

“Action heroines of Hollywood action cinema (2002-2012): representation and reception”.

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Abstract

Action cinema has been probably the last of the popular film genres to call the attention of scholars, particularly within the field of Cultural Studies and for analysis from a Gender Perspective. Amongst the analyses that do exist, one of the main area of study has been the ideological perspective and the representation of myth accomplished by the genre, and more recently its themes and its aesthetics of excess. The representation of the body has been one of the central issues discussed by many scholars, as it is a central element that includes resonances of all the elements that constitute the genre.

The bodies of action cinema have been preeminently male. Since the first action and adventure films made during the Hollywood silent era, the male body of action narrative has changed a lot, from the slender and athletic swashbucklers to the hyper muscular bodies of the 1980s action cinema, called thus “muscular cinema” (Tasker 1993). Such a panorama seemed an unlikely milieu for strong female characters to emerge. The role of women was at best that of the damsel in distress, if they were present or relevant at all in the story. However, in 1979, Lt. Ellen Ripley made a breakthrough as the improbable heroine of the Alien franchise. After her, little by little other strong female characters started to surface. These strong women of action have soon caught the attention of feminist scholars in particular, who have discussed their representation, their potential for empowerment or their failure in doing so from many perspectives, from Semiotics to Psychoanalysis.

However, Film Studies and Gender Studies have not been alone in showing interest in the cinematic representation of gender roles. Disciplines such as Psychology have explored the practice of cinema-going as a group experience, as well as the effects of cinema on its audiences. Sociology too has been interested in cinema-going, particularly in the motives that drive people to go to the cinema. More recently, phenomenological approaches have been applied to the study of the cinematic experience, in order to gain more depth. Particularly into the pleasures obtained through film-watching, especially Science Fiction and Horror films.

The present project is divided into two parts: a theoretical and an empiric one, with information obtained using a qualitative methodology. The first part brings together the different scholarly approaches to the analysis of the action heroine and combines the semiotic and narrative analysis — which provide a holistic portrait of this archetype— with a revision of the most prominent theories of spectatorship —which will serve to establish the framework for the second part. The second part, which comprises a sociological analysis of the reception of the action heroine, is based on content analysis of focus groups and will bring pertinent information to complement and contrast with the theory, and will allow thus to detect “disjunctures” (Currie 1999) between theory and praxis, as well as to pinpoint those elements in which both theory and praxis agree. Hence, the present research project seeks to obtain a more concrete description of the viewers’ reception of action heroines and bring new issues to the theoretical debates on the possible meanings and values of these strong female character of action cinema.