

# Woman with a Gun does not Signify Man with a Phallus

## *Gender and Narrative Change in the Action Movie*

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To see women strain against the world may be inspirational, but also at some psychic level unbelievable. (Richard Dyer)<sup>1</sup>

Within the traditionally male action genre there have always existed the subgenre of femme fatale action. In *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson kicked serious ass in the black action cinema, in the Hong Kong action movie the female warrior has been a frequent protagonist since the seventies, and in the eighties the white action heroine finally entered the genre: Cynthia Rothrock, Brigitte Nielsen and Sigourney Weaver were action heroines in *Above the Law* (1986), *Red Sonja* (1985) and *Aliens* (1986).

The heroine of femme fatale action performs the masquerade of masculinity: She kicks ass better than the Terminator, shoots straighter than Dirty Harry and like Rambo she transforms torture into renewed strength.<sup>1</sup> But somehow she seems too good to be true. Renny Harlin's action movie *The Long Kiss Goodnight* made me return to an old suspicion of mine: that the action heroine is not what she pretends to be. Or rather, that she is much more than she pretends to be. Like the sphinx she is a figure of ambiguity: She is beautiful and feminine, yet active and lethal. And like the sphinx she presents us with a riddle: 'Who am I?' she asks, caressing her gun. 'Am I a woman or am I a man?'. Feminist film theory has not yet solved the riddle of the sphinx who claws her way into the debate about active women in traditional male genres. Some suggest that the action heroine transgresses traditional gender roles, and that the pleasure of identification with this woman is open to both male and

female audiences.<sup>2</sup> Some suggest that she is really just a man in women's clothing, not a genderbender, but a crossdresser.<sup>3</sup> And some suggest that she is an uneasy response to feminism, an effort to both represent and contain the liberated woman within a traditional patriarchal system.<sup>4</sup> But neither of these answers have yet solved her riddle.

Just as she herself unites two genders, the key to her riddle is ambiguity: She may be in the same genre as the male hero, but she is not given the same story. The action hero fights to return to a utopian never-never land outside reality; his is a pre-Oedipal story, a narcissistic denial of the Law, of castration and, eventually, a triumphant refusal to enter the symbolic.<sup>5</sup> When woman becomes action hero not one, but two stories are told at the same time. One I will call 'her story': On the surface 'her story' is the story of the active woman – 'I can handle myself' says Ripley in *Aliens* – but looking closer we find three archetypes: The daughter, the mother and the amazon. In *Aliens*, *Red Sonja*, *Blue Steel*, *Nikita*, *Point of No Return*, *Terminator II*, *Cutthroat Island* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* hers is a story of integration into society, a fight for a life, family, even children. 'Her story' is the very opposite of the hero's; not a refusal of but an entering into the symbolic. In 'her story' male identification cannot be with the heroine as a stand-in for the male audience, because she is clearly a female protagonist locked in a woman's world.

The other story I will call 'his story': In the figure of a woman with a gun we recognize the image of a woman with a whip – a woman whose actions belong to the male masochist drama. This is a woman who, as Freud has pointed out, borrows her 'masculine attributes and characteristics' from the

man.<sup>6</sup> Because 'his story' is hidden within 'her story' it is unseen and unnoticed by women, but enjoyed and discussed by a male audience. When we separate them we will see that femme fatale action is no gender masquerade. It does not invite cross-gender identification. And it is surely no playground for feminism.

## I 'His Story'

'His story' comes to the surface in maybe the sleaziest femme fatale action movie ever made, *Barb Wire* (1996) with Pamela Anderson: The heroine is constantly dressed in s/m outfit: black leather or latex, corsets, high healed boots, chains, collar, no whip but always a gun. The woman with the gun belongs to the tableau of male masochism. She is the mistress punishing her male victim, and her 'masochisticness' has nothing to do with her being beaten, but with her beating men. She is cruel, yet maternal, dominant, yet dominated by his fantasies, castrating and phallic, yet only using weapons he has given her and taught her the use of.

Psychoanalytic theory has had little to say about her nature – as a *woman*, that is. Despite her heavy makeup and fetishistic outfit she has so far flaunted herself unnoticed. All attention has been devoted to the male masochist and his sufferings, and none to his female dominatrix, distributing pleasure and pain. Freud in his two essays about masochism<sup>7</sup> merely remarks that she represents the mother – and not, for instance, a lover, a whore or a daughter – and that she is the substitute of the father:

So the original form of the unconscious male phantasy was not the provisional one that we had hitherto given: 'I am being beaten by my father', but rather: '*I am loved by my father*'. The phantasy has been transformed by the processes with which we are familiar into the conscious phantasy: '*I am being beaten by my mother*'.<sup>8</sup>

Freud admits that this crossdressing is a bit confusing, especially since both the conscious fantasy and the physical enactment of the perversion always cast a woman in the role of father: 'the persons who administer chastisement are always women, both in the phantasies and the performances. This is confusing enough...'.<sup>9</sup> He insists, however, that the beating woman represents the Father. As a woman and a mother, she represents nothing. Her nature is not even feminine, she is merely a marionette whose strings are worked by the male masochist staging his drama. This fantasy is not of hetero-

sexual desire between son and mother, but homosexual desire between son and father.

Faced with her beauty Theodor Reik in his study *Masochism in Sex and Society* is bewildered for a short moment: On the one hand he agrees with Freud that 'the beating woman substitutes for the father'.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand he is infatuated with the 'irresistible charm' of his 'cruel mother-goddess' and plays with an alternative interpretation:

Viewed genetically, does not the oldest stratum of masochism as phantasy and action regress after all to the mother-child relationship as to a historical reality? That would correspond to an age that has not yet reached the Oedipus situation and in which education had still other tasks than to master incestuous impulses. In this time of infancy the mother actually was the unrestricted ruler... (..) This is perhaps the place for the long line of cruel, mythical figures of women, such as Salome, Brunhild, Turandot, who threatened to kill or behead the man, and who are *substitutes of the primal mother* as seen in masochistic phantasy'.<sup>11</sup>

Could it really be that this lustful and evil woman after all represents some sort of 'real' femininity? Reik is exhilarated by the idea, but reluctant he finally abandons the theory of a primal mother and returns to the Freudian thesis: 'Whenever we had the opportunity to study a case we found the father or his representative hidden behind the figure of a beating woman.'<sup>12</sup> And because her origin and nature is not important to the drama it once again remains unexplored and unexplained.

The only important study of masochism to do more than shrug off the woman with the whip is Gilles Deleuze's *K*, a study of the Austrian novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Deleuze disagrees with Freud's explanation of masochism. The original conflict may be Oedipal castration, says Deleuze, but in masochism the conflict between father and son is replaced by the alliance between mother and son. In order to avoid the castration of the father the son turns to the mother for help. She becomes an important figure in Deleuze's study.

Deleuze calls the woman with the whip 'the ideal masochistic woman.' She is a complex figure composed out of three maternal figures that Deleuze – based on the fictions of Sacher-Masoch – identifies as central to masochism: the uterine mother, the Oedipal mother and the oral mother. The first figure, the uterine mother, is a hetaera, a Greek Aphrodite whose qualities are chaotic sensu-

ality and hermaphroditic pleasure. She loves both men and women, and her sexuality is polymorphous. The second figure, the Oedipal mother, is a cruel mistress; she is sadistic and cold, and next to her is often found her even crueler lover, a blood-thirsty father-figure who is not her victim, but her accomplice. The third figure is the oral mother; she unites elements from both the uterine and the Oedipal mother and she exists in the space between the two women:

Masoch's three women correspond to three fundamental mother images: the first is the primitive, uterine, hetaeric mother, mother of the cloaca and the swamps; the second is the Oedipal mother, the image of the beloved, who becomes linked with the sadistic father as victim or as accomplice; and in between these two, the oral mother, mother of the steppe, who nurtures and brings death. We call her intermediate, but she may also come last of all, for she is both oral and silent and therefore has the last word.<sup>13</sup>

The uterine mother and the Oedipal mother are not masochistic ideals, but the extremities between which the oral mother is found. She is the ideal masochistic woman.

The oral mother, alternatively called the 'good mother' and the ideal masochistic woman', belongs to the mythical era of the Amazons. Drawing on the theories of anthropologist and jurist J.J. Bachofen, a Swiss contemporary of Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze outlines three historical phases corresponding to the three women: The first is the Aphroditic era of lustful chaos; in this maternal era 'the father was 'Nobody'', says Deleuze. Then comes the Demetrian era of the Amazons; here the father or husband () acquired a certain status but he still remained under the domination of the woman'.<sup>14</sup> Last is our present era, the Apollonian era; now matriarchy degenerates and disappears and is replaced by the sadism of the father's patriarchy.

Deleuze's mythical and rather abstract theory of the three maternal figures (the uterine, the oral and the Oedipal mother) and the three historical ages of Bachofen (the maternal, the amazonian, the paternal) correspond to three phases in the development of the child's relation to his mother: The first phase is pregnancy and early infancy where mother and infant exist in symbiosis and the breast is an internal (that is, fantasized) object of desire. This is what Deleuze calls chaos and sexuality, the cloaca and the swamps. We can say that the uterine mother symbolizes waste and primordial death, her liquids are shit and sweat. In the second phase the

mother's breast becomes an external object of desire. Now mother becomes Reik's 'primal mother', an authority who overrules the father, who nurtures, yet also punishes. Her liquids are pure and noble, milk and tears. In the third phase the mother is cruel because she is associated with the Oedipal father. This is the wicked mistress accompanied by her cruel father-lover. She signifies sexuality and death, and her liquids are blood and semen. In masochistic fantasy these three maternal figures are thus not three women, but three fantasies of the same woman frozen at different moments. And just as fantasies may play with different versions of the desired object, the three figures morph into one another in the masochistic fantasies. Thus Wanda in Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in furs* begins her career as uterine mother, then transforms into first an oral mother and later a cruel Oedipal mother. The masochistic fantasy is not fixed on the oral mother, but floats freely within the limits of the uterine and the Oedipal mother.

Deleuze corrects both Freud and Reik: The woman with the whip is neither a father beating a child, nor a primal mother disciplining her infant. She is the 'good oral mother' who tortures and mistreats her son in 'preparation for a rebirth in which the father will have no part'.<sup>15</sup> She is indeed a paradox: She castrates in order to undue castration, she is 'the beating mother who possesses the ideal phallus and on whom rebirth depends'.<sup>16</sup> Her cruel actions lead not to humiliation and destruction, but to rebellion against the father, to the rebirth of a 'new man', to triumphant pleasure and independence. She wards off the attack of the father, she takes the cross from the shoulders of Christ, whips away the burning stigmata from his body, then heals his wounds.

This woman appears strong-willed, beautiful, proud. But there are conditions tied to her activities: The first of them is education. To make sure she fulfills his wishes and his goals, she is instructed in the correct attitude, she is educated, transformed and remodelled to fit his fantasies. In this universe of paradoxes, the slave trains his mistress to ensure her cruelty. The second condition is the contract, a formal document casting desire into language. Again a paradox: the contract of Sacher-Masoch and his wife Wanda is written by him, yet is in her name; she is mute and her tongue speaks his desire. After completing her education and dressing her up, the man hands her the script, the weapons and the 'ideal phallus'. She cannot be said to possess phallic authority since it is forced upon her. The phallic woman does not represent fe-

male desire, she serves only his autoerotic pleasures. Her duties are clear as crystal: *The ideal masochistic woman is a phallic woman created, educated and contracted by the masochist to serve a rebirth outside the Law of the father.*

To sum up: In **his story** we find a female figure (a good and cruel mother) whose torture serves the rebirth of a 'new man' out of reach from the father. **His spectacle** is a split screen: The passivity of male suffering and the activity of female torture. **His pleasure** is the creation of and total control over plot, spectacle and story. **His attitude** may appear feminine, however, as Deleuze demonstrates, there is nothing effeminate about this masochistic rebellion against male stereotyped sadism: It is both passive and active, both giving up and taking control, both regression to old and a creation of new pleasures. Sweat and shit, milk and tears, blood and semen.

Deleuze presents his theory as superior to Freud's account of male masochism. He insists that the mother plays the central part, not the father. But he is not looking deep enough: Even though the father is absent in this drama, his very absence dictates every move of mother and son within the masochistic drama. And regarding the question of mother or father, this cruel female figure is not the origin of the perversion, but merely a reaction formation. By returning to old mother-images the male masochist constructs his fantasy of a woman-lover-mother. What Deleuze has given is thus not an alternative explanation of male masochism, but a revealing study of the elements that Freud chooses to ignore: The nature of the beating woman and her relation to the masochist.

It is time to look at 'her story'. The sphinx is waiting impatiently by the abyss for an answer.

## II 'Her Story'

just as the absence of a penis need not indicate lack of the phallus, its presence likewise need not indicate possession of the phallu (Gilles Deleuze)<sup>17</sup>

Like the maternal figures in 'his story' the daughter, the mother and the amazon in 'her story' have a tendency to morph into one another, mixing their qualities in various combinations. Renny Harlin's *The Long Kiss Goodnight* from 1997 unites all three feminine archetypes and their themes in the story of sweet and gentle schoolteacher Samantha who after eight years of amnesia recalls her former

life as CIA killer Charly. With private detective Hennesey Samantha Caine (Geena Davis) leaves her eight-year old daughter Caitlin and her boyfriend Sam to discover her past and confront the mystery woman she kissed goodnight eight years ago. As Samantha gradually transforms into CIA agent Charly she disavows her family – 'Samantha had the kid, not I' she snaps at Hennesey (Samuel L. Jackson) who wants her to phone her daughter. Charly decides to clear out with a fortune that has been waiting eight years for her in a locker. The key is tied to Caitlin's favourite teddy bear, Mr. Perkins, and while Charly steals the key, the CIA kidnaps her daughter. Now she must chose: Independence – or a daughter? Assassin – or mother? In a truly mythological scene *The Long Kiss Goodnight* unites all opposites: Charly saves her daughter, kills the corrupt CIA agents, saves a city from destruction, keeps her money, her daughter and her boyfriend, remains a mother and a femme fatale and is finally congratulated by the president.

**The Daughter.** To explain how Samantha became Charly the theme of the daughter is used. This is the theme of education, transformation, masquerade and prostitution. It is the theme of the father teaching a daughter to handle his gun, of man transforming woman into his mistress. Samantha first visits Waldman, whose dedication she has found in one of her books: 'Your name is Charlene Elizabeth Baltimore. You're an assassin working for the United States Government. I should know. I trained you', he tells her. Her father was a Royal Irish Ranger, and when he was killed Charly was adopted by Mr. Perkins – yes, the name of Caitlin's teddybear and also the name of the corrupt leader of the CIA. Samantha Caine was the fictional cover for Charly, who in this brief scene is presented as a product fathered by a line of men: her father/Waldman/Perkins and the CIA.

The daughter must first be educated and transformed. 'The masochistic contract implies not only the necessity of the victim's consent, but his ability to persuade, and his pedagogical and judicial efforts to train his torturer', says Deleuze.<sup>18</sup> Luc Besson's French film *Nikita* (1990) perfected the archetype that says it all: The young murderess Nikita is offered 'a second chance' by the government: to become an assassin serving the country. Her faked suicide has already been executed, and Nikita has no choice but to sign the contract. She must now 'learn. Learn to read, walk, talk, smile and even fight. Learn to do everything'. The first half of the film describes her education by a man who is teacher, father and creator. We find the same

education of the heroine in *Red Sonja* (1985), *Lady Dragon* (1992) and *Black Belt Jones* (1974). And in *Blue Steel* (1989) Megan is asked three times (by three men) what motivated her to become a cop. Her first two answers are 'I wanted to shoot people' and 'I like to slam people's heads up against walls'. Her third and final answer, the true answer, is almost mute: 'Him' she whispers, suddenly without a voice of her own. The theme of male creator and female creation is old; Ovid in his *Metamorphosis* tells the Greek myth of the king and sculptor Pygmalion who falls in love with his ivory creation: 'Meanwhile, in ivory with happy art/ A Statue carves; so graceful in each part./ As woman never equall'd it: and stands/ Affected to the fabrick of his hands'.<sup>19</sup> Man creates his love. And sometimes man's love is a phallic woman. And aggression, although now in female hands, is somehow still male.

It is striking how Mother is always missing from the education of the daughter. We often find a Beautiful Woman next to the father, but she is controlled by the law: 'Could you just leave if you wanted to? Just get on a plain and disappear?' Maggie asks Amanda in the American remake of *Nikita*, *Point of no Return* (1993). 'To tell the truth, dear, I don't know. It's a possibility that never entered my mind', is the answer. Her job is to transform the surface of the phallic woman into stereotyped Female Beauty. Admiring the transformed Maggie in *Point of no Return* Bob exclaims: 'Wow. You look beautiful. You've really outdone yourself this time.' He is not speaking to Maggie, but to Amanda, who replies 'yes, about this one I am pleased'. The Beautiful Woman teaches the daughter to *appear as* 'man's perfect companion – a woman.' Those are the words of Amande, the older female agent who instructs Nikita in the use of the masque of femininity in the French original: 'Smile when you don't know anything. You won't be any smarter, but it's more agreeable to those who look at you'. Amande's words calls to mind Joan Riviere's classic essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade': 'Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it'.<sup>20</sup> There is a deep irony at play here: In Riviere's text the masque of femininity is used by masculine women as a protection against male reprisal. In the theme of the daughter the very same masque is an element in man's education of the masochistic woman. The Beautiful Woman simply echoes the wishes of the

agency, and femininity is employed in the conscious creation of the phallic woman.

This masquerade is thematized as both drag and prostitution. While both women stare into the mirror Amande covers Nikita's hair with a wig. Later Nikita stares into the mirror, then pulls of the wig, rejecting her transformation. Kathy in *Lady Dragon* also puts on wig and make-up when she transforms from professional martial arts fighter into a whore in high heels and short dress: 'Since you like to act like a whore I'll be happy to accommodate you', says the villain before raping and torturing her. She thought her disguise would fool him, but of course the goal is always to accommodate him. When Samantha transforms into Charly she accepts this daughter of CIA as her true identity. But the scene accentuates the metamorphosis, the fakeness, the masquerade: Charly dies her dark hair blond, puts on heavy make-up, exchanges her feminine skirts for pants and a leather jacket – essentially remaking herself as a 'bitch'. Maggie, Nikita, Megan and Charly all look in the mirror when they don their costumes. The mirror has nothing to do with an original or natural woman; it is all about reconstructing a recognizable stereotype, about tapping into male fantasy. Contrary to Lacan's mirror stage, this mirror mocks female narcissistic identification. The mirror is turned against the woman, is used to steal her identity and image from her. This is an aggressive act followed by rape and prostitution: Kathy in *Lady Dragon* and Megan in *Blue Steel* are raped; Charly says 'no thanks, I am saving myself till I get raped' to a man making a pass – and her daughter Caitlin is revealed to be the result of a rape. The daughter is persuaded to impersonate a prostitute and as such she is raped: 'in masochism the woman assumes the function of prostitution in her capacity as honest woman',<sup>21</sup> says Deleuze. This female drag is a prostitute, her job is a 'dirty job' and her creator is the pimp cashing in on her activity. 'I know you and your sadistic game. You're sick, Bob', Nikita tells Bob. 'I'm happy to see you. I miss the time when I had you to myself every day', he replies and hands her another 'job'.

As all daughters Charly mistakes her new ability to 'handle herself' for freedom. But she quickly discovers, as daughters do, that when she no longer fulfills her role as obedient and cold-blooded killer there is no place for her. Deleuze insists that the woman is not an object in the contract: 'In the contractual relation the woman typically figures as an object in the patriarchal system. The contract in masochism reverses this state of affairs by making

the woman into the party with whom the contract is entered into (...) and one furthermore in which the woman is the master and torturer'.<sup>22</sup> But the daughter is not persuaded, she is forced against her will, and she is the true victim of the contract. Likewise Maggie in the American remake: 'I know that you like you made me into something different. But you're not looking close enough. I am different. Help me be better. Please, Bob, let me go'. The theme of the daughter openly acknowledges that she is forced to sign the contract, which she finally annuls. But these narratives can only represent her rebellion as an empty stare or a final absence – think of lifeless Megan in *Blue Steel* being carried away by a police officer, Nikita and Maggie leaving his territory, battered and empty. Here is no room for female realization. Charly's end is different, but that is only due to the next archetype, the mother.

**The Mother.** In the composite figure Charly/Samantha we find the theme of the good/bad mother. This theme began in femme fatale action with *Aliens* (1986) where the heroine Ripley wakes up after 57 years in space-sleep to find her biological daughter long dead. 'I promised her I'd be home for her birthday. Her eleventh birthday', she whispers, looking at a picture of her lost daughter. Promises, especially broken ones, always appear as the motivating force for the mother. 'When will you be back?' Caitlin asks Samantha. 'Before you know it. I swear', her mother promises. Ripley also swears to save the ten-year old girl Newt who is the sole survivor on a planet invaded by aliens. 'Cross your heart and hope to die?' Newt asks. 'Hope to die', Ripley replies. The movie *Aliens* turns Ripley into a good mother by confronting her with a 'bad' mother – the lethal alien queen.<sup>23</sup> This is the simple version of the good/bad mother. A more complicated version is found in *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991), where the heroine Sarah, who in *Terminator* (1984) was sweet and caring, has become possessed with fear of the future. In her fanatic preparations she emotionally abandons her son, who must discard her as a 'complete psycho' and 'total loser'.

The psychology of the mother is simple: the 'good' mother is warm, nurturing and sensitive. Her domain is home, she is Samantha baking cakes, smiling, laughing, the center of family happiness. She 'knows what it's like to really create life', as Sarah puts it in *Terminator II*. Conversely the 'bad' mother is cold, disciplining and insensitive. 'Stop being a little baby and get up!' Charly commands Caitlin, who is afraid of skating and has fallen on the ice and broken her wrist. 'Life is pain.

Get used to it!' This is the first sign of the 'bad' mother in Samantha/Charly. The bad' mother will mistreat and abandon her children. Thus Ripley abandoned her first daughter (although not intentionally), Sarah abandoned her son both emotionally and physically by becoming a 'psycho' locked up in an mental hospital and Charly simply disavows her child: 'I didn't ask for the kid. Samantha had the kid. Not I!'.

In the bad mother we recognize Deleuze's Oedipal mother. She is phallic and sadistic, she castrates and tortures, like a black widow she may even turn to killing and devouring her own family. Thus Charly turns over Caitlin's room to find the teddybear with the key. Hearing the church bells she goes to the window and aims her rifle at Caitlin, who is in church dressed as an angel in white, complete with wings and halo. Mum is dressed in black leather, black rifle, all greed, no smile, no halo. Charly aiming her rifle at Caitlin is the pure image of the phallic and destructive Oedipal mother. Will Charly shoot her own daughter? Kill and devour her own family? As if making her wish come true the assassin Timothy abducts Caitlin from church. 'You're just gonna be written off as some crazy mummy who kidnapped her own kid and died with her in a blizzard', he says before locking Charly and Caitlin in a freezer room.

The point of the theme of the mother is not to glorify the good mother and disavow the bad mother, but to unite the two mother figures in the third mother that Deleuze calls 'the oral or 'good' mother':

However, the transfer of the functions of the father onto the three mother-images is only one aspect of the fantasy. The main significance of the fantasy lies in the concentration of all the maternal functions in the person of the second mother, the oral or "good" mother. It is a mistake to relate masochism to the theme of the bad mother. There are of course bad mothers in masochism (the two extremes of the uterine mother and the Oedipal mother) but this is because the whole tendency of masochism is to idealize the functions of the bad mother and transfer them onto the good mother.<sup>24</sup>

This third mother is the masochistic ideal: Tender and maternal, yet phallic and cruel. Vindictive and aggressive, yet protective. She is Ripley saying: 'Get away from her, you bitch'. She is Charly promising her daughter 'we are not gonna die. They are'. Between freedom and her daughter Charly chooses not to become 'some crazy mummy'. She

sacrifices her life to save Caitlin. On her knees and deadly wounded she drags Caitlin out of a huge truck rigged with explosives. 'The truck is a bomb. It's gonna blow up. Go. I'm right behind you, baby. Go. Don't look back...'. Caitlin runs off, believing her mother will follow behind. 'Good girl', Charly whispers, then falls lifeless to the ground. Caitlin immediately returns to her: 'Mummy, no! It's okay. I'm sorry I left you. Please get up', she cries – apologizing and forgiving the 'bad' mother who left her – and she repeats Charly's former words: 'Life is pain. You just get used to it. So stand up right this minute, mummy'. Caitlin is more than a child; she is the element uniting opposites, the angel absolving the bad mother from sin and bringing the good mother back from the dead. Caitlin makes possible the impossible unity of Charly/Samantha.

Deleuze terms this unity the 'oral' mother: The administration of cruelty is taken over by the good mother and put to the service of the new phallic mother. Her mission is the rebirth of a new man and the disarmament of the father: The resurrected Charly/Samantha kills Timothy (Caitlin's father), she kills an endless number of corrupt CIA people and in the end the leader of the CIA, Mr. Perkins, is arrested. Charly/Samantha causes the rebirth of her partner Hennesey, the sleazy black detective who is a loser and a swindler, but ends up 'a new man' on the Larry King show, admired by his son and ex-wife. She even causes the symbolic rebirth of a nation, providing the films very maternal president (dressed in a night gown) with yet another argument for cutting down funding for the CIA: 'Where is your funding? Well, I'll tell you where it is: Can you say 'health care'!!'. In short, Charly/Samantha belongs to masochistic maternal utopia, punishing and correcting the father, redefining the limits of authority and power. And of course the good mother turns down the president's offer to return to the CIA; she has fulfilled her mission and the rest is now up to her breed, the new men.

**The Amazon.** In Greek mythology the amazons were a race of women warriors descendent from Ares, the god of war, and the nymph Harmonia. The amazons loved war and to fight without impeding they cut off their right breast – 'amazon' meaning 'those without breasts'. Men were merely tolerated as slaves, breeding took place once a year, and male children were either killed or mutilated; only female children were raised. The amazon is the last female stereotype in the masochistic trinity. She is the 'pure' Charly – the spy and assassin – who doesn't aim for the shoulders but shoots to kill. She is the fantasy of total and unnegotiable

male submission. She is the picture the masochist sees when closing his eyes to imagine the ideal mistress:

The blows fell thick and fast with dreadful force on my back, arms and neck; I clenched my teeth not to cry out loud. Then she struck me full in the face. The warm blood began to run but she laughed and continued to whip me. "I am only beginning to understand you," she cried. "What a treat to have someone in one's power, especially a man who loves one – for you do love me, do you not? My pleasure grows with each blow; I shall tear you to shreds. Go on, writhe with pain, cry out, scream! You cannot arouse my pity."<sup>25</sup>

Her sexuality is intimately linked with dominance, violence and death and her desire has nothing to do with romance or love. She cannot be won, owned or seduced, but takes what she pleases: 'When I want a man I just take him. Grab him', says Zula in *Conan the Destroyer* (1984). Likewise Charly making love to Hennesey, who resists her: 'It's love at first sight. Shut the fuck up', she tells him. Her pleasure comes first, his do not even count.

The amazon is neither a daughter nor a mother, but a figure located between the two. She is the result of the education and prostitution of the daughter, but has not yet turned into a good/bad mother. Violence is presented as her nature, but this is only an illusion; in reality she is a daughter suffering from amnesia, any memory of her education has been burnt away and now she mistakes her phallic role for her true female identity. To transform the daughter into an amazon you need this precariously balanced mixture of amnesia, sexuality and education. The daughter must be tortured to death to be reborn as an amazon purified through pain. Thus CIA agent Kathy in *Lady Dragon* is raped, tortured and dumped in the jungle to be reborn as a justified amazon. Red Sonja is also raped and left for dead, and Charly is brought back to life in a car accident that hospitalizes Samantha and kills a male friend. When Daedalus and Timothy torture Samantha in cold water Charly finally takes over completely. Torture cannot weaken the amazon, her sensuality and very existence is tied to pain, and the cold water baptizes a pale and furious Charly: 'Daedalus. I'll make you a deal. Let me go now and I'll leave you the use of your legs'.

This active and aggressive woman is a dangerous and lethal ballbuster, a phallic woman with a sword castrating those who challenge her. Her symbol is the scar: A comic scene in *Lethal Weapon 3*

(1992) has the hero comparing scars with a higher ranking female police officer who only surrenders to a man more scarred than herself. The scar is the memory of castration. Normally the hero's wound is a sign to be first awed and pitied, then later on avenged. However, on the female warrior the scar produces awe, fear and desire. Her scar is the mark of her education and the signature on her contract, it is a sign of her phallic power and her potential for male rebirth. Samantha looks in the mirror three times: First to wonder about and admire the many scars scattered over her body; then to face the scary memory of a bleeding and scarred Charly in the mirror, and finally she uses the mirror to re-create herself as Charly. The mirror is an apt metaphor; the amazon is a fantasy reflected in the mirror of male desire.

Like the good/bad mother the amazon can be split in two, a 'good' and an 'evil' amazon<sup>26</sup> appearing as hero and villain in femme fatale action: The good amazon Cleopatra Jones is thus cast against an evil Godmother figure in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), in *Conan the Destroyer* the amazon Zula is up against evil Queen Taramis and in *Red Sonja* Red Sonja has sworn vengeance over evil Queen Gedren, who killed her family and had her soldiers rape Sonja who rejected the lesbian queen. And Kathy in *Lady Dragon* has to seduce Susan, the villain's evil mistress, to accomplice her revenge. With this evil amazon the themes of Deleuze's uterine mother come into focus: She is chaotic sexuality, making love with men and woman, she is dangerously kinky and almost inevitably lesbian and connected to prostitution – thus Susan procures her lover Ludwig prostitutes that he beats and tortures, and Godmother in *Cleopatra Jones* keeps a harem of female prostitutes. Both the daughter and the amazon contain themes of the uterine mother, but the evil amazon is the extreme version of the masochistic woman who delights in her perverse pleasures. Her dominatrix-education has finally become part of her nature. Thus in the Hong Kong action movie *Princess Madam* (1989) the evil female gangster boss rapes, beats and tortures the husband of a 'good' female cop.

The stimulating sexuality of the amazon is so dangerous and perverse that it poses a threat to a male audience. It must be controlled, and an effective way to control a phallic woman is through phallic banter. 'Swearing acts out this double movement, which it is particularly adapted to do because language can both name something and deny it in the same breath', says Anthony Easthope<sup>27</sup> in *What*

*A Man's Gotta Do*. Normally banter is used between men to cope with homoeroticism and homophobia, but in femme fatale action banter is deployed to deal with the phallic woman. The mother is controlled through her traditional mother role, here is no need for humorous banter. But the daughter and the amazon are both surrounded by banter. This is the joke that Megan in *Blue Steel* is served as she is suspended for overreacting when she shot and killed a robber on her first day on the police force:

Stanley: 'Not now, Nick.'

Nick: 'It'll only take a second: This guy comes to New York, it's saturday night, he's got a hooker in the back of his car, her head is buried in his lap, life is good, right. The taxi hits a whole in the road, her head pops up. What do you think? She's still got his dick in her mouth. So the guy, he's bleeding all over the place, but he don't wanna go nowhere, he don't wanna go to a hospital, because he's someone. The cabdriver he is pissed off because there is blood all over his back seat. The hooker pulls out a needle and thread. Stanley – she sews his dick on backwards!!'

This patronizing and degrading joke suggests that the daughter doesn't know how to handle a dick/a gun. The joke castrates the phallic daughter and it makes sure she knows that phallus is male and she is merely allowed to use it in his service.

The phallic banter surrounding the amazon is quite different. Here is no doubt about her ability to handle herself, but about *his* ability to handle himself. The amazon generates banter about male power, potency and desire, and the question of the phallus is reduced to this: Can he handle his dick/gun? When private detective Hennesey puts a gun in the pocket of his coat, Samantha comments: It makes a bulge for people to see!'. 'You want me to stick it in my pants and shoot my own dick off?' Hennesey asks. Samantha sarcastically replies: 'You're a sharp shooter?' Later Hennesey is chocked at the sight of Waldman's guns: 'Jesus, how many of these things you've got?' Waldman looks at him with disdain: 'Three. One shoulder, one hip and one right here next to mr. Wally. On those pad-downs other agents are often reluctant to feel up another man's groin'. Just as Hennesey has no faith in his ability to handle a gun, erection and potency also pose a problem: 'Get real sweetheart. I ain't handsome, I ain't rich and the last time I got blown candy bars cost a nickel', he says, refusing a blow



job. Phallic banter circles around the question of dicks and guns. If men can't trust them, how do they perform in the hands of a woman?

To tell the truth they perform excellent. The amazon is not only granted a gun, she is also granted symbolic confidence in the phallus: 'Suck my dick everyone of you bastards,' Charly screams as she rides her truck over the cliff. She even ridicules male potency: 'Honey, only four inches', is Charly's comment to Timothy's knife. 'You'll feel me!' he promises. The amazon is granted a special status in femme fatale action, she remains on top of things (so to speak), in control of dicks, guns, the phallus and herself. But she is only granted her independence because his satisfaction depends on it. After her revenge she is not allowed to roam the streets on her own anymore and although she is never dominated, she is finally domesticated: Charly reverts into schoolteacher Samantha, Kathy in Lady Dragon acquires a new family in Grandfather and his son, the warrior Zula end up serving the new queen and Red Sonja finally surrenders to Lord Kalidor.

### Conclusion: What is the Pleasure of all This?

The favoured position of hardcore fans for watching action movies in the cinema is slumped in the seat with legs slung over the seat in front. This is an excellent position for anal sex as well as for cunnilingus and fellation. Come to think of it, for the male viewer action movies have a lot in common with being fellated. (Richard Dyer)<sup>28</sup>

Women have been action heroines since the beginning of the action cinema. But have they finally

come to represent a progressive female image? I do not mean to destroy or deny all pleasure on behalf of the female spectator (among which I am one), but neither do I want to keep up the illusion: The woman with a gun does not signify a man with a phallus. She is always daughter, mother or amazon, always a fantasy, always using a fetich offered by him. And she is always at his command, at his feet and at his service.

Some male critics naively claim that male audiences identify with action heroines 'in the same way' they identify with male heroes.<sup>29</sup> And some women optimistically view femme fatale action as radical feminism. However, both these identifications are located on a narrative level dealing only with social conventions and gender stereotypes. Such readings are blinded by the bright utopian surface of 'her story'. But seen from a new angle it is clear that 'his story' structures and controls 'her story'. The daughter, the mother and the amazon are nothing but modern versions of ancient male myths of femininity. These phallic action heroines do not exceed the bounds of traditional gender roles, they cannot empower women and they do not pose a threat to male dominance. Male identification is never about 'being like them' but rather fantasizing about 'being with them'. His story' has nothing to offer women because it takes place on a level where women are agents of male pleasures.

We finally face the cruel and beautiful sphinx with an answer to her riddle: 'You are neither woman, nor man, but man's masochistic fantasy of a woman. You are the trinity of the maternal figures, the union of the daughter, the amazon and the mother. You are the ideal masochistic woman'. Her green eyes turn black with terror and – so it seems – relief. Absolved from her perverse duties she falls screaming into the abyss.

### Notes

1. Richard Dyer, 'Action', in *Sight and Sound* no. 7, oct. 1994, p. 7-10, p. 9.
2. See e.g. Jeffrey A. Brown, 'Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the Point of No Return', *Cinema Journal*, 35, no. 3, 1996, pp. 52-71.
3. See e.g. Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (London: BFI, 1992).
4. Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 19, 20.
5. See Rikke Schubart 'Syndabock och hämnare: maskulinitet i actionfilmen', *Filmhäftet*, no. 1-2 (1997) for a discussion of the hero as scapegoat, and 'Passion and Acceleration: Generic change in the action movie' (in review for *Cinema Journal*) for a discussion of the development from a masochistic to a sadistic story in the action movie.
6. Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919) in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), vol. xvii, pp. 179-204.

7. Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1919) and 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' (1924) in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), vol. xix, pp. 157-170. For a thorough discussion of psychoanalysis and masochism see Kaja Silverman *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
8. Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten', p. 198.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
10. Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Sex and Society* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1976), p. 214.
11. *Ibid.*, my inversion, p. 215, 216.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
13. Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty in Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 55.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 52, 53.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
19. George Sandys (translation), *Ovid's Metamorphosis: Englished, Mythologized and Represented in Figures* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), book X: 250-56.
20. Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds.), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 38.
21. Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, p. 62.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
23. Although the alien queen is a good mother for her own offspring she uses her maternal power to impregnate and kill another race – humans.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 61-2.
25. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs in: *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 223-4.
26. The enemy female agents in the Bond movies are evil amazons.
27. Anthony Easthope, *What A Man's Gotta Do* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 98.
28. Dyer, 'Action', p. 10.
29. Brown, 'Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the Point of No Return', p. 69.

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