



Action Heroines in the Twenty-First Century: Sisters in Arms

Bournemouth University in collaboration with University of Wolverhampton

Thursday 9 June – Friday 10 June 2022

Talbot Campus, Bournemouth

Keynote: Professor Yvonne Tasker, University of Leeds

It is 30 years since *Thelma and Louise* hit our screens, grossing a cool \$45mil at the US box-office and carving out a special place in movie history. A deliberately feminist project for screenwriter Callie Khouri, it was hailed and derided in more or less equal measure by critics for its portrayal of two ordinary Arkansas women turned gun-toting outlaws. The film busted the Hollywood myth that a female-led action movie could not be a critical and commercial success. It also broke the mould by presenting us with not one but two action heroines, this being perhaps the most revolutionary thing about it. As a result, many anticipated an upsurge in female action heroines, but this was not to be. The genre continued to be almost exclusively dominated by men, and where a female action hero did appear (Geena Davis being one significant action star, Angelina Jolie of course another), they were almost always positioned as a single woman surrounded by a cast of men, as though to reinforce their exceptionality and their distance from ordinary women and from socially acceptable constructions of femininity. In the new millennium, however, we have seen an increasing number of women star in and lead action films emanating from Hollywood and beyond. And perhaps more interestingly we have seen the emergence of films that feature more than one female action figure, effectively removing that stultifying burden of representation otherwise shouldered by the lone 'woman'. The papers here respond to a range of films and television series from Asian productions through to mainstream Hollywood and examine various aspects of the on-screen superheroine. We warmly welcome you to our collaborative conference on 9-10 June and thereafter look forward to working with you on a co-edited collection.

Programme

Wednesday 8 June - Online: 16.45 BST – Welcome and opening panel
Online access
17.00 - 18.30 Panel 1 Action heroines in Asian film and television
Alicja Bemben (University of Silesia) – Sisters in Arms, or How Collectivity Facilitates an Individual's Agency Gauri Durga Chakraborty (Bennett University) – Lady Gangsters in Bollywood: Locating Action and 'Angry Young Women' in Rural India Liao Zhang and Jiyoung Kim (University of Nottingham) – <i>Ajumma</i> in Arms: The Rejuvenation of Aging Women in Contemporary South-Korean Action-Comedy Films Yongde (Dennis) Dai (University of Macau) – Modern Mulan Tales: Iron Girls from Socialist Revolutionary Cinema to Main Melody Military Action Blockbusters
Thursday 9 June - Bournemouth town centre 19.00 - 23.00 Pre-conference dinner
Friday 20 June - Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus 09.15 - 09.45 Registration and coffee 09.45 - 10.00 Welcome
10.00 - 11.15 Panel 2 – Femininity and feminism: From Charlie's Angels to Women at War
Lavinia Brydon (University of Kent) – Activist Heroines: The Eco-Warrior and her Sister Lucy Bolton (Queen Mary University, London) – 'Once Upon a Time, There Were Three Little Girls': The Enduring Attractions of <i>Charlie's Angels</i> Aviva Dove-Viebahn (Arizona State University) – Exploring the Second Closet: Feminine Power and Knowledge in <i>Charlie's Angels</i> (2019)
11.15 - 11.30 Coffee
11.30 - 12.30 Keynote
Professor Yvonne Tasker (University of Leeds) - Women in Action Partnerships: Problems of Genre
12.30 - 13.45 Panel 3 Gender politics and cinematic superheroines
Christopher Holliday (King's College, London) – Hollywood Cinema's Nasty Women Laura Crossley (Bournemouth University) – 'I Know My Value': Feminism, Femininity and Transgression in Marvel's Agent Carter Miriam Kent (University of Leeds) – 'I'm Not The Killer That Little Girls Call Their Hero': Action Femininities in Marvel Studio's <i>Black Widow</i>

12.30 - 13.45 Panel 4 Action heroines taking over the small screen

Mareike Jenner (Anglia-Ruskin University) – Recycling Action Heroes: The ‘Gender Swap’ in Contemporary Action TV Re-Boots

Mathieu Arbogast (CEMS & Cresppa-GTM) – Armed and Dangerous: Police Women in TV Series, A New Equality of Arms

Frances Gateward (Howard University) – ‘Isn’t That the Whole Idea of Starfleet?’: *Star Trek Discovery* as Female-Driven Science Fiction

13.45 - 14.30 Lunch

14.30 - 16.00 Panel 5 Violence and agency in action narratives

Helena Bassil-Morozow (Glasgow Caledonian University) – Harley Quinn, the Female Trickster: Emancipated or Stereotyped?

Marianne Kac-Vergne (University of Picardie Jules Verne) – Sisters in Arms in *Terminator: Dark Fate*

Rebecca Wright (Cardiff University) – Violence and Collective Agency in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Terminator: Dark Fate* and *Birds of Prey*

Emma Payne (Cardiff University) – ‘Am I Your Bitch Now?’: The Sound of Subversive Fighting in *Atomic Blonde*

16.00 - 16.15 Coffee

16.15 - 17.45 Panel 6 Race, sexuality and the evolving action heroine

Deborah Jermyn (University of Roehampton) – ‘I’ve Been Here Before, Over and Over Again...and I’m Just Tired of it’: Advancing the Action Genre/Heroine in *The Old Guard*

Jenny Alexander (Bournemouth University) – ‘Nubian Queen Rise’: The Black Queer Action Heroine, Sisterhood and the Closet

Esmé Fransen (Stockholm University) – Be Gay, Do Crime? The Construction of *Ocean’s 8* as a Lesbian Heist Movie

17.45 Plenary

18.15 Drinks reception and close

Abstracts

Jenny Alexander: “Nubian Queen Rise”*: The Black Queer Action Heroine, Sisterhood and the Closet *(Wyclef Jean, 2019)

“I bear two women upon my back
one dark and rich and hidden
in the ivory hungers of the other”
(Audre Lorde From *The House of Yemanjá*)

The black queer action heroine was born under a bad sign, a sign bell hooks calls “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1995), and she must be a double-rebel. “The world has moved on, Commander Bond,” Lashana Lynch’s black female 007 agent, Nomi, tells us, in *No Time To Die* (2021). But has it?

Black queer representation on film emerged, gradually, in the wake of New Black Cinema, in the 1980s. Spielberg’s *The Colour Purple* (1985) felt it necessary to closet the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie in Alice Walker’s novel. This “celluloid closet” (Russo, 1981) continues to operate. This year (2021) the Criterion Collection sought to include its first film by a black female director in its archive. Dee Rees was approached about her WW2 drama *Mudbound* (2017), a tale of black-white male friendship in the post-war Deep South. She herself had to ask if her first film, *Pariah* (2011) could be included instead; a semi-autobiographical account of the awakening of a young black lesbian.

The Hollywood action heroine (like her male counterpart) has predominantly been white, although the Blaxploitation era and the influence of Hong Kong action cinema have injected diversity. She has also, whatever her ethnicity, mostly been (ostensibly) straight. “Action heroines are conventionally beautiful, glamorous and sexualised,” writes Jeffrey Brown in his book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism and Popular Culture* (2013), meaning, they mostly conform to a heterosexual Hollywood standard. Black action heroines too, like Eartha Kitt in *Batman* (1967-68), Pam Grier in *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), Angela Bassett in *Strange Days* (1995) and Danai Gurira in *Black Panther* (2018) look fine, kick ass and desire men. Nevertheless, the action heroine genre has incorporated queerness in three ways: as sublimated, or queer-coded “buddy” homoeroticism (e.g., *Thelma and Louise*, 1991 and *Jessica Jones* 2015-19); as (suggestive) female bisexuality designed for a straight male gaze (e.g., *Barbarella*, 1968); and, in the performance of what Yvonne Tasker calls “musculinity” (Tasker, 1993); the depiction of hard-bodied women whom (we might argue) shade into the performance of queer “female masculinities” (e.g. Charlize Theron in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015).

If action heroines are routinely depicted as outlaws and rebels, even when operating inside institutions, the black queer action heroine is an outsider’s outsider. She appears fleetingly on film, as a warrior, a revolutionary, a bank robber, a fighter pilot, and a secret agent ball-breaker. In her more radical appearances, her relationships with female friends and lovers are foregrounded, in her less radical outings, she is a closeted best friend/ buddy to her white counterpart, or an aggressive, but desexualised, competitor-comrade to white male heroism.

This paper considers the (semi) emergence of the black queer action heroine into the blockbuster genres of the 21st century, alongside her more radical roots, and the way in which she is granted, or deprived of, the sisterhood of female friends and lovers. We look at Honey, played by herself,

in Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), Zula played by Grace Jones in *Conan the Destroyer* (1984), Cleo in *Set it Off* (1996) played by Queen Latifah, Maria Rambeau in *Captain Marvel* (2019) played by Lashana Lynch, Nomi in *James Bond: No Time to Die* (2021) also played by Lashana Lynch, and Cuffee played by Danielle Deadwyler in *The Harder They Fall* (2021) (a female-attracted cross-dressing character whom we might claim as either lesbian or trans-masculine).

Dr. Jenny Alexander teaches Politics, Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. She has previously taught Gender, Media and Cultural Studies at Sussex and Middlesex. She has published on anarchism and sexuality, fan cultures, sadomasochism and genre television (Buffy, Harry Potter). She is presently writing a book for Intellect, titled *Queer-Coding or Queer-baiting? The Homoerotic Subtext of *Supernatural*: A Case Study in Reading Subtext on Screen*.

Helena Bassil-Morozow: Harley Quinn, the Female Trickster: Emancipated or Stereotyped?

Using the taxonomy of trickster characteristics (Bassil-Morozow, 2014; Bassil-Morozow, 2016), this paper discusses whether the character of Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) in *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020) can be considered a genuine female trickster, a character challenging the *status quo*, as opposed to upholding it by being yet another sexualised heroine.

In a recent interview to the *Vogue* magazine Margot Robbie reveals why she is so excited to play Harley Quinn – a DC comics character, 'professional psychopath', the dark version of the female trickster, and Joker's former lover: 'Those scenes ... where everything is exploding around you, and you make it just in time, those massive epic war hero runs? Those movie moments? Girls never get those. Girls *never* get those' (Wiseman, *Vogue*, August 2021).

Robbie's description suggests that Harley Quinn is not only an action character but also an agentic one; someone who chooses her way in life and is strong enough to stand her ground and to (quite literally) fight her corner. Tricksters break stereotypes, cross boundaries and reject the standards imposed onto them by society. In this sense, Quinn is a female trickster – someone destructive and on the margins, living in the underworld and attempting to subvert the existing social order. Indeed, as cinematic and television narratives are gradually moving towards letting female action protagonists have the centre stage to themselves instead of confining them to the bland role of the hero's girlfriend or turning them into semi-protagonists (like Furiosa (Charlize Theron) in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)), characters like Harley Quinn should be celebrated. At the same time, Quinn (and many of her fellow action heroines) still fulfil a range of gender stereotypes, the most obvious of which being skimpy outfits and the love of pole dancing.

Dr. Helena Bassil-Morozow is a cultural philosopher, media and film scholar, and academic author whose many publications include *Tim Burton: The Monster and the Crowd* (Routledge, 2010), *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* (Routledge, 2011), *The Trickster and the System: Identity and Agency in Contemporary Society* (Routledge, 2014), *Jungian Film Studies: The Essential Guide* (co-authored with Luke Hockley, 2016) and *Jungian Theory for Storytellers* (2018). She is a lecturer in Media and Journalism at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Alicja Bemben: Sisters in Arms, or How Collectivity Facilitates an Individual's Agency

Regardless of the ascribed type of agency, action heroines tend to be seen as agents endowed with highly individualised selves, strong egos as if sculpted to be detached from the world (to be able to go against it). Their social connectedness, sense of collectivity, and – most importantly from the perspective of this presentation – the question of how their sense of collectivity informs the shaping of their personal agency, tend to be brushed over. Films and television series working with the sisters-in-arms convention thus provide a perfect ground on which to explore the mentioned issue, as they often portray highly individualised selves acting in situations of social connectedness. One such example is the *Rookie Historian Goo Hae-Ryung* television series, which tells the story of Goo Hae-Ryung and her sisters-in-arms trying both to survive and find their place at a highly patriarchal and cutthroat court of the Joseon Dynasty in the early nineteenth century (modern-day Korea).

Focusing on the key protagonist of the series and her sisters-in-arms, this presentation aims to analyse the dynamic in which she enters with them to support the thesis that collectivity can function as a tool facilitating an individual's agency. With a view to doing so, I ground my arguments in Kenneth Gergen's theory of the relational self and his repertoire of discursive resources on which the self draws to act in social situations. Accordingly, in the first part of my presentation, I briefly introduce the *Rookie Historian Goo Hae-Ryung* series and explain how Gergen's ideas are applied to its analysis. In what follows, I analyse the mentioned dynamic with respect to how Goo Hae-Ryung's sense of collectivity informs her self-shaping, i.e. enhances her sense of agency. Finally, I close my presentation by expanding on my findings.

Alicja Bemben, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor at the University of Silesia, Poland. She is a founder of the *H/Story* research group under the auspices of which she has co-organised a number of conferences (<https://www.hstory.us.edu.pl/>). She has also co-edited several monographs and authored a number of texts dealing primarily with historical novels, historiography, and their affinities. Her latest publication is *Emotions as Engines of History* (Routledge 2022). She is an associate editor of *The Robert Graves Review* and cooperates with several other journals.

Lucy Bolton: "Once upon a time, there were three little girls": The Enduring Attractions of Charlie's Angels

When Drew Barrymore and Flower Productions put Charles Townsend's detectives, Natalie, Alex and Dylan, on the cinema screen, many of the sights and sounds of the television detective series were respectfully and joyously reinvented for 20th century audiences. Arguably no other team of women characters on television or in cinema more embodies the conference theme of 'sisters in arms' than the various iterations of Charlie's Angels. In *Charlie's Angels* (directed by McG, 2000) the angels are played by three of the leading stars of the day, Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz and Lucy Liu, with Bosley played by Bill Murray. The production is high octane, bright and sunny, full of laughter, glamour and martial arts. Barrymore was concerned to represent these young women in ways that aligned with her beliefs: she wanted to show them enjoying eating food, being like a family for each other, and not using guns. Rather than swap pistols between clutch bags like the Seventies TV crimefighters, the Angels 2000 are accomplished in martial arts and able to fight criminals and assassins with ferocious power and skill. The contrast between the playful, girlish angels in the realms of their dating and party lives and the fierce, ruthless martial arts skills of the detectives, creates a comic-book diegesis, full of colour and craziness, rather

than the cool, mature and sexy police procedural which characterised the television series. In this paper, I will examine the changes that Barrymore insisted upon in terms of the politics and behaviour of the Angels 2000, and analyse how these changes updated the dynamics between the angels themselves, the angels and Bosley, and the angels and Charlie, and how Barrymore's film reinvented the angels as post-feminist action heroines.

Lucy Bolton is Reader in Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London, where she teaches and researches film philosophy and film stardom. She has published widely in these fields, and is currently working on a monograph on philosophy and film stardom combined. She is the co-editor of *Lasting Screen Stars: Images that Fade and Personas that Endure*, and the author of *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, and *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema, and Thinking Women*. Lucy is on the editorial boards of *Open Screens*, *Celebrity Studies* and *Film-Philosophy*, and co-edits the book series *Visionaries- the work of women filmmakers* (EUP).

Lavinia Brydon: Activist Heroines: The Eco-warrior and her Sister

Women have long been linked with the natural environment, but this often means the clichéd collapse of the female body onto the landscape: the female as one flower amongst many. However, in last two decades there have been increasing attempts to interrogate and rethink the problematic traditions of this association. To some extent, this need to reconsider the relationship between women and landscape is fuelled by our current moment of ecological crisis, not least because the heroines at the forefront of climate activism, such as Berta Cáceres and, more recently, Greta Thunberg, present a different version of the woman-nature coupling. These are women who eschew traditional notions of female passivity and pliability, and refuse the environment a similar understanding, but, rather, act and take actions into their own hands. We might consider them eco-action/activist heroines.

With reference to Benedikt Erlingsson's 2018 Icelandic film *Women at War* and a close examination of its central character Halla (Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir), this paper seeks to consider an on-screen articulation of the shift in the women-nature association, and how it might not necessarily mean the complete dismissal of various long held traditions that reside in nature and femininity, for example, the capacity for calm or the responsibility for life's continuation. The paper thus considers, on the one hand, how Halla is presented as the fierce 'Mountain Woman' able to take down power lines with one deft pull of an arrow and, on the other, how she is the mild-mannered tai chi practitioner who yearns to be a mother. As such, it argues that Halla can be read in both extraordinary action heroine terms, with stunt sequences recalling the athletic capabilities of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) in the *Mission Impossible* film series but, also, an ordinary woman happy to embrace the smaller worlds of domesticity and child care. Importantly, the paper develops to consider how the lone woman trope of the female-centred action film is confirmed but complicated by *Women at War's* protagonist, not least in how Halla's ordinary endeavours necessitate a late but crucial intervention by her twin sister.

Lavinia Brydon is a Senior Lecturer in the Film and Media Department at the University of Kent. Her research interests centre on issues of place, space and the environment in film and the wider arts. She has published on her interests in various journals and edited collections, most recently, in the volume *New Directions in Flânerie: Global Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2021). She is also currently leading an AHRC-funded project on arts-led engagement with climate research, focussing on the Kent coastline. In 2020, she co-edited a special issue of *Film Studies* on the theme 'Difficult Women'.

Gauri Chakraborty: Lady gangsters in Bollywood: Locating action and 'angry young women' in rural India

New Bollywood is a symbolic reference to 'content driven' Hindi mainstream cinema in India. Catalyzed by socio-economic triggers of neoliberalism introduced in the 90s, the Hindi mainstream industry has organically shifted to women-led narratives which explore identity, desire and agency. Many of these 'women oriented' films represent a paradigm shift in the portrayal of the heroine and strategically locate the problematic as an internal conflict of the protagonist with an urgent need to the persuasive question of identity. Contrary to individualization of a single woman's quest for self-actualization in such films, *Gulaab Gang* (2014), posited as a 'empowerment narrative of the collective' with two female superstars, set in rural India amalgamates Bollywood's formulaic approach to storytelling with a focus of women as a group seeking agency and fighting for justice. *Gulaab Gang* substituted the erstwhile male protagonist and venomous antagonist with stars, Madhuri Dixit and Juhi Chawla. The absence of a male star with an intended rearrangement within this politics of representation is deliberate. It subtly corroborates with the 'angry young man' symbolic of the 1970s, stardom, and its association with justice in India's hinterland.

The research paper will explore the placement of action from the the feminist film theory lens, spectatorship studies and star system vis a vis commercial cinema ecosystem in context of the women collective located in rural India portrayed in *Gulaab Gang* (2014). The paper will also examine the quasi-empowerment portrayal within the 'women action heroes,' embedded with mock male machismo and rupture of the stipulated attributes for the leading lady in the Hindi mainstream industry.

Dr. Gauri D Chakraborty graduated from Asia's premier institution, The Film and Television Institute of India, Pune and has been a part of the Audio-Video Industry since 1995. She has worked with BBC WST on HIV awareness in India. Gauri was the Associate Producer for the award winning film *Sheep Thief* (Asif Kapadia, 1997). Dr Gauri has been a media educator for the last 16 years has co-headed the Amity School of Communication, Noida from 2017-21. Her doctoral thesis explores representation of the 'Emancipated other half in cinema of the City'. She has been resource person for UGC refresher programs and member of IAMCR, IAWRT, GRAFTII and The Asian Media & Cultural Studies Network. She is currently exploring concepts of De-gendering, Femvertising and OTT in her research. Gauri was the Festival Director for IAWRT AWFF 2019. She has received the *100 Womenfaces* award from the Centre for Women Entrepreneurs (COWE) in 2018. Currently, she is serving as Professor, Times School of Media, Bennett University.

Laura Crossley: 'I Know my Value': Feminism, Femininity and Transgression in *Marvel's Agent Carter*.

As Phase Three of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) drew to a close with *Avengers: Endgame* (John and Anthony Russo, 2019), there was much debate over the fates of two of its female characters: Natasha Romanov/Black Widow and Peggy Carter. After many years of waiting, fans did finally get the Black Widow standalone movie in 2021 – but only after the franchise had killed her off in *Endgame*. After the cancelling of the TV series *Marvel's Agent Carter* (2015-16), Peggy continued to appear in small but important moments across a number of MCU instalments. As a series, *Agent Carter* chartered Peggy's struggle to fit into the expected domesticity and hegemonic gender roles of the post-war period; crucially, it also detailed her moving on emotionally from the loss of Steve Rogers/Captain America, forming a new romantic partnership and – as the film cameos inform us – eventually marrying and having children. All of this is undone in the final moments of *Endgame* as Captain America takes himself back to the 1940s to live out a quiet life with Peggy and thus erasing the narrative, agency and character development that had been built up for her over the years. Rather than being given a satisfying story arc of her own, Peggy's agency is overwritten to reform her as the reward for the male hero. By drawing on the works that examine female action heroes in general (White 2007) and Peggy Carter specifically (Mahoney 2019), this paper interrogates the positioning of Peggy Carter within feminist and postfeminist contexts and her role within the wider MCU, especially in light of the recent series *What if...*, which posits Peggy Carter herself as the serum-enhanced First Avenger. Peggy's hyper-stylised and performative femininity is simultaneously transgressive and reductive, as her character arc is repeatedly constrained by and contained within traditional heteronormativity.

Laura Crossley is a Senior Lecturer in Film at Bournemouth University. Her research interests include national identity, British film, nostalgia, postmodernism and post-colonialism. Specific areas of interest are on British spy fictions, particularly on film and television. She is currently researching aspects of nostalgia culture in contemporary Cold War fictions as part of a wider research project. Laura is founding co-editor of 'Routledge Studies in Espionage and Culture' (Routledge) and is part of the BAFTSS Special Interest Group on British Film and Television.

Aviva Dove-Viebahn: Exploring the Second Closet: Feminine Power and Knowledge in 2019's *Charlie's Angels*

Midway through the 2019 film remake of the iconic and controversial 1970s television series *Charlie's Angels*, Angels Sabina (Kristen Stewart) and Jane (Ella Balinska) bring Elena (Naomi Scott), a whistleblowing tech programmer under their protection, to The Closet. As Elena admires the bounty of designer clothes and shoes, including a bulletproof polymer camisole Sabina cheerfully declares as “a bra that doesn't dig—progress!”, Bosley (Elizabeth Banks, also the film's director) descends into the room, remarking, “Ah. We're still in the first closet.” To Elena's delighted astonishment, Bosley then reveals a second closet, an armory, full of advanced weaponry and spy gear.

Drawing attention away from one closet (full of clothes) to the other (full of weapons and technology) echoes the film's attempt to address several salient sticking points from earlier iterations (TV: 1976-1981 and 2011, films: 2000 and 2003). Unlike the campy push-pull of its

predecessors, the 2019 film's feminism is unequivocal, although reviewers diverged on whether they felt it was performative or sincere, too much or not enough¹. The new Angels constitute a global network rather than a preternaturally exceptional trio; gratuitous invocations of the Angels' sexual allure are mostly avoided; and the film makes an effort at inclusivity in terms of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.² And yet, even Banks' version cannot resist the temptation to remind us that these Angels, no matter how tough, rational, intelligent, strong, and collaborative, also possess seemingly *de riguer* feminine traits: beauty, a love of designer fashion, intuition, and altruism.

My paper will interrogate these two juxtaposed conditions upon which the premise of the 2019 film rests. The liberatory and empowering potential of the Angels' communal power structure challenges past conventions of action heroines as standalones who are "not like other women." And yet, the insistence on femininity as the font of the Angels' knowledge and power also begets a risk: that the entire enterprise might destabilize under the weight of status quo assumptions of gendered norms that continually haunt women's empowerment narratives.

Aviva Dove-Viebahn is an Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at Arizona State University, as well as a public scholar and Contributing Editor to *Ms.* magazine. She has a PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester. Dr. Dove-Viebahn has published on iterations of gender, race, and/or sexuality in media for *Alphaville*, *Feminist Formations*, the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, and *Women's Studies*, among other journals and edited collections. She is working on a book manuscript exploring the representation of feminine intuition as a form of gendered power and knowledge in contemporary television and film franchises. <http://avivadoveviebahn.com/>

Esme Fransen: Be Gay, Do Crime? The construction of *Ocean's 8* as a Lesbian Heist Movie.

Upon its release in 2018, the all-female ensemble film *Ocean's 8* (Gary Ross, 2018) was almost instantly declared a "lesbian heist movie." Despite lacking what is typically considered to be lesbian representation, the heist film provided multiple points of entry for queer female audiences, who eagerly read the friendships between women – especially between protagonists Debbie (*Sandra Bullock*) and Lou (*Cate Blanchett*) – as being more than platonic. Lacking prominent male love interests and highlighting themes of female empowerment and sisterhood,

NOTES

¹ A sampling of representative reviews: Inkoo Kang, "The Dutiful Feminism of the New Charlie's Angels Made Me Miss the Sleazy Camp of the Old Ones," *Slate*, 14 Nov 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/11/charlies-angels-2019-movie-reboot-kristen-stewart.html>; Peter Travers, "Elizabeth Banks' Crew of Woke Angels Rescue Latest 'Charlie's Angels' Reboot," *Rolling Stone*, 14 Nov 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/charlies-angels-review-elizabeth-banks-910689/>; Clarisse Loughrey, "Charlie's Angels review: A more daring film lurks beneath the surface of this toothless sequel." *The Independent*, 28 November 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/charlies-angels-review-film-sequel-cast-kristen-stewart-elizabeth-banks-a9221116.html>; and Rachel Charlene Lewis, "In 2019, 'Charlie's Angels' Isn't Just about Girl Power—It's a Critique of Male Leadership," *Bitch Media*, 27 Nov 2019, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/charlies-angels-reboot-feminist-review>.

² Elizabeth Banks insisted in interviews that Sabina's character was "definitely gay," and yet there's little acknowledgment of her sexuality in the film itself. Chris Azzopardi, "Elizabeth Banks Talks Queering 'Charlie's Angels' & How Kristen Stewart Is 'Definitely Gay' in the Movie," *Pride Source*, 12 November 2019, <https://pridesource.com/article/elizabeth-banks-talks-queering-charlies-angels-how-kristen-stewart-is-definitely-gay-in-the-movie/>

the film text offers an ambiguous space that easily allows for lesbianism to be read into the heist narrative.

In theorizing such queer readings of films, scholarship has largely focused on the text-audience relationship, presenting queer readings as a resistance to the dominant text or an uncovering of queerness embedded within the text. Yet, queer readings of *Ocean's 8* started long before the film was ever released, and largely focused on elements external to the film, including interviews with the stars and a pre-existing Blanchett-as-lesbian-fantasy. As such, it is necessary to look beyond the text-audience relationship to understand the film's success with queer female audiences. This paper will explore industry awareness of queer meaning-making strategies in the creation of a lesbian *Ocean's 8* narrative. Placing the film's reception in dialogue with the film and its promotional materials, it challenges the idea that queer meaning is always either embedded in the film text or brought in by the audience "(in)appropriating" (Whatling, 1997) the text. Rather, the complex web of epiphenomena surrounding the film serve not just to enable but actively *encourage* queer readings of the film. The construction of *Ocean's 8* as a lesbian heist film, then, is far from a one-directional action, but rather a complex and constant renegotiation of queerness between commercial actors and audiences alike.

Esmé Fransen is a PhD student at the University of Stockholm. Her research interests include queer reception, female stardom, and audience-industry relations in Hollywood. Currently, she is working on a project exploring the interaction between queer politics, reception strategies, and market structures in the configuration and (re)negotiation of lesbian icons in contemporary Hollywood.

Frances Gateward: Isn't that the Whole Idea of Starfleet? Star Trek Discovery as Female-Driven Science Fiction

The Star Trek franchise, which began with the original television series in 1966, generated seven live action series, three animated series, and thirteen feature-length films. *Star Trek: Discovery*, which debuted in the fall of 2017 on the streaming platform CBS All Access (now Paramount Plus) was a highly anticipated show, "airing" twelve years after the end of the last Star Trek television show *Star Trek Enterprise*. Within that gap was a "rebooting" of the franchise on the silver screen with the release of three feature-length films – *Star Trek* (2009), *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013), and *Star Trek Beyond* (2016). Though the films were popular with audiences, generating hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office, hardcore Trekkies derided the new features as a betrayal of the Star Trek ethos with its dark themes, brutal violence, and hyper-stylized masculine aesthetic. In this presentation I argue that *Star Trek: Discovery* functions as an intervention, simultaneously returning Trek to its roots, while also moving forward with its depictions of gender. Where other Star Trek productions focus on male camaraderie (even *Voyager* with a woman as captain), *Star Trek Discovery* is female-centered, making it rare not only in the Trek universe," but in science fiction television overall.

Frances Gateward is professor and chair of Howard University's Communication, Culture, and Media Studies Department. She researches and teaches in the areas film and popular culture, with an interest in Korean cinema, women filmmakers, and African American film and expressive culture. She is the founding co-editor of the *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, and her essays have appeared in a number of books and journals. She is currently working on a second volume of the Eisner-Award-winning book *The Blacker the Ink: African Americans and Comic Books, Graphic Novels and Sequential Art* (Rutgers University Press).

Christopher Holliday: Hollywood Cinema's Nasty Women

"Such a nasty woman."

----- Donald J. Trump speaking at Presidential Debate (October 19, 2016)

"She has fire in her."

----- General Dreykov to Alexei Shostakov, *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021)

During the final Presidential election debate held at the University of Nevada in October 2016, Hillary Clinton's advocacy for an improved Social Security programme and increased taxes on the wealthy led to a retort by her opponent, Donald J. Trump, who remarked that the Democratic nominee was "such a nasty woman." This verbal attack prompted widespread derision and reaction, including the rise of the #NastyWoman rallying cry on social media and the subsequent reclaiming of the term via the Nasty Woman Movement, activist art exhibits, and the *Nasty Women Project: Voices from the Resistance* anthology that compiled empowering stories written by women in the struggle against patriarchal misogyny and other gendered forms of oppression. Popular Hollywood cinema's response to Trump's snide remark was the production of action films that fully reinforced themes of female vengeance to likewise reclaim nastiness through a (post-)feminist consciousness and heightened femme power. From *Atomic Blonde* (2017), *Peppermint* (2018) and *Anna* (2019) to *Miss Bala* (2019), *Ava* (2020) and *Kate* (2021), mainstream U.S. film embraced what Laura Mattoon D'Amore termed "vigilante feminism," a 'lone woman' cinema that is "attuned" to feminist struggles relating to sexual violence, trauma, and paths of justice. This paper examines Marvel's recent superhero feature *Black Widow* (2021) via the post-2016 "performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection" (D'Amore 2017: 387), and specifically the bonds of sisterhood that support its narrative of female control and toxic masculinity (strongly mirroring the Harvey Weinstein scandal and #MeToo reckoning). By first identifying the conventions of the post-millennial "girlfriend flick" (Winch 2012) and their progressive integration into female-ensemble action cinema, this paper argues the relationship between the three (super)heroines of *Black Widow* (Natasha, Yelena, Melina) reflects how contemporary Hollywood has increasingly explored female friendship to stage gender politics in Trump/post-Trump America.

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Christopher Holliday is Lecturer in Liberal Arts and Visual Cultures Education at King's College London, specializing in Hollywood cinema, animation history and contemporary digital media. He has published several book chapters and articles on digital technology and computer animation, and is the author of *The Computer-Animated Film: Industry, Style and Genre* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), and co-editor of the collections *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genres* (Routledge, 2018) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: New Perspectives on Production, Reception, Legacy* (Bloomsbury, 2021). Christopher is currently researching the relationship between identity politics and digital technologies in popular cinema, and can also be found as the curator and creator of the website/blog/podcast www.fantasy-animation.org.

Deborah Jermyn: 'I've been here before, over and over again... and I'm just so tired of it': Advancing the action genre / heroine in *The Old Guard* (2020)

Released on Netflix in 2020, *The Old Guard* had the distinction of being one of very few action summer blockbusters to make it to screens that year. This was but one distinction of many that the film amassed in constituting a landmark moment that re-envisioned the genre's landscape, as Gina Prince-Bythewood became 'the first Black woman to direct a big-budget comic-book film' (Buchanan, 2020). This paper is principally concerned with examining this milestone through Charlize Theron and KiKi Layne, who as Andy and Nile constitute the central partnership of the film. Andy is the millenniums-old leader of 'a group of immortals', 'soldiers' who use their accrued knowledge and indestructability to intervene in war and crime around the globe; US marine Nile has recently learned she is now among their ranks, having survived a deadly attack in Afghanistan. Andy becomes mentor to Nile, rescuing her from impending imprisonment and initiating her into the harsh realities of their immortal 'army'. But when Andy's ability to heal is lost and mortality looms, their roles are inverted as Andy must be rescued and (re)edified by Nile, who informs her rediscovered belief in humanity again.

All this points to the film's intriguing propensity to bring ethical and philosophical dimensions to bear on the genre. But crucially, this is done through a relationship in which the figure of the ageing white woman leader prepares to hand the reins to a young woman of colour. Charlize Theron's star power as both extraordinary beauty and bona-fide action protagonist are marshalled here by Prince-Bythewood to consummate, self-referential effect; just as Theron in real life navigates incessant scrutiny of her ageing, an increasingly weary Andy is repeatedly grilled about how old she truly is, and whether her time might be over. As this paper will explore, then, *The Old Guard* signals a new order, tussling with the genre's representational history. In this way Prince-Bythewood is also a 'sister-in-arms' alongside Andy and Nile, driven 'to put a Black female hero into the world' (cited in Robinson, 2020), in a story where the straight, white, lone male once preeminent in the genre is quite literally exiled by the end.

Deborah Jermyn is Reader in Film & TV at the University of Roehampton. She is the author and editor of 11 books and has published widely on matters of gender and ageing, celebrity, Hollywood cinema, and women filmmakers, including books on Kathryn Bigelow and Nancy Meyers. Her current research includes a new project on 'the menopausal turn' in contemporary media.

Miriam Kent: “I’m Not The Killer That Little Girls Call Their Hero”: Action Femininities in Marvel Studio’s *Black Widow*

Marvel’s *Black Widow* is a character whose comic book origins date back decades. Following her introduction to film in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), her on-screen iteration quickly became a staple of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The spy-turned-superheroine, played by Scarlett Johansson, finally appeared in her own film, *Black Widow*, in 2021 (directed by Cate Shortland). The film filled in her backstory and gives insight into her character that was only hinted at in previous MCU films, outlining her involvement as part of a covert Russian spy organisation that trains young girls to be super spies. While keeping in mind the comics on which the character is based, and considering her adaptation to screen, this paper will discuss *Black Widow*’s industrial and cultural significance as a superhero-spy movie hybrid that exploits both of these traditionally male-dominated genres to present an entry to a multimedia franchise that, in recent years, has become more overtly concerned with feminist politics. Undoubtedly a result of and response to a post-#MeToo popular feminist media landscape, *Black Widow* explores themes of found family and sisterhood that are arguably feminist critiques of these conventionally male-centric genres through the paring of the central heroine with fellow action-woman Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh).

As Marvel Studios recognises audiences’ increasing engagement with contemporary political feminisms, the company, owned by Disney, has shown a greater emphasis on “diversity” and themes that can be interpreted in broad terms as feminist. Hence, *Black Widow* offers a commentary of sorts on the exploitation of girls—and the control of their bodies— by an authoritarian state, while centring on the story of two women. While doing so, however, the film reinstates notions of American exceptionalism, while maintaining a white and heterosexual perspective.

Dr Miriam Kent is Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the University of Leeds. Her interdisciplinary research centres on representational issues in contemporary superhero narratives, especially focusing on Marvel superheroes and comic book adaptation and drawing from feminist, queer and critical race theories, as well as comics studies. Her monograph, *Women in Marvel Films* (2021, Edinburgh University Press) shows how the Marvel superhero film taps into political complexities regarding gender and related identity issues and provides an insight into gendered power dynamics in contemporary American popular culture. Her forthcoming research explores the relationship between media studies and comics studies.

Marianna Kac-Vergne: Sisters in arms in *Terminator: Dark Fate*

Terminator: Dark Fate (Tim Miller, 2019) marks a shift in the *Terminator* franchise by showcasing three female protagonists who form a team throughout the course of the film. The three female actors (Natalia Reyes, Mackenzie Davis and Linda Hamilton) are given most of the screen time and equal billing with Arnold Schwarzenegger, while Linda Hamilton’s return as the cult action heroine Sarah Connor was at the core of the film’s marketing strategy. Furthermore, the featuring of multiple women allows for a more diverse representation that includes a non-white female protagonist (the Mexican Dani played by Reyes), a post-human androgynous warrior (the “enhanced” Grace, played by Davis) and an older heroine (Sarah Connor). The difference in age and in skills thus allows for a mentor-mentee relationship to develop between women, which is relatively exceptional in blockbuster science fiction films. Nevertheless, the film repeatedly

highlights that the mentee, the one who has to learn, is the young Mexican woman, who displays empathy but little knowledge or skills. She is in fact presented most of the time as a damsel-in-distress, repeating a hackneyed action film trope that includes women of color only as victims to be saved (for instance in *Predator* (1987), all the way to *Rambo: Last Blood*, 2019). This imbalance is aggravated when Schwarzenegger's Terminator joins the team as a repentant yet experienced killer. Not only does he ultimately save the day, but he is also given most of the metafilmic humorous nods to *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2*. The Terminator combines qualities that the three women lack individually: killing experience contrary to Dani, empathy contrary to Grace and Sarah (he is a loving husband and father), and a sense of humor, contrary to all the women, confirming Hollywood's reluctance to feature strong funny women in its blockbusters. Even though *Terminator: Dark Fate* is the most inclusive film of the franchise, presenting a diverse cast of women protagonists, its racial and gender politics remain muddled, in part at least, by a gender-skewed industry's reliance on male bankable stars.

Associate Professor in American Studies at the University of Picardie Jules Verne (Amiens, France), Marianne Kac-Vergne works on gender in film genres. She is the author of *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema: Cyborgs, Troopers and Other Men of the Future*, I.B.Tauris, 2018. Her latest articles in English include "From Sarah Connor 2.0 to Sarah Connor 3.0: Women Who Kill in the *Terminator* Franchise", in Maury, Cristelle and David Roche (eds), *Women Who Kill: Gender and Sexuality in Films and Series of the Post-feminist Era*, Bloomsbury, 2020 and "Sidelineing Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film", *Miranda*, 12, 2016, <http://miranda.revues.org/8642>

Mareike Jenner: Recycling Action Heroes: The 'Gender Swap' in Contemporary Action TV Re-Boots

This paper explores the way the gender swap works on US network television. In Hollywood cinema the gender swap often includes the entire cast, including leads, as explored by theorists like Claire Perkins (2020). On TV, this usually affects only one character of the central cast, such as Kono (Zulu/Grace Park) in *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS, 1968-80/2010-20), the more marginal Patricia Thornton (formerly Pete Thornton) in *MacGyver* (ABC, 1985-92/CBS, 2016-21) or Higgins (John Hillerman/Perdita Weeks) in *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980-8/2018-). The main question this paper poses is: how does the gender swap function in TV action re-boots.

This paper specifically addresses Juliette Higgins in the re-boot of *Magnum, P.I.*. The character poses important questions about the social politics of the re-boot on television. In the original *Magnum, P.I.*, the characters of Magnum (Tom Selleck) and Higgins develop a relationship with decidedly queer subtones, as contemporary researchers like Mary Beth Haralovich (1991) note. Here, Higgins is imagined as a male character older than Magnum. In the re-boot, the character is played by a woman younger than Magnum (Jay Hernandez), which quickly develops into a straight will they-or-won't-they relationship. The character, thus, functions as a way to remove queer subtext and queer identity politics from the text. Nevertheless, she shares the original Higgins' past as physically skilled MI5 agent but is often visually associated with children and female victims. While she is also Robin Masters' Majordomo and later owns the property, she also joins Magnum as equal partner in his detective agency, serving to frame a complex negotiation of power.

Thus, the paper analyses the gender swap on television and the way it serves to frame and negotiate complex power structures in contemporary television.

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Mareike Jenner is a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University/Cambridge. Her research is focused on contemporary American television, television genres, contemporary television cultures, and streaming cultures. Her previous work includes the monographs *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* (Palgrave, 2018) and *American TV Detective Dramas: Serial Investigations* (Palgrave, 2015) and the edited collection *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies* (EUP, 2020) as well as several articles on the crime genre and contemporary television cultures.

Emma Payne: "Am I Your Bitch Now?": The Sound of Subversive Fighting in *Atomic Blonde*

Women in mainstream action films typically demonstrate unrealistic and highly stylised action, whereby their bodies show limited signs of exertion and the emphasis remains on visual and sexual appeal rather than physical strength. Balletic movements, slow-motion shots and the presence of music all shape these representations; as Lisa Coulthard (2016) argues, dominant musical cues place action in a 'musical realm that highlights its stylization and artifice'. Thus, female action protagonists fulfil what Lisa Purse (2011) describes as a 'dual status as both active subjects and sexualised objects'. Directed by David Leitch (*Deadpool*; *John Wick*) and starring Hollywood A-lister Charlize Theron as MI6 Agent Broughton, *Atomic Blonde* (2017) was promoted with an industry-standard focus on sex, music and style. However, I argue that in several scenes *Atomic Blonde* uses unexpectedly visceral sound and graphic visuals to construct an unconventional female protagonist. Instead of musical accompaniment, these scenes rely on detailed Foley effects and spatialization of sound to create a physically engaging quality, allowing audiences to feel the impact of the protagonist's extensive bodily exertion and injury. While this use of sound has been theorised by scholars including Coulthard, the extent to which this type of audiovisual representation might affect real audiences has not been explored. My paper will address this omission through empirical research, using one scene from *Atomic Blonde* to test my hypothesis: the shocking audiovisual portrayal of violence affects how people perceive the protagonist, and interacts with their assumptions about women in action films. The data seems to confirm my hypothesis, with participants expressing strong reactions to the violence and the role of the female protagonist. Yet the tension and duality present in the existence of the action woman are also evident in the data, whereby the look and behaviour of Theron's character is a site of contradiction.

Emma Payne is a PhD candidate at Cardiff University School of Music. Her area of research concerns the role of sound in the media representation of women, with a particular focus on cinema after the sensory turn. Her research methodology integrates empirical audience studies and theoretically-informed textual analysis, in order to test the impact of these representations on lived experiences of gender.

Rebecca Wright: Violence and Collective Agency in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Terminator: Dark Fate* and *Birds of Prey*

Millennial examples of female led action ensembles continue to address the vulnerable position of women in male dominated spaces, and indicate there is a trend in the depiction of violent female solidarity, that engages with patriarchal conventions of public and private participation. Similar negotiations of patriarchal structures, as identified by Lisa Coulthard, occur in representations of the violent, apolitical, individualistic action heroine. Coulthard argues the feature and function of violence, in female led action narratives, as superficially transgressive in its 'relation to feminism and female solidarity, collectivity or political action' (2007, p. 173). How do contemporary representations of violent, heroic action negotiate patriarchal structures, as well as resist cinematic conventions of narrative closure that confines feminist agency to the private domain? With the growing trend in female led action narratives, that foreground collectivity as the means for narrative resolution, what are the cinematic conventions around violence as a mode of collective feminist agency? This research examines these themes, drawing on Coulthard's interrogation of violence and the action heroine (2007) and the framework of Amy Allen's reconceptualization of feminist power (2018). According to Allen, collective feminism is viewed as inclusive of male participation and offers perspectives for interrogating female led action narratives and the role of male allyship in future collective feminisms. This paper offers the preliminary findings of continuing research on representations of collective feminist agency, the conditions of male allyship, and the transformative role of violence, as illustrated through the narrative and character constructs in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, G., 2015), *Terminator: Dark Fate* (Miller, T., 2019) and *Birds of Prey* (Yan, 2020).

Rebecca Wright is a teaching assistant and postgraduate researcher in Media and Cultural Studies at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University. Her research examines themes of gender and power in contemporary action cinema and approaches the film text as a culturally discursive construct. Her research is interdisciplinary, contributing to the fields of gender, film and cultural studies.

Dai Yongde (Dennis): Modern Mulan Tales: Iron Girls from Socialist Revolutionary Cinema to Main Melody Military Action Blockbusters

Ballad of Mulan, a folk song repeatedly sung to celebrate the legendary folk heroine Hua Mulan for her bravery and filial piety, has been sinicised, nationalised and patrioticised in both the socialist and postsocialist modernity. As an earliest heroine in the premodern warfield, Mulan's story of a cross-dressed woman into a masculine asexual warrior continues not only in the socialist revolutionary films such as *Zhanhuo zhong de qingchun/Youth in Flames of War* (Yan

Wang, 1959), but also in the present-day *main melody*³ military action blockbusters exemplified by *Meigonghe xingdong/Operation Mekong* (Dante Lam, 2016) and *Honghai xingdong/Operation Red Sea* (Dante Lam, 2018) in a gendered form of 'iron girl', a term popularized in the Maoist state where women were commonly seen equivalent labor force as men. While claimed to extol women's strength, independence and autonomy, iron-girl soldiers are molded, or masqueraded into a hypermasculine paradigm promoted by orthodox communist-socialist ideals, in which women, to become action heroines, must accept the Maoist concept of female masculinisation through Mulan-style of cross-dressing and her self-decentralisation amid the surrounding of alpha male protagonists.

This essay aims to explore the modern variation of Mulan manifested by 'iron girls' in both socialist and postsocialist military action films. The argument here is that woman soldiers as desexualised action agents are not optimistically driven by a feminist will but a far-reaching result of Chinese communist socialist schema of female masculinisation and iron girls' interpellation of nationalism and patriotism. This also leads to the discussion of conflicting construction of manhood and nationhood from the perspective of female masculinisation. Additionally, this study finds that heroine narratives of whether socialist or postsocialist 'iron girls' are inevitably interrupted by the discovery of her innate femininity like Mulan story presents, which tends to 'rescue' her from male territories and make her return to her 'natural roles'. Her forced leave from male-dominated arenas, as contended, can be symbolically read as 'absence of heroines' in Chinese nation-building history indicated by two very recent main melody movies *Wo he wode fubei/My Country, My Parents*⁴ (Jing Wu, Teng Shen, Ziyi Zhang, Zheng Xu, 2021) and *Changjinhu/The Battle at Lake Changjin* (Kaige Chen, Dante Lam and Hark Tsui, 2021).

DAI Yongde (Dennis) is presently a PhD student with Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Macau. His current PhD research is Chinese main melody cinema and masculinities studies. His other research interests are science fiction cinema (in both Hollywood and China), feminism and Boys' Love culture. He has presented his research work in three international conferences on such topics as main melody film and Chinese masculinity (*Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference*), artificially intelligent women in Hollywood science fiction (*Post-media Ecologies in Asia*) and Chinese Boys' Love web dramas and queerbaiting (*Screen Studies Conference*).

Liao Zhang and Jiyoung Kim: *Ajumma* in Arms: The Rejuvenation of Aging Women in the Contemporary South Korean Action-Comedy Films

In Korean film history, representations of aging women are subject to what Lemish & Muhlauer (2012, p.167) call "double marginalization," that is, they are marginalized both by their age and

³ *Main Melody* films (*zhuxuanlv pian*), first termed in 1987 by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (1986-1998) were meant to be exclusively state productions like the socialist propagandist cinema in the challenge of rising 'bourgeois liberalism' and the overemphasis of genre and entertaining films in the 1980s after Deng Xiaoping's economic reform. As cinematic tools of political education though, they are also distinct to the past socialist films characterised by class struggles, revolutionary fervour and CCP's achievements through embracing market reforms based on Deng's socialism with 'Chinese characteristics'.

⁴ The official English translation for the film title 'parents' does not literally include 'mother' in the original Chinese title. In the original Chinese title, 'fubei' refers to fathers, or elder generations. This film was co-directed by three male filmmakers and one female filmmaker, with an omnibus episode dictated to a story of a father, a rocket engine designer dead in line of duty and a mother, gunpowder designer.

by their gender. The portrayal of aging women, on the one hand, is confined to traditional gender roles as “the good wife and the wise mother” (Yu, 2007, p.261), which constitute a specific social identity for married Korean women – *Ajumma*. On the other hand, in contemporary postfeminist discourse, in which the female body is viewed as the primary asset of a woman (Gill, 2007), an aging female body signifies a loss of erotic capital, and is therefore viewed as defeated, repulsive, vulnerable, and helpless. It has been evident since the release of the film *Mapado* (2005), Korean films tend to depict older female characters as unfriendly, comical, poor, and hopeless.

Therefore, this paper aims to provide a new reading on the representation of aging women, or specifically, *Ajumma*, in the contemporary Korean action-comedy film *Twilight Gangster* (2010), which depicts the life story of three widowed best friends who are willing to rob a bank for a trip to Hawaii. Based on a textual analysis of this film using post-feminist theories, this paper explores how aging women's bodies and affects are rejuvenated through the portrayal of their female friendships and dreams. Drawing on Sadie Wearing's concept of rejuvenation, this paper argues that the rejuvenation of aging women's images in Korean action-comedy can be characterized as “necessary and impossible” (2007, p.278). In this film, the *Ajummmas* arm themselves to pursue their dreams with their sisters, and by doing so, they regain their subjectivities. At the same time, such rejuvenation of *Ajummmas* also creates “anachronism” (Russo, 1999, p.20), in which older women are eventually punished for not acting like their age.

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