’s CIA chief, complains to a Washington advisor that he can’t progress his search for Bin Laden because terrorist detainees are ‘lawyered-up.’ This evidence suggests a film that aligns more directly with earlier Westerns like *Shane* or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: a film that appears to validate the need for savagery in order to forestall an encroaching threat to civilization.

*Zero Dark Thirty* was made with the collaboration of the CIA. Alex Gibney has suggested that the film suffers from ‘access drift’: a tendentiousness in the film’s

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<sup>79</sup> Ali H. Soufan, *The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda* (London: Penguin, 2011), 71

<sup>80</sup> Jane Mayer, “Zero Conscience in *Zero Dark Thirty*,” *The New Yorker* December 14, 2012. URL: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/zero-conscience-in-zero-dark-thirty> (accessed December 29, 2017)

narrative rooted in the film makers' unique access to the senior CIA operatives' perspective.<sup>81</sup> In this respect, Bigelow's assertion of *Zero Dark Thirty* as a 'reported film' appears even less accurate. Rather than reporting a conflicted history, the film might be seen as mythologizing a fictional unity of perspective.

But the film's early privileging of Ammar's suffering finds a later echo in the film's narrative. Maya discovers an important clue has been in US possession all along, provided by a foreign government in a spirit of collaboration after the 9/11 attacks. Given that the clue was freely offered, and given that it was not obtained by means of CIA torture, the anticlimax of this moment might be seen as a destabilization of the CIA's torture policy. The provision of the crucial clue might be understood as reconfiguring the film's earlier presentation of torture as a strategy less fruitful than alternative, legal, collaborative practices. Working from this perception, we might comprehend *Zero Dark Thirty* as in conflict with its earlier Western genre antecedents on this point, privileging - however obliquely - the coded-feminine strategies of trust and collaboration over the valorized coded-masculine strategies of suspicion and coercion.

In addition, *Zero Dark Thirty* features a scene where Maya discusses al-Qaeda with her CIA colleagues in Islamabad. A television displays Barack Obama's appearance on US investigative documentary *Sixty Minutes*. Diegetic dialogue ceases long enough to allow Obama's words 'America does not torture, we must regain our moral stature in the world' to resonate. It could be argued that this formal construction offers a sufficiency of information to permit a double-

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Matt Taibbi, "Zero Dark Thirty Is Osama bin Laden's Last Victory Over America," *Rolling Stone* January 16, 2013. URL: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/zero-dark-thirty-is-osama-bin-ladens-last-victory-over-america-20130116> (accessed December 31, 2017)

experience, where the moral question of torture is implicitly raised by the film's formal construction, even if the film's characters fail to engage with it. In this moment of double-experience, the film might be understood as aligned with a similar moment of double-experience in *The Searchers*. In that film, a moment occurs where the film's protagonist and his associates are in direct conflict with a Comanche village, home of the film's villain. At the same time as the hero attacks the village, Glenn Frankel sees the film itself as offering an implicit alternative narrative through its presentation of the Native American families within the village attempting to shield their children from harm.<sup>82</sup>

To summarize, *Zero Dark Thirty* appears to display strong evidence of a contemporary form of manifest destiny, in that there is no narrative interrogation of the roots of al-Qaeda, no interrogation of the roots of American presence in Pakistan, Afghanistan or the Middle East. The film presents the atrocity of 9/11 as the beginning of a necessary defensive strategy, explicitly positioning the CIA's drive to track down and summarily execute Osama Bin Laden as rooted in his manichean threat to America. With regard to torture, the film appears to oscillate between two positions. On one hand, the film's principle torture victim is afforded a name. His suffering is presented as horrific, filmed in such a way as to align the viewer with his anguish rather than with the desires of the torturers. In addition, the film does not link torture to the detection of Bin Laden, but instead presents a combination of Maya's ingenuity, international co-operation and old-fashioned spy work as leading to success. In this way, the film appears to valorize the rule of

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<sup>82</sup> Glenn Frankel, *The Searchers: The Making of an American Legend* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 62

law over savagery. On the other hand, the film presents the deliberative politics of a functional democracy as obstacles to Maya's progress. It permits its chief torturer to suffer no consequences for his behaviour (in fact he is promoted) and it mythologizes a fictional CIA that is unified in its support of torture. In this respect, the film appears to condone the savage, amoral actions it portrays.

Seen in this light, *Zero Dark Thirty* appears to suspend its narrative at the centre of a genre-Western thematic dichotomy, oscillating between the opposing poles of summary justice and the rule of law. Like the Westerns *Red River* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, it presents its killer-hero's violent charisma as useful and necessary, while also valorizing the principles of deliberative democracy. With respect to invasion and torture, then, the film might be said to elide a vigorously contested ethical history in favour of a specific, genre-normative founding myth of American identity.

### **Conclusion: Reporting History, Reviving Myth**

This chapter demonstrated that *Zero Dark Thirty* offers significant strategies toward the disestablishment of repressive gender representation within the context of the spy thriller and the syntactic Western, while largely conforming to generic hegemonies with respect to ethnic difference, as well as producing an at-best ambivalent perspective on the political origins of its narrative.

The film's central figure, Maya, is notable by virtue of her femaleness. Aside from her sex, as a protagonist, she conforms to Western genre norms in oscillating between the film's generic thematic poles of civilization and savagery, the rule of

law and summary justice. The final execution of her task leaves Maya in a stateless narrative predicament familiar from the genre Western. However the film's ending serves to undermine Maya's heroic construction. Rather than position Maya as a mythic hero whose violence is tinged with adventure and excitement, the film's final scene appears to privilege the ethical and emotional cost of her pursuit. In this respect, *Zero Dark Thirty* could be described as supporting the central tenet of the Western, but undercutting one of its most potent elements at the final moment.

Within the context of the genre Western, it's clear that Maya's femaleness operates as a significant disrupter. Structured along the coded-masculine tenets familiar to the genre Western, Maya's character bears none of the hallmarks of a normative Western female figure. The film nonetheless acknowledges Maya's femaleness by peopling the narrative with male figures who serve to marginalize her on the basis of her sex. The film co-opts another Western genre convention in folding Maya's sex-based marginalization into the generic trope of the outsider, effectively repositioning her along coded masculine lines associated with the genre's lone hero. In this way, Maya's marginalization serves narratively to empower rather than to disempower her.

With respect to ethnicity, *Zero Dark Thirty* appears to conform to normative ideations much more closely. Echoing the positioning of Native Americans in a classical genre Western, *Zero Dark Thirty* positions Pakistani and Arabic people as largely threatening and unknowable. By contrast, the film allows its US soldiers full subjectivity against a structured Pakistani / Arab threat. In this way, it



is clear that *Zero Dark Thirty* privileges white, US subjectivity and dehumanizes Pakistani and Arab subjectivity, using tropes identified as typical of Western films. Like *The Hurt Locker*, then, the film can be understood as relatively uncritically reproducing damaging cultural stereotypes with respect to its representation of Arab and Pakistani people.

However three formal constructions offer Islamic people a moment of subjectivity within the diegesis, disrupting the seamlessness of the film's positioning of them as 'other.' Incidental to the story, these three constructions nonetheless provide some counterbalance to the film's white American perspective. In addition, through the film's narrative, Maya begins to reflect traits associated with the object of her quest. In this way, the film offers a potential reading of Maya's subjectivity as irrational, hysterical, self-abnegating and subject to the same tropes of holy-warrior-identification as her Islamist opponents. While the film offers no exploration of al-Qaeda's perspective, its positioning of Maya in this way destabilizes to some degree the hegemonic polarities reflected through genre cinema where white European civilization is valorized over a savage 'other.'

With regard to illegal invasion and torture, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s unproblematic presentation of the CIA's conflicts across the globe suggests a contemporary revivification of the manifest destiny ideology that underpins a number of genre Westerns. The film presents deliberative politics as a frustrating obstacle to be overcome, and appears to mythologize and valorize the CIA in its conflict with Obama over torture. However, the film offers a subjective, visceral experience of torture through the figure of Ammar, and constructs its narrative such that torture

is not a contributory factor in Maya's ultimate success.

In summary, it is clear that, rather than being a 'reported film,' *Zero Dark Thirty* harnesses defined, familiar Western genre tropes to effectively mythologize a recent key turning point in American history, thereby reinvigorating a sustaining myth of American identity. In inhabiting this narrative territory, the film shifts uneasily between the central thematic dichotomies of a traditional Western. While it effectively disestablishes genre rigidities around sex and gender, it largely supports normative ethnic 'othering', where Arabic and Pakistani figures are presented in the main as unknowable and disordered. Its generic, autocratic Western hero, who rails against the limitations of deliberative democracy, can be viewed as invigorating a radical right agenda in tacitly supporting the CIA practice of torture. Yet the construction of its plot, combined with the depiction of emotional bankruptcy that defines the film's final moments, suggests that the film strategically undercuts its own apparent support for this agenda. The final moments of the film can be comprehended as presenting the protagonist's genre-normative violence as profoundly destructive.

Perhaps the film's contradictions might most appropriately be understood as a strategy providing a sufficiency of 'calm pleasures' to produce genre familiarity and thereby draw a broad viewership, before offering a radical disestablishment of certain key genre tropes, generating 'exhilarated pleasures'<sup>83</sup> whereby some of the most entrenched, founding myths of the American imaginary are interrogated.

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<sup>83</sup> These terms refer to that definition of aesthetic pleasure outlined in the Introduction, drawn from Thomas Armstrong and Brian Detweiler-Bedell, "Beauty as an Emotion: The Exhilarating Prospect of Mastering a Challenging world," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2008): 305-359, 312. URL: <http://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2008-17010-001> (accessed March 27, 2018)

This interrogation might prove a successful strategy toward opening up a broader American cultural conversation whereby dominant, increasingly xenophobic and misogynist expressions of national identity can be publicly examined and critiqued. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the film's strategy of reframing gender and cultural identity is achieved at the cost of a reaffirmation of certain damaging, culturally conventional, ethnic and political ideations. In this respect, the film's strategies might be understood as echoing those strategies employed by *The Hurt Locker*.

### 3. *IN THE CUT*: AGENCY AND ANXIETY IN THE EROTIC NEO-NOIR

In this chapter, I examine Jane Campion's 2003 work, *In The Cut*, in relation to dominant tropes and idioms of the erotic thriller, where that genre is understood as a contemporary form of *noir*. I argue that *In The Cut* offers a recognizable Hollywood erotic thriller that nonetheless radically reframes the genre's central thematic dichotomy of desire and danger. I outline how the film reconfigures genre tropes in the construction of its protagonist to privilege female desire and anxiety, inflecting the *noir* conventions of linguistic play with a metatextual resonance and 'feminizing' the *noir* city. I profile how the film addresses gender relations by harnessing the *noir* genre trope of twinning to articulate and valorize divergent expressions of masculinity and femininity. And in its expression of cultural context, I outline the film's reframing of key erotic thriller tropes of sexual display. In addition, I identify how *In The Cut* collapses into a retrogressive depiction of ethnic difference by aligning blackness with the body and sexuality. I conclude that *In The Cut* offers significant strategies toward a form of Hollywood genre cinema that disestablishes repressive gender representation and conventional gender meanings, but that the film fails effectively to interrogate repressive conventions of ethnic and cultural ideation that inhere in its Hollywood genre form.

*In The Cut* is an adaptation of a novel by Susanne Moore and the sixth feature film by writer-director Jane Campion. It tells the story of Frannie Avery (Meg Ryan), a lonely New York English teacher. A brutal rape-murder near her building leads her to become erotically entangled with dubiously charming police

detective, James Malloy (Mark Ruffalo). Through the film, the mysterious serial rapist-murderer inches ever closer to Frannie, just as Frannie and Malloy circle around one another, desiring and distrustful. The film was broadly recognized on its release as addressing the conventions of the erotic thriller,<sup>1</sup> a genre category that can be seen as informed by that spectrum of screen stories we refer to as *film noir*.

A full discussion of *noir* in its various contested forms, iterations and interpretations is beyond the limits of this chapter. For the purposes of this analysis, I create a working definition of *noir* to focus on the most salient tropes relating to *In The Cut*. I trace these tropes briefly through ‘classic’ Hollywood *noir* to their fresh efflorescence from the late 1980s and into the 2000s, where they coalesce into the erotic thriller, in order clearly to outline the genre norms and conventions on which *In The Cut* draws.

### **Genre Context: Noir, Neo-Noir and the Erotic Thriller**

For the purposes of analyzing *In The Cut*, it’s necessary to establish a delimiting definition of that spectrum of films commonly associated with the term *noir*. James Naremore notes the term’s first appearance in the late 1940s among

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<sup>1</sup> see Lesley Felperin, “In The Cut,” *Sight and Sound* (December 2003) URL: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/1097> (accessed January 10 2018); Roger Ebert, “In The Cut,” October 31, 2003. URL: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/in-the-cut-2003> (accessed December 26 2017); Jonathan Romney, “In The Cut” *The Independent*, Sunday November 2, 2003. URL <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/in-the-cut-734424.html> (accessed January 10, 2018); A.O. Scott, “A Mystery of Language, A Mystery of Murder,” *New York Times* October 22, 2003. URL: <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E05EED71E3EF931A15753C1A9659C8B63> (accessed January 10, 2018)

French cinéastes, used to describe a particular form of Hollywood thriller.<sup>2</sup> The thrillers they identified drew heavily on German Expressionist conventions established by aesthetically bold, erotically-charged melodramas like *Doktor Mabuse* (Fritz Lang, 1922), *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931) and *Der Blaue Engel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930). There is some debate as to whether these earlier films constitute a kind of proto-*noir*; but for the purposes of this study, I adhere to Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's contention that *noir* is an indigenous American genre form produced through Hollywood.<sup>3</sup>

Even delimiting it to Hollywood cinema, the term *noir* contains within its definitions a sprawling territory of various subgroups and divisions. Naremore offers the narrative of *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) as an irrefutably *noir* film,<sup>4</sup> arguing for a definition of the term to include a network of films connected to or influenced by earlier, irrefutably *noir* films of that type. This is a curiously reflexive definition, where *noir* films are defined by films already defined as *noir*. However it reflects what Elizabeth Cowie observes as 'a devotion among *aficionados* that suggests a desire for the very category as such, a wish that it exist in order to 'have' a certain set of films all together.'<sup>5</sup>

The desire to 'have' a certain set of films together suggests, as Raymond Durnat points out, that *film noir* is primarily a form of classification by motif and

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<sup>2</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41; Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 24

<sup>3</sup> Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward (ed.s), *Film Noir* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 1

<sup>4</sup> Naremore, 1998: 6

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir*, 121-166 (London: Verso, 1993), 121

tone.<sup>6</sup> The tone in question is described by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton as ‘oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent and cruel,’<sup>7</sup> conjuring a story world where ‘good and evil go hand in hand to the point of being indistinguishable.’<sup>8</sup> Robert Porfirio refers to this tone as a ‘black vision,’ a mood of existential ‘despair, loneliness and dread’<sup>9</sup> that Foster Hirsh describes as ‘dislocation and bleakness.’<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps we might declare tone as a precondition for a film’s inclusion in the *noir* genre, but to define the genre exclusively by tone is too broad for the purposes of this study. In addition to tone, a case can be made for specific narrative and formal elements as definitive of the genre, allowing us to narrow the definition. Narratively, Paul Schrader identifies *noir*’s thematic focus on crime and corruption.<sup>11</sup> R. Barton Palmer points to the theme of social breakdown.<sup>12</sup> Janey Place notes the centrality of the isolated, deracinated hero.<sup>13</sup> And Katherine Farrimond, Philippa Gates, Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe are among the scholars who identify the thematic interweaving of sexuality and danger as a

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Durnat, “Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir,” in Alain Silver and James Ursini (ed.s), *Film Noir Reader*, 37-52 (New Jersey: Limelight Editions, 2006), 38

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, Paul Hammond (trans.) *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941 - 1953*, Paul Hammond (trans.) (San Francisco: City Lights Books 2002), 2

<sup>8</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, 25

<sup>9</sup> Robert Porfirio, “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir,” in Alain Silver and James Ursini (ed.s), *Film Noir Reader*, 77-93 (New Jersey: Limelight Editions, 2006), 78

<sup>10</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 72

<sup>11</sup> Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” *Film Comment* Vol. 8 No. 1 (Spring 1972): 8-13, 9. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43752885> (accessed December 5 2016)

<sup>12</sup> R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood’s Dark Cinema: American Film Noir* (New York: Twain, 1994), 30

<sup>13</sup> Janey Place, “Women in Film Noir,” in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, 35-68 (London: BFI, 1989), 47

definitive element of the genre, emblemized by the erotically charged *femme fatale*.<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, I adopt these narrative elements as indicative of genre norms.

In terms of form, critics like James Damico are reluctant to ascribe any consistent aesthetic to the genre, holding such a definition to be too restrictive.<sup>15</sup> But Paul Schrader, Andrew Spicer, Foster Hirsh and other scholars refer to a distinct iconography of *noir*: Broadly, they include specific presentations of the city, multiethnic *dramatis personae*, an emphasis on feminine sexual spectacle and an emphasis on stylized cinematography.<sup>16</sup> I adopt, for the purposes of this study, these formal elements as typical of the genre.

Having established a working definition of *noir* which includes the tone, narrative and formal elements that animate *In The Cut*, it is valuable briefly to outline the genre's transformation over the last half-century, focussing on those conditions leading to what is termed neo-*noir*, a term which, after Hanson, I take to include the erotic thriller.<sup>17</sup> The classic period of American *film noir* might be seen to run from 1940 until the mid-1950s. Emblematic films of the period include *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (Billy

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<sup>14</sup> Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 6; Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 96; Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2; James Damico, "Film Noir: A Modest Proposal," in Alain Silver and James Ursini (ed.s), *Film Noir Reader*, 95-106 (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 103; Janey Place "Women in Film Noir," in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, 35-68 (London: BFI, 1989), 47

<sup>15</sup> Damico, 105

<sup>16</sup> Schrader, 11; Spicer, 4; Hirsch, 72

<sup>17</sup> Helen Hanson, *Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2007), 152



Wilder, 1944) and *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946). Suffused with unease, set in gleaming, nocturnal cities, these films adhere to our *noir* definitions as outlined above in that they centre on tales of crime, with a thematic focus on sexuality, power and moral depredation, employing a tone and a set of narrative elements similar to those employed by *In The Cut*.

Barry Langford, Andrew Spicer and William S. Graebner posit the view that *noir* films were popular during the '40s and '50s because they reflect the existential anxieties of postwar American masculinity, prompted by an uneasy homecoming and the first indications of feminist discontent.<sup>18</sup> Whether or not this analysis is accurate, as the stresses of the post-war years gave way to a buoyant US economy in the late 1950s, the existential anxieties typically expressed through *film noir* became less fashionable. By 1960, *film noir* had all but disappeared. However interest was piqued again twenty years later, when a markedly similar tone, mood and narrative structure emerged as 'neo-*noir*.'

Michael Walker defines the typical narrative shape of Hollywood neo-*noir* as featuring a (usually, but not exclusively, masculine) protagonist who solves an eroticized murder mystery while brought dangerously close to death through a transgressive sexual liaison with a *femme fatale*.<sup>19</sup> Linda Ruth Williams notes that the tone of these works is of a piece with earlier *noir*, and their narrative structures

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<sup>18</sup> Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 230; Spicer, 25; William S. Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 19

<sup>19</sup> Michael Walker, "Film Noir: An Introduction," in Ian Cameron (ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, 8-38 (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 12

remain similar.<sup>20</sup> If genre can be defined as a form of repetition infused with difference, as Robert Stam suggests,<sup>21</sup> then the difference between neo-*noir* and its previous iteration is perhaps most clearly identified by a newfound formal emphasis on the visceral and the sexual.

Williams identifies the term ‘erotic thriller’ as appearing some time towards the end of the 1980s, used to cover the developing arena of successful cinematic works whose *noir* narratives feature explicit violence, often against the female body, and explicit sex, often prominently featuring female nudity. Thus films like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981) and *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) present the classic *noir* scenario of deracinated, alienated protagonist and his glamorously seductive nemesis, but this time suffused with much more explicit sexual spectacle than was permitted their antecedents.<sup>22</sup> *In The Cut* can be understood as clearly drawing on this oeuvre, given its emphasis on explicit sexual spectacle combined with violent crime and inchoate urban unease.

David Andrews sees the genre’s resurgent popularity as tied to newly re-awakened masculine fears around women and sex in the context of the AIDS crisis. He argues that these thrillers strike a popular chord in the public sphere of the politically-conservative US of the 1980s because of their ‘uniquely profitable

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<sup>20</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, “Speaking of Soft Core,” *Cinema Journal* Vol. 47, No. 2 (Winter 2008): 129-135, 131. URL: 10.1353/cj.2008.0013 (accessed August 26, 2011)

<sup>21</sup> Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000), 126

<sup>22</sup> Linda Ruth Williams 2008, 131

abstraction: *sex is dangerous*.<sup>23</sup> He describes these thrillers as essentially socially conservative, marked by ‘regressive ideas of gender ... in which misogyny is a function of a persistent linkage of aggressive women and sexual danger.’<sup>24</sup>

*Fatal Attraction*, directed by Adrian Lyne in 1987 and described by Naremore as ‘the most commercially successful *film noir* ever made,’<sup>25</sup> provides an example of this kind of neo-*noir*. The film sees its protagonist engage in an extra-marital sexual encounter, only to have his family threatened by his suddenly murderous paramour. So frightening is his nemesis Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) that she must be killed not once but three times during the diegesis, finally succumbing to the film’s morally pure figure of the good wife. This might be seen as articulating a fear of the sexually assertive woman *in extremis*.

While Alex Forrest cannot be termed a *femme fatale* in the classic *noir* sense, for reasons I discuss later in this chapter, the 1990s produced a new semantics around more genre-typical *femme fatale* figures. Catherine Trammell (Sharon Stone), who animates the erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), is constructed through a series of sleek sexual spectacles, where her wealth, social power and emotional disconnection are underscored. The film breaks new generic ground when Trammell is permitted to remain undefeated, presenting an uneasy and ongoing threat at the narrative’s end. The film’s great success with audiences prompted a further swathe of popular erotic thrillers, including films like *Body of*

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<sup>23</sup> David Andrews, “Sex is Dangerous, So Satisfy Your Wife: The Softcore Thriller and its Contexts,” *Cinema Journal* Vol. 45 No 3 (Spring 2006): 59-89, 59. URL: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cj/summary/v045/45.3andrews.html> (accessed December 19, 2017)

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 60

<sup>25</sup> Naremore 1998, 263. The film earned over \$320 million globally during its thirty-nine week theatrical run and was nominated for six Oscars.

*Evidence* (Uli Edel, 1993), *Sliver* (Philip Noyce, 1993), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (Peter Medak, 1993), *Colour of Night* (Richard Rush, 1994) and *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994). As Monica Soare notes, the narrative shift in these films might be seen as structured around escalating masculine fears of annihilation by all-powerful, cool, professional women.<sup>26</sup>

Linda Williams sees the sudden cultural focus on erotic thrillers during the '80s and '90s as connected to a new iteration of feminism, exemplified by moves toward equality legislation in the US. Seen through this lens, the erotic thriller's sudden popularity is part of 'the history of a genre as fantasy symptom.'<sup>27</sup> Making a similar observation regarding social changes afoot, Hanson sees masculine anxiety before sleek, powerful women as the natural territory of *noir*, giving rise to the popularity of neo-*noir* during the peri-millennial decades.<sup>28</sup> And indeed, as Gates notes, many of the neo-*noir femmes fatales* of this period appear in the guise of a successful business woman or high-status professionals, as distinct from the preponderance of cabaret singers, grifters and discontented wives of the genre's earlier 'classic' form.<sup>29</sup>

It's possible that the genre's abrupt decline might be connected to a shift in the focus of cultural anxiety over subsequent years, in particular as political and cultural events of 9/11 overtook American popular discourse. Seen in these terms,

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<sup>26</sup> Monica Soare, "Return of the Female Gothic: The Career-Woman-in-Peril Thriller," in Marcelline Block (ed.), *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, 88-119 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 94

<sup>27</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.s), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, 207-222 (Oxford: Blackwell Anthologies, 2000), 216

<sup>28</sup> Hanson, 152

<sup>29</sup> Gates 2006, 106-108

the erotic thriller presents something of a barometer for a specific set of cultural preoccupations. As Williams puts it, ‘trace it through the last twenty years of the twentieth century, and you get something closely approximating a story of the desires, fears, excitements and paranoias of these decades.’<sup>30</sup>

*In The Cut* was released in 2003, just as the popularity of the genre was beginning to wane. The film was readily identified as a further contribution to the recent cluster of erotic thrillers. It was recognized by critics and reviewers as a film in conversation with its genre antecedents, generally acknowledged as setting out to upturn some of the meanings commonly associated with erotic thrillers.<sup>31</sup>

In exploring *In The Cut*’s relation to its genre, I limit my frame of reference to those genre antecedents made between 1980 to 2002, which have elsewhere been identified as erotic thrillers in the neo-*noir* idiom. In that context, there are occasions when the erotic thrillers under discussion cannot be separated from the broader *noir* history on which they draw. Where it is appropriate, I reference tropes and ideations along the continuum from ‘classic’ *noir* of the 1940s and early 1950s, in so far as they continue to resonate through the semantics and syntax of more recent works.

With these references in mind, I engage in a close analysis of *In The Cut* relative to its genre antecedents, through the three lenses of its construction of protagonist, its depiction of gender relations, and then through its expression of the ethnic and gendered body in the cultural context of neo-*noir* and the erotic

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<sup>30</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), x - xi

<sup>31</sup> see Felperin; Romney; Scott

thriller. Through this analysis, I advance the view that *In The Cut* offers significant strategies toward a form of Hollywood genre cinema that disestablishes repressive representations of gender. However, I argue that the film reproduces those repressive conventions of ethnic and cultural ideation that inhere in its Hollywood genre form. With this argument in mind, I turn first to *In The Cut*'s presentation of its protagonist, Frannie Avery (Meg Ryan).

### **The Articulate, Urban Heroine**

*In The Cut*'s protagonist can be understood as both reproducing and recoding tropes of the *noir* hero in three different ways. She is an isolated, wounded urbanite, who risks death to slake a powerful desire for a potentially dangerous lover. She can be understood as embodying a meta-textual dynamic in relation to the film's *noir* antecedents, in that she is a collector rather than a deployer of sexual and violent slang. She signals the film's divergence from *noir* conventions in that her female experience is emphasized through a reframing of the *noir* city, where luxuriant, coded-feminine foliage is pictured pushing its way through the formal, genre-typical constraints of the 'concrete jungle.'

Looking first at her isolation, Frannie recalls Borde and Chaumeton's identification of the typical *noir* protagonist as an lonely figure,<sup>32</sup> living what Naremore identifies as a suffering, cosmopolitan existence.<sup>33</sup> Like her *noir* predecessors, she is a figure tied specifically to an urban context. Within the bustling city, such protagonists typically suffer what R. Burton Palmer calls

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<sup>32</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, xv

<sup>33</sup> Naremore 1998, 25; Silver and Ward, 6

‘dreadful solitude.’<sup>34</sup> This solitude, as Porfirio observes, is the necessary precondition to his or her risking death for erotic pleasure.<sup>35</sup> We see this structure reflected through the protagonists who drive *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence* and *Black Widow* (Bob Rafelson, 1992), for example, all of whom risk death for the opportunity to express their desire. Williams observes that erotic thrillers follow this genre norm closely, adding that these isolated protagonists frequently nurse a vulnerability in the shape of past trauma, like those festering behind the drivers of *Body Heat*, *Basic Instinct* and *Body Double* (Brian de Palma, 1984).<sup>36</sup> Equally, the investigators of *Body of Evidence*, *Original Sin* (Michael Cristofer, 2001) and *Night Rhythms* (A. Gregory Hippolyte, 1992) can be understood as nursing vulnerabilities that leave them open to cruel manipulation by their *femmes fatales*.

Not only does Frannie live alone, she’s also grieving for her deceased mother in a way reminiscent of what Hirsh sees as genre-typical psychic injuries.<sup>37</sup> Her mother’s death is explicitly linked to the risks of romance in that Frannie declares her to have ‘died of a broken heart.’ In this respect, Frannie evokes the ‘female gothic’ idiom of the *noir* protagonist, nursing the wound of an absent mother, as identified by Claire Kahane and Tania Modleski.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> R. Burton Palmer, “Moral Man in the Dark City: Film Noir, the Postwar Religious Revival and *The Accused*,” in Mark T. Conard and Robert Porfirio (ed.s), *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, 187-206 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 187

<sup>35</sup> Porfirio, 78

<sup>36</sup> Williams 2005, 33

<sup>37</sup> Hirsch, 167

<sup>38</sup> See Claire Kahane, “The Gothic Mirror,” in Shirley Nelson Gardener, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (ed.s) *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, 334-351 (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) and Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 1982)

Frannie's isolation, in combination with her psychic wound, position her along genre-normative lines in that she is sexually hungry. On first meeting Malloy, she retreats to the quiet of her apartment to masturbate. Later, she is presented alone on a crowded subway while her voice-over reads a sexually-themed poem. In a third instance, her habitual isolation is inferred by her sister Pauline, who persuades her to meet Malloy for a drink 'just for the exercise.' And when she does, she finds herself isolated in the bar as Malloy and his colleague talk over her.

This loneliness is amplified through the figure of Frannie's sister Pauline, who is also positioned as isolated and despairing. The women's shared sexual longing is emblemized through a 'courtship' bracelet Pauline gives to Frannie, marking their wish for romance, marriage and family.

Frannie's appetite for erotic adventure is clear from the film's opening scene, which sees her engage with one of her students to discuss sexual euphemism, before she moves alone to view with interest a scene of fellatio. When the film specifically suggests that Malloy is a potential murderer, Frannie continues to sleep with him, driven by her loneliness to override risk in pursuit of erotic fulfilment. As the narrative moves into its final act, Frannie further conforms to *noir* convention in that she overcomes her own psychological wound - along with the film's central threat - by locking her lover safely away and defeating the murderous villain, producing just the kind of transformative catharsis that Naremore identifies as an idiom of the genre.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Naremore 1998, 229



In addition to the *noir* hero's isolation, psychic wound and cathartic victory, Paul Schrader describes the *noir* hero as typically possessed of a hardboiled, cynical articulacy. His hardboiled language masks his desire for romance, Schrader argues, keeping that desire encased in 'a protective shell.'<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Christopher sees the constructed, surrealist manner of much *noir* dialogue in similar terms of psychological protection,<sup>41</sup> while Hirsh notes that street-slang and argot are frequent markers of the protagonist's attempt at emotional distance.<sup>42</sup> Making a similar point, Naremore notes the rapid-fire back-and-forth wit of classic *noir* as indicative of the hero's guarded-but-engaged rapport with his *femme fatale*.<sup>43</sup>

This emphasis on language is equally evident in neo-*noir* and erotic thriller works, albeit more often projected through aggressively straight talking women. Naremore complains that neo-*noir* offers 'dialogue that consists mainly of 'Fuck you' and 'No, fuck you!''<sup>44</sup> But perhaps he underestimates the subtextual resonance of powerful women using blunt, sexualized language. The *femmes fatales* who threaten the heroes of *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence* both exhibit their power by conducting a frank exchange on 'fucking' in their respective films' opening minutes, in a display that emphasizes sexual allure,

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<sup>40</sup> Schrader, 10

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York and London: Free Press 1997), 101

<sup>42</sup> Hirsh, 133

<sup>43</sup> For example, *Double Indemnity* sees prospective lovers Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson discuss sex through the metaphor of a speeding fine on the highway; *The Big Sleep*'s prospective lovers Philip Marlowe and Vivian Routledge discuss sex through the metaphor of horse racing.

<sup>44</sup> Naremore 1998, 266

power and - to some degree - sexual threat.<sup>45</sup>

*In The Cut* conforms to these conventions in peppering its lonely protagonist's dialogue with blunt speech and urban argot. Its layered, somewhat self-referential presentation of language aligns with Schrader's understanding of the hero as creating 'a protective shell' with words. Frannie is an English teacher; articulate, literary and self-aware. Rather than simply speaking slang, Frannie collects street slang. In observing the nature of the slang she collects, Frannie remarks 'it's all either sexual or violent,' a statement that operates at a metatextual level, in that it refers both to the slang and to the genre in which Frannie's story takes place. She speaks in blunt, aggressively sexual terms, but only in a borrowed voice, which permits her to keep an emotional distance from the frequently misogynist ideations behind the language, while nonetheless appearing to control and command the language herself.

The film explicitly links Frannie's articulacy with power when the film's *homme fatal* Malloy (Mark Ruffalo) presents the information that the film's killer employs a *modus operandi* which involves 'disarticulating' his victims. This prompts a second metatextual moment as Frannie takes note of the term, pondering aloud the linguistic conflation between being rendered mute with being chopped to pieces. In this way, the film might be seen to construct a syntactic bridge between Frannie's 'hardboiled' *noir* verbal sublimation of sexuality and the film's wordless, 'slasher' reduction of sexuality to visceral physicality, implicitly connecting the *femme fatale*'s generic articulacy with the erotic thriller's preferred

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<sup>45</sup> Questioned by the police in her screen introduction, *Basic Instinct*'s Catherine Trammel declares: 'I wasn't dating him, I was fucking him.' Similarly, Rebecca Carlson states in *Body of Evidence* 'I fucked you, I fucked Andrew, I fucked Frank. That's what I do - I fuck.'

form of dispatching its women. In this respect, Frannie's deployment of slang might be understood as a neat mimesis of *In The Cut*'s overall deployment of those tropes of sexual violence inherent within its genre form. Like Frannie, the film might be understood as quoting from the conventions of the erotic thriller's sexual violence, but only in a borrowed voice: the sexual violence of the narrative appears, like Frannie's slang, at one remove from the film itself.

The film extends this connection between Frannie's diegetic engagement with erotic thriller genre tropes and the film's own formal engagement with those tropes in its construction of a version of *noir* New York. As we have seen above, a central element of the *noir* protagonist is his or her embeddedness in the gleaming, dangerous, nocturnal city.<sup>46</sup> A reflection of the protagonist's fear and desire, Hirsch sees that the *noir* urban environment 'glitters with temptation. ... the visually striking city is a potent, galvanizing force, as beautiful as it is corrupt, as majestic as it is putrid.'<sup>47</sup> As the objective correlative of the hero's anxiety, the *noir* city possesses an oneiric aspect 'both spectacular and sordid, ... [it] can be a seductive, almost otherworldly, labyrinth of dreams or a tawdry bazaar of lost souls,' as Christopher puts it.<sup>48</sup>

Early forms of erotic thriller such as *Body of Evidence*, *Dressed to Kill* and *Romeo Is Bleeding* maintain these *noir* ideations of the city when they present their protagonist against the urban backdrop of Portland, New York and Chicago respectively. These cities reflect the existential plight of their protagonist: he is

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<sup>46</sup> Schrader, 11

<sup>47</sup> Hirsch, 83

<sup>48</sup> Christopher, 37

typically a dapper figure lost in a city that is down-at-heel, degraded and dangerous. Nocturnal, chiaroscuro images feature oblique framings designed to present the protagonist as off-balance, off-kilter and vulnerable within these urban spaces. '90s erotic thrillers like *Basic Instinct* and *Sliver* present a modified version of these tropes in that they reverse the element of dilapidation from the city to the protagonist. These films often favour the hero as down-at-heel, pitted against the attraction of a gleaming city characterized by sleek, modernist interiors and glittering, nocturnal exteriors. The formal construction here is of the protagonist refracted in a confusion of sheer, reflective surfaces, punctuated by sharp neon.

*In The Cut* harks back to the earlier form of the *noir* city. Frannie's anxieties are reflected in the form of a colourful, decadent, crumbling New York, piled high with rubbish. Her longing finds its correlative in the steamy, sweaty streets, slick with glittering rain. Frannie's anxious subjectivity is reflected further in a series of shots that punctuate the narrative, showing nameless women running through the streets. Unknowable, these figures reflect a sense of nonspecific sexual threat, offering a visual correlative to Frannie's sense of threat in her city environment. However, in a departure from those urban tropes described above, Frannie is equally reflected in her apartment's garden of lush, heavy foliage, dripping with huge blossoms. Leaves, blooms and vines creep through cracks in the city's footpaths where Frannie walks, clinging to the city's crumbling brickwork as she passes. These images of Frannie emphasise an anarchic, feminine-coded sensuality, which appears to be creeping up and cracking through her restrictive

urban casing.

In summary, Frannie can be read as a figure adhering to the genre's definition of an isolated urbanite. She carries an *a priori* psychological wound rooted in loss, in line with generic norms. While Frannie's lost mother is redolent of the 'female gothic' trope of absent maternal love / protection, this aspect of *In The Cut*'s protagonist is tangential rather than central to her catharsis, which is rooted more in the conventions of classic *noir*. Like her classic *noir* genre antecedents, Frannie's narrative construction sees her overcome her dangerous lover, remove that lover's agency and resolve the film's threat through her own catharsis. Formally, Frannie is not constructed through the kind of witty back-and-forth exchanges associated with classic *noir*. Rather, she is constructed in line with the sexually frank articulacy of '90s erotic thriller figures. However Frannie's articulacy is notably different from that of her genre predecessors. Instead of using frank sexual speech as a form of neurotically-coded attack, Frannie holds her collection of sexual slang at a distance from herself, speaking it only in a borrowed voice.

The formal presentation of Frannie's character against run-down strip-clubs and street hustlers bears a similarity to the urban tropes of classic *noir*. Yet the film constructs Frannie according to a second system of urban imagery, too, this one disestablishing one of the key tropes of *noir*. In framing Frannie against luxuriant foliage and flowers, the film adds by formal means a frisson of potentially explosive energy to its protagonist, recoding the 'concrete jungle' as replete with unexpressed, potentially destructive, coded-feminine sexual energy.

## Men and Women, Kissing and Killing

Focussing on gender relations, I argue that *In The Cut* presents heterosexual desire and danger in a way that explicitly problematizes gender. The film harnesses three major sexualized tropes of the *noir* world to reframe hegemonic ideational conventions around gender: the *homme fatal*, the *femme fatale* and the related syntactic trope of ‘twinning.’

If *In The Cut* might be reduced to a central question, it is whether Malloy is a good man or a serial killer. This central conundrum recalls the famous promotional byline for *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945): ‘Will he kiss me or kill me?’<sup>49</sup> *Spellbound* forms part of a cohort of similar works identified by Mary Ann Doane as the Paranoid Woman’s Film.<sup>50</sup> Doane argues that these films belong within what Williams calls the broader taxonomies of *noir*.<sup>51</sup> Frannie might be understood as a typical protagonist of Doane’s Paranoid Woman’s Film: like those women, she is isolated, disempowered and anxious. In films like *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941) and *Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1947), the lonely female protagonist is compelled by the sexual magnetism of a glamorous seducer, while simultaneously frightened by his potentially murderous intentions. In other words, the *noir* conflation of desire and danger, sex and death is projected onto a sexualized male figure. As Murray Smith notes, the Paranoid Woman’s Film and *film noir* can be understood in this respect

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Robert J. Yanai, *Hitchcock as Philosopher* (London: McFarland and Co Inc., 2005), 127

<sup>50</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987)

<sup>51</sup> Williams 2005, 128

as ‘two sides of the same coin.’<sup>52</sup>

The narrative structure of these films tends to diverge from that of classic *noir* in relation to their economies of power. Where the *noir* protagonist typically unmasks and defeats his *femme fatale*, the female protagonist’s anxieties are often passed off as misrecognition of a loving husband/partner. Where the *homme fatal* proves to be indeed fatal, the convention in such narratives, perhaps emblemized by the influential *Gaslight* (Thorold Dickinson, 1940), is to produce a ‘good’ man to rescue the victimized woman. In this way, Doane argues, the male figure is permitted to end victorious over the female and the films reassert the conventional social order.<sup>53</sup>

As Williams notes, peri-millennial erotic thrillers mark a significant transformation in this respect.<sup>54</sup> Films like *Jagged Edge*, *A Kiss Before Dying*, *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1989), *Copycat* (Jon Amiel, 1995) and *Sliver* all feature an alluring, but homicidal, *homme fatal* who must be unmasked by the protagonist-victim, in a structure not dissimilar from the conventions associated with the murderous *femme fatale* of classic *noir*. Linda Mizejewski observes that gender inflects these films such that the female protagonists who defeat their sexual nemeses in these works are typically depicted as diminished and scarred by their encounter.<sup>55</sup> However, Williams argues that the female protagonist can be

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<sup>52</sup> Murray Smith, “Film Noir and the Female Gothic and Deception,” *Wide Angle*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1988): 62-75, 64

<sup>53</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “The ‘Woman’s Film’: Possession and Address,” in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*. 283-298 (London: BFI, 1987), 285 - 286

<sup>54</sup> Williams 2005, 125

<sup>55</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 153

empowered by her confrontation with the dark side in these works,<sup>56</sup> more directly mirroring the male *noir* protagonist's catharsis.

*In The Cut* engages two genre-based strategies to avoid the conventional lack of catharsis afforded women in those peri-millennial works. The film bifurcates its *homme fatal* figure, and it creates a meta-textual cross-reference between subgenres to allow Frannie transform from the genre-typical female gothic protagonist into a highly stylized *femme fatale*.

Looking first at the film's *homme fatal*, the character Malloy aligns to some degree with Doane's conception of the earlier *homme fatal*, where the sexually alluring, dangerous figure ultimately emerges as benign.<sup>57</sup> But Malloy's *homme fatal* diverges from Doane's classic figure in that he remains supplicant to his lover rather than asserting power over her. He gives up his gun to her. He prioritizes her sexual pleasure. He informs Frannie 'I'll be whatever you want me to be.' He ends the film handcuffed to a radiator by his lover, yet he remains emotionally and sexually constant.

*In The Cut's* second *homme fatal* is the film's true serial killer, Rodriguez (Nick Damici). Rodriguez is presented early on as repelled by homosexuality where Malloy is intrigued by it. He is presented as wishing to control and protect Frannie where Malloy wishes to give her his gun. And most significantly, Rodriguez enacts a romance and marriage before murdering his victims. In contrast to peri-millennial, murderous *hommes fatales*, Rodriguez is never presented as desirable. Rather, his paternalistic, romantic approach is semantically

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<sup>56</sup> Williams 2005, 33

<sup>57</sup> Doane, "'The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address'" 1987, 285 - 286



linked to his misogyny throughout the narrative, making him unattractive to Frannie from the outset. Here, *In The Cut* could be read as implicitly undermining normative heterosexual masculinity, suggesting that heteronormative codes of masculine behaviour are at best undesirable and at worst pathological.

Where Frannie can be understood as structured along the lines of a neo-noir female protagonist for much of the film's running time, *In The Cut* invokes the separate trope of the *femme fatale* in its final sequences. The film shifts away from genre-normative structures after Frannie discovers her sister's decapitated body. Rather than become increasingly disempowered as the killer closes in, the film transforms Frannie. She appears in a crimson satin dress and high heels: an eroticised costume echoing the self-consciously sexy visual coding of late-century neo-noir *fatales*, as described by Fredric Jameson.<sup>58</sup>

Along with her shift in costume, Frannie's behaviour in this sequence undergoes a notable shift. Despite B. Ruby Rich's observation that the *femme fatale* is often thin on characterization,<sup>59</sup> David Andrews, Elizabeth Cowie, E. Ann Kaplan, Janey Place, Kate Stables, Yvonne Tasker, and Jans Wager all note the pleasures associated with the image of an empowered, glamorous *femme fatale* bestriding the public sphere.<sup>60</sup> Christine Gledhill identifies the *fatale* as a figure

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<sup>58</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, 111–125 (London: Pluto, 1983)

<sup>59</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "Dumb Lugs and *Femme Fatales*" in Jose Arroyo (ed.), *Action / Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, 130-135 (London: BFI, 2000), 130

<sup>60</sup> Andrews, 69; Cowie, 130; E. Ann Kaplan "Introduction to New Edition," in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, 1-14 (London: BFI, 1989), 10; Place, 47; Kate Stables, "The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema," in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, 164-182 (London: BFI, 1989), 171; Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), 357; Jans B. Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 76

explicitly rooted in power dynamics, whose function is to explore patterns of submission and dominance.<sup>61</sup> Thus the *fatales* who engage the neo-*noir* protagonists of *Body of Evidence* and *Basic Instinct* in sadomasochistic sex are merely the latest, most overt, expression of what Andrews identifies as the perennial *noir* conflation of powerful females and murderous sexual control.<sup>62</sup> And where classic *noir* sees the *femme fatale* routinely punished for her appropriation of power, Stables notes that the erotic thriller often sees her victorious at the film's close, pointing to a deeper cultural shift, whereby normative ideations of 'bad' and 'good' women, of 'normal' and 'deviant' sexuality, have become less secure.<sup>63</sup>

*In The Cut* is clearly drawing on the tradition of the *fatale* as a thrillingly powerful figure when it presents Frannie in this highly coded costume for its dénouement. Enacting precisely the sadomasochistic proclivities that drive the *fatales* in *Body of Evidence* and *Basic Instinct*, the film sees Frannie attain absolute sexual power over her lover, manacled him to a heating pipe. To underscore this shift in power relations, the film gives Malloy the line: 'I'm starting to feel like a chick.' Having subdued Malloy, Frannie-*noir* embodies Stables' victorious *femme fatale* by destroying the film's figure of sexual and murderous disruption, Rodriguez. In so doing, Frannie conflates two generic tropes of *noir*. She spends two-thirds of the film as a classic *noir* protagonist: existentially suffering, wounded, isolated. Rodriguez inhabits the role of the film's

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<sup>61</sup> Christine Gledhill, "Klute 1: A contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism," in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir*, 20-34 (London: BFI, 1989), 28

<sup>62</sup> Andrews, 66

<sup>63</sup> Stables, 171

disruptive, sadistic *homme fatal*, who is a threat to Frannie. However, in order to defeat him, the film transforms Frannie into the disruptive, sadomasochistic *femme fatale*. In genre terms, Frannie cannot inhabit the role of *fatale* if she is simultaneously inhabiting the role of the wounded protagonist who destroys the *fatal*. It is a moment of genre confusion and conflation, where Frannie's semantic, or narrative, coding indicates one position, whereas her syntactic, or formal, coding indicates another. Nonetheless, in the moment of Rodriguez's destruction, Frannie can be read as achieving narrative catharsis. Having destroyed the film's existential threat, she returns to her manacled lover Malloy, whom she can now fully embrace. In achieving this catharsis, *In The Cut* recalls another trope of *noir*, edging into horror: that of Carol J. Clover's 'Final Girl,' where Frannie is the empowered, coded-masculine, final victim who overcomes the serial killer.<sup>64</sup>

In her analysis, Clover notes that a female character's survival in the serial-killer genre is typically in inverse proportion to her sexual activity earlier in the narrative.<sup>65</sup> *In The Cut* exhibits some resonances of this trope in its equation of sexual assertion with survival. *In The Cut*'s first decapitated victim is introduced on screen as performing fellatio on the killer, privileging his pleasure over hers. Pauline's self-annihilating desire for love is implicitly entwined with her grisly death. Frannie's sexual encounters, by contrast, are defined by her assertion, emblemized by the expert cunnilingus she receives from Malloy. The film's murder victims might thus be semantically identified by their privileging of men's

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<sup>64</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1996), 57

<sup>65</sup> Clover, 57

sexual pleasure over their own.

The film, then, could be read as connecting Frannie's sexual assertion with her defeat of the film's killer. Those aspects of Frannie that most closely align with the archetypal *femme fatale* (sexual assertion, independence, violence) are semantically structured as responsible for her survival. Frannie commands her own narrative space, keeps her lover and survives the killer's advances because she has taken on the syntactic mantle of *femme fatale*. In this way, Frannie's accession to the position of a surviving protagonist is a marked departure from that of Clover's Final Girl. It is also markedly different to the genre norms of the chastened, terrorized survivors of the genre's *hommes fatals*, and it is different from the genre norms of the psychopathic *fatales* who survive films like *Basic Instinct* and *Body of Evidence*.

The film explores gender and gendered tropes from a different angle again in its use of twinning and mirroring. Hirsh observes that *noir* and *neo-noir* feature regular appearances by Doppelgänger and twins, whose visual symmetry embodies *noir* polarities such as virtue / corruption, virginity / sexual licentiousness and sanity / madness.<sup>66</sup> These syntactic structures appear in works like *Among the Living* (Stuart Heisler, 1941), where Albert Dekker plays both a sane and an insane twin; *Dark Mirror* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), which features 'good' and 'bad' sisters, both played by Olivia de Havilland; *The Guilty* (John Reinhardt, 1947), which presents dichotomous 'dark and light' twins played by Bonita Granville and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955) where Cloris

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<sup>66</sup> Hirsh, 189-190

Leachman is styled to bear an uncanny resemblance to Gaby Rogers.

Neo-*noir* and erotic thriller works appear to develop the *noir* trope of twin and doppelgänger in new ways. Williams suggests that neo-*noir* iterations of the trope tend to be less value-laden in their presentation of twinning, and more likely to function as structural problematizations of psychic unity.<sup>67</sup> In this way, *A Kiss Before Dying* (James Dearden, 1991) might be typical of neo-*noir* ‘twin’ semantics, in that Sean Young plays an investigator-victim whose twin sister, also played by Sean Young, has been murdered.<sup>68</sup> *Body Heat* sees Kathleen Turner’s Matty sacrifice her lookalike to murder.<sup>69</sup> *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) sees its protagonist threatened by a murderous ‘twin.’ Sharon Stone has a murdered virtual double in *Sliver*; and the heroine of *Femme Fatale* (Brian de Palma, 2002), as Charles Derry notes, takes over her murdered double’s identity.<sup>70</sup> *Basic Instinct* deploys doubling in Catherine Trammel’s markedly similar-looking female lovers. This last form of twinning, as Williams observes, serves to amplify the *femme fatale*’s power through the presentation of multiples of herself. Williams refers to this strategy of multiples as invoking an ideation around ‘women’s demonism.’<sup>71</sup> Talking about the same film, Linda Hart defines as ‘diabolical doubling’ the film’s figure of Elizabeth, who dyes her hair the better to

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<sup>67</sup> Williams 2005, 124

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 128

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 32

<sup>70</sup> Charles Derry, *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: McFarland, 1988), 175

<sup>71</sup> Williams 2005, 32

mirror Catherine Trammel.<sup>72</sup> Wager observes another form of twinning, where the *femme fatale* is complemented by an opposite, mirroring figure which he refers to as the *femme attrapée*. Antithetical to the *fatale* in much the same way as the ‘classic’ *noir* twins are antithetical, this figure is defined by her domestic, passive, normative-feminine character.<sup>73</sup>

*In The Cut* invokes the *noir* twinning trope in two sets of mirrored ‘twin’ figures, one set of which is masculine and the other feminine. Turning first to the masculine twins, the narrative structure of *In The Cut* hinges on a key misrecognition of Rodriguez for Malloy. This misrecognition is made narratively viable in that the film emphasizes an interchangeability between Malloy and Rodriguez. They are dressed in similar costume. Mise-en-scene emphasizes their similar stature and physique. The dialogue is structured such that they echo and repeat forms of speech and slang between them. They possess identical wrist tattoos. They are even attracted to the same woman, as we discover when Malloy asks his partner ‘Since when did you start liking white girls?’ ‘Same time you did’ comes the response.

Since Malloy aligns with the benign lover of Doane’s ‘paranoid woman’ narrative, and Rodriguez is the truly murderous *homme fatal* associated with neo-*noir*; the Malloy / Rodriguez dyad might be read as embodying a classic *noir* dichotomy, where Malloy represents virtue to Rodriguez’s corruption, or Malloy embodies loving sanity as against Rodriguez’ murderous madness. Equally, the

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<sup>72</sup> Linda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 129

<sup>73</sup> Wager, 76

Malloy / Rodriguez dyad could be read according to Williams' understanding of erotic thriller twinning as a form of psychic dimorphism,<sup>74</sup> in that the two men offer alternate readings of heterosexual masculinity: one gynophilic and the other gynophobic.

At certain pivotal semantic moments, the 'twinning' of Malloy and Rodriguez can be read as relating to the neo-*noir* strategy of amplification, as identified by Williams and Hart. For instance, Frannie meets Malloy in the bar and again in the police station, where he is in the company of Rodriguez. In both scenes, Rodriguez echoes, supports and reinforces Malloy's macho rhetoric around women, sex and death. His presence is structured to cause Malloy to ignore Frannie. In this way, Rodriguez serves to amplify and focus Malloy's threatening, obliterating masculinity. In the film's dénouement, Malloy is stripped of this threat when he is manacled by his lover while she destroys his 'twin.' This strategy might be read as purifying Malloy, purging him of unacceptable aspects of masculinity and rendering him an appropriate lover for Frannie.

Alongside the Malloy / Rodriguez dyad, *In The Cut* offers a feminine form of 'twinning' through Frannie and her half-sister Pauline. Where Rodriguez / Malloy could be understood as opposite ends of a *noir* thematic polarity, the Frannie / Pauline dyad is rooted in a more psychological, less value-laden, neo-*noir* form. Like Malloy and Rodriguez, the film emphasizes interchangeability between the two women. They are presented as so similar in height, build and shape that they can swap clothes. Rodriguez confuses Frannie and Pauline at key points in the

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<sup>74</sup> Williams 2005, 124

narrative, and Malloy asks Frannie of Pauline's photo, 'is that you?'

Unlike the sartorial twinning of Malloy and Rodriguez, however Frannie and Pauline are costumed so as to create an oppositional dynamic. Frannie wears no make-up, Pauline primps and paints. Frannie's costume is desaturated and desexualized, Pauline's is bright and hypersexual. Similarly, Frannie sublimates her desire through language, Pauline's desire is expressed through the body. Pauline's apartment is reached via a bar full of prostitutes and pole dancers. She often appears half-dressed, swaying woozily in her underwear. These differences serve to articulate their opposing strategies with regard to desire. Where Frannie's *noir* anxiety keeps her from sexual encounters, Pauline acts recklessly on her desire, desperate to fulfil her wish to get married. In this way, Pauline can be read as domestic and hyper-feminized, like a hyper-eroticised version of Wager's *femme attrapée*.

In her psychoanalytic exploration of the manichean feminine 'other' in film, Barbara Creed notes the addition of a new variant *femme fatale* in the erotic thriller of the 1990s. Alongside the cold, ambitious, sexually voracious *fatales* who drive films like *Body Heat*, *Body of Evidence* and *Basic Instinct*, '90s erotic thrillers introduce a fatal woman who is defined by her psychotic desire for a child or a husband. Creed defines this figure as a 'castrated woman.' This character asserts her desire in an uncompromising, often violent, way, like a *femme fatale*. However, unlike the seductive 'phallic woman' typical of classic *noir*, she remains within the dominant matrix of culturally appropriate feminine desires and wants.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 122



If Frannie invokes the symbolism of Creed's 'phallic' *femme fatale* at the narrative's climax, Pauline invokes something of the symbolism of Creed's 'castrated woman' in her relentless pursuit of romance. Although she bears some similarity to Wager's *femme attrapée*, Pauline is markedly different in that she is not passive or normatively 'feminine.' She stalks a married man, even going so far as to steal his wife's suit in a deranged effort to prompt a romantic encounter. This desperate behaviour aligns her along a spectrum, where the murderous desperation to inhabit heteronormative femininity, evident in *Fatal Attraction*'s Alex Forrest for instance, might represent an extreme.

Although Frannie and Pauline are constructed as oppositional in relation to their articulation of desire, their opposition is not presented as a source of dramatic conflict within the diegesis. The women appear to slip easily in and out of each other's identities, so that, for example, Frannie slides unproblematically into Pauline's erotic costume to date Malloy. In addition, the sisters mirror one another through physical intimacy, with scenes between the two women placing a strong emphasis on fluidity of body and identity. Three scenes see the two women lie across one another, caressing each other with easy familiarity. This physical fluidity is reflected in their fluid relation to their respective mothers, whose experience of romance is explicitly recalled by each character, and implicitly presented as structuring each woman's erotic sense of self. Thus Frannie's assertion that her father 'killed' her mother appears to structure her sexual fears. Pauline's more outward drive toward romance and marriage is similarly rooted in her mother's unfulfilled erotic longing.

In this way, the doubling and mirroring of identity between Frannie and Pauline appears to be multiplied through their mirroring and doubling of their own mothers. These forms of identity slippage, identity fluidity and mirroring recall Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic account of fluidity of identity between mothers and daughters, and by extension, between women.<sup>76</sup> Chodorow highlights a certain physical intimacy between women which she sees as an emergent property of this kind of identity slippage, a comprehension of feminine experience that can be understood as inflecting the 'female gothic,' as Claire Kahane and Tania Modleski note.<sup>77</sup> In invoking these mirrors, slippages and reflections, *In The Cut* presents through Frannie and Pauline a specifically feminine form of psycho-social engagement that is not commonly associated with the erotic thriller genre.

In relation to gender, then, *In The Cut* can be understood as reframing recognizable tropes of the *noir homme fatal* and *femme fatale*, as well as harnessing the generic trope of 'twinning' and the Doppelgänger, in order to articulate a counter-hegemonic ideation of feminine sexual desire and haptic sensuality. The film's figure of Malloy appears at first as a throwback to the classic 'Paranoid Woman' form of benign *homme fatal*, but departs from this generic form in that he remains in his abject position at the story's end, and in that he prioritizes her desire over his. In this respect, Malloy can be seen as supporting Frannie's positive articulation of feminine psycho-sexual power, in a form that runs counter to the generic norms of *neo-noir* and the erotic thriller. Rodriguez's

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<sup>76</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999), 83

<sup>77</sup> See Kahane and Modleski.

modus operandi of offering a wedding ring and a proposal of marriage to his murder victims appears to reference the Husband figure in 'Paranoid Woman' films. However Rodriguez's rigidly policed heterosexuality and his marked misogyny render him undesirable to Frannie. This semantic structure sees *In The Cut* link ideations of normative heterosexual masculinity and marriage with threatening psychosis.

Frannie is clearly not presented as a *femme fatale* within the film. She appears at first as conforming to the *noir* convention of an isolated, desperately desiring, psychically wounded figure. Yet *In The Cut* departs from these genre conventions when it reconstitutes Frannie in the form of a classic neo-*noir* *fatale* during the final third of the film. In the costume of the *fatale*, Frannie imitates her genre forebears in asserting dominance over her lover. Like her erotic thriller *femme fatale* antecedents, once Frannie acquires narrative power, she keeps it. However, she also retains her position as protagonist, in that she overcomes the film's villain, rescues her lover and experiences a full narrative catharsis. In this way, she can be read as acquiring and maintaining the *fatale*'s erotically-charged, powerful freedom to bestride the public sphere. And whereas the genre corpus features other *femmes fatales* who retain their power to the narrative's end, Frannie is relatively unique in suffering no psychic disturbance. In this respect, the film could be read as working against the deeply inscribed genre trope of coding feminine power in a negative fashion. Instead, *In The Cut* appears to assert an uncompromisingly positive articulation of feminine psycho-sexual power.

*In The Cut* uses the noir convention of twinning to destabilize traditional norms

through a combination of binary oppositions and mirroring amplification. Where Rodriguez acts as a polar opposite to Malloy's benign lover, he also serves to amplify Malloy's semantically charged machismo. In this way, the film aligns the destruction of Rodriguez with the destruction of the unacceptable, misogynist aspects of Malloy. Similarly, Frannie and Pauline's mirroring addresses opposite strategies in relation to erotic longing, but without problematising their opposition. Neither woman fully inhabits the genre-normative polarities of virtue / corruption, or indeed of sanity / madness. Instead, the film emphasises a slippage of identity between the women. Pauline's assertive erotic strategies are mirrored in Frannie's sexual sublimation, such that Pauline's demise leads to Frannie's accession to 'phallic woman' status. In this respect, we might conclude that the semantics of Frannie's and Pauline's twinning distinctly reframe those most commonly presented through genre convention. The reframing of the female body that occurs through Frannie's and Pauline's twinning is followed through in the film's engagement with its genre context of sexual display, as I shall demonstrate in the next section.

### **Cultural Context: The Body as Genre Spectacle**

*In The Cut's* engagement with *noir* conventions regarding the body-as-spectacle can be understood from three standpoints. Firstly, the film's performance of the ethnic body links it to genre conventions of black bodies as threatening, sexually licentious and the locus of deviance. Secondly, the film invokes, then effectively reframes, conventional generically-coded asymmetries of

power where men observe vulnerable, sexualized women. And thirdly, the film disestablishes the genre's emphasis on the cinematic spectacle of the female nude and the female murder victim.

Naremore has noted that *noir* films tend to feature a greater population of non-white figures within their diegesis than is typical of other Hollywood genres.<sup>78</sup> In his study of race and *noir*, Eric Lott observes that *noir* typically projects moral anxiety onto these non-white bodies. For Lott, *noir* is 'a sort of whiteface dreamwork of social anxieties with explicitly racial sources.'<sup>79</sup> He analyzes the people of colour who appear at the periphery of a number of classic *noir* narratives, arguing that these figures 'populate and signify the shadows of white American life.'<sup>80</sup>

White *noir* protagonists are often depicted as familiar with 'exotic' places like Harlem jazz clubs or ghettoised ethnic cityscapes, where, Naremore suggests, the non-white *dramatis personae* are coded as exhibiting excessive sexuality and moral turpitude.<sup>81</sup> Kellie Jones observes that this kind of presentation 'unquestionably reinscribes race as taint'<sup>82</sup> where the black 'other' is not only indicative of moral turpitude, but also, as Hirsh suggests, positioned as actively corrosive of white, bourgeois culture.<sup>83</sup> Turn-of-the-millennium erotic thrillers

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<sup>78</sup> Naremore 1998, 224

<sup>79</sup> Eric Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," in Mike Hill (ed.), *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, 542-566. (New York: New York University Press 1997), 551

<sup>80</sup> Lott, 551

<sup>81</sup> Naremore 1998, 224

<sup>82</sup> Kellie Jones, *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 108

<sup>83</sup> Hirsh, 180-182

appear on occasion to retain this form of encoding. For example, *Dressed To Kill* codes the New York subway as a dark, subterranean world, where the film's blonde and beautiful Liz (Nancy Allen) is encircled by a group of muscular young black men and explicitly sexually threatened.

*In The Cut* encodes blackness with sexual threat on a number of occasions. One of the film's early scenes sees Frannie meet her student Cornelius in a shadowy bar. Played by African-American actor Sharrieff Pugh, Cornelius is costumed to emphasize his muscular physique and filmed to underscore his imposing size. His dialogue circles around sex and violence. The scene is constructed to include disturbing disjunctures. Glass breaks into shards next to Frannie's vulnerable, sandaled foot. In the distance, white women in skimpy slips laugh and drink with black men, half-concealed in shadow. This scene appears to be constructed in order to play into just the kind of white cultural anxieties around sex, threat and black men identified by Lott.<sup>84</sup>

Black, gender-fluid pimp Hector (Patrice O'Neal) is presented as both embodying an excess of sexuality and physical threat. Overweight and wearing small, sexually-coded clothes stretched uncomfortably over his large body, Hector is structured as in command of the young white prostitutes who lean against him. He shows Frannie a pearl-inlaid pistol, suggesting a direct correlation between his sexualized physicality and his ability to inflict harm. Hector's implicit physical threat is amplified during Frannie's encounter with him when another corpulent black man, whose bearing is remarkably similar to Patrice O'Neal's, slams into

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<sup>84</sup> Lott, 552

Frannie as he walks past, knocking her from her feet.

*In The Cut* connects black bodies with a kind of polymorphous sexuality in two scenes. On a date with Malloy, Frannie catches the eye of a black woman seated a few feet distant. Malloy assumes a homoerotic relation, advising her, ‘You stare back at ‘em, that’s how you flirt with black girls.’ Later, black student Cornelius kisses Frannie’s hand, prompting black pimp Hector to make an attempt to seduce him, asking him to sit on his lap and assist with his earrings. These two scenes open with apparently normative heterosexual codings, only to swerve into unexpectedly homoerotic territory, on both occasions using black bodies to emblemize sexual deviance.

A link between the black body, sex and threat is made even more explicit later in the film, when Cornelius uses his size and muscle to force Frannie into a sexual encounter. Frannie is delivered from what may be a potential rape by Malloy’s white colleague Rodriguez. This moment explicitly recalls Borde and Chaumeton’s analysis of classic noir films like *Panic in the Streets* (Elia Kazan, 1950) and *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947), which they identify as containing ‘secret wishes’ regarding the subjugation of black men, the protection of white women and white supremacist violence.<sup>85</sup>

*In The Cut* might be understood as undercutting such ‘secret wishes’ in its presentation of Rodriguez as an unattractive, aggressive misogynist. His ‘protection’ of Frannie from rape is tinged by his earlier objectification and dehumanization of her. Rodriguez is eventually revealed as the film’s rapist-

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<sup>85</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, 22

murderer, in a scene that links his rigid, paternalist heterosexuality directly to his psychopathy. By this means, the film might be seen as at least weakening its earlier genre-normative conformity to the trope of the fantasy white saviour as against the threat of black bodies.

The erotic thriller typically includes another threat in the form of the asymmetry of a disembodied observer versus an observed body. A certain scopophilic compulsion, of the kind that structures *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), resonates through neo-*noir* and the erotic thriller. Williams sees *Body Double* as a film marked by this compulsion, where on-screen figures observe one another's bodies with varying levels of sexually threatening intent.<sup>86</sup> Tom Ryan suggests that *Dressed To Kill* is peopled by similarly culpable voyeurs.<sup>87</sup> *Body of Evidence* opens with a scene where an explicit sex tape plays on a prominent monitor, displaying the nude body of its *femme fatale*. *Basic Instinct* features a figure who declares she 'likes to watch,' as well as a *femme fatale* who 'likes to be watched.' *Sliver* presents what might be read as an erotic thriller re-imagining of *Rear Window*, themed around a technological panopticon that permits the disembodied observation of other people's carnal engagements.

These examples suggest a thematic link between the erotic thriller's narrative focus on sexual danger and its formal emphasis on hidden, sexually-motivated looking. Williams traces this trope of culpable voyeurism through a number of films, describing it as 'a sly interrogation of the film's own form.'<sup>88</sup> *In The Cut*

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<sup>86</sup> Williams 2005, 87

<sup>87</sup> Tom Ryan, "Looking in on Dressed to Kill," *Cinema Papers* No. 31 (March - April 1981): 20-25, 20. URL: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cp/31/> (accessed December 26, 2017)

<sup>88</sup> Williams 2005, 87



engages directly with this trope, in that the film is formally structured through a series of accidental and deliberate moments of voyeurism. Through its cinematography, the film structures Frannie's body as vulnerable to unseen masculine observation. Kevin Bacon's John Graham is presented as watching Frannie through a café window, then through her apartment window. Rodriguez too engages in sexualized watching through Frannie's apartment window. Malloy remains unseen in his police car, observing through his rear-view mirror, as Frannie teeters along the street in high heels. And from a shadowy alleyway, her unseen mugger observes Frannie before his attack. On each of these occasions the camera is unsteady, inflecting the images with a sense of nervous unease.

We might surmise that these cinematic strategies constitute a particular aspect of the 'male gaze,' where Frannie is rendered sexually vulnerable by her lack of awareness that she's being watched. Yet the film offers no direct scopophilic pleasure of the kind associated with such moments in *Sliver* or *Dressed To Kill*: Frannie is not costumed in an overtly erotic fashion, she doesn't engage in any intimate or erotic activities while under scrutiny. Furthermore, Frannie herself is positioned as a sexual voyeur. She stumbles upon a scene of fellatio and freezes, fixated by what she sees, hidden behind a voluptuous velvet curtain. The film offers in close-up images of the tableau's sexualized elements: long, green fingernails; a tattoo on the man's wrist; the erect penis. It's a heady, sexual image presented from the perspective of a female gaze.

The film's presentation of an erect penis brings us to the third arena, the film's engagement with the genre-typical spectacle of the nude and the dead. This single

'hardcore' shot might be read as specifically mirroring an image from *Basic Instinct*. The latter film achieved a degree of notoriety for the spectacle of Sharon Stone's 'crotch flash.' By contrast, *In The Cut's* close-up of the erect penis is structured to emphasize a sensual, uneasy, erotic response that might be read as coded feminine. In this respect, the image, which occurs within the first minutes of the film, might be seen as setting the tone for a different kind of sexualized imagery in play in the film.

The film engages in a figurative form of sexualized spectacle in its references to Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. One of the film's scenes features Frannie teaching her students about the book, with a big, red lighthouse drawn on the class blackboard. The lighthouse might be read as an emblem for the film's relation to sex and power: the lighthouse is Frannie's domain, both figuratively and literally. Its symbolism is underscored to an almost hysterical extent when Rodriguez drags Frannie to a big red lighthouse in order to 'marry' her then murder her. Costumed as Creed's 'phallic woman' in her red dress and heels,<sup>89</sup> Frannie's body is transformed as she defeats her misogynist killer inside the big red tower, with a gun hidden between her legs. This moment makes a spectacle of Frannie's newly 'phallic' body by all cinematic means available, including location, costume, choice of weapon and the placement of that weapon on her body. This extreme 'phallicization' might be read as a conscious reference to those generic *femmes fatales* who are marked by a distinctive, phallic image, such as the ice pick / murder weapon in *Basic Instinct*, or the tower as a site of catharsis in *Vertigo*.

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<sup>89</sup> Creed, 157

As Williams notes, the erotic thriller is structured around not just figurative iterations of the sexual body, but regular scenes of naked spectacle involving ‘a variety of sexual scenarios and as much [sexual] diversity as it can get away with.’<sup>90</sup> While Paul Verhoeven argues that his *Basic Instinct* infuses its scenes of sexual spectacle with narrative threat,<sup>91</sup> Neale suggests that such moments of spectacle most often serve to break rather than enhance narrative tension. They are a cinematic interlude, he argues, ‘contributing towards an economy which in many ways is the antithesis of that of the genres of suspense.’<sup>92</sup> In this way, these spectacles can be understood as a form of ‘production number,’ not unlike Patricia Mellencamp’s comprehension of the interludes that punctuate a musical,<sup>93</sup> in this instance offering the pleasures of viewing the naked female body.

*In The Cut* features three significant sex scenes that observe genre convention in their explicit nature. In the first, Malloy asks Frannie to restage an earlier mugging. He takes on the role of mugger, prompting a narrative elision between his tender seduction and the earlier attack, suggesting a mood not dissimilar to the mix of excitement and threat that animates the sex scenes of *Basic Instinct*. However, as the seduction progresses, *In The Cut* privileges Frannie’s sexualised view of her lover, and narrative dread vanishes. Using shallow depth of field and travelling focus, the film offers details of a carefully lit, eroticised male body. It is

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<sup>90</sup> Williams 2005, 25

<sup>91</sup> Paul Verhoeven, “Inside Basic Instinct,” interview by Jeff McQueen (1993), in *Basic Instinct: The Original Director’s Cut* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992; Live Home Video, 1993) Verhoeven makes the same point in his interview with Linda Ruth Williams. See Williams 2005, 243–44.

<sup>92</sup> Neale 1980, 30

<sup>93</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, “Spectacle and Spectator: Looking Through the American Musical Comedy,” *Ciné-Tracts* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1977): 27–35. URL: <http://library.brown.edu/cds/cinetracts/CT02.pdf> (accessed December 27, 2017)

a moment of pure spectacle, in line with Neale's definition.<sup>94</sup>

Two subsequent sex scenes reprise and expand these moments of spectacle. In both scenes, *In The Cut* systematically de-emphasizes Frannie's body by means of simple, flat textures and desaturated colours, maintaining emphasis instead onto Malloy's physique. This strategy secures a relatively stable female perspective on the action. *In The Cut*'s narrative supports this formal perspective, in that Malloy serves Frannie's desire through his prowess at oral sex. As Williams puts it, 'this is the sexualised, fetishised body for your delectation - but not the body you're used to seeing. ... [T]he charged eroticism of the scene ... makes men see their organs through the diegetic woman's eyes, and through a woman's camera-eye.'<sup>95</sup> Teresa de Lauretis echoes this view, observing that '[t]he idea that a film may address the spectator as female rather than portray women positively or negatively, seems very important to me in the critical endeavour to characterize women's cinema as a cinema for, not only by, women.'<sup>96</sup>

Stables notes that a number of erotic thrillers, including *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, feature a fatal woman who is presented as bisexual. This coding, Stables argues, is an element of the *fatale*'s presentation as 'a creature of excess and spectacle.' Her sexual deviance is defined as a function of her voracious, excessive appetite that must be controlled.<sup>97</sup> Taking up this point, Tasker observes

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<sup>94</sup> Neale 1980, 30

<sup>95</sup> Williams 2005, 419

<sup>96</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.s), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, 317-36 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 324

<sup>97</sup> Stables, 167

that the *fatale* may be presented as lesbian or bisexual, but without any suggestion that these are lesbian films in any ‘meaningful sense.’<sup>98</sup>

Although Frannie is the protagonist and not the film’s *fatale*, *In The Cut* appears to engage with this genre trope in its presentation of Frannie’s and Pauline’s sensuous, physical intimacy. The film opens with Pauline addressing Frannie: ‘Thank you for letting me share your bed.’ Throughout the narrative, the women are presented as finding easy pleasure in touching, embracing and caressing each other’s bodies. They dance together, semi-clad, in a moment of languid, erotic longing. They engage in a kind of slippage of identity through their dance, where the camera’s liquid, shallow focus melds one body into another. This presentation serves to emphasize a form of coded-feminine haptic pleasure, while avoiding more conventional forms of performed-lesbian softcore sexual display.

Barbara Kennedy notes that dance can function as a dynamic for ‘tactility and sensuality outside the scopic regime of classic film theory.’<sup>99</sup> She observes that this kind of presentation can ‘serve as a display of the fluidity of desire and an escape from positionality, in terms of object / subject positionings.’<sup>100</sup> Citing the rather essentialist perspective of ‘80s Lacanian feminists like Irigaray and Cixou, Kennedy observes that dance in this context ‘provides a multiplicitous sensuality, ... evinced in the *jouissance* of the female away from the politics of the

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<sup>98</sup> Tasker, 358

<sup>99</sup> Barbara Kennedy, “Postfeminist futures in Film Noir,” in Aaron, Michele (ed.), *The Body’s Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture*, 126 - 142 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 126

<sup>100</sup> Kennedy, 126

‘look.’”<sup>101</sup> This kind of haptic experience may be essentially female, as Kennedy suggests, or it may be culturally coded-feminine, so as to appear as if it were ‘natural.’ Either way, its ‘femininity’ is directly invoked through *In The Cut*’s presentation of Frannie’s and Pauline’s sensuous bodies.

When it comes to bodily spectacle, scenes of explicit violence are a central convention of the erotic thriller genre. As Williams notes, *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence*, *Sliver* and *Body Heat*, amongst others, all feature scenes of frenzied, murderous physical mutilation presented as a scopophilic pleasure.<sup>102</sup> *In The Cut* features three murders as brutal and visceral as any in those earlier films. The film repeats and enlarges its violent imagery with each consecutive victim, culminating in the blood-soaked bathroom and visual suggestion of Pauline’s decapitated head. However *In The Cut* presents all three of its murders as scenes of aftermath. There is nothing in the film of the dynamic, frenzied spectacle of murder which is codified in films like *Basic Instinct*, *Body Double* or *Body of Evidence*. In this respect, *In The Cut* might be understood as diverging significantly from its immediate forebears.

In summary, it’s clear that *In The Cut* invokes the tropes of classic *noir* through its presentation of African-American figures who are in equal parts threatening, sexually licentious and imbued with notions of deviance. In its depiction of people of colour as the denizens of corrupted urban space, *In The Cut* might be read as invoking a version of the crypto-racist *noir* ideology that links urban decay and sexual deviance with black bodies. However in an inversion of this coding, the

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Williams 2005, 25

film's black figures embrace a polymorphous approach to sexuality, whereas the film links rigidly white, heterosexual genre norms with its psychopathic killer.

It is equally clear that the film offers moments of genre-normative voyeurism that place Frannie's body in the powerless position of being viewed. This presentation is mitigated to some degree by Frannie's costume and action, which reduce the sexual overtones inherent in her positioning. Through Frannie's own voyeurism, the film reaches toward a potentially different syntactic template reflective of a female gaze. Frannie's female gaze is again privileged through her sexual encounters, which are formally structured to eroticize the male body.

Similarly, Frannie's sensual engagement with her sister offers a different spectacle of the female body, one rooted not in looking at the objectified body, but in a haptic pleasure that dissolves boundaries between bodies. And although the film conforms to genre norms in presenting the visceral mutilation of female bodies, it presents these mutilations as scenes of aftermath rather than scenes of frenzied action, which could be read as privileging a subjective, emotional horror over genre norms that privilege a kind of sadistic specular pleasure.

### **Conclusion: Feminine Anxieties, Female Noir**

In this chapter, I have argued that *In The Cut* is recognizable as a Hollywood erotic thriller, but one that strategically reframes the genre's central thematic focus of desire and danger to reflect feminine experience, recoding genre tropes to valorize a sustained feminine agency, polymorphous feminine erotic desire and anxiety, and a female erotic gaze. Nonetheless, I have demonstrated that the film's

strategy regarding the reframing of gender representation is not reflected in its representation of ethnicity and the non-white body. In this respect, the film reproduces conventional *noir* genre ideations of the black body as a site of sexual deviance and threat.

*In The Cut*'s female protagonist is presented initially in generic terms, departing from genre norms of vulnerability in the film's opening sequences when she is revealed as a curator of aggressively sexual slang, signalling her as capable of borrowing one of the defining tropes of the contemporary *femme fatale*. The film develops this figure through a fresh combination of familiar tropes. She is signalled as the erotic thriller heroine through her isolated vulnerability and her proximity to sexual violence. She is signalled as the 'female gothic' heroine through the wound of the absent mother, and through her desire for an ambiguous man. And she is signalled as a neo-*noir fatale* through her use of sexually explicit language, her later phallic presentation and sadomasochistic sexual dominance. In this way, the film deploys the symbolism of the erotic *fatale* to defeat the 'female gothic' threat as well as to keep her supplicant lover, thus simultaneously conforming to and undermining divergent *noir* conventions. This amalgamation of varying tropes of femininity into one, powerful figure is reflected in the film's imagery of an urban landscape that includes large, voluptuous plants, culturally coded as 'feminine,' cracking through the *noir* concrete jungle.

The film presents its love story while probing questions of misogyny that lie at the heart of our cultural ideations around romance. The film uses the generic element of twinning to bifurcate its *homme fatal* into two mirroring figures: the



dominant patriarchal ‘protector’ and the supplicant, polymorphously sexual lover. While the two figures occasionally join in amplifying certain misogynist traits, the former is presented as gynophobic and unattractive, the latter as gynophilic and physically alluring. In a break with generic form, the film’s benign *homme fatal* is neither unmasked as the killer nor reasserted as sexually dominant at the film’s close, but rather remains in a sexually supplicant position to the protagonist. In this respect, Malloy stands in some ways as this film’s emblem, embodying its innovation and extra-generic aspects. To the point of writing, Malloy remains a relatively unique figure within the context of the genre.

Although the film appears to conform to a genre convention marking the city’s racial differences and sexual deviances as threatening and corrupting, *In The Cut* could be understood as re-coding some of those syntactic elements as markers of liberation and intimacy. The film avoids genre norms of presenting its female protagonist as a sexually-charged object of voyeurism, instead planting her firmly and fixedly in the subject position. Conforming to genre convention regarding sexually explicit display, *In The Cut* structures its spectacle of heterosexual sex and sensuous, haptic moments of intimacy between women almost exclusively from a female viewpoint.

In short, we might conclude that *In The Cut* can be understood as a recognizable Hollywood erotic thriller, referencing aspects of the ‘female gothic,’ that offers a radically altered strategy with regard to its presentation of genre themes and structures. If the erotic thriller frequently presents narratives formed around masculine anxieties regarding sex and threat, *In The Cut* presents a

narrative that gives form to feminine anxieties around sex and threat. If the erotic thriller is frequently seen as informed by a limiting, misogynist worldview, *In The Cut* valorizes feminine subjectivity and experience in its narrative and in its aesthetic form. And if the erotic thriller is defined by the spectacle of female bodies, *In The Cut* offers the male nude as spectacle. In this respect, we might understand the film as harnessing the ‘calm pleasures’ of familiar *noir* tropes in the service of ‘exhilarated pleasures’ associated with counter-generic presentation. However, like *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, the film appears to conform to an ethnic ‘othering.’ Although in this instance, the ‘othering’ of African-American New Yorkers is rendered editorially positive, it nonetheless recalls Helen Tiffin’s critique of counter-discourse in that it reproduces the binary opposition of white / non-white as an immutable dichotomy.<sup>103</sup> In other words, the film’s reductive categorization on the basis of ethnicity cannot but reproduce limiting hegemonic ideations. In this instance, it does not appear that the film required these conventional, ‘calm pleasures’ of binary ethnic categorization in order to be recognizably a Hollywood erotic thriller. Its genre provenance is far better articulated through the upturned genre tropes it employs in the service of its formal and narrative reframing of sex and threat. In this context, we may surmise that *In The Cut* therefore offers a set of strategies toward a form of Hollywood genre cinema, whereby tropes and conventions that render the film’s form familiar may be employed to disestablish conventional gender meanings, but that the film fails effectively to offer strategies that interrogate those conventions of ethnic

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<sup>103</sup> Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse”, *Kunapipi*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1987: 17-32. URL: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1705&context=kunapipi>

ideation that inhere in its Hollywood genre form. In this respect, *In The Cut* can be seen as similar to *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, where strategies toward the disestablishment of repressive gender representation fail to disinter hegemonic ideations regarding ethnic and cultural representation.

#### 4. *BRIGHT STAR*: SEXUALITY AND STATUS IN A ROMANTIC BIOPIIC

In this chapter, I argue that Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009) falls within the spectrum of a specific form of romantic costume biopic that focusses on the suffering, female lover of a famous male artist. In that context, I demonstrate how *Bright Star* reframes its genre's conventions around the construction of protagonist, disestablishing hegemonic ideations linking femininity to subjection and suffering, and positioning its protagonist's costume as a form of creative self-expression. In its engagement with gender, I outline how *Bright Star* offers a set of 'twin' masculinities in a manner similar to Campion's *In The Cut*, where one 'twin' functions as an entitled patriarchal figure of cultural convention and control, while the other functions as a counter-generic, passive masculine love object. With respect to its cultural context, I profile how *Bright Star* conforms to genre norms of ahistorical, contemporary middle-brow good taste, while countering generic conventions whereby the artist is reduced to luxe object. In addition, I identify the film's radical, gendered reframing of dominant cultural ideations around Bohemia and the bourgeoisie. In its uninflected presentation of Keats' poetry as its lovers' emblem, I conclude that *Bright Star* harnesses its genre romance to mount an explicit critique of dominant ideations where masculinity is aligned with artistic creativity, freedom and high culture, while femininity is relegated to craft-based creativity, domestic restriction and low-brow romance. I note in conclusion that the film's lack of any ethnic diversity means its narrative reframes and recalibrates only gender conventions, but that the film nonetheless offers pertinent strategies whereby such a successful reframing might be achieved.

*Bright Star* (2009) is Jane Campion's follow-up feature to *In The Cut*. The film is drawn from Andrew Motion's eponymous biography of Keats, a work that emphasizes the poet's political and social engagement, seeking to slough off reductive ideations of the poet as a fey romantic.<sup>1</sup> Set between 1818 and 1821, *Bright Star* traces the last three years of John Keats's life, with Ben Wishaw in the role of the poet. The film tells the story of his love affair with unschooled teenage fashion enthusiast Fanny Brawne (Abi Cornish). In presenting its love story, the film privileges Brawne's perspective, depicting her discovery of the man and his poetry. The film's principal dramatic obstacle takes the form of Keats' friend and promoter Charles Brown (Paul Schneider), whose jealous intervention keeps the young lovers apart. In its fictionalized portrayal of a famous life, *Bright Star* forms part of a Hollywood cinematic form that has enjoyed significant resurgence over the last sixteen years. We might describe this form as biographical fiction, or, less fashionably, as the biopic. In making a close analysis of *Bright Star*'s engagement with its genre elements, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the biopic genre, tracing its recent rise to unprecedented levels of popularity as a Hollywood film form.

### **Genre Context: The Rise of the Biopic**

George Frederick Custen's 1992 survey of two hundred and ninety-one biographical films made in Hollywood before 1960 groups these works for the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber, 1997); For Motion's view of Campion's film, see Andrew Motion, "Rebel Angel," *The Guardian* Saturday, October 24, 2009. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/oct/24/keats-jane-campion-bright-star> (accessed September 13, 2012)

first time as a definable genre.<sup>2</sup> He points to distinct generic conventions, including a selective attention to profession, recurring figures, a differential in the handling of gender, and a limitation with regard to historical settings.<sup>3</sup> Dennis Bingham describes the biopic as ‘a genuine, dynamic genre and an important one,’<sup>4</sup> although widely considered ‘a respectable genre of very low repute.’<sup>5</sup> Custen and Bingham identify the biopic up until 1960 as a producers’ genre;<sup>6</sup> a form of Hollywood film that acts principally as hagiography for the military and scientific canon, whereby a narrative of *sui generis* ‘greatness’ is promulgated by means of a set of generic syntactic tropes.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps for this reason, as directors gain power in mainstream Hollywood during the 1960s and the 1970s, fewer biopics emerge as part of Hollywood’s output.

Over the next decades, however, Caroline Anderson and Jonathan Lupo observe that ‘what had reasonably appeared to thoughtful scholars as a dead end was only a fork in the road.’<sup>8</sup> The biopic genre re-emerges in Hollywood as a director-driven form in the late 1980s. These new works prove less hagiographic and more interrogative, typified by prestige films like *Raging Bull* (Martin

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<sup>2</sup> George Frederick Custen, *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 1

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 3

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 10

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 3

<sup>6</sup> Custen, 15; Bingham, 19

<sup>7</sup> Custen, 22-23

<sup>8</sup> Carolyne Anderson and Jonathan Lupo, “Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century,” in Steve Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, 91-104 (London: British Film Institute 2002), 91

Scorsese, 1980); *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987); *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992) or *Michael Collins* (Neil Jordan, 1996).<sup>9</sup> The 2000s see the genre achieve greater cachet as more major directors make contributions after the success of popular biopics like *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001) and *Catch Me If You Can* (Stephen Spielberg, 2002).<sup>10</sup> In tracing its re-emergence, Bingham identifies a set of unifying structures that he sees as generic elements of this new wave.

Bingham describes specific character forms who reappear from film to film. Among them are the Collaborator, whose function is to reflect and amplify the subject's specialness; the Sidekick, who provides folksy, light relief;<sup>11</sup> the mentor and (in the case of narratives based on 'great men')<sup>12</sup> the patient, helpmeet-wife, who offers endless support and supervises the domestic management of the great man's life, occasionally doubling as a muse.<sup>13</sup>

These tropes are identifiable in recent biopics of scientific visionaries like *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2009), *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), *The Theory of Everything* (James Marsh, 2014) and *Steve Jobs* (Danny Boyle, 2015). These films position their protagonist as in possession of a unique, one-of-a-kind genius.<sup>14</sup> Artists are also given the genius treatment in films like *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Peter Webber, 2003), *Finding Neverland* (Marc

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson and Lupo, 91-92

<sup>10</sup> Bingham, 13

<sup>11</sup> Custen, 59

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 89

<sup>13</sup> Bingham, 4, 60

<sup>14</sup> Bingham, 7

Forster, 2004) and *Set Fire to the Stars* (Andy Godard, 2014).

Despite this plethora of recent works, Bingham observes that film theorists have been slow to recognize the genre's conventions and historical phases. There remains 'no quicker way to pan a film than to brand it 'a biopic,' he writes.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, David Edelstein declares the genre 'the most vacuous in cinema.'<sup>16</sup> Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia describe it as 'very formulaic.'<sup>17</sup> Tom Brown and Belén Vidal observe that it is a genre 'at the rearguard of aesthetic innovation.'<sup>18</sup>

The disdain is not limited to theorists. As part of the promotion of Mike Leigh's biopic *Topsy Turvey* (1999), actor Allan Corduner worried that the film might appear 'some strange Victorian chocolate box biopic.'<sup>19</sup> Stephen Spielberg declared of *Lincoln* (2012) 'I never saw it as a biopic. I sometimes refer to it as a Lincoln portrait.'<sup>20</sup> And Campion herself prefers to think of *Bright Star* as a love story and not a biopic, declaring the latter a 'fated area.'<sup>21</sup> Robert Burgoyne posits the view that this disdain is based on the biopic's grubby early history of

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 12

<sup>16</sup> David Edelstein, "Readers Picks for Best Biopics," *Slate.com* November 24, 2004. URL [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/reel\\_time/2004/11/readers\\_picks\\_for\\_best\\_biopics.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/reel_time/2004/11/readers_picks_for_best_biopics.html) (accessed September 13, 2012)

<sup>17</sup> Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia, *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic* (London and New York: Routledge 2014), 5

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Tom Brown and Belén Vidal, *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (New York and London: Routledge 2014), 2

<sup>19</sup> Allan Corduner, in a promotional interview included on the DVD of *Topsy Turvy* (Mike Leigh 1999)

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Brown and Vidal, 2

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*



hagiography.<sup>22</sup> Marcia Landy and Amy Villarejo see the risk of hagiography as a perennial issue with the genre, in that ‘critical cavils regarding the biopic are consonant with the view that Hollywood produced frivolous films that falsify ‘reality,’ wreaking havoc with history in favour of ‘escapist entertainment.’<sup>23</sup> Given its producer-led, hagiographic origins, it’s perhaps unsurprising that historical veracity is inevitably at issue in these films. As observed in relation to *Zero Dark Thirty*, and as Custen notes with respect to the biopic, every historical retelling is by its nature a form of fictionalization, often refracted through a given set of genre conventions that brings with it its own thematic and subtextual inflections.<sup>24</sup> The historical biopic, then, can be understood as a mediated form of history, as Robert Rosenstone suggests; a re-presentation that is refracted through the specific vocabulary of a particular kind of narrative cinema.<sup>25</sup> It cannot but be inflected by contemporary genre concerns and ideations, since it is, as Rosenstone puts it, an ‘imagined creation.’<sup>26</sup>

It is in this context that I approach *Bright Star*. Its presentation of history and historical figures sits within a continuum of recent biopic works that have developed a set of generic tropes independent of the specifics of their historical or literary origins. In order accurately to establish those tropes, it’s necessary to drill

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 7

<sup>23</sup> Marcia Landy and Amy Villarejo, *Queen Christina* (London: British Film Industry 1995), 17

<sup>24</sup> Custen, 11

<sup>25</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film* (Harlow: Pearson Education 2006), 97-98

<sup>26</sup> Robert Rosenstone, “In Praise of the Biopic: the Truth of Fictional Lives on Screen,” in Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (ed.s) *History and Film: Portraying the Past in Cinema*, 11-29 (Arlington, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 2006), 13

down a little deeper and examine the sub-genre of the female-driven, costume biopic. The biopic form is bifurcated along sexual lines so marked that Bingham sees male-driven and female-driven screen narratives as identifiable sub-genres, each marked by distinctive syntactic elements. Women's biopics, Bingham suggests, tend to converge around a syntax of suffering, victimization and failure. 'The downward trajectory,' he writes, 'is nearly always motivated by a relationship with a man.'<sup>27</sup> In addition, Custen notes an extreme overdetermination in women's biopics with regard to opposition by the subject's family.<sup>28</sup> Minier and Pennacchia describe film makers who attempt to avoid the tropes of the female biopic as attempting 'a most arduous task.'<sup>29</sup> They point to Hollywood's recent output of female biopics as evidence of the difficulties involved in escaping dominant tropes of victimhood.<sup>30</sup> Josephine Dolan, Suzy Gordon and Estella Tincknell agree that there is an apparent cultural limitation around cinematic representations of female lives, with a tendency to emphasize vulnerability and fragility over achievement.<sup>31</sup>

Examples might include the emphasis on Iris Murdoch's intellectual reduction as a contrast to her intellectual achievement in *Iris* (Steven Daldry, 2002), the reduced and confused Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2011),

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<sup>27</sup> Bingham, 222

<sup>28</sup> Custen, 154-155

<sup>29</sup> Minier and Pennacchia, 3

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Josephine Dolan, Suzy Gordon and Estella Tincknell, "The Post-Feminist Biopic: Re-Telling the Past in *Iris*, *The Hours* and *Sylvia*," in Rachel Carroll (ed.), *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*, 174-185 (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 174

the disempowered artists who drive *Big Eyes* (Tim Burton, 2014) and the eponymous *Maudie* (Aisling Walsh, 2017), the disenfranchised mathematicians who animate *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016) or the suffering, traumatized widow of John F. Kennedy in *Jackie* (Pablo Larraín, 2016). And of course more distant history offers potentially richer pickings with regard to female suffering, leading to biopics like *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick, 2008), *The Duchess* (Saul Dibb, 2008) and *Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009).

A specific subset of these female biopics focuses on the lover, or what Bingham calls the ‘patient, helpmeet-wife,’ of a great male artist.<sup>32</sup> These films tend to articulate their narrative through the prism of a romantic melodrama, with an emphasis on the exceptional nature of the male artist.<sup>33</sup> Such is the structure of romantic historical biopics *Surviving Picasso* (James Ivory, 1996), *Nora* (Pat Murphy, 2000), *The Invisible Woman* (Ralph Fiennes, 2013) and *Summer in February* (Christopher Menaul, 2013). *Bright Star* clearly falls into this last category.

With reference to these genre antecedents, I conduct an analysis of *Bright Star* from the constitutive elements of its protagonist, its presentation gender relations and its expression of cultural context. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how *Bright Star* harnesses its genre romance to mount a critique of hegemonies whereby masculinity is linked with artistic creativity, liberty and high culture, while femininity is more often linked with craft-based creativity, domestic

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<sup>32</sup> Bingham, 4

<sup>33</sup> Bingham, 4

restriction and low-brow romance. The film's lack of any ethnic diversity means its narrative reframes and recalibrates only gender conventions; however the film's strategies regarding class and creativity nonetheless offer pertinent strategies whereby a successful reframing of ethnic difference might be achieved. I begin by profiling how *Bright Star* constructs its protagonist, Fanny Brawne, in terms that are markedly different from its genre antecedents.

### **The Suffering Heroine**

In its presentation of Fanny Brawne, I argue that the film resists three key generic ideations that frequently structure the costume romantic heroine: the suffering young woman subject to social restriction, the rebellious, frivolous teenage ingénue who comes to grief, and the genre figure of what Cora Kaplan refers to as the 'elusive, exceptional woman' whose bid for freedom ends typically in marriage or death.<sup>34</sup> Instead, I propose that *Bright Star* produces a recognizable costume romantic heroine who enjoys a loving and unrestricted domestic life, is serious-minded with regard to her artistic endeavour, and expresses agency without suffering social opprobrium.

This is not to suggest that *Bright Star* is anachronistic in its presentation of the freedoms afforded a middle-class teenage girl in the early nineteenth century. The film introduces Fanny Brawne as a bourgeois, uneducated young woman whose existence is limited to her house and its immediate environs. She has no economic or social independence. Her social engagement comprises her family's friends and

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<sup>34</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 109

the lodgers next door. She exists entirely under the authority of her mother. Fanny's narrative world offers strictly socially and ideologically curtailed opportunities for women. She appears subject to the stifling restrictions which, in Kaplan's terms, render a woman's life in this period as 'usually complicated ... and not always nice.'<sup>35</sup>

In this presentation, Fanny could appear to conform to what Bingham describes as a convention of the female biopic, which he sees as marked by 'the culture's difficulty with the very issue of women in the public sphere.'<sup>36</sup> Tracing this trend back to studio-era productions, Bingham cites films like *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) or *Mary of Scotland* (John Ford, 1936)<sup>37</sup> as typical in their emphasis on the romantic lives of their protagonists, ceding any political or social agency to the men surrounding the protagonist.

Costume biopics are often knowingly anachronistic in their presentation of the protagonist as so restricted. The genre can be understood as subject to what Kaplan describes as 'the theorisations and politics of the second half of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first, especially the social movements around gender, race and sexuality.'<sup>38</sup> It might be argued that one of the chief pleasures of this genre is to see an extreme articulation of some still-resonant cultural hierarchies, in particular those in play around the subjugation of women.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 11

<sup>36</sup> Bingham, 23

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 21-24, 368

<sup>38</sup> Kaplan 2007, 45

By displaying a protagonist suffering Regency or Victorian subjugation, limitation and disenfranchisement, the costume biopic - even if ostensibly a revisionist work of feminist reclamation - can find itself reiterating Bingham's dominant fatalistic, narrative of 'failure, victimization and the downward trajectory.'<sup>39</sup> This in turn runs the risk of reducing the female protagonist to an emblem of suffering, inadvertently reinforcing deep cultural precepts concerning the impossibility of women's engagement with 'high culture' or the public sphere in general.

An example of this kind of popular, revisionist biopic might be *The Duchess* (Saul Dibb, 2008), where Keira Knightly plays the politically influential eighteenth century aristocrat Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. The film was marketed as a feminist valorization of a forgotten historical figure.<sup>40</sup> But the film elides the Duchess' considerable political power, constructing her almost exclusively through a narrative of romance. This elision arguably removes those aspects of the historical figure that might be understood as the most empowered, effectively repositioning her within genre convention as a vulnerable, suffering victim. Similarly, *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006) might be read as featuring anachronistic formal elements specifically in order to punch home the contemporary, revisionist nature of the film's editorial stance. However like *The Duchess*, *Marie Antoinette* seems to reinforce dominant contemporary ideation rather than to interrogate it. At the heart of political power, buffeted by winds of

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<sup>39</sup> Bingham, 24, 27

<sup>40</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, "The Duchess, Review," *The Daily Telegraph* November 5, 2008. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/3559711/Film-review-The-Duchess.html> (accessed September 13, 2012)

political change, Marie Antoinette is constructed as a powerless, uninformed victim of circumstance.

These tropes, then, can derail films ostensibly focussed on valorizing women whose power within the public sphere was significant, reducing them to conventional representations of the subjugated, victimized romantic heroine. When applied to women whose access to the public sphere was already somewhat curtailed, they appear in an even more trenchant form. Works like *Surviving Picasso*, *Summer in February*, and *The Invisible Woman* (featuring portrayals of Picasso, A.J. Munnings and Charles Dickens respectively) might be read as united in their project of reclaiming a forgotten female historical figure. Each film privileges the female protagonist conducting a romantic relationship with a canonical artist-lover. Yet each film could be seen as constructing its narrative along the lines Bingham identifies, such that its female protagonist is stripped of power, stripped of agency and ultimately presented as the suffering victim of her lover. Jane Campion appears to risk falling into similar territory with regard to *Bright Star* when she says of the film ‘I think most women are love addicts,’ adding ‘we’re brought up in this culture to be such, and we believe we’re going to get fulfilled through being seen intimately by a man. But it’s just not true.’<sup>41</sup> This remark suggests that *Bright Star* might be structured as a revisionist narrative like those listed above, privileging the female protagonist’s ‘love addiction,’ so as to position her as subject to her beloved artist, suffering and without agency.

Previous literary and historical presentations of Fanny Brawne have indeed

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Ella Taylor, “A Chaste Love Story from a Passionate Director,” *The New York Times* September 10, 2009. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/movies/13tayl.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed September 23, 2012)

positioned her as subject to Keats, as Amy Leal notes. These presentations fall predominantly into one of two preordained forms. Either Fanny is presented as a flirtatious, superficial girl who delights in torturing Keats, or she presented as a conventional, loving help-meet to Keats.<sup>42</sup> These characterizations appear to be inflected by familiar, dominant ideations around femininity. On the one hand, the image of Fanny Brawne as a vapid, flirtatious girl bears resemblance to the trivialized teenager of *Marie Antoinette*. On the other hand, the presentation of Fanny as the devoted, suffering helpmeet recalls the victim-heroine of *Surviving Picasso*. In either case, Fanny remains subject to her lover.

*Bright Star*'s Fanny Brawne, while adhering to the genre convention of validation through romance, can nonetheless be read along significantly different lines from the alternatives outlined above. Bronwyn Polaschek posits the view that *Bright Star* presents Fanny as a 'significant historical figure in her own right.'<sup>43</sup> While this is perhaps overstating the case a little, it's clear that Fanny is presented as something more three-dimensional than a suffering victim, a trivial, flirtatious teen, or a 'love addict' acting as muse to a famous artist.

From the outset of *Bright Star*, Fanny is direct, confrontational and uninflected in her communication. Often framed through silence and unmoving tableaux, Fanny is structured as focussed on her work, then focussed on her love object. When John Brown patronizes her, she refuses to shake his hand, and later resists

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<sup>42</sup> Amy Leal, "Keats and His 'Bright Star,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* September 28, 2009. URL: <http://www.chronicle.com/article/KeatsHis-Bright-Star/48498/> (accessed September 13, 2012)

<sup>43</sup> Bronwyn Polaschek, *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen* (Dunedin: University of Otago 2010), 149



his romantic Valentine's card. Fanny suffers for love, just as Nelly suffers in *The Invisible Woman*, just as Florence suffers in *Summer in February*, just as Francoise suffers in *Surviving Picasso*. Unlike those women, however, Fanny does not suffer as the result of mistreatment by her lover. Rather, she suffers in the same fashion and to the same extent to which her lover suffers: as a result of the film's structuring social obstacle. This marks a significant syntactic difference between the construction of *Bright Star*'s protagonist and those others of this genre: as a protagonist, Fanny is not punished for her 'love addiction.'

This is not to say that Fanny escapes the tropes of the genre altogether. Romantic melodrama offers another genre trope aside from, but related to, that of the suffering 'love addict.' This is the trope of the transgressive feminine figure who has featured in many recent Regency and Victorian-set screen romances. Kaplan identifies this figure in literature as the 'elusive, exceptional woman.'<sup>44</sup> She defines her as a 'palimpsest of the representations of excessive female behaviour.' These are the seduced and abandoned heroines of the eighteenth century novel, the self-defining individualists of the nineteenth century, the proto-feminists of sensation fiction, as Alan Nadel observes.<sup>45</sup> Often defined by their sexual experience, these protagonists' expression of desire leads to their being disowned and rejected by their family and community. In this respect, they might be read as struggling to carve out an existence beyond the confines of patriarchal culture. They exhibit a narrative agency that is often missing in the iterations of

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<sup>44</sup> Kaplan 2007, 109

<sup>45</sup> Alan Nadel, "The Search for Cinematic Identity and a Good Man: Jane Campion's Appropriation of James' *Portrait*," *The Henry James Review* Vol. 18 No. 2 (Spring 1997): 180-183. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/12877> (accessed September 25, 2017), 182

the ‘suffering heroine’ as exemplified in *Surviving Picasso* or *The Invisible Woman*.

On screen, this figure finds articulation in the victim-protagonist of films like *Tess* (Roman Polanski, 1979), *The Mill On The Floss* (Graham Theakston, 1997) and both screen adaptations of *Far From the Madding Crowd* (Nic Roeg, 1967 and Thomas Vinterberg, 2015), where the heroine’s financial independence and consequent agency is undermined by the films’ emphasis on her romantic abjection. In line with Bingham’s view,<sup>46</sup> these heroines frequently end their story either in marriage, subsuming agency under auspices of the ‘right’ or the ‘wrong’ man, or else in death.

*Bright Star*’s Fanny bears some similarity to this figure. She is unhesitant in expressing her desire. She engages in excessive behaviour, at one point demanding a knife with which to kill herself. However the film diverges from these genre conventions when it positions Fanny as integrated into a stable, bourgeois identity. She’s situated within a set of familial relations depicted as functional and unified in terms of class and affect. She does not appear to be subject to the genre-conventional expectations of Regency or Victorian surveillance, as outlined by Andrew Higson,<sup>47</sup> which are most frequently structured as the prerequisite to the ‘elusive, exceptional woman’ drama.

Julianne Pidduck notes that Hollywood’s historical costume romance is frequently predicated on an understanding of bourgeois family life as repressive

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<sup>46</sup> Bingham, 222

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film.” in Friedman, Lester (ed.). *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, 91-109 (London: Wallflower 2006), 96

and sexually controlling for women.<sup>48</sup> Bingham has identified family opposition as a recurring feature of the female biopic,<sup>49</sup> and Renata Salecl sees familial prohibition as a structuring trope of the historical romance.<sup>50</sup> A common syntax of this particular genre, as Pidduck and Higson both note, is to present the romantic heroine as forced to transgress the family's rigid codes, in order to liberate herself to engage with her lover.<sup>51</sup> Here again, *Bright Star* can be understood as diverging from genre convention. It can be read as structurally significant that Fanny has no father. Her mother is presented as flexible and sympathetic rather than rigid and controlling. Contrary to the conventions of the genre, Fanny does not appear to suffer under familial sexual surveillance with regard to her burgeoning relationship. Fanny's overwhelming erotic desire is treated by her mother and adult friends not with oppressive restriction, but with gentle kindness. Half way through the film, as Fanny and Keats decide to marry, her mother raises the concern that Keats has no money. Fanny declares to her mother 'You taught me to love, you never said only the rich.' This single argument is enough to topple her mother's objections to the match and the couple become engaged without further obstacle. When Fanny declares her desire to kill herself, the level of tolerance is such that no-one reacts. This presentation of Fanny as supported by her Regency household marks a distinct departure from the generic norms of the costume

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<sup>48</sup> Julianne Pidduck, "Of Windows and Country Walks: Frames of Space and Movement in 1990s Austen Adaptations," *Screen* Vol. 39 No. 4 (1998): 381-400. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/39.4.381> (accessed January 1, 2018)

<sup>49</sup> Bingham, 4

<sup>50</sup> Renata Salecl, "I Can't Love You Unless I Give You Up," in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (ed.s), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, 179-207 (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1996), 179

<sup>51</sup> Pidduck 1998, 381-400; Higson 2006, 96

romance biopic.

However, at the close of the film, Fanny might be read as approaching the genre trope of the 'elusive, exceptional woman.' On hearing the news of Keats' death, she performs her grief by walking blindly out of her home. The final image positions Fanny away from domesticity and its concomitant restrictions, heedless of her brother's calls, reciting Keats' *Bright Star* while walking swiftly through a forest. In this moment, Fanny might be read as attempting to escape her cultural confines in a genre-typical way. But Fanny is spared the generic 'downward trajectory': her story does not end with marriage or death. Instead *Bright Star* situates her in the freedom of nature, with Keats' poetry to sustain her. In these terms, *Bright Star* appears to replace genre-typical ideations of the female-driven biopic protagonist with a more nuanced presentation of this figure. *Bright Star's* narrative and formal conclusion leaves Fanny in (relative) freedom. The inference is that her experience has changed her, permitting her now to escape (at least figuratively) her cultural constraints.

In summary, it is clear that *Bright Star* initially presents its protagonist as subject to the typical restrictions of a Regency household, in adherence to genre convention. However, the film counters that convention when it does not present Fanny as subjugated: she does not suffer a regular thwarting of her will, nor is she subject to a set of oppressive limits. Rather, the film presents Fanny as capable of asserting her ideas, her will and her desire to create in a markedly counter-generic fashion, without offering any of the engineered pleasures of outrage that works in this genre frequently elicit.

*Bright Star* presents Fanny as serious-minded, running counter to the genre trope of the light-hearted, frivolous and flirtatious teen, as well as to the genre trope of the powerless, suffering victim of circumstance. Fanny suffers, but she doesn't suffer limitlessly for her artistic lover, as genre convention might demand. And although Fanny is depicted as escaping her cultural constraints (however briefly) at the film's close, *Bright Star* eschews the genre limitations of the 'elusive woman,' in that Fanny remains within a functional set of social relations, and pays no social price for her escape.

As against those dominant tropes associated with the suffering victim-heroine, then, *Bright Star* can be understood as presenting a Fanny who is markedly more liberated, capable of expressing desire without punishment and capable of expressing agency without relinquishing social relations. In these respects, she might be seen as countering a central set of tropes that structure the generic romantic biopic, reframing those tropes through a more complex, nuanced construction of romantic feminine subjectivity. The film can be perceived as complementing and expanding its depiction of Fanny's agency through its interrogation of gender conventions.

### **Men and Women, Desire and Dominion**

With regard to gender relations, I contend that *Bright Star* asserts an equivalence between Fanny's creative work and her lover John Keats' creative work. The film appears to conform to genre conventions in its emphasis on Fanny's highly feminine Regency costumes, but Fanny's authorship of her own

costume transmutes her dresses from genre-typical, gendered emblem of restriction to a more counter-generic emblem of creative expression. I argue that the film interrogates hegemonic ideations surrounding the gendered stratification of creative practices. In a strategy reminiscent of *In The Cut*, I outline how *Bright Star* establishes a semantic polarity of masculinities, whereby Fanny's lover embodies one pole as a counter-generic, attractively passive figure, while her rival embodies the opposite pole as a generically familiar, dominant, patriarchal figure. By means of these strategies, *Bright Star* can be understood as harnessing highly gendered tropes typical of its genre, only to reconfigure those tropes into an interrogation of hegemonic, gender-based asymmetries of power and prestige.

*Bright Star* opens with an extreme close-up of the eye of a needle. Thread is pushed through, fingers sew the needle back and forth through the fabric. This is the visual introduction to Fanny. The next image sees her dressed in the results of her work: a striking tangerine hat and matching high-waisted jacket. She's almost luminous against the desaturated, dun tones of her village environment. Throughout the film, Fanny continues to sew and make adornment for her body, never appearing in the same extravagant outfit twice.

Julie Codell sees romantic biopics as frequently positioning their female protagonists as caught in a choice between a personal, affective drive and a creative, expressive drive, with the two drives constructed as mutually exclusive. In this way, the romantic biopic might permit its women to discover their creative potential, but it typically does not permit them the assertion of creative practice.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Julie Codell, "Nationalising Abject American Artists: Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and Jean-Michel Basquiat," *Auto/Biography Studies* Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2011): 118 - 137. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 5, 2018)

By contrast, *Bright Star* offers no moment of choice for Fanny between love and creative expression. However, Fanny's artistic practice is in itself subject to a coded hierarchy that positions it as less than other artistic practices. When Leal states that *Bright Star* 'redeems Brawne's passion for sewing by making it an art form in itself,'<sup>53</sup> her statement makes explicit the assumption that sewing requires 'redemption.' This assumption is rooted in our conception of a hierarchy of artistic practice, where, as Dayal observes, 'high art' is often perceived as the purview of masculine practitioners, and women are more often associated with less intellectually lofty, craft-based arts.

*Bright Star* explicitly challenges this cultural hierarchy, in that the film appears to validate Fanny Brawne's aesthetic expression to the same degree to which Keats' 'high art' is validated. Fanny's seriousness in relation to her work is made explicit throughout the film. She defends herself against her detractor, John Brown, asserting that her needlework is as valuable artistically as his poetry, adding that sewing has a commercial value to boot. At several nodal points in the narrative, Fanny expresses her agonised romantic emotion through her creative output. Her aesthetic objects are displayed as emblems of her love in the same way in which Keats' aesthetic objects are the emblems of his.

The film offers parallel sets of images to emphasize the lovers' artistic equivalence. In one set of images, John Keats lies at the top of a tree, bathed in sunlight. He is presented in this moment as the idealized Romantic poet: thrilled and inspired by the natural world. The image is juxtaposed with one of Fanny,

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<sup>53</sup> Leal

lying on her bed, a muslin curtain floating towards her in the breeze. Although Fanny is presented as limited to the domestic sphere, this juxtaposition suggests Fanny as just as enraptured by her experience as Keats is by his. In this way, Fanny is positioned not simply as a lover, muse or a helpmeet, but as a fellow artist.

Costume could be understood as constituting one of the principle visual pleasures of the historical romantic biopic. Nancy Bentley describes film in general as ‘a medium in which female agency is finally inseparable from the questions of the body and its visual image.’<sup>54</sup> In this way, as Stella Bruzzi notes, female costume in historical romance is often coded to demonstrate the repression and restriction of women, making literal the ‘genderized territory’ of the body, where men are afforded relative freedom and women are constrained.<sup>55</sup>

*Bright Star* makes a specific display of Fanny’s costumes. They conform to conventions of the genre, as identified by Bruzzi, in that they are somewhat anachronistic; their colour and shape serve the filmic image in both displaying and confining the body.<sup>56</sup> In this respect, Fanny’s feminine clothing invokes Freud’s conception of the fetish as ‘on the cusp between display and denial’:<sup>57</sup> her clothing can be understood as a dramatic obstruction to the expression of sexuality, while simultaneously foregrounding sexuality and sexual difference. In

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<sup>54</sup> Nancy Bentley, “Conscious Observation: Jane Campion’s *Portrait of a Lady*,” in Susan M. Griffin (ed.), *Henry James Goes to the Movies*, 127-146 (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 2002), 128

<sup>55</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), 36

<sup>56</sup> Bruzzi, 36

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 38-39



this way, Fanny's costume conforms to Bruzzi's conception of fetishized containment and control of the female body, offering an ideation of excitingly explosive female sexuality, held at bay by buttons and stays.<sup>58</sup>

Fanny's sartorial display can be read as performing a secondary narrative function, separate from that associated with the constraining tropes outlined above. Recalling Bentley, the function of Fanny's costume can equally be read as linked to Fanny's creative expression, a marker of her dominion over her body and over her image.<sup>59</sup> This secondary reading suggests a direct interrogation of those normative ideations that associate Regency or Victorian clothing exclusively with fetishized restriction and repression.

In its presentation of costume and femininity, *Bright Star* is notable in omitting the genre-typical scene of sexual connection, where the female figure is presented nude. Frequently implicitly coded as a surrender of power from the feminine figure to the masculine figure, this scene is structured as central in other, female-driven biopic romances like *Summer in February* or *Surviving Picasso*. We might perhaps surmise that, since *Bright Star* gives Fanny dominion over her body through creative self-presentation, it follows that to remove Fanny's costume might implicitly risk reducing her agency in formal, cinematic terms.

*Bright Star* can be understood to situate its narrative in the territory of sexual deferral rather than sexual activity. The lovers remain obedient to social mores. Indeed, sex as a performed event is barely present in the film - the lovers kiss only once. The film offers sex as an unfulfilled fantasy, an unanswered, impeded

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Bentley, 128

desire; sex as constantly, agonisingly postponed. In this way, the film might be said to interrogate the necessity for the display of sexual transgression that Higson suggests is typical of the genre.<sup>60</sup> In so doing, it also avoids the moment of sexual display that film makers Francesca Comencini and Agnes Varda describe as uneasily associated with masculine ‘use of the female body.’<sup>61</sup>

Turning to *Bright Star*’s handling of masculine genre convention, the film presents Fanny’s lover Keats in a form that appears to run contrary to genre norms. Opening at that point where Keats has just published ‘Endymion’ (1818), the narrative presents the poet as struggling to achieve a life of sensibility, harshly criticized by his contemporaries for effeminacy and romanticism.<sup>62</sup> As played by the slender and beautiful Ben Wishaw, *Bright Star*’s Keats can be read as emphasising a sexual self-presentation identified by James Najarian as ‘liminal.’

In contrast to Andrew Motion’s project of refuting Keats’ somewhat fey reputation, *Bright Star* appears to conform more closely to Najarian’s view of Keats as possessed of a certain passivity, permitting a degree of challenge to what Najarian describes as normative Victorian masculinity.<sup>63</sup> One of the ways in which this challenge is articulated, Najarian notes, is in ‘Endymion,’ where ‘Keats imagines the attraction of Adonis’s body in Venus’s eyes.’<sup>64</sup> Put another way, we might say that ‘Endymion’ sees Keats present the male body for the erotic

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<sup>60</sup> Higson 2006, 91-96

<sup>61</sup> Francesca Comencini, Agnes Varda in interview in the film *Women Film Desire: A Journey Through Women’s Cinema* (Marie Mandy, 2000)

<sup>62</sup> James Najarian, *Victorian Keats: Manliness, Sexuality and Desire* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 2002), 12

<sup>63</sup> Najarian, 23, 136

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 113

pleasure of the female gaze. *Bright Star*'s Keats is structured as a sensitive, sensual figure: a man whose desire is to love and be loved. In this way, Keats might be seen as approaching that form of 'love addiction' that Campion ascribes to women. *Bright Star*'s Keats exhibits a passivity that might be understood as aligning with the poet's philosophical ambition toward 'negative capability,'<sup>65</sup> where that term indicates an openness and receptiveness to sensual input and to multiple perspectives.<sup>66</sup> This negative capability might be understood as leaving open a diegetic space that effectively positions Fanny's active desire as the principal driving force of the film. In other words, Keats' passivity, in this instance, might be read as the prerequisite to Fanny's erotic agency.<sup>67</sup>

*Bright Star* features a second poet in the form of John Brown, Keats' loyal friend. Brown corresponds to a large degree to Bingham's trope of the Collaborator,<sup>68</sup> a fellow professional who recognizes the *sui generis* talent of the film's artist.<sup>69</sup> As well as articulating the value of Keats' work, Brown serves to amplify Keats' own focus on poetry, a function that Minier and Pennacchia observe as typical of the genre.<sup>70</sup> In a form of twinning reminiscent of *In The Cut*, Brown has a secondary syntactic function in *Bright Star*. He operates as a contrast

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<sup>65</sup> Li Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability* (London: Bloomsbury 2009), 1

<sup>66</sup> John Keats and Horace Elisha Scudder, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1899, reproduced in London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 326

<sup>67</sup> In this respect, Keats can be said to resemble another of Jane Campion's screen men, the character Malloy (Mark Ruffalo) in *In The Cut*. Like Malloy, Keats is a beautiful man whose desire is to be desired. Both Keats and Malloy are distinct in their lack of ambition to assert any kind of dominant masculinity over their respective lovers.

<sup>68</sup> Bingham, 4

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 59

<sup>70</sup> Minier and Pennacchia, 3

to its attractive, feminized erotic hero. Brown is constructed around an anxiety to maintain patriarchal authority over the demos, interpreted as lower class men and all women. On one level, he can be read as a form of cultural cypher: a figure perfectly contrived to embody those ideologies that Kaplan identifies as a source of horrified pleasure to the liberal minds of the twenty-first century.<sup>71</sup> He articulates clearly and unequivocally a certain gendered strain of Regency or Victorian ideology surrounding the superiority of the aristocrat to the domestic bourgeoisie, the superiority of poetry composition to fashion design, the superiority of men to women.

Brown's conception of his position relative to women and the lower orders is emphasised from the film's opening scene, where he scoffs and titters at the seriousness with which Fanny takes her work. He frequently refuses to engage directly with Fanny, speaking over her head to the men around her. Brown's disregard for women and the demotic is underscored later in the film, when he conducts a clandestine sexual relationship with the housemaid, only to abandon her when she becomes pregnant.

As a construction, John Brown corresponds to similar figures in comparable genre works, often structured as in direct authority over the suffering victim-heroine. *The Duchess* features such a figure in the Duke of Devonshire, played by Ralph Fiennes. In fact, Fiennes himself felt compelled to protest at the flat stage-villainy of the Duke's characterisation, which he saw as frustratingly devoid of the requisite social and political context that might prompt such a man's behaviour.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Kaplan 2007, 45

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Ralph Fiennes *The Film Programme*, BBC Radio 4, September 5, 2008.

Similarly, Lord James Ashford (Tom Felton) embodies an unmediatedly violent, aristocratic class and race prejudice in historic romance *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2013). Picasso himself (Anthony Hopkins) embodies a similar form of entitled, patriarchal oppression in *Surviving Picasso*. And in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), Jane Campion produces a version of Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich) who is a similarly dismissive, male-supremacist aesthete, as Nadel observes.<sup>73</sup> These characters' appeal lies in their comforting adherence to modern ideologies by their precise opposition to them. Presented without mitigating cultural or political context, they are monstrous, irrational and reassuringly disconnected from contemporary gender relations.

*Bright Star* deviates from this paradigm when it permits John Brown dimension in his genuine love for his friend. In presenting Keats as a passive, 'liminally' gendered figure, *Bright Star* opens up a space whereby Brown's relation to his friend is in some respects like that of a Victorian husband. As the film's central romance develops, so the roots of Brown's anxiety are presented as not simply ideological, but rather as erotically possessive. Brown's erotic desire for Keats, combined with his anxious desire to subjugate Fanny Brawne, recalls Susan Lurie's analysis of Hollywood cinema whereby female characters who express active desire arouse masculine dread. To assuage such dread, Lurie argues, these female figures are symbolically disempowered within the diegesis.<sup>74</sup>

*Bright Star* might be seen as referencing this paradigm through its diegesis, where

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<sup>73</sup> Nadel, 182

<sup>74</sup> Susan Lurie, "The Construction of the 'Castrated Woman' in Psychoanalysis and Cinema," *Discourse* No. 4 (Winter 1981): 52 - 74, 61-62. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44000262> (accessed September 13, 2017)

John Brown appears to suffer increasing levels of similarly-rooted anxiety as the film progresses.

Brown makes three attempts to disestablish Fanny's primacy over her lover. Firstly, he seeks to establish his intellectual superiority over her. Then he makes explicit the demotic nature of her interest in fashion and sewing. However it is his third attempt that appears to dramatize most precisely Lurie's analysis of masculine anxiety regarding feminine agency. The sequence begins when Brown tries to assert control over Fanny not by argument or by attack, but by the curious strategy of sending her a Valentine's Day card. Fanny shows the card to Keats, who comprehends it as a betrayal by his friend.

Staged in the woods, *Bright Star* then presents a debate between the two men on how to conceive of the woman in front of them. Fanny remains curiously silent through this exchange, suggesting that the debate has in effect very little to do with her subjectivity. The film depicts John Brown as asserting that Fanny's desire is simply to be loved. He argues against what might be seen as the film's central claim to Fanny's sexual agency, suggesting that she is equally responsive to any man's advances, hence the Valentine's Day card. In this exchange, the film portrays John Brown as diegetically attempting to position Fanny within normative ideations of passive femininity, so as to prevent her exercising her disruptive, disturbing erotic agency. Fanny's silent resistance to this attempt might be understood as positioning her alongside Keats in his 'negative capability'; she has no need to dominate or to overcome Brown, she is assured in her own self-possession and agency. It is perhaps in this moment of non-confrontation between

Fanny and John Brown that *Bright Star* works at its most counter-generic: where genre might dictate that she undergo her catharsis in this moment of struggle against patriarchal forces of restriction, Fanny instead remains silent, permitting the film's two forms of masculine anxiety to clash before her. It is significant that *Bright Star* stages Fanny's true catharsis in this same wild wood, when she recites Keats' poetry for her own pleasure in the freedom of her own domain.

In summary, then, it's clear that Fanny's feminine clothing is designed as an anachronistic simulacrum of the period's styles, in keeping with the conventions of the historical romantic biopic. As well as fetishizing her restrictive clothing in the sexual terms typical of the genre, however, *Bright Star* connects Fanny's agency to her authorship of her own clothes and consequent creative control over her self-presentation. In this respect, *Bright Star* can be seen as partially reframing the dominant ideation of female Regency or Victorian costume, structuring it with associations of agency and creativity.

Organized around sexual deferral rather than sexual transgression, *Bright Star*'s narrative aligns with genre-typical films' presentation of women's frustrated obedience to social norms. It is not atypical in its presentation of erotic contact as agonizingly deferred. However the film is unusual in offering no spectacle of gendered sexual display according to the idioms of romantic biopic. In avoiding such display, the film might be read as replacing the spectacle of sex with the spectacle of sexual declaration. To put it another way, Fanny's sensual creations and Keats' sensual poetry might be read as taking the place of physical consummation in the narrative. In this way, the poems' erotic frisson might be

viewed as replacing the erotic frisson of bodily display, making creative expression central to the film's articulation of desire.

The film offers a semantic polarity of masculinities in its presentation of John Keats and John Brown as inhabiting divergent forms of masculine sexuality. In its presentation of Keats as a passive figure whose desire is to be desired, the film runs counter to genre-normative constructions of romantic, masculine erotic agency. As a consequence of this counter-normative presentation, Fanny's erotic desire is given primary place as the driving force of the narrative. It is Fanny's sexualized gaze that renders Keats attractive, just as it is Fanny's developing comprehension of Keats' work that renders the poems erotically charged for the film's viewership. At the other pole of this semantic dichotomy, John Brown is a construct who oscillates between a certain Victorian ideological rigidity, familiar from other works in this idiom, and a counter-generic erotic possessiveness in relation to another man. Inhabiting in part the generic role of oppressive patriarch, John Brown embodies those gender-based and class prejudices we enjoy repudiating as though they exist only in the past. However Brown's implicit jealousy lifts him from among the flat, villainous patriarchs commonly associated with this genre, offering nuance and fragility to a genre trope. By this means, film's presentation of masculinity can be understood as a radical reframing of genre norms. The film might thus be understood as harnessing genre-typical presentations of gender and gendered power relations in order to create meanings that appear to run counter to the conventional ideations of the costume romantic biopic.



### **Cultural Context: Prestige, Bohemia and the Bourgeoisie**

With respect to its cultural context, I advance the view that *Bright Star* conforms to generic costume romance codes of prestige-signalling via its display of high culture, its costume, location and narrative context. However, I propose that the film strategically undercuts its genre's middle-brow aesthetic by constructing the conditions for authentic engagement with Keats' work, disestablishing genre conventions whereby an artist's erotic life elides his creative expression. In its engagement with class, I argue that the film constructs a critique of the genre-typical Regency Bohemian artist that makes explicit how his freedom is bought at the expense of women and the working class. In its deployment of these strategies, I conclude that the film radically reframes those conservative, prestige-focussed cultural values conventionally articulated through the costume romantic biopic.

Turning first to the question of prestige-signalling, one of the most dominant tropes of the costume historical romance is perhaps its appeal to contemporary middle-brow taste through its ostentatious cinematic presentation of stately homes, lavish furnishings, and a commodification of the famous artist as a luxury display item. *Bright Star* conforms to many aspects of this prestige-signalling, but avoids the requisite genre reduction of its artist to luxe item. As it progresses, the film appears to offer an implicit critique of comfortably familiar hegemonic comprehensions of prestige and heritage, presenting instead a portrayal of Bohemian life as a privilege afforded only to the monied, masculine Regency artist, and bought primarily at the expense of women and the serving class. By

these means, the film can be understood as radically reframing the conventional cultural values articulated through the costume romantic biopic.

Examining the film's formal display, Fanny Brawne's elaborate costumes might be understood as consonant with what John Hill sees as historical costume drama's tendency towards the ostentatious, conjuring a sense of aspirational bourgeois comfort through luxe fabrics and rich styling.<sup>75</sup> This emphasis on bourgeois comfort is reflected in the film's presentation of Fanny's Hampstead home. Photographed to emphasize its elegant architectural symmetry, the film's interiors are wood-panelled, tasteful and picturesque. The film makes a feature of its verdant, carefully manicured, bucolic surroundings. In line with Rosenstone's observation that the historical biopic is mediated through contemporary culture,<sup>76</sup> *Bright Star's* pared-back, simple muslin furnishings and plain walls bear little resemblance to authentic Regency aesthetics. Rather, they align with a twenty-first century, upper-middle-class aesthetic such as one might find in the pages of *Vogue Interiors*. In this sense, the film's production design recalls Mark Eaton's comprehension of historical film as a spectacle of middle-class, twenty-first century 'exquisite taste.'<sup>77</sup>

This tasteful re-imagining of Regency costume and settings positions *Bright Star* within Higson's comprehension of 'heritage cinema,' a form that presents a particular conception of taste as a way of invoking contemporary mythologies of

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<sup>75</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81

<sup>76</sup> Rosenstone 2006, 13

<sup>77</sup> Mark Eaton, "'Exquisite Taste' The Henry James Films as Middle-Brow Culture," in John R. Bradley (ed.), *Henry James on Stage and Screen*, 157 - 77 (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 157

status.<sup>78</sup> This mythology coalesces around an imagined English past that Sue Harper describes as emblematic of Hollywood's 'middlebrow Anglophilia.'<sup>79</sup> The genre positions the aesthetic refinement of country estates, panelled interiors and period costume as value determinants, Cairns Craig suggests.<sup>80</sup> Together, these good-taste values align with a twenty-first century, class-based ideal of English Regency bourgeoisie, which Kevin J. Hagopian links to an affinity with ancien régime perspectives on class and privilege.<sup>81</sup>

A feature of this form of 'heritage cinema' is the emphasis on artists and writers as objects of prestige. Kaplan notes the recent efflorescence of bio-fiction relating to the Romantic writers Keats, Byron and Shelley,<sup>82</sup> including two cinematic works in the last year: *A Storm in the Stars* (Haifaa Al-Mansour, 2017) and *Mary Shelley's Monster* (Coky Giedroyc, 2017). What unites these works is their lack of emphasis on the creative output of their creative artist figures. Their narrative focus, as Pidduck notes, is not on the artist, but rather the prestige environment within which their lover suffers psychosexual anguish.<sup>83</sup> The works through which these artists achieved cultural prestige are not the subject of the biopic. As Kaplan notes, and as Janet Malcolm has explored in another context,

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<sup>78</sup> Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), 101-106

<sup>79</sup> Sue Harper, "Historical Pleasures: Gainsborough Costume Melodrama," in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, 167-196. (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 173

<sup>80</sup> Cairns Craig, "Rooms Without a View," *Sight and Sound* Vol. 1 No. 2 (1991), 10

<sup>81</sup> Kevin J. Hagopian, *Hollywood Restoration: Genre and the American Film Industry in the Culture of American Affirmation, 1936-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 184

<sup>82</sup> Kaplan 2007, 38

<sup>83</sup> Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: British Film Institute 2004), 157

the artist's creative work in these instances can end up trivialized into a simple barometer of his sex life.<sup>84</sup> To some extent, this relieves the film of complexity, withdrawing what John Barrell sees as the intellectual challenge of our having to engage with 'difficult' high-culture works.<sup>85</sup> However, in presenting the world-famous artist without any exploration of his work, such films can be understood as risking a transmutation of that artist into another emblem of middlebrow 'quality' as Sue Harper and Geoffrey McNab observe.<sup>86</sup> Presenting a renowned writer or artist as a romantic love interest in such a film could be deemed analogous to presenting the artist as another 'high culture' artefact, like a particularly tasteful pair of curtains.

*Bright Star* appears open to this criticism in that the film makes a virtue of its protagonist Fanny's bourgeois status, removing any suggestion of her familiarity with high culture endeavour, and thereby removing any potential threat that the film will be 'difficult.' It makes no attempt to explore Keats' artistic process. However *Bright Star* cannot be said to elide or trivialize Keats' poems. In certain respects, the film can be read as organized around their presentation. In placing the poet to one side of the narrative, *Bright Star* positions Fanny's ignorance as the lens through which the film approaches Keats' poetry.

The first reading of Keats' work appears close to the film's mid-point, as Fanny's love affair with Keats first blossoms. Fanny begins by articulating what

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<sup>84</sup> Kaplan 2007, 43; Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 8-9

<sup>85</sup> John Barrell, "Inside the Head" *London Review of Books* Vol. 22 No. 21 (2000): 18-20

<sup>86</sup> Harper, 167 - 196; Geoffrey MacNab, "A Harsh Look at Life in the Square," *The Independent* May 8, 1998. 10 - 11, 11. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/film-a-harsh-look-at-life-on-the-square-1160686.html> (accessed September 13, 2017)

we might term a ‘bourgeois’ perspective on Keats’ work when she declares ‘it is a strain to make out.’ From there onward, the film features a number of excerpts from his oeuvre, including ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ and ‘Endymion’, culminating in ‘Bright Star.’ The poems are mediated through Fanny’s developing engagement with Keats and his creative practice. The film’s romantic narrative can thus be read both as a story of Fanny’s developing infatuation with the man Keats, and equally as the story of Fanny’s increasing level of aesthetic engagement with Keats’ poetry. In this way, the film might be seen as developing an incipient connection to the poetry simultaneous with Fanny’s incipient connection to the poet. Although the presentation of Keats’ poems can be understood according to Pidduck’s critique, in that they are presented as reflective of the emotional relations between the lovers,<sup>87</sup> nonetheless the poems are permitted a cinematic space somewhat separate from the genre-based romance.

Formally, *Bright Star* employs a particular strategy in relation to its presentation of Keats’ poetry. The film frames short excerpts from his work in settings of intense visual and auditory quiet. Silent, elegiac tableaux see Fanny focussed on her sewing, reclining in nature or dreaming in an often symmetrical, visually calm domestic setting as Keats’ voice recites. The soundscape behind these moments is sparse, offering a silence that might be read as uninflected and open. This motif of screen silence reaches an almost ecstatic culmination during Keats’ Roman funeral. The scene recalls Fanny’s earlier active silences in listening to Keats’ words. It reflects the impossibility of communication between the distant

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<sup>87</sup> Pidduck 2004, 157

lovers, as well as acting as a cinematic correlative for Fanny's existential horror in the face of her lover's demise.

Formally, then, *Bright Star* can be said to offer an experience of uninflected engagement with Keats' artistic practice. In this respect, the film runs counter to the genre-typical approach to the high culture figure, where that figure is typically positioned as an emblem of status to be admired, rather than as an author with whose work the film engages directly. In this way, the film might be understood as avoiding the genre-typical elision of the artist's work that could arguably be said to occur in romances like *Summer in February* or *Surviving Picasso*.

The comfort of the Regency bourgeoisie relied upon the exploitation of women and the lower orders, but as Rosenstone notes, few historical biopics - especially romances - approach any reference to economics, politics, class or gender in this fashion.<sup>88</sup> Such genre films prefer what Custen describes as a 'symbolic annihilation' of class difference in order to produce an artificial, simplified view of history.<sup>89</sup> *Bright Star* appears to touch on questions of power and exploitation in that its narrative can be understood as centred on a dichotomy between an emergent nineteenth century artistic Bohemia, with its roots in the aristocracy and haute-bourgeoisie, and a more demotic bourgeois culture.

As Romantics, the film presents John Keats and John Brown as members of a group rejected by the literary establishment,<sup>90</sup> early Bohemians who, as Andreas Huyssen puts it, 'rejected bourgeois society and its stagnating cultural

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<sup>88</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Vision of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 60

<sup>89</sup> Custen, 77

<sup>90</sup> James Najarian, 1

conservatism.’<sup>91</sup> John Brown is in a position to take such a cultural stance because he is wealthy and educated. He is an advocate of the Bohemian worldview, setting intellectual creativity above domestic concerns, disparaging earning money as ‘vulgar’ and privileging intellectual ‘men’s work’ over the frivolous necessities of ‘women’s’ sewing and cooking. Keats is presented as the beneficiary of Brown’s patronage, elevated by his artistic practice from his otherwise bourgeois origins.

As noted above, Brown is constructed as ruling his Bohemian enclave like a traditional patriarch. He is oppressive and dismissive of those outside his purview. He abuses his status and power over the vulnerable housemaid (played by Irish actor Antonia Campbell-Hughes). When the rough-and-tumble of the children’s liberated outdoor life impinges too closely on him, he insists on quiet, assuming that he and Keats should take preeminence in order to conduct their ‘poetic musings’ in peace. In this way, *Bright Star* signals Brown’s Bohemian posturing as hierarchical, exploitative and exclusive.

In contrast to this restrictive existence, the conventionally bourgeois Brawne family are constructed as tolerant, open and accepting. They have no patriarch: their widowed mother (Kerry Fox) is the head of the household. Early in the film, the family are presented as taking part in an in-joke where they ritually stir their tea in time with one another, underscoring both their playfulness and their unity. Fanny is depicted as close to her vibrant, active younger siblings. The family are frequently presented in natural environments - Fanny and her siblings pick flowers in colourful fields, climb trees, swim, lie in the grass. Her life appears

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<sup>91</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 5

considerably freer and more pastoral than that of her avowedly Romantic neighbours. In this way, *Bright Star* links Fanny's earthy domesticity with sensual naturalness, while Romantic Bohemianism becomes linked with a barren, cerebral restriction.

Opposed in their approach to lifestyle, John Brown and Fanny are positioned as equally opposed on the matter of economics. Fanny is presented as valorizing her fashion work over Keats' and Brown's poetry because it's possible to earn an income from her work. A swift cut to John Brown reveals that he finds this privileging of economics to be vulgar. Similarly, during the first half of the narrative, Fanny's mother reveals her bourgeois focus on economics when she points to Keats' poverty as the reason it's impossible for him to marry Fanny. However, Fanny's mother is presented as changing her mind in this respect. Before Keats leaves for Rome and the hope of recovery, Mrs Brawne exhorts him to 'come back and marry our Fanny.' In this respect, the film appears to demonstrate a shift of position on behalf of Fanny's bourgeois friends and family from the economic imperatives of their lives to a more romantic focus on love.

As an aside here, this moment in *Bright Star* might be seen as indicating a shift in bourgeois social values from economically and socially based marriage to marriage based on love, prefiguring the kinds of social transformations that were to overtake bourgeois life during the nineteenth century. In this respect, the film might be understood as reflective of incipient social change, rendering emblematic of Rosenstone's remark that '[h]istory in film becomes what it most centrally is: a process of changing social relationships where political and social



questions... are interwoven.’<sup>92</sup>

*Bright Star*’s dichotomy of natural domesticity versus rigid, patriarchal Bohemianism is extended through Fanny Brawne’s seduction of Keats. Their relationship develops through his gradual integration into her family’s outdoor life. Through Fanny, Keats learns to play and to engage with nature at a sensual level. Their single kiss takes place under a blossoming tree. When Keats’ illness requires him to remain in the stuffy drawing room with his anxious friend Brown, Fanny remains in her domain, outside in nature. This prompts a scene where Fanny knocks balefully on Keats’ drawing room window. She watches, anxious and desiring, as Keats tries to reach her, but is prevented by Brown. Keats remains frustratingly indoors while Fanny returns to her natural playground.

This scene references a generic trope we might call the Regency or Victorian woman-at-the-window. Pidduck and Raw separately identify this trope as making frequent appearances in recent historical romances. Capturing ‘a particular quality of feminine stillness, constraint and longing,’<sup>93</sup> the woman-at-the-window can be found gazing wistfully from films including *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995), *The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996), *Washington Square* (Agnes Varda, 1997), *Jane Eyre* (Cary Fukunaga, 2011) and *To Walk Invisible* (Sally Wainwright, 2016). The image appears on each occasion to express frustrated desire in the context of socio-cultural restrictions placed on women. In reversing the gender roles of who is constrained and who is free, *Bright Star* reframes

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<sup>92</sup> Rosenstone 1995, 61

<sup>93</sup> Pidduck 1998, 381; See also Laurence Raw, “Rethinking the Costume Drama: Agnieszka Holland’s *Washington Square* (1997),” *The Henry James Review* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2003): 69-81, 73. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39122> (accessed December 31, 2017)

central genre conventions regarding class, sex and control.

To summarise, *Bright Star* can be understood as engaged in prestige-signalling in its presentation of classical, painterly images of verdant fields, flowers and woods. Its interiors are presented as tableaux of domestic tranquility. And in accordance with the genre's 'middlebrow' good taste, the film's domestic interiors are styled using an anachronistically contemporary aesthetic. In this respect, the film appears to conform to generic costume romance codes rather than to interrogate them in any meaningful way. The film introduces Keats as part of the film's conservative presentation of tasteful objects. The poet is not aesthetically contextualized, nor is his work given diegetic space until midway through the narrative. Here again, the film appears to align with those works that co-opt a famous literary or artistic figure as a 'prestige' adornment to a conventional romantic melodrama. However the film can be read as introducing Keats' poetry in a syntactically coherent form through the protagonist's direct engagement with it. As Fanny develops an authentic response to Keats' work, so the film engages formally and directly with the poetry, allowing it uninflected screen space. In finding a cinematic form that appears to correlate with Keats' ambition towards 'negative capability,' *Bright Star* can be read as reconfiguring the genre convention whereby an artist's erotic life elides his creative expression.

With respect to *Bright Star*'s construction of a dichotomy based on class and economic power, it is apparent that the film works against hegemonic ideations associating Bohemia as a liberated realm and the bourgeoisie as rigid and conventional. The film depicts Fanny's conventional bourgeois home as playful,

democratic and connected viscerally to the natural world. Mrs Brawne is constructed as a figure who learns to value emotional attachment over economic imperatives, potentially prefiguring a social and political transformation and reflecting a more complex view of sociopolitical history than is evident in most historical romantic biopics. By contrast, the film presents Brown as narrow and hierarchical, constructing a critique of the genre-typical Regency Bohemian artist that makes explicit how his freedom is bought at the expense of women and the working class. In its deployment of these strategies, the film can be understood as radically reframing those conservative, prestige-focussed cultural values conventionally articulated through the costume romantic biopic.

### **Conclusion: Silence as Self-Determination**

In this chapter, I have argued that *Bright Star* harnesses its genre romance to mount an explicit critique of dominant ideations where masculinity is aligned with artistic creativity, freedom and high culture, while femininity is relegated to craft-based creativity, domestic restriction and low-brow romance. It is clear that *Bright Star*'s construction of Fanny Brawne resists the genre's conventions whereby pleasurable outrage is provoked by a display of female subjection and suffering. Fanny's active silence denotes both her attention to her work, as well as her growing comprehension of the work of her lover. She avoids the tripartite genre trope of the costume romantic heroine: she is not powerlessly abject, nor is she a trivial ingénue, nor is she an 'elusive woman' heading toward social exclusion and ultimate doom. The film reframes feminine costume as emblematic of artistic

expression as well as the more genre-typical emblem of gender-based repression, underscoring Fanny's seriousness as well as her agency. In a related strategy, the film replaces more conventional moments of sexual transgression and sexual display with moments of sexual declaration, achieved through recitations of Keats' creative work, affectively integrated into the diegesis. The film's direct access to poetry triggers the the protagonist's final departure from genre norms, ending the film in an ambiguous state of cultural abdication / liberation. In one light, Fanny's ending conforms to genre norms of the 'elusive woman': she mourns her lover and embraces his poetry in a wild, extra-cultural space. But seen in another light, her continued integration into social and familial relations makes her a counter-hegemonic figure whose liberation appears not to cost her in any conventional sense. In this respect, we can conclude that, as a protagonist, Fanny presents a counter-generic challenge, albeit structured in part through a reconfiguration of the familiar 'elusive woman' genre trope.

The film constructs a dyad where Keats and Brown are positioned as opposing forms of masculinity. The figure of Keats replaces genre-normative masculine ideations with a figure whose desire is primarily to be desired. Relatively passive throughout *Bright Star*, Keats allows Fanny's erotic desire to take centre stage and drive the action. In a strategy similar to that of Fanny, then, we might comprehend Keats as constructed through the trope of the artist as luxe object: a man whose *sui generis* genius signals a generic form of cultural prestige. Nonetheless, Keats' erotic passivity offers a counter-normative challenge. Similarly, John Brown can be understood as recoding the familiar, generically flat, villainous patriarch,

reconfiguring him as a man in love with Keats' poems, whose jealousy over Keats' affection causes him to assert his misogyny and his class authority.

Through John Brown, *Bright Star* structures a syntactic opposition between a hierarchical, exploitative and narrow Bohemian outlook and Fanny's more demotic, rural and liberated domesticity. The film implicitly interrogates its genre's typically rather pious approach to high culture through the diegetic rejection of John Brown's patrician, reverential approach to poetry. Through its presentation of Keats' poetry in a relatively unmediated, communicative form, the film might be said to reflect something of Keats' 'negative capability'<sup>94</sup> in its presentation of his work and character. In these respects, the film appears interrogative of the kinds of genre ideations frequently reproduced in female-driven romantic biopics.

Overall, then, *Bright Star* can be understood as deploying familiar generic strategies of prestige-signalling via its tasteful, anachronistic design and costume. In addition, it offers the pleasures of genre conformity regarding the initial presentation of its young lovers, whose yearning for one another is thwarted by the restrictions of their community. By these strategies, *Bright Star* renders its narrative clear, familiar, 'easy' and recognizable as a costume romantic biopic, suffused with a certain genre-typical middlebrow Anglophilia. However in a strategy recalling *In The Cut*, the film reconfigures these familiar genre tropes to offer counter-hegemonic meaning. In this way, the protagonist is presented as not just unschooled and trapped within the narrow confines of family, but also as a

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<sup>94</sup> Ou, 1

serious-minded, active agent. Similarly, the pleasures of feminine costume are recalibrated to include not just the fetishization of the female body, but also the creative authorship of the protagonist. The ‘high culture’ artist is presented not just as a form of prestige-signalling, but his work is also meaningfully integrated into the film’s diegesis. Keats’ poetry is included not just as a barometer of the poet’s psycho-sexual experience, but also as a cognitive challenge undertaken by the protagonist and by the film’s viewership, foregrounded by means of a constructive, active silence. The film’s depiction of class difference is presented not just to elicit a form of pleasurable outrage, but also to disestablish the hegemonic ideation of the Romantic masculine artist as the pinnacle of cultural prestige. In other words, *Bright Star* is recognizably a genre work, where those genre elements it invokes are, in the main, presented to provoke meanings other than the hegemonic, politically conservative meanings commonly associated with its genre.

For these reasons, *Bright Star* can be understood as engaged in a strategy of fusing the ‘calm pleasures’ of familiar generic tropes with the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of counter-generic innovation, offering productive strategies toward a popular genre film that disestablishes conventional gender, class and cultural hierarchies. It is, however, worth observing that *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and Campion’s *In The Cut* collapse into reproducing repressive presentations most profoundly when it comes to constructing ethnic difference through their diegesis. *Bright Star* might be comprehended as simply avoiding this pitfall by virtue of its rural English Regency setting. In the next chapter, I examine

a film that operates a diametrically opposing strategy toward ethnic 'othering,' while effectively reframing familiar, conventional ideations of gender and power.

## 5. *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*: COMING OF AGE, WU-XIA STYLE

In this chapter, I argue that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* combines a recognizable martial arts genre semantics with the syntax of the Hollywood coming-of-age film to present a challenging, multivalent adventure that disestablishes certain restrictive hegemonic tropes of gender, ethnic and cultural identity. I demonstrate how the film's protagonist is constructed to embody its multivalent thematic polarities, oscillating between dichotomies including authenticity and social integration, desire and discipline, feminism and patriarchy. I profile the film's disestablishment of key genre conventions regarding masculine mastery and feminine subordination, destabilizing fundamental gender-based values of its martial arts diegesis. I outline the film's implicit interrogation of hegemonic ideations surrounding the ethnic 'other' through its simulacral, genre-based fantasy landscape, where a floating, fantasy 'Chinese' subjectivity is invoked. I demonstrate that the film's fantasy landscape can be understood as a form of Brechtian distancing, interrogating real-world socio-political concerns in an uncanny, parallel world. I conclude that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* produces a narrative ambivalence that contains more than one set of coherent meanings, none of which is necessarily in conflict with another, and each of which disestablishes conventional, normative forms of culturally-transmitted power asymmetry.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is director Ang Lee's seventh feature film. On its release in 2000, the film became the highest grossing non-English-language



film in American cinema history. Filmed over five months in China across a range of spectacular locations, it was rapturously received by Western audiences and received a standing ovation at Cannes before winning four Oscars. The film is based on an original early twentieth century novel of the same name by Wang Dun Lu. Taking place during a reimagined Ching dynasty, or what might be understood as a genre-based mythic Chinese past, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* opens with travelling warrior-heroes Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat) and Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh). The warriors are presented as sublimating a socially prohibited love for one another into their ascetic lifestyle. When a talismanic, magical sword under Li Mu Bai's protection is stolen, the pair must discover the thief and recover the sword.

The plot becomes increasingly complex when the thief, Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi), takes over the narrative. Jen Yu is a young aristocrat preparing to be married. Under cover of darkness, she is also a consummate, stealthy warrior. Unlike the initial couple, Jen Yu is presented as a transgressor, a breaker of rules. The narrative swerves with her to include dramatic engagements with her illicit, bandit lover Black Cloud Lo (Chang Chen), her martial arts master and Li Mu Bai's sworn enemy, Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei), and finally back into conflict with Yu Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai. The story ends with the murder of Li Mu Bai, to the consequent regret of Jen Yu. In engaging in a close analysis of the film, it is first necessary to outline the genre landscape into which *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* makes its intervention. The film's primary genre terrain can be defined as the fantasy martial arts genre, otherwise known as *wuxia pian*.

## Genre Context: Coming of Age in Fantasy Martial Arts

A term meaning ‘chivalrous or noble combat,’ *wuxia pian* has a long history stretching back through a literary tradition that began in the ninth century. *Wuxia pian*, or *wuxia* cinema typically takes place in a pre-technological, quasi-medieval world of swords and sorcery, chivalry and romance. Its stories can be compared in some respects to the Northern European fairytale tradition in that they operate at the level of myth: noble, often magically endowed, heroes grapple with questions of ethics and morality in an imaginary landscape. This mythic, folkloric form translated readily into early cinema, invoking the kind of comprehension of genre cinema advanced by Silvie Magerstädt as operating along similar cultural lines to traditional, mythic story forms.<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Teo notes that the ‘medieval dynasties and other mythical fantasies’ that form the landscape of these narratives serve to inform their narrative conventions.<sup>2</sup> He describes Confucian ideals of filial piety and social order as structuring the semantics of these works, seeing the typical story as predicated on the threat of chaos to an idealized, hierarchical community. The narrative semantics of these works typically include a disruptive, exploitative villain, often of socially high status, who is ultimately defeated by the magical warrior skills of a chivalrous knight-errant.<sup>3</sup> This defeat, as Elvis Mitchell notes, is often achieved

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<sup>1</sup> Silvie Magerstädt, *Philosophy, Myth and Epic Cinema: Beyond Mere Illusions* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), xiv

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI 1997), 98

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2009), 2

via complex, labyrinthine plotting.<sup>4</sup>

But the fantasy martial arts film's chief pleasure is not the (often somewhat predictable) narrative, but rather the regular presentation of thrilling visual spectacle. The hallmark of the genre is its elaborately choreographed, visually resplendent presentations of what Teo calls the 'effortless facility of swordfighting heroes and heroines [who] leap, somersault and generally levitate in defiance of gravity.'<sup>5</sup>

Fantasy martial arts, or *wuxia*, films are not to be confused with Hong Kong's influential cultural export, the Kung Fu film genre, otherwise known as *wuxu* films. These narratives typically feature displays of unarmed combat, favouring a more realist approach to fighting. Kung Fu could be defined as placing emphasis on the body, real physical strength and training, whereas *wuxia* emphasises fantasy, myth and the supernatural.<sup>6</sup>

*Wuxia* as a film genre stretches back to the 1920s. However it was the mid-1960s that saw Hong Kong develop a booming industry of genre *wuxia* films, dominated by the Shaw Brothers studios. 'With their relatively high budgets and standing sets,' David Desser notes, 'the Shaw Brothers could, and often did, produce spectacular period films with glorious costumes and well-groomed fighters.'<sup>7</sup> Poshek Fu and John R. Eperjesi propose Zhang Cheh's *One Armed*

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<sup>4</sup> Elvis Mitchell, "Action Fans, Be Prepared for Heart And Feminism," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2000. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9503EFD7133CF93AA35753C1A9669C8B63> (accessed January 19, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Teo 1997, 98

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception," in Poshek Fu and David Desser (ed.s), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History Arts, Identity*, 19-43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 33

*Swordsman* (1967) as the most influential *wuxia* film of the period.<sup>8</sup> Poshek Fu identifies Zhang's characters as displaying a muscular masculine quality, expressing a rebelliousness 'typical of modern man.'<sup>9</sup> And certainly the film's themes, privileging nobility and order over greed and chaos, along with its figures of tragic orphan, wise martial arts master and nefarious gang members, align with the genre's central tenets.

David Bordwell favours as more lastingly influential two 1960s works by Taiwanese director King Hu.<sup>10</sup> Hu's work appears a more direct genre antecedent to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Hu brings the values of balletic choreography to the fore in his seminal works *Come Drink with Me* (1965) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971). Known for his inventive staging, his fights are often presented in unusual locations, including a bamboo forest not unlike that which appears in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Grasso calls *Come Drink with Me* 'one of the best Hong Kong films ever made.'<sup>12</sup> Teo calls it a 'seminal interjection,'<sup>13</sup> adding that *A Touch of Zen* 'perhaps the first true masterpiece of

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<sup>8</sup> Poshek Fu, "The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema," in Poshek Fu and David Desser (ed.s), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts Identity*, 71-89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 79; John R. Eperjesi, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Kung Fu Diplomacy and the Dream of Cultural China" *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March 2004): 25-39, 31. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1035782042000194509> (accessed January 17, 2018)

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Che, *Huigu Xianggang Dianying Sanshi Nian*: 61, quoted in Poshek, 79

<sup>10</sup> David Bordwell, "Richness through Imperfection: King Hu and the Glimpse," Poshek Fu and David Desser (ed.s), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts Identity*, 113-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 114-115

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Grasso, "Wuxia Masks: On *Come Drink With Me* and the Beijing Opera: The Artistry of King Hu," *Offscreen: Cinema as Pleasure* Vol. 10 Issue 3 (March 2006) URL: [http://offscreen.com/view/wuxia\\_masks](http://offscreen.com/view/wuxia_masks) (accessed January 17, 2018)

<sup>13</sup> Teo 2009, 117

the genre.’<sup>14</sup>

These two genre films are set in the same, recognizably genre, fantasy world. They centre around female aristocrats who are also consummate *wuxia* warriors. Both films bear other notable resemblances to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. *Come Drink with Me* centres on warrior princess Golden Swallow (Cheng Pei Pei), who defeats a gang of thieves to rescue her captive brother.<sup>15</sup> Golden Swallow is presented as a warrior of superhuman speed and dexterity. She single-handedly destroys an entire tavern full of assailants, defeats a temple full of bandits and effortlessly cuts down her enemies in battle. Similarly, *A Touch of Zen* centres around the aristocratic Yang (Xu Feng), who avenges the death of her father by ruthlessly defeating her enemy and his spies with her magical levels of speed and skill. The film includes the aforementioned balletic fight sequence in a bamboo forest, which Teo describes as ‘one of the most outstanding of *wuxia* battle sequences achieved in the cinema.’<sup>16</sup> At the film’s close, Yang is presented as achieving Zen enlightenment, a state normally reserved for male warriors.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps significantly, *A Touch of Zen* was the first *wuxia* picture to take a prize at Cannes.<sup>18</sup>

Hu’s influence can be seen in the subsequent plethora of popular female knight-errant films produced, many of which starred Cheng Pei Pei. His direct

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 179

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 118

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 132

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Chan, *Remade in Hollywood: The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 84

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Teo, *King Hu's A Touch of Zen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2007), 8

influence may be read in female-driven *wuxia* films including *That Fiery Girl* (Chun Yen, 1968), *The Jade Raksha* (Meng Hua Ho, 1968) *Dragon Swamp* (Wei Lo, 1969), *Lady of Steel* (Meng Hua Ho, 1970) and *The Shadow Whip* (Wei Lo, 1971), as well as *The Deaf and Mute Heroine* (Wu Ma, 1971), *Lady Whirlwind* (Feng Huang, 1972) and *When Taekwondo Strikes* (Feng Huang, 1973).<sup>19</sup>

Hong Kong martial arts burst into Hollywood consciousness with Kung Fu star Bruce Lee's English-language debut, *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973). Lee's influence on subsequent Hollywood and international cinema made it clear that Kung Fu was in the cultural ascendant. Although the Shaws continued to produce *wuxia* films, by the mid-1970s their martial arts genre work had shifted emphasis to Kung Fu narratives with more contemporary settings.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, elements of the *wuxia* idiom began to find their way into Hollywood fantasy narratives, including the Shaw brothers-financed fantasy *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). However *wuxia* fantasy martial arts as a genre fell into a cultural abeyance for twenty years or more.<sup>21</sup>

Ronny Yu's *The Bride with White Hair* (1993), Michael Mak's *Butterfly and Sword* (1993) and Wong Kar-Wei's *Ashes of Time* (1994) provided a reinvigoration of the genre for a new generation. In a narrative that prefigures *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the first of these works features two warriors whose love for one another compels them to leave their chosen vocation, but who

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<sup>19</sup> Teo 2009, 146

<sup>20</sup> Desser, 19-43

<sup>21</sup> Teo 2009, 143

are pulled back to fighting by forces of evil and chaos.<sup>22</sup> *Butterfly and Sword* sees Michelle Yeoh take the role of the warrior-aristocrat, using magical fighting skills to defeat the genre staple of a dastardly eunuch, while secretly in love with her fellow warrior. *Ashes of Time* offers a postmodern take on *wuxia*, presenting a somewhat labyrinthine plot, even by the standards of the genre, that centres around a young woman who disguises herself as her brother.<sup>23</sup>

These three films may have been significant in stimulating something of a cult following for the *wuxia* genre in Europe and the US. The semantics and syntax of *wuxia* began to permeate Hollywood cinema during the 1990s, appearing with increasing frequency in Hollywood's fantasy lexicon towards the end of the last millennium. The genre's structuring tropes of a parallel fantasy world, peopled by warriors possessed of monk-like calm, talismanic weaponry and, in particular, capable of producing magical, counter-gravitational fight sequences, can be seen as informing an array of Hollywood fantasy films from this period onward. Examples include the fantasy genre vampire film *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998) and its sequels, the monk-like warriors and magical fight sequences animating the quasi-feudal world of *Star Wars Episode I* (George Lucas, 1999) and its sequels, as well as the philosopher-warriors whose counter-gravitational combat drives *The Matrix* (Wachowski siblings, 1999) and its sequels. Released just a year after *The Matrix*, it could be said that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* appeared at a moment when the aesthetics of *wuxia* were newly en vogue in

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 168

<sup>23</sup> Juanita Huan Zhou, "Ashes of Time: The Tragedy and Salvation of the Chinese Intelligentsia," *Asian Cinema* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Autumn 1998): 62-70, 63. URL: <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/ac/1998/00000010/00000001/art00009> (accessed January 3, 2018)

Hollywood, but at a moment when the medieval fantasy world of its genre origin proved a fresh iteration of the Hollywood genre.

Before engaging with the film's constitutive elements, it is necessary to explore a second aspect of its genre provenance, the coming-of-age film. David Bordwell challenges *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* place in the *wuxia* genre, arguing that the film's narrative is constructed in fundamental opposition to fantasy martial arts genre norms.<sup>24</sup> He cites Li Mu Bai's intention to retire from his warrior lifestyle, despite not having avenged his master's death, as contrary to the genre's demands. This recalls *wuxia* narratives like *Come Drink with Me*, *A Touch of Zen*, and *Butterfly and Sword*, which are relatively simple revenge tales. However *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* narrative close does see Li Mu Bai slay his master's killer and achieve revenge, before dying himself. In addition, the narrative trope of repressed lovers who wish to retire from *wuxia* has significant genre forebears, as noted above, forming as it does a central tenet of films like *The Bride with the White Hair* and *Butterfly and Sword*, amongst others.

Other critics have advanced more convincing challenges to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon's* narrative difference from genre-typical fantasy martial arts fare. Felicia Chan, Chris Berry and Feii Lu all claim *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to be syntactically rooted in romantic melodrama.<sup>25</sup> Stephen Teo too identifies Jen

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<sup>24</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2011), 183

<sup>25</sup> Felicia Chan, "Reading Ambiguity and Ambivalence: The Asymmetric Structure of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*" (unpublished 2003), 4. URL: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2003/november-2003/chan.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2017); Chris Berry and Feii Lu (ed.s), *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2005), 164



as a romantic heroine.<sup>26</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo<sup>27</sup> and Hsiu-Chuang Deppman<sup>28</sup> see the film as a romantic melodrama formed around a love triangle, where Jen is caught between Lo and Li Mu Bai. However this comprehension of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a romantic melodrama appears to ignore crucial aspects of the film's narrative presentation. To begin with, the film features not a love triangle but two couples. Although Yu Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai are presented as sublimating their love for one another, it's difficult to read this sublimation as the central focus of the film's narrative. Indeed, Kwai-Cheung Lo reads the film's clash in the bamboo forest as indicating Li Mu Bai's burgeoning erotic desire for Jen, suggesting a narrative of existential crisis more than one of tripartite romance.<sup>29</sup> The theory that romance is the film's central narrative is further weakened in that Jen twice rejects her lover, Lo, not in favour of Li Mu Bai but in favour of freedom and adventure. And although she appears to acknowledge Li Mu Bai's nascent erotic interest in her, the film never presents this coupling as a narrative aim or a state of yearning, as it is, for instance, in *Bright Star*.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, therefore, cannot be deemed to express the identifying tropes of a Hollywood genre romantic melodrama. However the film's complex plot does offer one unifying narrative thrust: all its characters struggle

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Teo, "Love and Swords: The Dialectics of Martial Arts Romance," *Senses of Cinema*, Vol. 11 (December 2000). URL: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/current-releases-11/crouching/> (accessed January 17, 2018)

<sup>27</sup> Kwai-Cheung Lo, "Transnationalization of the Local" in Esther Yau (ed.), *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless Word*, 261-276 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001), 265-266

<sup>28</sup> Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Adaptation in Modern Chinese Fiction and Film* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 16; Felicia Chan 2003, 4

<sup>29</sup> Lo, 265-266

between authenticity and social integration. This can be born out by examining the narrative arc afforded each of the film's five major figures. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* begins by presenting Li Mu Bai's agony of choice between his duty as a warrior and his deep desire for an integrated, loving relationship. Yu Shu Lien and Black Cloud Lo are presented as struggling between their love and their desire for social inclusion. Jen Yu's central drive is to engage her martial skills while remaining integrated within her social bonds, while Jade Fox can be read as raging against her inability fully to express her martial skills within the existing social order. The film ends with Yu Shu Lien's regret at her lost opportunity for love with Li Mu Bai. She offers a final piece of advice to Jen Yu: 'Promise me one thing, whatever path you take in this life ... be true to yourself.'

*Wuxia* as a semantic apparatus may be particularly well suited to the expression of this thematic polarity. Kenneth Chan notes that *jianghu*, or the ancient martial arts world, constitutes the habitus where the demands of social and communal responsibility are located. In genre-typical works, however, the potentially oppressive social responsibility inherent in the world 'disappears into the spectacularity, the romance and the epic scope of martial arts displays.'<sup>30</sup> By contrast, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* offers a perspective on the limitations of this world. It positions Jen Yu's transgressive desire for self-expression as the means by which the rigidity of *jianghu's* social codes can be interrogated. Through Jen Yu, then, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* can be seen to 'ultimately question the very ideological basis of the superstructure - namely, the myths and

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Chan, *Remade in Hollywood: The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 82

conventions with which [the film] starts.’<sup>31</sup>

This thematic polarity of authenticity versus social integration is not typically found in the *wuxia* corpus. However, it is the typical terrain of the Hollywood coming-of-age genre. A sub-genre of Hollywood coming-of-age narratives features young, talented figures who seek a socially meaningful forum for their gifts. Hollywood fantasy screen narratives in this idiom might include works like *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012), *The Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017) or the arthouse film turned popular success, *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002). Claire Barbre notes that these films take as their thematic backdrop ‘the use and abuse of power, of the ambiguous relationship between violence and vitality.’<sup>32</sup> Considering *Crouching Tiger*’s central presentation of Jen Yu’s struggle between frustration and freedom, this observation can certainly be seen as an appropriate definition of the thematic terrain that informs the film. As director Ang Lee puts it, *Crouching Tiger* might thus be viewed as ‘*Sense and Sensibility* with martial arts.’<sup>33</sup> Using Rick Altman’s paradigm,<sup>34</sup> we might understand *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* as constituted through the semantics of martial arts fantasy cinema, but harnessing the syntax of a coming-of-age narrative.

With these generic references in mind, I conduct an analysis of *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* through the constitutive elements of its protagonist, its

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 81

<sup>32</sup> Claire Barbre, “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; Girlfight; Gladiator; The Contender,” *Journal of Religion and Health* Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 2001): 325-328. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27511542> (accessed January 19, 2018)

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Devin Gordon, “It’s the Year of the Dragon,” *Newsweek*, December 4, 2000: 60. URL: <http://europe.newsweek.com/its-year-dragon-155845?rm=eu> (accessed January 4, 2018)

<sup>34</sup> Rick Altman, “A Semantic / Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.s), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, 179-190 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000)

gender and ethnic relations and its engagement with cultural context. Through that analysis, I advance the view that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* disestablishes conventional gender, ethnic and cultural power asymmetries through its multivalent thematic polarities, its recoding of character tropes and its strategic deployment of a form of Brechtian distancing. I begin this argument by demonstrating that the film's narrative multivalency is clearly articulated in its construction of protagonist.

### **The Problematic Protagonist**

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, hereafter referred to for the sake of brevity as *Crouching Tiger*, features a protagonist structured as desiring to be authentic as well as to integrate socially. As I shall demonstrate, Jen Yu's bifurcated motivation leads to an ambiguous characterization, that in turn reflects a multivalency in the film overall. She can be construed as a feminist figure, an ingénue caught between desire and discipline, or as an innovator in a traditional world. Her secondary genre provenance, whereby she inhabits a broader coming-of-age narrative, permits these thematic polarities to coexist without contradiction.

The film prefigures its challenging multivalency in the first twenty minutes, during which it is unclear as to which character will emerge as its true protagonist. The film features three figures perhaps equally prominently in its early stages. The figure of Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat) serves as an introduction to the world of *jianghu*. He appears at first as the genre-typical hero: a master *wuxia*, a knight errant whose orderly, monastic calm belies magical martial speed and skill.

However Li disappears from the diegesis at the first action sequence. The narrative is overtaken by Yu Shu Lien, who drives the first fight spectacle. Actor Michelle Yeoh is a skilled martial artist, and the lengthy spectacle of her first fight appears to lend weight to Yu's claim to the protagonist's role. About thirty-five minutes into the film's running time, teenage aristocrat and secret warrior Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) takes over the screen narrative. After a lengthy flashback presents her relationship with Black Cloud Lo (Chang Chen), the film adopts her adventures as its narrative focus. Jen Yu is presented as a young, aristocratic woman preparing for marriage. She has a hidden talent: she is secretly an expert *wuxia* fighter. Her talent is in direct contradiction to her assigned identity under the social conventions of her world, which require her to be meek, elegant and decorative. In this way, Jen's exterior life is disrupted by outbursts from the 'hidden dragon' of her interior life. Jen Yu might be compared to earlier *wuxia* protagonists like Cheng Pei Pei's figure in *Come Drink With Me*, as Teo notes.<sup>35</sup> She is presented as a similarly effervescent figure, bristling with talent and longing for adventure. Eperjesi notes her amorality as a structuring dynamic: she is an exciting figure 'detached from principles of good and evil, of right and wrong,'<sup>36</sup> a figure at the cusp of adulthood whose loyalties are still in flux.<sup>37</sup>

Her moral ambiguity is played out through her relationship to the film's magical sword as well as through her human relations. Jen Yu steals, and then returns, and then steals again the Green Destiny sword. She calls Yu Shu Lien her

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<sup>35</sup> Teo 2009, 179

<sup>36</sup> Eperjesi, 30

<sup>37</sup> Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 137-138

sworn enemy then her sworn sister. She is intimate then distant with her lover Lo. Jen Yu could be said to feel compelled to flout the patriarchal class system under which she lives, at the same time as she appears compelled to prove herself capable of entering its elite ranks. There are three main construals of meaning that coalesce around this struggle. The first sees Jen's struggle to escape her traditional domestic duties in favour of a warrior lifestyle as explicitly feminist. As Kenneth Chan and Fran Martin both point out, Hollywood has produced a number of coming-of-age works focussed on the young woman who overcomes significant social obstacles in order to express an inherent talent deemed inappropriate for her sex, ethnicity or class.<sup>38</sup> This syntactic thrust structures films ranging from *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002) to *The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2011) to *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016). Apparently drawing on this narrative antecedent, Barbre includes *Crouching Tiger* in that category of works featuring 'individuals who resist the negative cultural transmissions that shape sex-role stereotyping and gender socialization, especially in terms of how aggressive behaviour, domination and subjugation is understood and confronted.'<sup>39</sup>

A second comprehension of Jen's struggle roots the films' theme in Confucian philosophy, whose tenets form a founding orthodoxy of *wuxia*. The fantasy action narrative, as Gomes argues, is almost always predicated on a thematic dichotomy

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Chan, 85; Fran Martin, "The China Simulacrum: Genre, Feminism, and Pan-Chinese Cultural Politics in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," in Chris Berry and Lu Fei-i (ed.s), *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After*, 149-159 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 156

<sup>39</sup> Barbre, 325

between chaos and order.<sup>40</sup> In this light, Gomes classifies Jen Yu as a typical young protagonist of the genre.<sup>41</sup> In her early tendency towards unenlightened self-indulgence and chaos, she might recall Hollywood fantasy protagonists like Luke Skywalker or *The Matrix*'s Neo. William Leung articulates the same reading, recalling Ang Lee's remarks in relation to *Crouching Tiger* and *Sense and Sensibility*, and aligning the film's two female warriors with the two women around whom the latter film is organized. If we comprehend *Crouching Tiger*'s theme as concerned with the limits of freedom, Yu Shu Lien offers the 'conventional wisdom' of that earlier film's Elinor, while Jen Yu's wild bid for liberty is analogous to Marianne's sensibility.<sup>42</sup> In line with this set of meanings, Teo argues that the overall film is a 'thesis on the moral conduct and behaviour of the female knight-errant figure.'<sup>43</sup>

A third set meanings sees Jen Yu as a narrative site where an alternative modernity might be articulated. Jen appears to Leon Hunt as a culturally transitional figure, a woman who cannot settle into a conventional marriage, but is not permitted to become a master and join *wudan*, the genre's elite, male-only martial-arts institution.<sup>44</sup> In this context, Jen could be seen as a locus of resistance

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<sup>40</sup> Catherine Gomes, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Genre: An Investigation Into Western Film Criticism's Reading of Feminism in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," *Lumina* No. 11 (2005): 47-56, 47. URL: [https://www.academia.edu/3231657/Crouching\\_Women\\_Hidden\\_Genre\\_An\\_Investigation\\_Into\\_Western\\_Film\\_Criticisms\\_Reading\\_of\\_Feminism\\_In\\_Ang\\_Lees\\_Crouching\\_Tiger\\_Hidden\\_Dragon](https://www.academia.edu/3231657/Crouching_Women_Hidden_Genre_An_Investigation_Into_Western_Film_Criticisms_Reading_of_Feminism_In_Ang_Lees_Crouching_Tiger_Hidden_Dragon) (accessed January 15, 2018)

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 47

<sup>42</sup> William Leung, "Crouching Sensibility, Hidden Sense," *Film Criticism*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Autumn 2001): 42-57, 47. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44019095> (accessed January 2, 2017)

<sup>43</sup> Teo 2009, 174

<sup>44</sup> Hunt, 139

to cultural rigidities, rigidities to which the film's other figures are presented as complying. In support of this reading, we might observe Jen's narrative ambiguity. Her wild actions generate chaos. Her revolt against her *wuxia* master, Jade Fox, seeds the narrative conditions that allow for the death of Li Mu Bai. As Eperjesi puts it, she's 'a moral wild card that can be played in the direction of evil, Jade Fox, or in the direction of good, Li and Yu.'<sup>45</sup> This moral ambiguity positions Jen as analogous with the forces of change. This comprehension of the film's narrative sees Jen's rejection of her domestic duties as less a feminist rebellion and more a revolt against broader forms of rigid tradition and in favour of flexible modernity. In this analysis, as Eperjesi notes, the film may be understood as implicitly critiquing Jen's revolt, in that her actions are structured as leading to death and regret.<sup>46</sup> This analysis might be read as suggesting the necessity carefully to integrate modernity into traditional cultural precepts.

It's clear, then, that the film's central thematic struggle can be perceived as expressive of three different themes. Yet all three of these interpretations are contained within the Western narrative idiom of the coming-of-age story, whereby the protagonist must struggle with thematic polarities of individual self-expression and social integration.

Jen Yu, then, can be understood as a figure structured as desiring to be authentic as well as to integrate socially. This bifurcated motivation creates a certain unpredictable multivalency, such that her conduct through the film is ambiguous, her loyalties uncertain. Jen's multivalency produces a multivalency in

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<sup>45</sup> Eperjesi, 31

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*



the film's overall theme. It can be viewed as a feminist narrative predicated on the will to expression of Jen's authentic, warrior self. It can be read as a dichotomous struggle between unfettered desire and necessary discipline, or as the struggle to integrate a morally ambiguous form of modernity into an ethically driven, traditional world. Bound together in a construction rooted in Hollywood coming-of-age form, these elements appear to offer a satisfying, unified narrative with a multivalent set of perspectives. The protagonist's multivalency structures the film's central narrative and thematic engagement with gender, as well as its strategy regarding ethnic 'otherness.'

### **Bridging the 'Other' and 'Us'**

With regard to gender, I argue that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* harnesses the fantasy martial arts trope of women warriors on two levels, one linking to its martial arts origins, the other linking to its coming-of-age genre provenance. Both of these strategies serve to interrogate the gendered asymmetries of power that inhere in the genre's own foundational structures, and by extension, in the broader cultural sphere. With respect to ethnicity, I propose that the film's presentation of a simulacral Chineseness offers ethnic alterity as a form of fantasy identity into which Hollywood genre viewership may easily slip, thereby disestablishing any question of ethnic 'othering' even before the narrative takes hold.

Turning first to the film's gender relations, *Crouching Tiger* is notable in its presentation of more than one female warrior. Elizabeth Croll traces the genesis of the female *wuxia* warrior, or *nu xia*, to early traditional folklore and poetry,

including the legendary Fa Mulan. These folk stories appear to have formed the basis of traditional *wuxia* narratives presented at the Beijing Opera.<sup>47</sup> The Opera, Croll notes, routinely featured female actors playing *nu xia*, whose martial prowess was equal to that of their male colleagues. This tradition was simply extended into the great number of films featuring women as knights-errant.<sup>48</sup>

The *nu xia* was not a new or controversial figure in 1960s genre fantasy martial arts cinema, but it was King Hu's seminal 1966 work, *Come Drink with Me*, which made fashionable the idea that a *nu xia* should drive the film as protagonist. That film made a star of former dancer Cheng Pei Pei, who later drove genre films *Golden Swallow* (Cheh Zhang, 1968) and *The Lady Hermit* (Meng Hua Ho, 1971), before returning to the screen as the villainous Jade Fox in *Crouching Tiger*.<sup>49</sup> During the flowering of the Shaw Brother's studios, actors like Cheng and Angela Mao became famous for their multiple depictions of warrior women. The 1980s and early 1990s saw a fresh wave of such protagonists, played by stars like Maggie Cheung and Anita Mui. Siu-fung Koo identifies Michelle Yeoh as the 'Queen of Martial Arts' during this period, alongside Brigitte Lin's celebrated transgendered role in films like *The East is Red* (Siu-Tung Ching and Raymond Lee, 1993), *Dreadful Melody* (Min Kan Ng, 1993) and *Ashes Of Time* (Wong Kar-Wei, 1994).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in Twentieth-Century China* (London: Zed Books, 1995), 153

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 153

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Teo, "King Hu," *Senses Of Cinema* Vol. 21 (July 2002). URL: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/hu/> (accessed January 3, 2017)

<sup>50</sup> Siu-fung Koo, "Philosophy and Tradition in the Swordplay Film," in Lau Shing-hon (ed.), *Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980)*, 25-32 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival & The Urban Council, 1996), 30

However for Hollywood fantasy cinema, the entrance of female fighters into the genre, emblemized by figures like Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) in *The Matrix*, or like Jen Yu and Yu Shu Lien in *Crouching Tiger*, offered a fresh iteration of the idiom. Teo writes that a typical reaction of critics ‘not versed in the tradition of ... martial arts cinema... was that it was not common to see women cast so prominently in action parts.’<sup>51</sup> J. Robert Parks is typical of those reviewers Teo critiques when he rejoices in *Crouching Tiger* as a new and refreshing portrayal of ‘strong, extraordinarily effective women who can do anything a man can do, while at the same time overcoming the obvious prejudice against them.’<sup>52</sup> Gomes describes commentators like Parks as informed by previous Hollywood genres, where female fighters might be viewed as exceptional and extraordinary. This context leads them to see figures like Jen Yu and Yu Shu Lien in simple empowerment terms. However, Gomes suggests that this perspective fails to register the ‘subtle ideologies’ that these figures embody within generic martial arts cinema.<sup>53</sup>

There is a patriarchal ideology in play within the genre, as Kenneth Chan notes: ‘female *wuxia* joins the lower ranks of petty swordsmen, who are ruled by their passions and aspire to become like the (male) master, epitomized by Li Mu Bai – the ultimate swordsman who achieves enlightenment in the form of a transcendental aloofness from the baser human instincts.’<sup>54</sup> Gomes describes the

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<sup>51</sup> Teo 2009, 176

<sup>52</sup> J. Robert Parks, “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” *The Phantom Tollbooth* URL: <http://www.tollbooth.org/2000/movies/crouchingtiger.html> (accessed January 5, 2018)

<sup>53</sup> Gomes, 47

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Chan 2004, 11

genre as ‘highly prejudiced against women,’ arguing that female warrior figures must be understood as inhabiting a specific echelon within the highly stratified world.<sup>55</sup> This prejudice is structured into the ambivalent nature of *jianghu*, the fantasy terrain within which these generic narratives play out, marked by a set of values and principles transposed onto a particular strand of Hollywood fantasy cinema from the peri-millennial period onward. As an expression of Confucian worldview, Berenice Reynaud describes *jianghu* as ‘a symptom of disorder ... composed of thieves, travelling entertainers, knights-errant, killers, bodyguards for hire, and unattached women.’<sup>56</sup> It is precisely because of its presentation of disorder, Reynaud observes, that *jianghu* is diegetically structured to include the female warrior. Their presence indicates the need for ‘Confucian respect of the master, father and traditional authority.’<sup>57</sup> This codified comprehension of *jianghu* might render figures like Jen Yu not as feminists fighting for equal rights, but rather as embodying a violent disruption that necessitates the imposition of strong, paternalist order.

With respect to its presentation of masculinity, *Crouching Tiger* appears to diverge from genre norms in its construction of Li Mu Bai. He is revealed early in the film as having failed to reach the highest levels of monastic enlightenment. He declares that he will give up the warrior discipline in favour of an erotically fulfilling life. Only Jen Yu’s audacious theft of Green Destiny compels him to

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<sup>55</sup> Gomes, 47

<sup>56</sup> Berenice Reynaud, “The Book, the Goddess and the Hero: Sexual Politics in the Chinese Martial Arts Film,” *Senses of Cinema*, Vol. 26 (May 2003). URL: [http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/sexual\\_politics\\_chinese\\_martial\\_arts/](http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/sexual_politics_chinese_martial_arts/) (accessed January 17, 2017)

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

remain in place as a figure of paternal authority. The generically typical martial arts master is most frequently positioned as an unfailingly stable figure, the one who, as Bhaskar Sarkar notes, restores order to the disordered world,<sup>58</sup> the moral arbiter who ‘speaks softly yet carries a big sword,’ as Eperjesi puts it.<sup>59</sup> In Lacanian terms, he might be defined as the symbolic authority; what Todd McGowan calls an absolute paternal power who represents the rule of law, at a level of status commensurate with that authority.<sup>60</sup>

The Green Destiny has both literal and figurative significance in this context. As a literal object, the sword’s magical qualities make its wielder more powerful. The sword can also be read as an emblem of the power and authority of *wudan*, the mythical, male-only martial-arts school. The sword is thus also an emblem of Li Mu Bai’s status as eminent master warrior, as the film’s figure of stable moral authority. Its theft constitutes the theft of Li Mu Bai’s status and power. As Rong Cai remarks, the sword can thus be viewed in Lacanian terms as the phallic marker of paternal authority. And Jen’s theft can be read as ‘a usurpation of male power and a grave challenge to both male authority and male propriety.’<sup>61</sup> When Jen Yu wields Green Destiny, she proclaims herself the greatest warrior and gives herself a *nom de guerre* that relates to the sword. It is the sword that endows her

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<sup>58</sup> Bhaskar Sarkar, “Hong Kong Hysteria: Martial Arts Tales from a Mutating World,” in Esther C.M. Yau (ed.), *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, 159-176 (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 164

<sup>59</sup> Eperjesi, 32

<sup>60</sup> Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany: State of University of New York Press, 2004), 42

<sup>61</sup> Rong Cai, “Gender Imaginations in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the Wuxia World,” *Positions* Vol. 13 No. 2 (Fall 2005): 441-471, 451. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/186805> (accessed January 25, 2018)

publicly with her master warrior status, rendering her culturally ‘masculine’ and making her the equal of Li Mu Bai. But the Green Destiny is also emblematic of Jen’s outsider status: she is compelled steal it since she is not permitted to earn it. As a genre-normative *nu xia*, Yu Shu Lien is presented as repeatedly and explicitly connecting the sword to Li Mu Bai’s cultural power and prestige. His possession of its magic has been earned through the hierarchical code of *wudan*. Jen’s transgression of that traditional code is presented as angering Yu Shu Lien even more than the theft itself.

When Li Mu Bai suggests that Jen Yu be offered an opportunity to excel through the men-only *wudan* school, thus gaining prestige, status and - ultimately - the right to wield Green Destiny, this too presents problems for female Yu Shu Lien. Li Mu Bai is proposing a radical reorganization of their gender-based, hierarchical world. In this narrative moment, the camera lingers on Yu Shu Lien. Yu Shu Lien’s reaction to Li Mu Bai’s remark appears to be a mixture of dismay and astonishment. It is another multivalent moment in the film’s structure, permitting complementary readings.

One reading might involve Yu Shu Lien’s private disappointment that such a change was not made for her. Equally, the moment can be read as shock at the very idea of upending tradition. Or the shot can be read as surprise that Li Mu Bai is so flexible in this respect, despite his role as enforcer of Confucian codes. Regardless of which reading is preferred, the focus on actor Michelle Yeoh’s face in this moment allows the film a crucial extra dramatic beat, emphasising the ideological significance of Li Mu Bai’s proposal. In this moment, the film offers

what Schamus describes as ‘an interruption of the transmission of culture through the usual homosocial lineages of master and student by inserting female subjectivity into the chain of tradition, an insertion that both ruptures and, in a new and untested form, preserves cultural identity.’<sup>62</sup> But Li Mu Bai’s earlier reference to his struggle with erotic desire returns, this time presented as a nascent desire toward the young girl he wishes to take on as his first female student. The film appears to disestablish Li Mu Bai’s genre-ascribed patriarchal authority again here, suggesting a confusion between two desires. One is his desire to take a disciple and ensure cultural continuity; the other is his desire for this particular woman, which constitutes a profound breakdown of cultural order as the film’s *wuxia* genre constructs it.

The ensuing fight between Li Mu Bai and Jen Yu in the bamboo trees offers a key moment of revelation in relation to this dual set of meanings. At one point, Jen Yu arches back through the branches with Li Mu Bai leaning over her in a dominant, sexualised pose. The film halts its forward momentum with a sudden, intense close up of Jen Yu’s face. Her expression can be read as one of ecstasy or surprise. This image appears to change the confrontational meaning of the scene and instead highlights the sexual undercurrents in play. It serves to underscore the ethical transgression that the master is in danger of making in order to acquire this disciple. The potential for transgression is made even more explicit when Li Mu Bai rescues the drugged Jen Yu from Jade Fox’s cavern. ‘Did you come for me or the sword?’ asks the disorientated Jen Yu.

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<sup>62</sup> James Schamus, “Aesthetic Identities: A Response to Kenneth Chan and Christina Klein,” *Cinema Journal* Vol. 43, No. 4 (Summer 2004): 43 – 52, 45-46. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/172198> (accessed December 18, 2017)

If *Crouching Tiger* offers Li Mu Bai as a challenge to gender conventions of the genre, equally it presents Jade Fox as a challenge through its presentation of her as an excluded, disempowered woman rather than simply as a stock genre villain. Jade Fox is depicted as a talented *nu xia* who has been denied the opportunity to reach beyond a certain level of expertise within *wudan* on the basis of her femaleness. This narrative point is underscored through the film's casting, in that the part of Jade Fox is played by veteran martial arts actor Cheng Pei Pei, who has played the part of the genre-normative swords-woman in over forty fantasy martial arts films. *Crouching Tiger* positions Jade Fox as suffering gender-based exclusion, and as a direct consequence, as harbouring a murderous desire to tear down and destroy those who have excluded her.

Li Mu Bai's frailty is expanded to suggest a broader, systemic frailty when Jade Fox reveals that she was exploited by her *wudan* master in just the way in which Li Mu Bai is at risk of exploiting Jen Yu. Here, *Crouching Tiger* appears to interrogate the central ideological conventions of wuxia, raising the spectre of systemic sexual abuse. Although they are diegetically opposed, the film permits Li Mu Bai to recognize that structural inequality has led to Jade Fox's bitterness. In a scene that appears explicitly to articulate a critique of rigid gender-based hierarchies, Li states that Jen Yu must find a path to accommodate her warrior identity within their social world. In this way, as Rong Cai notes, Jen Yu and Jade Fox, disciple and master, are linked as dangerous 'manifestations of out-of-control female desire,'<sup>63</sup> an out-of-control desire that the film explicitly roots in their

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<sup>63</sup>Cai, 452



suffering through harsh, gendered power asymmetries.

Jen's out-of-control desire is demonstrated through her wild use of Green Destiny. In one such wild use, she picks a fight with numerous warriors gathered in a tavern. The tavern fight is a frequent trope of the *wuxia* genre. Teo describes the trope as a device whereby the heroic knight-errant can display courage by eliminating evildoers in an uneven match of his or her skill against their numbers.<sup>64</sup> Populated with what might be described as stock characters, the tavern fight is a central element of King Hu's films *Come Drink With Me* (1965), *Dragon Inn* (1967), *Anger* (1970) and *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973), amongst others. In *Crouching Tiger*, Jen Yu engages in battle with a tavern's denizens in what appears to be just such a genre-typical fight. However, while *Crouching Tiger's* tavern fight includes almost all the semantic elements typical of the genre, it is syntactically at odds with those earlier films. Whereas those earlier fights present the knight-errant eliminating diegetically-defined villains, *Crouching Tiger* presents Jen Yu as enjoying her martial superiority without any of the moral substructure of clearly identified 'evildoers' against whom to pit her skill. Indeed, her tavern opponents are quick to identify her breach of the genre's codes.

In this way, the film connects Jen Yu's exuberant transgression of moral codes in the tavern directly to her ruthless exclusion from what we might conceive of as her 'natural' warrior community. In structuring her as doubly-transgressive, as it were, the film creates a self-reflexive aspect that is atypical of its genre conventions, and seems to present an implicit critique of its fantasy world's

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<sup>64</sup> Teo 2009, 119

gender-based exclusions.

In this focus on gender-based exclusion, *Crouching Tiger* could be understood as conforming to a convention of the coming-of-age narrative. Marina Gonick identifies this form of narrative as ‘represent[ing] a social and cultural fascination with girls that is also an expression of the uncertainties, tensions, fears and anxieties elicited by the rapid social, economic and political changes.’<sup>65</sup> This genre trope maintains that the precepts and rituals of a society are necessary as a structuring force, but that they require emendation, such that those who have traditionally been excluded might contribute more meaningfully to their culture. As Barbre puts it, the Hollywood protagonists in this genre ‘remind us that, through the imprint and legacy of socialization, cultures impart meanings that delineate behavioural norms and transgressions - boundaries that may be challenged by the creative will of individual initiatives.’<sup>66</sup> Examples of Hollywood genre fantasies in this territory might include *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, 1997-2003), *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming 1996), *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012; Francis Lawrence, 2013-15), and more recently my own direction of Marvel’s long-form *Jessica Jones* (created by Melissa Rosenberg, 2015-18), all of which depict young female protagonists struggling to find a place for their magical talents within a restrictive society.

The central power struggle of *Crouching Tiger* might thus be perceived as the struggle for Jen Yu’s destiny in the context of *wudan*, where *wudan* is a

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<sup>65</sup> Marina Gonick, “Between ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia’: Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject,” *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 2006): 1-23, 4-5. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199490> (accessed January 3, 2018)

<sup>66</sup>Barbre, 325

synecdoche for traditional, gender-based, hierarchical culture. This power struggle for Jen Yu is played out between Jade Fox and Li Mu Bai, two gendered forces in diametrically opposed positions relative to that culture. However, the film strongly suggests that Jen Yu runs a risk if she aligns herself with either of her two potential mentors. The film therefore offers no clear correct choice for Jen Yu. This structural ambiguity is emphasised in the film's bifurcated closing scenes.

The film's close is of necessity bifurcated as it traces different outcomes for its two pairs of lovers. Li Mu Bai expresses a dying regret that he adhered to the repressively gendered social code, thereby confirming *Crouching Tiger* as a film that interrogates the accepted asymmetries of power inherent in the *wuxia* genre. The final scene sees Jen positioned with her lover Lo, looking out from a mountain top over the clouds. The image evokes the idea that the world is at Jen's feet. Unexpectedly, Jen jumps from her lover's side and descends into the clouds. This narrative moment is as multivalent as some of the earlier pivotal points in the film. Here again, the various potential readings appear to complement rather than to contradict one another.

On one level, Jen's action suggests suicidal remorse for her part in Li Mu Bai's death. This positions the film within a discourse of coming-of-age stories, where, as Schamus puts it, 'a protagonist of great promise fails to avoid the wages of hubris.'<sup>67</sup> A second reading presents the rather bleak view that there remains no social option open to Jen where she can simultaneously pursue her love and her ambitions as a warrior. Lo's determination to marry Jen, as Kenneth Chan

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<sup>67</sup>quoted in Horace L. Fairlamb, "Romancing the Tao: How Ang Lee globalized Ancient Chinese Wisdom," *symploke* Vol. 15, No. 1 (2007): 190-205, 193. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 15, 2018)

observes, is structured as automatically delimiting her ability to achieve mastery of *wudan*.<sup>68</sup> This reading sees Jen's choice of death as a choice to inhabit the 'location for all the impossible signs' as Claire Johnston puts it.<sup>69</sup>

The third interpretation situates the film's meaning within the mythic elements of its diegesis, in a form similar to coming-of-age film *Whale Rider*, where protagonist Paikea undergoes an apparently fatal journey that serves to make literal a mythical event. In so doing, she emerges as the proven spiritual leader of her community. Similarly, an early event in *Crouching Tiger* introduces the myth of the lover who throws himself from the cliff in order to make manifest his lover's desires, and who is thereby spared death. When Jen undertakes this feat at the film's close, she might be read as moving from the film's 'everyday' fantasy life into its self-constructed mythic aspect. In support of this reading, we might note that Jen's body in this moment is positioned for flight, not for falling. In this way, we might interpret the final moment of the film as offering Jen a form of apotheosis. She is not killing herself, she is rendering herself immortal. She is becoming a part of her community's mythology. She will survive this spectacular descent - either literally or figuratively - to become the legendary warrior she was destined to be, fulfilling what Kenneth Chan refers to as the film's 'politics of hope' with respect to its presentation of the politics of gendered exclusion.<sup>70</sup>

Turning to the film's relation to ethnicity, it is clear that *Crouching Tiger* is an unusual Hollywood film in that its dialogue is delivered in Mandarin within a

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<sup>68</sup> Kenneth Chan 2004, 14

<sup>69</sup> Claire Johnston, "Femininity and the Masquerade: Anne of the Indies" in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 64-72 (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 68

<sup>70</sup> Kenneth Chan 2004, 14

fantasy Chinese landscape. The film might be understood as offering its warrior-heroes, Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien, as a bridge over potential linguistic or cultural alienation. The two warriors are of the culture, but are presented as not entirely integrated into it, in that they are constantly in motion through it. Although they have a clear place in the social hierarchy of this world, they can be seen as to some degree deracinated. Writer James Schamus argues that placing these figures in the film's opening moments offers an initial subject position that is intentionally 'internally displaced.'<sup>71</sup> These figures are sufficiently at odds with their surroundings that they can act as an initial point of identification for the film's Hollywood genre viewership.

The film's resultant all-inclusive representation of Chineseness might be seen as reflected in its casting. All four lead actors speak the film's Mandarin with four distinctly different regional accents. Lisa Funnell observes that two of them are entirely non-Mandarin speakers and recite their dialogue as a phonetically-learned sequence of sounds.<sup>72</sup> In this way, the film's language might be understood as another aspect of its fantasy landscape, a distancing device that enhances the alternative, fantastical nature of its diegetic world, which cannot be comprehended as reflective of 'realist' accent, dialogue or vocabulary.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis suggest that the film

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<sup>71</sup> Schamus 2004, 45

<sup>72</sup> Lisa Funnell, *Warrior Women: Gender, Race and the Transnational Chinese Action Star* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014), 94

<sup>73</sup> Felicia Chan 2004, 57

can be seen as presenting an inclusive frame for its fantasy narrative,<sup>74</sup> where *Crouching Tiger* becomes Martin's 'simulacral, postmodern and transnational version of 'Pan-Chineseness.'"<sup>75</sup> Such an inclusive, open-bordered framing of its fantasy world offers the 'pleasure of floating in and out of identification with the spectacle of 'Chineseness,'"<sup>76</sup> where that spectacle is itself a fantasy. The pleasures of entering this kind of simulacral China might be seen as analogous to those pleasures of *unheimlich* identification that we associate with entering any fantasy Hollywood narrative; but in this instance it is a pleasure that potentially dissolves the boundaries between identity and alterity, between the 'West' and the 'other.'

Summarizing *Crouching Tiger*'s approach to gender and ethnic representation, I have demonstrated that *Crouching Tiger*'s multivalency extends to its presentation of female warriors. The martial prowess and psychological depth afforded to Jen Yu and Yu Shu Lien marks them as exceptional in Hollywood genre cinema, marking them as emblematic of subsequent cultural shifts toward gender inclusion in the genre. However, within the terrain of *jianghu*, Yu Shu Lien might be seen as a typical figure: an expert fighter, she is presented as at a lower level of mastery than Li Mu Bai. Similarly, Jen Yu's ethical ambiguity can be interpreted in this cultural context as moral dislocation; her impetuous behaviour can be read as indicative of the need for ordered guidance. This more traditional, martial-arts reading positions Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu as perfectly normative

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<sup>74</sup> Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh, and Darrell William Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (New York: Columbia University Press 2005), 193

<sup>75</sup> Martin 2004, 158

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 154

expressions of a patriarchal, gendered set of ideations consonant with genre wuxia films.

In the figure of Li Mu Bai, the film appears more uniformly to undermine genre-typical ideations of the stable, moral masculinity of the master warrior. Similarly, the flat, genre villain is replaced in the film by Jade Fox, a woman whose rage is the logical outcome of her systematic gender-based exclusion from the culturally sanctioned hierarchy of her discipline. If the world of wuxia typically sees rage and violence defeated by *wudan* martial expertise and the imposition of order, then Li Mu Bai and Jade Fox together can be seen as destabilizing that genre idiom. Instead, *Crouching Tiger* appears to present the structural inequality of *wudan* itself as the cause of rage and violence.

Jen Yu's theft and rampage is similarly structured as the result of her gender-based social exclusion. Her talent, her transgression and consequent lack of social place are presented narratively as dangerous to herself and to others. In this respect, the film suggests that traditions must be remade in order to avoid the rage, disorder and violence that are attendant upon structural inequality. In this respect, the film appears to trigger a counter-generic desire for social inclusion, with particular, explicit reference to gender.

In an open ending, Jen's predicament can be read as rendering her self-destructive, since she is unable to resolve her conflicting desires for authenticity and social inclusion. Equally, she can be read as self-martyring, unable to find a subject position within the restrictive and narrow traditions of her world. She can be read as ascending to the level of myth, where she takes flight into a new,

magical reality, free of obstacle. All three potential readings appear to contain within them a counter-generic drive against the genre's structuring power asymmetries.

With respect to its engagement with ethnicity, *Crouching Tiger* establishes a genre-typical world of *jianghu* in its opening scene. In their diegetic deracination, Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien might be seen to offer audiences a narrative entry point into the fantasy world. The actors' variable knowledge and pronunciation of the film's Mandarin further underscores the film's diegetic world as a fantasy construction, whereby actual knowledge of 'real' Mandarin is of no particular advantage to actors or viewership. In this way, *Crouching Tiger* offers its viewership a sense of floating in and out of a borderless, largely imaginary Chinese identity, permitting an easy identification with what we might describe through a Euro-American lens as the 'other' of generic Hollywood cinema. In this context, the film can be interpreted as a boundary-crossing project on more than one level, such that its transnational origins implicitly call into question reductive notions of ethnicity and alterity. The film's genre-based fantasy landscape affords a further disestablishment of hegemonic ideation when it comes to its broader cultural context.

### **Cultural Context: Fantasy Landscape, Real Social Engagement**

I argue in this section that *Crouching Tiger*'s genre-based fantasy landscape can be understood as a form of Brechtian distancing, in that it interrogates real-world socio-political concerns in an uncanny, parallel world. I demonstrate how



the film harnesses the tropes of fantasy martial arts spectacle and infuses them with a counter-generic, challenging psycho-social drama, transforming the conventional meaning construal of both genres in the process.

The film establishes its generic territory in the opening scene, which depicts an idealized medieval Chinese stately home. In the background rise verdant mountains, in the foreground is a glistening pond. This fantasy presentation of tranquility and prosperity is followed by a shot of the ordered, busy streets of a big medieval town. Rong Cai describes these two scenes as conforming to ‘a perfect image of a traditional landscape painting (*shanshui hua*), a picture of balance and serenity.’<sup>77</sup> These opening images appear to connote the cinematic world of *jianghu* (literally, rivers and lakes<sup>78</sup>), the genre’s fantasy medieval landscape, typically peopled by a specific complement of martial arts experts, lords, ladies and villains. Ang Lee underscores this generic conception of *Crouching Tiger*’s diegetic world, describing the landscape he conjures as ‘kind of a dream of China.’<sup>79</sup> In relation to his references in constructing this world, Lee remarks that ‘I knew nothing about the real China. I had this image in my mind, from movies.’<sup>80</sup>

The film’s setting can thus be understood as firmly rooted in the genre norms of fantasy martial arts cinema, informed by deeper cultural fantasies of the

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<sup>77</sup> Cai, 454

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 445

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Mark Landler, “Lee’s *Tiger*, Celebrated Everywhere but at Home,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2001. URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F06E7DC1F39F934A15751C0A9679C8B63> (accessed December 9, 2017)

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Rick Lyman, “Crouching Memory, Hidden Heart,” *The New York Times* March 9, 2001. URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE1D7163AF93AA35750C0A9679C8B63> (accessed December 22, 2017)

medieval, 'harmonious' past. In this way, *Jianghu* might be understood as incorporating a contemporary ideological impulse toward a more 'perfect' past, of the kind outlined in the first chapter of this study. Invoking a socio-political outlook parallel to that which we might understand as at work among some contemporary neo-conservative thinkers, this projection of a more perfect past can be understood as structured through a set of social relations rooted in rigid power asymmetries, where power is ascribed on the basis of gender and heredity.

If *jianghu* conventionally offers a parallel to the aspirations of a certain neo-conservative Euro-American politics, it is a parallel distilled through the distancing effect of the film's distinctive milieu. In this way, *Crouching Tiger* might be comprehended as employing a strategy of Brechtian distancing, in that *jianghu* presents a world that is visually alien, but ideologically familiar. It might thus be understood as having the potential to act as a metaphor through which contemporary cultural anxieties can be examined, or a parallel world through which we might more clearly view real concerns of our own. To put it in Freudian terms, the genre convention of fantasy martial arts might be seen as designed to invoke a reassuringly familiar conservative political ideology, packaged through tropes of a thrillingly uncanny or *unheimlich* setting.

One of the prominent genre expectations of fantasy martial arts cinema is the production of spectacle. Bordwell notes that *wuxia* as a genre is punctuated by bursts of choreographed, aesthetically pleasurable fights. The genre's fight sequences, he argues, might be understood as moments where a film's narrative effectively halts, providing purely formal aesthetic pleasures devoid of thematic or

psychological resonance.<sup>81</sup> As Klein sees it, this is the genre's 'particular flaw: the lack of integration between the narrative and displays of action.'<sup>82</sup>

*Crouching Tiger* appears to conform to the generic idiom of spectacularly choreographed fights, offering lengthy and elaborate sequences that feature magical, balletic movement on a par with anything in the genre canon. These fights circle around the film's magical sword, the slender and elastic Green Destiny. *Crouching Tiger* conforms to genre norms too in its spectacular presentation of Green Destiny, underscoring a genre convention whereby, as Teo puts it, 'the sword is at the heart of *wuxia* in theme and action.'<sup>83</sup> Overlaid by the genre's familiar swishing and ringing sounds, *Crouching Tiger's* presentation of Green Destiny 'is like a compendium of every ... Hong Kong action film ever made,'<sup>84</sup> Mitchell observes.

But *Crouching Tiger* diverges from genre norms with regard to spectacle in two respects. Firstly, it delays the introduction of this genre trope. And secondly, it invests in its fight sequences what might be seen as counter-generic narrative and psychological detail. The first twenty minutes of the film's running time sets out a complex emotional world, establishing the psychological, social and subtextually sexual relationships that serve to drive the film's narrative. This means the film's first fight spectacle is 'far too late by Hong Kong standards,' according to Klein.<sup>85</sup> In this respect, *Crouching Tiger* might be understood as failing to serve broader

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<sup>81</sup> Bordwell 2011, 229

<sup>82</sup> Klein 2004, 31

<sup>83</sup> Teo 2009, 175

<sup>84</sup> Elvis Mitchell

<sup>85</sup> Klein 2004, 31

genre expectations. However, this formal investment of time offers the later profit of fight sequences where emotional engagement can be depicted through and in the balletic fight choreography. In this way, the film's fights can be comprehended as playing out in a landscape of complex psychosocial relationships, serving up evocative emotional pleasures as well as the more genre-typical pleasures of pure aesthetic spectacle.

In this respect, King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* may be seen as an obvious genre reference point for *Crouching Tiger*. That film's first fight sequence occurs an hour into its running time, and can be read as equally suffused with psychological and emotional subtext. Teo observes that '*Crouching Tiger*'s debt to *A Touch of Zen* has not been fully acknowledged in the current discourse on Ang Lee's film.'<sup>86</sup> While clearly influenced by the themes and aesthetics of *A Touch of Zen*, *Crouching Tiger*'s construction of spectacle may equally be construed as relating to its syntactic roots in the coming-of-age genre idiom. That genre's conception of narratively-driven spectacle, exemplified by moments in works like *The Hunger Games* or *Whale Rider*, might equally be comprehended as providing a genre paradigm for the articulation of emotional transformation through spectacular action. In this way, *Crouching Tiger*'s fights can be understood as working counter to its semantic idiom, but as conforming to its syntactic idiom, presenting those fights as a mode that serves to 'express characters' feelings and desires, externalize their inner lives, and give physical shape to their relationships,' as Klein puts it.<sup>87</sup> Through the lens of the coming-of-age narrative, as Teo suggests,

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<sup>86</sup> Teo 2009, 179

<sup>87</sup> Klein 2004, 31

the provisional and tentative outcomes of *Crouching Tiger's* fights can be construed as reflective of Jen Yu's genre-typical uneasy relation to her own cultural positioning and to the cultural positioning of those who seek to help her.<sup>88</sup>

With regard to the film's presentation of cultural context, we may surmise that the film uses its genre-based fantasy landscape as a form of Brechtian distancing, in order to present what might be familiar socio-political concerns through the lens of an uncanny diegetic world. In addition, the film harnesses the genre pleasures of fantasy martial arts spectacle to deliver a coming-of-age psycho-social drama, in the process permitting its spectacular fight sequences an unease and an ambivalent outcome more redolent of the latter than the former genre.

### **Conclusion: Maintaining Tradition through Transformation**

This chapter has demonstrated how *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* combines a recognizable martial arts genre semantics with the syntax of the Hollywood coming-of-age film to present a challenging, multivalent adventure that disestablishes certain restrictive hegemonic tropes of gender, ethnic and cultural identity. I outlined how film's protagonist is constructed to embody its multivalent thematic polarities, oscillating between dichotomies including authenticity and social integration, desire and discipline, feminism and patriarchy. I profiled how the film's presentation of gender relations disestablishes fundamental values of its martial arts genre, as well as how the film's simulacral, fantasy 'Chinese' subjectivity undercuts Euro-American conventions of identity and alterity. I

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<sup>88</sup> Teo 2009, 175

demonstrated that the film's fantasy landscape is a form of Brechtian distancing, interrogating real-world socio-political concerns in an uncanny, parallel world. In conclusion, I now advance the view that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* produces a strategy of narrative multivalency that is unified in disestablishing retrogressive forms of culturally-transmitted power asymmetry regarding gender, ethnic and cultural representation.

The film presents Jen Yu in productively ambiguous terms: she desires transgression and tradition, freedom and filial piety. The film affords her considerable psychological depth, rooting her conflicted behaviour in her untenable cultural status. Jen's multivalent behaviour produces a multivalency in the film's overall theme. Its thematic polarities can be read as oscillating between authenticity / integration, chaos / order, desire / discipline, modernity / tradition and feminist / patriarchal. From this perspective, the film can be seen as replacing normative, reductive, one-note genre thematics with a multivalent thematic presentation.

The film undermines genre-typical ideations of the stable, moral authority of the master warrior, and equally undermines the genre figure of the villainous nemesis. In reframing these two figures as subject to a hierarchically based, socially sanctioned system of inequality, the film destabilizes the fundamental gender-based values of its diegetic world. Rather than its martial system bringing order to an otherwise violent world, the film suggests that the martial system is itself the bringer of violence. In this respect, *Crouching Tiger* can be said to operate in a counter-generic manner by privileging the extension of equality and

confronting traditional, normative hierarchies as unjust. In addition, its diegetic presentation can be understood as implicitly interrogating the bounded ideation of 'Chineseness' as 'other,' creating a fantasy environment whereby a floating subjectivity produces a fantasy identification with simulacral China and Chineseness, effectively dissolving conventional Hollywood conceptions of identity and alterity.

With respect to cultural context, *Crouching Tiger* positions its genre landscape to produce a form of Brechtian distancing, recoding familiar socio-political concerns through the lens of an uncanny fantasy world. By means of this strategy, the film harnesses the genre pleasures of fantasy martial arts spectacle to deliver a coming-of-age story that interrogates real-world cultural and political concerns from a fresh, unexpected perspective.

It is clear, then, that *Crouching Tiger* marries the semantics and conventions of *wuxia* with the coming-of-age genre to address contemporary concerns regarding gender-based asymmetries of power. Its moments of narrative ambivalence produce more than one coherent set of meanings, none of which is necessarily in conflict with another, but each of which speaks to a specific cultural cohort of viewership. In this way, the film can be understood as strategically imbuing genre elements with counter-generic meaning, producing a work that is at once familiar and challenging. Its strategy offers the 'calm pleasures' of a thrilling magical adventure, harnessing those same magical tropes to convey an array of 'exhilarated pleasures,' reframing hegemonic ideations of gender and ethnic difference, as well as recoding its genre characters explicitly to critique

hierarchies of power that are reflective of real-world power asymmetries. In this way, the film appears to offer potentially valuable strategies toward the construction of a pleasurable Hollywood genre film that effectively counters repressive forms of gender, ethnic and cultural representation.



## 6. *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*:

### A COWBOY'S ROMANTIC MELODRAMA

This chapter identifies *Brokeback Mountain* as a film with semantic roots in the romantic melodrama and syntactic roots in the Western. Tracing the development of the romantic melodrama genre's most salient conventions, I demonstrate how *Brokeback Mountain*'s suffering, silent protagonist conforms closely to those conventions, while radically reframing the defining tropes of the Western hero. I identify how the film fuses romantic melodrama tropes related to timelessness with Western tropes of the timeless landscape, a fusion that serves to amplify the film's romance to an epic, quasi-mythic level. This quasi-mythic quality, I argue, is underscored by the film's radical reframing of gendered Western ideations linking the wilderness with masculinity. However this strategy has the corollary of reinforcing conventional Western ideations of femininity. Noting that, like *Bright Star*, the film presents a mono-ethnic Caucasian *dramatis personae*, I propose that *Brokeback Mountain*'s focus on homophobia is consonant with an interrogation of cultural 'othering,' identifying the film's explicit presentation of the cinematic male body as a site of erotic display and of cultural control. Overall, I conclude that *Brokeback Mountain*'s conformity to the conventions of the romantic melodrama results in a familiar, culturally dominant ideation of gay men as abject, isolated and suffering. In addition, the film's valorization of male homosexual love through the idiom of the Western results in the film's reinforcement of a related Western convention, whereby femininity is thematically linked to a contained domesticity. However, *Brokeback Mountain*'s radical reframing of the

mythic Western hero as homoerotically charged, in tandem with its adherence to Hollywood genre conventions of melodrama, results in a film that successfully reframes the mainstream Hollywood romantic melodrama, such that a story of love between men appears natural, epic and universal.

*Brokeback Mountain* was released in 2005, after director Ang Lee's career hit a minor low with *Hulk* (2003). Made for a modest \$14 million, Focus Features planned a small release for the film. However by the end of its theatrical run, the film had grossed \$178 million dollars worldwide. It won the Golden Lion in Venice, accolades at the Golden Globes and the BAFTAs as well as eight Academy Award nominations. At the time of writing, *Brokeback Mountain* ranks eighth among the highest-earning romantic films of the last fifty years. 'I thought it was a small work of love,' Ang Lee commented just before the Oscars 'I never thought it would play like this.'<sup>1</sup> *Brokeback Mountain's* promotional website became a blend of marketing and community service, with thousands of people adding their experiences to its 'Share Your Story' section.<sup>2</sup>

The film is an adaptation of the novella by E. Annie Proulx, telling the romantic story of an uneducated, traditional man living a life of economic and emotional poverty in rural Wyoming. Young Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) experiences a powerful, socially forbidden attraction to Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), while shepherding in the wilds of Brokeback Mountain. Ennis sequesters his feelings away, marries and produces children. Nonetheless his

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Leopold, "'Mountain' looms over Oscar Nominations," *CNN* (March 5, 2006). URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/31/oscar.nominations/index.html> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> This facility has now been discontinued on the film's website.

relationship with Jack intensifies over the subsequent twenty years, through stolen days spent together in the wilderness. In adhering to his community's rules, Ennis slowly destroys his own happiness and that of his wife, his daughters and - later - a girlfriend. His lover Jack inadvertently exposes his homosexuality, and is beaten to death. Ennis ends the film alone in his mobile home, with only Jack's shirt and a postcard of the mountain to remember his romance, having lived 'half a life.' In making an analysis of the three primary constitutive elements of the film, I shall turn first to a brief overview of the film's genre antecedents, the romantic melodrama and the Western.

### **Genre Context: A Romantic Western**

The tragic narrative of *Brokeback Mountain* can be understood as falling within the genre parameters of romantic melodrama. As a genre, romantic melodrama might be understood, Steve Neale suggests, as a form largely defined by film scholars in an act of retrospective recognition of certain Hollywood trends that emerged prior to the second world war, and coalesced into a firmer set of conventions in the period directly afterward.<sup>3</sup> According to Thomas Elsaesser's conception, the genre centres on a figure whose apparently unwarranted suffering

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 179-205; Steve Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press," *The Velvet Light Trap* Vol. 32 (1993): 66-89. URL: <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-90190295.html> (accessed January 14, 2018)

suffering animates a narrative of emotional family drama.<sup>4</sup> Barbara Klinger's overview points to a scholarly consensus of genre definition whereby it is organized around a figure who is prevented from fulfilling her or his desire for another as the result of profound social and familial interdiction.<sup>5</sup>

Romantic melodrama as a form might be broadly understood as culturally coded 'feminine,' as Pam Cook,<sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Doane,<sup>7</sup> Christine Gledhill,<sup>8</sup> Marcia Landy<sup>9</sup> and others suggest. This may relate to Anthony Giddens' wider argument that romance is the only occasion where women enjoy autonomy, in a society where they are otherwise routinely marginalised.<sup>10</sup> Such is the cultural conflation of romance with femininity that Neale has identified confusion surrounding the use of the labels 'romantic melodrama' and 'woman's picture' when describing that specific set of Hollywood romances that emerged during the 1940s,<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods Vol. II.*, 164-189 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985); Thomas Elsaesser, "Gefühlte Opfer: die mediale Inszenierung einer prominenten Rolle," in J. Metelmann, & T. Beyes (ed.s), *Die Macht der Gefühle: Emotionen in Management, Organisation und Kultur*, 109-126 (Berlin: Berlin University Verlag, 2012); Thomas Elsaesser, "Melodrama: Genre, Gefühl oder Weltanschauung?" in Margrit Frölich, Klaus Gronenborn, Karsten Visarius (ed.s) *Das Gefühl der Gefühle: Zum Kinomelodram*, 11-34, (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi

<sup>6</sup> Pam Cook, "Melodrama and the Women's Picture," in Marcia Landy (ed.) *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. 248-262 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1991)

<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987)

<sup>8</sup> Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987)

<sup>9</sup> Marcia Landy, *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1991), 25

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy: Love, Sex and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 47-56

<sup>11</sup> Neale 1993, 66-89

Rick Altman sees the two terms as referencing the same body of Hollywood films.<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I identify the Hollywood romantic melodrama as a film where two lovers are prevented from coming together by social obstacles, resulting in a final, tragic separation. This tragic separation is perhaps a key marker of the genre, although it could be argued that recent films like *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2016) are consonant with the form of the romantic melodrama, despite the lovers' union at the film's close.

The Hollywood romantic melodrama might be understood as finding some of its defining tropes in the 1940s, with works like *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) or *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945). Identifying their war and early-post-war provenance, Barbara Creed understands these romantic melodramas as a form of cautionary tale for women seeking to exceed the limits of traditional femininity. She describes their narrative structure as passing through a pattern of stages marked by 'transgression, sexuality, temporary happiness, opposition, separation, atonement, capitulation.'<sup>13</sup> Laura Mulvey sees the genre's typical narrative as depicting a woman who acts on a culturally forbidden sexual desire, enjoys the fruits of her transgression, then suffers a cruel twist of fate resulting in the loss of her lover. Mulvey interprets the defeat of the protagonist in these works as demonstrating a cultural imperative: to underscore the impossibility of the woman's desire successfully to transgress

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<sup>12</sup> Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," in Browne, Nik (ed.) *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, 1-41 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998), 7

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Creed, "The Position of Women in Hollywood Melodrama," *Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, No. 4 (1978):27-31, quoted in John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 26

social restriction.<sup>14</sup> In her seminal examination of the period's romantic melodramas, Mary Ann Doane identifies these films as typically opening with a narrative that apparently interrogates social and cultural restrictions delimiting women's erotic desire, only to collapse by their closing reel into a valorization of social conformity.<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith comprehends melodrama in Freudian terms as 'fundamentally concerned with the child's problems of growing up into a sexual identity... under the aegis of a symbolic law which the Father incarnates.' Nowell-Smith sees the genre's typical resolution of its protagonist's suffering into ennobled social conformism as 'a form of acceptance of castration ... achieved only at the cost of repression.'<sup>16</sup> Christine Gledhill echoes Mulvey, Doane and Nowell-Smith in her view that these works can be understood as inherently culturally conservative. They routinely map sociopolitical oppositions onto apparently 'natural' polarities like those between male and female, she argues. This narrative strategy effectively depoliticises any cultural critique, presenting culturally-driven power asymmetries as eternal and inalterable.<sup>17</sup>

In her study of the genre, Barbara Klinger identifies the mid-1950s as something of a high point for expressions of the Hollywood romantic melodrama.<sup>18</sup> It is a moment, as Thomas Schatz observes, where many of the genre's enduring tropes coalesce, including the specific articulation of three of its

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: MacMillan 1989), 39-44

<sup>15</sup> Doane *The Desire to Desire* 1987, 61

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama," in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and Women's Film*, 70-74 (London: BFI, 1987), 73-74

<sup>17</sup> Gledhill 1987, 93-94

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 157

defining features: a focus on socio-sexual mores, a small-town setting and a *dramatis personae* characterized by close interrelationships, exemplified in films like *Young at Heart* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955), *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and *Peyton Place* (Mark Robeson, 1957).<sup>19</sup>

Anna Siomopoulos views the genre at this period as organized around a principle whereby suffering acquires a moral value in and of itself.<sup>20</sup> As Jeanne Allen puts it, these films are replete with ‘suffering, self-sacrificing and morally regenerative women.’<sup>21</sup> According to Allen’s equation, the more the film’s protagonist suffers, the more moral they appear within the ethics of the film’s diegesis. This equation of suffering with morality underscores a certain critical comprehension of romantic melodrama as a genre structured around the reinforcement of cultural norms. This comprehension evokes Judith Hess Wright’s earlier view of genre film as presenting an apparent challenge to cultural dictum, but invariably reaffirming cultural hegemony by the final reel.<sup>22</sup>

An alternative reading of romantic melodrama of the ‘40s and ‘50s suggests that the form might be understood as expressing a pointed critique of normative cultural restriction. Schatz offers a comprehension of this period’s genre conventions as ‘at once celebrating and severely questioning the basic values and

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Schatz “The Family Melodrama,” in Marcia Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, 148-167 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1991), 150

<sup>20</sup> Anna Siomopoulos, *Hollywood Melodrama and the New Deal: Public Daydreams* (London and New York: Routledge 2012), 7

<sup>21</sup> Jeanne Allen (ed.), *Now Voyager*, Warner Brothers Screenplay Series (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 37

<sup>22</sup> Judith Hess Wright. “Genre Films and the Status Quo” in Grant, Barry Keith (ed.), *Film Genre Reader IV*, 60-68 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012)

attitudes of the mass audience.<sup>23</sup> Elsaesser emphasizes the films' mid-narrative privileging of desire over social transgression.<sup>24</sup> Pam Cook points to the genre-typical protagonist's 'desire to act against socially accepted definitions of femininity' as intrinsically counter-hegemonic, 'bringing her face to face with society.'<sup>25</sup> The eventual defeat of this protagonist, in these terms, might be understood as presenting a socio-cultural call to arms, rather than an endorsement of cultural repression.

Whatever construal might be made of the genre's cultural meaning, as US postwar prosperity blurred into a more counter-cultural mood in the 1960s, the romantic melodrama fell out of popular favour. Like *film noir* before it, however, the idiom found a fresh iteration in the decade prior to *Brokeback Mountain*'s release, most notably in the form of tragic romances like *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clint Eastwood, 1995), *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996) and *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997). The 2000s saw fresh Hollywood expressions of similarly structured genre works like *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (John Madden, 2001), *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004) and *If Only* (Gil Junger, 2004).

These films might be understood as retaining many of the identifying generic tendencies noted by scholars like Doane, Klinger et al as typical of the genre's mid-century expression. In each of these works, a protagonist endures culturally rigid repression in the face of awakening sexual desire. Caught in a set of socio-

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<sup>23</sup> Schatz 1991, 150

<sup>24</sup> Elsaesser 1985, 164-189

<sup>25</sup> Cook, 254



cultural circumstances with little prospect of transformation, the protagonist succumbs to convention and relinquishes the object of desire. In each film, the suffering protagonist is presented as ennobled by their suffering.

*Brokeback Mountain* emerges within this resurgence of the form. The film can be read as closely aligned to the defining themes of the romantic melodrama as outlined above, in that it deals directly with transgressive desire and social convention, concluding with the tragic crushing of the protagonist's romantic relations. However, *Brokeback Mountain*'s opening imagery invokes directly its secondary generic idiom. A series of majestic mountains, sweeping rivers and open, uninhabited landscapes recalls the mythic West of John Ford and John Wayne. From their screen introduction, the film's lovers are clearly presented as cowboys. Their costume, their curt dialogue and their physicality are all emblematic of the classic Western hero. They uphold the values of the cowboy: they are straight-talking, blunt, action-orientated. They hunt, they fish, they know how to live off the land. As Jim Kitses puts it, 'the cowboy is the American emblem par excellence, and Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are nothing if not prototypical cowboys. Exemplars of pastoral purity and yeoman industry, they possess the knowledge and skills of the wilderness.'<sup>26</sup> Recalling Altman's comprehension of genre, we might thus identify the semantics of *Brokeback Mountain* as recognizably adherent to romantic melodrama, whereas the syntax is clearly structured according to the codes of the Western.<sup>27</sup> In this respect,

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<sup>26</sup> Jim Kitses, "All That Brokeback Allows," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 60, No. 3 (Spring 2007): 22-27, 23. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2007.60.3.22> (accessed January 31, 2017)

<sup>27</sup> Rick Altman, "A Semantic / Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.s), *Film Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 179-190

*Brokeback Mountain* appears to reference a certain postmodern nostalgia for the Western myth, traceable through films like *The Hi-Lo Country* (Stephen Frears, 1998) *All the Pretty Horses* (Billy Bob Thornton, 2000) and *Open Range* (Kevin Costner, 2003). These films offer a fantasy of the cattle drive and bronco busting as pure, unmitigated pleasures of the cowboy life.

With reference to these genre antecedents, I analyze *Brokeback Mountain* through the constitutive elements of its protagonist, its gender relations and its cultural presentation of the body as a site of surveillance, advancing the argument that the film's adherence to the tropes of the romantic melodrama results in a radical reframing of the Western hero, but reproduces a culturally dominant ideation of the gay man as abject, while reinforcing a repressive ideation of women. With this argument in view, I turn first to the film's construction of protagonist.

### **The Lonesome Hero as Suffering Lover**

With regard to its construction of protagonist, I argue that *Brokeback Mountain* integrates the tropes of the romantic melodrama with genre-Western motifs in a strategy that radically reframes the genre Western hero, but that leaves Ennis del Mar an abject, isolated figure, in line with the genre conventions of the melodrama, and far outside the conventions of contemporary queer cinema.

In keeping with Schatz's comprehension of the tropes of the romantic melodrama, Ennis del Mar is presented in the context of a cast of characters, all of whom are closely interrelated. He inhabits a repressive, small-town milieu. Like

the women who animate the melodramas referenced by Mulvey, Doane, Gledhill, Klinger et al, Ennis acts on his desires, challenges conformity and enjoys a celebration of his transgressive love, before suffering a cruel twist of fate and, ultimately, repression and defeat. *Brokeback Mountain*'s protagonist can thus be said to remain unable to transform or even seek a route to transform the restrictions of his world. In these respects, he clearly conforms to the central tenets of the romantic melodrama's protagonist, as outlined above.

However, Ennis del Mar could be understood as resisting one of the romantic melodrama's key tropes. The film does not present him as experiencing the redemptive pleasures of moral suffering. In this respect, the film does not emulate the kind of transformation that lifts the closing moments of *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* or *The Notebook*, and that finds its roots in the morally uplifting suffering of *Now, Voyager*, *Brief Encounter* or *All That Heaven Allows*. There is no sense in which Ennis can be comprehended as ennobled by his repressed conformism. Instead, *Brokeback Mountain* depicts Ennis's capitulation to social convention as destructive to him, to his family and to his relationships. In this respect, *Brokeback Mountain*'s presentation of its protagonist could be understood as resisting one of the genre's identifying principles, that of cultural conformism rewarded.

Turning to the film's Western provenance, we find a genre whose protagonist is most frequently organized around the valorization of heteronormative

masculinity.<sup>28</sup> John Cawelti describes the rugged, empowered, traditional masculinity of the Western hero as a defining emblem of the genre.<sup>29</sup> Jim Kitses and Robert Pippin both identify the genre as presenting a specific masculine ‘imaginary,’ embodied by actors like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.<sup>30</sup> Ennis appears initially to inhabit that imaginary with some precision: his screen introduction privileges his isolation, his physical prowess and his withheld communicative style. However, the romantic melodrama, as we have seen, is a generic form that is culturally coded as feminine. Its narrative terrain is driven by what John Mercer and Martin Shingler describe as ‘emotional issues, characterised by an extravagantly dramatic register and frequently by an overtly emotional mode of address.’<sup>31</sup> Its protagonists might be characterized as emotionally articulate, socially disempowered figures who feel deeply. In this way, the genre’s typical protagonist might be understood as an antithesis of the terse, emotionally withheld, minimally verbal Western protagonist, as defined by Scott Simmon and others.<sup>32</sup>

Combining these two apparently opposing registers of protagonist produces

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<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, “Revisiting the ‘Revisionist’ Western.” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 1 (2003): 26 - 35, 28. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/396082> (accessed January 14, 2018); Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1998), 47-53 and Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything : The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 5, 153

<sup>29</sup> John Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1984), 117

<sup>30</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 140; Robert Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford on Political Philosophy* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 2010) 18; 160 note 18

<sup>31</sup> Mercer and Shingler, 1

<sup>32</sup> Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre’s First Half Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 133

what could be understood as a productive conflict of form. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the film's romantic melodrama provenance requires a central figure who produces deeply felt emotion, while its Western genre roots require the terse, emotional minimalism of a Western hero. Conversely, the disempowered positioning of the romantic melodrama's suffering hero must be evoked alongside what Cawelti describes as the gunslinging, self-assertion that characterizes the Western protagonist.<sup>33</sup>

In bridging these two genres, *Brokeback Mountain*'s central figure can be read as introducing an unsettling tone of heroic restraint into its melodrama, while displaying an uncharacteristic depth of emotional suffering in its cowboy. Ara Osterweil refers to the resulting figure as a creature made from 'a strange fusion between a Douglas Sirk melodrama and a John Ford western,' where this figure can be understood as a protagonist who 'deals in both virtue and virility.'<sup>34</sup> In other words, the film presents a culturally-coded 'feminine' romantic semantics of gay subjectivity through a culturally-coded 'masculine' Western syntax. In presenting Ennis del Mar in these terms, the film might be understood as conforming to the disempowering or, as Elsaesser, Mulvey and Nowell-Smith view it, 'castrating,' semantics of the melodrama,<sup>35</sup> but confronting - and potentially disestablishing - the heteronormative ideation of the Western hero.

The film's relative conformity to the codes of the romantic melodrama leads us to the protagonist's relation to queer cinema. Ennis del Mar's homosexual desire

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<sup>33</sup> Cawelti 1984, 117

<sup>34</sup> Ara Osterweil, "Ang Lee's Lonesome Cowboys," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Spring 2007): 38-42, 38. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2007.60.3.38> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>35</sup> Elsaesser 1985, 164-189; Mulvey, 39-44; Nowell-Smith, 70-74

is perhaps best emblemized in the film's promotional poster, which features a close-up of its two lovers wearing expressions of agonized tenderness, in combination with the tagline 'love is a force of nature.' Daniel Mendelsohn raises a complex issue in his judgement that emblemizing Ennis' desire as a source of suffering in this way causes the film to abandon 'upfront queerness' in favour of a more apologetic sociopolitical and aesthetic presentation.<sup>36</sup> This conservative presentation is profoundly at odds with the aesthetics of that body of films we might define collectively as queer cinema.

A definition of queer cinema must always be contingent, but Harry Benshoff suggests a form of definition rooted in the sociological use of the term 'queer' as describing what Louise Sloan calls an 'oxymoronic community of difference.'<sup>37</sup> This community includes people who identify as LGBT, as well as what Benshoff calls 'straight queers.'<sup>38</sup> This last category might be seen to include *Brokeback Mountain's* protagonist, in that Ennis explicitly declares 'I ain't queer' to which his lover Jack responds 'Me either.'

In its form and its content, queer cinema as a project might broadly be seen as seeking to reframe conceptions of gender identity, sex and sexuality by directly confronting heteronormative assumptions through specific characterization. In some respects, this objective might be seen as aligning with the implicit critique

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, "An Affair to Remember." *New York Review of Books* Vol. 53, No. 3, (February 23, 2006), 13. URL: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/02/23/an-affair-to-remember/> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>37</sup> Louise Sloan, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*; quoted in Lisa Duggan, "Making it Perfectly Queer," in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (ed.s) *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*. 149 - 164 (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 156

<sup>38</sup> Harry Benshoff, "The Monster and the Homosexual," in Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (ed.s), *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, 63 - 74 (New York: Routledge, 2004), 63

of social constraint that oppresses *Brokeback Mountain*'s romantic protagonist. However there is perhaps a differentiation to be made between queer protagonists and those who drive what Sue-Ellen Case calls the 'polite categories of gay and lesbian' films.<sup>39</sup> The queer protagonist could be understood to embody a certain irreverence, or confrontational provocation, as William Leung points out.<sup>40</sup> As Susan Sontag's early 'Notes on Camp' observes, a certain formally innovative self-presentation, as well as a tendency toward self-ironizing, appears to be integral to the formation of the queer protagonist.<sup>41</sup> Queer screen heroes, Case argues, do not 'petition for civil rights.'<sup>42</sup> Instead, they might be said to offer gleefully unruly and defiant attacks on those ideations culturally constructed as 'natural.'

Diana Ossana suggests that *Brokeback Mountain*'s romantic gay narrative knowingly 'subverts the myth of the American West and its iconic heroes,'<sup>43</sup> and *Brokeback Mountain*'s protagonist can be read as running counter to normative cultural ideations of the cowboy. However, the film exhibits no postmodern flourishes, no knowing winks to the audience. Indeed, the film's melodrama semantics resist any semblance of glee in Ennis' experience of desire. And while

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<sup>39</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," in Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Reader*, 198-209 (London and New York: Routledge 2000), 200

<sup>40</sup> William Leung, "So Queer Yet So Straight: Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and *Brokeback Mountain*," *Journal of Film and Video*, Volume 60 No. 1 (Spring 2008): 23-42. URL: <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/235257> (accessed January 14 2018), 23-24

<sup>41</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *A Susan Sontag Reader*, 105-119 (New York: Vintage, 1983), 119

<sup>42</sup> Case, 200

<sup>43</sup> E. Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry & Diana Ossana *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 145

the film presents ecstatic images of its protagonist and his lover, these images are presented in a somewhat anodyne fashion, with an emphasis on cuddling and playing. While Ennis del Mar might be comprehended as unruly, he cannot be understood as defiant in his expression of sexuality. He does not espouse any kind of post-modern, irreverent, confrontational, or provocative self-presentation. In short, *Brokeback Mountain's* suffering protagonist appears to have more in common with the cultural passivity of the genre romantic heroine than with the sex-positive protagonists of queer cinema as identified by Benshoff, Case and Leung. Viewed in this way, the film's protagonist can be understood as bearing little semblance of queerness, despite the centrality of gay experience to his narrative construction.

Perhaps ironically, the gay cowboy is of course an iconic figure within the bounds of queer cinema. *Brokeback Mountain's* cowboys recall a debate predicated on the similarly contested territory of 'upfront queerness' versus 'polite gay and lesbian cinema,' centred on Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967) and John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1968). Warhol's film is a satire of the Hollywood Western expressed through a wild, sexualized anti-narrative.<sup>44</sup> Experimental in form, it features a gay cowboy engaged in a riotous celebration of homoeroticism, free of what might be termed culturally normative caveats or obstacles. It is by any standard a work of queer cinema. *Midnight Cowboy* might be seen as appropriating some of the iconography of that earlier film, but it is a

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<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the film, see Christopher LeConey and Zoë Trodd, "Straight Shooters, Stainless-Steel Stories and Cowboy Codes: The Queer Frontier and American Identity in a Post-Western World," in Thomas Peele (ed.), *Queer Popular Culture*, 151-168 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2007), 163



narrative articulated unequivocally through the romantic melodrama form. The film presents with tender intensity the development of a close male friendship, marked by profound suffering, and ending in tragedy. Although the two male leads clearly come to love one another, the film leaves the possibility of an erotic component to their relationship unaddressed.

In his response to Schlesinger's work, Warhol identifies two divergent strategies regarding the representation of male homosexual desire in film. One strategy includes works like Warhol's own *Lonesome Cowboys*: works that feature celebratory, culturally confrontational and creatively innovative central figures. The other elides the most transgressive aspects of homosexuality, structuring instead a protagonist who enjoys a 'close friendship,' in a bid for mainstream cultural acceptability.<sup>45</sup> Warhol's criticism of the latter strategy can be read as founded on a conflict between cultural compromise and cultural confrontation, where compromise might be said to include the valorization of arguments of suffering over arguments of sexual freedom. Viewing *Brokeback Mountain*'s protagonist through this lens, it's clear that Ennis del Mar's uninflected generic presentation, predicated on romantic suffering rather than on a bid for sexual freedom, renders him so far from queer cinema's heroes as to appear almost antithetical.

The film further amplifies its genre presentation of romantic victimhood by presenting its protagonist and his lover outside any continuum or network of gay culture, emphasizing instead their painful isolation, an isolation structured as the

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<sup>45</sup> Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol 1960s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 250

result of their sexual difference, as Martin Manalansan and William Leung observe.<sup>46</sup> This isolation forces Ennis's lover Jack to travel to Mexico to find another gay sexual partner. It might be argued that this presentation is an authentic reflection of rural life for gay people during the period and place in question, as B. Ruby Rich suggests.<sup>47</sup> Yet *Brokeback Mountain* constructs Ennis' lover Jack Twist as an accomplished rodeo cowboy, travelling across the state to compete at various festivals. Christopher LeConey and Zoë Trodd note that a rudimentary gay 'scene' existed 'out on the prairie' and at rodeo competitions for many years prior to the film's setting.<sup>48</sup> They quote a rodeo cowboy as describing these informal gay networks as 'going on for hundreds of years.'<sup>49</sup> Given this cultural backdrop, the film's choice to position its protagonist as utterly isolated from any other potential gay experience could be read as artificially magnifying the atypical nature of his sexuality. In erasing the existence of a gay network on the rodeo circuit, the film could be read as compromising its authenticity in favour of conformity to the tropes of both its genre antecedents: on the one hand, the mythic ideation of the hyper-masculine, heteronormative cowboy, and on the other, the abject, isolated suffering romantic hero. In so doing, *Brokeback Mountain* can be

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<sup>46</sup> Martin F. Manalansan, "Colonizing Time and Space: Race and Romance in *Brokeback Mountain*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 13 No. 1 (2007): 97-100, 100. URL: [muse.jhu.edu/article/207531](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/207531) (accessed January 14, 2018); William Leung, "So Queer Yet So Straight: Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and *Brokeback Mountain*," *Journal of Film and Video* Volume 60 No. 1 (Spring 2008): 23-42, 25. URL: <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/235257> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>47</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "Brokering *Brokeback*: Jokes, Backlashes and Other Anxieties," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 60, No. 3 (Spring 2007): 44-48, 47. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2007.60.3.44> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>48</sup> LeConey and Trodd, 163

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

seen as upholding a dominant culture that prefers to position gay men as isolated, aberrant and extra-cultural.

However, to position Ennis del Mar as failing relative to standards of queer cinema is to ignore possible cultural advantages afforded the film by its adherence to popular genre convention. In positioning its protagonist within the genre framework of a mainstream romantic melodrama, *Brokeback Mountain* might be read as offering a radical reframing of who is culturally licensed to drive a Hollywood romance. From this perspective, the film's privileging of genre imperative over identity politics might be read as a radical interrogation of those heteronormative conventions that obtain within the genre itself. In other words, in presenting Ennis del Mar as the protagonist of a genre romantic melodrama, the film might be understood as disestablishing the heteronormative repressive conventions of Hollywood genre romantic melodrama.

In summary, then, *Brokeback Mountain*'s protagonist can be understood as a figure integrating key tropes of romantic melodrama with genre-Western motifs. The film's dual generic strategy effectively disestablishes hegemonic ideations of the hyper-masculine, heterosexual cowboy, but at the same time, conforms to dominant comprehensions of gay men as abject and victimized, as a result of its adherence to romantic melodrama tropes of suffering. Nonetheless, the film appears to eschew the romantic melodrama's thematic link between suffering and morality, instead positioning its protagonist and his family as irrefutably damaged by cultural constraints.

If we identify queer cinema as the positive and playful assertion of homosexual

desire, then *Brokeback Mountain*'s Ennis del Mar cannot be understood as expressive of queer cinema discourse. However, in positioning its gay protagonist at the centre of a Hollywood romantic melodrama, the film could be read as a radical disestablishment of heteronormative identity as a prerequisite for the protagonist of a popular Hollywood genre film. In this way, Ennis del Mar could be read as interrogating both the conventions of romantic melodrama and the conventions of gay screen narrative. In positioning his love as no more transgressive than, for instance, the cross-class love that animates *Titanic* or the extramarital love animating *Now, Voyager*; the film's protagonist could be read as normalizing homosexual desire, removing its 'otherness' within the discourses of popular Hollywood genre idiom.

### **Mythic Masculinity, Wearisome Women**

With respect to ethnicity, *Brokeback Mountain* is notable in featuring only white cast members. However, the film's presentation of lynching as a form of punishment reserved for the cultural 'other' invokes the spectre of racist dehumanization. When its gay lovers are murdered and displayed using exactly the control mechanisms by which victims of racist violence are murdered and displayed, the film appears to substitute homosexuality for the racialized 'other'. I explore how the film presents the bodies of its lovers in this way in the fourth section of this chapter.

In terms of the film's depiction of gender relations, I contend that *Brokeback Mountain* harnesses the gendered tropes of the romantic melodrama and of the

Western to produce a sense of timeless, 'natural' romance. In demonstrating how this strategy reframes homoerotic desire as consonant with heroic masculinity, the wilderness and authenticity, I outline how the film conforms to the genre's corollary of femininity as consonant with domesticity, constraint and mendacity.

The opening twenty minutes of *Brokeback Mountain* feature numerous panoramic shots emphasising the natural beauty of the mountains. It is in this timeless world that Ennis and Jack discover their attraction to one another. They discover it in the context of pre-technological, quasi-mythic activities including hunting, fishing and caring for livestock. They discover it in the timeless extremes of nature - hail, snow and wild wind. In this way, the film positions their sexual awakening by association as natural, elemental, timeless.

As they age, Ennis and Jack return to the timeless wild landscape of the Western as the only place they can consummate their love. This being-outside-of-time is underscored by one of three flashbacks in the film. After what will be their last encounter, Jack waves goodbye to the middle-aged Ennis and his horsebox. The scene shifts fluidly to the young Jack, embraced by the young Ennis and repeating his goodbye as Ennis leaves on horseback. Thus their relationship is expressed as marked by repetition, a series of Goodbyes through time, in a timeless space. This timelessness evokes Giddens' observation of the magical, outside-of-time quality pertaining to genre romance, where our conception of love draws on an orientation towards 'colonizing an empty future.'<sup>50</sup> Ennis and Jack appear to inhabit this 'romantic time,' as the film unspools their lives through their

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Transformation of Intimacy: Love, Sex and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 47 - 56

series of encounters in nature. As Manalansan puts it, ‘the *Brokeback* lovers do not need to follow a specific chronology or developmental trajectory.’<sup>51</sup>

This romantic genre conception of being outside time finds an echo in the Western idiom. Cawelti describes the classic Western as taking place in a ‘timeless epic moment.’<sup>52</sup> Richard Slotkin notes that the figure of the independent Western hero, inhabiting an unchanging landscape, contains within it just such a sense of timelessness.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the Western accords with mythic thinking, where, as Will Wright puts it, ‘the future is the same as the past.’<sup>54</sup> Through its mise-en-scene, then, *Brokeback Mountain* appears to combine this atemporal ideation of the mythic romance with the atemporal mythology of the classic Western, unifying what we might understand as the ‘feminine’ epic codes of one with the ‘masculine’ epic codes of the other. The resultant amplification of a dual trope of timelessness leads Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon to note that the film presents its romance ‘as if pop music, mass culture, velocity, ... the crudities of entertainment and self awareness had been forcibly exiled from *Brokeback*.’<sup>55</sup> In other words, the combination of both genre tropes structures the film as supremely mythic, inhabiting a doubly atemporal space. In this respect, the film’s gay love story could be understood as rendered as both ‘natural’ and timeless, destabilizing

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<sup>51</sup> Manalansan, 99

<sup>52</sup> Cawelti 1984, 23

<sup>53</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Athenium, 1992), 276

<sup>54</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1977), 207

<sup>55</sup> Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Me,” *Film Quarterly* Vol. 60 No. 3 (Spring 2007): 62-67, 65. URL: <http://fq.ucpress.edu/content/60/3/62> (accessed January 31, 2018)

convention to offer a valorization of homosexual desire as timeless in the romantic sense of the melodrama, and timeless in the epic landscape sense of the Western.

Barry Langford sees the performance of a rugged masculinity in this timeless terrain as at the core of the genre Western.<sup>56</sup> The mythic independence of the hyper-masculine cowboy is rooted in a structuring dichotomy that Slotkin sees as positioning masculinity in the natural landscape, where femininity is positioned in the domestic interior.<sup>57</sup> Related to this thematic polarity is the genre convention noted by Tompkins, whereby the cowboy's masculinity involves action rather than linguistic fluency, while that genre's women tend to be construed through speech rather than action.<sup>58</sup> As noted earlier, the cowboy's inarticulacy creates a productive tension between *Brokeback Mountain's* emotive narrative focus and its lovers' withheld expression. Indeed, the cowboys' masculine emotional inarticulacy drives what Kitses calls 'the emotional attack of the film,' in that it is 'the inadequacy of its characters to articulate and understand, let alone control, the experience that strikes them like a storm.'<sup>59</sup> Notable here is Kitses' deployment of nature as a simile to describe the lovers' experience, again evoking the Western tropes of the timeless, natural landscape.

But the cowboys' inarticulacy also points to what Jane Tompkins sees as a gendered revolt against language-as-power at work in the Western. Western heroes

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<sup>56</sup> Langford 2003, 26 - 35

<sup>57</sup> Slotkin, 338

<sup>58</sup> Tompkins, 51

<sup>59</sup> Kitses 2007, 25

employ a desperate shorthand as an ‘attempt to communicate without using words,’ a strategy deployed against the ‘feminized’ process of persuasion and manipulation.<sup>60</sup> In this way, the Western’s privileging of masculine, wordless engagement with landscape carries within it a corollary of devalued, feminized prattling and domestic confinement. *Brokeback Mountain* appears to pit its timeless, romantic wilderness against just such a ticking away of the two men’s confined, domesticated lives. The course of domestic time sees Ennis suffer in a small, cramped flat with screaming children. Jack endures the chinking accounting machine in the nylon interior of his moneyed home.

If the film positions its two men as wordless and at home in the wild, it positions their respective women as genre-typical in their orientation toward a marginalized domesticity, in line with what Lee Clark Mitchell sees as defining tropes of the Western.<sup>61</sup> It’s clear from the outset that Alma (Michelle Williams) and Lureen (Anne Hathaway) have no place in the wild. During their brief courtship, Alma playfully wrestles with Ennis in the snow, but her alarm alerts Ennis to the fact that he cannot be as physically uninhibited with her as he is with Jack, invoking Armando Pratts’ observation of genre-Western women as inherently repressive of their men’s natural exuberance.<sup>62</sup> What Cawelti calls the Western hero’s ‘spontaneous passion’<sup>63</sup> is invoked through contrast when Lureen

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<sup>60</sup>Tompkins, 51, 55, 72-73

<sup>61</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, 46-53

<sup>62</sup> Armando J. Pratts, “Back from the Sunset: The Western, the Eastwood Hero and *Unforgiven*,” *Journal of Film and Video* Vol. 47 No. 1-3 (1995): 106-123, 111. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688069> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>63</sup> Cawelti 1999, 30



first meets Jack in a bar. She asks ‘what are you waiting for cowboy, a mating call?’ The question makes explicit the difference between Jack’s natural, spontaneous relation to his homosexual lover and this more cultural, linguistically-coded encounter.

As the film progresses, Ennis’ wife Alma is structured as wanting to move to town, when Ennis wants to remain living near the wilderness. In line with Michael Kimmel’s observation of Western women as agents of social conformity, Alma’s desire is explicitly articulated as part of her desire to align with the broader community.<sup>64</sup> Jack’s wife Lureen is revealed as oppressively articulate, evoking the Western trope of the prattling female figure. Lureen encourages Jack to submit to cultural hierarchy in the form of her powerful father, echoing Tompkins’ perception of Western women as obedient domesticators.<sup>65</sup> When Ennis and Jack meet unexpectedly, Alma suggests they go to a local eatery. Ennis’ response, ‘He ain’t the restaurant type,’ recalls Cawelti’s observation of the town as requiring the genre-Western hero to curb his ‘masculine honour and natural camaraderie,’<sup>66</sup> as well as Slotkin’s comprehension of the genre’s gendered coding of civilization as feminine and the wilderness as masculine.<sup>67</sup>

The film’s dichotomous positioning of its men as wild and its women as domesticated is further emblematised in images like that of Alma struggling with

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<sup>64</sup> See Michael S. Kimmel, “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective,” in Harry Brod (ed.), *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, 121-54 (Allen and Unwin, Boston: 1987), 121-54

<sup>65</sup> Tompkins, 9

<sup>66</sup> John Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1999), 30

<sup>67</sup> Slotkin, 338

her bedsheets in the wind, or the gleaming mechanized farm machinery of Lureen's family. The agglomeration of these emblems and metaphors coalesces into an expression of domesticated married life as the antithesis of Jack's and Ennis' more elemental experience of eros in nature. In an extension of this expression, the film compares the unbridled passion the men experience together in the wilderness with their experiences of unsatisfying, banal reproductive sex. In mid-sexual act, Alma breaks the mood by reminding Ennis to use contraception. The ensuing exchange leads directly back to money and Ennis' responsibilities as the provider for his family, rooting Alma once again in diminished, dull domesticity. And evoking the Western's gender-coded thematic polarity of action and language, Jack observes that he and Lureen could conduct their marriage over the phone.

As the film progresses, it follows romantic melodramatic form in that the men are presented as increasingly enmeshed in their women's repressive, culturally controlled restrictions. By the close of the story, the mountain's awesome vastness, aligned with the eroticized masculinity of the wild, has been repressed and restricted to a printed postcard. This repression of Ennis' and Jack's romance combines the requirements of the romantic melodrama's tragic final repression, while simultaneously conforming to the Western idiom that it is women who desire things that, as Tompkins puts it, are 'massively, totally and unequivocally wrong' for masculine Western heroes.<sup>68</sup> The film does offer some level of subjectivity to the women who inhabit these claustrophobic domestic

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<sup>68</sup> Tompkins, 55

environments, however. In spending screen time on the pain that the lovers inflict on their women, *Brokeback Mountain* could be read as encoding into its melodramatic tragedy a perspective whereby the whole community is presented as suffering through the enforcement of sexually repressive norms of behaviour.

In summary, it is clear that *Brokeback Mountain's* articulation of masculinity and femininity fuses tropes of the romantic melodrama with those of the genre Western, expressed through genre-based, gender-coded ideations of landscape, time and language. The film's fusion of romantic melodrama and Western tropes amplifies both genres' mythic formulation of timeless romance in the wilderness, giving its lovers an epic dimension. Deploying Western genre elements, *Brokeback Mountain* valorizes a profoundly counter-hegemonic homoerotic draw between the two men, ironically positioning their love affair under the rubric of the kind of hyper-masculinity we associate with wordless, rugged Western figures like Clint Eastwood and John Wayne. Nonetheless, this liberation is achieved to some degree by means of conformity to Western genre conventions whereby women are linked to domesticity, confinement and control. As demonstrated above, this generic link between women and confinement is not simply a descriptive representation of real women's culturally prescribed roles, but can be understood as morally weighted, where the film's thematic 'femininity' is presented in a negative light in relation to the Western man's desire for freedom. The film does, however, afford its women a certain degree of subjectivity: they are structured as suffering just as much as the trapped masculine heroes of the story. In this respect, *Brokeback Mountain* might be said to extend beyond the

protagonist the genre-typical suffering required of a romantic melodrama plot, contributing to the counter-generic note the film strikes, whereby cultural conformity is presented as universally damaging rather than individually ennobling. However the film's thematic link between eroticism and suffering is perhaps most clearly articulated not in its expression of gender relations, but rather in its engagement with the body, surveillance and control.

### **Cultural Context: Looking and Being Seen**

In terms of its cultural context, I posit the view that *Brokeback Mountain* presents men's bodies as objects of romantic and erotic display. This display can be understood as a thematic precursor to linking those eroticized bodies to counter-hegemonic anxieties around seeing and being seen, violent xenophobic cultural control and grisly punishment.

In his review of *Brokeback Mountain*, MSNBC critic Erik Lundegaard expresses surprise at the film's success with female viewership, given its subject matter, suggesting that 'women are so broad-minded, or so in need of a love story, that they'll go even when their gender isn't part of the equation.'<sup>69</sup> This notion that women are 'in need of a love story' recalls Giddens' observation that romance is 'feminine' because it is the only public sphere where women are routinely permitted centre-stage and afforded some agency.<sup>70</sup> This observation suggests that it is *Brokeback Mountain*'s romantic melodrama provenance and concomitant

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<sup>69</sup> Erik Lundegaard, "Love makes 'Brokeback' Oscar Favourite," *MSNBC*, February 1, 2006. URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11102003/> (accessed January 14, 2018)

<sup>70</sup> Giddens, 47-56

themes of desire and disempowerment that resonates with its female viewership. However, it is possible that the film may have tapped into something else: a vein of erotic response that had hitherto remained relatively unexplored in Hollywood film.

After an initial, discreet sex scene, the carnal nature of Ennis and Jack's relationship is coded in more cinematically sensual, romantic ways. Recalling Andy Warhol's critique of the desexualized *Midnight Cowboy*,<sup>71</sup> *Brokeback Mountain* presents its lovers in less overtly sexual and more gently romantic terms. The film's single sex scene is presented in near-silhouette. Instead of sex, the film privileges the young men tenderly playing with one another. Thus they are presented semi-naked, frolicking, wrestling. They are presented in softly lit surroundings, cuddling one another. These visual presentations serve to display the beautiful, eroticized bodies of the film's actors, without any transgressive or explicitly sexual images to disturb the display. Instead, the men's developing love might be comprehended as coded in emotional rather than in sexual terms. The tropes of romance are heavily emphasized in the film through swelling orchestral sounds over the men's kisses, the use of flickering firelight and the presentation of long, lingering shots of the moon. As was noted above, this erotic, but desexualized, expression of love between men runs counter to established conventions of queer cinema and cinema for gay men. Indeed, *Brokeback Mountain* makes explicit that neither of its lovers identifies as homosexual; both men remain sexually responsive to women during the course of the narrative.

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<sup>71</sup> Warhol and Hackett, 250

This presentation of romantic eroticism between young, beautiful men recalls a specific subculture of graphic novels, produced for and by straight women, which flourishes in Taiwan (which is of course the director's homeland), Hong Kong, China and Japan. The graphic novels revolve around handsome young men who engage in erotically-charged encounters with one another, although they typically do not identify as gay.<sup>72</sup> The preference in these works is for a sublimated eroticism, as Midori Matsui notes,<sup>73</sup> expressed in precisely the heightened emotional tone associated with the Hollywood romantic melodrama.<sup>74</sup> Known variously as *Tanbi*, *Danmei*, and Boys' Love, Fran Martin identifies these stories as expressing a fantasy version of male homoeroticism, designed explicitly for the pleasure of girls and women.<sup>75</sup> *Brokeback Mountain* could be seen as tapping into the same pleasures as those evoked through 'Boys' Love' stories. Erotic in nature, such pleasures might be viewed as related to, but distinct from, the emotional pleasures associated with the suffering protagonist of the romantic melodrama. Seen in this light, *Brokeback Mountain* could be comprehended as a film that disestablishes broad genre conventions through its presentation of beautiful male bodies in a cinematic form tailored less to the specifics of cinema for gay men,

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<sup>72</sup> Tomoko Aoyama, "Male Homosexuality as Treated by Japanese Women Writers," in Gavin McCormack and Y. Sugimoto (ed.s), *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, 186-204 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 202

<sup>73</sup> Midori Matsui, "Little Girls Were Little Boys: Displaced Femininity in the Representation of Homosexuality in Japanese Girls' Comics" in Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (ed.s), *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, 177-196 (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), 180

<sup>74</sup> Buckley: 173

<sup>75</sup> Fran Martin, "Girls Who Love Boys' Love: BL as Good to Think with in Taiwan (with a Revised and Updated Coda) in Maud Lavin, Ling Yang and Jing Jamie Zhao (ed.s), *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, 195 - 220 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 197-199; 205-207

and perhaps more toward the straight female erotic gaze.

The question of ‘who is looking’ is one that animates the diegesis of *Brokeback Mountain*. The film features several instances of surveillance and observation, all interrogating the cultural ‘othering’ of Ennis’ apparently aberrant desire. The first instance of this power dynamic occurs when Jack and Ennis are presented as under observation by their employer, Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid). Aguirre witnesses the young men playing together, shirtless, at their mountain camp. Aguirre discovers the sexual relationship between the two men through binoculars, making his observation of their relationship not accidental but a deliberate act of surveillance. The film presents a close-up of Aguirre as he makes his discovery, his expression a mask of disgust. His disgust notwithstanding, Aguirre’s quick deciphering of the nature of the men’s relationship suggests that their illicit affair is not so unique as they imagine; Aguirre even has a phrase to hand, accusing Jack of ‘stemming the rose’ while the dogs mind the sheep.

Just before this event, Jack reassures Ennis that their relationship ‘ain’t nobody’s business but ours.’ The juxtaposition of apparent privacy with exposure via surveillance recalls Michel Foucault’s conception of the panopticon, his model of modern identity as constantly under surveillance by broader society. From a Foucauldian perspective, Aguirre can be comprehended as a figure of cultural control, monitoring and seeking to ‘discipline and punish’ those whom he observes transgressing social dicta.<sup>76</sup> Having established an instance of surveillance, the film invokes the risks of being seen as the primary danger to

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<sup>76</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Pantheon, 1977), 203-204

which the lovers are exposed. The risk of observation and discovery structures a later scene where Jack visits Ennis for the first time since their initial encounter on Brokeback Mountain. Ennis pulls Jack out of public view in order to kiss him. But this attempt at privacy is presented as insufficient. Just as in the earlier scene where Aguirre witnessed their romance through binoculars, the men are observed once again through a glass barrier - this time by Alma, who stands at the door of Ennis' home. Again the camera remains with the watcher, assessing her response. Alma's distress echoes Aguirre's repulsion, representing a potential threat to the lovers. As has been noted earlier, however, her shocked, disempowered misery suggests less the repressive cultural authority of Aguirre and more the suffering figure of the romantic melodrama, positioning her as damaged rather than explicitly dangerous. Nonetheless, the film structures Ennis as consistently afraid of 'being seen' by Alma and by anyone else.

Ennis' fear is made concrete in the first of the film's three flashbacks - a rural Wyoming scene of homophobic torture and murder. Via voice-over, Ennis relates his father's display of the murdered gay couple to the child Ennis and his brother, while the film presents an image of the two boys gawping at the naked, broken bodies in the dust. The moment might be read as a definitive 'outing'; a presentation of the punished, transgressive, homosexual body. Its presentation, and the inclusion of Ennis' father as the avenging tool of cultural repression, recalls Elsaesser, Mulvey and Nowell-Smith's psychoanalytic comprehension of the romantic melodrama genre as a form whereby the child's emergent sexuality is repressed by the Father. Viewed in this context, this moment in the film might be



understood as a concrete metaphor for what we might see as the driving principles behind the romantic melodrama genre.<sup>77</sup>

In a related analysis, Robert Jackson identifies the threat of lynching as a specific mechanism through which cultural order is maintained in the broader landscape of the Western. Jackson describes lynching as a symbolic as well as a literal punishment that can be meted out not just on the basis of transgressions of racial hierarchy, but also on the basis of transgressions of sexual mores. He observes that lynching constitutes a form of display, designed to be observed. Typically involving the humiliation of nudity, Jackson observes that such display can be construed as a re-inscribing of hegemonic cultural conformity on the transgressive body.<sup>78</sup> In specifically invoking the horror of lynching, *Brokeback Mountain* recalls the Western's conventions of ethnic 'othering', as identified by Scott Simmons and Steve Neale, amongst others, whereby the bodies of non-white people may be dehumanized, brutalized and displayed as a form of warning against the dangers of transgression.<sup>79</sup> By placing gay men in a similarly abject position within the landscape of the Western idiom, the film can be understood as aligning its gay characters' bodies with the vulnerable and abject bodies of earlier films' non-white figures. Indeed, *Brokeback Mountain*'s Ennis declares that his father was pleased by the murder of the gay couple, seeing the act as reasserting

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<sup>77</sup> Elsaesser 1985, 164-189; Mulvey, 39-44; Nowell-Smith, 70-74

<sup>78</sup> Robert Jackson, "A Southern Sublimation: Lynching Film and the Reconstruction of American Memory," *Southern Literary Journal* Volume XL, Number 2 (Spring 2008):102-120, 117-8. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20077909> (accessed January 31, 2017)

<sup>79</sup> Simmon, 3-15; Steve Neale, "Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-War 'Pro-Indian' Westerns," in Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pierson (ed.s), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, 8-28 (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 21

'moral' norms. 'For all I know,' Ennis concludes 'he done the job himself.' In this moment, the father becomes a synecdoche in the same mode as Aguirre: a representative part of the greater straight, white community, a figure who embodies pervasive social surveillance and who 'does the job' of inscribing the necessary punishment on disempowered, deviant and transgressive bodies.

Throughout the film, Ennis is presented as maintaining a frightened, watchful eye for watchers. An innocent truck passing on the horizon proves sufficient to prevent him from openly discussing his future with Jack. Through dialogue he describes experiencing constant anxiety, wondering if people 'know' by looking at him that he is aberrant, transgressive, counter-hegemonic. By contrast, Jack is presented as less fearful of the watchful community. The film presents him as overtly travelling to Mexico, in order to find men with whom to have sex. In this respect, the film presents Jack as capable of pursuing his desire in a more assertive way than Ennis.

John Howard notes that this disjunct between the lovers renders curiously multivalent the fate that befalls Jack at the film's close.<sup>80</sup> When Lureen gives Ennis the news of Jack's death, the film's third and final flashback offers a violent visual counterpoint to her voiced story. This bifurcation of narrative can be seen as an extension of the film's genre-Western thematic polarity of masculine-coded physical exchange versus feminine-coded verbal exchange. This polarity aligns the body and physical action with nature, honesty and freedom, while language and articulacy are aligned with culture, mendacity and control. Lureen is

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<sup>80</sup> John Howard, "Of Closets and Other Rural Voids," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol. 13, No. 1 (2007): 100-102, 102. URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed January 14, 2018)

presented as a disembodied voice on the phone, lacking all physical substance to Ennis. She delivers a monologue detailing Jack's benign-but-fatal tyre-changing accident. As Lureen relates events over the phone, the film presents a series of visceral, physical images in which Jack is tortured, disfigured and then murdered; lynched by the men of his own community. In this sequence, *Brokeback Mountain* can be read as validating Ennis' anxiety in relation to the community's surveillance and punishment of transgression. However, an alternative reading of the scene presents Ennis as conjuring his own, physically violent imagining of Jack's death. Perhaps Jack's death was accidental and Lureen is telling the truth, or perhaps language is untrustworthy and the masculine community has exacted its visceral punishment on Jack's transgressive body. It might be argued that it is irrelevant which version of events is 'true.' *Brokeback Mountain* presents Ennis del Mar in this moment as a figure who has internalized the constraints of his culture to such a degree that, like the heroine at the close of a genre romantic melodrama, he no longer requires any coercion in order to conform.

The film ends with Ennis revealing a closet containing Jack's shirt and a postcard of Brokeback Mountain. The literal metaphor of the closet serves to connote Ennis' desire as hidden from scrutiny, while Jack's shirt operates as a correlative of Jack's body, which is then visually connected to the vestigial image of nature, freedom and unfettered desire. This final moment appears to align directly with the idiom of the romantic melodrama, whereby the protagonist remains within the confines of cultural restriction. However, Ennis' articulation of regret at his 'half life' could be understood as a departure from generic norms.

Ennis has not contributed to his community as a result of his suffering, as might be inferred from classic romantic melodramas like *Close Encounter*. Rather, his suffering can be understood as having wrought damage on all of those around him. In this way, the film's closing moments might fit with Cook's comprehension of the romantic melodrama,<sup>81</sup> whereby the protagonist's capitulation to cultural hegemony can be construed as an indictment of social strictures, rather than Doane's comprehension of the genre as ultimately vindicating oppressive social strictures.<sup>82</sup>

Overall, in presenting its beautiful young lovers in romantic rather than sexual terms, *Brokeback Mountain* can be understood as significantly divergent from the conventions of homoerotic cinema aimed specifically at a gay male viewership. On these grounds, *Brokeback Mountain* might be comprehended as presenting objectified, eroticized male bodies in a cinematic form tailored more toward the straight female erotic gaze. The film could be construed on this basis as reframing conventions of Hollywood genre cinema whereby an assumption of masculinity is routinely made regarding the constructed subject inhabiting the camera's sexualized gaze.

Having established the tender romance of its masculine bodies, the film presents escalating mechanisms of cultural restraint, beginning with surveillance and ending in lynching, as the means by which the film's lovers are coerced to remain within social bounds. While the film conforms to the tropes of romantic melodrama in offering no progressive pathways towards cultural transformation, it

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<sup>81</sup> Cook, 254

<sup>82</sup> Doane *The Desire to Desire* 1987, 61

nonetheless could be understood as resisting the genre-typical ideation of suffering as instigative of moral growth. Instead, *Brokeback Mountain* offers a clearly articulated critique of the human costs of violently policed sexual conservatism. In this respect, the film could be read as seeking to reframe the cultural substructures of the public sphere, specifically to valorize the ‘natural’ condition of homoerotic desire.

### **Conclusion: Telling a Queer Story Straight**

In this chapter, I demonstrated how *Brokeback Mountain* deploys a strategy toward the disestablishment of hegemonic ideations regarding gay masculinity by means of a narrative rooted in two quite different genre forms, the romantic melodrama and the Western. I detailed how its suffering protagonist conforms to the tropes of the romantic melodrama, as well as embodying tropes of the Western hero. I argued that the film’s invocation of a gendered Western thematic polarity serves to valorize its lovers, rendering their romance ‘natural’ and timeless, but collapses its female figures into repressively conventional ideations. I profiled the film’s engagement with its cultural context, identifying its eroticization of the tender male body, and demonstrating how that eroticization serves to amplify the horrific punishment meted out to that body.

In its construction of protagonist, the film’s blending of the conventions of the romantic melodrama with Western tropes creates a productive tension between the heightened, suffering emotion of one genre and tamped down, non-verbal articulation of the other. This fusion invokes volcanic levels of romantic emotion

in its protagonist, but offers only terse, affectless forms of expression, producing the effect of an epic, stormy romance. This formulation of protagonist is however distinctly at odds with the queer cinema project, in that he does not provide any positive confrontation with dominant cultural restrictions. However what *Brokeback Mountain* loses in the 'challenging pleasures' of formal innovation and frank sexual display, it arguably wins back in its successful fusing of the 'calm pleasures' of familiar romantic melodrama narrative, fused with the 'challenging pleasure' of comprehending a gay man as the epic genre Hollywood romantic lover.

Although the film's *dramatis personae* are all Caucasian, the film invokes the horror of lynching, thematically aligning its 'othering' of gay men with the dehumanizing 'othering' of American people of colour, and specifically of Native Americans within the generic lexicon of the Western. With respect to its expression of gender relations, the film connects the romantic precept of timelessness with the Western trope of timeless wilderness, fusing these two generic elements by inscribing them into the film's evocation of landscape. The result of this fusion of clear, familiar tropes from each genre is a distinct amplification of the film's homoerotic love to an epic, quasi-mythic scale. This fusion offers a radical genre reframing of Western narrative polarities, such that the tropes of the Western mythic hero, self-reliant and at home in the wild, are thematically aligned with the film's presentation of homoerotic romance. However, in positioning Jack and Ennis along these clear syntactical lines, the film is forced into positioning its female figures along the thematically opposing

syntactical lines, invoking genre-typical codings of femininity as linked to suffocating domesticity. In this respect, *Brokeback Mountain* can be understood as conforming to Western hegemonic ideations of femininity as domestic, bourgeois, small-minded, lacking in scale. These familiar, ‘calm pleasures’ of cultural misogyny limit the film’s apparently counter-hegemonic project, falling into a trap of valorizing gay men’s love at the expense of women’s cultural integrity.

The film offers some moral counterweight to this structural positioning in that it presents the women as suffering just as much as their frustrated menfolk through the latter’s cultural repression. This in turn suggests a potentially counter-generic construal of meaning with regard to the film’s romantic melodrama roots. Where the genre might typically present the protagonist’s suffering and ultimate collapse into conformism as ennobling, *Brokeback Mountain* presents social coercion as a force that causes suffering and devastation to the protagonist and his family. In this respect, the film can be understood as disestablishing a hegemonic link between suffering and virtue, opening up a potential space for cultural transformation.

Finally, the film harnesses the conventions of the Western to establish its lovers’ masculine romance as allied to outdoor, natural play. This presentation tends towards a female gaze, in that it permits a space for heterosexual women to enjoy the scopophilic pleasures of watching beautiful young men in eroticized, romantic settings. However in emphasizing the community as a site of social surveillance, the film depicts that playful, romantic body as punished, mutilated and murdered for transgression of sexual conventions. This thematic polarity

between natural, erotically appealing homosexual desire and unnatural, punishing social surveillance explicitly disestablishes hegemonic conventions of the 'natural' versus the 'unnatural.'

*Brokeback Mountain*, then, can be understood as deploying specific, familiar 'calm pleasures' from each of its genre antecedents, then engineering a fusion of genre tropes to produce the 'exhilarated pleasures' of a counter-hegemonic narrative that reframes homoerotic desire as heroic, epic and natural. However, in deploying the gendered thematic dichotomy of the Western to recode its masculinity, the film reproduces in an uninflected form the 'calm pleasures' of that genre's repressive encoding of femininity. In this respect, *Brokeback Mountain* offers a clear strategy toward an increased mainstream acceptability of homoeroticism, but presents unresolved problems with respect to a more intersectional disestablishment of normative, repressive ideations around femaleness. As a reference for the disestablishment of repressive gender, ethnic and cultural ideation, then, the film presents a set of strategies that can be understood as only partially successful.

This criticism notwithstanding, in closing it is perhaps worth noting that *Brokeback Mountain* enjoyed a moment where it may have disestablished the hegemony of heteronormative masculinity more powerfully than any avowedly queer film before it. At the 2006 Academy Awards, where *Brokeback Mountain* received eight nominations, Jon Stuart invited the audience to view a montage of moments from classic Westerns. The mainstream audience at the Oscars and across the world, informed only by *Brokeback Mountain*, then engaged in unison



in a queer reading of over twenty classic Westerns. In that two-minute montage, *Brokeback Mountain*'s straight storytelling may be understood as having queered a global Hollywood audience.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the potential of a film to provide the pleasures of popular, genre-based Hollywood cinema, while at the same time disestablishing those limiting and stereotypical gender, ethnic and cultural representations frequently encoded in the tropes of Hollywood genre cinema. To that end, I have engaged in a close analysis of six Hollywood genre films that interrogate key tropes of their chosen genre with respect to gender, ethnic and / or cultural representation. Now, I identify the overall conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis, before drilling down into the specifics of those strategies that can be seen as successfully constructing counter-hegemonic meaning through the films' constitutive elements of protagonist, gender and ethnic relations, and cultural context. The set of strategies emerging from these conclusions informs the outcome of this study, an original screenplay titled *Sea Fever*. That screenplay is presented in a separate volume as an Appendix to this study. *Sea Fever* is intended as a genre-based, popular film that delivers the pleasures of a high-octane, fantasy thriller while simultaneously disestablishing retrogressive gender, ethnic and cultural representation.

This study is informed by shifts in the contemporary political and cultural landscape. As the socio-political sphere appears increasingly to tolerate repressive articulations of gender, ethnic and cultural difference, the development of online social engagement appears to have led to increasing levels of cultural and political entrenchment. At the same time, the consumption of online screen fiction is increasing exponentially, with Netflix now comprising almost forty per cent of

total global internet traffic. In the last twelve months, Netflix and its rivals have tripled their investment in Hollywood genre film works. Where other forms of online expression remain within their ‘cultural bubbles,’ Hollywood genre film offers a form of narrative and aesthetic pleasure that appears to traverse traditional socio-cultural divides. In its capacity as a popular narrative form that reaches across what we might term ‘cultural bubbles,’ then, a Hollywood genre film might be in a position to make some cultural impact by reframing those repressive gender, ethnic and cultural representations that frequently animate popular cinema. It is with these new penetrating, cross-cultural distribution conditions in mind that I pursue the possibility of a film that offers the pleasures of popular genre cinema, while disestablishing repressive ideations. I now draw from the six films analyzed those strategies that prove most productive in this respect.

Taking an overview of the six films comprising this study, it is apparent that each of the six engages in a similar strategy at its outset, consciously evoking the familiar ‘calm pleasures’ of its chosen genre and appearing to adhere closely to the precepts of that genre. This strategy can be understood as establishing a comfortable, easy clarity. It is perhaps this easy clarity that permits these films to traverse economic, cultural and political divides in terms of their viewership. Each of the films then appears to engage in two separate strategies regarding the introduction of those ‘exhilarated pleasures’ that produce counter-hegemonic meaning. One strategy is simply to introduce the surprising, non-generic elements into the film’s narrative or form, such as the femaleness of the protagonist in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the serious-minded silence of Fanny in *Bright Star*, or the irruption of

homoeroticism in *Brokeback Mountain*. The second strategy, employed to varying degrees by every film under discussion, is to harness precisely those familiar tropes of its genre, then to recalibrate those same tropes such that they come to produce counter-hegemonic meanings. It is perhaps this strategy that marks these films as operating at a multivalent frequency whereby they manage consistently to reaffirm the ‘calm pleasures’ of their genre, while simultaneously provoking the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of disestablishing conventional representation, producing more cognitively challenging meanings.

This strategy of harnessing powerful genre tropes in the production of counter-hegemonic meaning can be a slippery undertaking, however. Films like *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *In The Cut* recalibrate potent tropes of their genre to disestablish oppressive ideations of the courageous masculine war hero, the female spy and the vulnerable erotic thriller heroine respectively, but their strategies permit the retention of oppressive, genre-typical ideations of ethnic difference - the shadowy, threatening Islamic ‘other’ in the case of the first two films, and the licentious black body in the case of erotic thriller *In The Cut*. Similarly, *Brokeback Mountain* harnesses the potent, gender-based thematic polarities of the Western to disestablish a hegemonic ‘othering’ of gay men’s desire, but this strategy results in a corollary reinforcing retrogressive, genre-typical ideations of femininity. *Bright Star* engages in a similar strategy of invoking its genre’s central thematic polarity in order to disestablish hegemonic conceptions of feminine domestic confinement and suffering. However, like *Brokeback Mountain*, the corollary of *Bright Star*’s reframing of one pole of its

thematic dichotomy is the collapse of the other pole into genre-conformity, in this case conformity to the trope of the rigidly oppressive patriarch. *Bright Star* mitigates this to some degree, however, through that figure's complicating, extra-generic, homoerotic dimension. In a related strategy, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* clearly presents according to the codes of the fantasy martial arts genre, before reconfiguring familiar characters of the genre so as to interrogate conventional, gender-based power asymmetries. However, unlike *Zero Dark Thirty* or *In The Cut*, *Crouching Tiger*'s disestablishment of normative gender ideation appears to avoid the reaffirmation of normative ethnic 'othering.' *Crouching Tiger* achieves this intersectional disestablishment of genre norms in part because its interrogation of hegemonic gender ideation is expressed through a genre-based fantasy 'Chineseness.' This simulacral 'Chineseness' permits a floating, fantasy 'Chinese' subjectivity that perforce dissolves boundaries between normative Euro-American conceptions of identity and ethnic alterity. In experiencing *Crouching Tiger*, in other words, we are all 'Chinese.'

This overview of the six films' strategies suggests that, in the context of popular Hollywood genre film, explicitly conforming to familiar, prominent genre tropes is a necessary strategy in signalling genre credibility and establishing mass appeal. Once those tropes are invoked, two prospective strategies open up. The first is to introduce extra-generic elements, thereby producing 'exhilarated pleasures' of cognitive challenge, but running the risk of reducing the film's cross-cultural genre appeal. The second is to maintain genre tropes, but to recalibrate or even invert their meaning, such that they can signal the 'calm pleasures' of genre

familiarity, while simultaneously producing the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of counter-hegemonic meaning. This second strategy, involving the recoding of familiar genre tropes, appears to produce notable successes with respect to the objective of disestablishing oppressive cultural ideation while maintaining cross-cultural popular appeal. However, it is clear from my analysis that such recoded tropes must be deployed with due care to the complex intersection of gender, ethnic and cultural representation, since, by definition, genre tropes tend toward the reproduction of normative thematic polarities of their genre. To put it another way, the harnessing of genre elements to disestablish a specific set of retrogressive norms may produce a corollary that reaffirms another, equally retrogressive, set of norms.

Drilling down into specifics, I examined the strategies employed by the six films in this study using a trifold comprehension of story construction and meaning construal, whereby the film is interrogated through three constitutive elements:

- its construction of protagonist
- its presentation of gender, ethnic and sexual relations
- its expression of cultural and political story context.

Turning first to the construction of protagonist, as noted above, all six films deploy a strategy harnessing specific tropes of their genre to create clear, familiar, generic figures in their opening moments. *The Hurt Locker* presents its protagonist in the genre-normative form of a contemporary war hero, referred to by other figures in the film as a courageous man. Having established its genre conventions,

the film then destabilizes this hegemonic ideation by shifting focus, revealing the same man as a damaged, anhedonic hysteric who deliberately endangers his own life and the lives of his fellow soldiers in order to ‘win’ an imaginary game with the anonymous bombers whose work he defuses. This strategy permits the film to oscillate between the expression of a familiar genre trope and a counter-generic, pathologized version of that same trope.

Similarly, *Zero Dark Thirty* opens with a genre-familiar scene of torture, establishing key conventions of the spy thriller while at the same time invoking tropes of ethical violence associated with the Western. The film then counters its semantic forebears by producing a female spy whose construction bears little relation to the conventions of the generic female spy narrative. Equally, the film signals the familiar tropes and conventions of the Western hero, but counters those tropes in that its mythic, violent hero-position is occupied by a woman. The film maintains Western genre conventions of the avenging hero throughout, only departing from its adherence to genre norms when its protagonist’s savagery is not affirmed through an elegiac departure. Instead, like the protagonist of *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s protagonist is presented as damaged by the cost of her violence, thereby implicitly interrogating the central generic tenet of heroic violence.

*In The Cut*’s female protagonist is presented in equally generic terms, departing from genre norms of vulnerability in the film’s opening sequences only in so far as she is a curator of aggressively sexual slang, signalling her as capable of borrowing one of the defining tropes of the contemporary *noir femme fatale*. The

film develops this figure through a fresh combination of three genre *noir* figures, causing the protagonist to morph through the drama from erotic thriller heroine, inflected by elements of the ‘female gothic’ heroine, through to fully fledged neo-*noir femme fatale* by the film’s final reel. In this way, the film deploys the figure of the *femme fatale* to defeat the film’s *homme fatal*, thus simultaneously reproducing and radically reconfiguring *noir* conventions. In *The Cut*’s protagonist thus fuses a variety of familiar generic tropes, or ‘calm pleasures,’ in order to generate a unified whole that produces profoundly counter-hegemonic ‘exhilarated pleasures.’

*Bright Star* does something similar when it reconfigures the familiar genre trope of elaborate feminine costume, overlaying genre meanings of sexual display and sexual control with a counter-hegemonic meaning signalling aesthetic independence. This overlay provides the groundwork whereby, later in the film, the lovers can make an egalitarian exchange of their artistic productions, positioning Keats’ work at a level of artistic parity with Fanny’s. This parity of exchange is the precondition for the protagonist’s final departure from genre norms, such that she ends the film in an ambiguous state of cultural abdication / liberation. The protagonist conforms to genre norms of the ‘elusive woman’ in her final embrace of poetry in a wild, extra-cultural space, but here again, this trope is recoded such that she is not stripped of her social relations, but rather remains integrated into her social and familial network. She thus produces ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of counter-generic cognitive challenge, but those pleasures are nonetheless structured through the familiar ‘calm pleasures’ of genre.



Like the protagonist of *The Hurt Locker*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*'s protagonist can be understood as initially signalling her conformity to genre convention, before evolving to oscillate between generic and counter-generic positions. Through one lens, she provokes the 'calm pleasures' of a genre-typical martial arts figure. Through another, she is a counter-hegemonic emblem of the cost of genre-typical, gender-based exclusionary practices. The protagonist's genre reconfiguration is amplified by the film's invocation of a secondary genre convention, whereby coming-of-age thematic polarities produce a set of tropes privileging individual authenticity over social order, and merit over inheritance. In parallel with the ending of *Bright Star*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*'s protagonist finds no subject position within the diegesis, but nonetheless ends in an oscillating narrative position of abdication / liberation, this time structured through its fantasy genre conventions of martyrdom and apotheosis. Through combining familiar generic tropes of fantasy and coming-of-age, then, the film produces 'exhilarated pleasures' of counter-normative, cognitively challenging meaning through a reconfiguration of recognizable 'calm pleasures' associated with its martial arts and its coming-of-age genre provenance.

Employing a strategy similar to that of *The Hurt Locker* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Brokeback Mountain* deploys familiar genre norms to structure its lone, hyper-masculine hero, before radically reframing him as the protagonist of a romantic melodrama. In this way, *Brokeback Mountain*'s protagonist successfully recodes as homoerotic those familiar, gendered-masculine Western ideations of nature, the landscape, freedom and the call of the wild. However, the

film's adherence to the tropes of romantic melodrama result in a protagonist who reproduces normative ideations of the gay man as abject, suffering and isolated.

Developing a set of strategies based on these films' construction of protagonist, it is clear that each film opens by evoking characteristics consonant with familiar genre norms. Having signalled those genre-normative characteristics, a strategy can then be employed whereby the protagonist is revealed as diverging significantly from genre norms by virtue of their sex, or their sexual orientation. Alternatively, the protagonist can be revealed as diverging by virtue of psycho-social damage done to them as a result of their normative genre characteristics, or by demonstrating that those genre characteristics are produced by *a priori* psycho-social damage. By means of this strategy, the protagonist signals the 'calm pleasures' of genre fidelity, before producing the 'exhilarated pleasures' involved in disestablishing hegemonic ideations. In a related strategy, the protagonist can proceed through the narrative by morphing into other, familiar tropes of her genre in order to achieve counter-generic, full and satisfying catharsis. Where the diegetic conditions prevent the protagonist from achieving full catharsis, a strategy toward an open, multivalent ending can structure a clear thematic drive toward cultural transformation.

In terms of gender relations, four of the six films employ strategies that tend toward a disestablishment of hegemonic conceptions of femininity and masculinity, while the other two employ strategies that tend to collapse into conventional ideations of femininity, while focussing on a disestablishment of genre-driven masculine ideation. *The Hurt Locker* could be understood as one of

the latter. Its strategy successfully reframes the war film's masculine, soldierly courage as a form of neurosis. The film raises and subverts genre expectation by producing, then subverting, stock masculine authority figures. However in this process, the film presents uninflected a common trope of the genre whereby women are thematically aligned with domesticity and family, reinforcing rather than disestablishing that particular hegemonic ideation.

*Zero Dark Thirty's* strategic revelation that its protagonist is female marks it as a significant disrupter of gender norms in the context of the spy thriller, as well as in the context of the Western. The film deploys its 'exhilarating' counter-normative ideation of femininity through strategy whereby its spy becomes something akin to a 'Sadeian woman,' a figure who allies herself with violence and subjugation, who eschews feminine accoutrements and who aggressively refutes any diminution of her social power. Structured as the Western's coded-masculine lone hero, she is presented as self-reliant, resourceful and ruthless. The film recodes attempts at her marginalization to align with the generic trope of the Western lone hero, thereby converting her gender-based exclusion into a form of genre-based empowerment. In other words, the film presents its protagonist as a genre-normative figure whose 'exhilarated pleasure' is that she is a woman whose gender is irrelevant to her genre function.

By contrast, *In The Cut's* strategy deliberately invokes cultural norms of femininity to reframe familiar generic sexual spectacle so as to objectify the male nude. In addition, the film recodes the familiar genre spectacle of feminine homoeroticism so as to valorize affectionate relations between sisters. The film

reconfigures another familiar *noir* trope when it uses ‘twinning’ to reframe hegemonic conceptions of the romantic hero, bifurcating its *homme fatal* into two mirroring figures. One is organized around the familiar traits of protection and patriarchal romance, the other around extra-generic traits of supplication, egalitarian sexual connection and female empowerment. In this way, the film harnesses familiar tropes of its genre to interrogate conventional associations between assertive romantic masculinity and the concomitant feminine loss of agency, valorizing, by means of those reconfigured genre tropes, a profoundly counter-generic narrative position on gender and power.

*Bright Star* employs a similar mirroring strategy with respect to its presentation of two masculine figures. John Keats’ desire is counter-generic in that it is essentially passive, where John Brown inhabits the familiar genre trope of a Regency gentleman who unabashedly asserts those powers culturally ascribed to him by virtue of his gender and his class. In this regard, Brown reproduces the genre-normative villainous, abusive aristocrat. However, the film recodes this trope to some degree by placing Brown to one side of its economy of power, rather than adhere to the genre norm of placing him in direct authority over the suffering protagonist. In addition, the film recodes his genre profile with a suggestion of homoerotic impulses, thus subtly signalling him less as a villain and more as a nuanced, romantic rival. By these means, the film appears once again to employ the familiar ‘calm pleasures’ of genre idioms, only to overlay those idioms with unfamiliar, ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of extra-generic and counter generic meaning.

In a strategy similar to that employed by *The Hurt Locker*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* opens with a familiar, genre-typical, masculine martial arts master, only to unseat his traditional diegetic prestige by revealing him as psychologically fractured. Equally, the film introduces the familiar genre trope of arch-villain, only to reconfigure her unequivocally evil status with a narrative of sexual harassment and systematic exclusion. In this way, the film exhibits genre fidelity via the presentation of familiar generic figures, but then recodes those figures as damaged by the structuring tenets of that same genre. This strategic reconfiguration of familiar tropes produces an interrogation of the codes underpinning the martial arts genre, and, by extension, the broader culture that informs that genre.

As noted above, *Brokeback Mountain* employs a strategy aligning the Western trope of wordless hyper-masculinity with homoerotic yearning. However this recoding produces heterosexual relations that are genre-normative, in that femininity is thematically linked with the domestic sphere, containment and confinement. The film does mitigate those rather retrogressive ideations when it presents the suffering of the women in the context of their husbands' inauthentic lives. This strategy offers a slightly more inclusive set of meanings whereby the women's suffering is structurally linked to the broader community's rigid sexual policing, but it does little to shift the ideological pairing of women with domesticity. However *Brokeback Mountain's* presentation of its gay lovers through formal romantic melodrama conventions may be read as privileging a gay male gaze and a heterosexual female gaze, affording counter-generic, scopophilic

‘exhilarated pleasures’ of beautiful young cowboys behaving erotically toward one another.

These analyses suggest a set of strategies toward the disestablishment of repressive gender representation along the following lines. One strategy sees the familiar figure of patriarchal authority deliberately tolerate masculine abjection, naming it heroism. This figure can trigger an explicit interrogation of cultural mythologies around masculinity, stoicism and fraternal protection. A similar strategy presents the genre-typical masculine figure of mastery and authority, only to reveal a fundamental fracture in the psychology of that figure. This strategy produces a convincingly complex characterization that disinters cultural iniquities in the gendered ascription of power, prestige and status. As a corollary, the genre-typical villain may be introduced along conventional lines, before being revealed as scarred by gender-based exclusion. These related strategies see familiar genre tropes deployed and recoded so as to interrogate conventional representations of gender, in particular as those representations relate to the transmission of power and prestige.

Another strategy towards the disestablishment of encoded white masculine hegemony is the *noir* trope of mirroring or ‘twinning.’ The bifurcation of two forms of masculinity permits a clear articulation of thematic terrain, allowing the film to amplify through twin repetition specific tropes and traits, as well as to divide its twins into hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms of masculinity. Equally, the strategy of twinning permits the amplification of relations between women as well as an interrogation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic feminine

subject positions. Extending questions of gender into romantic display, the strategy of eroticized display of the male physique may appeal to a masculine gay sensibility, and may equally appeal to an arguably underserved libidinous heterosexual female viewership. The cinematic male body, once positioned in this way, can prove a powerful site for the interrogation of cultural hysteria around masculine homoerotic transgression.

When it comes to ethnic difference, three of the six films deploy strategies that appear to conform to limiting, stereotypical binary ethnic conventions, while two of the six feature an entirely white cast. *The Hurt Locker* conforms to the genre convention whereby only one soldier of colour is included in its central *dramatis personae*, collapsing its presentation of the ‘enemy’ into uninflected and familiar genre tropes. *Zero Dark Thirty* echoes *The Hurt Locker* in that it deploys tropes that reproduce uninflected normative genre ideations of ethnic difference and threat. Although the film briefly undermines these generic conventions, in the main it privileges the subjectivity of its US spies and soldiers over a generalized, dehumanized Pakistani / Arab ‘enemy.’ However, invoking a strategy familiar from *The Searchers*, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s protagonist is structured as progressively incorporating into herself those traits associated with the film’s monstrous other, throwing doubt onto the film’s otherwise apparent adherence to the dominant cultural polarity of West / East, civilization / savagery.

While *In The Cut* offers a counter-normative representation of gender relations, the film deploys a thematic strategy that appears to reproduce the *noir* convention whereby ideations of sexual excess and moral turpitude are projected onto people

of colour. *In The Cut* partially re-codes this convention such that its black bodies can be read as indicators of sexual freedom. However in projecting this thematic value onto black bodies, the film nonetheless reproduces a reductive, ethnically-based genre trope. By contrast, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* immerses its viewership in a fantasy Chinese subjectivity, deferring Hollywood ideations of the 'other' by permitting a floating subjectivity that simply doesn't admit of its 'otherness.'

Drawing these strategies together, it becomes clear that cinematic and narrative 'othering' on the basis of ethnicity is a common genre practice. Within the genre traditions of the war film, the spy film and those films predicated on a Western syntax, social and political narratives can become submerged under persistent binary genre conventions of white / non-white, where non-white figures trigger ideations of irrationality, chaos and savagery. These ideations are compounded by a Eurocentric conflation of communities from vastly different traditions, such as the conflation of Arabic with Pakistani communities in *Zero Dark Thirty*. It is clear that countering these kinds of ideations requires a strategy where multiple individual, named figures are contextualized by complex characterization and by a functional set of relations with other people of colour as well as with white characters. As a corollary to this point, a strategy linking an ethnic group to a genre-based theme or value, whether or not that thematic value is weighted as positive, can only serve to promulgate hegemonic power asymmetries ascribed according to ethnic difference. However, it is apparent that a Hollywood genre film, well enough structured, can successfully present its diegesis through a set of



social relations that are exclusively non-Western, non-Caucasian and even non-Anglophone. The conventions of the fantasy genre, routinely conjuring imaginary worlds and languages, may offer terrain that is particularly suitable for such a strategy. In such terrain, a subject position becomes available that elides the concept of ‘othering’ altogether, while offering the ‘calm pleasures’ of additional production value in conjuring an entirely fantasy world.

In representing cultural and political context, three of the six films engage in strategies that promulgate hegemonic ideations, while three engage in strategies that interrogate or actively disrupt genre-typical presentation. Although *The Hurt Locker* can be understood as working contrary to genre norms in presenting war as anti-heroic and chaotic, the film reproduces genre convention in a number of the cultural and political aspects of its presentation. It conforms to some of the tropes of a captivity narrative, in that no reason or rationale is afforded those shadowy figures who threaten its American soldiers. It renders its controversial military conflict as an apolitical, *a priori* condition of life, and the film’s American sequence effectively severs any ideational link between the deliberative, democratic citizen and the political drive toward war.

*Zero Dark Thirty* echoes *The Hurt Locker* in its genre-typical, depoliticized presentation of its diegetic conflict. Indeed, the film could be read as supportive of current, retrogressive political perspectives (at least for a section of its running time) in appearing to position deliberative politics and the law as obstacles to be overcome in the fight against a shadowy Islamic ‘other.’ The film does offer a potential ideological counterweight in its visceral depiction of one man’s

agonizing - and fruitless - torture, as well as in presenting its protagonist as both inhabiting the worldview of her enemy other, and as psychically wounded by her actions. In this way, *Zero Dark Thirty* can be understood as producing a strategy of conflicting indicators, oscillating between generic conformity and an implicit critique of that generic convention.

*In The Cut* appears to reframe the conventions of *noir*, feminizing a typical *noir* city by means of lush, voluptuous plants, emblematic of culturally constructed femininity. In reproducing its genre's structuring theme of sexual display and voyeurism, *In The Cut* reconfigures its generic sexual display to privilege an androphilic erotic gaze, presenting its male lover's sculpted physique to the camera. As a corollary, the film strategically invokes genre conventions of performed female homoeroticism by capturing sensuous, mesmeric, haptic moments of intimacy between women from a female subject position, thereby reproducing in recoded form its generic idioms.

*Bright Star* signals its adherence to norms of 'heritage cinema' through its anachronistic, tasteful interiors that privilege cultural prestige over historical authenticity. However, the film reconfigures genre-normative reverence toward prestige objects when it links such reverence to the genre figure coded to signify ostentation, abuse of power and patriarchal discrimination. In addition, *Bright Star* invokes the familiar genre trope of conflict over class and cultural hierarchy, strategically reversing the editorial values signified by this trope. In this way, the film produces a narrative strategy that effectively transposes conventional genre values, valorizing a feminine-coded bourgeois domesticity over a masculine-

coded Bohemian libertarianism.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* reproduces its genre's fantasy sphere of simulacral medieval Chineseness, governed by a set of familiar patriarchal codes and restrictions. The film's cultural politics are both strange and familiar, producing a set of Brechtian distancing conditions that serves to reflect something of our own cultural heritage and contemporary political concerns through the mirror of a fantasy landscape. The film's strategy then reconfigures the 'calm pleasures' of this fantasy landscape such that the disruptive explosions of violence that drive its narrative conventions are linked to the landscape's systematic, gender-based injustices.

*Brokeback Mountain* presents the 'calm pleasures' of a genre-typical world where homosexuality is vanishingly rare, arguably reinforcing hegemonic ideations of gay men as exceptional, isolated and abject. However, after signalling its adherence to the structuring tropes of the iconic Western cowboy, at home in the wilderness and replete with yeomanry skills, the film recodes that figure as a homoerotically charged, romantic body. This strategy serves to disinter violent codes of mutilation and murder that inhere in the Western idiom. By these means, the film reconfigures the familiar tropes of its genre to produces a semantic polarity between natural, wild, erotic desire and unnatural physical control through violence. This strategy could be understood in terms similar to that of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, in that it uses recoded genre tropes to interrogate structuring systems of power and control that inhere in the genre.

Drawing together those strategies that emerge from the films' presentation of

cultural context, it is apparent that the ‘calm pleasures’ of high dramatic tension can be conjured through a strategy whereby a threatening presence is evoked, but remains unseen, elusive, anywhere. However, embodying this unseen enemy in shadowy Arab men and women reproduces cultural ideations of the ‘other’ as disordered, reinforces culturally constructed links between the binaries of normal/deviant and white/non-white, and exacerbates a damaging Euro-American stereotype of Arab and Islamic peoples. Furthermore, representing political or military conflict solely through the narrow lens of European or US subjectivity can elide complexity, rendering the origins of a political or military conflict obscure and even severing the citizen from any sense of deliberative democracy. However this does not preclude the strategic deployment of fantasy, science fiction or historical genre paradigms in the service of a counter-hegemonic genre film. Political and economic conditions can be interrogated by harnessing the familiar tropes of fantasy or historical cinema. Such tropes produce the ‘calm pleasures’ of a fantasy or historical subject position, but can nonetheless be recoded so as to afford the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of counter-hegemonic ideation, interrogating contemporary political and social concerns by means of Brechtian distancing.

These observations and concerns structure the strategies deployed in the Appendix to this study, an original screenplay in the idiom of a popular Hollywood narrative. The screenplay is structured to signal the ‘calm pleasures’ associated with the familiar terrain of the genre thriller, fused with the familiar themes of the coming-of-age genre. Titled *Sea Fever*, the screenplay centres

around a marine biologist whose dissertation research takes her aboard a deep-sea fishing trawler. When an unknown, lethal parasite infects the trawler's fresh water supply, she struggles to find a way to save the trawler crew, despite their suspicion that she might be the source of their infection.

In terms of its genre strategy, *Sea Fever* clearly signals its provenance as a genre thriller, delivering on that genre's conventions of a high-octane narrative replete with suspense and spectacle. The screenplay fuses these thriller conventions with a coming-of-age syntax, where the protagonist struggles to assert an authentic self in the face of a closed-off community in which she can find no place. Like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Crouching Tiger* and *Brokeback Mountain*, the film's dual generic provenance produces combined sets of thematic polarities. One set aligns along a typical thriller dichotomy, where the drive toward self-protection is in conflict with the drive toward community protection. The other aligns along a typical coming-of-age dichotomy, where the drive toward an authentic self is positioned against a restrictive social order.

Analogous to the strategy employed by *The Hurt Locker*, the film's protagonist is presented as both heroic and damaged. In a fusion of the film's two genre sources, she bears the recognizable traits of a thriller hero, along with those of a coming-of-age protagonist. In the mode of *Bright Star*'s strategy, although this figure is presented as powerless within her social milieu, she is rendered capable of agency through a diegetic focus on her specific area of expertise. Using the strategic approach of *Zero Dark Thirty*, her heroic aspect is not delimited by her gender. Rather, it is her isolation, her purity of focus, and her willingness to take

responsibility that position her as heroic. Like that film, her gender is incidental rather than instrumental to her narrative drive, and she is not defined by a drive toward romantic engagement. Like the strategies employed by *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, those around her are presented as oscillating between admiration for her heroism and resentment at her narrowness of focus. In the manner of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s strategy, this figure is presented as capable of self-abnegation and of sacrifice. And in a fusion of this heroic trope with the coming-of-age trope, her struggle results in an impossible cultural position. Like the protagonists of *Bright Star* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, she is presented with a figurative liberation, since there can be no literal liberation at the story's end.

In forming a strategy toward the film's transforming social relations, I draw on a strategy also seen in *The Hurt Locker*, whereby apparently genre-typical characters are interrogated through shocking moments of misperception, unexpected emotional outbursts and unanticipated death. Using a familiar *noir* trope strategically employed by *Bright Star* and *In The Cut*, the screenplay establishes a form of twinning in its two key male figures. Each man inhabits a position on the semantic polarity between isolation / connection; rational detachment / magical thinking. These polarities are expressed through a semantic polarity in the construction of their masculinity, where one is positioned as flirtatious and over-confident; the other as quiet and expert. In establishing a connection with her collaborator, the protagonist is afforded a full catharsis during the film's final act. Drawing on the strategy deployed by *In The Cut*, this catharsis

positions her collaborator as subject to her, such that she retains full narrative agency to the story's end. Drawing on the strategies deployed by *In The Cut* and of *Brokeback Mountain*, the film privileges an androphilic subject position when it displays an eroticized male body. This emphasis on the erotic charge of the male body is emphasized, as in *Brokeback Mountain*, when that body is later subject to destruction. In a strategy parallel to that employed by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, I have sought to demonstrate how systematic exclusion can trigger not abjection but violence. When one of the boat's figures is repeatedly rendered powerless and voiceless, she responds not as an abject victim, but as a destructive, murderous force, akin to *Crouching Tiger's* Jade Fox, threatening to overwhelm the community.

With respect to strategies toward ethnic representation, the film references authentic experience, peopling the trawler with seven figures, four Irish, one Scandinavian, two Arabic. Avoiding the implicit racism of *In The Cut's* thematic projection onto black bodies, the film's people of colour are not defined or thematized according to their ethnicity. One of the film's Arabic crew members forms part of the semantic polarity between the protagonist's two potential male collaborators. His ethnicity is incidental rather than instrumental in his narrative position as part of that polarity. I underscore the incidental nature of his ethnicity by structuring a second complex, layered, Arabic character among the crew, a man who bears no thematic relation to that semantic polarity. The film permits the two figures occasional exchanges in Arabic, but they retain no special connection in narrative terms. Similarly, the film positions its captain as Scandinavian,

articulating a counter-intuitive truth regarding the fishing community's inclusive, trans-national inter-connectedness, spanning the West of Ireland, Western Scotland and the Western seaboard of Scandinavia, this is a community with no national borders or ethnic identity.

In parallel with the strategy providing structured social critique that animates *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the film features two authority figures in the form of a husband and wife who own the trawler. This team, and in particular the husband, is initially presented as embodying authority and safety, with commensurately high social status. These figures are progressively revealed as flawed and burdened, destabilizing the social order such that they trigger an implicit interrogation of the way in which social authority is obtained and transmitted.

Alongside the strategy apparent in *The Hurt Locker* and in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the film's small community encounters a threat that remains shadowy, unknowable, unseen and potentially omnipresent. But rather than collapse into ethnic 'othering,' this film structures an unknowable natural phenomenon as its threat. In line with the strategy driving the figures in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the film's central threat is reflected with certain aspects of the protagonist herself. For this reason, the film employs a strategy whereby the protagonist is depicted as a figure who is at home in the silence of the subaquatic world and who is ruthlessly ready to sacrifice individual human lives for the greater balance of her ecosystem. In addition, cognisant of how *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Hurt Locker* fail to examine the conditions leading to their current threatened predicament, *Sea Fever* is



positioned explicitly at the sharp edge of real political conflict between economic survival and ecological destruction.

The intention behind this study is to establish a set of strategies toward a popular form of feature film that offers the satisfying, ‘calm pleasures’ of thrilling genre experience, while delivering the ‘exhilarated pleasures’ of a challenging, innovative narrative where oppressive gender, ethnic and cultural ideations are disestablished in favour of complex, conflicted characterizations, situated within a diegesis reflective of real, urgent economic and ecological conflict. In the last months, the resultant screenplay has won awards from the Irish Film Board and from Creative Europe, and has now attracted international production finance. It completed principal photography in November 2018, starring Connie Nielsen and Dougray Scott.

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Chadwick, Justin *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008)

Cheh Zhang *One Armed Swordsman* (1967)

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Chi-Wai Tam *The Spirit of the Dragon / Lao Shu Long Zhi Meng Long Go Gang* (1998)

Chun Yen *That Fiery Girl* (1968)

Cimino, Michael *The Deer Hunter* (1978)

Clouse, Robert *Enter the Dragon* (1973)

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Coppola, Francis Ford *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Coppola, Sofia *Marie Antoinette* (2006)

Corbijn, Anton, *A Most Wanted Man* (2014)

Costner, Kevin *Dances with Wolves* (1992)

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Cristofer, Michael *Original Sin* (2001)

Curtiz, Michael *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

Dahl, John *The Last Seduction* (1994)

Daldry Steven, *Iris* (2002)

Davies, Terence *The House of Mirth* (2000)

De Palma, Brian *Dressed to Kill* (1980)

- *Body Double* (1984)
- *Casualties of War* (1989)
- *Femme Fatale* (2002)
- *Redacted* (2007)

Dearden, James *A Kiss Before Dying* (1991)

Demme, Jonathan, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)

Densham, Pen *Moll Flanders* (1996)

Dibb, Saul *The Duchess* (2008)

Dieterle, William *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936)

Dmytryk, Edward *Murder, My Sweet* (1944)

Douglas, Gordon *Young at Heart* (1954)

Dickinson, Thorold *Gaslight* (1940)

Eastwood, Clint, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976)

- *Unforgiven* (1992)
- *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995)

Edel, Uli *Body of Evidence* (1993)

Feng Huang *Lady Whirlwind* (1972)

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Fiennes, Sophie *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012)

Fincher, David *The Social Network* (2009)

Fleming, Andrew *The Craft* (1996)

Ford, John *Mary of Scotland* (1936)

- *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939)
- *Rio Grande* (1950)
- *The Searchers* (1956)

Forman, Milos *Man on the Moon* (1999)

Forster, Marc *Finding Neverland* (2004)

Foster, Norman, *Woman on the Run* (1950)

Frankel, David & Michael Salomon *Band of Brothers* (2001)

Frears, Stephen *The Hi-Lo Country* (1998)

Friedkin, William *Jade* (1995)

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Fukunaga, Cary *Jane Eyre* (2011)

Fuller, Sam *The Steel Helmet* (1951)

Gansa, Alex and Howard Gordon, *Homeland* (2011 -2016)

Garnett, Tay *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)

Giedroyc, Coky *Mary Shelley's Monster* (2017)

Godard, Andy *Set Fire to the Stars* (2014)

Haggis, Paul *In the Valley of Elah* (2007)

Hanson, Curtis *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* (1992)

Harris, Ed *Pollock* (2000)

- Hathaway, Henry *Kiss of Death* (1947)
- Hawks, Howard *Sargeant York* (1941)
- *The Big Sleep* (1946)
  - *Red River* (1948)
  - *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)
- Haynes, Todd *Poison* (1991)
- *Far From Heaven* (2002)
  - *I'm Not There* (2007)
  - *Carol* (2015)
- Heisler, Stuart *Among the Living* (1941)
- *Blue Skies* (1946)
- Hill, Walter, *The Long Riders* (1980)
- Hippolyte, A. Gregory *Night Rhythms* (1992)
- Hitchcock, Alfred *Rebecca* (1940)
- *Suspicion* (1941)
  - *Spellbound* (1945)
  - *Rear Window* (1954)
- Holland, Agnieszka *Washington Square* (1997)
- Hool, Lance *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning* (1985)
- Howard, Ron *A Beautiful Mind* (2001)
- *Frost / Nixon* (2008)
- Hu, King *Come Drink with Me* (1965)
- *Dragon Inn* (1967)
  - *Anger* (1970)
  - *A Touch of Zen* (1971)
  - *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973)
- Huston, John *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)
- Ivory, James *The Bostonians* (1984)
- *A Room with a View* (1985)
  - *Maurice* (1987)
  - *Howard's End* (1992)



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- *Surviving Picasso* (1996)
- *The Golden Bowl* (2000)
- *The Divorce* (2003)
- *The White Countess* (2005)
- Kalin, Tom *Swoon* (1992)
- Kar-Wei, Wong *Ashes of Time* (1994)
- *Happy Together* (1997)
- Kasdan, Lawrence *Body Heat* (1981)
- Kazan, Elia *Panic in the Streets* (1950)
- *East of Eden* (1955)
- Kotcheff, Ted *Rambo: First Blood* (1982)
- *Uncommon Valour* (1985)
- Kubrick, Stanley *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)
- Kuzui, Frank Rubel *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* (1992)
- Lang, Fritz *Doktor Mabuse* (Lang, 1922)
- *M* (1931)
- *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947)
- Larraín, Pablo *Jackie* (2016)
- Lau Wai-keung *A Man Called Hero / Zhong Hua Ying Xiong* (1999)
- Lawrence, Francis *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013)
- *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (2014)
- *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2* (2015)
- *Red Sparrow* (2018)
- Lean, David *Brief Encounter* (1945)
- Lee, Ang *Sense and Sensibility* (1995)
- *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000)
- *Hulk* (2003)
- *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)
- Lee, Spike *Malcolm X* (1992)
- Leigh, Mike *Topsy Turvey* (1999)

Leitch, David *Atomic Blonde* (2017)

Leroy, Mervyn and Albert Lewin *Madame Curie* (1943)

Levinson, Barry *Disclosure* (1994)

Lewis, Joseph H. *Gun Crazy* (1950)

Lloyd, Phyllida *The Iron Lady* (2011)

Lucas, George *Star Wars Episode I* (1999)

Lyne, Adrian *Fatal Attraction* (1987)

- *Unfaithful* (2002)

Mak, Michael *Butterfly and Sword* (1993)

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Mandy, Marie *Women Film Desire: A Journey Through Women's Cinema* (2000)

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Marquand, Richard *Jagged Edge* (1985)

Marsh, James *The Theory of Everything* (2014)

Medak, Peter *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993)

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Meng Hua Ho *The Jade Raksha* (1968)

- *Lady of Steel* (1970)

- *The Lady Hermit* (1971)

Miles, Christopher *Priest of Love* (1981)

Miller, Sam *No Good Deed* (2014)

Minelli, Vincent *Lust for Life* (1956)

Moore, John *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001)

Morano, Reed *The Rhythm Section* (2018)

Murphy, Pat *Nora* (2000)

Neill, Roy William, *Black Angel* (1946)

Ng, Min Kan *Deadful Melody* (1993)

Norrington, Stephen *Blade* (1998)

Noyce, Philip *Sliver* (1993)

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- Park, Chan Wook *The Handmaiden* (2016)
- Passer, Ivan *Haunted Summer* (1988)
- Peele, Jordan *Get Out* (2017)
- Peirce, Kimberly *Stop-Loss* (2008)
- Penn, Arthur, *Little Big Man* (1970)
- Polanski, Roman *Tess* (1979)
- Prestwich, Dawn and Nicole Yorkin *Z: The Beginning of Everything* (2017)
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- *Black Widow* (1987)
- Rapper, Irving *Now, Voyager* (1942)
- Ray, Nicholas *They Live by Night* (1948)
- Reed, Carol *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965)
- Reinhardt, John *The Guilty* (1947)
- Robeson, Mark *Peyton Place* (1957)
- Roeg, Nic *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967)
- Rosenberg, Melissa *Jessica Jones* (2015-18)
- Ross, Gary *The Hunger Games* (2012)
- Rush, Richard *Colour of Night* (1994)
- Russell, David O. *Three Kings* (1999)
- Russell, Ken *Gothic* (1986)
- Schlesinger, John *Midnight Cowboy* (1969)
- Schroeder, Barbet *Single White Female* (1992)
- Scorsese, Martin *Raging Bull* (1980)
- *The Age of Innocence* (1993)
- *The Aviator* (2004)
- Scott, Ridley *Black Hawk Down* (2001)
- Sheane Duncan, Patrick *84 Charlie Mopic* (1989)
- Siodmak, Robert, *Phantom Lady* (1944)
- *Dark Mirror* (1946)
- Sirk, Douglas *A Scandal in Paris* (1946)

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Soderbergh, Steven *Erin Brockovich* (2000)

Softley, Iain *The Wings of a Dove* (1997)

Spielberg, Steven *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)

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Stevens, George, *Shane* (1953)

Stone, Oliver *Platoon* (1986)

Temple, Julian *Pandaemonium* (2000)

Theakston, Graham *The Mill On The Floss* (1997)

Thornton, Billy Bob *All The Pretty Horses* (2000)

Tyldum, Morten *The Imitation Game* (2014)

Vallée, Jean-Marc *Young Victoria* (2009)

Van Sandt, Gus *My Own Private Idaho* (1991)

Varda, Agnes *Washington Square* (1997)

Verhoeven, Paul *Basic Instinct* (1992)

Vidor, Charles *Gilda* (1946)

Vinterberg, Thomas *Far From the Madding Crowd* (2015)

von Sternberg, Josef *Der Blaue Engel* (1930)

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Wallace, Randall *We Were Soldiers* (2002)

Walsh, Raoul *Objective, Burma!* (1945)

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Warhol, Andy *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968)

Wayne, John *The Green Berets* (1968)

Webber, Peter *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (2003)

Wei Lo *Dragon Swamp* (1969)  
- *The Shadow Whip* (1971)  
Whedon, Joss *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)  
Wilder, Billy *Double Indemnity* (1944)  
Wu Ma *The Deaf and Mute Heroine* (1971)  
Wyler, William *Best Years of Our Lives* (1946)  
Yu, Ronny *The Bride with White Hair* (1993)  
Zito, Joseph *Missing in Action* (1984)  
Zwick, Edward *Courage Under Fire* (1996)  
Zwigoff, Terry *Ghost World* (2001)