

14 Lara Croft, Kill Bill and feminist film studies

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An eye stares at us in extreme close-up. The camera zooms out and we see Lara Croft hanging upside-down on a rope. Somersaulting, she jumps onto the ground of what looks like the ruins of an Egyptian temple. Silence. We see beams of sunlight shining between the pillars and grave tombs. Dust dances in the sun. Lara looks warily around. Then the stone next to her violently splits open and the fight begins. For minutes, Lara runs, jumps, and dives in an incredible feat of acrobatics. Pillars topple over, tombs burst open. She draws pistols and shoots and shoots and shoots. Her opponent, a robot, appears to be defeated. The camera slides along Lara's magnificently-formed body and zooms in on her breasts, her legs, and her bottom. She falls to the ground and, lying down, fires all her bullets at the robot. Then she grabs his 'arms' and pushes the rotating discs into his 'head'. She jumps up onto him, hacking him to pieces. Lara disappears from the monitor on the robot, while the screen turns black. Lara pants and grins triumphantly. She has won.

The first *Tomb Raider* film (2001) opens with this breath-taking action scene, featuring Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) as the 'girl that kicks ass'. What is she fighting for? No idea, I can't remember after the film has ended. It is typical for a Hollywood movie that the conflict is actually of minor importance. The story concerns a struggle between good and bad, where it is established in advance that the good, and thus the Hollywood hero or heroine, will win. As a true 'warrior' Lara goes to battle, but for what or why hardly matters. Lara is super strong – invincibly strong. But also stunningly beautiful – unbelievably beautiful. The combination of strength and beauty has characterized film heroines since the 1990s.

Traditionally, the action hero in Hollywood films was a man. In the 1980s, the female action heroine emerged, fighting and swearing like a man (Tasker 1993). For instance, Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* (1986), or Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon in *Thelma and Louise* (1991). At the end of the 1990s, the action heroine once again became as erotically attractive as the early female stars. Lara Croft is exemplary of this ambivalent woman's image: eroticized as a woman and masculinized as action heroine. The action film is a violent genre and the woman warrior therefore fights in the midst of a battlefield of torn-out eyes, hacked-off limbs, spouting fountains of blood, and innumerable dead bodies. In this chapter I will trace the image of woman as the 'warrior' and how it can be interpreted with the help of feminist film theory. To this end I discuss two women warriors: Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* films and Beatrix Kiddo from the *Kill Bill* films.

Although the films were made in the same period, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and more or less belong to the same action genre, they nevertheless represent two quite different tendencies in contemporary visual culture. Where Lara Croft can still

be analyzed with the help of classic feminist film theory, this is not the case for Beatrix Kiddo. Art and popular culture sometimes stride ahead of academia. Such new cultural practices require new theoretical concepts. This can be demonstrated through the cases of these two female ‘warriors’, each of whom embodies a different gender performance. In this chapter I will discuss the feminist and poststructuralist adaptations of classical psychoanalysis, Marxism and semiotics (for a detailed summary, see Smelik 2007). With the help of the two action heroines, it will become clear whether this body of theory can still be used or needs to be adapted.

Looking and being looked at: the voyeuristic gaze

Feminist film theory developed in the early 1970s under the influence of the women’s movement. That process ran parallel with the emergence of structuralism within the humanities, through the influence of semiotics and psychoanalysis. It was the period when film studies started to become established in academia. From a poststructuralist and structuralist perspective it was not so much the content that mattered (what is the meaning of this film, television series, or video clip?), but how meaning was acquired. A film should not be regarded as a *reflection* of given meanings, but as a *construction* of meaning. In other words, the process of signification was most important for the analysis of gender in cinema. In more recent years, a shift has taken place to paying attention to the sensory and affective *experience* of watching films.

From the early outset of film theory, questions such as class, gender, and ethnicity have been central in this new subject area. Within film studies, and more generally within visual studies, it is customary to pay attention to these social and ideological issues. The feminist analysis of ‘the gaze’ is generally accepted in cultural studies. Feminist theory has thus been an important factor in film studies ever since it came into existence.

Film studies has interpreted the fascination for film with the help of psychoanalysis. The absorbing effect of film – in the cinema you are all ears and eyes – can psychoanalytically be explained as a primary identification with camera and projection (Metz 1982). Moreover, the fascination for film is linked to sexuality. According to the Viennese founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud eroticism begins with looking: *scopophilia* (Freud 1905). Touching and the sexual act follow on from a desiring gaze. Film theorists were quick to propose that the medium of film is in fact based on scopophilia: in the darkness of the cinema, the viewer is a voyeur who can unlimitedly look at the silver screen. Watching films has thus always had something of the erotic, in contrast to the theatre where voyeurism is disrupted because the actors can look back. The television and the computer do not have the same voyeuristic setup as cinema either, because in the living room the lights are on, people are talking, the screen is much smaller, and there are all sorts of distractions.

Laura Mulvey (1975) advanced the idea that active and passive aspects of scopophilia, the urge to look, are divided among the sexes. In his well-known book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger had already proposed that in western culture, from painting to advertising, ‘men act and women appear’ (1972: 47) or rather: men look and women are looked at. It is important to realize that Mulvey’s analysis is based on the classic Hollywood film: the commercial black and white films made in the years between 1930 and 1960. While matters have changed in the course of decades, the principle of ‘the male gaze’, as it became known, is still very much the same. According to Mulvey, in the Hollywood film (but the principle also applies to European films) this works as follows. The male

character looks at a woman and the camera films what the man sees (a so-called point of view shot). Because the camera looks along with the male character, the viewer is invited or rather forced to adopt a male position. The spectator in the cinema thus looks through the eyes of the male character at the woman. It is a case of a threefold 'male' gaze looking at the female figure: camera, character, and spectator. In addition, the woman's body is 'cut up' by editing and framing; the image of the woman's body is thus fragmented in a two-dimensional space.

In Mulvey's analysis, it is important that the cinematic apparatus, such as the camera work, the framing, the editing, and the music objectify the woman's body and turn it into a passive spectacle for the voyeuristic gaze: 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1989). One can find conventional examples of this kind of voyeurism in classics such as *Gilda* (1946, with Rita Hayworth), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946, with Lana Turner), *Written on the Wind* (1956, with Lauren Bacall), and *Psycho* (1960, with Janet Leigh), but also in later films such as *Sliver* (1993, with Sharon Stone) and *True Lies* (1994, with Jamie Lee Curtis; incidentally, Janet Leigh's daughter).

Mulvey continues her analysis by considering the notion of the castration complex. The voyeuristic gaze at the woman's body is unsettling for the man because it is different; in Freud's words 'castrated' (Freud 1931). At an unconscious level, the man is reminded of the threat of 'castration' because the female body is not complete. In Freud's words, the female body is inferior, which is later echoed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who claims that woman is the bearer of a lack (Mitchell and Rose 1982). These are harsh terms for twenty-first century women, but it is always important to keep in mind the historical context when those male theorists were writing. As feminists we can neutralize these deeply misogynist interpretations by shifting the rather anatomical notion of a castrated female body to a more symbolical reading in which the female body signifies *difference* in a male-dominated culture. In most cultures, it is after all the case that woman-as-other, namely as other from man, signifies sexual difference. In such a more neutral reading, the woman constantly reminds the man of her otherness, without having to translate this symbolic difference in such loaded terms as castration or lack.

In cultural products, in this case films, the male fear of the female body has to be averted. According to Mulvey, this happens in two ways. The first is through sadism: the woman's body has to be controlled and inserted into the social order. Sadism usually is given form in the narrative structure. The erotic gaze is often followed by violence, such as rape or even murder. It is no coincidence that in the classic Hollywood film, more often than not, the femme fatale is killed, as for example in *Double Indemnity* (1944, with Barbara Stanwick). In the 1990s, the sexually active woman still dies, as in *Fatal Attraction* (1987, with Glenn Close) and even in a so-called feminist movie like *Thelma and Louise* (1991, with Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis). *Basic Instinct* (1992) is perhaps one of the first films where the femme fatale (Sharon Stone) is allowed to live on at the end, followed by *The Last Seduction* (1994, with Linda Fiorentino).

According to Mulvey, the second way of averting male fear is through fetishism, which is a strategy of disavowal (Freud 1927). The female star is turned into an ideal beauty, a fetish, whose flawless perfection turns any attention away from her difference, her otherness. The camera lingers on the spectacle of female beauty, allowing the male spectator to disavow her physical 'lack'. At such moments of 'spectacularization', the film's story is temporarily brought to a halt, while all the cinematic means help fetishize the female body: glamorous make-up and costume, lighting, framing, editing and

music. All Hollywood female film stars are fetishized, but the most classical examples are Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe. A contemporary example is Angelina Jolie.

Mulvey's feminist analysis dates from the 1970s, but has been of great importance for insights into visual culture to this very day. Her influential article is one of the most quoted in film studies. Due to feminist film studies, the image of the passive woman in cinema has been deconstructed in recent decades, because Hollywood wants to reach out to an important segment of the market. A more active role for actresses is more often available and women are able to play the leading part, even active and violent ones, in many different genres of action movies, such as horror (Neve Campbell in *Scream*, 1996), science fiction (Angela Bassett in *Strange Days*, 1995; or Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien* series, 1979–1997), adventure films (Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*, 2001 and 2003), the revenge films (Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*, 2003 and 2004), and as a soldier in the action film (Demi Moore in *GI Jane*, 1997). Women are also increasingly directors and producers of films (see Tay 2009 on contemporary women filmmakers).

The analysis of the gaze does not only pertain to gender, but also to ethnicity. Dyer (1997) demonstrates that the Hollywood system is geared towards the white star, for example in the lighting schemes or in the dominant position that they adopt in the narrative. Both Hall (1997) and Nederveen Pieterse (1992) provide an extensive historical analysis of the way in which people of colour have been depicted in western culture. It was often a case of stark gendered and racial stereotyping, such as the fetishist exoticism of black women in European films, or the image of the black man as sexually threatening in American films (Gaines, 1988). 'Another' ethnicity in films is nearly always linked to sexuality (Young 1996). Although in some European films, interethnic relationships can also end positively, such happy endings are still rare in the American film (Smelik 2003). A more recent example is *Monster's Ball* (2001) for which Halle Berry, as the first black woman, was awarded an Oscar for best actress in a leading role. To date, she is still the only woman of colour who ever won this award.

The voyeuristic gaze in today's visual culture

Although classic voyeurism occurs less frequently in today's cinema, the voyeuristic gaze is still prominent in advertising, fashion photography, and video clips. Video clips and fashion shows are nearly always constructed around fetishized women's bodies and the sexualized play of looking and being looked at. A number of trends can, however, be discerned. First, voyeurism is less directed through the male gaze, which means that the spectator does not look along with a male character, but rather with a 'neutral' camera. At the same time, it seems that the visual spectacle of to-be-looked-at-ness has increased in recent decades. Representations of the female body are increasingly more naked and erotic.

Second, certain subcultures are strongly zeroing in on voyeurism, in particularly rap and hip-hop video clips with 'pimp' and 'ho' stereotypes. On the one hand, this can be read positively for its visualization of the black body as erotic and attractive, but on the other hand, this macho culture can be criticized for its sexist view of women.

Third, the phenomenon of the voyeuristic gaze has been extended to the male body, which is now also objectified in films, advertising, fashion, and soaps (Hall 1997). Since the 1990s, the male body has been fragmented, objectified, and eroticized (Simpson 1993). This was at first an influence from the gay movement, but now the male image has been made more heterosexual in the figure of the metrosexual. The spectacle of an

often nude and eroticized Daniel Craig in the *James Bond* films testifies to this recent development.

These three changes over the last decades have produced a sustained and omnipresent exposure of eroticized images of both female and male bodies, which can be understood in the context of 'sexualization' (Levy 2005) and 'pornification' (Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007) in today's visual culture.

Fourth, the body has changed dramatically in recent decades due to the fitness culture: male and female stars are not only expected to be beautiful, but they also have to be thin, fit, young, and hairless (Smelik 2015). The fuller figures of Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, and Ava Gardner have been replaced by the streamlined bodies of Gwyneth Paltrow, Nicole Kidman, and Keira Knightley. In Hollywood, older actresses also have to meet the norm of 'thin is in'; in *Alien Resurrection* (1997), Sigourney Weaver has arms of steel. Skinny and muscular models and actresses are the new image of women in the twenty-first century. Moreover, models are becoming younger and younger.

Sometimes this new body image provides anachronisms. When Angela Bassett plays the role of Tina Turner in *What's Love Got To Do With It* (1993), she sings a rock'n'roll song in a sleeveless 1960s dress. Her muscular arms are out of character and the viewer realizes at once how the body has changed in a couple of decades. As Lars Svendsen (2006) argues, a 'natural' body does not exist, because the human body is just as much subject to fashion as the clothes that cover it. For today's film or pop star, plump arms are taboo and sculptured biceps are a must. We can even argue that women's bodies have been flattened out, with the exclusion of the breasts, which, with the help of silicon or digital manipulation, are unnaturally large and are unnaturally high up on the body. Breasts should never fall prey to the force of gravity. Arms, legs, bottoms, and tummies should no longer be round or soft, but just as hard and muscular as in a male body.

Contemporary culture expects both women and men to discipline their body (Foucault 1977), which sometimes leads to dangerous combinations of diets, starvation, laxatives, colon irrigations, and 'fitness bulimia'. Perhaps we can say that the voyeuristic gaze has been internalized in impossible norms for a thin and yet strong and well-formed body. Even after pregnancies, actresses have to prove that within the shortest amount of time they will once again fit into size 8. Although a film such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) mocks the predilection for perfectionism by, for example, labelling a woman with size 10 as 'fat', or by making fun of the new norm where size 6 has by now been 'downsized' to an impossible size 0, nobody shirks from the norm of perfect and fit slimness. However, there are some signs of rebellious reaction against this trend of always becoming younger and thinner. The cosmetic brand Dove launched an advertising campaign in 2005 with 'ordinary' women with round forms and in 2006, for older models. Actresses such as Kate Winslett, Scarlett Johansson, and Jennifer Lopez present their female forms as healthy. The modelling world has proposed a minimum weight to prevent extreme cases of anorexia. Blogs present different images of women by featuring people of colour, plus-size, and older women, but in mainstream visual culture diversity still lags behind.

To summarize, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, classic voyeurism has changed, because the spectator does not look from the perspective of a dominant male gaze. This means that the gaze of the camera has become more neutral, allowing both the male and the female viewer to enjoy the erotic spectacle of either sex. Moreover, the fetishization of both the female and the male body has strongly increased in an eroticized body culture. The voyeuristic gaze has then shifted to a more equal representation of

gender, which takes place at the level of looking (the gaze), as well as the level of being looked at (the object), in which activity and passivity are shared among both sexes.

Take for example *Tomb Raider*. Lara Croft plays an active role and holds her ground as far as fighting and violence are concerned. Her body serves as an erotic spectacle for the viewer (m/f) without being mediated through the eyes of a male character (Kennedy 2002; Mikula 2004). Angelina Jolie may well have gorgeous breasts, but her body is also hard and muscular. Her fitness and her 'phallic' weapons turn her into an invincible warrior. Furthermore, she is not available as an erotic object for the male characters in the narrative – in fact, she is even quite lonely and does not maintain any sexual relations.

We can extend this analysis to Jolie's ex-partner, Brad Pitt. Since the eroticization of his backside in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), he is an example of the contemporary hero who functions as an object of the female gaze. His body has also become considerably well-built in the course of time; compare his early physique with his well-developed torso in *Troy* (2004). In *Mr and Mrs Smith* (2005), the film that brought them together as partners, Jolie and Pitt are represented on equal terms with regard to activity and passivity, to looking and being looked at. On the one hand, they are a perfect match for each other in fighting skills, although Jolie is the better contract killer because she has killed dozens more people than Pitt has. On the other hand, the camera exploits their reputation as the most beautiful man and most beautiful woman by eroticizing their bodies on the screen.

Looking and being looked at: the narcissistic gaze

The gaze can be directed at another person, but it can also be directed at oneself. Different forms of desire inform the direction of the gaze: voyeurism arises from the desire to *have* (or get) someone, while narcissism is predicated on the desire to *be* (or become) someone. Where film studies took the notion of *scopophilia* from Freud, it was primarily Lacan's theory of the *mirror stage* that was adapted to clarify processes of identification that make up the structure of narcissism. Film theorists such as Metz (1982), Baudry (1992 [1974]), and Mulvey (1975) used Lacan's concept of the mirror stage to explain the complexities of cinematic spectatorship. In this perspective, the spectator has a primary identification with the cinematic apparatus (the screen), and a secondary identification with the hero (the figure on the screen). The screen of the film thus functions as a mirror in which the spectator recognizes his or her ideal 'I' (ego).

Lacan (1977) postulates the mirror stage as one of the early moments of the subject's ego formation – the 'subject' being the psychoanalytic term for an individual who is endowed with an unconscious. This narcissistic process takes place when the baby is six to eighteen months old, preceding language in a phase that Lacan termed the Imaginary. He suggests that the child learns to recognize itself in the mirror and develops the first inklings of self-consciousness by identifying with the specular image. The mirror image is always an idealization, because the child projects an ideal image of himself or herself, thus constructing an 'Ideal-I' (Lacan 1977: 2). While the child still has little control over its own fragmented body, it sees itself reflected as an autonomous entity in the mirror. This ideal self-image leads the child to a 'jubilant' (ibid.: 2) recognition of itself, which is the first awareness of the ego in its idealized form. The mirror stage is thus a narcissistic gaze directed at the self, while the voyeuristic gaze is directed at the other.

While for Freud a certain amount of narcissism is considered both necessary and healthy to develop into a happy human being, Lacan's view is a bit more cynical. It is crucial for Lacan that the first formation of the I (the ego) is based on an *image*, which is

the reflection in the mirror, and hence on a source outside of itself. Thus the formation of the I is, from the very start, based on an alienation from itself. The identification of the self with the mirror image is thus a 'mis'-recognition (*méconnaissance*, which is a typical Lacanian word play in French, *ibid.*: 6). Lacan thus suggests that the ego is from its very beginning based on an illusion. The child identifies with its own image as an-other, that is, as a better self than he or she will ever hope to be in the future. According to the ever pessimistic Lacan, this is a tragedy for mankind: we construct our own identity on the basis of an ideal image to which we will forever aspire. In his eyes, we are therefore always existentially deprived; our ego is basically a gaping lack that will never be fulfilled.

As the mirror often features as a visual *topos* in paintings, films, video clips, advertisements, and fashion photography, it is easy to recognize the Lacanian mirror stage at work. In visual culture, the mirror functions as a moment of narcissistic (self-)reflection for the character, model, or performer. In the classic Hollywood film, it often indicates the weakness or even mental illness of the female character (Doane 1987). Today's visual culture depicts narcissism even more often than before, but now it rather points to the character's power and independence. The fact that Lara Croft does not enter into any relationships underlines her narcissistic autonomy. In addition to an active role in the story, narcissism enables the female star to be in charge of her to-be-looked-at-ness. In this respect, Lara Croft fits the trend of contemporary representations of female (and also male) beauty of film or pop stars that serve a narcissistic rather than voyeuristic gaze. Another example in this respect is pop star Madonna.

The concept of the mirror phase also applies to the spectator. By identifying with a powerful and attractive hero, the spectator relives the identification with an ego ideal. The screen or image then functions as a mirror. For Mulvey and other feminist film theorists, the problem with classic Hollywood films was that the female spectator could only positively identify with the male hero as an ideal image, because identification with the objectified heroine was either marginal or masochistic (Doane 1987). The search and even demand for the visual and narrative pleasure for the female spectator has long dominated feminist film theory (Bergstrom and Doane 1989). Many critics have also explored the possibilities of a specific black (hooks 1992; Grayson 1995; Hall 1997) and lesbian spectatorship (Gever and Breyson 1993; Smelik 1998b; Dyer 2003; Aaron 2004).

With the arrival of powerful heroines in the 1970s, negative identification mostly disappeared. Lara Croft may serve again as an example here. The female spectator can identify with the ideal image of a woman who has power and agency, but who is also beautiful and attractive without losing her independence. Film stars such as Angelina Jolie, but also pop stars and models, offer ideal images for identification. Fan culture is to a great extent based on such a narcissistic identification (Stacey 1994).

However, there are some drawbacks here. In a culture that presents perfect models in digitally manipulated images, celebrating youth, fitness, and beauty, the ideal image is becoming increasingly unattainable. Identification through the narcissistic gaze may then collapse with the internalization of the voyeuristic gaze, as discussed above. This results in a cultural practice of disciplining the body (Foucault 1977) with, for example, diets, fitness, and products from the beauty industry. This is problematic in so far as it concerns a self-imposed ideal that is derived from visual culture that surrounds us everywhere: on television, in cinemas, in glossies, fashion shows, and on billboards. Few people can recognize themselves in the ideal image of contemporary visual culture and many become dissatisfied with their own image. This may lead to frustration and at times to drastic measures such as cosmetic surgery, or to illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia. In these

cases, the narcissistic gaze fails in the mirror of pop culture, because identification leads to dissatisfaction with oneself instead of strengthening one's self-esteem.

Oedipus

So far I have emphasized the complex play of looks that regulate identification and desire in films, because it is so characteristic of visual media. The Oedipus complex (Freud 1900; 1925; 1931) is another psychoanalytical concept that has played a major role in film studies, as it did in literary studies. It pertains more to the narrative than to the visual register. Because of the emphasis on the oedipal element as a structural element of the cinematic *story*, psychoanalysis is less suitable as an analytical framework for television and digital media. Those media are less characterized by narrative, and more by spectacle, fragmentation, and interactivity.

Hollywood movies abound with oedipal motifs. The conventional film story has the following structure: good wins over bad, son wins over father, hero gets girl, the dangerous woman, or ('even worse') the homosexual, is punished or killed, and the symbolic order is restored (Kuhn 1999). I will not repeat the rather obvious analysis of such film narratives. The interesting point here is that film theorists have primarily interpreted the Oedipus complex as a structuring device for the narrative. The oedipal structure pertains to any classic Hollywood film, for example, in the rivalry between men in westerns, or the father and son struggle in adventure films such as the *Indiana Jones* series.

We have already seen that Lara Croft does not engage in sexual relationships with men, but the oedipal motif is foregrounded in *Tomb Raider*. Lara has a complex relationship with her father, whose approval she is constantly seeking until reconciliation finally takes place. The cinematic relationship between father and daughter is doubled up in 'reality', because Jolie has a much publicized complex relation to her father in real life, the actor Jon Voight, who plays the role of Lara's father in the film.

The structuralist analysis of the Oedipus complex dominated film theory for some time and has also influenced feminist analysis. Teresa de Lauretis (1984) claims that a story always has an oedipal structure because the narrative is inevitably driven by the oedipal desire of the male hero. Just as Mulvey proposed that sadism needs a story, de Lauretis argued that a story cannot do without sadism. Could any Hollywood movie, or European film for that matter, escape oedipal ideology? Apparently not. Melodrama is the only Hollywood genre that addressed a female audience, but the vicissitudes of the oedipal plot make it into a true tearjerker for women: staging tyrannical mothers, a suffocating mother-and-daughter relationship, the unhappy and forever unfulfilled housewife, and unattainable or treacherous men. This kind of plot can now often be found in television soaps. More marginal cinematic genres, such as horror and science fiction, do break with the oedipal pattern by flagrantly depicting the uncanny or the abject (Creed 2005; see also McCormack 2008), but they hardly make for more positive representations of femininity (Smelik 2017).

Because female characters in cinema are always defined as the object of male desire, the question of female desire becomes an important one. This can be understood as a reformulation of the Freudian question: '*Was will das Weib?*'. Silverman (1988) and de Lauretis (1994) have tried to theorize alternative forms of female desire, but they remain within the orthodox framework of psychoanalysis. According to Mulvey and others, the exploration of female desire and subjectivity was only possible within an experimental aesthetic that radically breaks with the oedipal plot. In the 1970s, female filmmakers such

as Chantal Akerman, Marguérite Duras, Ulrike Ottinger, Helke Sander, and also Laura Mulvey herself produced avant-garde films (Kaplan 1983; Kuhn 1994). But the avant-garde is notoriously inaccessible and may not give much visual pleasure to large audiences. In *And the Mirror Cracked* (Smelik 1998a), I analyzed how women directors express female subjectivity and desire within more or less conventional narrative structures. This can be done, for example, by systematically giving the narrative and visual point of view to the female character. She thus acquires an active role within the narrative and dominates the look of the camera, allowing for narcissistic identification while blocking a voyeuristic gaze. Another way of shaping female subjectivity is by representing an inner life on the screen in dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations.

And the Mirror Cracked tried to stretch the limits of psychoanalysis by focusing on mainstream women's films. Since the 1990s, the domain of cinema studies has been broadened to 'visual culture' (Carson and Pajaczkowska 2001; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Jones 2003). In addition to film and television, this field also comprises new media, such as the internet and computer games, and more recently includes new fields such as fashion studies (Bruzzi and Church Gibson 2014). The academic interest in these media requires a different theoretical framework. These developments have led to new theoretical trends in media studies that attempt to go beyond semiotics and psychoanalysis.

The sword fighting nemesis

The question is whether semiotics and psychoanalysis today can still provide a fruitful or innovative framework for interpreting contemporary visual culture. Postmodern culture and digital technology have produced new forms of cinematic aesthetics that break with the classic structures of representation and narration (Stam 2000). The postmodern film foregrounds spectacle, sensation, and affect at the expense of a tight plot and round characters (Kramer 1998). Narrative fragmentation in contemporary films can be regarded as a radical break with the oedipal plot. A good example is *Kill Bill 1* and *2* by Quentin Tarantino (2003; 2004).

Kill Bill is a typical action film, hybridized with many violent genres such as the spaghetti western, the Japanese samurai, yakuza and anime, the Chinese kung fu, the American blaxploitation, the gangster film, and 'rape revenge' film. The latter is a horror genre for an audience of young men, in which a female warrior, the 'Final Girl' who survives the horror at the beginning of the movie, takes revenge on her rapists for the full length of the film, often in gruesome ways (Clover 1992). In the two *Kill Bill* films, this act of revenge takes nearly five hours.

Uma Thurman plays the main female character: Beatrix Kiddo alias The Bride alias Black Mamba alias Arlene Machiavelli alias Mummy. She is a warrior who was once part of the 'Deadly Viper Assassination Squad', a group of merciless warriors from the underworld under the leadership of a certain Bill. When Beatrix becomes pregnant she tries to escape from this life by settling in an ordinary job and marriage, but Bill finds her and orders the Squad to kill all those present in the church during a rehearsal for the wedding. Bill personally shoots the highly pregnant Beatrix in the head. But, as befits a real heroine, she survives this murder attempt and wakes up after four years in a coma, with a bullet in her head and no baby in her belly. Turning into an angel of revenge, she traces and kills the three women and two men that made up the Squad, and incidentally, single-handedly massacres with her sword entire gangs, such as the 'Crazy 88' in Tokyo. Finally, she confronts her ex-lover and father of her daughter, Bill (David

Carradine). The child was born in a hospital during her comatose state and kidnapped by Bill. The full story can only be understood at the end of the two long films, because the chronology is fragmented and the narrative constantly jumps in time, thwarting any attempt to stitch the story together. Even the name of the heroine is only disclosed at the very end.

Kill Bill is a typical product of the globalized film industry, being filmed in studios in Beijing. The films are inspired by the Japanese cult classics *Lady Snowblood: Blizzard from the Netherworld* (1973) and *Lady Snowblood: Love Song of Vengeance* (1974), which also feature a merciless heroine undertaking a bloody journey of revenge with her flashing sword. Another source of inspiration is the funky blaxploitation films, a genre made by and for African-Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, with the 'Queen of Blaxploitation' Pam Grier in the main role. As a James Bond-like figure, she adopts the role of Cleopatra Jones in the film of the same name (1973), fighting the drugs mafia as a special agent. In *Coffy* (1973), she plays a nurse who takes revenge for her younger sister's drug addiction. In the blaxploitation genre, the awakening Black movement meets the cheerful spirit of the 1960s in a hippy mix of violence, sex, and humour. Tarantino pays an impressive tribute to Pam Grier in *Jackie Brown* (1997), where she plays an intricate trick on both the gangsters and the police and escapes with the money. Grier plays the role with a certain panache and cool eroticism, thus creating a female icon that is seldom seen in Hollywood: a dignified and attractive 'older', black woman. The sources of inspiration for *Kill Bill* thus show that the figure of the female warrior has its predecessors in film history.

There is a world of difference between Beatrix Kiddo and Lara Croft. The latter is transferred from a game to a film and therefore remains a rather one-dimensional character (Walden 2004). In contrast, Kiddo is a highly complex character with a whole range of emotions. She excels in courage, power, and perseverance, always saving herself from the most awkward situations. She wins impossible fights (on her own against 88 men) and literally steps out of a grave where she was buried alive. A striking difference with Lara is that Kiddo's body is never eroticized. The camera does not glide along the contours of her body, nor along any of the other female warriors in the film. Of course, we see that Uma Thurman has a slim and fit body that meets the contemporary norms for the blond beauty. But she is never an object of the voyeuristic gaze like Lara. Rather than fetishizing her body, the film fetishizes her 'Hattori Hanzo' sword. We do not see her eyes reflected in the mirror, but in the glimmering steel of her sword. While *Kill Bill* avoids a voyeuristic gaze, the narcissistic gaze is mediated through the weapon and becomes part of her revenge.

Despite the absence of eroticism, *Kill Bill* is nevertheless a very physical film. It is, after all, a continuous fight full of blood, sweat, and tears. The film relishes in showing vulnerable flesh that is cut, beaten, or slashed. But we also see how Kiddo time and again emerges victorious from the battle. She may be smeared with the blood of her victims and she may be wounded or shaking with exhaustion, but she wins every fight, one after another. With valiant courage, she constantly wrestles to find a way through her fears and despair.

From a feminist point of view, the special emphasis on motherhood is most striking in *Kill Bill*. Motherhood is generally not popular in the commercial Hollywood film. Being a mother is just not sexy or glamorous – at least not in Hollywood terms. Mothers do feature in the genre of melodrama, and in the TV variant, the soap, where motherhood is usually a source of suffering and problems. Kiddo's pregnancy and the loss of her child

is an important motivation for her nemesis. It is only much later that she learns that her daughter is still alive, a knowledge that renews her fighting spirit.

The first fight in *Kill Bill* takes place between Kiddo and Vernita Green (Vivica Fox). In the middle of the intense fight, Vernita's four-year-old daughter comes home. The two women stop the blade fight immediately, concealing the knives behind their backs. Panting and bloody, with torn clothes in a smashed-up living room, they talk in soft tones to the girl who stares at them in amazement. Once the girl has gone upstairs, the women chat on and Kiddo says: 'Don't worry. I won't kill you in front of your child.' But when Vernita suddenly fires a bullet at her, Kiddo kills her instantly with the knife. While Kiddo wipes the blood off her knife and face, she apologizes to the daughter for having killed her mother.

This strange mixture of mercilessness for the enemy and tenderness for the child is characteristic of the fighting women in *Kill Bill*. When Kiddo carries out a pregnancy test during an assignment to kill a certain Lisa Wong in another city, Lisa shoots her way into the hotel room. While the women hold each other at gunpoint, Kiddo shows the strip and tells Lisa that she is pregnant. The other woman retreats slowly yelling out 'congratulations' as she runs away. It is the only fight which does not result in death. The film also visually emphasizes Kiddo's pregnancy in the flashbacks.

When Kiddo, at the end of her long quest for revenge, forces her entry into Bill's house to kill him, he holds their four-year-old daughter in front of him while he gently talks about 'Mummy' who has now finally come to meet the child. It is the first time in the film that Kiddo cries. For nearly five hours we have watched a strong, cruel, and violent 'warrior' who yields to nothing or no one in her furious desire for revenge. We regularly share the pain for what has happened to her, but we have never seen her cry. Together Bill and Kiddo put the child to bed and talk about their feud (it is only now that the viewer gains insight into the complex story). The spectator is almost lulled into believing there may be a reconciliation, but during a short fight, Kiddo kills Bill with the 'Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique' that she has learned from her Chinese master. The spectator knows this is quite special, because this Pai-Mei 'hates whites, loathes Americans and despises women'. Even Bill was not allowed to learn this deadly technique. It is thus an honour that Kiddo can carry out her ultimate revenge in this way.

Affect

Psychoanalytic concepts such as voyeurism, narcissism, and the oedipal narrative structure are of little help in analyzing *Kill Bill*, or more generally, for insights into the complexity and paradoxes of contemporary visual culture. There are various sources for new inspiration within film studies, such as the concepts 'performativity' and 'intermediality' from theatre studies, or 'ludology' from new media theory, but in this chapter I will consider the Deleuzian body of thought, because this has offered the most resistance to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari (1977; 1988) has only recently been received within film studies (Rodowick 2001; MacCormack 2008). With its psychoanalytical orientation, film studies was at first unable to take stock of their pioneering ideas. Deleuze and Guattari propose a non-verbal and anti-oedipal model to break away from the semiotic preoccupation with meaning, representation, and interpretation (Colebrook 2002). In recent years, film theory has therefore witnessed a shift to an exploration of rhythm, energy, emotion, fragmentation,

and rhizomatic connections (Flaxman 2000). This perspective allows different questions to be addressed: rather than asking ‘what does it *mean*?’ the question becomes ‘what does a film *do*?’ (Kennedy 2000).

The importance of such questions is immediately clear in relation to *Kill Bill*. The chronology of the story is fragmented to such an extent that an oedipal structure cannot be detected, whereas the oedipal plot dominated *Tomb Raider*. For an analysis of *Kill Bill*, it may be more productive to explore the rhizomatic connections between past and present, between people, cultures, and genres. The film is a ballet of violence in which rhythm and energy are more important than meaning and signification. This choreography of revenge, however, gives much room to emotion, whereas in *Tomb Raider* the action completely overrides emotional depth. Kiddo is driven by a maternal desire to protect her child and to raise it in a ‘normal’ environment. Her motherhood is the source of affect in the *Kill Bill* films.

O’Sullivan (2006) argues that in order to understand the power of contemporary visual culture, we need to address the aesthetic experience that defines art, but which was left out of the analysis in semiotics and psychoanalysis. This experience can be understood in physical terms, as ‘haptic’ (Marks 2000), or in emotional terms, as an affective event (Hemmings 2005). Such a perspective enables the film theorist to place the analysis beyond questions of narrative and representation. The semiotic and psychoanalytical frameworks have long inspired film studies, but they threaten to keep it imprisoned in contexts that do not help in understanding contemporary visual culture. The focus on the sensory and emotional experience of the audiovisual medium of cinema also brings the analysis beyond the purely textual and visual that dominated film theory in past decades.

This is necessary because contemporary visual culture is changing. Perhaps it is more productive to analyze video clips, games or fashion in terms of rhythm, energy, and affect, rather than search for their meaning (see for a Deleuzean reading of fashion, Smelik 2016). Cinema is also changing as a consequence of digital technology and cultural influences. Developments in recent films could be described as a movement from sensation to affect. If postmodern cinema can be characterized by sensational pastiche and performance (for example, *Kika*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Lola Rennt*, *Huit femmes*, *Chungking Express*, *Pulp Fiction*), then the contemporary film can be regarded as an aestheticism of affect, with abundant attention to small signs of humanity in a world full of violence (for example, *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Volver*, *21 Grams*, *Babel*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Marie-Antoinette*, *l’Amour*, *La vie d’Adèle*). Sometimes this development takes place within the work of one and the same filmmaker, such as Tarantino, Almodóvar, Ozon, or Kar-wai Wong. Now that films represent affect in new aesthetic forms, often in a choreography of violence, a careful analysis is needed of the way in which subjectivity and identity are reconfigured and remediated.

Within psychoanalytical theory, at any rate such as it has been processed and applied in film studies, subjectivity and identity are often linked to a negative view on desire, love, and happiness. Deleuze and Guattari resist the classic idea of desire as repressed or as a lack. Instead of looking for the repressive forms of an oedipal structure, the film theorist can explore how a film embodies multiple forms of desire. In the best case, this touches upon the moment of affirmation in cinema. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this affirmative process as ‘becoming’ (*devenir*). That is the moment of resistance, of change, of escaping from an identity that imprisons us. We thus return once again to the revolutionary attitude that started film studies in the 1960s, but hopefully with a new passion that opens

up to the moment of 'becoming', in which the spectator can establish a different, that is, affective, relation to the film (Kennedy 2000).

This can be illustrated with the last scene of *Kill Bill*, where the affective power of motherhood is shown in a rather moving way. After Bill's death, the scene switches to a hotel room. The camera films the little daughter who lies on the bed watching television. A crane shot takes the camera to the bathroom. In a strangely framed shot from above through the ceiling the spectator sees Beatrix Kiddo lying on the floor between the washbasin and the WC totally overcome with emotion, crying and laughing at the same time, while she softly calls out 'thank you, thank you, thank you'. Kiddo's emotional release is quite touching. The film demonstrates her long process of becoming a warrior, her years of training, and her months of revenge. But in the last scene she has become a mother. The two films of *Kill Bill* thus represent a complex form of female empowerment, which consists of her becoming a warrior as well as a mother. In the very last image of the film, Beatrix Kiddo radiantly embraces her daughter: for the first time in ages she is happy.

Questions

1. Is the action heroine an example of successful emancipation or not? Provide theoretical arguments in support of your answer. You may want to compare cinema to the genre of video clips, for example, Beyoncé's *Lemonade*; or to television series such as *Homeland*.
2. Images of nude or half-nude women appear in visual culture all the time. Discuss in small groups whether this is liberating or oppressive. How does this relate to the image of nude or half-nude men? Look for examples of nude men and women in various media (film, TV-soaps, video clip, advertisements, etc.) and carefully analyze the voyeuristic and narcissistic play of looks. Now return to the original question: has your opinion about the liberating or oppressive nature of the images changed?
3. Choose a film with a female leading character with whom you strongly identify. With the help of the concepts discussed in this chapter, analyze how the identification is constructed and how it works. Do the same for a film with a male leading character. Does your viewing experience differ; and if so, how?