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Thea Cheuk

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Submission or Subversion: *Women with Shaved Hair in Media*

By Thea Cheuk

“It is quite obvious that the shaving of heads fundamentally damages the physical and moral integrity of those people for whom it was intended,” Fabrice Virgili asserts in his book *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (135). For centuries, hair has been held as a standard of feminine beauty, therefore a lack of it has a long and storied history as well. Records of head shaving as a form of punishment for women can be traced back to Ancient Greek and Roman times. Shaving a woman’s head was a sign of sin and shame, and stripped them of their femininity and identity.

When examining the goal that is achieved by a woman’s head being shaved, the immediate concept that comes to mind is submission. The woman’s head is shaved either by physical force or by creating a hostile environment where her head must be shaved as a form of protection through conformity. It is a form of taking power from women and reinforces a strict patriarchal narrative.

However, looking at more recent media, such as *V for Vendetta* or *Alien*³, another theme appears: subversion. In media, where head shaving starts off as a form of oppression, the female character often doesn’t just accept having short hair but chooses to own it in defiance of those who took it away. This points to traditional Western culture being in a transitional time where shaved hair on women is being normalized and losing the stigma that it has carried for hundreds of years.

I chose to focus this paper exclusively on white and white-passing female main characters because my emphasis is on changing values in current American society. White women with shaved hair are perceived based on the Western cultural connotations that I wanted to look at, which might not apply to women of color to the same extent. Additionally, in other cultures, for instance in India,

nuns shave their heads as a form of devotion to their religion, but while there is some tie into humility, the act has different levels of freedom. These conflicting messages about shaved hair resulting from cultural differences led me to limit my characters to white and white-passing characters only. I also am not looking at female characters who have shaved heads due to cancer for obvious reasons; they are only superficially similar to the characters I examine and have none of the underlying power structures in play.

In Western culture, a woman's head being shaved has traditionally been a sign of humiliation and shame, but a recent trend in fictional mass media has been portraying female characters with shaved hair both more frequently and more positively. When looking at film and television within the last two decades, female characters have reclaimed their shaved hair, shifting the traditional meaning from the subjugation of women to those women subverting the patriarchy and wearing shorn hair as a sign of empowerment. The shift in the significance of female head shaving in white and white-passing female characters is an indicator of feminist values being integrated into mainstream popular culture.

Historically, head shaving has been a shame tactic meant to demean women. Curtis Montier argues in his Master's thesis, *Let her be shorn: 1 Corinthians 11 and female head shaving in antiquity*, that during the time of the Ancient Greeks and Romans shaving a woman's head was not a sign of being a prostitute (as previously accepted), but rather a visible, public admission of her adultery meant to shame her. This precedent was carried down into the Apostle Paul's writings, where he warns if a woman doesn't cover her hair, she might as well shave it off. Fabrice Virgili, a historian with an emphasis on gender relations, agrees, pointing out the same passage by Paul as well as other texts that emphasize shaving a woman's hair "was a disgrace" (182). The Greek historian Plutarch notes the shamefulness of a woman having hair cropped short, and shaving a woman's hair punitively can also be found in a story from a Roman historian about a German man punishing his wife's infidelity by shaving her head. Whether or not the account actually happened, the tale was meant to

be met with approval. This sets the historical precedent that continues through Greco-Roman culture and thus into western culture today and establishes the cultural significance of a woman's head being shaved throughout history due to women's beauty being tied to their hair.

The historical record of Western head shaving may begin in Ancient Greece and Rome, but the cultural connotations have been carried on throughout history. Thousands of years later, this tradition emerged again during World War II for essentially the same purpose. From 1943 to early 1946, over 20,000 French women accused of "collaboration" with Germany had their heads shaved and were dragged through the streets to humiliate them (Virgili, 1). Nazis also used head shaving as a form of dehumanization in concentration camps, stripping women of their dignity, individuality, and a marker of their femininity. Nicole Ephgrave, a scholar in women's studies and feminist research, examines the way the societal expectations of femininity contributed to the loss of identity women felt in concentration camps. Many of the women targeted in the Holocaust were Jews, so their religious observance of modesty being a form of appropriate femininity made them particularly vulnerable to assaults on their privacy and dignity through head shaving and nudity. In her article "On Women's Bodies: Experiences of Dehumanization during the Holocaust," memoirs and oral testimonies collected from survivors often mention the humiliation they suffered when their hair was shaved. Auschwitz survivor Livia E. Bitton Jackson said of the women's trauma from having their hair shaved and the resulting loss of identity, "The haircut has a startling effect on every woman's appearance. Individuals become a mass of bodies, height, stoutness, or slimness. There is no distinguishing factor—it is the absence of hair that transformed individual women into like bodies" (Ephgrave, 21).

Clearly shaving the heads of women is a tool used by oppressive patriarchy to maintain the power imbalance and control over women. In all but one of the movies and television episodes I analyzed, there is an institution that embodies male dominance that the shaved female character struggles against and

ultimately triumphs over by accepting her shaved hair, not as a loss of femininity as intended, but through realizing femininity exists outside of long hair. These can generally be categorized into media where the female character is shaved either to assert male dominance over her or media where she is shaved to fit into the power structures of male dominance, coding her male in the eyes of the institution and thus not a threat to the patriarchy. These manifestations of the patriarchy often are entangled with traits of toxic masculinity or machismo: violence, sexual aggression, and misogyny, among others, which the female character must survive.

The 2016 Netflix original show *Stranger Things* featured a young girl named Eleven, who was an escaped victim of human experimentation, which had left her with psychic powers.

In “Chapter Four: The Body” she donned a blonde wig so that the trio of boys she was discovered by could sneak her into their school. The clearest physical marker of her otherness was her shaved head, which led her to be mistaken for a boy when she first escaped. Eleven’s hair can be assumed to be a result of her captivity and status as a test subject for the government-run Hawkins Lab. She also clearly showed that she thought she was prettier with hair than without, so it can also be presumed that it was not her choice for her head to be completely shaved. It could be argued that her hair was shaved to make keeping her clean more manageable and to improve the application of her electrode cap, which was probably what the characters of the show, including her “Papa” Doctor Martin Brenner, would cite. However, it also plays into the age-old ploy of men shaving a woman’s hair to reinforce a power imbalance and exert control over her.

The negative reactions of the boys when they first find Eleven show the “natural” reaction to a female with a shaved head, and clearly illustrate what the societal norm was in the sleepy town of Hawkins, Indiana, 1983. El was repeatedly referred to as a weirdo by Lucas, and though he never specifically referenced her hair, it can hardly be discounted as one of the reasons he calls

her such. Once she donned the wig, they were obviously taken aback by how different (conventionally attractive) she looked, stammering out that she looked pretty. El repeated the word, staring at herself with hair (18:36).

El was shown as a victim of the patriarchal, government-supervised Hawkins Labs that worked with a military force to accomplish their goals, using deadly force in some cases. She did not choose her cropped hair, and when given the opportunity to have long hair, she immediately thought she was more beautiful, though her opinions were most likely influenced by the boys'. Her lack of hair was a way to ostracize her and make her feel alone in an environment where her only emotional "support" (manipulation) was the man overseeing her tests, Doctor Brenner. It was another form of control over her, symbolizing her lack of power while she was in Hawkins Lab. Considering her psychic abilities, it makes sense that the scientists would want to make her feel as weak and helpless as possible; otherwise, she would be fully capable of turning the tables on them. The doctors and scientists shaved Eleven's hair in order to psychologically influence her into thinking she was at their mercy.

"Chapter Seven: The Bathtub" was the continuation of development regarding El's hair, culminating in her reclaiming the shortness of her hair. In the very first scene, Mike Wheeler was cleaning El up after the confrontation with a bully (which ended in El breaking the bully's arm), and she did not have her head full of blonde hair on. She was self-conscious about it and slid a hand over her cropped hair as if dissatisfied with her appearance in the mirror. Mike reassured her that she was still pretty and when Eleven looked at herself again, her nervous expression softened. While it could be argued that Mike's approval was another form of manipulation, albeit an unintentional one, El was not looking for him to tell her what to do, like Dr. Brenner did. She wanted confirmation of her own opinion, not to have her opinion made by someone else and given to her. Mike, as her closest friend, was able to validate her feelings about herself and her hair. El's shaved head was exposed for the remainder of the show.

It was not, however, the last time her hair was mentioned negatively in the

episode. When Hawkins Lab showed up at the Wheeler's door just after losing the boys and El, Dr. Brenner showed Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler a picture of Eleven, wondering if they had seen her. They both denied it since Mike had been hiding El in the basement and sneaking her food behind their backs. But while Mrs. Wheeler was focused on her son's safety, Mr. Wheeler's first question was about why El's hair was cut so short. Mr. Wheeler had been shown to be a distant father, leaving any discipline and decisions about Nancy and Mike up to his wife and did not offer support to Mrs. Wheeler as she raised their children. This question regarding what happened to El's hair was one of his only lines, and it came at a potentially stressful time: he was being told that his son had been harboring a little girl in their house and a government agency was trying to track them both down. It is safe to conclude that this is another solid example of what a shaved head on a female means within "normal" society and the cultural stigma of "otherness" signified by shaved hair. This is only further reinforced when the bully, Troy, described to the deputies at the police station how his arm was broken. When Police Chief Jim Hopper overheard that the girl who attacked Troy had no hair and asked him to elaborate, the main thing that the boy noticed, and thus mentioned to Hopper, was her short hair. "She doesn't even look like a girl," he muttered, before moving on to her psychic powers (12:15). It is disparaging, and yet another cultural indication of long hair defining a girl, more so than wearing the "right" clothes or acting a certain way.

This makes the scene where El moved on from the wig even more significant. By this point, she had had more exposure to the world outside the labs. She had grown more comfortable speaking to the boys and had begun to make emotional connections with the adults. With the increased societal awareness gained from navigating relationships and situations of the external world, El was likely more conscious of all the differences (physical and otherwise) between her and everyone else. Yet she did not ask for the wig back. She realized she did not need it and rejected the idea that her worth is based on her traditional femininity and beauty. Thus, Eleven's cropped hair transformed from a symbol of

her oppression at the hands of Dr. Brenner and Hawkins Lab to a manifestation of accepting herself as she was. She started using her powers more freely, of her own free will, supported by a network of people who had cared for and protected her. Her hair became a subversion of what Brenner intended as she grew into herself and her abilities, using them for good to search for the missing Will and Barb instead of being used as a tool, which is how the gate to the Upside Down, another reality, was initially opened. She embraced herself, redefining her shaved head as “pretty” as her true self was revealed.

The movie *V for Vendetta* also featured the government as the embodiment of the patriarchy. The fascist, totalitarian party in control, Norsefire, controlled the formal police and military, but also a division of secret police, the Finger. Evey Hammond, the female protagonist, was apprehended by a few Fingermen who attempted to rape her at the beginning of the film. The Fingermen kidnapped, tortured, and executed people throughout the movie, representing the oppressive and restrictive Big Brother role of the government.

Similar to *Stranger Things*, the people with shaved heads in *V for Vendetta* were being experimented on in a government facility to perfect bioweapons. In flashbacks, a woman named Valerie was shown many times, though she was only identified and given a history around the middle of the film. In an autobiographical note Valerie wrote to comfort prisoners after her death, she talked of being experimented on, and a scene of her hair being shaved was played, mirroring the scene where Evey’s head was shaved. In fact, many of the captivity scenes with Evey and Valerie were parallels because the audience is meant to believe the same story that Evey did: that Evey was being held by the government under the same circumstances as Valerie. Both the audience and Evey later find out that her imprisonment was a huge ruse put on by V, a masked vigilante intent on bringing down the government, so she would experience what he went through, and ultimately be freed from fear, as he was.

However, before V’s deception is found, Evey honestly believed that she was being tortured and interrogated by the government, which she knew from

her parents' fate was willing to kill any undesirable citizens who threatened its power. As with EI and Hawkins Lab, shaved hair on prisoners and human experiments was a good way to cut down on disease while still allowing minimal cleanliness, but as the Nazis discovered, it also had the psychological bonus of stripping identity and control from the prisoner, degrading them. Evey, terrified, wept as her long hair was shorn to the scalp, and her shaved hair heightened the dehumanization she went through as she was then thrown into a cell with nothing more than a toilet and fed rotten food the rats wouldn't touch. She was tortured and interrogated about any information regarding V, and her visible, pale head only emphasized her vulnerability as she cried and cowered. Despite the intimidation she suffered, however, she refused to give up any information on V, and when finally faced with death versus telling anything about V, she chose death. Immediately after, she was told she was completely free. Allowed to leave her cell and wander the hallways of the facility, she found she'd been in V's home the entire time, and he'd been the one hurting her.

Understandably horrified and betrayed, the first thing Evey accused V of was cutting her hair, which is a telling comment considering the objectively worse things he did to her while she thought she was being held by the government. The next grievance she brought up, after all, was the fact that he tortured her. It may just be that she was in shock and that was the first thing out of her mouth, as she did have what appears to be a panic attack during the ensuing conversation with V.

However, Evey was aware of what her government was capable of, even before she got tangled up in V's plot. Her parents, after all, became radical protesters after the death of her brother, and she watched from under the bed as her parents were "black-bagged," kidnapped and disappeared, by the Finger. Right before she was captured, she saw her former boss and confidante suffer the same fate, and she was clearly worried about what was going to happen to him after he wrote and aired a critical, mocking parody of the government on his television show. Evey knew that she could expect to be tortured in the name of

national security if she was caught by the government. She had prepared herself for it, even if she desperately hoped it would never come true. What she was not expecting, though the audience knows in a twist of dramatic irony, was how Larkhill facility treated their human test subjects, and how this treatment killed Valerie and created V. V, in turn, simulated it for her, though adjusted to meet her expectations of the government wanting information about V. The audience has already seen the gaunt, stumbling figures dressed in drab rags with induced tumors and shaved heads, but Evey had no idea what was in store for her. She thought she was a political prisoner like her parents were, not a pseudo-human science experiment living out V's experiences to reach common ground. She had no way of knowing that her hair, culturally tied with feminine beauty and identity, was about to be forcibly taken from her as a show of power and her own helplessness in the face of that power. After being freed, Evey learned, as V intended her to, that she had transcended the fear of her own death because of her belief in something bigger than herself. She decided she would rather make her own way in plain sight, no longer afraid of the government. V allowed her to leave, but asked her to return once more before the fifth of November, when his plan will conclude.

As per their agreement, Evey returned to visit V on the fourth of November, to his surprise. She recounted a few experiences of her life, mentioning that she ran into one of her old friends and thought she would be recognized and turned in, but that her friend did not recognize her at all, even when looking her full in the face. The audience may have been meant to interpret this as a sign that Evey's lack of fear was such a reversal of her tentative, wary former self that she was now a completely different person, but what should stand out the most is that her head was still shaved.

The timeline of the movie is difficult to pin down. The first and last scenes both take place at the turn of November 4th to the 5th, but a year apart. This gives a rather long range for certain events to take place. The day after V's first attack was when Evey was knocked unconscious saving V, and in return, he carried her

to his home to protect her. She then was held against her will for several weeks but managed to escape V and seek refuge with her old boss. It is unclear exactly how much time she spent hiding in his home, but once the government raided his home and she fled, she was immediately captured by V and her reimprisonment began. Again, it is impossible to tell how long it took before she was set free, but judging by comments made by V and the police trying to catch him about his timeline, when Evey decided to return to the outside world, there were likely still several months left before the fifth of November. The movie then followed V, the efforts of the government to catch him, the investigations of Police Chief Eric Finch to find out the truth, and the changing sentiment of the public against the government. When Evey next showed up, it was the fourth of November, but her hair was still the same length as it was when she left. Even if she was released just weeks, and not months, before the fifth, her hair should have grown out noticeably from the buzz cut, but it had not. Evey must have kept it that length of her own will for some reason.

No explanation is given for Evey keeping the buzz cut, so only speculation is possible. Over the course of the film she developed a complicated but intense relationship with V, so perhaps she kept it as a reminder of him, or maybe she kept it as a part of a disguise as she reentered the outside world and braved a government undoubtedly on the lookout for her. Perhaps she kept her hair cropped as a symbol of the freedom she gained when she stopped fearing the dictatorship and realized that it had no power over her that she did not give it. Alternately, Evey made a strong emotional connection with Valerie. Only the audience has seen that Valerie had buzzed hair, but it's not too far a stretch to say that Evey probably correctly assumed that Valerie was also shaved while in captivity and was able to relate to her through the shared experience. Aspiring after Valerie's composure and strength in the face of her certain death, Evey may have kept her hair short as a tribute to Valerie and the appalling injustices she bore with grace and strength. With such little evidence, it is not possible to draw any certain conclusions regarding Evey's motivation behind her choice to main-

tain the cropped style of her hair, but by keeping it at the length it was when she discovered her fearlessness, she refused to give up that freedom and defied the government that had held such power over her and her country.

There are also women who shave to “become” men. By having their heads shaved just like all the men around them, they have assimilated into the existing power structure and the threat they represent to the patriarchy is neutralized. Therefore, there is safety in being shaved, as the woman ceases to be an outsider and is accepted as a member of the patriarchal institution. Perhaps less obvious than shaving a woman’s head to drive home her powerlessness, this still strips a woman of her traditional femininity, but goes a step further to add a false layer of masculinity that acts as a form of protection through conformity.

As a woman in the post-apocalyptic setting of George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the protagonist Furiosa was the only female Imperator, one of the highest ranking, most trusted generals under the tyrannical dictator Immortan Joe. Joe’s death cult army of War Boys and Imperators all had shaved heads, including his own heirs (both male) and the War Pups. In fact, out of all the main characters who live in the Citadel, Immortan Joe and his “wives” had the longest hair. The meaning of long hair here is, once again, power. Joe was able to maintain his hair even in the midst of the aftermath of nuclear warfare because of his powerful status as the leader of the Citadel, and he had the resources to support this extravagance. He was willing to devote water that could be used for more practical purposes to the upkeep of his and his breeders’ hair. He exerted this power over his War Boys by making them shave, and over his wives by making them keep their hair long. One of the wives, Toast, had short, choppy hair, which supports this.

Toast’s actress Zoë Kravitz said in an interview with entertainment journalist Scott Huver that Toast chopped her own hair off, to make herself less attractive through the loss of femininity (2). So long hair does signify privilege and status, but in the case of the wives, it also was a sign of their objectification and sexual slavery; their worth defined solely by the babies they could produce. Toast

chose to hack her hair off (but not shave it) to defy Joe and his control.

It could be thought that Toast could have made a more powerful show of defiance if she had completely shaved her hair. However, given the imposed hairstyles of the other characters in the film, the opposite is true. The Imperators were shaved completely bald. The War Boys were shaved completely bald. The seven-year-old Pups training to be War Boys were shaved completely bald. A totally shaved head was a sign of a different kind of subservience to Joe, and Toast knew this. Her choice to subvert Joe was calculated to bring her hair to a length that rejected the idea of being his property in any way, either as a “wife” or as a suicide fighter.

Furiosa is a different story. She was an Imperator herself, but unlike all the other Imperators, she was not fully bald. But she was not a wife either, and her hair reflected that, as it was neatly shaved to be far shorter than Toast’s. It could be argued that her strange hair length is a result of her being the only woman Imperator seen in the movie, and possibly the only woman warrior in Joe’s army. However, that is unlikely as her gender was otherwise not mentioned. Instead, it is important to be aware of how Furiosa was complicit in the system Joe had created. At the beginning of the movie, she was trusted enough to have the title of Imperator, and drive the War Rig, a huge vehicle with massive importance in regards to the capacity to trade, which keeps the Citadel sustainable. Her crew instantly followed orders and coordinated well with her and one another, indicating they had experience working together in addition to trust and respect for her. When she first turned off the road, her crew merely believed that she had been given orders they had not and even when it became obvious that she had betrayed them, her second in command still attempted to reason with her before resorting to violence. Later one of the Vuvalini, the tribe she was born into, asked her how long it had been since she had been taken from the Green Place (where she was born), and her answer was around twenty years, giving her plenty of time to rise up in the ranks before earning her place as Imperator (1:19:25). She was comfortable with violence and did not hesitate to kill, but it was also

clear that she did not enjoy what she had to do, since she told Max that she was searching for redemption, not hope (1:16:07). She had a long vendetta against Joe that took years to come to fruition, and may never have.

The rationale behind Furiosa's iconic hair was that it stripped away her femininity and made her "male" in the eyes of the patriarchal society that only viewed women as baby making machines (a role she could not fulfill). Furiosa fought as a warrior, which was the role of men as seen through the lens of the toxic masculinity Joe cultivated at the Citadel, so she had to fit the part physically as well. If she was presented and seen as a man, she was not a threat to their hierarchy. This can be further supported by the reaction of Nux, a War Boy, to defeating Furiosa with Max. He automatically assumed that as men, they were both working for Joe and trying to capture her, telling Max how rewarded they would be for having stopped Furiosa. Furiosa's betrayal had made her an outsider, but it is reasonable to imagine that she was not seen any differently than any of the other male Imperators before she defected. This is heightened by the fact that Nux was so quick to elevate a mere bloodbag, a slave who is forced to supply blood directly to injured fighters, to a comparatively higher status of a War Boy when he thought Max fought Furiosa to save Joe's wives.

Furiosa was taken as a girl from the Green Place where she was a part of a matriarchal society called the Vuvalini. From the few surviving Vuvalini in the film, including the one closest to Furiosa in age, Valkyrie, they all appear to have had long hair, though it was often covered by hoods and shawls. Presumably, Furiosa also had long hair then, which may have been part of what brought her to Joe's attention as a potential wife, since he clearly valued long hair as a standard of beauty and power. In the Vault, the locked rooms where Joe keeps his wives isolated, it can also be assumed that long hair was expected, since Toast cut hers to defy Joe, and the rest of the wives had long hair. Therefore, even if Furiosa did not have long hair as a child, Joe likely would have made her grow it out when she was one of his wives to fit his ideal of female beauty. With this in mind, Furiosa's short hair was a sign of her purpose as a woman (being a child bearer)

being stripped away and replaced with a man's purpose (being a warrior).

Despite this, she was also gentle and quiet when she needed to be, traits that the men of the movie had to learn. In the hyper-masculinity of the Citadel, peaceful negotiation over violence would be seen as soft or a sign of weakness. Furiosa was neither, yet she used any tool at her disposal to solve the problems she encountered, and she recognized that sometimes she needed to coax, not force. She was not limited to violence the way the men were, and she possessed the stereotypical "feminine" social skills needed to persuade and work with others. Resisting attempts to indoctrinate her as a male to maintain the status quo, she was still undeniably female and instead broadened the definition of femininity instead of narrowing it.

Furiosa's hair, in addition to being practical, was a small sign of her hidden rebelliousness against Joe even as she worked for him. She refused to fall in line with the completely shaved heads of all the others who fight for Immortan Joe, and instead chose to grow her hair out very slightly. She never forgot the end goal of revenge against him, and the length of her hair showed it. Short enough to nominally be a show of support and indoctrination to Joe and his cult, Furiosa's hair proved that she was never broken by Joe by being just long enough to symbolize a tiny, everyday mutiny.

One of the best known shaved female characters in history is *Alien's* Lt. Ellen Ripley. Gender scholars Ximena Gallardo and C. Smith contend in their book *Alien Woman* that Ripley went through several transformations throughout the *Alien* franchise, and they argue that in the third film she left behind the mantle of untouched woman and mother established by the previous movies (124, 146). Instead, she was made "male" so as not to disrupt the status quo of the double-Y chromosome "hyper-male" prison population on Fury 161, and even during her attempted rape she did not physically read as a woman (138-9). With her shaved hair and baggy clothes, she was indistinguishable from the male inmates she was surrounded by, but even though her hair had been cut to "protect" her, she did not let them take her sense of self. She stood her ground

and refused to be controlled, but she also refused to relinquish that which she decided made her who she was. She was unapologetic when she asked for sex and was not fazed by the threat of rape. The first time this was shaken was when she scanned herself and finally could no longer ignore the fact that she was the monstrous mother that would birth a new Alien Queen, who was also a monstrous mother (147). At the end of the film, however, she was fully feminine as she birthed the Queen. She took back her body and her ability to give birth when she chose to die and take the Queen down with her rather than allow the patriarchal Company get their hands on the product of her body (153).

Finally, there is one female character who fits into neither of the above categories. Debra from *Empire Records* (1995) is the only character who willingly shaved her own head in open defiance of society. Deb was first seen as she tore through the store flipping off or flat out ignoring characters, and the manner in which they take it in stride indicated her abrasive behavior was normal. Deb was the most antisocial worker of the bunch and tried to drown herself in her work during the course of the movie. Whether this was a result of her fragile emotional state after a breakup with her boyfriend and subsequent suicide attempt, or if that was her usual nature, we can clearly see that she was a loner.

However, most of this characterization comes after the scene where she shaved her head, one of the very first of her appearances. All later characterization largely seems supplementary information when presented with such a defining act so early after her introduction. She shaved her head once she got to the restroom, first taking scissors to cut most of it, and then cleaning up with electric clippers. Her facial expressions were revealing: at the beginning, she looked teary, but by the time half of her hair was gone and she could get a sense of what she would look like with all of it removed, she seemed to start to smile a bit and began cutting the rest with a renewed vigor. When she was buzzing the final bits off, she looked pleased with herself, scrubbing a hand over the bristles and grinning. When she exited the restroom, she had put on the apathetic, insolent air she wore on the way in, and flippantly dismissed AJ and Lucas' surprise

at her new hair, which quickly shifted to concern about the bandage on her wrist. She did the same to Gina and Corey at the registers, who were more disdainful of her hair.

Gina and Corey were both well within the bounds of acceptable hair length to fit into hair's correlation with conventional beauty. "Good girl" Corey had long hair down her back, where the more promiscuous Gina's hair was comparatively shorter, a little past her shoulders. Just like Mr. Wheeler and the bully Troy in *Stranger Things*, the reactions of the two girls illustrate the default societal norm that women are expected to conform to in order for them to be considered feminine and attractive. However, aside from that initial backlash, which could easily be contributed to the hostility between the outsider Deb and best friends Gina and Corey, no one else in the film disparaged Deb's rebellious decision to buzz her hair. Admittedly, the setting is an independent record store that employed an assortment of misfits, so the cast of characters at *Empire Records* would likely be more open to transgressive actions than general society.

It was obvious that she cut her hair as an intentional subversion of the standard of beauty, not as a forced submission to it. She was adorned with tattoos and piercings, both of which would have been more controversial in the 90s when *Empire Records* was filmed and set than today, and therefore she showed a general disregard for traditional standards of femininity and beauty. It could also be tied into the tendencies of women to cut their hair after a breakup, which is a milder but still telling form of women cutting their hair short to move past expectations of femininity imposed by men. It symbolically puts the past behind and changes the woman into a different person, but it also can reaffirm identity and is something that women can control. Long hair is a traditional form of validation for women, and sometimes women grow their hair out because of the preference of their partner, so cutting it can come with a feeling of empowerment. Deb's haircut was more drastic than many "break-up" haircuts are, but the fact she was doing it for herself remains clear. Deb is an example of what a modern interpretation of femininity might be. With head shaving losing its historical stigma of humiliation,

more female characters are wearing their shaved hair proudly. As positive representations of women with shaved heads become more common onscreen, short cropped hair on women enters mainstream culture as simply another form of expressing femininity.

Media such as television and film indisputably influences cultural norms and expectations, so it is vital to not underestimate the impact of characters who shake up the status quo of patriarchy. The recent portrayals of female characters with shaved heads as strong and powerful results in positive associations of women with shaved hair. Shaved hair is slowly becoming normalized and accepted as an expression of femininity, leaving behind the history of head shaving being a way for men to dominate and shame women.

At the very least, having a wider range of female characters who have shaved heads is increased representation for women who cannot choose their short hair. In her dissertation looking at women experiencing hair loss, such as natural thinning or alopecia (balding caused by an autoimmune disease), Priya Dua examines women's struggle with their identity, and "media representations of hair loss and baldness influence this process as they are unable to find images of women, particularly white women and women with non-cancer related hair loss, to identify with and emulate" (113).

An example of the effects of positive representation of females with shaved heads comes from behind the scenes of *Stranger Things*. Millie Bobbie Brown, the child actress who played Eleven, was persuaded into shaving her head to play Eleven by Furiosa from George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In a behind-the-scenes article written by the Duffer brothers (the creators of *Stranger Things*), they reveal that a promotional picture of Charlize Theron they found in a magazine and showed Millie shifted her perception of a shaved head as ugly or undesirable (in both the physical sense, but also when being considered for other roles) to being "badass" and cool (M. Duffer and R. Duffer). Brown moved away from the long-accepted social canon of the meaning of shaved hair on a woman to short hair being a sign of strength. Having a shaved head transformed

from a symbol of shame to a sign of power because Furiosa refused to bow to the misogyny that her hair signified. She killed Joe, an old oppressive white man representing toxic masculinity, and reclaimed the meaning of her shaved hair. She turned her hair into a symbol of pride and strength, and that resonated not just within the movie, but in the world outside of it too.

While this trend comes full circle with Brown and the character of Furiosa, the beginnings of shaved hair losing cultural associations of sin and shame and gaining connotations of transgressive strength have slowly been occurring in films and television shows within the past several decades. Female characters with shaved heads are expanding the definition of what femininity can be, which is then spread and normalized. As socio-normative views of what a woman should look like are changing, society is in a transitional time where shaved hair may eventually lose its stigma of sin and shame for women.

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