

**THE CULTURAL-ECONOMIC LOGIC OF CONTEMPORARY
ACTION HEROINE CINEMA: (POST)FEMINISM,
POSTMODERNISM, AND THE CONSUMPTION OF
SPECTACLES**

MAO CHENGTING

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2013

**THE CULTURAL-ECONOMIC LOGIC OF CONTEMPORARY
ACTION HEROINE CINEMA: (POST)FEMINISM,
POSTMODERNISM, AND THE CONSUMPTION OF
SPECTACLES**

MAO CHENGTING

(M. A., Wuhan University)

(B. A., Wuhan University)

A THESIS SUBMITTED

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

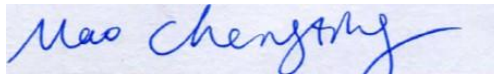
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS AND NEW MEDIA

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2013

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis. This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

A handwritten signature in blue ink on a light blue background. The signature reads "Mao Chengting" in a cursive, flowing script.

Mao Chengting

24 January 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Hoofd, Ingrid Maria, for her inspiring guidance, invaluable suggestions and considerable understanding, not only during the thesis writing process, but also throughout my entire PhD years. Her impressive grasp of feminist theories, postmodernism and techno-culture has been acting as a beacon light for me in my reading and thinking. She is generous of her intellectual support balanced with critical questions and illuminating advice, which in many ways challenge my earlier perspective and help push my arguments up to a higher level. Her dedication to the research of gender issues, representation, and philosophy of technology has been inspiring me to pursue an ever more sophisticated level of critical thinking, which is crucial in conducting research in humanities. Her consistent friendliness and patience always make it a pleasurable and rewarding experience to interact with her.

And my sincere gratitude also goes to my former supervisor, Prof. Chung Peichi, who used to work in Department of Communications and New Media. She is the one who gave me tremendous courage in continuing the research on my current topic, without whose support I would be nowhere in my first two years of candidature. I am also grateful for the opportunities provided by her to work as a research assistant, which not only helped relieve my financial burden as a self-supported student, but also broadened my academic view to a larger landscape. In this regards, I want to specially thank Prof. Zhang Weiyu as well, who not only offered research assistant

positions that challenged and exercised my research skills, but also guide me in writing and successfully publishing a paper, the topic and method of which is different from that in my comfort zone. I also want to thank her for sharing her experience, views and ideas in doing research, for helping me not only in academia but also in life and career.

Many Professors, staff, colleagues in Department of Communications and New Media have been helpful in the process of walking through my study and research. I thank Prof. Cho Hichang, Prof. Leanne Chang, Prof. Denisa Kera for their intellectual support. I thank Retna for her spiritual support and generous help in many ways. And many thanks to Yuanying, Shasha, Wanchao, Chi Hong, Cheryll, Wang Rong for your company, help, and friendship.

Last but not least, this dissertation is dedicated with utmost thanks to the consistent support from my family. My heart-felt thanks to my husband, Dr. Xiong Chengjie, who not only takes the financial burden of all my tuition fees and daily expenditures, but also whole-heartedly encourages me to pursue what I want, and sustains me with trust and love; without his support, I will not be able to have this dissertation done. And thanks to my parents and parents-in-law; you might not be able to read your daughter's work, but it is in important ways dedicated to you for your long-time understanding and trust while I am not around.

Mao Chengting

July, 2013

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 The Rise of Action Heroine Cinema	1
Introduction: The Action Heroine Phenomenon	1
Past Images: A Change of Rules	4
Chapter 2 Action or Heroine?	10
Feminist Film Theory.....	11
Feminism vs. Postfeminism	29
Chapter 3 The Cultural-Economic Logic	44
Reproduction of Technological Images:	45
Blockbuster, Special Effects and Technology.....	67
Spectacle versus Narrative	89
Chapter 4 The Action Heroine Cinema Consumed	106
As the “Composite Commodity”	107
As the Spectacles of Technology	137
The Spectacular	150
The Technology-Themed Spectacles.....	169
As the Spectacles of Heroines’ Bodies	184
Subject or/and Object	184
The New Apparatus	204
As the Idea of Feminism	237
After the Orgy.....	239
Metastasis and Trans-state.....	252
Chapter 5 The “Logical” Predicament: Feminism and Postmodernism	277
Bibliography	284
Appendices	302

Summary

Featuring sexually attractive women as the central action figure, contemporary action heroine cinema has brought opposing interpretations from the feminists and postfeminists. To disentangle the root of their bifurcation, this dissertation intends to look at the extra-textual cultural logic that forms and transforms the way audiences are engaged with the action heroine films now. Navigated by Jean Baudrillard's theories of postmodernism, particularly of semiurgy, sign value, simulation, implosion, and consumer culture, I argue that watching these films is purely a consumptive process, and a multiple process in which the action heroine cinema is consumed as the composite commodity, as the spectacles of technology, as the spectacles of the heroines' bodies, and as the idea of feminism. In a cultural logic where representations become free-floating media simulacra, any political engagement with the image is thus diluted and invalidated – a situation that puts feminist engagement with cultural representation in a chaotic dilemma.

List of Figures

Figure 1 Number of Genre Films across Years	95
Figure 2, 3, 4	96
Figure 5	97
Figure 6	97

Chapter 1 The Rise of Action Heroine Cinema

Introduction: The Action Heroine Phenomenon

Ever since the advent of Hollywood blockbuster in the late 1970s, action cinema has been the staple production representing the “blockbuster-ing” effect. With its wide commercial appeal, this movie genre mainly served as a strategic move to wrestle off the pressuring competition from television and other home entertainment¹, such as cable TV, VCR, or DVD. As computer and Internet, which is capable of rendering almost everything in downloadable digits, enters the household, this competition becomes even more imminent and intense. However, the film industry has appropriated its own blessing from this digital revolution. Ensured by the speedy development of computer-supported filmmaking technology, action cinema, increasingly incorporated with science-fiction and fantasy elements, has carried the blockbuster tradition forward quite well to recent decades. “Traded in the fare of contemporary ‘high concept’ cinema – elevated ‘B’ movie genre materials, episodic plots, breathtaking visual spectacle of the post-*Matrix* combat stunts, amazing digital effects and computer generated imagery variety and tie-in friendly musical soundtracks” (O’Day 201) – such action-sci-fi-fantasy films have shown a

¹ This is to state that this thesis will employ several parts of my previous publication “Just Look at it: The Cultural Logic of Contemporary Action Heroine Cinema” in Nov. 2010, *gnovis*, (listed in Bibliography). This publication is a paper based on the research proposal designed for this thesis, but the arguments in this thesis are much more developed than those in the paper. And only bits and pieces of this 3000-word paper will be re-used in the thesis across several sections and chapters (mainly Chapter 1, 2, 4) in a quite dispersive way. So I will not cite each of the quotation one by one.

bombarding upswing in the number of production and gained remarkable popularity in this new millennium.

From the 20th-century series of *James Bond*, *Indiana Jones*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Rambo*, *Terminator*, and *Die Hard* and the 21st-century productions of *Spider-Man*, *The Mummy*, *X-Men* and *Transformers* saga etc., a number of obvious common characteristics can be pinpointed to these films: “a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts” (Neale 52). These “hyperbolic” features have often been “accompanied by an emphasis on the ‘hyperbolic bodies’” (Neale 52) which are predominantly embodied by male stars, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Hugh Jackman, to name only a few, who confront the evil, push the narrative, and finally save the world.

Although there were occasions where women were the action heroes in mainstream Hollywood, as in the *Alien* series (1979-1997) or *Terminator II* (1991)², these occasions were still rare before 2000. However, in the short period of the recent decade, the incarnation of action heroines becomes increasingly prominent. Especially after the “most iconic” (O’Day 201) figure of Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) in a two-episode movie series (2001 and 2003), a proliferating number of Hollywood films put

² In the four episodes of *Alien* films, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), a female warrant officer on a spaceship, survives the attacks from extraterrestrial creatures and manages to defeat them every time. In *Terminator II*, Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), the mother of the future Savior, fights together with T-800 Terminator to protect her son from being killed by a more sophisticated Terminator, T-1000.

female leads in action pursuing the evil-fighting, world-saving cause once accomplished by male characters, such as Alice played by Milla Jovovitch in *Resident Evil* saga (2002, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2012), Selene played by Kate Beckinsale in *Underworld* series (2003, 2006, 2012), Elektra played by Jennifer Garner in *Elektra* (2005), Aeon played by Charlize Theron in *Aeon Flux* (2005), and so on. Meanwhile, the blockbuster strategy applies consistently: the female superstars' personal charisma, the promise of the fancy experience into a fantastic world of special effects, the never-ending expectation brought by the prospect of sequels and adaptations, and the ancillary market's even more far-flung and deep-seated influence among fans (for example, the video games of *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil*). All these work together to push the female super-heroes onto a quite salient agenda in the world of Hollywood.

These new-century female superheroes share two common qualities which seem contradictory to each other but nevertheless coexist. First, as the main characters who command the narrative, they are physically strong and agile, as exemplified by their maneuver over vehicles, their abilities to wield multiple firearms, and their prowess in hand-to-hand fight. They are intellectually outstanding as well, as demonstrated by their meticulous reasoning, ingenious tactics, and unique insight that no male characters appearing in the same movie can match. Second, despite these conventionally masculine qualities, they maintain their femininity with overtly sexualized bodies that most heterosexual men would find desirable, as highlighted by their particular costumes (tight, scanty) and figures (curve, breasts) in the films, as well as the actresses' own star image as pretty and attractive.

Through such contrarious combinations of masculine power and feminine body in one central character, this unique image has been variously termed as “action babe” (O’Day 202), “warrior woman” (Waites 205), or “bit girl” (Rehak 159), as indicating both the transgressive and the conventional characteristics these female heroes thus carry. And this oxymoronic representation of action heroine constitutes the object and the starting point of this research in its further enquiry of the reasons for the emergence of such representations, as well as the cultural implication from this image.

Past Images: A Change of Rules

Such a representation of women forms a fissure, if not a total gap, that breaks away from the past female characters on Hollywood screen in an unprecedented way. The traditional roles for women, though occasionally allowing for certain complexity and intensity, used to be confined to a small number of stereotypical images. From the simplistic bifurcation of virgin/whore in the early Hollywood, to the fallen woman, sex goddess, dumb blonde, and the domestic trinity of wife, mother, and daughter in the classical Hollywood era, women were characterized by passivity and negativity, occupying the sideline position that serves to set off the centrality of male characters or act as the sex object of male heroes. These stereotypes, if not unchanged at all, are presented, then undermined, then reinforced in Hollywood history across various genres, most typically, comedies, gangsters, Westerns in early ages and action, science fiction in more recent decades.

In a broader generic account, there is certain group of movies categorized as woman's film, which is defined as "a movie that places at the center of its universe of a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems connected to the fact that she is a woman" (Basinger 20). Although under such a term that seems to specifically speak for women, these films are generally marked by domestic settings, by romance and/or by pathos and sentiment. The female protagonist is often depicted as sentimental, torn between romance, career and family. The audience is often "characterized as composed of frustrated housewives, oppressed by the duties of motherhood and marriage, by sexual frustration and lost fantasies of romantic love" (Gledhill 324). This genre is also termed as "weepie" or "chick flick" with a derogatory tone implying a "sappy" movie with dramatized sentiment but trivial subject. And finally, however much is it about women and appealing to women, the narrative resolution often leans toward patriarchal ends –woman will be happy only when she marries the right man—while looking satisfying to women.

When speaking of the particular genre of action and adventure, it used to be overwhelmed by male dominance, as showcased by the series of *James Bond*, *Indiana Jones*, *Batman*, *Die Hard*, *Rambo*, to name only a few. Women characters in these films were mainly portrayed as passive foil to men's execution of heroism, abject victims whose fate lay in the hero's hands, or the love object of male characters in a side-storyline.

When women characters did take the active role in action-involved films, they embodied a force that entailed investigation, recuperation, punishment, or even destruction. This was epitomized by the notorious archetype of Femme Fatale in the film noir of the 1940s and neo film noir in the 1980s. She did pick up pistols with no shaking hands, but she was, nevertheless, seductive, scheming, mysterious and dangerous. She was a criminal using her sexuality as a lethal weapon to achieve her own wicked purpose (Haskell; Kuhn, and Radstone; Waites).

Another type of active female characters would be what Carol Clover identified as the “Final Girl” in the circular low-budgeted horror-slasher films in the 1980s and 1990s. This type of female image represented an involuntary transformation from passive to active under the circumstance of threat and persecution. After enough torture and horror, she was forced to stand up against the psychic killer and finally destroyed the villain. If slasher movies “deal with genital behavior only indirectly, through the metaphor of violence,” the rape-revenge narratives used a real penis as the aggression against women (Clover 157), which led to another category of “toughened-up” women derivative from the final girl: “Avengers” (Clover). They took karate or bought a gun because they were revenging rape previously inflicted on them, oppression that smolders for so long, or domestic violence that can only be rid of by violence. They represented the abused “woman-turned-warrior” (Waites 207) as illustrated by many of the revenge films in the 1980s (*I Spit on Your Grave*, *Lipstick*, *Ms 45*, and *Savage Streets*) or more recent incarnation like *Thelma and Louise* (1991) (Kuhn, and Radstone; Read).

Framed as domestic and sexual victims, avengers were implementing the radical feminism's assertion of "sexual oppression as *the* or at the very least *a* fundamental form of oppression for women" (Beasley 55). And in portraying their rage against men, these movies constituted a "male-bashing" piece of radical feminist propaganda (Walters 6), stating that men as a group are the "main enemy" (Beasley 55). Worthy as these movies might be – and "who can blame Thelma or Louise for wanting a self-actualized life free from abusive and exploitative relationships with men?" –such action heroines could not be constructed as equal counterpart to the patriarchal incarnation, because in this specific genre of action, "hero" or "warrior" in traditional sense customarily acts out of a "higher purpose" that enables them to "look beyond the immediate... battle... and see the larger implications of struggle" (Waite 207). Be it Spiderman or Superman, "the stakes are high and represent the age-old battle for justice" or humanitarian cause that, typically, involves the good warrior versus the evil villain, or the single hero saving the whole human race, which, as cliché or simplistic as it may be, "is the bread and butter of the high-grossing, ever popular action film genre that is constantly dominated by male heroes" (Waite 207).

In light of this historical review of past female characterization, the contemporary action heroines differ in a lot of ways. First, they are the active agent who push the narrative forward, disentangle the enigma and finally resolve the state of disequilibrium. They are hence no longer in the peripheral role defined in relation to male characters as lovers, mothers, or sisters. Second, their motivation for action marks a very significant break from the past representations of active women. When

they are active, they are motivated neither by any dark or selfish purpose like the femme fatale, nor by any explosive fury against previous inflictor like the avenger, but by their moral imperative to uphold the righteous, to guard humanity from disaster, and to keep the world in order. For instance, Lara Croft's treasure-seeking endeavors are aimed at preventing the evil force from abusing the mystic power of the treasures, such as time-reversing Magic Triangle in Episode 1, and the Pandora's Box in Episode 2. Alice, in *Resident Evil* series, is constantly trying to exposing Umbrella Corporation's research on viral weapon and to find the cure for the already infected victims. Their powers are not involuntarily forced out of any extreme circumstance (like final girl in face of violence), but seem like a "given", a natural-born gift that can be brought into play at any necessary moment.

While the female characters with all these exceptional qualities look new and exciting, the question remains whether such distinctive representation necessarily equals better representation for women, or even further, whether such representation is a reflection that women are actually more and more empowered. If so, is it the reason why action heroine movies are so popular these years? Because they "better" represent women and they "empower" women? If not so, what meaning can we imply from these images and the act of representing the images in such particular way? In this thesis, I will argue that instead of empowering or "better" representing women, these action heroine films, due to a new cultural-economic logic prevailing in Hollywood film industry, have come to entail a viewing process of total objectification and multiple consumption.

In Chapter Two, I will review the existent scholarly writings about the representation of woman as action heroine and the relevant theories. In Chapter Three, I will elaborate on the theoretical framework of this thesis – the cultural-economic logic that will navigate the analysis of the action heroine cinema in Chapter Four, and then the thesis will come to the conclusion in Chapter Five.

In order to make the argumentation of this thesis a precise and powerful one, I need to acknowledge at this very beginning that, firstly, the focus of this study is genre specific – Hollywood action cinema with its spectacular images and its derivative media production (which, inevitably, is mixed with genres like science-fiction, fantasy and thriller), and thus the discussion and argument made is applied to the cinema of the spectacular form (action genre or genre mixtures) without any intention to generalize to all movies; secondly, the audience I will talk about in the following discussion also refers to a particular demographic – people living in late capitalist society with easy access to all kinds of media tools like cinema, computer and the internet; thirdly, since this thesis focuses on exploring the gender politics in contemporary film representation, the other concerns like race, class, age, will not be addressed; and fourthly, in the following chapters, I am not presenting any in-depth analyses of each and every film, but are instead using the action heroine genre as exemplary of how the cultural-economic logic operates.

Chapter 2 Action or Heroine?

Woman's image on screen has been a heated subject for feminists' endeavor to get rid of oppression. When female characters step on the mainstream Hollywood stage with such a high profile as the action heroine, feminist readings of them are indispensable to uncovering the politics hidden in that image—what this could mean for woman. However, feminism has never been a static or simplistic entity. It is more than just the suffrage movement of its initial stage, for it has entered all kinds of fields of political, social, and cultural life. In the more than one hundred years since the late 19th century, we cannot say that the movement is necessarily always going for better or improving women's life for sure, but it is certain that the meanings, goals, forms, and struggles of feminism have undergone various changes, and meanwhile among each different field of feminist engagement, the changes are always vigorous. And film is such a typical field. Feminists begin to explore films in its later stage of development, when film theory itself gradually matures around the 1970s. Because seeing is so crucial to knowledge in western culture, cinema has been, in Laura Mulvey's words, "the crucial terrain on which feminist debates about culture, representation and identity have been fought out" (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 77). Feminists' engagement with film theory is also by no means monotonous or stagnant. There have been countless and ongoing disputes over the issues of gender, femininity, sexual difference in films, over the interpretation of a certain film or a

certain character, and most importantly, over the question of what theoretical tools are best for analyzing films from a feminist point of view. It is during this continual process of debating and complicating that feminist film theory begins to take shape and gradually stand on its own. In light of the vigorous dynamics of feminist film theory, it is, therefore, necessary to look back historically for a background knowledge how woman in film is read and theorized in feminist writings before getting down to the how feminist film theories could work in discussing the image of action heroine.

Feminist Film Theory

In 1972, the first issue of an ephemeral American journal, *Women and Film*, was published, declaring itself to be part of feminism's "second wave." The term "second wave" was coined to refer to the increase in feminist activity occurring in America, Britain, and Europe since the late 1960s. In America, the second wave of feminism arose as a response to the women's experiences after World War II. It was an era of remarkable "economic growth, a baby boom, suburban expansion, and the triumph of capitalism, which encouraged a patriarchal family life", where women were restricted to the roles of housewives and mothers. "Disillusioned with their second-class status, women began to band together to contend against discrimination" (Thornham, "Second Wave" 30). The movement is usually believed to have begun in 1963, when the "Mother of the Movement," Betty Friedan published her famous book, *The*

Feminine Mystique. In this book, Betty Friedan explicitly opposed the mainstream media portrayal of women, arguing that placing women at home limited their possibilities, and wasted their talent and potential, and that the perfect nuclear family image strongly marketed at the time, did not reflect happiness and was rather degrading for women.³ The tactics employed by second wave feminists ranged from highly-publicized activism, such as the protest against the Miss American beauty contest in 1968, to the establishment of small consciousness-raising groups (Thornham, “Second Wave” 30-31). The movement grew with legal victories, which addressed a wide range of issues: work, education, family, health, and marriage. The slogan “the personal is political” sums up the way in which “second wave feminism did not just strive to extend the range of social opportunities open to women, but also, through intervention within the spheres of reproduction, sexuality and cultural representation, to change their domestic and private lives” (qtd. in Thornham, “Second Wave” 37).

In the spirit of this movement, the journal, *Women and Film*, stated in its first editorial, “the women in this magazine, as part of the women’s movement, are aware of the political, psychological, social and economic oppression of women. The struggle begins on all fronts and we are taking up the struggle with women’s image in film and women’s roles in the film industry – the ways in which we are exploited and the ways to transform the derogatory and immoral attitudes the ruling class and their male lackys [sic] have towards women and other oppressed peoples” (qtd. in

³ From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second-wave_feminism

Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 93). The editors' goal is threefold: "a transformation in film-making practice, and end to oppressive ideology and stereotyping, and the creation of a feminist critical aesthetics" (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 93). It is in this climate that the feminism's engagement with film begins – as an urgent political act. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that it is through the myths found in religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, movies that we not only interpret but also experience our material existences as men or women, and feminists since Beauvoir had seen cinema as a key carrier of contemporary cultural myths. Though "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth," women, too, must inevitably see themselves through these representations (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 93-94).

The first editorial of *Women and Film* also raised some crucial questions:

Which analytical tools will best serve the political goals the editors outline?

What is the relationship between the different types of oppression which they describe, and between the different forms of transformation they envisage? In particular, what is the precise relationship between oppressive images, representations, or structures of looking, and the material inequalities which women – and "other oppressed people" – experience as social beings? What, finally, has looking to do with sexuality, with power and with

masculinity/femininity? Why is it that the circulation of images of women's bodies can in itself seem an act of oppression?

(Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 94)

These questions have not been answered straightforwardly after over thirty-five years, and as I will show, they are still relevant questions today. But the point is that we can never envisage a utopian moment when "images of women" will "reflect" the realities of women's lives, because cinematic representations have proved to be far more complex than this.

In the initial stages, American feminism focused on film representations as false images of women. Several works, such as "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research" by Sharon Smith in 1972, *Popcorn Venus* by Marjorie Rosen in 1973, and *From Reverence to Rape* by Molly Haskell in 1974 all employ a survey methodology, and concentrate on criticizing the issue of "sex-role stereotyping." Their concern is to reveal how both false and oppressive the limited types of women representations are. These accounts adopted a reflectionist approach, believing that "films both reflect social structures and changes, and misrepresent them according to the fantasies and fears of their male creators". These writers focus on linking "the power of cinematic representations to the social context that produces and receives them, and insisting on women's collective power to instigate change" (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 95). However, what is missing in these accounts, according to Thornham, is "a theoretical framework capable of both explaining the

persistence and power of these representations in structuring women's sense of identity and seeing them as culturally constructed and thus open to change" (95). As limited this framework might be, the development of reflectionist approach pushed the focus away from the misrepresentation via "oppressive images," and "towards a consideration of how cinema structures meaning and pleasure in such a way as to reinforce, or help to construct, our gendered identities" (95).

Then, Claire Johnson, a British feminist film theorist, with her "Notes on Women's Cinema" in 1973, was the first to take a theoretical turn by inputting cultural theory and the ongoing debates within European film, which includes structuralism, semiotics, Marxist theories of ideology, and psychoanalytic theory. According to these approaches, "film representations should not be viewed, as in the American "sociological" approach, as reflections of reality, whether 'true' or 'distorted'." Instead, "films are bearers of ideology, which can be defined as that representational system, or 'way of seeing' the world which appears to us to be 'universal' or 'natural' but which is in fact the product of the specific power structures which constitute our society" (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 96). It is thus ineffectual to do the matching game between the stereotypes of women in films and the reality women live, as the two live within the same ideological structure. What needs to be examined is how woman as a sign functions in specific film texts, not just in terms of what role she plays, but more of the "meanings it (woman as a sign) is made to bear and what desires and fantasies it carries" (96).

Also in the 1970s, a number of French film theorists shared the same interest in Marxist film theory, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and ideology critique, and developed what is called the “apparatus theory.” It shed light on how the mechanics of representation construct spectatorship, and laid the theoretical foundation for most of the later feminist film criticisms.

The “apparatus” in film theory refers to the interaction between spectators, texts, and technology (Miller 403). Apparatus theory investigates how the technical and physical specificity of watching films influences the viewers’ processing methods. This goes beyond issues of technological innovation to concentrate on cinema as a “social machine” (403). This machine is not just the obvious mechanisms of the cinema – film, lighting, sound recording systems, camera, make-up, costume, editing devices, and projector, but delves into the realm of “demands, desires, fantasies, speculations (in the two senses of commerce and the imaginary)” (Comolli 122). The conflation of “narrativity, continuity, point of view, and identification” makes spectators part of the apparatus designed right for them (Flitterman-Lewis 3, 12). The apparatus takes the spectator’s illusion of experiencing the film as “real life,” and combines power with relaxation, engagement with leisure: a “technique of the imaginary” that combines the realism of capitalist fiction with the “primary imaginary” of recorded sound and image (Metz 15).

The emphasis of apparatus theory is on the occasion of consumption, which means the material circumstances of spectatorship, and the dialectic between subject

and film when the viewer is engaged in the act of perception in the cinema (Miller 404). This emphasis is one of the most important distinguishing factors between film theory and literary criticism which “fetishizes the text as a stable object that is always the same wherever and whenever it is read” (404). However, the focus on the material conditions does not inspire extensive empirical studies. Apparatus theory operates basically at the level of speculation (despite occasional writing on technological history and meaning). This is because the principal interest of apparatus theory revolves around “how subjectivity is constituted via the imaginary and the symbolic and their dance around the real. The interest in the specific technical apparatus of cinema is inextricably intertwined with an interest in Marxist theorization of prevailing ideological norms plus psychoanalytic theorization of fantasies and complexes” (Miller 404).

The foundational social assumptions of apparatus theory are raised by the French philosopher and Marxist, Louis Althusser. In his influential essay, “Ideology and the ideological state apparatuses,” Althusser argues that the social relations necessary to uphold capitalist production are maintained by what he calls ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). These consist of the family, the judiciary, schools, the church, the political system, culture and media, and are supported by repressive state apparatuses – the military, the police, the courts, the bureaucracy, and the prisons – which involve the use of force and its threat as a means of eliciting obedience. Althusser explicates ideology as “a ‘Representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their

Real Conditions of Existence” (152). Ideology in fact plays a part in people’s everyday perceptions of the world and structures people’s lived experience.

Althusser argues that one of the chief ways in which ideological state apparatuses position individuals is by the process of interpellation or hailing. The cultural texts, for example, “hail” or “call up” readers, and position them in relation to what they are consuming in the process. As a result of interpellation, the individual sees him or herself as a sovereign, autonomous individual and recognizes him or herself as the subject of ideology, but at the same time, in Althusser’s terms, the individual also misrecognizes him or herself. This is because “these positions are not normal and inherent to individuals, but individuals ‘misrecognize’ or mistake these positions as being natural and inherent in themselves” (Jancovich 132). As a result of misrecognition, individuals become the active agents of ideology, empowering and sustaining the very ideologies that work to exploit them.

About the knowing and doing individual subject, it suggests that ideas are material practices or rituals, such as the act of paying a social debt (material faith in justice). When these practices are carried out by the subject, they define that subject at the same time. For the subject hailing and being hailed through this set of practices (Althusser), the “experience of watching film would best be understood as a set of objects (the technology of the cinema and the techniques of narrative), plus relations to those objects (credulity, identification, and fantasy)” (Miller 405).

The logic of ISAs elicited what Jean-Louis Baudry has theorized as film's capacity to be both an "impression of the real" and "more-than-the-real" (299). The ostensible ontological control of the real offered by cinema is in accordance with Althusser's understanding of ideology. The subject is presented with what seems like unveiled, transparent truth. Eyes were substituted by the camera. Spectatorship is like "being there," present in a whole bunch of absent images, but the time and perspective is radically transformed in a bewitching way: the distant draws near, the past turns into present, the points of view vary. The spectator's lack of mobility is "compensated by this promiscuous look, which traveled everywhere, to the most dangerous or painful as well as exhilarating places...as classical narrative ensured the ultimate restoration of equilibrium through perfect knowledge" (Miller 405). This is how Metz calls the cinema "a veritable psychic substitute, a prosthesis for our primally dislocated limbs" (15). Just as social subjects represent their living condition back to them in everyday life by means of ideology that masquerades as a plain, transcendent truth, "so film was a key mechanism for encapsulating such cultural messages" (Miller 405).

In the same vein, Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry both compared the operation of the "cinematic apparatus" on the spectator to that of the dream. Baudry argues in "The Apparatus" that "taking into account the darkness of the movie theater, the relative passivity of the situation, the forced immobility of the cine-subject, and the effects which result from the projection of images, moving images," the process of viewing film offers remarkable parallels to the state of dreaming (305). Like dreams

and hallucinations, cinema provide us with strong but illusory perceptions through sound, images, and movement, which embrace unconscious desires and fantasies, putting aside the “reality principle” that would repress them. Metz argues in “The Imaginary Signifier,” the spectator enters this realm of desire and fantasy through identification – an instance that is necessarily involved when watching a film, because, as argued by Metz, the spectator “continues to depend in the cinema on that permanent play of identification without which there would be no social life” (21). The identification can be with a character in the film, the protagonist in most cases. But not all films, as Metz points out, contain characters. Even when characters are indeed present, identification cannot be total, because the screen is a mirror but not in a literal sense. That is to say, the spectator must identify with the cinematic apparatus itself, with the all-powerful gaze of the camera that re-creates the act of looking:

The spectator identifies with himself, with himself as pure act of perception...as condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject...At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am all-perceiving. (25)

Even today, after cinema mechanism and film theories has undergone so many changes, this all-perceiving-ness of the apparatus theory is still very relevant, when it comes to how film naturalizes its consumption. But it is relevant in quite different

ways, as the perception itself has changed, as theorized by Jean Baudrillard, and the all-perceiving-ness becomes only an illusion, which I will come back to later.

Such theorization of identification becomes the meeting-point of apparatus theory and psychoanalytic theorization of Lacan via the notion of the mirror phase. The process of viewing is equated to the illusion of a strong ego of the mirror phase⁴. “Taken together, these qualities of ideology, lens, and subjectivity blind spectators to the fact that they, like the films they watch, are thick with discourse, unknowable by themselves or others without this encrustation of meaning and interpretation, as are all social phenomena in a world of ideology” (Miller 406).

What apparatus theory dealt with opened up a theoretical route for feminist interrogation to move beyond the reflectionist way of looking at female representation, and delve into the textual depth for a better knowledge of how the sign of woman operates in the cinematic structures and how female spectators are positioned in such occasion of consumption.

After “Notes on Women’s Cinema,” Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” has become the most anthologized article in feminist film theory. Mulvey thus changed the analytic focus away from a purely textual analysis but towards a concern with the structures of identification and visual pleasure in cinema – the spectator-screen relationship. According to Mulvey, there are two patterns of

⁴ For Lacan, the mirror stage, beginning in the sixth month of infancy, refers to a development period when an infant first begins to develop a sense of its own identity as a being that is separate from its parents. Through the recognition of its own image in a mirror, the infant begins to formulate a conception of its identity, despite the fact that the infant still lacks mastery over its motor skills or bodily coordination. It is also during this stage when the infant’s ego begins to develop (Miller 407).

pleasure in film viewing, one is scopophilic which comes from sexual instinct, and the other is narcissistic identification which comes from ego libido. What is more important is the dichotomy between active/male and passive/female that in Hollywood classical cinema, man, as the one with power to forward story, is the bearer of the look at woman, who is displayed as a sexual object and erotic spectacle for men on screen and men as spectators. She also elaborates on the two mechanisms that help allay the castration threat signified by women: voyeurism (by investigation, punishment, and devaluation) and fetishizing (by objectifying her and hiding her lack with glamorous images).

However, in putting sexual difference at the analytic center, and arguing women are objects, not subjects of the gaze, Mulvey said nothing about the female spectator. And most following theorizations of the relationship between spectator and film labeled the gaze as male, expelling the possibility of identification by female spectator. With regard to films texts, women were found to function primarily as objects of desire for the male gaze. Therefore, the basic problem for feminist film theory at this stage became whether woman, either as spectator or character, can be conceptualized outside the dominant hegemony. In the 1980s, Mary Ann Doane carried on Mulvey's use of psychoanalytic theory and sought to take into account this shadowy figure by analyzing the viewing pleasure offered by the "woman's film" of the 1940s. Doane argued that films which address the female spectator cannot count on the same psychic mechanisms – voyeurism, fetishism and narcissistic identification – that address her male counterpart, since these mechanisms protect the masculine psyche,

according to Freud, from the knowledge of woman's difference (her "castration"). Instead of the all-powerful and eroticized distance characteristic of the masculine viewing position, what these films offer their female spectator is a "masochistic over-identification with the cinematic image" (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 98). The distinction between the spectator and the object of her gaze is then crumbled: she is not offered – like the male spectator – an eroticized image for her gaze, but instead an identification with herself as image, as an object of desire or of suffering. The female protagonist of these films may appear as active agent at start only to end up as passive object; the movies may begin with her voice-over only to erase it; they offer the female spectator identification with the female protagonist's gaze only to invest it with anxiety and fear but not desire (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 98). Take Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) for example, in the sequence of the masquerade ball, its central but nameless character seeks to assert her identity, she can do so only through assuming her predecessor's identity, Rebecca, and by presenting herself as object of her husband's – and male spectators' – gaze. When she comes down the staircase wearing an identical dress to that of Rebecca, she becomes the object of spectacle, as in so many similar scenes. And female spectators are invited to identify with that objectification, and with the following humiliation (98).

These explanations indeed provide powerful theorizations of how film influences unconscious mechanisms of identification in order to confirm gendered identities, according to which, however, women have no presence, no specific experience, and no possibility of active intervention at all. In this account, then, the problem is how

such an analysis of unconscious structures for identifications could help women affect any change? Moreover, as “a vital part of feminism’s project has been to transform women’s position from that of object of knowledge into that of subject capable of producing and transforming knowledge” (Thornham, “Feminism and Film” 94), if there is no sense of “activity,” but only the passive objects (as female characters) and identification with the objects (on part of the female spectators), there is no, consequently, possibility of constituting the female subjectivity. Thus, Ruby Rich and others argue, in “A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics” (Citron et al.), that the female viewer is a social being as well as cinematically constructed spectator, who cannot be reduced to a position that slips passively into acceptance of the ideological structures of the text. She, on the contrary, actively engages with these structures, constructing her own readings, often “against the grain.” She is, moreover, no single identity just along the single divide of sexual difference, but along lines of multiple differences – of race, class, sexuality, nationality, for example. What is needed, then, is a theoretical language that can comprehend these contradictions, and not get entrapped by some simplistic conclusions solely based on gender difference (Thornham, “Feminism and Film” 99).

As feminist film theory’s use of psychoanalytic concepts seemed to have led into an impasse, there were quite a number of responses to it in the 1980s. While remaining within a psychoanalytic framework, some began to rethink its terms. Freud’s theories on dream and fantasy, then, underwent reinterpretation. While his theories had been the foundation for fixing cinema spectators within the structures of

sexual difference, they became extended to embrace the quite opposite – that the spectators were offered multiple and fluctuating positions in their viewing process. For instance, by studying genres of pornography, horror and melodrama – or “body genres” – Linda Williams’ argues that despite the fact that it is the female bodies that have “functioned traditionally as the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear, and pain” (5), the viewing positions in these films are not necessarily bound by the demarcation between genders. The viewing experience for both female and male spectators is marked by a combination of passivity and activity, sadism and masochism, powerlessness and power, and an oscillatory identification along the spectrum. That is to say, female spectators are not necessarily cooped in a masochistic loop, nor male spectators always occupying the powerful male gaze (Thornham, “Feminism and Film” 99-100).

Further moving away from psychoanalysis, there were responses that were closely involved with the perspectives emerging from British Cultural Studies. According to Stuart Hall, one of the most influential scholars, to understand the how film or television texts produce meaning, we need to build a model that will explain the whole process of the communication, not just the meanings inscribed in texts, or their ideological or behavioral “effects.” In Hall’s model, this process is operated through three connected but distinctive “moments” – the “moment” of production, of the text, and of viewing. Each moment is conceived of as the locus for struggle or negotiation over meaning, so there are, respectively, the meanings “encoded” by the text’s creators, the meanings incarnated in the text, and the meanings “decoded” by

the viewers. This model of analysis was then appropriated for a feminist engagement. This model suggests that the textual meanings never remain uncontested, and neither do the ideological structures which they refer to (in Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 100). The position popular texts offer for their spectator to occupy is not singular or fixed. Film representations may derive their meaning from the textual and ideological structures in which they are embedded, "but they refer outwards too, to a social reality in which power – whether socio-political or ideological – is not simply imposed but contested". If the text does allow multiple positions rather than a single one "from which it must be understood and enjoyed, it might be appropriated for new readings, for the production of new, perhaps more contingent, partial and fragmented identities, or for a feminist politics of reading" (Thornham, "Feminism and Film" 100).

Therefore, according to Thornham, this point has led a number of feminist writers to go beyond the textual analysis of film and to explore women as film spectators "who are historically situated – that is, of women as cinema audiences rather than – or as well as – textual spectators" (101). For example, Miriam Hansen examines how the "textually constructed spectator" (the female spectator in Mulvey's terms) differs from the "actual" movie-goer (the one who buys the ticket), and the "social, collective, experiential dimension of cinematic reception" from the exclusively psychoanalytic accounts (169). Jackie Stacey has investigated how the film star functions for female fans by conducting an ethnographic study of British women's relationship with Hollywood film stars of the 1940s and the 1950s through their recollections. Stacey's research thus "takes her beyond the moment of reception

examined in theories of the female gaze (that is, when we actually watch the film), and towards a fuller understanding of the more pervasive, and positive, role popular cinema plays within women's everyday lives" (Turner 158). Therefore, for theorists like Hansen and Stacey, "film does not only happen in the cinema; it is a social practice that affects everyday lives through fandom, gossip, fashion, and the whole range of activities through which cultural identities are formed" (Turner 159).

There has been now a lengthening line of feminist critiques of psychoanalytic film theory. Such critiques insist on the need for seeing a greater degree of social, historical and cultural specificity, for recognizing the diversity in watching the same text, and for acknowledging the multitude of extra-textual factors that might affect audience responses to popular films, such as fan activities or other ancillary cultural contexts (Turner 152). Not only in the realm of feminist film studies, but also in the area of film studies as a whole, the psychoanalytic approach is no longer as powerful an influence today as it once was. Over the 1990s in particular, "the psychoanalytic tradition attracted criticism for its totalizing tendencies and for its displacement of other, alternative, modes of analysis" (qtd. in Turner 152). According to Judith Mayne, the problem with many contemporary applications of psychoanalysis to film texts is that it almost becomes a formula:

How many times does one need to be told that individual film x, or film genre y, articulates the law of the father, assigns the spectator a position of male oedipal desire, marshals castration anxiety in the form of voyeurism and fetishism, before

psychoanalysis begins to sound less like the exploration of the unconscious, and more like a master plot? (69)

And also as Bordwell and Carroll have argued, any strong sense of the differences between films, let alone between spectators, tends to disappear before this kind of psychoanalytic theory.

This research will join the move away from the psychoanalytic entrenchment, not because, however, this approach is not “popular” any more, or because it is under criticism. After all, psychoanalytic theories of identification still contend most of the territory of popular cinema, and many of the readings these enquiries have produced have remained rich and useful, such as Babara Creed’s work on the “monstrous-feminine” in the *Aliens* trilogy. As filmmaking becomes more an industry not only about the film text, but also about technology, marketing strategy, consumption, and one of the knots among an even bigger and longer industrial chain, to examine the behind-the-screen cultural-economic logic will be more pertinent to the question of why there is such female representation. Just as Toby Miller puts it, the analysis of the text or the audience must today be “supplemented by an account of occasionality that details the conditions under which a text is made, circulated, received, interpreted, and criticized, taking seriously the conditions of existence of cultural production” (qtd. in Turner 61). In particular, with the advent of twenty-first century when capitalist economies and thus the homologous cultural production are increasingly marked and changed by the new age’s ways of operation, as most saliently characterized by, for

instance, multinational corporations and the wide use of ever-sophisticated media technologies, the consumption of a Hollywood movie cannot be only restricted to the two-hour-long textual duration in a dark theater, but should be contextualized in a larger cultural, social, economic background working under a new set of rules and meanings. The psychoanalytical approaches and the apparatus theory will not be dismissed simply as “outdated” but will be re-examined for what changes have occurred to them under such a larger context. Therefore, this research intends to inquire into film as a cultural product and as a social practice, and as a specific means of producing and reproducing cultural significance, valuable both for itself and for what it could tell about the systems and processes of culture. The interest in the context of consumption will be a primary focus for this research.

Feminism vs. Postfeminism

As the figure of action heroine steps on the stage of popular films with a rather glamorous and highlighted profile in the new millennium, it both reflects and furthers the discursive transformation within feminist theorization as well as the interaction between feminism as politics and its connection to popular culture. It is thus becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the various readings of this image along feminist line of thinking, as feminism, rather than a singular and universalized construct, can take different forms and bear diversified connotations and propositions. Especially after the second wave, the field has been fraught with vigorous debates and

reconfigurations like the ones I just outlined. However, among the existent interpretations of contemporary action heroines, there seems to be a tendency towards “taking a stand” through labeling the textual image as having produced either a progressive or a regressive discourse for women.

For those who tag the representation of action heroine as regressive, such an image reinforces the sexist practice of objectifying female characters by featuring the heroines in highly sexualized bodies and outfits. For example, Angelina Jolie’s Lara Croft outfit comprises a close-fitting black vest and shorts which highlight her rangy form and stacked breasts, black boots with combat lace-ups, straps, and her trademark pistols attached to each thigh. Similarly, Selene (in *Underworld* series) always wears shiny one-piece leather tight that highlights her body shape, though she dislikes the very feminine evening gown even for special occasion. Elektra (in *Elektra*) is dressed in a red corselet-like “armor” when she is on mission, and Aeon Flux (in *Aeon Flux*) in skin-tight black or white suit, or occasionally just two slice of cloth scarcely covering her chest. Therefore, even though the action heroine figure “appears to be the equal of men as she brandishes swords and engages in martial arts combat to overcome villainy,” she is actually “constructed more to appeal to young male audiences than to young women looking for female models of heroism,” (Ferriss, and Young 20) if her image could ever be sought as an identifiable model in the first place, because “the physical beauty and alluring sexuality of the female stars and the characters they play embody traditional, patriarchally defined qualities of femininity” (O’Day 205). Despite the transgressive acts and characteristics she may show to the

audience, she is still subject to the male gaze. In Mulvey's terms, male spectators look at her in a fetishistic way to play down the "threat of castration" denoted by women. The claiming of her equal-to-men power cannot legitimate the sexual display of her body, for she is degraded to the status of purely erotic object for pleasure, and the long-term effort by the second wavers to reject male objectification and to form a female subjectivity will be totally reverted and wasted.

In contrast, there are views that treat the image of action heroine as progressive. With its growing popularity, it is significant in advancing the cause of equality by granting women more central roles in film, who, at the same time, upset the "traditional gender conventions" (Waites 204). These defenders of the super-heroine phenomenon argues that the powerful agency of the leading female provide a strong active womanhood that has never been seen before. Intelligent, resourceful, tough, and competent, she "wields amazing physical prowess and multiple firearms, and capable of any physical activity demanded by various incredible situations" (Rehak 161), such as Lara Croft back-flipping in an ancient cave, or punching a shark underwater. The heroine, in her function as central protagonist in the action narrative, can clearly be seen to constitute the figure in the landscape, the position traditionally occupied by the male hero in classical cinema. Together with her undeniable feminine traits, the action heroine is, as O'Day says, "simultaneously and, brazenly, both the erotic object of visual spectacle and the action subject of narrative spectacle" (205).

While still being the erotic object, with which feminist reading is critically engaged, the heroine is read as being granted the power to enjoy her sexual body and being in a controlling position in romantic relationships, if any. This discursive construction of women being both strong and sexy runs parallel to a narrative called postfeminism that is extensively circulated in popular culture and media. The term “postfeminism” itself “originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement” (Gamble 36). It is “a dominating discursive system that assumes a ‘pastness’ for feminism, arguing that feminism’s purported success in the past allows, even necessitates, that it be superseded in the present” (Gamble 38). The most influential definition of postfeminism through reference to a rhetoric of relapse is Susan Faludi’s backlash trope. A group of women predominantly identified with postfeminism decry second wave feminism for “fostering an inappropriate image of female victimization,” what Naomi Wolf calls “victim feminism” (in Gamble 37). Postfeminists use this label as “shorthand for the claim that feminism has focused almost exclusively on – and overstated—the victimization that women face in their personal, professional, and political lives.” Rather than being victims, they claim, “women as a group hold significant social power, in part because of the stereotypes of women as gentler, fairer, more believable, less violent, more victimized, etc., than men” (Showden 170). As a result, according to the postfeminists, there is “exaggerated feminist propaganda...responsible for the oppression of women in contemporary society”

(Projansky 71). Another form of postfeminism, which is, though less antithetic, still based on a discourse that feminism is redundant and unnecessary, suggests that the second-wave feminism's agenda has been achieved already. While enjoying the equality and all the rights brought by the success, women are entitled to have more choices in life concerning sexuality, family, career and body, and to invest in the "personal empowerment" and in "increasing their self-esteem without 'sacrificing' preoccupations with beauty, man and consumerism" (qtd. in Helford 59).

Up until now, there have been a long line of conceptualizations and categorizations of postfeminism, each of which could be quite different from the other. For instance, according to Sarah Projansky, there are five categories of postfeminism, which are the "linear postfeminism," the "backlash postfeminism," the "equality and choice postfeminism," the "(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism," and the "men can be feminists too." According to Rosalind Gill, there are three dominant accounts of postfeminism: an epistemological shift within feminism (which is similar to Projansky's "linear postfeminism"), a political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with "difference," and a backlash against feminism (which is the same as Projansky's "backlash postfeminism"), but she herself consider postfeminism as a sensibility. Besides, some scholars consider postfeminism in two kinds, one is the culture postfeminism generated by popular culture and media, and the other the academic postfeminism, which incorporates theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism and sometimes is used interchangeably with Third Wave feminism, and this conceptualization of postfeminism is also similar to what Gill summarizes as the

political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with "difference," such as race, ethnicity, nationality, region, class, sexuality or cultural background.

I will not elaborate on what all these different conceptualizations and categorizations are, because that is not the focus of this study. But what I want to point out is that among the wide range of conceptualizations of postfeminism, what is particularly important that makes postfeminism a relevant and an appropriate discursive terrain into which the incarnation of action heroine is closely entwined is its reclaim of both traditional femininity and heterosexuality. And such relevance and reclaim is located within the type of postfeminism termed by Projansky as the "(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism" and also "the culture postfeminism generated by popular culture and media." In this postfeminist view, second-wave feminists are "dowdy, anti-sexual prudes who fail to account for women's need to feel desirable" (Showden 175), and they need to "loosen up" (171). Young women today (but maybe only young women who live in urban area of capitalist society and enjoy higher social class, better education and economic advantages), they claim, simply want "equal access to employment without having to worry about how they are dressed or having sex". Women today are confident in their body and with their sexuality and "do not need a political movement to tell them what is demeaning and what is liberating" (172). Postfeminism includes women's "choice" to engage in heterosexually attractive bodily behavior. Helford argues that postfeminists who "choose" sexuality "find their individual 'activism' primarily in battle against what they must first establish to be a legacy of feminist anti-sexuality" (qtd. in Projansky 79). This celebration of

(hetero)sexuality is in tension with representations of women who, having supposedly achieved professional success, now realize that “having it all” often means give up a boyfriend/husband and a family (Projansky 79). Thus, along with challenging an assumed “sex-negative” feminist legacy, these discourses construct sexual interaction with men as a core desire for women. In other words, these discourses suggest, “if feminism means not sacrificing personal desires and aspirations, why should women have to give up (hetero)sexuality in order to have a professional career” (Projansky 80)? As Robert Goldman and others put it, “meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests” (338). This celebration of women’s play with the heterosexual male gaze –their invitation of the gaze, their own fascination with and attention to the object of that gaze (i.e. their own bodies) – not only intensifies heterosexuality within the postfeminism depicted in the popular media, but also ensures the importance of femininity in postfeminism (Projansky 80). Advertising, particularly, contributes to this version of postfeminism, celebrating women’s “equality” and their access to “choice” (feminism), “while marketing commodities that call for and support constant body maintenance (femininity)” (80).

In this vein, the action babe who simultaneously represents the “action” and “babe” serves as a fit embodiment of equality and choice. She is doing what men used to do in the film, and she wields her prowess right at the start of the film instead of after a long torturing process that forces her to toughen up, indicating that she is enjoying the inheritance already passed down from the previous generation. At the

same time she “chooses” to keep her body in perfectly desirable shape that suits to the traditional feminine beauty. This inclusion of femininity also differentiates the 21st-century action heroines from their precursors in the 80s and 90s like Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* series, and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator II*. They, although marked by female body, are not sexualized as are contemporary heroines, because rather than exhibit a more typically feminized curving body and revealing outfit, they are usually in astronaut uniform (Ripley) or prison clothes (Sarah Connor) and showing their muscles more than their breasts or bottom. There is one specific scene featuring Sarah exercising her biceps with dumbbell in the jail, and multiple scenes of her firing heavy arms quite proficiently. And Ripley is clearly more perceptive as the first one to discover the corporate scheme and more capable of maneuvering weapons against the alien invasion; in the sequels she even stands up against numerous monstrous alien creatures alone and kills them all. All of these exhibit what Tasker calls “musculinity”, a female body overwhelmingly marked by masculinity, which can be seen as “an erasure of the female body rather than a redesigning of its potential for power” (3), because it is not femininity empowered and becoming equal to the masculine, but femininity totally replaced by masculinity, which actually points to an even more patriarchal standard that masculinity is the final goal of women’s equality.

In response to the fervent rise of postfeminism that seems to submerge the second wave, the feminists who identify feminism ultimately as a “political movement” raise their criticisms of the postfeminist discourse. Many feminists argue

strongly that postfeminism constitutes precisely that – a betrayal of a history of feminist struggle, and rejection of all it has gained. Tania Modleski's dismissal of postfeminist texts as "texts that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism – in effect delivering us back to a prefeminist world" (3) is typical of such attacks. The claim of victimization of women as an "exaggerated feminist propaganda" is nothing but postfeminists' own exaggeration and negation of feminism. For Faludi, postfeminism is only pseudo-intellectual, and it defines itself through media-inspired images, thus not worthy of serious consideration (in Gamble 38). On one hand, the inscription of feminism as "being strident and lesbian, a state of 'being' that is implicitly undesirable" (Jones 316) is a highly charged stereotype and "a media-orchestrated misunderstanding" that exists "in the popular imagination" (Gamble 39). On the other, postfeminism is denounced as a depoliticizing practice, that "takes the sting out of feminism, confusing lifestyle, attitudinal feminism with the hard political and intellectual work that feminists have done and continue to do" (qtd. in Genz 336). It abandons the structural analysis of patriarchal power, and "masks the larger forces that continue to oppress many women's lives and re-inscribes their marginality by undercutting the possible strategic weight of politicized feminist collectivities." Postfeminism is condemned "not just for being apolitical but for producing, through its lack of an organized politics, a retrogressive and reactionary conservatism" (Genz 336). Second wave feminist critics unanimously take a negative view of postfeminism's individualistic stance, arguing that "the distinction between

feminist politics and feminist identity is in danger of completely disappearing” (qtd. in Genz 343). “The resort to individualism is said to negate feminism, removing the basis for women’s collective self-understanding and action.” Furthermore, according to the critiques of second wavers, “the danger lies not in postfeminism’s celebration of the personal struggles and triumphs of women, but rather in mistaking these often satisfying images for something more than they are: a rhetoric of tokenism that redefines oppression and structural disadvantage as personal suffering while reframing success as an individual accomplishment” (Genz 344). This tokenism obscures that collective nature of oppression and the need for organized action to remedy social injustice. As to the film text of *Tomb Raider*, there is no other woman whose power equals Lara’s. In fact, there are no notable women at all. Consequently, postfeminism is identified as “a privileged, distinctly middle-class perspective appealing to young women professionals imbued with confidence, an ethic of self-reliance and the headstart of a good education” (Kaminer 23) while the propaganda seems to direct at all young women. At its best, postfeminism’s individualist discourse is “a luxury the majority of women can’t afford” while at its worst “the conflation of the personal and the political...enables backlash politics” (Lee 172). For example, the reason why Lara Croft can afford to play the role of a superhero, driving fancy vehicle and using top technologies to fight villains, is that she is born in a family of status and wealth.

However, feminists themselves are faced with the accusation of being essentialist, as the subjectivity of women in their terms are on the same exclusive track of being

white, middle-class, and heterosexual. After all, as Showden asks, “How can a movement allow all women to dance (to their own beat)?” (169) For sure, any criticism advanced and directed towards each other cannot be treated as a stigma that marks any of them a “worse” or “less worthy” form of feminism. If feminists and postfeminists are stuck in such a dialectical opposition, with both parties attempting to lay claim to some kind of “pure” or “correct” version of feminism, the debate will be forever locked within their own circle of accusing each other. As Genz says, “the inevitable uncertainties and turmoil attendant upon the postfeminist age should not be interpreted solely and hastily in terms of a depoliticized backlash that denies any constructive political potential while employing an overly simplistic rhetoric of opposition to dichotomize the feminist/postfeminist coupling” (338).

The way to walk out of the circle might be, I would argue, rather than pick what each other got wrong, to first settle the question of what is the root of such opposition of feminists and postfeminists, and also what this opposition is symptomatic of. The reason for this is that if the postfeminist discourse is, in most cases, generated by popular culture and media, the forces influencing the representation and interpretation of postfeminism could be multi-polar coming from the larger picture of cultural, social and economic contexts that not only directly affect women per se, but also indirectly affects the ways of looking at representations of women. Rather than saying that postfeminism is not worthy of serious consideration because it is media image (Faludi), it is actually important to examine postfeminism just because it comes from media. And meanwhile, since feminist engagement has been already expanded to

many spheres such as films, the feminist movement, though remaining a political movement in essence, should also take into consideration how their political ideals could be influenced by the cultural and techno-economic content.

By adopting a more subtle and self-conscious approach, some postfeminists (e.g. Naomi Wolf) evade the stark opposition between “good” and “bad” feminism, “as ‘bad’ feminism does not really exist in the sense that it is not an ideology being promoted by any particular individual or group” (Gamble 39). “Instead, it is a media-orchestrated misunderstanding which women must surmount in order to embrace ‘power feminism,’ the aims of which are equality, economic empowerment, and the confidence to act both collectively and individually to achieve such goals” (Gamble 39). Then, why is there such a media orchestration that makes all these misunderstandings or misrepresentations come into being in the first place? What is it that impels films, television programs, or advertising to play such an “orchestrating” role? As for the action heroine films, what is the background mechanism that makes these films possible and popular? Moreover, if postfeminism is dismissed by feminism, which assumes to occupy the height of academia and the intellectual, as merely media hype or belonging to the “lower” terrain of cultural field, there are the “risks recreating the artificial separation between the academic ivory tower and popular culture that has hampered critical analysis” (Genz 337). It is thereby of great importance to examine the both the cultural and academic aspects that help bridge this ostensible fissure. In particular, since the starting point of this research – action heroine cinema—that pulls out the dispute between feminism and postfeminism is a

synthesized form of contemporary popular culture and media, it is of more urgent significance to move beyond the dispute itself so as to look into the root of this dispute from a distance where a clearer vision of the that culture and media can be found.

Back to the opposing interpretations of the action babe figure, it seems that the bifurcation of feminism and postfeminism runs parallel to a similarly bifurcated “navigation system” for the opponent and defender of such an image. Therefore, those endorsing the representation of women as both strong and sexy tend to appropriate the optimistic version of postfeminism while inevitably adopting backlash’s (stereotypical) views of feminism. And those condemning such representation are more adhering to feminist ideals. On one hand, they frown on the erotic objectification of female body. On the other, they question the overall media agenda of producing the comforting illusions that equality has been achieved.

However, these two opposing readings as progressive versus regressive follow the same path that feminism/postfeminism antithesis has taken, which will inevitably wind up in a dead end. For one thing, the opposing readings do locate the theoretical support from the feminism/postfeminism antithesis as the progressive reading appropriates the postfeminist discourse while the regressive reading the feminist discourse, but the theoretical antithesis now remains an unsolved entanglement. For another, the different interpretations of action babe phenomenon focus too much on the textual details that defend their respective stand, but fail to consider how such

textual details work under the image apparatus that has also changed due to the transformations in cultural, social and economic circumstances. That is to say, their interpretations will ultimately render the contention within a stagnant circle, while the larger locus where this “circle” is formed and operated remains unexamined. They insist on asking the question of what kind of discourse is produced from the representation in film texts, while failing to inquire why there is such disputable and oxymoronic representation of women, and where is exactly the source of their own oppositional debate. The key to these questions does not lie in the fact that there is irresolvable conflict between feminism and postfeminism. Neither question can be answered simply from the perspective of feminist/postfeminist discourses, but need to be interrogated from both within and outside the text, especially in association with the larger cultural and social background and the function of technological image.

As Tasker has pointed, “ideological readings based solely on an analysis of (the films’) plots may be reductive, misleading, or both,” because “an experience of cinema is not limited to the duration, or content of a particular film, since texts are contextualized in a variety of different ways by the other mass media, and by the more immediate and diverse ways in which different groups appropriate images from those media” (30). Such an understanding has been crucial to a variety of critical discussions of popular pleasure and how the image apparatus works. Therefore, besides examining the critique of sexism and patriarchy, the potential to look through the phenomenon and nail down the real cause of the debate and conflict lies in our initiative to examine the cultural-economic logic behind all the texts, of which all the

representations and receptions are only symptomatic, and to ask how the film medium is already not neutral and embedded in the particular political economy that make this representation possible.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the cultural-economic logic that operates behind contemporary action heroine cinema, and the relevant theories that provide the critical axis of this thesis. I argue that, subject to such cultural-economic logic, the watching of these action heroine films is a multiple process of consumption: the films are consumed simultaneously as composite commodities, as spectacles of technology, as spectacles of female bodies, and as ideas of feminism.

Chapter 3 The Cultural-Economic Logic

Action, adventure, horror, thriller, fantasy, science-fiction. These are the common generic terms used to tag the action heroine films in question. All of them involve high intensity of action, as the focus of this study is on the “action” heroine. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and its sequel (also with a third to be expected in 2013) unfold around Lara Croft’s treasure-hunting adventures full of supernatural encumbrances. *Resident Evil* series, which use an Alice-in-Wonderland metaphor for the protagonist named Alice in “Zombieland,” embrace a survival-mode of adventures through horror and thrill caused by science-fictional catastrophe. *Underworld* saga, as well as *Elektra* and *Aeon Flux*, feature the heroines in fabricated fantasy worlds, facing with all kinds of horrendous enemies or obstacles, be it ferocious werewolves, top assassins, or governmental conspiracy (see Table 1 in Appendices).

It looks familiar if we also check the generic categories which the highest-grossing films in recent years, or even in the whole history of Hollywood, fall under (see Table 2a and Table 2b I in Appendices). From the *Star Wars* saga, to the ten-year-old *Harry Potter* movies, and to the recent rise of *Transformers*, myriad magical and exquisite scenes have been presented to the audience by means of special-effects created spectacles to support the idea of action, science-fiction, fantasy, horror, and thrill: the moving photos, gigantic firing dragons, flying wizards shuttling around Quidditch in *Harry Potter* movies; the roaring billows, walking skeletons with rolling

eyeballs, and pirates whipping through the high-rising masts while engaged in fierce fighting in *Pirates of the Caribbean*; the highway explosion, mechanical octopus fleeing out from underground, and the moment of Optimus Prime transforming with every single twirling part incredibly visible in *Transformers*.

These spectacles do not exist only on screen. They are everywhere, reproduced through technological means. They traverse time and media, to sequels or prequels, to comic books or video games. Cinema now is not only a scene of representation, but of production and reproduction. Although this research is not going to base its argument on concrete data, yet, Table 2a and 2b actually tell a lot about the enquiry of the larger industrial and cultural background in which contemporary Hollywood plays a dominant role. The next sections will explain this further.

Reproduction of Technological Images:

First, a few big titles appear on the list in a recurring pattern, like *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, only with different subheadings to indicate different episodes under the same franchise. Once in a few years, or even once a year, these titles would appear and reappear to claim the top in box office. With a closer look, it is neither hard nor surprising to find out that those which only appear once on the list are not produced alone, either – they do have sequels or prequels, too, such as *Mission Impossible*, and *Shrek*. While it is startling to see the unbelievable multibillion dollar revenue one single movie can make, it is no less

astonishing to look at the enormous investment to pulling out such an economic hit. For instance, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) took over 100 million dollars on the complete graphics of the movie which included a 17 minute battle scene where Neo alone fight against hundreds of Smith clones simultaneously, and this scene cost over 40 million dollars⁵. This has become a common practice in Hollywood for the past decade.

In response to the highly competitive marketplace of audio-visual content, Hollywood has adopted a new set of strategies by concentrating its resources on the “blockbuster.” Blockbuster strategy was originally employed to counteract the crisis of the major studios in the postwar period. Being deprived of their exhibition monopoly due to Paramount Decree⁶, the major players had to reduce their output, and began to focus on fewer but more expensive and extravagant pictures, which finally culminated in today’s aggressively promoted big-budget movie with high production values, big stars, massive simultaneous release patterns and, increasingly, expensive special effects. Due to the massive investment in such a movie, Hollywood is thus increasingly cautious about which films to make and tends to base a film on a presold or pre-established successful property that is already present all over the world, such as best-selling novels (as in the case of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*), comics, or computer games. Thus, the blockbusters today are more often than

⁵ From <http://www.whatthefacts.com/most-expensive-hollywood-fight-scene/>

⁶ Paramount Decree (1948), also known as the Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948, the Paramount Case, was a landmark United States Supreme Court anti-trust case that decided the fate of movie studios owning their own theatres and holding exclusivity rights on which theatres would show their films (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_v._Paramount_Pictures,_Inc.).

not narratively conservative text open to a world audience (Jöckel, and Döbler 85), which allows several (sub)cultures to generate meaning from it (Fiske)⁷. What's more important, the blockbuster-ing effect is not supposed to be over in just one production. Usually, the billion-dollar investment is intended neither for a one-time flash that disappears immediately the movie theater is lit, nor for an artifact for the future generation to excavate its aesthetic value like what we did with Van Gogh's painting long after his miserable death. The blockbuster needs to exhaust all the opportunities to make profit. It is to be continued and to be reproduced in a second, a third, or an even longer series. Is it simply because the *Harry Potter* books just happen to be such a long series? Not so much. The seven books of *Harry Potter* provide a convenient and lucrative undertaking for the film industry to engage in their prolonged practices of making one after another blockbuster, thus making huge amounts of money once and once again. Not only *Harry Potter* per se, but also for all serial movies, like *Transformers*, it is actually a process of reproducing economic value through a recirculation of near-identical images (except that the casting ages across years) under the name of narrating different stories, and through a re-appropriation of audiences/fans' fascination and loyalty either to the original text or to the kaleidoscopic screen.

Second, each title on the list is by no means contained within the sphere of film.

It can be a myriad display of related products. What were ancillary markets for film –

⁷ While there would be quite diversified interpretation and reception of Hollywood films in different countries, regions and cultures, this study's focus is on the audience that has its cultural background embedded in society of late capitalism.

home video, DVDs, and computer games – have in some cases become more important than cinema exhibition. And to satisfy the range of desires that comes from the watching a popular film – the desires for fashion, for the new, for the possession of icons or signs that are highly valued by one’s peers, there is a massive increase in merchandising – in the amount of products now licensed to individual films, such as soundtrack album, T-shirts, books, action figures, posters and so on (Turner 7). In this view, today’s Hollywood film can rarely be presented to its public as a single product, event, or commodity. Rather, according to Graeme Turner, it is a kind of “composite commodity,” linked to “the making of DVD, the computer or video game, the range of action figures, or the theme park ride – all aimed at extending the purchase of film beyond the cinema walls” (8). More fundamentally, the change in the nature of film as a cultural commodity reflects the hard industrial fact that film is no longer the product of a self-contained industry; today, it is “most often merely one of a range of cultural commodities produced by large multinational conglomerates whose main interest is more likely to be electronics or petroleum or theme parks than the construction of magical narratives for audiences to enjoy on the screen” (8).

Therefore, now, audiences can see the movie in the cinema, or rather the Cineplex, at home on DVD, on computer, on smart phone. They can see the face of Jack Sparrow (the protagonist of *Pirates of the Caribbean* played by Johnny Depp), for instance, smirking from the movie posters or LED trailers in cinema, in diners, or in subway stations. Every other year, they anticipate a new episode to be “coming soon” – a sequel or prequel, or maybe an updated version of director’s cut or Blu-ray.

If they like the soundtrack of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, they may see Jack Sparrow again on the cover of the OST album in music store. Thanks to the development of computer and internet technologies, they can go manipulating their favorite characters in simulated adventures if they purchase the video games of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. When they open a webpage, Jack Sparrow's face could pop up in sidebar commercials, maybe for movie, for game, or for a new brand of soda drink. Or even better, he may stare at a Facebook-er with his heavy eyeliner in anyone's news sharing section. The image is everywhere, reproducing and reproduced in every corner, every media, every breath. In this sense, the audiences have undergone a similar reproducing process by adopting multiplied identities, not only as spectators who watch the movie in the theater, but also as music lovers, game players, or frenzy fans who would buy anything to fulfill their fantasies. In whichever way, however, they are ultimately labeled under the same general term – consumers. As a result of the endless reproduction, the consumers never have the finished product. There is always one way or another to make the consumption possible or possible-r.

Take the horror film series *The Final Destination*⁸ as a metaphorical example. The audiences know that all characters in each episode will die eventually, but they are still consuming the images of different ways of dying again and again, and expecting the next *Final Destination*, which actually will never be the Final one. So if there is never a final destination for producing and reproducing images, as the “re-”

⁸ *Final Destination* is a series of horror films centered on the themes of fatalism, predestination and precognition. Each film features a group of people who escape their fate of dying in an accident at the beginning (because one of them has a warning premonition), but later die in series of elaborate and often gory scenarios.

process can go on endlessly in circular manner, then what can be the consequences for all these images?

This question could go back to the critique of mechanical reproduction of images by Walter Benjamin. As early as the beginning of 20th century, photography and film making technologies had already been capable of capturing the reality and reproduce it in images for the masses. In his famous 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin raised his reflection on the effects of modernity on the work of art, and referred to the manner in which modern modes of technological production and reproduction have shattered previous ideas concerning the aesthetic value of the work of art. He pointed out that the mechanical reproduction of art had led to the loss of “aura.” The aura, for Benjamin, represents the originality and authenticity of a work of art that has not been reproduced, which includes the atmosphere of detached and transcendent beauty and power supporting cultic societies. It also refers the legitimacy conferred to the object through a lengthy historical existence. Benjamin wrote: “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (107). Thus, a painting has an aura while a photograph does not, for the photograph is an image of an image while the painting remains utterly original. The sky-high prices for original classic paintings also manifest a residual attachment to the aura of the original artwork in contemporary society. However, the growth of the mass media in the twentieth century with the proliferation of images, which appears in its most radical forms in film and

photography, heightened the tendencies of which Benjamin talks. In contemporary society our experience of arts is generally of their technological reproductions. The new forms of artistic media in the twentieth and twenty-first century, such as film, video and television, are, indeed, based on technological methods of reproduction, and the aura which surrounds *The Mona Lisa*, for instance, is unavailable to, and indeed irrelevant for, these kinds of art forms. For the new kinds of art forms, millions of images of an original are circulated, all of which lack the “authentic” aura of their source. The increasing “desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly,” and to “get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” impels the consumption of reproduced images (108). The beauty supposed to be appreciated from a distance has been eroded as it gradually travels to its mass consumers. No matter it is a picture magazine full of close-ups of a glamorous star like Angelina Jolie, or a super-high-resolution Blu-Ray DVD showing every single pore and every moving hair of that star, it “preserves not the unique aura of the person, but the spell of the personality, the phony spell of a commodity” (113). At the same time people mass consume the image, the mass consumption revels in the consequence of the loss of aura.

Indeed the impact of Benjamin’s theory on technological reproduction of images can be detected in some of the theorizations of postmodernism several decades later. For many theorists and critics, the postmodern era is when reproduction takes over from authentic production. The term postmodernism is contextualized in the post-

world war II era where advances in science and technology paved the way for newer forms of analysis (Mendoza 43).

Postmodernism, as the prefix “post” implies, can mean “after” modernism, “not” modernism, or “going beyond” modernism according to different theorists (Berger 7). In one way, postmodernism can be described as “a wide-ranging cultural movement which adopts a skeptical attitude to many of the principles and assumptions that have underpinned Western thought and social life for the last few centuries” (Sim 289). These assumptions are based on the core ideas of what is called modernism, which is characterized by a belief in human progress and a dedication to originality in thinking and art. Modernism roots from the Enlightenment period of eighteenth century with an overwhelming belief in the power of human reasoning to understand the world through scientific thought and natural philosophy, which were man’s tools to initiate change and progress. Modernism assumes that, in the extent of knowledge and the sophistication of techniques, there is an inevitable superiority of present civilization to that of the past. As an aesthetic, modernism advocates the view that “originality is the highest state of artistic endeavor, and that this can best be achieved by experimentation with form” (Sim 289).

Postmodernism, on the contrary, calls into question modernism’s commitment to progress, as well as the ideology underpinning it. Postmodernism encourages a dialogue between past and present in thought and the arts, and thus partly rejects the modernist commitment to experiment and originality by embracing a return to the use

of past styles or artistic methods (Sim 289). As summarized by Berger, the differences between modernism and postmodernism include: First, if modernism involves differentiation (between the elite arts and popular culture), postmodernism involves what can be described as dedifferentiation, breaking down the barriers between the elite arts and popular culture and reveling joyfully in mass culture. Second, if modernism involves a “high seriousness” toward life, postmodernism involves an element of game playing (playfulness), an ironic stance, and the celebration of the surface “depthlessness” of culture. Third, if modernism involves stylistic purity, as reflected visually in modernist architecture, postmodernism involves stylistic eclecticism, fragmentation, and variety, with the pastiche as the governing metaphor. But, due to the difficulty in defining postmodernism in the first place, this comparison cannot be exhausted or definite (9-10).

In a sense, “postmodernism can be regarded as part of a longer-running philosophical tradition of skepticism, which is intrinsically anti-authoritarian in outlook and negative in tone: more concerned with undermining the pretensions of other theories than putting anything positive in their place” (Sim 289). Thus, according to Jean Francois Lyotard, postmodernism seeks to reject the “grand narrative” – the universal theories that claim to be able to explain everything – and nurtures the cause of the “little narrative” instead (60). Little narratives are put together tactically by small groups of individuals to achieve some particular objective but do not intend to answer all society’s problems. In Lyotard’s view, little narratives are the most inventive way of creating and disseminating knowledge, which help to crush the

monopoly constructed by grand narratives (Sim 8-9). This line of conceptualizing postmodernism is rather a positive reading of the postmodern, in that it sees postmodernism as a deconstructive challenge to the authoritarian narrative structured by dichotomies and universal truth, thus making spaces for the minority discourses that used to be tyrannically excluded in modernist outlook, to which, for instance, feminism adheres for its critique of patriarchy. However, postmodernism could be seen, on the other hand, as characterized by an “anything goes” pluralism (Hayward 275). It then renders a culture that is fragmented, schizophrenic, promoting “hedonism and anarchy” (Hayward 282), and finally leading to the loss of the human subject. For elaboration, a comparison between the effects of the industrial machine on the individual (the subject) and those of the post-industrial one would be useful. While the industrial machine was one of production, the post-industrial one is of reproduction (Bruno 69). In the former case, the industrial machine results in the alienation of the subject, which means the subject no longer commands the modes of production. In the latter, the post-industrial machine leads to the fragmentation of the subject, to its dispersal in representation (Bruno 69). Stuck in the ever-present, the subject thus has no history and no memory. According to Jacques Lacan, language forms the experience of temporality and its representation. If, in this light, the subject has no experience of temporality, no link with the past or the future, it is then without language – there is no way to represent the “I.” This leads to a schizophrenic situation where the subject cannot assert its subjectivity (in Hayward 281-82).

The conceptualization of postmodernism is surely not limited to such positive/negative categorization, for postmodernism has long been considered as an evasive term that is beyond definition. For one thing, any attempt to valorize it would run counter to its own anti-authoritarian nature, for another, different theorists of postmodernism would have different concerns and understanding about it. And therefore, it is not the purpose of this study to align with any side of the reading of postmodernism. What is needed then is, first, to locate the characteristics of postmodernism pertinent to explaining the cultural landscape of Hollywood production and reproduction, which, in turn, decides the contextual reading of the action heroine films in concern, and second, to see how those characteristics condition and are conditioned by the studied films.

Among the many theorists of postmodernism, the most prominent one that delves into issues of media, image (re)production and consumption is developed by the French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. He shared similar thinking with Benjamin on the issue of image reproduction. Although he did not state specifically what is the consequence of reproduction of images, his “explicit expression of the reality problematic” (Mendoza 45) and his works on political economy of sign and the consumer culture, provided radical insights into the power of reproduction and consumption and how it was playing a crucial role in organizing contemporary societies around objects, images and commodities. Baudrillard sees the post-industrial society as the society of spectacle dominated by electronic mass media. Such society is one of reproduction and simulation, which, instead of producing the

real, reproduces the hyper-real (Hayward 279). In his view, the real is what is always already reproduced, a simulacrum of the real – thereby no original serves as a point of comparison and no distinction remains between the real and the copy—and that is, briefly speaking, the reality problematic. In the following paragraphs of this section, I will elaborate on Baudrillard’s theories of the issues stated above.

Baudrillard’s early works are built on Marxist theories on capitalism⁹. His analysis still holds the central problem of commodity as “the structural problem of all societies” (*A Critique* 5), but it prefaces the importance of the role of communication in analyzing the commodity by supplementing Marxist analysis of society with de Saussure and Barthes’ semiology (Mendoza 47). In Baudrillard’s perspective, the commodity is “not merely as a material object, but as a vehicle of communication, a sign” (47). Baudrillard abandons Marxist privileging of production and position the importance to the opposite pole of the spectrum on consumption. According to Baudrillard, “consumption is not merely the passive recipient of production through satiation of needs but rather it is an active endeavor in ‘the manipulation of signs’ towards the creation of the ‘person’ and its integration within the system” (Mendoza 48). It is a process in which the subject is undergoing an objectification while the object a subjectification through consumption. In a capitalist society, “consumption acquires for the person signs in the object being consumed which in turn determines his status” (48) and identity. Such relationship between the consuming subject and the

⁹ Marx’s general thesis in “Capital” argues that the underlying logic of capitalist societies is the accumulation of wealth through “immense collection of commodities” in which “the individual commodity appears as its elementary form” (125)

object consumed is what Baudrillard calls “personalization” (*System of Objects* 5). This line of theorization partly agrees with Althusser’ apparatus theory in that the subjectivity seems to be formed by consuming the sign. But in his later works, he gradually sees such creation of “person” is overwhelmed by the endless reproduction, absence of signified and the third-order simulacra – that is, the manipulation of signs is only a false one (or a simulated one), which I will show later.

Baudrillard further argues that the consumption of a commodity has entered a second stage. The historical form of consumption in its early phase is relatively primitive, which is based on the binary opposition of use-value versus exchange value. But the second stage of political economy – late capitalist consumer society – is the “generalization and complexification of the sign form, which extends throughout the entire culture and environment and mutates into sign-value” (Best 52). In this stage, use and exchange value does not disappear, but the commodity is “produced, distributed, reproduced, and consumed for its conspicuous social meaning” (Best 52). The object is transformed into a mere sign of its use, abstract and detached from any physical needs. In this case, consumption, like that of a car décor, is not based on a need – or the use-value according to Marxism. “It is a consumption of what it signifies and how the consumer consuming the sign is integrated within the system” (Mendoza 49). “In this society, advertising, packaging, display, fashion, ‘emancipated’ sexuality, mass media and culture, and the proliferation of commodities multiplied the quantities of signs and spectacles, and produced a proliferation of sign-value” (Kellner, *Beyond* 4).

Therefore, Baudrillard argues, commodities are not only comprised of use-value and exchange-value as in Marx's theory, but also sign-value –“the expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury, power, and so on” (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”) – which becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption. The commodity form has developed to such an extent that “there is actually no more ‘objective’ value of a commodity because the exchange-value only uses the use-value as a mere alibi for its existence” (Mendoza 50), and that “use and exchange value have been superseded by sign-value that redefines the commodity primarily as a symbol to be consumed and displayed” (Best 41). The current form of capitalism is thus structured around configurations of sign-value, from which “people attain status and prestige according to which products they consume and display in a differential logic of consumption, in which some products have more prestige than others, according to current tastes and fashion” (Kellner, *A Critical Reader*). In this logic, the Hollywood blockbuster, with its far-ranging marketing and pervasive presence in every commercial form, keeps bombarding people with spectacles boasting of highly expensive special effects and celebrity casting. Consuming such commodity becomes the fashion, the mark, and the prestige that constitutes the consumer's identity as a must-see blockbuster viewer that walks the trend. At the same time, he/she might also be a fan who desires to possess action figures or movie posters to add on to his/her collection of various sign-values.

With the mass communication, mass production and mass consumption, signs and codes proliferate and reproduce, and other signs and new sign machines are

produced in astonishing speed and ever-expanding cycles. As the political economy enters the second stage in which the commodity's sign-value serves as the analytical basis, "signs and images slowly reduce reality into appearance" (Mendoza 52). This is what is called *The Society of the Spectacle* (first published in 1967) by the Situationists. In this highly influential theoretical work of Situationism, the author Guy Debord writes by paraphrasing Marx, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (thesis 1). The word "spectacle" here is more than its dictionary meaning (a very impressive show or scene); it is a complex term which "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (thesis 10). In one sense, it refers to mass media society. But more generally, it "refers to the vast institutional and technical apparatus of late-capitalism, to all the means and methods power employs, outside of direct force, to relegate subjects to the critical and creative margins of society and to obscure the nature and effects of its distorting power" (Best 47). And Steven Best further explains,

Thus, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life – recovering the concrete totality of human activity through social transformation. The spectacular society spreads its narcotics mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment. (48)

Cinema would be one of the most important and powerful mechanisms involving a “commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure and everyday life” (Best 47). Through its concentration on non-reality-based genres and endless spectacles to please the eye but not nourish the mind, contemporary Hollywood does well in convincing people that they enjoy their life very much.

“The advanced abstraction of the spectacle brings in its wake a new stage of deprivation” (Best 48), in that history of social life can be understood as “the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing.” (thesis 17). The spectacle epitomizes how postmodern society operates – the relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, in which “passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity” (thesis 4). Debord also writes, “the spectacle is not a collection of images...; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (thesis 4). “Political economy now revolves around images as the form of exchange in commodities – the relationship between consumer and commodity is mediated with the image or spectacle” (Mendoza 53). Therefore, the mode of production and the social consciousness bombarded with images, amplified by mass media, particularly intensified by film industry, becomes a relationship of spectacle. “Society has transformed the relationships of subjects to objects, and subjects to other subjects, into a relationship based on what can be shown – appearances, between brand names and labels” (Mendoza 54). “What appears is good; what is good appears” (Debord thesis12).

In these aspects, there is a remarkable congruence between Debord and Baudrillard's key themes. But according to Best, Debord was more of a Hegelian-Marxist than a proto-Baudrillardian (50), particularly when Baudrillard's theorization later took a postmodern and post-Marxist turn. Although both of them emphasized the artificiality of the spectacle, Debord never stopped trying to interpret and change social reality. Best described their incongruence as follows,

Debord peered into the abyss of a reified unreality but drew back to report and critique what he had seen; there is an 'implosion' of opposites (Baudrillard), but the separate poles retain their contradictory identity; illusion overtakes reality, but reality resurfaces precisely where it is most absent; alienation has divided the essential unity of the social and the individual, but the whole can be regained at a higher level if the historical subject – the proletariat—becomes conscious and realizes its revolutionary objectivity. (Best 50)

This is the point from which Baudrillard departs. Later becoming a post-Marxist, he declares this neo-Marxist framework of Debord's is a fiction. He believes in the obliteration of the subject, embrace of object, and the loss of identity for binary opposites. In this process, there is no more truth or reality, no more politics or social. This is the threshold point where modernity transits to postmodernity (Best 50).

For Baudrillard, postmodernity consists in his categories of simulation, implosion, and hyperreality. Modernity, Baudrillard claims, is structured by a mode of representation in which ideas represent reality and truth, and with a subject-object

dialectic in which the subject was supposed to represent and control the object. According to modern philosophy, “the philosophic subject attempts to discern the nature of reality, to secure grounded knowledge, and to apply this knowledge to control and dominate the object” (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”). Whereas, a postmodern society pulls down this epistemology by creating a situation in which fragmented subjects lose contact with the real, and “thought and discourse could no longer be securely anchored in a priori or privileged structures of ‘the real’” (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”). Baudrillard follows his semiological analysis of sign to explain this process of loss of reality in the postmodern world.

In his later work, Baudrillard claims that the semiotic system inscribed at the heart of the entire system of commodities took on an autonomy of its own. As the era of production is finished, a new, dematerialized society of signs, images, and codes emerges, which is governed by a process of “radical semiurgy.” In this phase of political economy, according to Baudrillard, the relative unity and stability of the industrial world/sign breaks apart. No longer restrained by an objective reality, or tied to some signified in a simple binary relation, the signifier becomes a free-floating one that establishes its meanings through its manipulation in coded differences and associative chains. Disassociated from any stable relationship with a signified, where a distinct referent is assigned according to the sign structure, the signifier then becomes its own referent – this autonomization becomes the basis of semiological domination and the structural prerequisite of sign-value. The “sign-form” overshadows the commodity-form which subsequently “bears no relation to any

reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 173). Signification is radically relativized and anything can pass for “meaning” or “reality”, which actually point to the fact that there is reality no more.

This process is further elucidated by Baudrillard in “Simulacra and Simulation.” According to him, simulation is a process where representations of things come to take the place of the things being represented, during which the representations become even more important and more real than the “real thing.” There are four successive phases of the image. In the first stage, the image is “the reflection of a basic reality,” thus “a good appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament”; in the second phase, the image “masks and perverts a basic reality,” “an evil appearance,” where the first-order simulacrum comes into being; in the third, the image “masks the absence of a basic reality,” playing at being an appearance, a second-order simulacrum; in the fourth stage, the image “bear no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum,” which is “no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation,” and this is the third-order simulacrum (173). And Baudrillard also points out the crucial distinction between dissimulation and simulation. Both concepts include a feigning and a faking. However, dissimulation covers or masks reality, which means it ultimately reaffirms the presence of reality, but simulation devours the real – the representational structure and space it depends on – and there is nothing left behind except commutating signs and self-referring simulacra, feigning a relation to an absent real (170).

The concept of simulation and simulacra marks the fundamental rupture between modern and postmodern societies. According to Baudrillard's theory, "modern societies are organized around the production and consumption of commodities, while postmodern societies are organized around simulation and the play of images and signs, denoting a situation in which codes, models, and signs are the organizing forms of a new social order where simulation rules" (Kellner, "Jean Baudrillard"). In a society that revolves around consumerism and media images, people are trapped in the endless play of images, spectacles, and simulacra, whose relationship to an external or objective "reality" becomes increasingly loose until the very ideas of the social, political, and "reality" are devoid of any meaning. "The media-saturated consciousness is in such a state of fascination with image and spectacle that the concept of meaning itself, which depends on stable boundaries, fixed structures, and shared consensus, dissolves" (Kellner, "Jean Baudrillard").

And this dissolving of boundaries consists of the second category of Baudrillardian postmodernity – implosion. With the disappearance of the referent, depth, essence, and reality, the possibility of all potential oppositions, dichotomies, and boundaries vanishes as well. Thus in postmodern world, for Baudrillard, the once important boundaries and distinctions, which modernist analysis depends on, have lost power. If modern societies, for classical social theory, were characterized by differentiation, originality, growth and explosion, postmodernity are characterized by dedifferentiation, or the "collapse" of distinctions, such as those between subject and object, between social classes, genders, and once independent spheres of society and

culture (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”). Postmodernity marks the horizon where such modern dynamics have reached their limits and begun to draw inward and absorb themselves, resulting in an implosive process devouring all relational poles, structural differences, conflicts and contradictions, and referential finalities. In Baudrillard’s society of simulation, “the realms of economics, politics, culture, sexuality, and the social all implode into each other. In this implosive mix, economics is fundamentally shaped by culture, politics, and other spheres, while art, once a sphere of potential difference and opposition, is absorbed into the economics and political, and sexuality is everywhere” (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”). This is also what happens to feminism and anti-feminism. Their opposition implodes into media images travelling to multiple spheres, and characterized by what is called “postfeminism”, a term of no less uncertainties. In this situation, differences between individuals and groups implode while the previous boundaries and structures upon which feminist theory had once focused is taken in a rapidly mutating dissolution.

The third category of postmodernity for Baudrillard is hyperreality. It happens when simulations proliferate and come to refer only to themselves. It is like “a carnival of mirrors reflecting images projected from other mirrors onto the omnipresent television and computer screen and the screen of consciousness, which in turn refers the image to its previous storehouse of images also produced by simulatory mirrors” (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”). In such an endless play of self-referentiality, the lost reality is superseded by what Baudrillard calls “hyperreality.” The hyperreal comes into being as a result of a historical process of simulation, in which technology

made images and self-referential signs gradually replace the natural world and all its referents. Best further explains,

This is not to say that “representation” has simply become more indirect or oblique, but that – where the subject/object distance is erased, where language no longer coheres in stable meanings, and where signs no longer refer beyond themselves to an existing, knowable world—representation has been surpassed. The real, for all intents and purposes, is vanquished when an independent object world is assimilated to and defined by artificial codes and simulation models. (53)

The “precession of the model” is what “puts an end to the real” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 167). For Baudrillard, in this universe of hyperreality, entertainment (such as the all-pervasive Hollywood movies), information, and communication technologies (such as all popular social network websites, instant messengers, and bulletin board systems) manage to offer experiences that are more intense and engaging than what people have with their banal everyday life. It can even be said that the space of the hyperreal is more real than real, “whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior” (Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard”).

While Baudrillard describes postmodernity in terms of these three categories, he also makes emphasis on the new technologies – media, cybernetic models and systems, computers, information processing, digital and virtual technologies, entertainment and knowledge industries and so on –without which, all of the

reproduction and consumption of images and spectacles in contemporary society and what he states as the postmodern turn would not be possible. Technology plays a decisive role in creating and pushing the shift from real to hyperreal. And as a kind of media technology and image mechanism, cinema is a typical manifestation and catalyst of this technology indispensability.

Blockbuster, Special Effects and Technology

Besides the endlessness and ubiquity of images that marks Hollywood blockbuster films, the spectacularization of cinematic images, enhanced by the development of special effects, is another great marker of the films of contemporary cinema. The overarching quality of what is presented to the audience as a blockbuster and an attractive consumer product is its intensive presentation of the spectacular, in particular, the dazzling special effects achieved by today's sophisticated computer technology. Looking back again at the generic convergence of those high-grossing blockbuster productions in recent decade and the films that score the highest box office in history (see Table 2b in Appendices), we can find that an overwhelming number of them mix two or more genres from action, adventure, science-fiction, fantasy, and horror. Why particularly these genres? And why all generic mixtures?

For the first question, one of the most conspicuous reasons is that there is a strong tendency among these genres to put on the pedestal the unique sensual enjoyment of visual spectacles, which are blissfully guaranteed by the remarkable

advancement in filmmaking technologies, and which, in turn, provide a highly effective and lucrative locus for displaying such technological miracles as well as the “miracle” of technology, creating of which has already become a privilege for Hollywood studios. And by combining many such genres, Hollywood build up a more centralized mechanism where all generic conventions are distilled and intensified to produce a commodity that contains all of the pleasure, all of the pain, and all of the opportunities to further display and sell its technological images.

In the process of creating various spectacularized images that are built up by the fantastic, awe-inspiring, and extravagant special effects, Hollywood is actually producing signifiers of difference intended to inspire no more than a “wow” effect. When watching genre films, the audience is on one hand, expecting what is already known as the routine about the genre, and on the other hand, looking forward to something extraordinary, something that transgress what is familiar (Altman). That is to say, when they are watching an action movie, for instance, he/she knows that there is going to be gun shooting, weapon wielding, hand-to-hand combating, and car racing on highway followed by clashing or explosion, etc. Based on this knowingness, the audience also awaits to be surprised, amazed, or shocked by a reworking of the earlier cinema, by what deviate from the conventional in an upgraded manner, such as an explosion no longer on the highway, but up in the air as the car is falling from Golden Gate Bridge (and a female hero would also be an example in contrast to the conventional male hero). Therefore, in order to keep providing such surprise, amazement, and shock that keeps the audience coming back and thus keeps their

competitive edge, the filmmakers are obliged to generate more special, more splendid, and more visually pleasurable spectacles through what is offered by the rapidly growing digital technology. And this endeavor to give ever more and fresher images by exploiting hi-tech special effect goes on and on in such a contagious and ever-escalating manner that the whole film industry just cannot stop its obsession with technology to produce and reproduce images, spectacles, and signs that actually pile up to celebrate the “triumph of the signifying culture” (Featherstone 15).

Hollywood’s obsession with, or dependence on technology to gain and regain its marketplace is not a recent practice. Hollywood does have a long history and tradition of exploiting technological advances to bring back lost audiences to the cinema theatre. Actually there were different reasons for pushing the adoption of new film technologies: it could be the tactic to obviate threat from a new medium, the urge to gain a more powerful position within the circle of filmmaking, or the intention to rekindle a stagnant film industry with the potential of computer-made images. But for whatever reason, there has been a keen desire to stand out, and thus to keep alive the film industry by making good use of the most advanced visual/audio technologies only those major studios and individuals possess.

The first major technology that establishes the feature film as the main attraction in the cinema is the introduction of sound. There has been a great deal of argument over the industrial reasons for introducing sound. One view tells that the major studios in Hollywood were in financial trouble, as audiences were declining and the

expansion into the extravagant “picture palaces” in mid-1920s had concentrated the benefits on a limited number of the most popular movies. As the first one to use optical sound in a string of shorts and then the famous musical *The Jazz Singer*, Warner Bros was even claimed to have been on the verge of bankruptcy, and clinging to the hope of the talking picture like a drowning man (Sklar 75). But Douglas Gomery argues differently that the studio was not bankrupt at all and he sees Warner Bros’ achievement in the introduction of sound as a prescient business decision. As a company much smaller than the majors then, it needed a new product that none of the others had. Sound was that product (43).

No matter what is the true condition of the industrial history, however, “there were some aesthetic and ideological conditions supporting the introduction of sound which deserve consideration” (Turner 14). For a technological change to be widely accepted, there has to be a specific need, and according to Buscombe, with the coming of sound on film, this is the need for the narrative feature film to become more realistic (83). “The development of the moving picture from the still camera was a movement towards realism, towards the apparent replication of the experience of viewing life” (Turner 14). In resonance with the apparatus theory, the camera acts as an apparatus that embodies the reality by seeing the world as the object of the spectator’s point of view. The introduction of sound thus further facilitates the complication of realistic narrative by incorporating the audio aspect that is also indispensable to human senses in daily life. Turner points out that the realism here is “not just an ideological position, but an explicit aesthetic – a set of principles of

selection and combination employed in composing the film as a work of art” (15). The presentation of dialogue in synchronous lines pronounced by characters instead of body language or silent subtitle reconnects the motion picture with real life of verbal language. To this end, the industry rapidly designed a set of techniques for shooting and cutting dialogue which later become conventions. For instance, the technique of shot reverse shot over a continuous soundtrack was used to embody a conversation such that the spectator perceives a linear and logical action. These systems work in a similar way to that in the nineteenth-century novel which epitomizes realistic art. In this sense, “the feature film, like the realist novel, sets out to construct a realistic world, to provide psychological depth for its characters, and to place itself within notions of real life. This series of objectives dominates the development of the narrative feature after the advent of sound” (Turner 15).

In view of these ideological and aesthetic considerations, a more convincing explanation for the introduction of sound is its effectiveness as an economic strategy in re-attracting a disinterested audience. As the German and Russian cinema stood out in terms of aesthetical and cultural quality in the late 1920s, which rose as strong rivals against Hollywood then, the introduction of sound into great quantity of films won Hollywood remarkable edge and helped American industry reclaim the hegemony over global market. It is especially so as Hollywood developed a new genre combining the pleasure of film and vaudeville simultaneously – the musical – which none of the foreign industries were capable of competing due to the lack of sound technology (Turner 16).

However, film audiences have been dwindling for most of the last fifty years in the 20th century. According to Turner, in most Western capitalist countries the figures for cinema attendances reached a prime in 1946 and the overall trend has been downward until the end of the 1990s (23). By 1953, when almost 50 percent of American household had a TV set, the “US attendance levels had sunk to half the 1946 figures” (23). There has not been satisfactory explanation for such slump in attendance, “but it is clear that film was already losing its cultural pre-eminence by the beginning of the 1950s and that television merely exacerbated this decline” (24). It is then that the second major technology – color – came in to help rewind the decline with success, but not without difficulty.

Colored movie was in existence as early as 1900, as much silent film was actually tinted then. Technicolor, the processor of color motion pictures, was invented in 1915, but it did not become dominant until the 1930s and 1940s. But it was not more widely used before the 1960s because of the high cost and Technicolor’s irritating monopoly. It became more widely in use after sound and Technicolor’s introduction of a new three-color subtractive process in 1932 (Turner 26). But still, it was as not much of a dramatic breakthrough as that sound had been, and it was not until TV’s conversion to color in the 1960s that color film finally became the conventional production for feature film (27). At first, color was widely used in cartoons, musicals, westerns, and comedies where spectacles, epics set in the past, or special effects in fantasies were presented. So color’s function was “not to create the illusion of the real, but to signify artifice, decoration, the cinema as storyteller” (27).

Only when color became part of current affairs programs and news reporting on television did it lose its association with fantasy and spectacle (28).

Concurrently, in other attempts to make movies better than ever brining unique experience that a television screen can never provide, Hollywood produced some “well-calculated, and some bizarre, innovations” (Turner 25). Experiments with widescreen formats became prevalent in the early 1950s – Cinerama was introduced in 1952, Cinemascope in 1953. “Cinerama used three projectors to screen images from three cameras on a curved screen in a specially equipped theatre. Cinemascope projected its image onto an elongated screen, its dimensions not the prevailing 1.33:1, but 2.35:1” (25). Both these screen formats have survived, and due to the success of these wide-screen innovations, the normal size for projection screens is now wider than it was in the 1950s. In the mid-1970s “it was the new super-formats of the widescreen (70 mm film), use of front projections and motion-control systems for special effects and new sound technology” (Hayward 57), George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977) being an outstanding example.

In the 1990s and the past decade, it is the digital technology that creates so much more potential for camera work and special effects, which continues to be exploited extensively over a broad set of genres. During the 1990s, a great number of movies that featured spectacular special effects, particularly made by computer generated images, achieved huge success in box office, such as *Terminator 2* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). This “encouraged a trend for movies which were marketed for

their appeal as spectacle rather than as narrative” (28). More examples include disaster movies such as *Dante’s Peak* (1997) and *Twister* (1996), comedy science-fiction such as *Men in Black* (1997, and sequels in 2002 and 2012) and *Mars Attacks!* (1996), and apocalypse epics such as *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Armageddon* (1998). And this trend has been carried forward not only well, but better, into the new millennium with all those serial blockbusters such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Harry Potter*, *Spider Man*, *Transformers* and so on. For a large part of these two decades, the blockbuster is almost synonymous to the special-effects movie. Even the success of *Titanic* (1997), said by Turner, “seems to have been tied, in large part, to director James Cameron’s use of computer-generated images to create the illusion of the sinking liner” (29). In such films, it is the creation of the illusion that attracts audiences’ attention and wins their admiration. And industrially speaking, the spectacular and visceral nature of the experience of watching blockbusters act, at the same time, as the most convincing advertisement that highlights the pleasures of the cinema over those of television, home video, or other forms of entertainment.

This is especially so for these four years, during which period, 3-D and I-Max format of movies is revived by James Cameron by his 2009 hit, *Avatar* (shot and projected in 3-D technology). A 3-D film is a motion picture that enhances the illusion of depth perception. It is derived from stereoscopic photography, and made by using a regular motion picture camera system to record the images as seen from two perspectives by using computer-generated imagery to generate the two perspectives

in post-production. When viewing the film, special projection hardware and/or eyewear are used to provide the illusion of depth (Wikipedia footnote 9).

3-D technology is not a recent invention. It has been adopted by film industry intermittently ever since 1915¹⁰. 3-D films had been largely put under a niche market in motion picture industry because of the high cost in hardware and in the processes required to produce and display a 3-D film, and the lack of a standardized format for all segments of the entertainment business. Nonetheless, 3D films were prominently featured in the 1950s in American cinema, and later experienced a worldwide resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s driven by I-MAX high-end theaters and Disney theme parks (Wikipedia footnote 9). 3-D films flourished throughout the 2000s, culminating in the unprecedented successful 3-D presentations of *Avatar* in December, 2009 and January, 2010. Following the huge success of *Avatar*, almost every single blockbuster production that involves spectacular scenes or intense actions embarks on this three-dimensional undertaking to catch up with the “trend,” and to coax audiences from the TV screen into movie theater while making them believe that the extra money per ticket costs is a wise investment in 3-D experience. From Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) immediately after *Avatar*, animation *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), to numerous sequel movies whose previous episodes were actually made in 2-D format, such as *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010), *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), *Saw VII* (2010), *The Final Destination V* (2011), and once again *Harry Potter*, the second part of the seventh episode, *Harry Potter and the*

¹⁰ From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3D_film

Deathly Hallows II (2011), and even to the “3-D-ilzed” *Titanic* in 2012, a wrapping of the old sweet memory in a brand-new shell, it is expected that the audiences would feel more shocked, more viscerally pleasurable, and more enchanted with this illusive images that seem so real, so concrete, and so close that they cannot help reaching out their hands to get hold physically of that hallucination.

From sound, color, wide screen to digitalization of filmmaking, the history of Hollywood film can be written as a history of technological development. And it is in this history that Hollywood keeps thematizing the technological superiority – higher and more technologies seem to bring the audience a better experience of the cinematic magic – and thus it is the same history in which Hollywood keeps selling their commanding of such superior technology. In particular, the digital technologies precipitate the changes in American films for the past few decades as the cultural-economic logic takes a, as Baudrillard conceptualized, postmodern turn. All these technological advances made by Hollywood studios to pull back audiences to movie theater seem to pull them further closer to “reality” with each technique invented, because real-life interaction occurs with audible conversation of daily verbal language instead of Chaplin-style gestural expression or inter-titles; because trees are green, sky is blue, each visible component of world is reflected in our eyes as colorful (although color was once considered as unreal effect in cinema for a while); because space and objects are perceived to have different depths and three dimensions. If a tornado really attacked, it would look exactly like what the computer generated imagery brings on screen and it would be seriously convincing that those people are running in panic for

a real reason. If there were zombies coming into “life” someday in future, they would look exactly as shown in *Resident Evil*, the specially made decay skin, rotten flesh, and rolled-over eyes. However, I argue, if movies before the 1980s blockbuster era produced an illusion of reality, there was still some trace of “the real.” These new technologies, however, represented by digital technology, virtual reality and cybernetic technologies push the illusion of reality to a completely new level, or, over a certain boundary that marks the real, which is hyperreal, characteristic of simulacrum and losing contact with the previous orders of replica. If the classical Hollywood cinema¹¹ is the second order of simulacra, then the new Hollywood blockbuster cinema is the third order which has no relationship whatsoever to reality, not even illusion of reality, but hyperreality that completely overturns the existence of reality, and instead produces “the real” and “the social” for us to consume as such. Let me explain this through another recourse to Baudrillard’s theories.

For Baudrillard, the relationship between simulacra and “the real” is formed by the “orders of simulacra,” and thus takes different stages of “orders of appearance.” He also gives an analysis of about how simulacra came to dominate social life in different stages across time. By making a historical sketch of the orders of simulacra, Baudrillard claims that modernity introduced an artificial democratized world of signs (such as stucco, theater, fashion, baroque art, or political democracy) that valorized

¹¹ Classic Hollywood cinema, also called classical narrative cinema, is a cinema tradition which designates both a visual and sound style for making motion pictures and a mode of production used in the American film industry from the 1930s to the 1960s. Classical style is fundamentally built on the principle of continuity editing or “invisible” style. The classic Hollywood narrative is structured with an unmistakable beginning, middle and end, and generally there is a distinct resolution at the end (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson).

artifice over natural signs, thereby breaking down the established medieval hierarchies and orders, and departing from the fixed structures of signs and social positions (in Kellner, *Beyond* 78).

According to Baudrillard, the feudal era was marked by a fixed social order and an established hierarchy of signs, based on which the class, rank and social position is determined. Signs at this stage were stable, restricted and perfectly clear and transparent – in a word, “obligatory.” So an individual’s social rank and status could be readily told from his or her clothes and appearance. However, in the modern age that follows, the order became that the “counterfeit” is the paradigmatic mode of representation, and this is when the first order of simulacra begins (Kellner, *Beyond* 78). Class mobility disturbs the traditional reference systems, and in the consequent chaos, the original references dissipate. The definitions and categories that used to be natural and apparent, such as the specific attire appropriate for status, are pushed aside, and counterfeit comes in their place. But at this stage, the counterfeit requires an original for its meaning. This is the first order of simulacra, because representation is clearly an artificial place-marker for the real item, and the concept of artificiality still requires some sense of reality against which to recognize the artifice (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 170).

In Baudrillard’s terminology, this stage of early modernity was dominated by a “natural law of value”, where simulacra, be it art or political representation, were meant to represent and reflect nature or to embody “natural” rights or laws (in Kellner,

Beyond 78). “Simulacra are not only a game played with signs; they imply social relations and social power” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 168). He thus suggests that the “inherent goal of the order of simulacra is to produce a flexible and controllable universal system of order and power” (qtd. in Kellner, *Beyond 78*). In this historical stage, Baudrillard observes that signs have not yet floated independently of social relations – they are in fact entirely wrapped up in social relations of power: “The counterfeit is working, so far, only on substance and form, not yet on relations and structures...But it is aiming already, on this level, at the control of a pacified society, ground up into a synthetic deathless substance: an indestructible artifact that will guarantee an eternity of power... It is a project of political and cultural hegemony” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 170).

Then the “second order” of simulacra came into being during the industrial revolution, an age of infinite reproducibility in the form of the industrial mass production. “Production then became mechanized, and turned out series of mass objects: exact replicas, infinitely produced and reproduced by assembly-line processes and eventually automation” (Kellner, *Beyond 79*). In this order of simulacra, there is no more nostalgia for a natural order, because nature becomes the object of domination, and reproduction becomes a dominant social principle regulated by the laws of the market (79). The industrial order, as seen by Baudrillard, is ruled by the “commercial law of value,” and equivalent exchange, rather than by the “natural law of value” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 172). This is where and when feminists of film critiques began to examine what illusion the film apparatus is creating to naturalize

certain ideologies that are actually demeaning to women after their reflectionist attempt to look at how cinematic representations offer the false images of women in real life, which could be relegated to the stage of first-order simulacra.

With the introduction of photography and film, as Walter Benjamin argues, “even art was taken over by mechanical reproduction, losing its aura and thus being forced to relinquish its claims to represent a higher dimension offering alternative and allegedly superior values and representations” (qtd. in Kellner, *Beyond* 79). Due to mass production and proliferation of copies, the distinctions between the image and the representation begin to disintegrate. “Such production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it, for instance, in photography or ideology” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 172). This is especially true with classical Hollywood cinema, where its narrative mechanism and its accessorizing with sound and color is a typical second-order simulacra attempting to render certain “realism” through ideological means. Classic Hollywood cinema (or classic Hollywood narrative) is what David Bordwell and others call an “excessively obvious cinema” in which cinematic style serves to explain, and not obscure, the narrative (1). It is based on a neatly organized pattern that is almost beyond any doubt.

This cinema, then, is one that is made up of motivated signs that lead the spectator through the story to its inevitable conclusion. The name of the game is verisimilitude, “reality.” However, an examination of what gets put up on screen

in the name of reality makes clear how contrived and limited it is and yet how ideologically useful that reality none the less remains. (Hayward 64)

Classic Hollywood narrative, whatever the genre is, must have closure – the narrative must come to a completion, be it a happy ending or not. No matter what forms the closure takes, it will, almost without exception, deliver or enunciate a message that is central to dominant ideology, for instance, criminals finally facing legal sanctions, good triumph evil, or true love uniting distressed couple. The most taught discourse by the dominant cinema as myth-maker is its naturalization of heterosexual coupledness and family, and the point that all else must potentially read as deviancy (Hayward 65-66). This is also called seamless realism, whose ideological function is to disguise the illusion of realism. Film technique – supported by narrative structures – erases the idea of illusion, creates the “reality effect” (Hayward 311).

It hides its mythical and naturalizing function and does not question itself – obviously, because to do so would be to destroy the authenticity of its realism. Nothing in the camera-work, the use of lighting, color, sound or editing draws attention to the illusionist nature of the reality effect. The whole purpose is to stitch the spectator into the illusion – keeping reality safe. (Hayward 312)

When there is illusion, there is a potential for reality. That is how the feminists since the 1970s have been engaged with the issues of women in films – to disentangle the illusion mechanism by getting deep into the images, the spectatorship, and the ideologies.

However, as of today, Baudrillard claims, “we are in the third-order simulacra; no longer that of the counterfeit of an original as in the first-order, nor that of the pure series as in the second” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 179). This stage is the end result of a long historical process of simulation, where simulation models come to constitute the world, overtaking and finally “devouring” representation (Kellner, *Beyond* 79). Now “the structural law of value” reigns, and models take precedence over things, while “serial production yields to generation by means of models...Digitality is its metaphysical principle...and DNA its prophet. It is in effect in the generic code that the ‘genesis of simulacra’ today finds its most accomplished form” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 180-81). Society thus moves from “a capitalist-productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order that aims now at total control” (qtd. in Kellner, *Beyond* 80).

Baudrillard draws analogies between language, genetics and social organization to explain how third order simulacra becomes the order of the day. Language structures our communications through codes and models (like words and grammar); Genetics decide our body features, and some abilities or tendencies through permutation and combination of DNA codes; so in a similar manner, society forms the environment and human life also through certain codes and modes of social organization and regulation. More specifically, architectural and transportation models in cities structure, in some way, how urban areas, houses and transportation systems are organized and used, which are in turn governed by the logic of the simulation model or code. For instance, interior design manuals, exercise videos,

child-care books, sexual manuals, cookbooks, magazines, newspapers and broadcast media all provide models that structure various activities within everyday life (in Kellner, *Beyond* 80).

Cinema in this era is one of most important providers of these models, and also absorbs all the other codes and models, infiltrates into every aspects of social life, proliferates across all possible industrial outlets and terminals, and makes its high-profile but hollow appearance. So where is the reality of today's blockbusters? It is, oddly enough, simultaneously in multiple places, texts, occasions, and commodities: in the production studios backstage of evaluating whether the huge investment could be recovered and deciding pouring how many images into how many channels; in the pre-view media conference where the cast are featured in another set of glamorous dresses and suits for photo-shooting and fans-screaming; in the movie theater of "connoisseur-ing" a popcorn and a drink with a visual extravagancy; in the interview feature on magazine adding some "personal flavor" to the celebrity image; in the movie trailer introducing the major spectacular stunt pieces you cannot miss rather than briefing the storyline; in the plot of, again simultaneously, the game version, the film version, and the book version that are inter-adapted and inter-textualized. If solely talking the films, we are, at once, repeating consuming the STORY of the super hero defeating the villain again and again, and consuming the SPECTACLE of that story and of the machinery behind. This is the reality the omnipresent media build for us – the hyperreal. This stage is, then, also when the postfeminist discourse comes

into being, which is based on the media images – the third-order simulacra, but not representations – for its epistemological existence, just like the cinema.

More often than not, as “the opportunity to make a sequel became a standard consideration for many successful films” (McClellan 171), the story structure changes in that the serial mode of production tends to leave the narrative of each episode open, which runs contrary to the classical narrative structure that always put a definite end to a diegesis. As usual, there is never an end story, or an end product. Images and spectacles spill over to other spaces, to other media, floating everywhere, fragmented and with no fixed meaning. But with fancy appearances, or, in Baudrillard’s term, sign value, they are so good at creating desires among us – the movies are must-see, the movie poster makes your room look cool, the action figure allows you to possess the character – that we are made to approach each other and the world through the mediation of these images. We therefore no longer acquire goods out of real needs but out of desires that are increasingly defined by the amazing trailers or the computer generated images, which keep us at one step removed from the reality of our bodies or of the world around us and relocate us to a technological environment that is our new reality. We are so well tamed under these flashy images that if they were not consumed, we would starve of failing to upgrade our aesthetic tastes. In the end, we will be confused if this is the taste of our own, or the simulated taste that belongs to no one and nothing. Reality is nowhere to be found, but in a simulated image, story, or taste.

According to Baudrillard, we do not know the “real” but merely the appearances behind which the real is supposed to hide (*Perfect Crime 2*). As simulation enters the third stage, an image, especially like a cinematic image made of CGI, is “bound neither to truth nor reality; it is appearance and bound to appearance” (*Lucidity Pact 91*). As such, for Baudrillard, “we disappear behind our images” (*Lucidity Pact 85*). “The closer we supposedly approach the real, or truth, the further we draw away from them” (*Gulf War 49*), because what we are getting close to are always the layers of images. With the case of contemporary media – the virtual technology, the spectacular cinema, and their ubiquity and proliferation – the referent disappears into the virtual, vanishing “into the technical programming of the image” (*Lucidity Pact 96*). We do not, as said by Baudrillard, get closer to the reality of a thing or an event by burying it under layer upon layer of images. Indeed, images only take us further away from the real, as reality today is reaching a point where any firm distinction between reality and representation tumbles over the abyss of hyper-simulation (in Coulter 12). Whatever relationship the image and reality may have been said to share in historical time is now stretched beyond credulity in the age of real time media (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 168).

Baudrillard further points out that the process of disappearance and replacement is one of duality. “Not only do we face the problem of the image replacing reality but the real (our obsession with realism, especially in cinema), is making the image disappear” (Coulter 11). As Baudrillard writes, “we deplore the disappearance of the real, arguing that everything is now mediated by the image. But we forget that the

image, too, disappears, overcome by reality, what is sacrificed in this operation is not so much the real as the image” (*Impossible Exchange* 145). Indeed, “cinema is at risk of disappearing at the hands of reality” while at the same time, “reality is [also] disappearing at the hands of cinema” (*Lucidity Pact* 125). On one hand, the more realistic the technological image looks, the more the image, as the third-order simulacrum, is replacing the reality and becoming the hyperreal, in which the cinema is nothing more than another simulacrum, thus already disappeared. On the other, contemporary cinema is one of the main loci for disseminating and reproducing the endless images, which, therefore, leads to the disappearance of reality in the myriad simulacra – the hyperreal world. As such, the simulacra in films move toward the force of reality, though not based on any counterpart in the real world, and this disappeared reality is experienced as being more real than any reality.

There is even not the illusion of reality. The traditional seamless narrative, generally speaking, based the plot on social issues. No matter how easy the solution a “happy ending” can provide to disguise the sad reality, to naturalize social problems and divisions, and thus to reinforce a certain ideology, there is at least an illusion that problems can be solved, and there is still a possibility of accessing the hidden fact of the real through critique. Whereas, for blockbusters to open up to as many audience groups as possible and thus allow them to generate meaning and enjoyment, a central instrument for bring such “polysemic appeal is a rejection of reality-based genres.” Instead, these movies “take on fantastic or futuristic themes. Conjuring up exotic worlds and plots that take place in the future or in a past that never existed, these

blockbuster movies do not represent reality but rather construct it, a simulacrum that precedes anything real, and that does not exist at all” (Jöckel, and Döbler 87). This is also the case for the “reality” in films about action heroine – a non-reality but full of spectacles to look at. The world fabricated in the film replaces the real world to generate desire and pleasure that has never been experienced before, while forming a hyperreal universe that is also “seamless,” in the way that there is no possibility to find any referent for lucidification, because even the illusion has already gone, anything meaningful is lost in this fantastic or futuristic world that, at the same time, overwhelmed by endless spectacles. The blurring of the real and the virtual is the “obsession of our age” (Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V* 92).

For Baudrillard himself, he understands cinema, in the first place, to be (at its best) a degraded form of photography. He believes that, rather than making images stronger, as the popular view sees it, sound and movement represented dilutions of the purity of the image (*Cool Memories II* 44). This view is resonant to Walter Benjamin’s idea about loss of aura, except that for Benjamin, photography is already a pollution of the original image. In Baudrillard’s opinion, technology and an obsession with “realism” are in many ways decreasing the quality of the cinematic image. For Baudrillard, “cinema has been on a downward trajectory over the past century from fantastic and mythical, to realistic and hyperrealistic” (qtd. in Coulter 8). By pursuing virtual technologies – huge amounts of postproduction and the addition of CGI– some cinema, considered by Baudrillard, is “abolishing itself” with “hyperreal” technology (“Simulacra” 167). As cinema’s relation to technology has

long been one of an “illusion of progress”, the use of virtual technologies today thus represents a further degradation of the image as did the addition of sound and color in earlier times (*Gulf War* 49). And this is especially so in recent years, argues Baudrillard, as films are increasingly “stuffed with special effects” and cinematic edge has been lost with the proliferation of high-tech machinery (*Lucidity Pact* 80).

As Baudrillard told an interviewer, “Cinema has become hyperrealist, technically sophisticated, effective (performant). The films... fail to incorporate any element of make believe (l’imaginaire).” In his view, it is as if the cinema were regressing towards infinity, towards some indefinable perfection, a formal “empty perfection” however (*Interviews* 31). This is because when the image “approaches an absolute correspondence” this is “the very definition of the hyperreal” (“Simulacra” 168). And “the closer we come to the absolutely real, to veracity – as in digitalization and computer generated effects – the closer we move towards banality and boredom” (qtd. in Coulter 10). Efforts to achieve perfect definition only move us further away from the power of illusion which is so vital to good cinema (*Perfect Crime* 30). The result is then, wrote Baudrillard, a “pornography of the image, technical processes of illusion which remove the possibility for illusion in the radical sense” (*Artefact* 8). Hence, Baudrillard strongly opposes the embrace of technology in cinema and its links to so-called cinematic realism in recent years. This analysis and stand of his fits well within his overall suspicion of technology and his ability to make us rethink our sense of “technological prowess” which is in fact, he argues, only a disempowering aspect of our contemporary lives, for such prowess is only a false one (in Coulter 9).

It is also an analysis that fits well with the overall tone of this thesis, which will come later in the third chapter.

While technology and image work together to transform the real into the hyperreal, the remaining question is, what happens to the other aspect of cinema – narrative – if it is (or was?) the reason that all the images are produced in the first place? As narrative is an important locus where the active agency of action heroines is embodied, the next section will tackle this question.

Spectacle versus Narrative

The film-viewing experience composes of two dimensions that coexist in cooperative way, or competitive way, narrative and spectacle. Narrative is understood primarily “in terms of the telling of a coherent and carefully developed character-based story throughout the course of the film” (King, *New Hollywood* 179). Spectacle is seen as sequences that employ a heightened degree of spectacle or spectacular action, a source of distraction or interruption: the “big” chase sequence, the “big” explosion, or the “big” presentation or outburst of special effects. As a quality provided by Hollywood to maintain the distinctive appeal of cinema – the big-screen event, spectacle is crucial to the industry’s broader commercial interests. “Spectacular imagery, of various kinds, sells. It is an intrinsic part of many of the properties on which the studios draw for their big franchise products. It also plays an important role in the aesthetics of spin-off products like computer games or theme-park rides” (King, *New Hollywood* 179).

There have been vigorous debates over Hollywood's use of special effects. It is argued that "the marketing of Hollywood cinema has been dominated by the presentation of the spectacular rather than the meaningful: by the promotion of the visual effects available in the film concerned rather than the narrative concept which structures it or, even, the stars who appear in it" (Turner 36). Many voices, be it from popular platform (like movie magazines or websites, IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes being the most influential sites), or from scholarly writings, have expressed their concern with this extensive adoption of special effects, considering it unfortunate for film industry, because as such, films are more treated as marketable projects than their unique qualities as narrative or as popular art. It now becomes total commonplace to encounter movie reviews (sometimes even in the form of newspaper headline) which describe the latest blockbuster as a special effects extravaganza that is insufficient in plot development. For instance, many of the reviewers of the first two *Matrix* films found the plot difficult to follow. The focus upon what illusions or fantasies could be created through new technologies certainly provides us with plenty of opportunities to marvel at what is on the screen, but, "it is said, the capacity to develop strong and resonant stories may have atrophied as a result...Therefore, concerns have been raised about contemporary cinema losing its soul, its human referent, and thus eventually its audiences" (Turner 35).

For one thing, our focus on development of plot is "halted while we sit back to contemplate with amazement/pleasure/horror (or whatever particular reaction) the sheer sensory richness of the audio-visual experience" (King, *New Hollywood* 179): the gigantic Titanic cracking and sinking in the sea (*Titanic*, 1997), the computer generated dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993) which revived the species never seen by human eyes before, the liquid metal T-1000 Terminator transforming into totally

another person (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991), the various ferocious monsters and bizarre creatures appearing across the eight episodes of *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), and all other equally amazing spectacles in those less successful blockbusters such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (2005-2010), *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), and *The Golden Compass* (2007), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Prince of Persia* (2010), *John Carter* (2012). For another, the presence of stars is also a routine “disruption” of the internal narrative coherence in certain way. The star-as-persona might be consumed as a form of spectacle, a disruptive audio-visual presence which is to be enjoyed in its own right – it thus cannot be entirely integrated into the fictional world of narrative driven by character. Films featuring favorite stars might be experienced in terms of the star presence as much as (or even more than) their place within a developing narrative which they are supposed to help shape (King, *New Hollywood* 181). The overwhelming priority of contemporary blockbuster to offer a spectacular big-screen experience with special effects and to generate profitable spin-offs in other media has heralded the demise of coherent narrative, which used to be at least an equally important component of classical Hollywood cinema.

Conversely, some such as Geoff King take issue with this criticism of spectacles, arguing that the critics themselves underestimate how tightly the special effects are tied to the movie’s narrative structure (*Spectacular Narrative*). In his discussion of *Jurassic Park*, for instance, King argues that even the most spectacular of specially effects are still contained within “the arc” of the narrative. According to him, one tendency in debates about the relationship between narrative and spectacle in the contemporary blockbuster has been to exaggerate the importance of classical

narrative¹² in the studio era, at the expense of other appeals. Another has been to underestimate the importance of narrative – “classical” and otherwise – today, as narrative construction remains an important ingredient even in those most spectacular and special-effects-laden blockbuster productions (*New Hollywood* 182). King first elaborates on the two senses in which the term “narrative” can be used. The first refers to “plot” or “story”: the on-going events of a film, both as depicted on screen and as the viewer is invited to recreate them. The second refers to thematic structures such as the patterns of oppositions, negotiations and in some cases imaginary reconciliations that can be found in – or read into – Hollywood narrative structures (183). King admits that the corporate blockbuster is very often a noisy, action-packed and spectacular affair, that much of its investment goes into these dimensions, and that it is not a format noted for the finer nuances of narrative structure. But, he argues it is easy to get carried away, or so it seems for some commentators: although the pleasures of narrative might not always be the main or most obvious appeal of such films, narrative structures remain important, however, in terms of both story/plot and thematic issues, often working in combination with the delivery of spectacle (184). Narrative structures might be sometimes found to have changed from those employed in many Hollywood films. However,

Too many products of the studio era veer away from an exclusive reliance on what are described as “classical” norms. And too many blockbuster products of recent decades have a continued investment in quite carefully honed narrative structure, including elements consistent with Bordwell’s version of “classical”

¹² A particular form of narrative, the dominant component of classical Hollywood cinema, which is a form based on clear and “unambiguous patterns of cause-and-effect in which events are justified and motivated rather than arbitrary or coincidental, and organized around the actions” of goal-driven characters seeking to overcome a variety of obstacles (Bordwell, 12-3).

narrative. Elements of spectacle and narrative co-exist across the history of Hollywood cinema, in varying combinations. (King, *New Hollywood* 184)

It is, therefore, according to King, an “exercise of sweeping and over-stated generalizations” to say that contemporary blockbusters have no narratives (*New Hollywood* 39).

However, the argument King made about the importance of narrative even in today’s spectacular movies fails to recognize how the “blockbuster culture” may affect people’s recognition of the narrative-spectacle proportion. That is to say, the reproduction of cinematic images into many other spheres has located people not only in the movie theater dwelling solely on the film itself, but also many other loci that are equally or even more appealing while having nothing to do with the “narrative”. And as the images takes on a technological track that goes right into people’s fascination with and imagination about technology – that insurance for a better enjoyment of life—narrative becomes wedged away. According to King, narrative does matter and there is a narrative that strings together and thus justifies all the spectacles. But the point is not whether narrative exist on its own or not, but whether narrative matters to an audience whose major experience with blockbusters is preoccupied by spectacles. On one hand, spectacles have become the central quality in contemporary blockbusters. Such centrality has stolen the importance of narrative. The ever more intensified presentation of spectacles marginalizes the significance of narrative, and eventually makes it matter less. On the other hand, the overall cultural and industrial background has nurtured a type of audience (or rather consumers),

whose engagement with film has been transformed to a large extent. This, of course, does not mean all audiences are homogeneously only paying attention to spectacles. There are exceptions who, for instance, choose to watch an art film instead of a spectacular blockbuster, or who focus more on how the story is told than a special effect. This thesis does not intend to make generalizations to all people, nor to provide any universal theory of how audience receive contemporary blockbusters, but attempt to theorize how the cultural-economic logic works to affect people's reception, and to synergize all the critical strength on the industrial practice and the larger cultural-economic background that tends to create such kind of audience and has actually already nurtured some. In the same way, the following discussions of audience do not intend to make generalization, only that the exceptions are not the focus of this study.

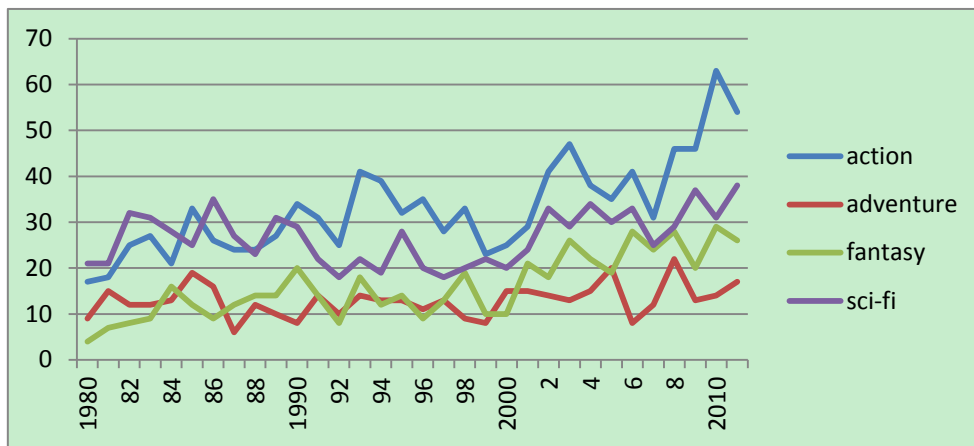
At the same time, it cannot be denied either that there are some blockbuster movies which appeal to the audiences with both narrative and spectacular special effects as they work in tandem to light up each other just at the right moment (such as *Inception* (2010)), the tendency towards synthesizing all elements of fantasy, action, sci-fi, horror and any "larger-than-life" form is too obvious to ignore. The fancy technologies that privilege cinema production can be easily and conveniently played to the full for the spectacular such genres entail. In terms of the movies per se, the quantity of movies that fall under such generic categories has obviously increased during recent years, as shown in Figure 1¹³. The expansion in such generic affiliation means the increase in the use of the spectacular in association with the thematic

¹³ From Wikipedia, list of different genres of films. Retrieved in June, 2012. The data Figure 1 shows can only show a general tendency. There are so many genre mixing and genre overlapping, so the number of films of certain genre is not exhaustive.

requirement, the superbly challenging stunt, the extraterrestrial species beyond human imagination, and the dazzlingly picturesque scenery in the other world.

Figure 1 Number of Genre Films across Years

(summarized from boxofficemojo.com)



Not only does the cinema become more spectacular quantitatively, but also for most blockbuster films nowadays, the intensity of spectacles has risen to a completely new level compared to those before 1980s. This is well illustrated by Fred Pfeil (1998) and also Geoff King himself (2002). The action spectacular of classical narrative style offers “an accumulation of unspent dramatic or suspenseful elements throughout the narrative’s so-called ‘rising action’ into a force that is discharged most completely at the story’s climax” (Pfeil 180). As shown by King, a simplified version of his structure might be represented graphically in Figure 2 or a slightly complicated one in Figure 3 (*New Hollywood* 186). An example of a film from the studio era that follows this model is *San Francisco* (1936).

In contrast, many of the blockbuster productions of the corporate era produce a rather different graphic profile, such as *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995), which “offers us an altogether different economy of pleasure, in which the giddy blur of

the high-speed chase and/or the gratifying spectacular release of aggressive impulse occurs at regularly recurring intervals throughout the film” (Pfeil 181). This kind of narrative/spectacle relationship is represented in Figure 4 (King, *New Hollywood* 187). Another way of indicating the relationship between spectacle and narrative is suggested in Figures 5 and 6 (188). Figure 3 is offered as a model of what is said to be the more “classical” type of construction, the line representing the linear progression of the narrative and the explosion symbols representing moments of spectacular display or action. “The classical version is one in which the narrative component is supposed to be largely dominant, sustained through periodic moments when the emphasis shifts towards spectacle/action that are not overwhelming, before building perhaps towards a more sustained spectacular climax” (King, *New Hollywood* 187). Figure 4 shows the relationship implied in some accounts of the contemporary blockbuster. Spectacular moments here are both larger and more frequent, fragmenting the narrative. Narrative, in this model, becomes attenuated, so as the agency embodied by such narrative. Its short segments are cut off from one another and serving as little more than the glue that holds together a series of spectacular displays, which resembles the free-floating signifiers that do not have a fixed signified for a concrete meaning.

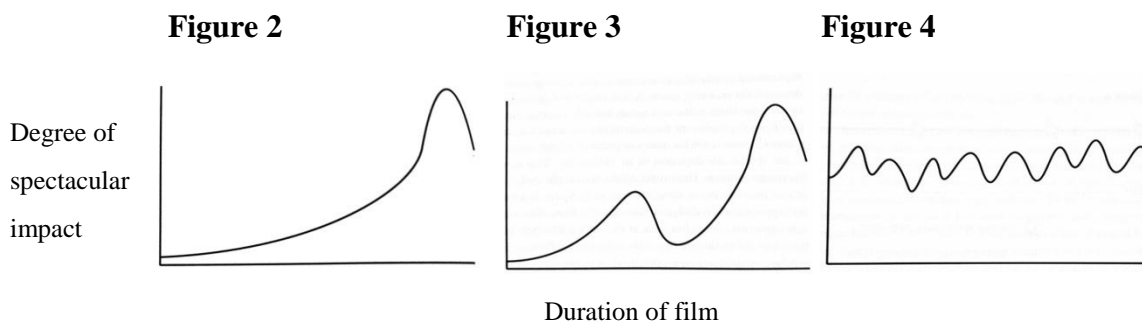


Figure 5

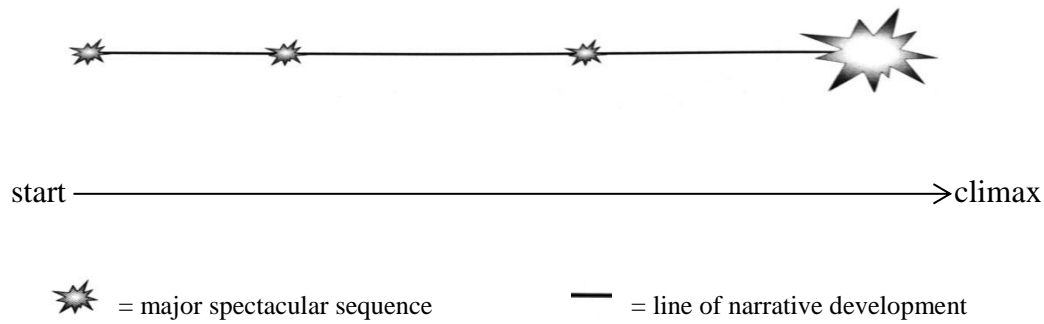
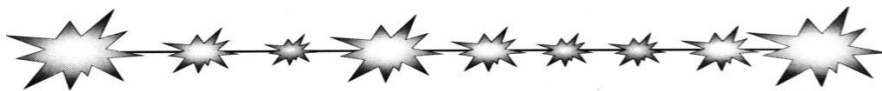


Figure 6



As much King questions the adequacy of this measurement and over-subjectiveness of this model, it does give a sense at least of the relative differences between one film or another. What is more important, the point here is not about drawing a “divine” demarcation between the movies in classical era and in the new Hollywood era, nor about making quantitative measurement of what constitutes a “spectacle,” but rather to grasp the tendency of industrial practice, to trace the cultural background that nurtures such tendency – how this tendency is forming and formed by contemporary culture and economy. It is thus of equal importance to look into aspects other than the movie itself, and to have a view that takes into consideration the audiences’ take and taste of today’s films, and how it has changed as Hollywood blockbuster becomes a composite commodity that facilitates and is facilitated by the reproduction of technological images.

When it comes to the other end of the big screen – the spectatorship, there is a large literature on the dream analogy¹⁴ of audience involvement with the image before

¹⁴ At the heart of the cinema experience is the blurring of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real. Representation is experienced as perception. Metz (1982) has called the filmed image “the

the 1980s. However useful this analogy can be, there are limitations. The process of decoding film languages is as much conscious and social as it is unconscious and presocial. Metz says that when he is in the cinema as a member of the audience, he “watches” and he “helps.” The cinema audience watches because the image is itself seductive, larger than life, an object of desire. The audience thus concentrates on looking (420-21). But the meaning of the narrative structure has to be actively constructed by the viewers as they watch. The term “suture”, for instance, explains how “each shot in a film is continually involved in constructing the relationships which will help the film make sense – relationships between one shot and the next, one sequence and its adjacent sequences, and so on” (Dayan 24). Since the meaning of one shot is held over until viewers see how it is stitched together – sutured – by its relation to the next shot, cinema is able to keep it to itself how it is constructed. This process of deferring meaning put the viewers in such a position that they have to close the gaps and drive the narrative forward to understand what they have seen. Viewers thus concentrate more on the meaning of each shot or series of shots than on examining the means of construction. In this way, the viewers do not know all they need to know until the ending of the film. This aggravates the pressure towards reaching the completion, and mastering the narrative. “The spectators are drawn between, on one hand, their desire for the image, their luxuriating in this amplification of the real and its celebration of the power of their gaze; and on the other hand, their desire for ‘entering’ the film, for domination of the narrative, for their achievement of

imaginary signified,” referring to the fact that the reality which the filmed images call up is always absent. “present” only in our imaginations. This recognition has led researchers to examine similarities between viewing a film and an analogous condition, dreaming. Dreams do not “really” happen although we might experience them as if they did; contradictorily, even though the content of the dream may not have happened, the dream experience itself did. Like films, dreams have the capacity to express thought through images; they also have a tendency towards narrative structures, and give the effect of seeming more than real (Turner, 147).

mastery” (Turner 146). That is to say, the pleasure of watching films is supposed to be from both the narrative and spectacle.

However, as the “visual display is elevated to a defining feature of the genre” (Tasker 6) with the rise of spectacular blockbusters, such distinction between narrative pleasure and visual pleasure blurs to such an extent that the cinematic pleasure is almost equivalent to visual pleasure, which also foreground its technicity. As viewers need to “concentrate” on and “construct” – “help” – the narrative formation in the years of classical Hollywood, audiences of today’s spectacular indulge in distraction. In “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” Walter Benjamin already lends his insight on the effect of distraction by cinematic images¹⁵. According to him, the film “hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him” rather than the other way around – the spectator enters the film. “It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator” (117). He then compares the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. He says the painting invites the spectator to contemplation. Before the painting the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so, because “no sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed” (117). It cannot be arrested. Duhamel, Benjamin quotes, notes this circumstance as follows: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (117). The process of associating with these images by the spectator is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, argues Benjamin, like all shocks, should be cushioned

¹⁵ This essay, though written in 1936, is still relevant here, because the early silent cinema, characterized by Tom Gunning (1986) as “a cinema of attractions,” is a previous instance in the history of film when technologies exercised a similar attraction to contemporary blockbusters by presenting spectacles.

by heightened presence of mind. “By means of its technical structure, the film has taken the physical shock effect out of the wrappers in which Dadaism had, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock effect” (118). This also applies to contemporary blockbusters, with the constantly changing images becoming considerably spectacularized and proliferated, thus endlessly enlarging the shock effect. Again, Benjamin cites Duhamel as he “has expressed himself in the most radical manner” (118). What Duhamel objects to most is the kind of participation which the movie elicits from the masses. Duhamel calls the movie

A pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries...a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence...which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a “star” in Los Angeles. (qtd. in Benjamin 118)

As radical and over-generalizing as this is, it does point to the painful fact about today’s cinematic experience that from “concentrating” and “constructing” to “distracted” and “shocked,” the audience’s active engagement with the movie has been tuned to a minimal level. This is, however, not to say that the audience today has turned into some mindless group who has lost their ability to think and judge. It is only a shift in the mode of watching a film, and this shift is not formed on its own, but subject to how the film changes, how they adapt to the cinematic changes, how the subject is “stitched in” in a novel way, and finally how the economic and cultural condition causes and reflects these changes.

Cinema puts the mass in the position of critic, which used to be a privilege of few. But with today’s blockbusters an epitome of infinite spectacles that provide

nothing but visual pleasure, the reception of the movie devalues that position, because it is a process in a state of distraction that “requires no attention” (Benjamin 119). “The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (Benjamin 119).

This is also not to say that there is absolutely no narrative or Hollywood screenwriters suddenly become dumb and exhausted with their creativity. The narrative is “absent” or “lacking” in the sense that it is eclipsed or overwhelmed by the spectacle. For one thing, the narrative power of contemporary blockbusters is weakened out of industrial concern. With an increasing number of mega productions coming in more than one episode, the serial format of contemporary blockbusters always resort to open ending to build up expectation for the next one, which, as discussed before, disrupts the closure and thus the integrity of a narrative. *Resident Evil* series would be good case in point, as the protagonist Alice always encounters new challenges during the last minute of the movie after the first one and half showing how she survives the endless attack by zombies and monsters. This format resembles TV shows, only with much longer intervals, which further fragment the continuity of the story, if there is one across all the episodes. There are also cases where each sequel stands out as an independent story that does ends with a completion. The continuity is formulated through the main characters or the “signature face,” but the plot follows a repetitive pattern. For example, in *Pirates of the Caribbean* saga, Jack Sparrow chases after different mission or treasure each episode; in *Transformers*, old enemy down, new villain rises, and it’s a whole set of good-triumph-evil story all over again. In this case, what keeps the audiences coming for the endless sequels is not so much the story to be told, because they somehow already know what is going to happen. What they can expect from the sequel is how the same story is to be presented in an upgraded version of visual-audio pleasure.

For another, with the over-amplified emphasis on the visual feast widely and intensively promoted by film marketing, the audiences are largely implanted with this preference to the spectacular. This is what they are made to think they have paid for and what deserves their attention. With this purpose in mind, they pursue only the surface value of the movie, the spectacle, and dwell comfortably on it. Even if they sometimes feel lack of plot or creativity in the story while watching the film, an explosion, or a marvelous scene of wonderland, will work quite well to convince the audience to put aside their doubt and to indulge in the visual guilty pleasure. In this way, the audiences have minimum active engagement with the movie, but sit there passively and loosely, waiting for the images to impose on them and distract them.

Usually it is not that the contemporary Hollywood films have no soul or no deep value of making implicit meanings. Most of the newest spectacular movies are actually quite “old-fashioned” narrative-wise. They still reinforce the conventional ideology like good forever prevails over evil (like *Harry Potter*, for instance); that evil will be controlled, punished, or destroyed by justice, more often than not, represented by a superhero (like *Superman Returns*, *Hancock*); or that individualism, patriotism, freedom is worth pursuing, which is so typical of American value system (like *Iron Man*, *Captain America*, *The Lord of the Rings*). And some are even trying to tell the unconventional, or to add a little twist to the classic. For example, the story does not have to end in a “happily-ever-after” heterosexual romantic relationship, as exemplified by most of the action heroine films. However, based on a knowingness resulting from genre routine, and intertextuality with other content and media, the audiences often can foresee what is going on and thus care less about what the films tells through plot. They would rather resort to the other set of “rules” of pleasure, because “the criteria for the good life revolve around the desire to enlarge one’s self,

the quest for new tastes and sensations, to explore more and more possibilities” (Featherstone 118). Therefore, the logic becomes like this: as long as they are offered an upgraded fill of visual enjoyment, they do not mind hearing the old story again. The “soul” of the film, be it a restatement of conventional ideology or a new voice of discourse, has its thunder stolen by the appearance, thus conveniently assumed invisible.

While cinema was considered as an important form of ideological state apparatus that interpellates people into certain position and adopt certain values by subjugating them into dominant ideologies, which is particularly so in classical Hollywood era, it now functions in a subtly different way. Spectacular film of today subjugates people into images, the computer-generated simulacra that cease to be representation and become the hyperreality. This subjugation into images positions people nowhere but in an unstoppable circulatory loop of desire, consumption and pleasure, like anything else in media and society. It is both empty and full, empty of mind, full of sensual. According to Baudrillard,

The centrality of the commercial manipulation of images through advertising the media and the displays, performances and spectacles of the urbanized fabric of daily life therefore entails a constant reworking of desires through images. Hence the consumer society must not be regarded as only releasing a dominant materialism for it also confronts people with dream-images which speak to desires, and aestheticize and derealize reality. (qtd. in Featherstone 66)

For film, appropriate amount and tempo of narrative and spectacles has been disrupted, and the distinction of form and content has dissolved and imploded into a bizarre juxtaposition of anything that gives no more than shock, pleasure, and

sensation. For the cultural-economic logic operating behind the (re)production and reception of films today, Fredric Jameson captures it quite well in his writing on postmodernism. Jameson, another eminent theorist of postmodern culture, sees postmodernism the cultural dominant, or the cultural logic of the third great stage of capitalism, late capitalism which originates in the post-WWII (2001). He describes postmodernism as the spatialization of culture under the pressure of capitalism. He teases out the characteristics of postmodernism in the phrase “postmodern depthless culture” and the notion that “ordered historical development should give way to the perception of the past as a conglomerate of images, fragments and spectacles which are endlessly reduplicated and simulated without the possibility of discovering an essential order or point of value judgment” (96). In the similar vein as Baudrillard, Jameson argues that “postmodernism is based upon the central role of reproduction in the ‘de-centered global network’ of present-day multinational capitalism which leads to a ‘prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm’ through the saturation of signs and messages... to the point at which everything in our social life ... can be said to have become ‘cultural’” (qtd. in Featherstone 8). And for Baudrillard, the accumulation, density and seamless, all-encompassing extent of the (re)production of images in contemporary society has been forming a qualitatively new society in which the distinction between reality and image become effaced and everyday life becomes aestheticized – the world of simulation or postmodern culture (in Featherstone 68).

As the audience is always a historical and cultural product, in this context, he/she is the product of the postmodern cultural-economic logic. How he/she reacts to a movie is under the influence of the “present age which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the

essence...” (Debord 11). The postmodern condition develops “an aesthetic of sensation, an aesthetics of the body which emphasizes the immediacy and unreflexiveness of primary processes (desire), what Lyotard refers to as the figural, as opposed to the discursive which has its basis in secondary processes (the ego)” (qtd. in Featherstone 122). “It is, therefore, legitimate to subvert narrative into a series of flows, to dwell on the sonority as opposed to the meaning of the spoken word, to focus on the body as art” (Featherstone 124). This aesthetics facilitates a vicious circle among the audience and the film industry. With the endless flow of fascinating images and simulations, the audiences keep demanding more and better images to feed their enlarged appetite, an appetite produced also by the film industry, or the larger cultural-economic logic. In order to satisfy such demand, the studios work desperately to come up with the more and the better to surpass the previous products and their peers. This, in turn, only serves to consolidate the already “spoiled” audiences’ obsession with pleasurable visuals to the effect that they rarely look into (the depth of, if there is any), but tend to look at (the surface of) the films. This aesthetics and this circle is exactly the cultural-economic logic operating behind contemporary Hollywood production, as well as behind the action heroine cinema.

Chapter 4 The Action Heroine Cinema Consumed

The action heroine films discussed in this study are one type of contemporary mainstream Hollywood products that share the same production mechanism of the blockbuster. The films, the images, and the whole package of the entire industrial chain are subject to the cultural-economic logic of consumption and reproduction of technological images – the serialization and merchandising of a film into a media franchise composing of commodities in multiple forms and providing multiple pleasures, the intensive use of and obsession with spectacles made by sophisticated filmmaking technologies, and thus an overwhelming consumer culture in which audiences are engaged in the endless consumption of depthless signs and images—all of which keeps the images of action heroine commercially profitable and culturally prominent. It is also this cultural-economic logic that makes the consumption of action heroine films a complex and elaborate process that goes far beyond the binary debates between feminists and postfeminists.

The specific films for this study are listed in Table 1 (see Appendices). They are mainly three series, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001, 2003), *Underworld* (2003, 2006, 2012), *Resident Evil* (2002, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012) and two single productions, *Aeon Flux* (2005) and *Elektra* (2005). In this chapter, I will argue that the action heroine films are consumed in four ways, namely, consumed as the composite

commodity, as the spectacles of technology, as the spectacles of female body, and as the idea of feminism.

As the “Composite Commodity”

Strictly speaking, not all these 21st-century action heroine films can be categorized as “blockbusters”, especially when it comes to the production budget and expected box office – the resplendent mark of the favorite for today’s Hollywood. Compared to those “genuine” blockbusters of concurrent age whose budgets are mostly over 100 million dollars, these action heroine movies, ranging from *Underworld* with a relatively low budget of 22 million to one rare high 115 million dollars (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*), cost much less to make. It is even more appropriate to label some of them as B movies considering the financial aspect only¹⁶. Accordingly, due to the limited investment, these action heroine films may not enjoy the same level of publicity and marketing as those mega productions.

Despite their lower production expenditure, however, all of these movies manage to make solid profit, gaining worldwide gross that far exceed the cost (except for only one movie, *Aeon Flux*). And some of them did enjoy a high media exposure in its marketing stage. For instance, when the fourth one of *Resident Evil* franchise

¹⁶ B movie generally refers to low-budget commercial picture. But in its current usage, this term has somewhat contradictory connotations: it may signal an opinion that a certain movie is (a) a genre film with minimal artistic ambitions or (b) a lively, energetic film uninhibited by the constraints imposed on more expensive projects and unburdened by the conventions of putatively “serious” independent film. The term is also now used loosely to refer to some higher budgeted, mainstream films with exploitation style content, usually in genres like Western, science-fiction, or horror (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B_movie).

came out in September, 2010, its trailers and posters were equally visible in various promotion channels; its total gross ranked the second compared to the movies which opened in the same month, surmounting *The Legend of Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole*, an action-adventure animation but with a higher budget. Besides the enormous cost and expected financial return, there is another aspect which a blockbuster refers to – the array of special attractions and dazzling effects put on screen to bring in audiences in droves, be it sets, stars, costumes, or technical effects. Although these action heroine movies cannot compete with those market-commanding mega productions in terms of the money invested and earned, they do have a lot in common with the blockbuster with regard to the second aspect: casting of big stars, generic affiliation of action, adventure, sci-fi, fantasy, and horror, and extravagant use of special effects for the spectacular. For each action heroine film here, the actress who plays the central role is (or at least was) among the highest paid stars in show business, whose name and face are well established among either fans or simply movie-goers. Angelina Jolie, who plays Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, is a good case in point. She is a highly prolific actress that commands many of the Hollywood commercial screens, and most of her characters tend to be strong personalities, which might be police officer (in *The Bone Collector*, 1999), spy (in *Salt*, 2010), special agent (in *Taking Lives*, 2004), assassin (in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, 2005; *Wanted*, 2008), criminal (in *Original Sin*, 2001; *The Tourist*, 2010), or mother that fights for her child (in *Changeling*, 2008, which earned her a nomination for Academy Award for Best Actress). As an icon image for action heroine as Lara Croft, she has been cited as the

world's most beautiful and sexiest woman, a title that brings her substantial media attention. In the promotion of *Tomb Raider* movies, considerable media exposure has been focusing on Jolie's fitness and preparation for her role through the action makeover, such as a special diet, meditation, yoga, training of weapons, gymnastics fights, motorbike riding and husky racing, which are mentioned in the DVD behind-the-scenes documentary. "Special emphasis is laid on Jolie's lack of fear, on her mission as 'an actor training to be an Olympic athlete' and on her apparent identification with the character she plays" (O'Day 207).

In a similar manner, Milla Jovovich, appears in a number of science fiction and action-themed films, such as *The Fifth Element* (1997), *The Messenger: The Story of Joan Arc* (1999), and the *Resident Evil* series, for which she has been referred to by music channel VH1¹⁷ as the "reigning queen of kick-butt." Charlize Theron (who plays Aeon Flux), a winner for the Academy Award for Best Actress in 2003, also stars plenty of successful commercial films, and the Oscar win pushed her to The Hollywood Reporter's 2006 list of highest-paid actresses in Hollywood, ranking the seventh only behind Halle Berry, Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore, Renee Zellweger, Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman¹⁸. Together with the florid special effects, breathtaking stunts, and lifelike make-up, these star images act as an invaluable asset

¹⁷ VH1 is an American cable television network based in New York City. The original purpose of the channel was to play popular music. Its more recent claim to fame has been in the area of music-related reality programming and the channel's overall focus is on popular culture (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VH1>).

¹⁸ Accidentally or not, all these six highest paid actresses have played female characters that are active, strong and unconventional. For instance, Halle Berry in *X-men*, *Catwoman*, Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrymore in *Charlie's Angels*, Renee Zellweger in *Cold Mountain*, *New in Town*, Reese Witherspoon in *Legally Blonde*, and *Walk the Line*, and Nicole Kidman in *Cold Mountain*, *The Hours*.

that is supposed to play a magic with the number as if the cost went ten-fold simply because the movie possesses a well-known face with a charming look, whose irresistible appeal works so well to build up audience expectation and to guarantee the box office just as a blockbuster does.

As the reproduction of images is a contemporary routine for blockbusters, this logic prevails in action heroine cinema as well. Like other commercial films, these movies are enmeshed in a complex network created by mega corporations to reach a global market as large and pervasive as possible. In so many ways, these movies are typical “composite commodities” that keep pushing the limit of what a title and an icon image can do. Among the movies studied here, most are adaptations from other popular media, or some are later followed up to be adapted to other media.

The most illustrative example would be the *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* movies, which are based on the prototypes of the hugely popular namesake video games. The original *Tomb Raider* is an action-adventure video game first released in 1996, followed by incessant series of updates until today. The game was then developed into a lucrative franchise consisting of video games, comic books, novels, theme park rides and movies, centering around the adventures of the fictional English archaeologist Lara Croft, who went on to become a major icon of the virtual gaming industry and registered by the Guinness Book of World Records as the “Most Successful Human Virtual Game Heroine” in 2006¹⁹. The name as well as the visual

¹⁹ From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lara_Croft:_Tomb_Raider

image of Lara Croft cannot be more familiar to those game players of *Tomb Raider* who may have manipulated the avatar of Lara Croft for countless hours in search for ancient treasure. Meanwhile, *Tomb Raider* was also licensed to comic book publisher, and some of its scores are in market as promotional items in limited edition that later became rare collector's items. In June, 2001, the first *Tomb Raider* film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* came out featuring Lara Croft racing against time and villains to recover a powerful artifact called the Triangle of Light. And this movie is the second most successful video game adaptation to date (after *Prince of Persia* (2010)) (Wikipedia footnote18). Together with its sequel, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life* (2003), the film was included in the six Paramount Parks. The whole process of reproducing the images from the game into more games, into movies and more movies, into print, and into theme park ride, successfully repeats what it takes to make a Hollywood product into a composite commodity offering multiple experiences, multiple pleasures, and multiple opportunities for consumption. So does *Resident Evil*. As a media franchise originally created as a survival horror game series, *Resident Evil* was initiated with the eponymous PlayStation title in 1996, which later branched out to include action games and was re-released on several other platforms. It has been expanded to comic books, novels and novelizations, sound dramas, live-action and computer-generated feature films, and a variety of collectibles, such as actions figures and strategy guides.

The movie *Elektra* is an adaptation from a comic series published by Marvel Comics²⁰, the birth land of so many American superhero stories and images. The character Elektra also appears in some other comics of Marvel's, including *Daredevil* and *X-Men's Wolverine*. Meanwhile, she is playable character in many video games of Marvel's, and also in the toy line of Marvel Legends. *Underworld* is an original film series with one pre-sequels and two sequels depicting the conflict between vampire and werewolf. There have been various spin-offs and tie-ins in a range of other media. IDW Publishing has published a number of *Underworld* comics, and in addition to the novelizations of first two *Underworld*, and an original novel titled *Underworld: Blood Enemy*, there is also contract for the production of *Underworld: Bloodline*²¹. *Aeon Flux* made its first appearance as an avant-garde science fiction animated television series that aired on MTV²² in various forms throughout the 1990s, with film, comic book, and video game adaptations following thereafter. The live action motion picture *Aeon Flux* loosely based on the series and featuring Charlize Theron was released in 2005, preceded in the same year by a tie-in video game based mostly on the movie but containing some elements of the original TV series²³.

²⁰ Marvel Comics is an American company that publishes comic books and related media. Marvel counts among its characters such well-known properties as Spider-Man, the X-men, Wolverine, the Hulk, Avengers, Fantastic Four, Thor and Captain America. Marvel characters and stories have been adapted to many other media, including films, which dominate the blockbuster titles in recent years, television programs, video games, prose novels, and theme parks (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marvel_Comics).

²¹ From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underworld_\(film_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underworld_(film_series))

²² An American cable television, originally for playing music videos, but now primarily for broadcasting a variety of popular culture and reality television shows targeted at adolescents and young adults, while still playing a limited selection of music videos (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MTV>).

²³ From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeon_Flux

More often than not, these cinematic versions of the media content only account for one of the many products in the long streamlines of consumer commodities. The inter-adaptation between games, comic books, films, television series, and novels becomes a golden pattern that ensures the most thorough use of a media title. And it goes on and on to branch out each version by serializing, by merchandising or any way possible. For these action heroine movies, there are three series that composed of at least two installments (two for *Tomb Raider*, five for *Resident Evil*, and four for *Underworld*), with the expectation that one more will be coming soon for each franchise. Also for these movies, there are comprehensive lines of merchandise, which include DVDs, Blue-Rays, soundtracks, novelizations, books, action figures, photos, posters, wallpapers, props (original and copies), clothes, and so on.

For a large part, the cinematic rendering of each action heroine is not particularly aimed at telling a unique story about a female character, nor intended to distinguish the filmic version from other version in the same streamline, or from other films. On the contrary, it is for generating a commodity that draws on exactly its similarity with other media and other films while appearing to be different in the sense of experiential pleasure achieved by technological wonder. These films, or any other related media product, cling to the fame and expectation from the already established titles to re-attract the familiar customers while inviting new ones that might not be game players but movie lovers or any other type of consumers, and put up on the market what is considered as the “signifier of difference.” By “signifier of difference,” I do not mean there is a unified “signified” behind that all different kinds

of representational products can refer back to as a benchmark for a specific and fixed meaning. This is because, according to Baudrillard, the dialectic of signifier and signified has ended. In Saussure's theory of the sign, the signifier or word is distinguished from both the signified or mental image and the referent. The structural relation between signifier and signified thus shows how one value of the sign is constituted (Poster 3). Baudrillard calls this relation a "symbolic" structure to communication maintained by preindustrial societies: signs included words that were attached to referents and were uttered in a context that are open to possible reversal by others (Poster 4). Such is the signifier/signified dialectic that facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and of meaning, the linear syntagma of cumulative discourse (Kellner, "Jean Baudrillard"). However, as the era of sign emerges in the late twentieth century, argued by Baudrillard, when signs and codes proliferate and "produce other signs and new sign machines in ever-expanding and spiraling cycles" – a process termed by Baudrillard as semiurgy – signs become completely separated from their referents, "resulting in a structure that resembles the signal: signifiers act like traffic lights, emitting meanings to which there is no linguistic response" (Poster 4). Baudrillard terms such composite organization of signifiers the "code", which functions by pulling out the signified from the social and re-configuring them in the media as "floating signifiers." Television advertisements as a particular example, says Poster, constitute a new language form where the code transmits signifiers to the population who are subject to this "terroristic" mode of signification (4). With no distinction between signifiers and what they signify, objects signify but each other in

a closed circle, in which signification is mutual – all “objects have the same solidity, or suffer the same dearth of solidity, and they are all engaged in the same never-ending cadrille of disappearances and reappearances” (Bauman 35).

Therefore, the consumer objects replicated in exponential speed, be it on cinema screen, on computer screen, or on comic books, are best understood as a network of floating signifiers that are inexhaustible in their ability to incite desire. And the desire acts on behalf of the “difference” to be put on the market. The object thus obtains “its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs. It is in this way that it becomes ‘personalized,’ and enters in the series, etc.: it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference” (Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 22). All the images, in cinema, in game, in comic, in spin-off store, or in cyber-database, are different in the sense of being carried in different media, in varied formats that are installing the “personalized” desires, but they are undifferentiated because they are all commodities based on reproduction technology with no origin or true meaning. In Baudrillardian terms, sign value runs rampant while use value has died out. Images scatter everywhere in a floating manner with no essential anchoring point for stable meaning, acting as the alibi for the use value which has long been replaced by sign value. Each sign simply refers to each other for its temporary meaning, being its own referent, if there is any.

This floating signifiers’ self-referentiality recalls the process of what is termed as intertextuality, which is not a new phenomenon, but now becomes closely

associated with postmodernism. The term “intertextuality” was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966 to explain literature text. It generally means that an author’s borrowing and transformation of a prior text or to a reader’s referencing of one text in reading another. While “the classical sign is a sealed unit,” as Roland Barthes explains in “Theory of the Text,” “whose closure arrests meaning, prevents it from trembling or becoming double, or wandering, the same goes for the classical text: it closes the work, chains it to its letter, rivets it to its signified” (33). But, such closure, he also claims, must apply to traditional exegesis (such as historical, or biographical), because for Barthes, any text cannot be disassociated from the active work of reading, and the very concept of intertextuality means that no text is an untouched, unified whole. The text is never a sealed entity, but “a galaxy of signifiers, a network of interrelated codes, an open, dynamic playground where the endless process of signification takes place” (Cancalon, and Spacagna 1). For Kristeva, meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, “codes” imparted to the writer and reader by other texts (69). So signifiers refer always and only to other signifiers. Words gain their meaning not by referring to some concrete object in an outside reality or present to the mind of the language user but from the endless play of signification. As Sim says, “Language can be transformed, translated, transferred, but never transcended... [and] postmodernism embraces an extreme notion of intertextuality, in which the play of meaning is infinite, in which anything goes” (285). And postmodernism’s close relationship with intertextuality is especially in use as postmodern media-scape takes heterogeneous

forms, in which the signifiers thus run wilder and wider. Just as John Frow points out in his essay “Intertextuality and Ontology”,

[The concept of intertextuality] was not restricted to particular textual manifestations of signifying systems but was used, rather, to designate the way in which a culture is structured as a complex network of codes with heterogeneous and dispersed forms of textual realization. It formulated the codedness or textuality of what had previously been thought in non-semiotic terms (consciousness, experience, wisdom, story, gender, culture, and so on).

(47)

This shows, rather than the simple observation that all texts contain traces of other texts, a much more complex conception of the interactions between texts, text creators and their readers’ living contexts. And this kind of conceptual framework is conducive to examining postmodernity in that “it enables us to think of media discourse as being qualitatively continuous with the experience of everyday life” (Meinhof, and Smith 3). And as contemporary life is preoccupied by the ever more sophisticated media technologies, media texts, which are in many cases essentially multimodal, illustrate particularly well the disparate and heterogeneous processes – an intertextual universe in which signs, texts, culture and everyday life refers to each other in a circular manner. That is to say, that many media texts exist in, and make use of, what we shall call several different semiotic modes at the same time, among which, spoken and written text, visual images and music are the most familiar ones. This multimodality is clearly a very different thing from remodeling a source text A in a subsequent text B (Meinhof, and Smith 10).

Therefore, a film like *Tomb Raider* or *Resident Evil* is, on one level, a cinematic text that plays intertextual reference with numerous other action-adventure films, while generic intertextuality is only one type among kinds played between filmic texts (other kinds may include that by director, casting, script, visual elements or soundtrack). On the other level, it is at once an audio-visual product in intertextual relationship with so many other commodities replicated, adapted, remediated and merchandized from or into it, which, while penetrating people's everyday life through endless cultural signs, penetrate this play of intertextuality into their life too. And this play is a gorgeous one that flashes the spectator with the seductive surface, the resplendent stimulus, which is exactly what the product as film relies on to make the difference. Thereby, the makeover of *Tomb Raider* game into the two movies starring Angelina Jolie in 2001 and 2003 respectively is not particularly made for telling a story of adventure about a female archaeologist who hunts for magical treasure before evil hands abuse it, though this central line of narrative validates such media rendering as "film." It is more for another set of visual presentation of a basic and familiar narrative with the star image of Jolie as the major asset. Postmodern intertextuality makes the watching of *Tomb Raider* (or any other mainstream genre film) an always familiar activity of endless play that transcends time, text, and media.

For one thing, contemporary technologies of mass (re)production and multi-channelled distribution offers modern spectators easy availability of a host of filmic images competing for a brief moment of attention. Under such circumstances, the model of spectatorship has shifted into a hyper state in which the "hyper-spectator" has the "memory (or hyper-memory) of the whole history of cinema" (Cohen 157). New media technologies create a virtual and universal digital-cinematheque, comprising an immense museum of cinema prepared for our visits. Digital cable

systems provide their subscribers with hundreds of choices of films each week and ready access to any film in their immense film libraries. Band width offers a digitalized hyper-space, where all films are stored and ready to roll, running side by side all the time on their separate or interactive screens. “The hyper-spectator’s random access memory (RAM) scans any and every detail of filmic dialogues, iconic configurations, conventions and narratives, and relates them to the universal history of cinema” (Cohen 159). In this tremendous archive and labyrinth of compressed hyper-space there are places for all genres, ages, categories, nations, and eccentricities. Just as easily as we now surf on the Internet cross-referentially among the never-ending hypertexts, the hyper-spectator “surf” “hyper-films” moving from film to film, from genre to genre, or from one director to another (Cohen 161). Such hyper-ness of contemporary spectators builds up for them an intricate knowingness that provides ample room for postmodern intertextuality. For another, as spectators used to “view films in a building dedicated to the showing of films as a commercial enterprise” (Cohen 159), contemporary Hollywood has already expanded its sprawl outside the cinema wall to include consumer goods, media products, or even mega-malls and mega-hotels playing on movie references. Concurrently, the play of intertextuality goes beyond the film text, and expanded to omnifarious forms of representations in video game, in action figure, in rollercoaster ride, or in the themed restaurant wall. While film industry is a gigantic storehouse of images, in most cases of contemporary industrial practices, the film is only made to be one spin-off to a certain media franchise, or made to be the prototype for following spin-offs. An even more gigantic pool of signs is out there to revolutionize people’s engagement with films.

Hence, when watching *Tomb Raider* movies, viewers may undergo a series of *déjà vu*, ranging from generic reference to cross-referential association by director or

actress. As spectators accompany Lara Croft through her adventure, they may jump back to the more ancient setting of treasure-hunting where Indiana Jones (in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and later *Indiana Jones* series) maneuvers through numerous obstacles and enigmas, to the scenes of hazardous Amazon jungles in *The Rundown* (2003) (as Lara drives through Cambodian jungle), to *Mission Impossible* when Lara shows the same nerve and skills in diving from incredible height, or even to the chasing and gun-shooting scenario in the action classic *Die Hard*. In other words, watching the movie *Tomb Raider* is a pieced-together process of a female *Indiana Jones* that will always *Die Hard* even on *The Rundown* journey to accomplish a *Mission Impossible*. When watching *Resident Evil* movies, viewers may be reminiscent of the zombie apocalypse classic, *Night of the Living Dead* by George Romero (1968), or *Alien* series which also feature gruesome creatures and advanced weaponry technology. When watching *Underworld* saga, viewers may travel back to an older series of vampire action, *Blade*, or simply to the beautifully grim mystery around *Dracula*. When watching *Aeon Flux*, viewers may be impressed by the black leather tight Aeon Flux is wearing which highly resembles the outfit of Catwoman. Such intertextual experience is carried to such an extent that to watch these action heroine movies is like to pick up any of the already available images, scenarios, narratives from a huge galley and to run a pleasurable commutation.

While the examples of intertextual travelling only within filmic sphere can already go on forever, this hyper experience could be further complicated if the viewer has certain knowledge in the female stars' filmography or happens to be a fan of the game or comic. For Hollywood cinema at least, stardom provides a good starting-point for cross-referentiality. "The very concept of a film star is an intertextual one", relying on "correspondences of similarity and difference from one

film to the text, and sometimes too on supposed resemblances between on-and off-screen personae that is reported, written, featured not only in cinema but also in magazine column, tablet coverage, or television interviews” (Reader 176). That is to say, the intertextuality never stops at one type of texts, and is relentlessly diffused to hook up with signs residing in any other media. For instance, for *Tomb Raider* game players, the cross-media spectatorship is composed of even closer and more intense inter-referencing. When they are watching movies, the intertextual association goes beyond the cinematic mode of representation to the world of *Tomb Raider* game and game-related products. The main character is the same; her abilities remain superb; the narrative is still about treasure-hunting adventures; even the costume of Lara Croft remains unchanged as light-blue vest and dark shorts. But at the same time, the cinematic version offers a whole new set of experience and signifiers that is not for the story per se, but for another visual presentation of the story. Compared with what the players experience in the virtual world made of digital graphic in the game of *Tomb Raider* or *Resident Evil*, what is offered on the big screen in cinema is the real(istic)/photographic images (even though some are still made by digital technique, they are made to “fit into” the “real” world), the enlarged effects of shooting, bombing, or monster growling, and especially the human agency of flesh and blood that personifies the virtual characters. All of them tickles people’s fascination about how technological artifacts can refresh spectator experience with intensified level of visual pleasure, but never functions to differentiate the film or particularly that film from other films or from games, because the only thing that exists is the array of “signifiers of difference” that are actually identical copies through technological means; there is no uniqueness or originality, there is no referential point for differentiation, there is no “signified of difference.”

Such intertextual reference runs back and forth across the playground of screens of cinema, of televisions, of computers or increasingly of smart phones, each carrying a set of signifiers but without constant agenda of signification. When we are talking about movies, we could refer to games for some narrative or iconography (but not “the” narrative or iconography); when we are picturing the character in mind, we could download from so many websites the photos of Jolie in costume; and when we are looking at pictures of Jolie, we could click the hyperlink to pages gossiping about “BrAngelina” (a blending from the couple of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) if the movie is seen after *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005, after which the “BrAngelina” came into being). During this running-back-and-forth across the different surfaces, the spectatorship is thus split into multiple fragments floating around the different surfaces – the screens, the media, the products – open to a number of engagements, but each of the engagements could only bring more uncertainty to the cinematic experience of viewing one specific movie, because each of them participates in that relay of “endless play of signs” and expels the possibility of a solid and singular signification. The movie as a composite commodity seems to synergize a wide range of texts, experience and pleasure under a name like “*Tomb Raider*,” but it is actually fragmenting what used to be a concrete text (but already an “intertext” that borrows at least genre conventions) into multi-model texts, sensual stimuli, or theme-park simulacra. Hence, being an exhibition of extensive droves of codes, signs and spectacles that always make intertextual traverse, the movie, such a composite practice, is at once a process of fragmentation.

Jameson insists that our awareness of the play of stylistic allusion “is now a constitutive and essential part” of our experience of the postmodern film (24). It is thus neither new nor old to see the movie of treasure hunting or the movie of zombie

killing by female protagonist that is simply a repetition of past genre films and a concurrent adaptation. There is not even any intention of parody as there is only superficial copies of sets, scenes, stunts and spectacles (as to why the female lead does not count as a change or difference, I will elaborate in following sections). “In a culture dominated by codes so pervasive that they appear natural, the intertextual, viewed as the presence of these codes and clichés within culture, can cause a sense of repetition, a saturation of cultural stereotypes” (Allen 168). Jameson, commenting on how postmodern theory tends to wipe out notions of what he styles “depth”, writes: “depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)” (12). He also argues that, “pervious modes of identity and expression, based on a shared sense of the ruling norm, give way to a heterogeneous, rootless culture in which neither norm nor a resistance to that norm seems any longer possible” (qtd. in Allen 169). In a postmodern context, intertextual codes and practices predominate because of a loss of any access to reality. Under such circumstances, a parody of dominant norms is no longer possible and in its place there is what Jameson calls pastiche:

In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that, alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyes...the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the

imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture. (17-18)

Such intertextual practice is no longer capable of radical double-voicedness. It collapses into a kind of pointless resurrection of past styles and past voices wheeling expeditiously around the surface with ever more florid and rapidly updated appearance to hide the fact there is nothing underneath the surface and the surface is all that contemporary culture has. If the intertextual allusion loses its satiric power or any ulterior motive, it only adds to the reproduction of signs and thus further exacerbates the process of fragmentation. When Booker, M. Keith talks about the inevitable fragmentation of postmodern Hollywood films, he focuses on the formal fragmentation of cinema, and attributes the film editing, cutting in particular, as the main cause. In the first place, even before the postmodernity enters the scene,

Film, after all, is always already mechanically reproduced. There is no ‘original’ film of which the various prints distributed are mere copies: each film exists only as mechanically reproduced copies. Further, film is inherently fragmented in both its construction and its presentation to audiences; each film is shot as separate scenes and presented as a montage in which these scenes are joined by a sequence of cuts that, for Benjamin, disrupt the sense of wholeness that gives traditional art much of its religious flavor. (ii)

When the issue of fragmentation takes into consideration the role of intertextuality and the “composite commodity” where technological reproduction surpasses the cinematic mode into a more thorough consumer culture, fragmentation

of films goes further. This anticipates Jameson's later characterization of postmodernism that fragmentation is a reflection of the character of life in the late capitalist world. According to Jameson, the formal fragmentation of postmodern texts is closely related to the increasing psychic fragmentation of individual subjects (25). "Meanwhile, this psychic fragmentation itself implies that the mind of the individual artist is no longer stable enough to be the source of a unique personal style, resulting in the necessity of borrowing styles from others via pastiche" (Booker xviii). This tendency is further sped up by the rapid change of the postmodern era, in which individuals virtually cannot maintain any genuine sense of historical continuity. It then relates to a second stylistic feature Jameson identifies besides the pastiche – what he calls schizophrenia. He uses Lacan's definition of schizophrenia – a form of psychosis – as a metaphor to describe the fragmentation of subjectivity. The schizophrenic, he claims, experiences time not as a past-present-future continuum, but as an "eternal present," which may be occasionally and briefly visited by the past or the possibility of a future (in Storey 151). And Storey further explains,

The "reward" for the loss of conventional selfhood (the sense of self as always located within a temporal continuum) is an intensified sense of the present...To call postmodern culture schizophrenic is to claim that it has lost its sense of history (and its sense of a future different from the present). It is a culture suffering from "historical amnesia", locked into the discontinuous flow of perpetual presents. The temporal culture of modernism has given way to the spatial culture of postmodernism. (151)

With the codes, images, and spectacles rotating so fast while cross-referencing to so many other memories, relevant or irrelevant, past, present or future, that the whole process of the contemporary hyper-spectatorship becomes a schizophrenic experience composed of vertiginous amount of fragments.

One result of this loss of historical sense, according to Jameson, is a tendency for contemporary artists to see the past styles as a sort of aesthetic cafeteria from whose menu they can nostalgically pick and choose without considering the historical context in which those styles originally came into being (in Booker xviii). While this rhetoric stays on the “aesthetic cafeteria of past styles”, what I want to add and emphasize is that this is more than a “cafeteria” and more than the artist only. With each film developing into/belonging to a colossal franchise, the fragments do not only reside in the film text but spilt out to any related media products. Just like what a late capitalist economy would do, the “cafeteria” would be a chain business whose products could include anything from fast food to classy wine, or possibly even pesticide. The watching of *Resident Evil*, for instance, jumps back and forth between film and film, film and game, film and advertisement, which may composed of a whole bulk of fragments ranging from Milla Jovovich’s magazine shoot, Avon (the make-up brand Milla endorses in 2012), to the newest game walkthrough of *Resident Evil 5*. What is more, the “pick and choose” process is increasingly done by spectators based on their respective knowingness of contemporary cultural and media landscape, whose subjectivity has undergone a breaking up not only in terms of historical continuity but also in terms of space coherence – the fragments have been to more

than one form of media. This “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (Storey 148) and present, from one media and another, reduces the movie to a series of diversified spectacles, a collection of heterogeneous images disconnected from any genuine sense of referent reality or historical process, the consumption of which constitutes a typical schizophrenic experience – that of “isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link into a coherent sequence” (Jameson 119) – while this breakdown is not only in temporality, but also in space, a further erasure of reality.

It is also futile attempt to locate the reality of each franchise at its debut state, because on one hand, the technological reproduction goes so fast and ubiquitously that the copies, adaptations and spin-offs have already diffused on a large and intensive scale before the “original” could establish its meaning – it is hard to tell the meaningful from the prevalent. On the other hand, even the “first” appearance is already created for the purpose of being reproduced in the first place, which is an inevitable adaptive response to media landscape. The postmodern consumer culture has already prescribed the destiny of every single media product – reproduction precedes appearance. In the ensuing discussion of this section, I will take *Tomb Raider* as a case study to expound how reality is lost even in Lara’s first appearance.

Despite the claim that Angelina Jolie be the most “iconic” human embodiment of Lara Croft, which in turn has boosted up Jolie’s fame in her acting career, Lara Croft is perhaps more famous as the “digital heroine” – the protagonist in the video

game solving puzzles, fighting enemies and locating the treasure – than the one that played by Angelina Jolie in two concrete stories on cinema screen. The character of Lara Croft was initiated by England's Core Design in 1996 “as the visual and interactive centerpiece of the video game *Tomb Raider*: an avatar controlled by the player in order to explore exotic environments and raid deathtrap-laden tombs for treasure and mystical artifacts” (Rehak 159). As described by Flanagan,

Lara Croft might be compared to a person, but she is much more onscreen. Lara wields amazing physical prowess and multiple firearms. She is capable of any physical activity demanded by the game's incredible situations: back-flipping out of buildings, swimming underwater, punching tigers, round-housing monks, and even biting foe...while barely clad in scanty, skin-tight “explorer” clothing. In addition to her superhuman traits, Lara is precise, rides in great vehicles, and unless there is user error, never needs a second take. (78)

Although the 1996 game avatar is the first appearance of Lara Croft, this does not mean this is the reality about its image. The larger environment of new media and her digital nature as a software-generated character without human referent unleashes the game to a sphere that is more than an interactive, goal-oriented electronic experience designed to entertain and immerse players (Rehak 159) – but a sphere of multiple instances of consumption and experience, which then determines her hyperreal existence and inevitable upcoming simulations and simulacra. This “playable, copyable, endlessly reframable digital star who serves her collective

makers and users in myriad ways”, offers similarly varied avenues for signification over and above the context of a single image, body, identity, experience or product (Rehak 160).

Such translatability of Croft also manifests a revolution in media production and distribution that is based on digitality. According to Rehak, “the impact of digital recording, manipulation and transmission of data has made it possible for a character born of computer – conceived in 3D software, rendered and animated on high-speed graphics displays – to be copied and permuted into whatever form a given medium demands” (163). Croft thus could be present across various media forms, functioning as, simultaneously, action heroine, Internet avatar, pin-up, entry of fan albums, spoke-model and public service announcement. As a text readable by all kinds of audience, Croft manifests in as many forms as there are for people to view. “She can appear bikini-clad in *The Face* magazine while giving ‘interviews’ to PC Gamer’s website, ‘posing’ for a calendar ‘shoot’ and, of course, exploring crypts and castles on the screens of any player who has purchased or pirated her computer games” (Rehak 163). It is within this porous network of sign reproduction and circulation that the symbol of Lara Croft loses its meaning and reality, and becomes an uncertain and fluctuant object, which, however, is exactly why it plays so well in the postmodern consumer culture.

Lara Croft, as a female character, was originally conceived to provide an alternative to traditional gender alignment in videogames, but she then began to carry

public significance beyond *Tomb Raider*'s jungles and crypts. Like Sonic the Hedgehog and Mario the plumber, she “became a brand in her own right, a means of personalizing technology while instilling consumer loyalty to the Sony corporation” (Rehak 162). This “brand in her own right” resembles a collage of different signifiers and signifiers of difference – a “GARAP” that Baudrillard exemplifies in the opening paragraph of *The System of Objects*,

Let us imagine for the moment modern cities stripped of all their signs, with walls bare like a guiltless conscience. And then GARAP appears. This single expression, GARAP, is inscribed on all the walls: pure signifier, without signified, signifying itself. It is read, discussed, and interpreted to no end. Signified despite itself, it is consumed as a sign. Then what does it signify, if not a society capable of generating such a sign? And yet despite its lack of significance it has mobilized a complete imaginary collectivity; it has become characteristic of the (w)hole of society. To some extent, people have come to “believe” in GARAP...it would suffice to associate the sign GARAP with product for it to impose itself immediately. (10)

“All the walls” here could be the analogy to the products and all the forms of media in which the composite commodity of Lara Croft is carried. In addition to the media appearances in computer games, comic books, action figures and motion pictures, Croft has been featured in calendars, men’s magazines, promotional tours, music videos, Nike ads, billboard and television campaigns for *Tomb Raider*, as well

as Lara's Book – the “walls”. And such “walls”, in turn, ensured the popular awareness of the avatar – the “GARAP” – which quickly outstripped the treasure-hunting and puzzle-solving scenarios where Croft was brooded in the first place. She seems highly capable of migration, “cloning herself from one media environment to another and maintaining simultaneous existences in each (she is a “media raider” as well)” (Rehak 162). What is more, compared with “real” person celebrity doing advertising, like Bob Dole²⁴ for Pepsi, who ends up being frowned upon, audiences do not seem bothered by her participation in commercial domains advertising Pepsi. “Through the endless translation of information between diverse technological frameworks and cultural hierarchies in this postmodern media” (Rehak 162), Lara Croft has, writes O'Rourke, “always transcended her videogame origins, due to the strength of the character...in many ways she was a movie, TV show, comic or novel waiting to happen, it always seemed just like circumstance that you experienced her first adventures via a videogame” (2002).

The reason for the ease of Croft's translation could be about Croft's “polysemous perversity”, her ability to endlessly re-signify. “In this sense, she merely extends the essential emptiness of the avatar, a semiotic vessel intended to be worn glove-like by players” (Rehak 162). It then ends up like what Baudrillard argues about GARAP,

²⁴ Bob Dole is an American attorney and politician. He represented Kansas in the United States Senate from 1969 to 1996, was Gerald Ford's Vice Presidential running mate in the 1976 presidential election, and was Senate Majority Leader from 1985 to 1987 and in 1995 and 1996. Dole was also the Republican Party presidential nominee in the 1996 presidential election. In his retirement, he worked part-time for a Washington, D. C. law firm, and engaged in a career of writing, consulting, public speaking, and television appearance, which include television commercial spokesman for such products as Viagra, Visa, and Pepsi-Cola (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Dole).

Yet, this basic lexicon, which covers walls and haunts consciences, is strictly asyntactic: diverse brands follow one another, are juxtaposed and substituted for one another without an articulation or transition. It is an erratic lexicon where one brand devours the other, each living for its own endless repetition. This is undoubtedly the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals. And the “loyalty” to a brand name is nothing more than the conditioned reflex of a controlled affect. (21)

That is to say, her multiplicity and instability is exactly the source of her popularity and ease of commercialization. Since “in order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign” (20), the very emptiness allows for producing the signifiers of difference to incite personalized desires for consumption: playing the games, reading the comics, collecting the action figures, watching the films (possibly not only in cinema, but in DVD or on computer), buying the magazine, the calendar, the Nike shoes, the Pepsi, and so on. The various signs of Lara Croft are “Only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us...” but “the mind is irresistibly attracted to a place devoid of meaning.” It is “non-sense that seduces”; seduction employs “signs without credibility and gestures without referents” (Baudrillard, *Seduction* 74–5).

Even the appearance of Lara Croft is similarly an unstable one. The graphic design of first generation Croft is relatively low in resolution, mainly composed of polygons, which might not be considered as a desirable image for its lack of perfect concrete embodiment. However, she is an open text as such. As argues by Steven Poole, Croft’s appeal stems precisely from this lack of individuating detail:

She'll never be thoroughly realistic. For Lara Croft is an abstraction, an animated conglomeration of sexual and attitudinal signs (breasts, hotpants, shades, thigh holsters) whose very blankness encourages the (male or female) player's psychological projection and is exactly why she has enjoyed such remarkable success as a cultural icon. A good videogame character like Lara Croft or Mario is, in these ways, inexhaustible. (153)

Such abstract entity allows for multiple representation and embodiment, hence opening up the market to various appropriations and adaptations. Croft's "success as a cultural icon" that crosses over so easily results from the fundamentally convergent nature of new media²⁵. With the digital technologies as the shared weapon to reproduce and circulate endless images, new media works so seamlessly with the postmodern consumer culture to create multilayered commodities catering and appealing to ever increasing proportion of demography. Lara Croft's translatability illuminates the hidden (or rather quite conspicuous) connections binding media together, which in turn, enable her easy crossover. Sufficient common ground exists between the spheres of gaming, film-making, advertising, and publishing that Croft's "transit across their public faces serves as a kind of industrial signposting for consumers, a means of orientation within apparently competing forms of textuality and commerce" (Rehak 168). Her ability to transcend different media with multiplied appearance is a phenomenon that enjoys the trendy label "synergy." However, this

²⁵ New media can provisionally be described as "a global network of communication technologies and information flow whose material backbone is the digital computer and whose aesthetics and formal properties are heavily shaped by digital processes" (Rehak 161).

“synergetic” nature of Lara Croft does not mean she becomes a consolidated or concrete entity where the “real” meaning of each image can be retrieved. This “synergy” is simply a loose and anarchistic assembly or bricolage of whatever fragment possible for market, of which the only organizing logic is a capitalized pleasure.

As a star image that frequents all kinds of commercial platforms, the visual presentation of Lara Croft has been kept a flickering one. From the visual history of Lara Croft²⁶, it can be seen that she takes different forms on different gaming equipment, and has undergone gradual transformation from the very first creation to later updates in terms of the resolution and texture. For example, the *Tomb Raider* game, “Angel of Darkness” released in the summer of 2003, features a Croft rendered with 5,000 polygons as compared with the first game’s 500 (Rehak 170), and later this year, a rebooted *Tomb Raider* will introduce the most realistic portrayal of Lara Croft, who looks like a real human with blood and flesh. At the same time, in the absence of a human referent, dozens of women participate in “casting” the avatar of Lara Croft, imitating her clothing and hairstyle to “flesh out” a fictive persona. This is a part of *Tomb Raider* marketing involving both fans and producers. Fan websites of *Tomb Raider* feature photographs of women on a regular basis. These women could be both unknown amateurs and professional models (such as Rhona Mitra, Lara Weller and Nell McAndrew), who are dressed in Croft’s trademark outfits and wielding her props. As Polsky observes, “she was never just one woman, but rather three very similar

²⁶ Brian Altano, and Daemon Hatfield, IGN Report, retrieved on 13 Sep. 2012. From <http://games.ign.com/articles/121/1219865p1.html>

looking catalog models decked out in safari outfits” (31). One such officially authorized “cosplayer”, Rhona Mitra, was quite successful as the avatar’s lip-synching double in concert performances for an Eidos-funded CD of tie-in music. But as her popularity grew, Mitra began to overplay her role (Rehak 165). After Mitra claimed in an interview that “I know that I’m her,” she got fired by the software company because of this heresy, although she was “arguably the most popular human Lara yet” (Polsky 32). This excommunication signaled a strong tendency of the company’s strategies – Croft was maintained as an open-ended construct:

Eidos announced that from that point forward, they would hire human Lara models only on an ad hoc basis and made it a point to introduce two new human models at the same time as a gesture of their commitment to preserving Lara’s multiplicity. Ironically, Eidos’s decision to push multiplicity was a response to the pressure brought on by Mitra’s appropriation, her becoming Lara. The post-Mitra human models, however, always referred to Lara in the third person.

(Polsky 33)

And according to Polsky, even in the game developers’ machinations to hire Angelina Jolie to cast in the 2001 and 2003 movie adaptations, multiplicity and instability is still the decisive criteria,

The openly bisexual, but undeniably human, Jolie appears to possess the uncanny ability to sustain the complex alliance of identification and desire that digital Lara wields over her fans...I believe that to a great extent Jolie’s success

in the role of Lara can be attributed to her own public image of instability (perhaps it is this very quality that allows Jolie to so seamlessly “become” her characters). (35)

It is Lara’s quilting, multiple affordances and fragmentation all over contemporary media that contribute to the game’s, and more importantly, the franchise’s very success. As says Rehak, it is Croft’s very rootlessness or lack of physical referent that enables such multi-vocality (167). This is in resonance with what Polsky argues, “the failure to anchor Lara in one body, one character, or one narrative facilitates opportunities for players to participate in her continuing evolution” (35). At the heart of Croft’s stardom, summed up by Rehak, is the apparent contradiction between Croft’s “emptiness” and “fullness”, “which stems from a kind of public overload – an avalanche of imagery and meaning – in the face of which audiences have no choice but to begin writing, indexing, cataloguing” (167). Lara Croft thus can be understood as a kind of industrially produced intertext, a dense weave of prefabricated linkages that serves exactly as a preface to composite commodity.

The success of the action heroine figure as a plural and instable, abstract entity is surely not limited to the case of Lara Croft. All the action heroines in concern are undergoing the same process of reproduction, translation and fragmentation, just in different degree catering to different consumer base. It is in this very process that the figure of action heroine is totally transformed into multiple commodity objects, free-

floating signifiers that do not anchor to any stable reality about these images. It is this very process that finally leads to the death of the action heroine as a meaningful representation (and this will be further elaborated in the third section of this chapter).

As the Spectacles of Technology

As composite commodities, the big titles that each feature a female action hero synergize all kinds of pleasures while allocating difference to each product in the streamlining of it. Such industrial practice, together with the hyper-spectatorship nurtured by contemporary media-scape, has rendered the watching of action heroine films a typical undergoing of postmodern aesthetics and sensibility – a fragmented experience consisting of transient signifiers that always only point to other signifiers – and further contributed to the instability and thus meaninglessness of each image. But this is only an extensive embodiment of postmodernity in contemporary media and culture, which tells how images penetrate people's everyday life. As constantly as people may be seeing various signs at the bus station, at the shopping mall, or in front of their personal computer, the intensity of spectacles is far less than how images are presented in the duration of a blockbuster movie that keeps bombarding audience with actions, bombings, crashes, and all other fascinating images. If the reproduction technology makes the images proliferate on a large scale and mingle with people's daily routine through all kinds of commodities and commercials, the cinematic mode of it converges and compresses all the images into a two-hour-long screening of enlarged projection, and then consolidates them with the spectacularity of omnipotent

digital special effects. Therefore, to make it intensive, Hollywood does a very good job by making each image a spectacular one, which, then, tells how images seduce. Each of the action heroine film is representative of the postmodern film with its extravagant richness, its unending barrage of spectacular images, and its unabashed sense of itself as spectacle. Be it *Tomb Raider* or *Underworld*, *Resident Evil*, or *Aeon Flux*, the intensive aggregation of spectacles makes the film itself an extraordinarily enticing commodity to consume.

I will analyze the spectacles in action heroine in two categories. One is the spectacles of technology for this section, and the second type for next section, which is emphatically unique to action heroine, is the spectacles of the female heroes' bodies that are highlighted by the generic fact that it is a woman who occupies most of the screen time. For spectacles of technology, there are also two facets. One refers to those spectacles made by technologies, or more specifically, the generic spectacles that utilize special effects and any other filmmaking technologies (for instance, make-up, cinematography, stunt, and most notably, the computer generated images, or the digital technology), to visualize the impossible in science-fiction, fantasy or horror based scenario, or to enhance the stunning effect and to add varieties for action and adventure. The spectacle of this facet is a regular feature in contemporary blockbusters. Due to its intention to bring shock effect and spectacular content by means of highly professional post-production technologies behind the scene, I will term this kind of spectacle in the following discussion as "the spectacular." The second type of spectacles relates to technology not specifically through the

background supporting role of technology, but on the contrary, by putting the theme of technology right in front of the audience. In other words, this kind of spectacles depict what and how technologies are used in the film narrative, and further how technologies, especially the so-called high tech, are thematized in these movies, for which I will term this kind of spectacles as “technology-themed spectacles.” For instance, the weaponry system and the cybernetic technologies used by Lara Croft to track the treasure and her enemy, or the ongoing scientific research on virus in *Resident Evil* – these are spectacles that epitomize technology in a particular way, from which we could see further how the cultural-economic logic frames our fascination with and consumption of technology.

When it comes to “technology,” there have been innumerable discussions of it, its changes, and its interrelation with cultural change in recent years. From the perspective of the ever more technologized cultures of the industrialized society, the entire world has undergone huge changes (Rutsky 1), which is, as Baudrillard says, “the mutation of [a] properly industrial society into what could be called our techno-culture” (*A Critique* 185). This mutation into techno-culture has often been related to postmodernity in terms of a broader shift from the modern to the postmodern. However, although technology is indeed indispensable to notions of both modernity and postmodernity, by no means is modern or postmodern culture determined by technology, nor does this indicate the rise of techno-cultural mutation nowadays is caused by some particular changes in technology. “Rather, whatever changes or mutations have occurred in contemporary cultures—whether one calls these cultures

postmodern or not—seem to be based less on changes in technology per se than in the very conception of technology, of what technology is” (Rutsky 1).

This is the very idea of what Heidegger raised as the “question concerning technology” – what he calls “the essence [Wesen] of technology” that “is by no means anything technological” (4). The commonly accepted definition of technology labels technology as instrumental, as a means to an end. Heidegger argues, however, this narrow conception of technology is merely the modern manifestation of “the essence of technology,” which obscures the non-technological “essence,” and also blinds people to a broader “essence” “that informs not only the modern view of technology, but also the quite different conceptions of traditional technology and the *techne* of ancient Greece” (Rutsky 2). By seeking to re-envision the broader view of technology, Heidegger has actually raised the question that are particularly appropriate to “how the conception of technology may have changed in an age of high technology, and thus appropriate to what might well be called ‘the question concerning high tech’” (Rutsky 2).

A first glance of “high technology” would seem to render an idea of “a matter of more technology”— a more extreme, more effective version of modern technology (Rutsky 3). As seen from what the dashing advance in technologies of communications, information and military, for instance, could bring to human race – that those who possess and instrumentalize these technologies enjoy an obvious advantage in their life and social positions, it is undeniable that the “high technology

remains a 'tool' for distinguishing social classes", or in other words, the "instrumental or functional conception that defines modern technology still remains an important aspect of high technology, or 'high tech'" (Rutsky 3). At the same time, however, high tech also includes, or rather, highlights, the non-instrumental, or "non-technological" aspect, the aspect that has been obscured in the modern conception of technology in Heidegger's terms (Rutsky 3). And this aspect is actually linked to a domain considered right opposite to modern technology: that of art and aesthetics. Such connection does not come from nowhere, for the relationship between the two has undergone various shifts from the beginning of western culture. In fact, the Greek root of technology, *techne*, was generally translated as "art," "skill," or "craft" and depicted activities ranging from engineering to the arts. For the Greeks, "it was not technology alone that bore the name *techne*," but art too "was simply called *techne*"(Heidegger 34). Slowly, it split along two lines: one, the "technical" or "technological" and two, the arts. The rupture between the technical and the artistic had repercussions in cultural fields, when the social "sciences" and the humanities became "subjects" distinct from "science." Technology became the privileged province of the latter. And the arts, seen as the very opposite of technology, was deemed non-technical. The "scientific revolution" and subsequent developments reinforced this division – a division that persists to this day. Indeed, modernity, defined in terms of the instrumental rationality and technology, is the basis on which the West distinguishes itself from "non-technological" others. However, Heidegger does not mean that such close relationship between art and technology in ancient

Greece has simply been lost, but has always been basic to technology, to its “essence,” even when these two spheres are explicitly in contrast to each other in modern conception.

However, there are changes to technology. When technological development enters the postmodern age, the word “technology” is usually prefixed with a “new” or “high.” Different from modern technology defined as simply a tool or means to an end, high tech emphasizes on issues of representation, style, and design, seeming to retrieving the aesthetic aspect that is originally contained in the word “techne” (Rutsky 4). This concern with representation and style, as Rutsky points out, lies not only in the design of technological objects themselves, but also in the practice of providing a “high-tech look” or style for objects that are not in themselves highly technological (4). For instance, basketball shoes could have a “high-tech style”

In “high-tech design,” then, the modernist ideal of functional form has been largely abandoned in favor of a technological look or style that need not be functional in any traditional sense. The efficacy of such items becomes, for the most part, a matter of cultural style, cultural desires. Yet, the high-tech concern with style and stylishness is not limited to questions of design; in high tech, the very “function” of technology becomes a matter of representation, style, aesthetics—a matter, that is, of technological reproducibility. In high tech, the ability to technologically reproduce, modify, and reassemble stylistic or cultural elements becomes not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself. (Rutsky 4)

This is how postmodernity is related to, though not determined by, high tech. As high tech is defined by this process of technological representation, of reproducibility, alteration, and assemblage, which are the very properties of postmodernity, particularly in Baudrillard's terms, it can be said that high technology is simulacral technology, or, technology of reproduction. "What this technology reproduces –and thus puts "into play" – is representation itself, style itself. But then, representation and style have always been technological, supplementary, simulacral." That is to say, "in high tech, however, this simulacral status becomes an end in itself, rather than merely a means to an end or a copy of an original" (Rutsky 4). In this sense, what I want to emphasize here for this study is the high technology's nature of being "simulacral", its ability to alter, to modify and to simulate. If high technology's reproducibility enables the extensive proliferation of a certain cultural icon, or a media franchise in the form of composite commodity, like Lara Croft for instance (elaborated in the previous section), its ability to modify/alter/simulate is both the means and the end to the intensified spectacles in the movies. Or to be more specific, the computer generated imagery, the magic-like technique to create monsters purely from innumerable pixels and motion capture, or the post production that gives the final touch to bring perfection, are all means of high technology to produce spectacles, but at the same time, such means are themselves spectacles. On one hand, the filmmaking high technology makes it possible to feature the impossible spectacles in the movie, and thus to bring visually pleasurable content for consumption. On the other hand, the technology itself becomes the "end", the very spectacle, the object to be consumed.

Therefore, a high-tech aesthetic or style does not simply mean a particular look that possesses specific set of visual features, but refers to “a cultural concern with ‘stylishness,’ with ‘aesthetics,’ that is intrinsic to high tech” (Rutsky 5). Put in the context of cinema, to speak of a high-tech aesthetic is, similarly, not simply to speak of a specific astonishing image, but of a fascination with what the “highest” technology (the most up-to-date technology) is capable of, which in turn constitutes a spectacle for audience to marvel at. According to Botkin and others, “high” as in high technology is equal to another expression – state-of-the-art. By this term, it means an inclusion of function and design, implying not only the most recently developed technologies, but also an incorporation of both function and design into aesthetic processes. Rutsky further points out that the rhetoric of high tech is often related to the avant-garde artistic movements in the early twentieth century. While admitting the difference between the two – that “if the rhetoric of the modernist avant-gardes served to distinguish an artistic vanguard from the rest of the population, the notion of a high-tech avant-garde privileges a ‘highly technological’ vanguard that is also, often, ‘highly capitalist’” (5), Rutsky emphasizes on their common concern – the conjunction of the technological and the aesthetic:

the very fact that metaphors such as “state of the art” and “avant-garde” have been so commonly employed – and accepted – in describing high tech is evidence that an “aesthetic” dimension has become part of the definition of contemporary technology. Technology has come increasingly to be seen as a matter of aesthetics or style, as an “aesthetic movement.” (Rutsky 5)

However, it is not only the conception of technology that has changed, Rutsky continues to argue, but also the notion of aesthetics. The definition of the aesthetic can no longer be based on the dichotomy between either the aura/wholeness, or the modernist terms of instrumentality/functionality. Just like technology, the aesthetics becomes an instable and reproductive process, “which continually breaks elements free of their previous context and recombines them in different ways” (8). The demarcation between the technological and the aesthetic further dissolves and the two begin to “turn” into one another (8). Such a transformative condition is, again, highly resonant to the postmodern turn especially in terms of the free-floating signifiers and endless signification. And such is also the way the action heroine movies, so representative of postmodern movies, play with both technological and the aesthetic, and with their implosion – the movies provide a popular/well-publicized venue for the representation of technology, both directly and indirectly, and in turn, the imagery that is supposed to speak for the aesthetical side of movies becomes more and more generated and facilitated by the high tech.

Although modernism never seems able to recognize the shift in the conception of technology and continues to conceptualize technology almost entirely in the terms of instrumentality and functionality, there is an opposite tendency to technologize art. This tendency is based on a desire to make art practical and functional, which is well suited to the modernist mass production (Rutsky 9). For instance, a house is to be a mass-produced “machine for living in” (Corbusier 95) and the object of design is to be “of no discernible ‘style’ but simply a product of an industrial order like a car, an

airplane and such like” (qtd. in Rutsky 10). Hence, in terms of production, art is said to be subject to a standardization and rationalization in a similar manner to what Fordism practices, while in terms of use, the artistic object becomes more and more conceptualized in practical or functional sense. “In both cases, an instrumental or technological rationality is to be applied to art, stripping it of superfluous ornamental and ritual value. The result is a new ‘machine aesthetic’ in which form is to follow function” (Rutsky 10).

In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin, as mentioned before, attributes the loss of “aura” in artwork to the advent of technological reproducibility. He makes this analogy between the modernist “emancipation” of “constructive forms” from art and the Renaissance freeing of the sciences from philosophy (“Paris” 161). Such analogy indicates that, just as modernity’s scientific technological, instrumental view of the world is based on the “death” of animistic, magical, or spiritualized conceptions of the world, artistic modernism is premised upon the “death” of the aura – an autonomous, “living” spirit that “animates” artwork in Benjamin’s terms (in Rutsky 11). And modernism, in turn, finds the analogy between technological reproduction – with its related techniques of assemblage, collage, and montage – and the rationalization and functionality of mass production (Rutsky 11). The reproduction techniques, such as montage and assemblage, resembles the set of procedures adopted in the factory assembly lines, and the “products” made by these techniques are thus viewed functional as well (11). This is how the production of a movie, with its wide use of

montage, editing, alternation – the technological reproduction – is a typical example for Benjamin of modernist transformation of aesthetics into a functional form.

However, Rutsky further argues, such belief in the “functional form,” or “machine aesthetic” “betrays the extent to which modernism misunderstands its own “aesthetic” uses of technology”, because modernist aesthetics is actually based on “the myth of functional form” for most cases, and “taking technology and mass production as models for art and artistic production does not, after all, make modernist art inherently more functional” (11). In a discussion of modernist architecture, Reyner Banham also points out that the so-called “functional forms” only “looked” technological, and they were rarely particularly technological or functional (25). Therefore, about the functionality and technological reproducibility, Rutsky says,

the analogy that modernism attempts to draw between the functionality of mass production and technological reproducibility is similarly flawed. In both cases, modernism conflates productive functionality with efficacy of use or representational efficacy. Although rationalization and standardization may make factory production, and perhaps its products, more functional, the efficacy of, for example, a photograph or film is only minimally related to the rationalization and standardization of its production. (11)

Similarly, the use of high tech does not make a movie more functional, but more of a style of functionality. Just as a picture ceases to be a unique piece of art put in a

frame and hung on the wall but becomes a ubiquitous digital file, scanned, shot, and copied, on one's computer subject to whatever drawing software, or a representation of a beautiful narrative (if we can call it that way) ceases to be the uninterrupted performance for hours on stage in theatrical form or even passionate directing with proficient shooting and devoted acting in cinematic form. It becomes an assembly work pieced together by lots of post-production – the background is added later, the props are inserted afterwards, and even the eyes, the skin, and the hair of the characters are generated wholly in this post stage (like those Na'vi in *Avatar*). When pictures can be created solely out of drawing tools on computer or brought to perfection by them, it seems that the nimble manipulation of a highly complicated software through commutations of mouse clicks and keyboard punches is much more “professional” or “awesome” than what can be done by an actual painter with real paint, brushes and canvas, no matter how skillful he is. This is all because of a high tech illusion and fascination that the more advanced, the better, and such “criteria” goes to the art as soon as technology and aesthetics begin to turn into each other (and what is more, such computer generated images can be stored and multiplied) in an age we prefer to see a flawless cover face revised by Photoshop, rather than the face with freckles and truth. Thus we would rather say that this is less about how all such assembly technologies of filmmaking post-production enable the movie to become more functional and more efficient, (well, if “being a blockbuster” were a function, it is certainly more functional. But to the root, people are consuming not the “function” of a blockbuster, but the style that the blockbuster looks) but more about how the look

of the high technology, no matter it is the end product made by it, or simply the thought of high technology, works as a highly fascinating object for the masses – isn't it a great idea to see what we usually have no easy access to on an enlarged screen, in high-resolution detail, and in a pleasurable and relaxing seat? – And the look is enough, because that is all a culture of signs asks for.

To put it in Baudrillard's theoretical terms, the "machine aesthetic" of modern design is virtually a simulation of the rationalized, standardized forms of machines and factories: it is no more than an aesthetic, or a style that is divorced from any functional or instrumental context but posing as if it is still in it. The effect of machine aesthetic on the very conception of technology itself, knowingly or unknowingly, is that technology becomes more of style and aesthetic than of functionality or instrumentality, which further testifies the "turning" happens on both sides, especially with the rise of technological reproducibility (Rutsky 12).

So as the modernist conception of technology starts to undergo an "aesthetic turn," the conception of "the aesthetic" also undergoes its own "technological turn." The efforts of modernism to expel the aura, and to make art more functional and technological could be viewed as an attempt to extend an instrumentality or technological rationality to the realm of art, and to cultural forms more generally (Rutsky 12). Yet, it is this extension itself that leads to a "turning" in the notion of both technology and the aesthetic. As Rutsky summarizes,

In “aestheticizing” the functional and the technological, modernism separates technological form from function; it allows stylistic or aesthetic elements to be “unsecured” from their previous context and to be recombined or reassembled into new configurations according to the dictates of “style,” of “aesthetics.” Yet, the “aesthetic,” as it comes to be seen in terms of the technological, moves away from romantic notions of wholeness and spiritual value; in other words, it loses its sense of aura. As such, the aesthetic will become indistinguishable from culture more generally. The aesthetic, in short, becomes a matter of style, a technological or techno-cultural style. (12)

Hence, both the technological and the aesthetic have become techno-cultural. Rutsky’s line of theorizing technology and aesthetic runs parallel to Baudrillard’s take on the postmodern categories of implosion and simulation, in that the distinctions between art and technology tend to disappear, and both parties begin to simulate each other. Such tendencies and condition constitute the general culture – or the cultural-economic logic – of late capitalist society in which the movies in concern are produced and reproduced, and also serves a central concern of the following sections’ argumentation.

The Spectacular

In view of this techno-cultural background in which “the ability to technologically reproduce, modify, and reasonable stylistic or cultural elements

becomes not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself” (Rutsky 4), we can then further explore how technology works as spectacles in contemporary blockbuster movies, and particularly the action heroine movies. This section will look into the first kind of spectacles of technology – “the spectacular.”

Like other spectacular blockbusters of concurrent time, the action heroine films in this study also boast spectacular scenes, shots, stunts, and set pieces that are no less imaginative, eye-catching, and breathtaking. Though unable to compete with those mega productions in terms of the investment in each specially made shot (hence not of the best “quality”), these action heroine films do manage to provide certain sensual relish at the according level to their production condition respectively, which might include, for instance, the budget, or the technological state at the time of production in view of the soaring progress of filmmaking technology. Viewers who went to the cinema at the release time of each action heroine movie would have found it intriguing to see Angelina Jolie taming a hi-tech combating robot twice her height in perfect composure at the beginning of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, to see her jumping from the balcony to rock back and forth on her rubber ropes while literally using them to swing into prolonged action with numerous enemies, or to see her punching a shark underwater right in its face before steering this ferocious animal as if it were another ride of hers. They would have found it exciting to see a pale-faced beauty with human countenance suddenly revealing her vampire fangs in *Underworld*, to see a hulky man mutating ghastly into hideous werewolf in painful detail, or to see the legendary ancient figure of vampire wielding modern weapon to kill its mortal enemy. They

would have found it thrilling to see the first walking dead with bloody bitten face first coming into sight in *Resident Evil*, to see piles of zombies pouncing at one human, to see the grossly monstrous licker looming behind helpless people, or to see Alice spin kick in slow motion. They would have found it enthralling to see the bizarre but idyllic shaping of buildings in *Aeon Flux*, to see Aeon Flux jumping from impossible height in a graceful curve, to see the assassins communicating secret information by exchanging pills hidden in the tongue, or to see tender grass transforming into sharp blades when Flux's face is one inch from ground. All such spectacles, the examples of which can go on forever, play a great part in holding the audiences in the seats or perhaps on the edge of the seats, and are typical of "the spectacular" type boasting of their spectacular content created by the amazing filmmaking technologies.

Following the golden pattern of maximizing pleasure, and the overwhelming postmodern eclecticism that elbows out any purity and uniqueness, these films are unexceptionally quintessential examples of generic hybrids. As can be seen from Table 1, none of them could be assorted under one and only generic category. Each and all are compounds of at least three genre elements, which might contain adventure, fantasy, science-fiction, thriller, and horror in addition to their common entry of action. Unlike other genres such as history or drama, which focus on storytelling and character portraying, these genres depend more conspicuously on iconographic visualization of the scenes, phenomena or artifacts that are impossible to be seen in daily life and would be impossible to make without the support of special effects technologies – that is, spectacles. Each generic element of these films could be

thought of as a series of spectacles that help to define the film as such. Then it is not hard to imagine the density of spectacles in hybrid text less than two hours. When the star image, another important spectacular asset of the movie, enters the scene, the whole array of spectacles just make sense through a simple permutation and combination hinted by given genre convention. So *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* movie is the spectacle of Angelina Jolie causing, carrying, and clashing other spectacles: the spectacles of her engaged in spectacles of action, under which, there are back flipping, diving, boxing, motor racing, and any imaginable variety; of her travelling through spectacles of adventures, to the exotic site of Cambodia in episode 1, of Tanzania in episode 2, to the ancient underground or underwater cave of myriad treasure; of her witnessing the spectacles of fantasy unlocking the miraculous power of the Triangle of Light, or the Pandora's Box. And similarly, *Resident Evil* movie generates another set of spectacles in which Milla Jovovich shoots zombies' head on innumerable occasions, witnesses bitten human transform into walking dead, and fights against Umbrella's ulterior scientific research actually equaling horrifying disaster.

In view of the prevalence of such generic repetition, the question is, why these genres in particular? And not only for the action heroine films (the "action" as in action heroine is of course a genre already), but also for the general mood of blockbuster industry? Or why Hollywood bends on creating spectacles of action, adventure, fantasy, science fiction, horror, and thriller? A simplistic answer to this question is because these generic spectacles sell, and the Hollywood is just good at producing them as American film industry commands the highest level of filmmaking

technology that is indispensable to making such spectacles. The further question is why these spectacles sell and what the audience is actually consuming? For one thing, people have been inculcated by the depthless cultural-economic logic a preference to the spectacular images and an indulgence in sensual pleasure. For another, through the consumption of the technologically made images, and particularly the images' spectacularity only achievable by such technologies, people are at the same time hooked to their own fascination with what the high tech is capable of and ultimately the high tech itself. That is, they are actually consuming spectacles of technology. I will elaborate on these two points in the following paragraphs.

When people watch the films, they are engaged in a consumptive activity of their fascination with the spectacular. Consuming these films also consumes their fascination. This fascination comes from the cultural-economic logic of contemporary media, culture and society, where images rule, depthlessness prevails, and touching the surface is the aesthetics of postmodern life. Huge quantities of images are circulated and consumed with every passing second. What catches the eye even for a brief span of time is already a success in this "attention economy" (Beller). However, as "the society of the spectacle" communicates its tenet of immediacy and unreflexiveness to the masses through media hype, advertisement, and cinema, the process of cinematic spectacles catching the audiences' attention is actually "a process in a state of distraction that requires no attention" according to Benjamin, because "the public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one" (119). Therefore, if what Benjamin means by "attention" is a deep contemplation that put the mass in the

valued position of critic, the “attention” here in the course of watching the spectacular action heroine films refers to a fleeting and pleasurable look that stays only on the surface of images and thus puts the viewers in the position of consumer. Such a pattern of “attention” seems to be an instruction manual-like guide to teach people how to consume the present-day myriad of images. The audiences, though not all of them, have been implanted with the preference to consuming the sensational, to consuming what is easy, playful and pleasurable.

In the opening scene of *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, Croft loses her underwater vehicle and oxygen mask in deep sea after she gets injured by her rival’s sneak attack. Without any resort, she uses her own blood to attract sharks, and then punches an approaching one to subdue it, holding to it as a motor to bring her out of the water. While audiences are watching such scenario of emergency tactics, they are prepared to be shocked by whatever imaginative and bold measure taken: Jackie Chan using a short stick as a pulley to slide down high building, for instance, or Batman turning his damaged car miraculously into a lighter black motorbike. So as the audiences see Croft use a shark as vehicle, they are so preoccupied with marveling at how thrilling to ride that dangerous creature, or so invested into connoisseur-ing this scene with memories from similar scenarios of other movies as side dishes, that they barely think more than what fits the eye, nor link her action to any further implication (if there is any). Be it *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, *Resident Evil*, *Underworld*, or single production of *Elektra* and *Aeon Flux*, each movie is replete of such action pieces and fantastic effects, but it does not matter whether such spectacles can be

linked together to contribute to the compactness of narrative. Spectacle is the spectacle, fragmented but seductive; spectacle is meant for the awe at the moment, to propagate its own spectacularity, and to, according to Steven Best, “relegate subjects to the critical and creative margins of society and to obscure the nature and effects of its distorting power” (47). Viewers look at each action as an action, the images as fragmented images in their relegated places. Whatever potential interpretation pointing to sexism/racism/imperialism in these films, if any, is thus marginalized and lost in the endless presentation of spectacles. These images are the priority commodities to be consumed, and trivialize the potential deep meaning to the extent that it gradually disappears.

Just as Baudrillard corroborates how the object is converted into a mere sign of its use, because the object is now abstract and divorced from physical needs, these cinematic spectacles are similarly abstract and divorced from their signified (the signified as in the form of, for instance, ideological implications), and become merely signs. Under the “radical semiurgy” where the autonomization of the signifier becomes the prerequisite of how signs work in contemporary media culture, and the relative unity and stability of the industrial world/sign breaks apart, watching such spectacular movies becomes a consumption of the floating superficial, the pure signifiers. And how audiences watch these spectacles – like how the consumer consumes the sign – is “integrated within the system,” (Kellner, *Beyond* 4) the system working just like the “instruction manual-like guide” to instill the consumption pattern. So the image is “bound neither truth nor reality; it is appearance and bound to

appearance” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 167). And the more spectacular the image is, the further the reality breaks apart from the image, and the more thorough the autonomization of the image is, because besides the myriad of images that invalidates the usual pairing of signifier and signified, the focus on the spectacular will draw people further away from the contemplation on signification. This is just what Baudrillard says, “we do not get closer to the reality of a thing or an event by burying it under layer upon layer of images. Indeed, images take us further away from the real which today is reaching a point where any firm distinction between reality and representation can tumble over the abyss of hyper-simulation” (“Simulacra” 168).

Therefore, the audiences are not there for recondite reflection on what reality the action heroine movie could tell them (besides a repeated story of the protagonist defeating the villainy through waves of action), or which image could reflect what profound meaning – they are there for a showcase, for a grand display. For one thing, the high-paced movie cannot wait to fill the audiences with next set pieces; before they could react, the roller-coaster of spectacles has already taken them to another high point. For another and more importantly, the way they consume spectacles has long been registered into them as an integrated system by the larger cultural-economic logic, for the spectacle has been used as a tool of pacification and depoliticization in a “permanent opium war” which “stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life – recovering the concrete totality of human activity through social transformation” (Best 48). This is not to say that all audiences are mindless and identical beings (the audiences discussed in this study refer to those of

the late capitalist societies), but that since “the spectacular society spreads its narcotics mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment” (Best 48), the overall commutation and circulation of spectacles has been so into people’s life that people cannot avoid being “mindless” particularly when sitting in front of a vast sea of free-floating signifiers – if there are only signifiers with no signified, why bother to dig, and if the signifiers are so pleasing to look at, why not enjoy them. As the present age is marked by the preference of “the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence...” (Debord 11) the only way that could keep attracting them among the fierce industrial competition is to raise the level of spectacularity and thus to hail the current “aesthetic of sensation, an aesthetics of the body which emphasizes the immediacy and unreflexiveness of primary processes (desire)” (Featherstone 122).

In conformity to this aesthetics, one after another action heroine movie comes boasting its increasingly higher degree of spectacularity, which nurtures an audience that is ever more spoiled – like pampered child asking for more candy and sweeter candy – sitting in the dark theater comfortably expecting to taste the eye-candy, to be “blockbuster-ed!” The emphasis on the spectacular thus widens the gap between viewers and the image – the gap already created by the multiple layers of spectacles – and hatches an urge to spectate rather than participate. Therefore, as watching these action heroine movies which present constant parade of spectacles, the audiences, whom the blockbuster industry has already been dotting on for more than a decade

with ever more newfangled visceral stimulus, put on their habitual mechanism to embrace the “different” set of images. This regular system to process the image, any image, works in a simple enough way– swallow it and then spit it with a few occasional exhilarating hoorays at the explosive moment. The audiences thus become a passive and bottomless receptacle of car exploding, hand-to-hand combating, and monster howling, indulging in that tickling process of visual pleasure where they consume their expectation for and their obsession with the spectacular.

One of the most important “narcotics” spread by the spectacular society pertinent to the movie is the preview before its release. As a form of screen advertising and media hype that has been at the forefront of film promotional techniques ever since the 1910s, the movie trailer has played a hugely important role in building up audience expectation and nurturing that habitual mechanism. In turn, it is also a crucial reflection of the industry’s, as well as the audience’s attachment to the spectacular. “Its limited running time of two to three minutes has often been seen as a marker of overt salesmanship and spectacular imagery over subtlety or layered communication” (Johnston133).

While many of modern blockbusters (mostly with action, adventure, science-fiction, or fantasy premises) are sold “on the basis of spectacular attraction, the scale and quality of spectacle is a major factor in the advertising, promotion and journalistic discourses surrounding their release” (King, *Spectacular Narratives* 4). The film trailer, as the first audio-visual link viewers have with forthcoming features whether

through a cinema, television, train LED, or computer screen, then, is to display and hype that spectacle, making it a central promotional message to attract future audiences. Given the direct address of trailers, and the apparent compression of visual spectacle within the trailer narrative, it is a conspicuous reflection that spectacle is the top priority to be consumed. As a highly concentrated essence of the major spectacular pieces in the whole movie, the trailer seems to make a promise to its mass receivers that the movie would be a widely grand and pleasurable experience allowing the audiences to “sit back and revel in the spectacle of the special effects” (qtd. in Johnston 145).

Key visual effects scenes – most notably the ancient rock statues coming into life and taking up offensive in *Tomb Raider*, the gruesome sticky monster swooping down from dark ceiling in *Resident Evil*, the bat-formed vampire unfolding its wings in *Underworld*, and so on so forth – could be included in the teaser and main trailer to make impact. Such shots then soon become the recurring images repeated in other forms of advertising, from bus stop posters to short television spots. As Johnston says,

Further iterations of the image (whether in ten-second television trailers or in press kits) isolate it from narrative: the image becomes a central element of the film’s ‘consumable identity...It was the extraction of those images, and the subsequent publicity they received, that built up the expectation of CGI spectacle within visual marketing materials. (143)

Again, it is not to say that the trailer is void of any hint of how the story side of the movie is structured. It just does not matter so much as the strings of spectacles. As an industrial practice to always hold back the crucial plots as a gesture to push the receivers to go to cinema and check out themselves, narrative suspense in preview works in a less effective way than the spectacular in an age when little is expected from a movie story that is told and retold for so many times – from previous episode or from other media – that viewers definitely know Lara Croft would smash the evil and find the treasure. For another, the quick editing and montage makes a two-minute teaser overwhelmingly packed with intense actions and shocking spectacles. The fragmented images break the storyline into discontinuous bits and pieces, which makes it ever more difficult to locate the narrative as the central concern, although the bits of plots do inform the potential viewers with a general idea that, for instance, *Resident Evil* being a zombie-themed thriller – and that is all. In addition to the trailer's content and form, what makes the trailer more of a pure spectacle is due to some industrial act of moving special shots early in production before the whole movie with a solid and concrete story takes shape, so they would be available for inclusion in the trailer and start promotion as early as possible (Johnston 144).

The preview is one of the prime locations for displaying advance “free samples” of future film productions, and the likeliest venue for luring a wide audience with a montage of spectacular images. After watching the whole movie, viewers have actually got – in addition to a narrative that does not matter so much as the spectacles – no more than what is offered in the trailer, only in a less high-pitched pace and

much more elaboration. The viewing process is like playing a game in which viewers try to identify and single out the location of each trailer spectacle in the movie. For instance, the trailer of *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* has literally listed all the major spectacular scenes in the whole movie, which include exotic scenery in Africa and China, aircraft landing on water, Lara fencing with her servant, riding horse while shooting perfect tens, somersaulting in her yacht, smiting a shark underwater, racing motorbike on the Great Wall, sliding down a rope from a cliff, jumping from skyscraper and parachuting, and numerous cuts of shooting, explosion and action. The first ten to twenty seconds of both trailers of *Tomb Raider* films usually features a brief introductory hint as to what is the target treasure for the upcoming adventure, and then the following chunk time of two minutes is replete of fast-paced cuts of spectacles, while playing rock music with exciting heavy beat. Such an intense preview compressing all pieces of the most valuable assets – “valuable” in the sense of the degree of spectacularity and thus the visual attraction to get the audiences into the theater in the first place – makes the movie appear like a must-see piece, which if you missed it, would be a tremendous loss of yours. The trailer acts exactly as a pre-embodiment of the movie’s sign value, because to watch it is assumed to be a highly fashionable choice in view of all the fantastic spectacles shown by the trailer (which is everywhere). The hype created by the particular way of putting together a free sample thus works as a highly effective advertisement to lure the potential consumers, as if the preview were saying bluntly, “Dear customers, if you buy the ticket to *Tomb Raider Lara Croft*, we will assure you a marvelous

experience with our gorgeous Lara Croft through her exotic adventures. What are you waiting for? This is definitely a best choice for your hot summer you don't want to miss!"

The more important aspect, however, about the spectacular and the way it appeals lies in what makes it so. Put it in a historical trajectory, such spectacularity of trailer and of the movie is neither singular to these action heroine movies, nor an immediate change out of blue. According to Johnston, the placement and display of such spectacle are not straightforward processes and are closely linked to issues of genre popularity and special effects development. By the end of the 1990s, with further developments in CGI, special effects spectacle has been more prevalent in trailer message than at any other point in trailer history (145). Spectacle, now largely created by CGI effects, is a more important element of trailer structure than in previous decades. The image, combining model work, motion capture, stunt, make-up, explosives and CGI, is obviously intended as a spectacular final image, a lure that audiences would not be able to resist. The growing prevalence of the "spectacular genre" and generic hybrid are interconnected with the advancement of technology. The identification of special effects as grand displays of "industrial light and magic" (Sobchack 7) is actually a fascination with the dreamlike wonder that visual technologies can help achieve and realize.

The spectacular images in the action heroine movies illustrated before involve multiple layers of technological participation. To achieve certain special effects, to

give a few example, there are, first, before-hand trainings of the starring actresses to make them better fit into action scenarios even if there are stunts to be done by stuntman; there are then on-spot wiring for actors to jump (from) high, explosive settings to make bombing convincingly in time, and all kinds of angle, length, and movement of the shooting camera that may need be positioned on a high-rising crane or be moving fast along trails; and there are, most importantly, post-productions to achieve what is unachievable by the preparatory or the on-spot techniques – polishing the unreal background or scenery, adding flesh or textures to motion captures, keying in the non-existent monsters to already shot scenes and so on. And most of such stunning post work is done by the computer-generated imagery techniques that use algorithms and models to create digital images for intended purposes. For example, the ancient rock statues hidden in the cave suddenly come into life to guard against intruders when Lara Croft and her enemies go in there for the Triangle of Light. The statues themselves and their movements of smashing, hacking and crushing are made by such digital technologies for a supernatural scene that looks as if it really happens. And in *Aeon Flux*, there is the thrilling shot of Flux sneaking into the dictator's residence and almost falling on the lawn when the tender grass turns into sharp blades. While such imagery could only be possible by forging intricate props on the ground in the past, it is now moved to the post stage and appears more convincing.

New technology has fuelled those genres' ability to display new sceneries, new worlds, new life-forms, new possibilities of stunts, and new spectacles of destruction. Despite the place of computer-generated imagery in almost all branches and genres of

modern filmmaking (like the flying feather in *Forrest Gump*), “the films with fantasy, science fiction, action-adventure genres continue to be a nexus where effects of technology and spectacular visual imagery interact” (Pierson 82), and where spectators consumes the maximum amount of technological images. For all the movies under consideration, the images involving computer generated imagery, digital technologies, or any other special effect technology, are “must-appears” in their movie trailers. As long as there are monsters or creatures with super power in the movie, the spectacles of them will show up in the trailer for at least once. For instance, the black monsters that emerge briefly at the end of *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* is used as an opening hype in the trailer. The pale-faced vampire suddenly revealing fangs (which involves highly intricate technique of making-up), the lycan transforming into furry and fiendish beast appear several times in the trailer of *Underworld*. The genetically mutated lickert (an alien-like creature) howling frantically with flying mucous is similarly a frequent scene in *Resident Evil* trailers. And the trailer of *Elektra* opens with the elaborate visuals of how the heroine’s enemies exert their supernatural power (for instance, the snake tattoo on a male ninja’s chest grows out of his body and becomes a real one). When audiences look at these technological spectacles, they cannot help wondering at how both realistic and fantastic these images are and indulging in the visual pleasure of how special these effects are, while at the same time, they are also applauding how sophisticated the technology is to make such high quality imagery. And it is in this process that the

audience is made to “worship” modern technology and thus to recognize it as their social condition.

And meanwhile, what makes spectacle and cinema more of something that only the big screen experience can truly offer is the resurrection of 3D technology in recent years. The sequels of the action heroine films that are produced during the past three years, such as *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010), and *Underworld: Awakening* (2012), also jump on this bandwagon to add one more dimension to the viewing process, thus to add more spectacularity through technological means. When these effect movies are released both in 2D and 3D, people would not mind spending a few more dollars on a more engaging and realistic experience of enlarged pleasure. They are paying for what the one more dimension can bring, and at the same time, paying for the technologies that add this dimension – on the audiences’ side, it is the pair of 3-D glasses. Compared to 2-D, the 3-D form of screening would be an upgraded way of living one’s life. People are consuming the technological progress in such a material and sensual way that their fascination with technology seems to come true and tangible. When looking at these spectacular images that fleeting across their eyes incessantly, they are further satisfied with dwelling on the simulated surface instantly made possible by codes and digit.

Stars, sound, color, widescreen, 3-D, and now an intense use of CGI: the expansion of elements that are capable of offering generic spectacle appears to confirm that spectacle can offer “a range of pleasures associated with the enjoyment

of ‘larger than life’ representations, more luminous or intense than daily reality” (King, *Spectacular Narratives* 4). “Viewer expectation of spectacle is actually located around those technologies and processes” (Barker, and Brooks 38). Cinema, as a form of art, as well as a representational technology from its very beginning, “has always been a central locus where the artistic and the technological constantly interact to effect changes” (qtd. in Johnston 170).

Thus people’s fascination with the technological images cannot only be ascribed to spectacle itself or the consumption of spectacle itself, but also accredited to what makes such images possible – the supporting technologies to produce them, especially the new technologies that rises in the twenty-first century. While viewers are consuming the various fantastic spectacles, they are, at the same time, consuming the technology. For one thing, these spectacles are made by the technology – the technology as a means; for another, the technology – what the technology is ultimately capable of in bringing ever pleasurable visual forms, and how the technology as a means finally produces the end spectacle – is a spectacle itself, which is to say, the technology serves as an end for consumption.

Besides the rising use of high technology for filmmaking, the consumption of technology as both means and end as in the action heroine films has much to do with the shift in the conception of technology discussed earlier in this section. In this techno-cultural space, technology can no longer be seen as machinery or hardware. “Rather, technology becomes increasingly a matter of technologically reproduced

information: images on a videotape, scenarios of a computer game, Web sites on the Internet. This is the paradox of high-tech aesthetics: as the form of technology edges toward ‘invisibility,’ technology increasingly comes to be seen in the form of data or media” (Rutsky 15). While the digital technology used to produce and merge computer-generated images with other shots and scenes, thus making the spectacles of the impossible or the supernatural look so real that people would deem it definitely should look like this if the impossible really happened. That is to say, the technology that supports the spectacularity of images is supposed to work behind the screen in subtle ways, but this does not mean that it is taken as a separate hardware that takes forms of the concrete devices with so many buttons, looking complicated to operate. Technology, in this sense, is increasingly what is there on the screen, as media, as data, as the images. And as the spectacular level rises, the technology as in the form of technologically reproduced images will become even more salient, for the knowing audiences (knowing that the impossible images in the movies are made by digital technologies, but not shot from real scenes or happenings, no matter how vague the idea is), while marveling at the spectacular image, are at the same time marveling at how sophisticated the technology is.

At a more general level, the change in the conception of technology means that, “as the cultural world around us becomes ever more liable to technological, digital reproduction, any distinction between technology and culture begins to vanish. Technology comes increasingly to be seen as a matter of cultural data, as a matter of techno-culture” (Rutsky 15). This helps to further explain why Hollywood has action,

adventure, fantasy and science-fiction as its favorite genres. Hollywood's big studios command the top technologies for digital post-production (which also explains why they command the film industry in the world), which those popular genres rely on so much to become culturally prominent. Thus Hollywood is capable of producing the images to support the generic iconography that none of other film industries can equal. And in turn, the sophisticated filmmaking technologies of Hollywood are more and more recognized through the cinematic images that are later widely circulated in cultural sphere – Technology has increasingly “come to be seen as an ongoing process of screening, of multimedia” (Rutsky 16). Hollywood's mastery of the essential technologies not only manages to generate the final images to sell, but the mastery itself is another important point to sell, to allure, to win fascination – Hollywood uses the “high technology” as both the product and the brand. They (Hollywood studios) possess the high technologies, not only can they create those incredible spectacles, but they are good at doing it. So to watch these films is not only to consume the incredible final spectacles, but also to consume the cultural prominence of “being technologically good at it,” and to consume the sign value that represents a trendy appreciation for a full efficacy of the most advanced technologies.

The Technology-Themed Spectacles

Postmodern spectacular cinema, the action heroin films as typical examples, present spectacles of technology not only in the form of the behind-the-scene digital

imagery generation techniques, but also directly representing technologies in a particular way, which constitute the two types of consumption of technology in the viewing process of action heroine movies. The second type of technology-themed spectacles is related to technology not by its form but by its content. Unlike the first type of spectacles relying on CGI or any digital technology to enforce their effects, these spectacles are not necessarily made of high technology. They embody technology through various signs, scenarios, shots, and set pieces that have a certain form of technology as their content and subject, for example, a close-up of a spying gadget, a scene of a laser gun, a panorama of a spaceship, or simply a snapshot of a research laboratory.

This type of spectacle has once again been closely interrelated with the generic affiliation of the action heroine movies. For instance, the most frequent genre category, action, brings on familiar memories of spectacles of explosion, gun shooting, and combatting helicopters. Science-fiction, particularly for its theme on “the future science”, is about spectacles of spaceship, alien shape, or highly sophisticated communication and weapon technology. Fantasy is about spectacles of magical light, human transforming, or supernatural creature. Horror is about spectacles of monstrosity, ghost looming behind, or suddenly coming out, and for most cases, the monstrosity is caused by lapse in scientific experiment as in *Resident Evil*.

For the first episode of *Resident Evil*, viewers unanimously express, in the commenting area of online movie website (IMDB), their appreciation of and

fascination with one single scene in the movie: the laser defense system of Red Queen. Red Queen is the artificial intelligence of the Hive²⁷, which controls and monitors the whole facility. Besides numerous surveillance cameras and steel doors protected by passing code, Red Queen has all kinds of killing mechanisms to deal with intruders. After cracking the passing code of one sealed door and entering the room, the commandos find themselves immediately shut in a narrow and long corridor-like chamber, the other end of which is another sealed door. When they begin to decipher the code, a horizontal laser beam suddenly comes across and moves along the room. Before they realize what is going on, the laser has already cut one commando into half. The leading commando avoids one beam by hanging to the ceiling, only to find that the next laser attack is an inescapable beam net. When watching this scene, the fascinated viewers are marveling at, on one hand, the intriguing defense technology of Red Queen that kills intruder ruthlessly and efficiently – the representation of a high-tech killing machine. On the other hand, they are captivated by the digital technology that make the spectacle of commando being cut an elaborately sanguinary and painfully realistic one, when they see the cutting line gradually appear from the flesh and the small chunks of body parts fall apart. The spectacle of technology becomes a main site of pleasure and consumption for this scenario. And for a further enquiry of its implication, such a scene of literally fragmenting a human's body by laser beams

²⁷ In the movie, the Hive is a top-secret generic research facility station manufactured and controlled by the Umbrella Corporation, a leading international corporation that secretly conducts bio-weapon research. One day, a thief steals a case containing vials of the T-Virus, a generically constructed mutating virus (which causes the dead people's transforming into zombies), and contaminates the Hive. The contamination causes Red Queen to seal the Hive and kill everyone inside using the facility's automated systems. A group of commando, not knowing what caused the action by Red Queen, was sent by the corporation to the Hive to shut down Red Queen and regain control of the facility (http://residentevil.wikia.com/The_Hive).

resembles, figuratively, the viewers' spectating process, consuming process, and even their overall existential condition under the late capitalism, which is sliced into bits and pieces by the technological reproduction. This is because, as discussed in previous section, the unavoidable floating and circulating of endless copies of signs and commodities split consumers' consumption activity into unrelated segments. Without a signified and with the ubiquitous intertextuality, people are lost in this myriad play of images and thus there is nowhere to locate their subjectivity.

Actually, the whole movie of *Resident Evil*, as well as its sequels, goes to great lengths and details to represent and show off technologies. For example, when they finally get to the chamber of Red Queen, there appears a Holographic representation of Red Queen in the form of a little girl who engages them in direct conversation. And there are numerous shots and scenes showing the sophisticated structure and equipment of that research facility. In the two minutes and fourteen seconds trailer of *Resident Evil 1*, the first half of it is all about such shots as the labs, the experiment tubes, the underground facilities, the surveillance camera and monitors, and all kinds of cybernetic technologies used by the protagonists, some of which are shown from the perspective of the central artificial intelligence. And the walking dead makes its first appearance only at 1:15 of the trailer. For a movie whose major theme is the zombie disaster and therefore the consequent horrors according to genre convention, the major focus of its marketing trailer is put on, however, the representation of technology. This is again a showcase that the technology-themed spectacle becomes a

selling point for contemporary blockbusters if we look at the classic zombie films that depended on gory horror as the major assets.

In the same way, for *Underworld*, and its first and third sequel, *Underworld: Evolution*, and *Underworld: Awakening*, extensive segments spreading the whole trailer displaying various high-end modern weaponry used by vampires and lycans (werewolves), while the former is a species from ancient legend and the latter still wanders between human and beast. Such a strong contrast between the old, the mythical, the tribal (as of the vampires and lycans) and the new, the technological and the modern (as of the weapon they hold) makes even more patent and prominent the spectacle of that killing technology, because even the oldest form of creature – the immortal species evolving from legendary ages of dark, brutal and non-enlightened – knows that they need to adapt to and adopt the modern technics to survive. In the latest episode, the heroine Selene is confined in a tube that keeps specimen in a similar scenario to *Resident Evil*, for scientific research on the most powerful hybrid from vampire and lycan. The spectacle is no longer limited to that of a typical blood-sucking creature that attacks by biting, but starts to include what bewitches modern audience – the technology of destruction, the promise of the better and the more powerful by scientific research. This succumbs to the logic of techno-rationality, “an inner logic of all modern social systems that has seen the rise of scientific techniques and technology as the overriding powers in society” (Slattery 86).²⁸

²⁸ Techno-rationality, however, also “sweeps aside individual opposition, rights and freedoms in the name of logical progress” (86), for which I will come back for discussion later.

In *Aeon Flux*, the erratic shape of building, the futuristic landscape, the hand-shaped feet²⁹, and fantastic secret weapons used by assassins constitutes a beautiful galley of the technological state in a post-apocalypse society which makes wide use of clone technology to keep human proliferate. In *Tomb Raider* series, Lara Croft keeps changing and updating her cybernetic technologies, the special gadgets and devices for training, transportation, tracing, and communication, which include headsets, hand phones, GPS trackers, training robot, plane, computer (with her hacker technician), and holographic glasses. And besides the pistols (the twin Heckler and Koch USP Match) she always carries as her main sidearm in hip holsters (which are integral to her iconic outfit), she has been in constant engagement with multiple kinds of firearms, be them used by Lara herself or other characters (see List 1 and List 2 in Appendices). Take, once again, the opening scene of *Tomb Raider Lara Croft* as example where Lara Croft fights with a high-tech robot. The robot is made by Lara's nerdy technician for her personal physical training, and also for "self-challenge." It looks like automatic version of ordnance with double machine gun points as its two arms. It is a total killing machine that moves and reacts very fast (while the actual level of automatic robot researching of current time is still stagnating on how to make it move smoothly like a human), emblemizing the imaginary of what the future technology will be capable of. However, as high-end and undefeatable as the robot

²⁹ The story of *Aeon Flux* is set in 2415, after a virus wiped out 99% of human population on earth. All the survivors live in a walled city-state ruled by a congress of scientists. Due to the infertility caused by the virus, people in this city are actually clones grown from recycled DNA. Aeon Flux is one assassin of a secret anti-government organization, and she finds out this scheme of human reproduction. In such a background, individual in this city can have some genetic surgery to make changes to his/her body part. Aeon Flux's partner adopts such alternation and changes her feet into the shape of hands, so as to make her feet more flexible for mission.

looks, Lara finally takes it down after a few intense rounds and easily turns the robot into a music player by swapping its chip. This scenario, together with all the fancy equipment Lara utilizes for her purpose, seems to indicate that, as a super capable human being, Lara is in total control of the various forms of technology, and no matter how destructive the technology is, as most of them are technologies for military uses, she is totally able to make them to her proper use.

However, this picture of mankind in perfect manipulation of technology is rather a utopian vision that could probably only be seen (visually) in Hollywood movies – the media images. The media representation, especially in entertaining industry, is the main location for people’s technological fascination and imaginary. Then the question is how such media images frame people’s perception (of technology) at all. Let us first see how these movies frame the use of technologies – Without the various high-tech gadgets and multiple firearms, Lara Croft would not be able to locate the treasure or to wipe out the villainy; Red Queen (the artificial intelligence central control of Hive) dictates people’s life in Hive researching on T-Virus, while T-Virus decides the fate of the human race (in *Resident Evil* series); the ceaseless research on the most powerful hybrid of human and werewolf, if successful (to be continued in more sequels), would create the most powerful and species on earth (in *Underworld* series); and the clone technology is the only hope for human reproduction in a post-apocalypse city (in *Aeon Flux*). From all these film images, technologies are depicted as essential and desirable, as the central theme, and as the almighty power either in blessing the human race or eliminating it. The media images preaching the imaginary

of a techno-utopianism are actually everywhere to see in addition to the genre films or similarly themed television shows. For instance, the advertisements of all kinds of commodities, which might include running shoes, medicine, cell phones, glasses, laptops, plastic surgery, telecommunication services, or massage chair, brand the high-tech-ness either in terms of design or functionality based on a discourse that the advanced technology would ensure a better life. As Baudrillard points out, the main locus people develop their imaginary is the screen:

We live once in a world where the realm of the imaginary was governed by the mirror, by dividing one into two, by theater, by otherness and alienation. Today that realm is the realm of the screen, of interfaces and duplication, of contiguity and networks. All our machines are screens, and the interactivity of humans has been replaced by the interactivity of screens. Nothing inscribed on these screens is ever intended to be deciphered in any depth: rather, it is supposed to be explored instantaneously, in an abreaction immediate to meaning, a short-circuiting of the poles of representation. *(Transparency 54)*

All the screens, all the media images instill in people a fascination with technologies, entrusting their longing for better life to the potential further development of science and technology – to their vision that one day the technology would enable human race to reach a utopian state in which every single problem would be solved by technology.

This techno-utopian and techno-rational view, and the penetration of technology into every facet of society, however, is not necessarily a blessing. For one thing, there

is still, as said before, the gap between the technologically “have” and “have-not”. The most cited example of techno-rationality trend is the growth of monopoly capitalism, the growth of state control and planning of the economy, the spread of bureaucracy, of automation and mechanization. These are all rational and apparently sensible developments, but all of them create an increasingly impersonal and alienating world in which the individual seems increasingly powerless, isolated and frustrated. In *One-Dimensional Man*, for example, Marcuse argues that the two main classes in capitalist societies have ceased to be effective historical agents. “Domination is no longer by class but by the impersonal forces of scientific-technological rationality. There is no opposition as the working class has been assimilated by mass consumption and rational production processes” (qtd. in Slattery 86). For Baudrillard, the bigger concern is the interrelated effects of technology, media, and images on men who ultimately lose their subject position and uniqueness. He says, even if a utopianism has been achieved, it is achieved “by casting off the negative, by disseminating the energies of everything condemned by society within a simulation entirely given over to positivity and factitiousness, by instituting a definitively transparent state of affairs” (*Transparency* 43) Baudrillard characterizes our current situation as

a man who has lost his shadow: either he has become transparent, and the light passes right through him or, alternatively, he is lit from all angles, overexposed and defenseless against all sources of light. We are similarly exposed on all sides to the glare of technology, images and information, without any way of

refracting their rays; and we are doomed in consequence to a whitewashing of all activity - whitewashed social relations, whitewashed bodies, whitewashed memory – in short, to a complete aseptic whiteness. (*Transparency* 44)

He compares the technological utopianism to a surgical compulsion seeking to excise negative characteristics and remodel things synthetically into ideal forms devoid of any distinctive traits. “If men dream of machines that are unique, that are endowed with genius, it is because they despair of their own uniqueness, or because they prefer to do without it – to enjoy it by proxy, so to speak, thanks to machines” (*Transparency* 51).

Paul Virilio, another postmodernist theorist who looks at technology, raises his dispute to techno-utopianism by exploring the original purpose of technology and the relationship between technology, military and human history. According to him, the development of technology is bound up with the military system which provides its origins and impetus. So while the techno-utopian view holds that the technological progress drives human history, Virilio says, “history progresses at the speed of its weapons systems” (3). He argues that all media of the last two centuries are military technologies. For instance, radio and telegraph was invented for direct communication with and commanding of troops, and cinema was meant for providing a near-direct vision from the front for propaganda purpose. Although many forms of technologies are now further developed for non-military use, Virilio believes that technology cannot exist without the potential for accidents. This kind of accident is not only

restricted to the sense that a locomotive would be subject to derailment someday, but could also be from our loss of wisdom and sight of our immediate horizon because the real space and real time, or rather the reality, is largely remediated and framed by media images – the landscape of darkness blind us to the future collisions. If technology, in this light, is so closely related to the modern warfare, then media images frame people's perception of the actual wars.

Virilio and Baudrillard both have their arguments about the Gulf War, which, though, are quite different. Virilio uses the expression of “logistics of perception” (*War and Cinema*) to describe the use of images and information in war. By this term, Virilio means that in contemporary warfare, logistics does not simply mean the movement of fuel, ammunitions, tanks, and personnel etc., but also the movement of images both from and to the battlefield. In discussing about the creation of CNN and the concept of the newshound, Virilio explains that the newshound will capture images that will be sent to CNN, which may then be broadcast to the public. By logistics of perception, it also means the televising of military maneuvers and the images of war, the viewers of which are not only people at home but also the military personnel involved in the conflict. Thus the “field of battle” also exists as a “field of perception.” The Gulf War, according to Virilio, is a “world war in miniature” (*War and Cinema* 35). Baudrillard, on the other hand, has a rather radical argument that the Gulf War did not take place, an infamous argument incurring infinite dispute. By no means is Baudrillard saying that these events never happened. By describing these happenings as non-events, Baudrillard actually attempts to make us question their

validity. He characterizes the Gulf War as non-event, where there is no shared, organic experience, but only individual viewers who are isolated by their technologically mediated experience. The war is “rather an atrocity which masqueraded as a war” (Merrin, “Uncritical” 447). The American army, by using powerful air forces, was not directly engaged in combat with the Iraqi for most of the time, thus suffering few casualties. And almost no report was made about Iraqi deaths. So in a way, the war “did not really take place” from the perspective of the West. In addition, people got to know the war in the form of images of propaganda. The media representations closely watched by the audience stripped of the possibility to distinguish the experience of what truly happened in the battlefield from its stylized, selective “simulacra” (Baudrillard, *Gulf War* 235) – or rather, spectacle. At this point, I do not intend to justify Baudrillard in his statement of “The Gulf War did not take place,” nor do I want to determine which one, Virilio or Baudrillard, has provided a more valid argument, but to, despite the radical difference between them, find the common ground for further argument – that they both point to how media images form people’s perception of events, of war, of technology in whatever use, and build people’s fascination with technology.

Actually most of the action heroine movie narratives deliver stories about accidents caused by technology, and these accidents sometimes develop into war-scale that put the whole human race at stake. The most salient example would be *Resident Evil* series. The “accidental” release of T-Virus – a most advanced type of bio-weapon research – leads to a world-wide infection, which turns human beings into

walking dead feeding on flesh. And in *Aeon Flux*, in order to keep in balance a society depending on clone technology for reproduction, measures must be taken by the government to eradicate the innocent living people to be replicated, and clashes occurs when the secret anti-government organization attempts to assassinate the governor. These movies seem to send out warning signals that technology could be dangerous and threatening in that it would ultimately cause accident. However, narratively speaking, the movies usually manage to provide a solution to the disastrous situation caused by technological lapse, thus bringing the story back to a reassuring equilibrium. For instance, for *Aeon Flux*, the governmental conspiracy is finally debunked, and people in that city that used to be infertile begin to recover their fertility. The final shot of *Aeon Flux* showing a re-grown green world outside the city wall (the wall was used to segregate the city from the polluted outside world). And for *Resident Evil*, which is now still in serial production thus no closure yet, features every episode ending with Alice and her fellow survivors succeeding in killing the main monster and arriving at a zombie-free territory – though temporarily, indicating that there is still hope; and they manage to do so because they have all kinds of modern weapons as essential means for killing. In general, these movies, following Hollywood's conventional storytelling in which good always triumphs evil, also make sure that the righteous heroine will snatch the destructive power back from the wrong hands at the final moment, thus dissolving the tension or panic from a technological disaster. If there are bad people abusing technology, then there must be the good ones

who make proper use of technology to strike a counter-force, thus renewing the assurance that technology is non-threatening and un-harming.

Despite the depiction of what atrocity technology could incur in the movie, the patterned closure to finally quench the disaster actually works to reinforce the techno-utopian discourse, because it turns out to emphasize how technology is able to keep itself in check. There could be problem caused, but the problem will eventually be solved by technology – a happy closure that could only strengthen people’s fascination. However, in addition to this recurring narrative of technology fixing technology, what works even more efficiently to further nurture people’s fascination is that as remediated by the high resolution big screen and especially after being visualized and amplified by special effects, the accident becomes a spectacle of threat, a spectacle of disaster, a spectacle of the mighty power of technology. In other words, what people see here are, again, media images that separate people from reality and simulate a hyperreality. “What such machines offer is the spectacle of thought, and in manipulating them people devote themselves more to the spectacle of thought than to thought itself” (Baudrillard, *Transparencency* 51). That is to say, people are obsessed with the spectacular idea of technology more than the technology itself; their fascination with technology is based on a spectacle-ization of technology, a “wow” effect of “it can do this!” rather than “but it may cause that...”

So it is not a choice between nuclear bomb or nuclear energy, but a spectacular thought of the nuclear. This spectacle-ization of technology, in some sense, could be

analogous to what Virilio sees as the second type of accident – an accident that happens whenever people are watching media images. This does not mean, however, the projector in cinema could burn down or explode and hurt people, but means that in front of these media images, we lose our sight of the immediate horizon – the potential threat posed by technology, and we are dazzled by the kaleidoscopic spectacles of technology, unable to foresee that the very technology we are looking at might cause collision in the future, be it fictional or not, and even already causes violence, pollution, or conflict today. And when things become spectacles, they are subject to consumption. If even a real war becomes a media image, a “non-event”, and a technologically mediated HD experience – then how could a fictional war-like scenario in a movie possibly dispel people’s fascination with technology? On the contrary, in front of the magnificent mushroom cloud explosion on the big screen, they are more in awe of the nuclear bomb, of the technological miracle. As Baudrillard says, “It’s beautiful, but it’s not war,” the Gulf War ends up a mediated event, a beautiful televised spectacle consumed by viewers. In a similar manner, the destructive power of technology is framed by that theater screen as a safe spectacle. Therefore as hard as Virilio expounds the close relationship between technology and war, the consumption of the technology as spectacles in these movies is just a “happy accident” that blinds people to anti-techno-utopian discourse.

As the Spectacles of Heroines' Bodies

The sexualized bodies of female characters on screen have always been the most heated site for debate in feminist film study. The overall thesis of this debate concerning the female representation in mainstream films is that, to put it simply, the objectification of eroticized female body has put women in a degraded position under the hegemonic male gaze. The heroines here are subject to the same old cinematic practice of eroticization. Their bodies, in action as well as sexualized, are consumed as the other type of spectacles in these action heroine cinema. However, such consumption, I would argue in the following section, is much more complicated than that of the conventional female characters. This complication is caused not only by the fact that these heroines are active, strong, smart and skillful – all the traits that differentiate them from the traditional women in film, but also by the contemporary cultural-economic logic specified all along.

Subject or/and Object

These action heroines do compose a lion's share of spectacles for consumption in a type of cinema categorized under a generic entity pertinent to them – action heroine cinema, and the representation of the female lead (it is the heroine but not the hero) is thus indispensable. The way for them to become pleasing spectacles for people to look at and thus enjoy is through, on one hand, how they are presented on screen and, on the other, how the casting stars are framed in media.

The overall appearance of these action heroines is beautiful, slim, with nicely-shaped bodily curve. Due to the necessity for action at any moment, their costumes are generally athletically oriented. They rarely wear high heels or any laced dresses that a stereotypical “lady” should be wearing, whether when they are on mission or not. For instance, in *Tomb Raider I*, when Lara Croft, as a famous archaeologist and wealthy heiress, attends an antique auction, a fairly formal occasion that may require a lady of her status to be dressed in suit at least, she simply wears a black motorcycle jacket and strides into the auction room with her sunglasses on. As what they wear enables them to leap easily into action, however, these action heroines are given signature costumes which highlight their femininity. Jolie’s Lara outfit is modeled on her game avatar, comprising a close-fitting black or light-blue vest and shorts which emphasize her rangy form and amplified breasts, black boots with combat lace-ups and fetishistic straps and her trademark pistols strapped to each thigh. Jovovich as Alice boasts the strangest “action babe costume” (O’Day 213). In *Resident Evil I*, she wears a long red cocktail dress, which she finds in bed prepared for her after a coma. The dress is held up by “the tiniest of shoulder straps and diagonally slashed at the left waist to reveal a short black mini skirt underneath, with plain black Prada boots for footwear” (213). Alice’s outfit, strongly suggestive of outwear as underwear, draws attention to her female body and, uniquely for *Resident Evil* series, she wears it throughout most of her ordeal, as the plot does not allow for costume changes (213), except when she borrows the black leather jacket of Spence – her lover and enemy. But in the following episodes, as the situation becomes bleaker and Alice becomes

stronger and more self-conscious, her outfit changes correspondingly from the red feminine dress to dark red vest and black long pants in the second episode, cowboy-like wind coat with mini-pants in the third, military-style black criss cross straps for vest and shoulder in the fourth. Similarly, Selene (by Kate Beckinsale in *Underworld* series) is forever in her shiny leather black tights that make her sexy shape highly prominent, while rejecting with disdain the “perfect evening gown” provided by another female vampire of her clan, and occasionally in a long wind-coat outside. Elektra played by Jennifer Garner is dressed in a red corselet-like “armor” when she is on mission, which shows off her cleavage nicely. Charlize Theron’s Aeon Flux usually wears skin-tight black or white suit, or occasionally just two slice of cloth scarcely covering her chest. Her signature outfit consists of a back tight with a revealing area exactly above her plump breasts that gives a good view of their shape whenever she is in “sensitive” posture, like bending over. As a rule, their clothes ensure no tripping on lace, but also no slacks blocking their captivating curves.

In addition to the feminine and sexualized, though not so explicitly, costumes wore by the heroines, literally all the films in study play knowingly with the eroticization of the female figure. Both *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* include an early teaser shower scene in the first episode, where the heroine is unrobed, Lara turning coquettishly to one side to reveal the outline of her left breast while talking to her servant about what clothes she loathes to wear, Alice placed in a more *Psycho*-like scenario as she was found naked and wrapped in the shower curtain which she pulled down as she fell unconscious by inhaling the gas released by the Red Queen. *Resident*

Evil, however, “with its 15 UK certificate and US R rating, takes this eroticization further, making sure that Alice gets wet in the laboratory so that her nipples show through her dress” (O’Day 213) and, in almost every episode of *Resident Evil*’s denouement or beginning, returning us to her naked body as she wakes alone in the Raccoon City hospital, or in Umbrella research laboratory. One of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*’s most successful action set pieces – the extraordinarily beautiful bungee ballet sequence, in which Lara jumps from the balcony to rock back and forth on her rubber ropes before using them to swing into fierce action – manages to put Lara in quite neutral shirt-pants-style pajamas rather than explicitly sexual woman-style silken gown, but her shirt, with only the first two buttons done up, actually reveals her upper body in an implicit and teasing way when she flips up and down.

Also in *Tomb Raider* movie the second episode, after Lara Croft and her former lover and helper on the Pandora’s Box mission, Terry, escape from their enemy’s encirclement by parachuting off a skyscraper together, they hide and rest in a boat. “Newly showered and outfitted in a suggestive and strapless white wrap, Lara succumbs to a moment of passion with Terry in her stateroom.” Shot in hazy lighting, the scene “emphasizes the charged, sexual atmosphere, as Lara slides from beneath his prone body to sit astride him, pinning his hands and permitting the camera a partial view of her ample breasts” (Waites 209). *Aeon Flux*, in addition to its bizarrely revealing costume of the heroine, makes the eroticization consummate in a sex scene where we see Charlize Theron’s nude back and a subtle profile of her left breast while

she is riding on Trevor and trying to strangle him³⁰. In *Underworld: Evolution*, vampire Selene and hybrid species Michael show us an elaborate love scene that is gleaming, tender and involves full side nudity of the two. When Michael reaches to unzip Selene's leather tight from the back, the close-up of her hip curve under soft illumination makes an extremely sensually pleasing spectacle to look at.

What labels these eroticized scenes of heroines as essential spectacles is that they are listed into the movie trailers as must-see shots together with all the other spectacular scenes illustrated in the previous section. In every single preview of these action heroine films, there must appear at least one cut that emphasizes the eroticized bodies or body parts of the heroines, be it partial nudity of her, sex scene, or a close-up of her lips. For example, the shower scene of Lara Croft in the first episode, and the sexual scene with Terry in the second episode are all included in their respective official trailer. So is the sex scene of Selene and Michael in *Underworld: Evolution* trailer. As a rule, each scene will not last more than two seconds. It flashes and moves on to other spectacular images of shooting, fighting, or explosion. More often than not, the couple of seconds' shot of sexy heroine has virtually nothing to do with the plot development or the generic necessity, for, narrative-wise, the exposure of her back or her breast is, after all, not an indispensable step to solve the enigma or to defeat the villain (she does not use her sexuality as weapon to seduce as femme fatale does after

³⁰ Aeon and Trevor are a couple in their former-life. In their present life (renewed by clone technology), Aeon is an assassin from an anti-government group assigned to kill Trevor, the "dictator" who is actually an innocent and good leader. They both have vague memories about their former life and residual affection for each other. So when they meet each other in person, they fall into a moment of passion and make love, and after Aeon wakes from their intercourse, out of natural vigilance, she turns against Trevor again and tries to choke him.

all). Nevertheless, as irrelevant as they are in terms of hinting narrative, such erotic spectacles are essential attractions for audience, which has been a tacit routine in commercial films as long as there is a line involving relationships or sexual desire. This routine persists regardless of whether the main character is male or female in catering to, in psychoanalytic terms, the voyeuristic spectatorship, which I will get back to in detail later. Therefore, in addition to the condensation of technological spectacles mostly embodied in forms of weapons, explosions or fighting that work to fulfill people's fascination with technology, these eroticized scenes seem to add the final touch to the spectacular trailer (or rather, the whole spectacular movie), the touch that fulfills the primal desire of looking. And when a woman, with fit and attractive body, occupies most of the screen time as the major player in various action, why not spice up the look with a little nudity? Not to mention that the particular beautiful body is incarnated by a well-known star.

Marc O'Day, in his "Beauty in Motion", terms what I call action heroine as "action babe". According to him, "the term 'action babe heroine' is intended to capture the yoking together of 'soft' and 'hard' elements which comprise this fantasy figure. She is at once – to draw on the contemporary popular cultural lexicon for describing beautiful young women – a 'babe' and, equally importantly, she is 'fit'" (205). "Babe," originally an expression for endearment in personal relationship, picks up its current meaning with infantilizing and sexist connotations from its wide circulation in media representations and everyday conversation, such as lads' culture of men's style magazines, soft pornography and internet site, and is used quite

unselfconsciously by many, particularly young people (205). And in a similar manner, “the use of the term ‘fit’ to designate physical attractiveness has emerged from commercialized sport and body culture into mainstream usage, stressing the idea of the body beautiful as the healthy, exercising, worked-on, athletic body” (205). And O’Day further elaborate,

The circulation of extra-textual publicity and behind-the-scenes materials on the action babe stars, characters and movies draws pervasively on this “fit babe” discourse, highlighting the ways in which the gendered body of both the star and the action babe heroine are processed through the twin lens of eroticization and active strength. Representational gatekeeping in the action babe arena demands an actress who is “young” (usually in her twenties or early thirties), slim, shapely, often (though by no means exclusively) white and marketed as of primarily (though not necessarily wholly) heterosexual orientation, who repeatedly undergoes the celebrity makeover of the beauty and gossip industries and is willing to undergo what we can call “the action makeover” to prepare her for the rigors of fights and stunts in the action babe spectacle. (205)

It is undeniable that the action babe stars are among the beauties of the contemporary entertainment industry. Several of them, Milla Jovovich, who plays Alice in *Resident Evil* series, and Charlize Theron, who plays Aeon Flux, for example, started out as fashion models and came to prominence as movie actresses. All undertake fashion, advertising and promotional work of various kinds. Jovovich, for instance, was the

face of L’Oreal and reputedly Miuccia Prada’s muse. Kate Beckinsale has worked in television and print campaigns to promote GAP denim, Diet Coke, Absolut Vodka and Lux Shampoo. Ever since Hollywood’s star system came into being, the erotic glamour and sexual availability of the famous actresses have been the key ingredients in the assembly lines of goddess. As such, the action heroines/the actresses are regular features of the articles for men’s style magazines, answering questions riddled with double entendres and suggestive “inside” details, while the pages are full of on-the-edge-of-soft-porn pin-ups playing on the soft and feminine visual aspects of the stars (O’Day 206). For instance, in one of FHM (For Him Magazine), Angelina Jolie and Rebecca Romijn-Stamos are included in the portmanteau “American Beauties,” which contains large HD photographs of each in various states of undress and remarks such as Jolie’s: “I’m just a big softie” (O’Day 206). All these attention, publicity and promotion from media and popular culture for the casting actress have made the action heroine more of an invaluable asset in film to appeal to consumers – a spectacle dressed up by the cinematic mechanism.

This spectacle of the action heroine functions as the central visual and narrative driver within the overall audio-visual feast which contemporary action-adventure aims to offer its audience. As Jose Arroyo suggests, at one level the action star operates as an integral production value, while the digital and other computer generated effects which deliver the requisite number of set-piece thrills in the action-adventure entertainment package can be seen as forms of product differentiation. Arroyo argues that such a package delivers the effect of the sublime – the combined

effect of quick cuts, slow motion suspension, shots of different length, tone, music, star image, and any desired effect achieved by technology – “a greatness beyond all possibility of measurement or imagination.”³¹ The sublime here is a “ride,” a ride that “fixes people’s gaze with awe and rushes them headlong into terror, thrill, and fascination, a ride during which the viewer is too busy rushing through its aesthetics to think of anything but its erotics” (Arroyo 24). And at certain moments in the action spectacle the human body functions as an almost abstract graphic element within the overall orchestration of non-representational signs such as color, motion and music, an orchestration which at its most successful is not only obviously artistic but also an affecting contemporary representation of the sublime (23-25). So the movie itself, for instance, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, is a star vehicle structured around a protagonist: but it is not important to know much about Lara Croft, the character Angelina Jolie plays. What is important is how Jolie the star looks, smiles, leaps, kicks, outwits. In such movies, the star functions less as character than as an integral production value. Thus, Angelina Jolie as “Angelina Jolie” in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* is its own kind of spectacle (as when she first reveals her face of Angelina Jolie after a number of shots of her training ground and the fighting robot in the opening scene). Moreover, it (her star image as a spectacle) is an integral part of the spectacle presented during the more elaborate action scenes. O’Day agrees with Arroyo in recognizing product’s commercial language and aesthetic language of representing the unrepresentable, but O’Day also points out that it is equally important to emphasize, from a

³¹ The sublime, originating from the Latin *sublĭmis*, refers to the quality of greatness, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, or literature.

phenomenological perspective, the unique ontological, photogenic and acting qualities of each of the action heroine actresses (207). He then suggests running a brief commutation test to the stars in the action heroine films. For instance, “how different *Charlie’s Angels* would have been if, as was mooted, Angelina Jolie had played the third Angel, or if Liz Hurley “was” Lara Croft” (207). And just as O’Day says, for all the wire-work and post-production effects, we are invited to believe that this is, for instance, Milla Jovovich – not a body double or a digital simulation – who jump kicks the walking dead who is attempting to bite her. The fact that (we believe) this is Milla Jovovich matters, and this is her that we want to look at with pleasure (207).

Despite the fact that the contemporary female leads are still subject to the same old sexist configuration of male gaze and erotic objectification, however, I will argue that there are differences between the traditional heroine and this group of action females that newly rises in these two decades, and further elaborate on how their unconventionality works in today’s cultural-economic logic of consumerism and late capitalism.

First, let us focus on what constitutes today’s heroine’s properties as different and unconventional. As discussed in the opening chapter about the comparison between the past female images and contemporary action heroines, the turning point is not how they look, but what they do, what role they play, and the fact that they are at the same time the central figure in the film that pushes forward the narrative and brings resolution to enigma, and peace to disturbance. All these complicated the

viewing process. Endless textual instances tell that the main role is taken exclusively by the heroine. As a living synthesesome of intelligence, competence, resourcefulness, and toughness, she is the agent that controls the direction of diegesis development, brandishes swords and guns, and engages in perilous combat to overcome villainy and save the day.

While traditional hero, gendered as male, like in *James Bond*, *Die Hard*, *Superman* stories, outwits and destroys the villain before finally wins the “princess” – the sexual object of the hero, here it is Lara Croft who is sent to find the magical triangle before the evil snatch it for vicious purpose in episode one, and to prevent the over-ambitious scientist from opening the Pandora’s Box in episode two; it is Alice who possesses the superb power she never abuses, and who smashes the ferocious monsters at each final scene; it is Selene who slashes the arch criminal into half, and manages to slaughter the darkest monsters while the “forefather of all power” fails to end the catastrophe simply because of his over-sentimentality and selfish intention.

The function of “princess” in these films, on the contrary, is acted by men, who are more scared of the anomaly power, and are often rescued or protected by the heroines: Alex’s (in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*) life is retrieved by Lara who uses the triangle to reverse time and reverse the knife flying at him; Michael (in *Underworld*) can only huddle himself down in the corner while Selene stands in front shooting away the attackers; Mark (in *Elektra*), as a father supposed to protect his daughter, clings to Elektra for help. In addition to this functional inversion, some of these films

feature the female protagonist as the story narrator telling the story from her point of view, such as *Underworld* series, *Resident Evil* series, and *Aeon Flux*. This allows the plots to move forward along the heroine's side of line.

If relationship and romance used to destine women under the label of emotional animal that will finally be tamed by a Mr. Right, the action heroines have a firm and free control over their love life. They do have feelings, and fall in love, but that is lower priority, a peripheral interlude far behind their principle and pursuit. If the potential man is taking the side as noble as hers, she may accept him; if the man's deed runs counter to what is righteous, she will resolutely give him up and take her priority. This rule is amply applied in the film texts. Aeon first hesitates to kill the dictator, Trevor (actually her former-life lover), whom she is supposed to assassinate so as to overturn his regime, because she finds a vague intimation and connection with him, but later when she discovers Trevor is not the real villain but the one who is trying to find the cure for all people, she is determined to assist him at the risk of being executed as a traitor. The reason why Aeon is reconciled with her former-life husband is because he agrees with her in that "leap of faith" to end the meaningless cloned life. The opposite case is found with Alice and Lara. Before Alice regains her memory, she is quite glad to accept the jacket Spence (her fake husband³²) offers her to shield cold, but once Alice discovers the fact that Spence is actually the one who causes the infection and wants to sell the T-virus in the black market, she resolutely

³² Spence and Alice are colleagues working for Umbrella Corporation under the disguise of a couple to protect the entrance to the underground facility below the mansion they live in. From the fragmented memories of Alice about their past, she actually loved him before she gets amnesia from the gas.

turns against him and finally kills him without any sympathy. At a final scene, Alice takes off the ring (property of Umbrella Corporation) with contempt and throws it away, which symbolizes her complete break from this “wrong” relationship and the nasty organization she is fighting against. In the same way, when Lara finds that Terry also covets Pandora’s Box, she shoots him without hesitation despite the help he offers before. Sometimes, these women act like a “Loner”. Elektra could have ended up in a “happy ever after” relation with Mark, a single father, and his daughter Abby, both of whom she actually loves a lot, but she walks away, maybe for fear that her “killer identity” may affect them, or simply because she is a free spirit. And a conversation shown below between Lara (L) and Terry (T) further presents this female “Loner” (Bont, Jan de, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*):

T: So where do I fit in?

L: What do you mean? You’re the guide.

T: I mean, when you think back on the vast scheme of your hugely adventurous life, where do I fit in? Was I the love of your life? Or just another bump on the road? Was I time well spent? Four months? More good than bad?...Come on, it had to be more than that, am I right?

L: (pretending to be serious) You’re right. It was five months (laugh).

T: You’re laughing at me.

L: No, no. As a fact, (light-heartedly) I used to find you charming.

T: I am charming.

The conversation shows a man, Terry, enquiring a woman, Lara, how much he weighs in her heart. This is a total reversion from the stereotypical scenario when this usually starts with the female raising the question – because more often than not, Hollywood movies tend to depict women as emotional creatures that think too much and care too much, as in most of the “weepies”³³. But Lara here adopts a fairly light-hearted attitude towards romantic relationship.

To play the reversion even further, some films intentionally fix the eroticized male body on display for gaze. In one scene of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, Lara sneaks into Alex’s³⁴ room to give him warning when Alex is in a shower. With complete composure, she confronts this wholly naked muscular guy, walks close to him, looks down at his lower part briefly and coquettishly, and says “Always a pleasure”, leaving Alex standing there looking embarrassed. This constitutes a pure erotic spectacle when the male character is put in a shower, a favorite practice of Hollywood to sexually objectify women. As action-adventure film used to put male body on show when they are in action or wounded, in whichever situation, his masculinity is said to allay his to-be-looked-at-ness. However, for this scenario, Alex’s muscular body

³³ Also called melodrama films, which are a subgenre of drama films characterized by a plot that appeals to the heightened emotions of the audience. Such films generally depend on stereotyped character development, interaction, and highly emotional themes. Victims, couples, virtuous and heroic characters or suffering protagonists (usually heroines) in melodramas are presented with tremendous social pressures, threats, repression, fears, improbable events of difficulties with friends, community, work, lovers, or family. Film critics sometimes use the term “pejoratively to connote an unrealistic, pathos-filled, campy tale of romance or domestic situations with stereotypical characters (often including a central female character) that would directly appeal to feminine audiences” (Dirks T. “Melodrama Films.” filmsite.org website opinion: <http://www.filmsite.org/melodramafilms.html>)

³⁴ Alex is a fellow tomb raider and a love interest for Lara, who, however, cannot abide his for-profit attitude

(though the image of muscle might carry a connotation of aggression) is in a passive state, (and his later action does not win him back any respectability, for he is destroyed by his own venality and needs to be saved by Lara) constituting a spectacle that may invite objectifying look from females, be it Lara (who is literally looking at him at ease), or the female spectators. The moment of Lara looking at Alex fixes the man for gaze, freezing the eroticized male body specifically for her visual pleasure. What else is interesting to know is that, through cross-referential clues, this male body makes a very celebrated object allowing for female gaze (in addition to a possible identification by male spectators). Alex in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* is played by Daniel Craig, who is the sixth actor to play James Bond, replacing Pierce Brosnan. He gains his fame through his highly acclaimed performance in *Casino Royale*. One of the film photos featuring him topless walking on the beach showing his beautiful muscle goes viral on the internet, used as an illustration of how a sexy man should look like, be it for heterosexual desire or homosexual pleasure.

The phenomenon of the voyeuristic gaze has been extended to the male body that is objectified in films, advertising, fashion, and soaps. Since the 1990s, the male body has been fragmented, objectified, and eroticized. 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 metrosexual³⁵. The spectacle of an often nude

³⁵ Metrosexual is a neologism derived from metropolitan and heterosexual coined in 1994 describing a man, especially one living in an urban, post-industrial, capitalist culture, who has strong aesthetic sense and spends a lot of time and money on shopping for his appearance and lifestyle. "The typical metrosexual is a young men with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference. Particularly professions, such as modeling, waiting tables, media, pop music and, nowadays, sport, seem to attract them but, truth be told, like male vanity

and wet Daniel Craig in the latest James Bond film testifies to this recent development. (Smelik 182)

Closely associated with this line of textual and extra-textual details is a complication of previous theorization about the look. The action heroine cinema breaks open, or rather doubles up, Laura Mulvey's dictum. While in the classic Hollywood movie, it is the active male protagonist who acts as the "figure in the landscape," the subject who advances the narrative, with "woman" connoting "to-be-looked-at-ness" and freezing the narrative as the passive object of male gaze, the situation in these movies forms a sharp contrast with the movement of women into medium and even big budget starring roles, where the female characters not only do action but also confront supernatural force, science-fictional hazard or unprecedented horror, increasingly both the central hero and/or heroine. Although these action heroines are still, in different ways and with differing emphases, relating to the operation of power in a patriarchal society, they can be seen to function simultaneously as the action subject of the narrative and the erotic object of visual spectacle. The generic specificity further contributes to such complication, as O'Day says,

While it remains the case that in patriarchy it is often men who look at women and women who are looked at, both the action hero and heroine can increasingly be viewed as simultaneously active and passive, both in action and on display. It follows that Mulvey's opposition between narrative and spectacle finds little favor among action-adventure critics, who view both narrative and visual elements as part of the overall filmic spectacle. Hence the much used copula action/spectacle implies that the action narrative itself is as much excessive

products and herpes, they're pretty much everywhere" (Simpson, Mark, in "Meet the Metrosexual," Salon.com, July 22, 2002)

spectacle as those lingering close ups of the hero/ine's beautiful body traditionally described by the term. (203)

The second complication, which delves into the issue of spectatorship in psychoanalytic terms, has something to do with the complex and fluid process of cinematic identification. Just as the action heroine can be seen to embody both masculinity and femininity, and to occupy both the position of (narrative) subject and (erotic) object, spectator identifications are thus not necessarily locked within the active, sadistic "male" gaze and the passive, masochistic "female" gaze. As reviewed in Section One, Chapter Two, plenty of critiques of popular cinematic genres, such as those by Mary Doane, Miriam Hansen, Jackie Stacey and so on, have by now demonstrated that each viewer is capable of making a range of identifications in relation to any given film. "Such identifications can, for instance, both confirm and question our gendered identities and they may be, however fleetingly, sadistic and masochistic, cross-gendered, and moving through a range of alignments and allegiances in relation to the unfolding filmic spectacle" (O'Day 204).

Carol Clover's analysis of the Final Girl in slasher movie, again, provides a detailed example of such fluid identification by examining the ways in which teenage boys and young men can identify cross gender with the Final Girl, "a figure combining feminine and masculine traits in ways partly comparable to the action heroine" (O'Day 204) except that the Final Girl is forced to take masculine measures after prolonged affliction and persecution while the action heroine gets this combination naturally imbued in her and seeks to deliver people from oppression. In the same vein, since it is the heroine who is more masculine than the male characters, who leads the story and triumphs at last, and who possesses the unique ability to combat, think and act, the viewers, whether male or female, may identify with, for instance, Lara Croft,

and follow her agency throughout the whole adventure of scheming, traveling, fleeing, and fighting, with Alice, and see the disaster from her perspective as the first-person narrator, or with Selene, and align themselves with this vampire to gradually disentangle the conspiracy in her clan. As pointed out by O'Day, "the institutional context of the high concept cinema demands that, in the commercial jargon, movies are made and marketed to the broadest possible demographic, and in such a context it is more or less common sense to assume that the pleasures on offer will target diverse audience constituencies" (204). Hence in addition to the technological spectacles that appeal to all of us who are fascinated with the miraculous computer-generated images in the movie as well as the imaginary technologies depicted therein, the action heroine films, simultaneously, manage to satisfy the diverse sexual fantasies and desires.

The action babe cinema provides an illuminating example of such processes, since it is clearly designed to appeal to both (mainly young) men and women. Along the have me/be me axes of desire, the action babe heroine can be seen most obviously to appeal not only to heterosexual boys and men, who desire to "have" her in fantasy but also to heterosexual girls and women, who desire to "be" her in fantasy. As Famke Janssen puts it, "we've always been ready for female superheroes, because women want to be them and men want to do them."

(O'Day 204)

However, while it is generally the case that the action heroine films stress the choices of heroines as heterosexual object, there are occasions in these films which offer the possibility of a range of lesbian, gay and/or queer identifications. For instance, in *Resident Evil*, the relationship between Alice, the relatively more

feminine heroine, and the muscular commando Rain (played by Michelle Rodriguez³⁶) resembles the feminine tomboy versus masculine butch opposition. Since Rain is the first one of the team to get bitten by a zombie, the following plot thus partly concerns Alice's attempts to secure the antidote so as to save her. As it becomes increasingly hopeless to get the cure, Rain makes Alice promise to shoot her before she is transformed into the monstrous Undead, but when Alice is about to do so, she grabs her gun, looks up at her and declares: "I'm not dead yet." "I could kiss you, you bitch." Alice responds in joy, which constitutes a moment which explicitly opens up a lesbian reading (O'Day 215). There are more instances of such identifications as that men who are either heterosexual or gay may cross-identify with either or both the feminine and/or masculine characteristics of the action heroine, thus fantasizing the "be me" aspects of cross-gender identification. Several of the action heroine stars also cater to lesbian desires, particularly Angelina Jolie, as mentioned before, deemed as bisexual thus serving a perfect incarnation for Lara Croft's unstable identity, appeal strongly to lesbians, who may identify simultaneously along the "have me" and "be me" axes.

Similarly, who is to say that women who identify as heterosexual may not in fantasy experiment with identifications along the "have me" axis? Or that they may not enjoy watching the action babe heroine as eroticized spectacle even if they do not desire her as a fantasy sexual object choice? Though these examples are false in so far as they attempt to fix and label psychic and bodily processes

³⁶ Michelle Rodriguez is an American actress, who gains her fame through an independent production, *Girlfight*, by playing a female boxer in a male-dominated sport. Following this breakout role, she has played tough girls and starred in Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Fast and the Furious* series.

which are partial and fluid, it is clear that the action babe cinema offers pleasures to a wide audience. (O'Day 204)

Overall, the contemporary action heroine cinema has become a salient type of the action-adventure cinema, boasting of its wide range of pleasures. On one hand, the physical beauty and enticing sexuality of the female stars and the characters they play embody conventional qualities of femininity defined by patriarchy, which, by Mulvey's thesis, relate to passivity, vulnerability, sexual availability and to-be-looked-at-ness. On the other, functioning as central protagonists pushing forward the action narrative, these heroines can undoubtedly be coded as active, strong and masculine, constituting the figure in the landscape, the position traditionally occupied by the male hero in classical cinema. In crude terms, the action heroine is simultaneously both the erotic object of visual spectacle and the action subject of narrative, combining elements of the "soft body" of "woman" and the "hard body" of "man", as well as traits of successful hegemonic patriarchal femininity and masculinity. Such an emblematic fantasy icon, by overturning and complicating the old tenet of look and identification, builds a dynamic representation for theoretical engagement.

For whatever complication or disturbance these action heroine representations might be able to cause to the prevailing discourse concerning female characters on screen, or for whatever "correction" or counterbalance the portrayal of them as powerful subject could bring to the erotic objectification of them, the further

complication is how contemporary cultural-economic logic takes it, whether such disturbance or “correction” really works given the postmodern consumer culture that prevails, and how the cultural-economic logic of late capitalism could possibly affect the mass audiences’, or rather mass consumers’, reception of such empowered women (if only partially empowered). I will address these questions in the following part.

The New Apparatus

For the first complication as to how action heroine combines subject of action and narrative and the object of visual pleasure, I would like to first stress the contextualization of the action heroine for further argument. Textually speaking, which means, considering the composition of the whole movie and its generic affiliation, these female heroes are positioned in a noisy and dazzling audio-visual piece replete of high-paced stunning effects that are busy displaying the spectacles of breath-taking action, blazing fantasy, fascinating science-technological miracle, and gruesome horror. What is more, this piece never ends at one stop of conclusion and is regenerated through an ever more intensified surface of images that keeps coming at us relentlessly. For example, in *Tomb Raider* the first movie, we see Lara Croft fighting a robot, racing motorcycle on expressway, and doing bungee with rubber ropes in her mansion’s giant lobby, while in *Tomb Raider II*, we see her in upgraded spectacles of punching a shark underwater, flying an airplane and landing it on water, and parachuting in a bat-shaped outfit from the highest skyscraper. In *Resident Evil I*,

we have only a brief glance of the monstrous licker at the closing of the movie, but in *Resident Evil II*, we see plenty of more evolved lickers in highly armed outfit destroying most of Alice's team. In *Underworld I*, we see Selene and Michael against plain werewolves and vampires, while in *Underworld II*, we see them fighting the invincible ancestors of vampire and werewolf with much more bloodcurdling appearance. In response to such fabulous feast of eye-candy, viewers adopt a set of mechanisms, which has been hatched ever since the flourishing of such banging blockbusters, to process such overwhelming flow of spectacles. This mechanism has been adopted by the audiences for a wide range of spectacular images in the same way as that of the consuming the technologically made spectacles ("the spectacular" as discussed earlier in this chapter), and it becomes ever more integrated with the audiences as ever more such florid blockbusters coming out with upgraded visual pleasure.

If the consumption of the action heroine movies were to be compared to the consumption of a feast of delicious food as in the each image constituted a nice dish, the audiences took in the images in a way as a glutton eats – they swallow and taste but rarely (but not never) take time to digest the images (food). To put it in another simile, the process of watching a spectacular movie as *Resident Evil* or *Tomb Raider* is like immersing the viewers in the seas of images and spectacles. The "seas" would not pose any danger of drowning anyone, but provide a floating delight in pleasing and kicking the viscera, during which the audiences seldom make much effort to paddle, swim or dive to make any direction, but float on the surface to let the tide and

flow to bring them anywhere thrilling and pleasurable. This mechanism is like a standardized operation procedure, in which the representation of action heroines is treated or “streamlined” like whatever kind of images: look at it, marvel at it, and then move away and forget it. The mechanism continually asks the viewers to wonder at the technological miracle and to wonder – how did they do that? (how did those filmmakers manage to make such impossible images?) And the fact that they (Hollywood filmmakers) did it, and how they did it (as an often-asked question actually used to exclaim the power of technology) is “at least as important as why” they make these images there (Arroyo 25), or rather more important than why. That is to say, it does not matter if these spectacles make meanings or not in the narrative context, or if it is balanced or not to over-squeeze spectacles in one place or one minute, as long as these images are pleasurable to look at – this is the watching priority prescribed by the postmodern consumer culture.

In most cases, the active agency of the heroine is embodied by the specific narrative development, for instance, who takes the initiative to pursue the justice, who possess the supreme power to right the wrong, and who is in control of his/her own course and the overall situation, which needs to be strung together from between the lines. However, with instant distraction of all kinds of spectacles and audience’s preference to the spectacular, the narrative details have been put as the secondary in the order of watching priority. And thus the active agency of the female lead is overwhelmed by all those amazing scenes and her own image as the spectacle, not in the sense that people ignore their appearance and existence (as a matter of fact, their

appearance is a very important spectacle to look at), but in the sense that the gorgeous exterior is the final destination for consumption, and there is little time or need to further contemplate on how the spectacles about her form her agency. The narrative is consumed together with the spectacles as a provisional line to at least string all those spectacles into a familiar story, if not only a fragmented story, or as a temporary closure in expectation for the next one (because there will be sequels!). Therefore, no matter how important and heroic the role the female lead has played in the story, no matter how strong and smart she is, no matter how resolutely she rejects a romantic relationship and pursue the justice, it just does not matter so much, for that level of meaning is far beyond the more pleasurable domain of consumption. So when Lara Croft is fighting a gang of villains quite skillfully, one may rarely look at this scene thinking that this woman is powerful. Instead he may look at the scene as a scene, the sign as a sign, as all consumer society is based on the consumption of sign value. And that is all that the viewer as the consumer wants, and hence not so much need to go further to make any deeper interpretation. Or one may have a more fragmented looking, looking at her slim legs, her rangy breasts, or her cool but sexy eyes, a way of bricolage-ing that is even harder to induce deep meaning.

More often than not, the female lead that narratively leads the story and finally resolves the problem, the most significant agency in the movie, is actually considered as the “extra bonus” in watching the films. She is simply one of the consumer images that intend to amuse and entertain. Rather than being the “central agency in the landscape” in Mulvey’s term, she is more of the “central spectacle in the landscape”.

Just as what Arroyo said, in a movie that functions as a star vehicle, what is important is not what the character does, but how the star herself looks as a spectacle (26). While, however, what the character does is exactly what forms her agency, or, the subject position of the heroine, in this analysis, the subject position of her is not as important as her role as the spectacle. So that is to say, she is ultimately, as powerful as represented, reduced to the status of an object, be it sexual or not, because the star image itself is a spectacle already. So the derivative logic of consuming the action heroines is not as what postfeminist reading suggested: “as long as women are strong and smart, who cares to be subjected to erotic objectification?” but the quite tricky opposite: “as long as women are offered as attractive eye-candy, who cares about their superb abilities?” The audiences see the movie with a preferential order that is preset by their overall experience of blockbusters. The first to come to their eyes is what is pleasurable to the eye, the fast-paced fierce action involving punching, kicking, shooting, and bombing, or the erotic scene of naked Lara Croft having a shower. All this is exactly what the marketing is promoting to the public, and the consumer culture installs in the viewers. This industrial strategy well orients consumers’ watching habit, and convincingly labels the spectacles as the most valuable commodities offered in such films, which would satisfy enough once consumed. The audiences would rather stick to the eye-candy aspect of the woman than further process the fact that this same woman is smart and strong, for such films are thought to be sensual enjoyment that is best coupled with a pack of popcorn and a cup of coke.

So the complications raised earlier in this section that claims the action heroine's subject position despite still being the sexual object, as well as the feminist or the postfeminist debates (reviewed in Chapter Two) on her being regressive or progressive representation, overlook how the proliferation of technological images invalidates their analysis that is based on a serious categorization of signs and referent, and the deep meaning of representation. For all these complications and debates, they are dealing with the connotation behind each image, and treating the movie still as a tool of the apparatus to interpellate individuals into dominant ideology, as if the movie itself still holds a certain kind of value in terms of ideological meanings. For instance, Lara in shower points to an objectification of female body thus a sexist representation of women; or Alice defeating the ferocious monster points to a certain empowerment of women; and such connotations through semiotic interpretation are supposed to work over people to the effect that they deeply believe women are sexual objects or women are powerful. But this way to analyze movies is premised on a clear distinction between signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, surface and depth, subject and object, or probably the use value of the film as a commodity (if there were, here the use value might be defined as "to learn and learn from a story"). And the problem with this analysis is that with the proliferation of signs, not only in and from these movies, but also in the whole mediated world, the semiological system changes – there is no distinction between signifier and signified, but signifiers replace the signified and float on a self-referential circle constructed by technological reproduction. If we incorporate Baudrillard's critique of the political economy of the

sign here, the so-called use value has always already been the sign value; there is no such distinction of use value versus sign value, just as there are no deep meanings (the signified) versus the images (the signifiers) in the action heroine movies. There are only sign values, and there are only images, because “use value has been superseded by sign-value that redefines the commodity primarily as a symbol to be consumed and displayed” (Mendoza 50), the whole industry of blockbuster is configured under the supercedence of the sign value, the endless and depthless spectacles. This is not to say that the apparatus theory is outdated or completely disappears, just as ideological implications in these action heroine films are still there to see, either a worsened sexism or female empowerment. It is that the argument and conclusion reached by the traditional apparatus theory of film analysis is quite limited, leading to the conclusion of contradictory discourses but never could see through the opposition to reach further understanding of contemporary film mechanism, because it is unable to take the contemporary cultural-economic logic into consideration, the cultural-economic logic that deconstructs the very foundation of such analysis – the institutionalized categories of signification – through endless play of images and consumer commodities. And if there were still an apparatus, it works under the influence of the postmodern images and thus is changed in this new socio-cultural-economic logic – if the traditional movie apparatus subjugates individuals into the dominant ideologies of, for instance, patriarchy or hegemony, now the film apparatus subjugates individuals into endless images and signifiers with uncertain signification (of course this is not a sudden change and thus cannot be demarcated by a specific date, just as it is always

difficult to divide periodically the modernity and postmodernity). Again, I need to emphasize here that what is theorized as this new apparatus is not applied to all movies, but to the specific genres of the spectacular form and endless commodification. As the movie becomes a compression of spectacles, and reproduction of images is so prevailing, the action heroine films are subject to this logic as well. The movie, the images in it, the super strong action heroine, has been remediated as a symbol, a magnificent sign, simply to be looked at and consumed.

In this way, no matter what *message* the movie might possibly deliver to the audience, the message, as in terms of deep ideological implication from signification, could only end up becoming *massage* that keeps making people sensually comfortable and pleasurable. This transition from “message” to “massage” resonates with Marshall McLuhan’s discussion of medium form as message, the often quoted saying by the Canadian cultural critic, with whom Baudrillard has long been associated. McLuhan’s thoughts on the collective experience of people in a “global village” and the transformation of our society and culture by electronic media all give a good preview of the key debates in postmodernism.

Coincidentally, from his claim that “The Medium is the Message” in *Understanding Media* (1964) to his book titled *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), he also plays with this pun of message and massage. By “The Medium is the Message,” McLuhan means that the form of a medium (print, visual, musical, etc.) embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences

how the message is perceived. McLuhan argues that the electronic ways of communications, such as radio, television, films, and computers, have far-reaching sociological, aesthetic, and philosophical impact, to the extent that they are actually altering the ways how we experience the world. He puts the focus of study on the medium itself, but not the content it carries by arguing that a medium affects the society not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself. For McLuhan, it is the medium itself that shapes and controls “the scale and form of human association and action” (*Understanding* 9). He takes the movie as an example, arguing that the way this medium plays with conceptions of speed and time, transforms “the world of sequence and connections into the world of creative configuration and structure.” Therefore the message of the movie medium is this transition from “lineal connections” to “configurations” (12). Likewise, the message of a newscast about an atrocious crime may be less about the individual news story itself – the content – but more about how public attitude towards crime that the newscast engenders is changed by the fact that such crimes are in effect being brought into the home to watch over dinner (Federman). In his book three years later, *The Medium is the Massage*, his main argument is still that technologies are the messages themselves, not the content of the medium. By using a pun term “massage”³⁷ McLuhan suggests that modern audiences have found current

³⁷ The new title of his book, *The Medium is the Massage* as changed from “the Message” is said to be more than his own taste for pun or a clever fusion of self-mockery and self-rescue (in view of the fact that his saying “The medium is the message” became a cliché). However, there are also sayings that such a play of word is actually a typo mistake. The FAQ section on the website maintained by McLuhan’s estate says that, “actually, the title was a mistake. When the book came back from the typesetter’s, it had on the cover ‘Massage’ as it still does. The title was supposed to have read *The Medium is the Message* but the typesetter had made an error. When McLuhan saw the typo he

media to be soothing, enjoyable, and relaxing, just like how massage works on human body, connoting that the effect each medium has on the human sensorium, and the inventory of the “effects” of numerous media in terms of how they “massage” the sensorium. However, the pleasure found in new media is deceiving, as the changes between society and technology are incongruent and are perpetuating an Age of anxiety (*Understanding* 26).

Therefore in McLuhan’s analysis, the message delivered by action heroine movies is its form as the cinematic images, as the spectacles, as the epitome of technological wonder and fascination. The logic of “the medium is the message” redefines what action heroine movies are composed of and how they are structured – it is less about the content of each individual movie, the story that a super strong woman saves the world, but more about the change in people’s watching mechanism engendered by the fact that the spectacles of high-tech and sexualized “star body” could be brought into people’s sight and enjoyment simply through the purchase of consumer products. And moreover, the message, in the form of spectacular images that are either highly sensualized digits or highly sexualized bodies, achieve the same kind of soothing, enjoyable, and relaxing audio-visual effects as the pleasure that massages could bring to the body.

However, the argument could be pushed further if we look at how Baudrillard differs from McLuhan, especially in terms of how the endless play of signs and self-

exclaimed, ‘Leave it alone! It’s great, and right on target!’ Now there are possible four readings for the last word of the title, all of them accurate: Message and Mess Age, Massage and Mass Age” (<http://marshallmcluhan.com/faqs.html>).

referentiality leads to the loss of reality. Although both of them are the key cultural icon for postmodernism devoted to the discussion of electronic media's influence on people's perception, Baudrillard emphasizes more on the supercedence of simulacra than "the medium is the message." For McLuhan, the distinction between content and form is still there, though he sees medium form rises as a highly important factor to affect how people perceive the world, if not more important than the content. And by saying the "pleasure we find in new media is deceiving" he sees the new media based on certain reality and truth behind these deceiving pleasure. For Baudrillard, however, the medium is the message because the medium becomes the message – the message itself is irrelevant. That is to say, the medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. "There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term – power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another – neither in content nor in form" (qtd. in Brantlinger 190). The medium/form/message has replaced whatever content there is, and becomes the content itself. If traditionally the media was said to mirror reality, McLuhan sees that the media is influencing reality, but Baudrillard sees the media replaces reality. By this, Baudrillard is suggesting that "there are no 'media' in the sense of institutions and cultural machines mediating between dominant political and economic powers and the population below. He claims that the media and 'reality' implode such that it is impossible to distinguish between media representations and the 'reality' which they supposedly represent" (Kellner, "A New McLuhan").

In this way, it is not so much that we seem to attach more importance to the medium form than content and thus our perception of the world is ultimately changed by the medium as message but not the content as message, but that under this new apparatus, the content is the form, and the form is the content—all the stunning effects and the “star spectacle” is what we consume in the action heroine film – we replace content with the form, and the story, the effects, the scenes all become spectacles for consumption. Thus the logic (or the new apparatus) goes like this: the surface of the movie is exactly the “deep meaning” of these postmodern artifacts; there is no deep versus superficial, but only superficial just as there is no use value versus sign value, but the use value is already sign value, and there is only sign value.

In the past, female images on screen were portrayed as passive and victimized, a vacuum sign designed by film apparatus to entice erotic look from male spectators. Now even if women are portrayed as active and strong, they are still subject to erotic objectification. It is not only because the female characters on screen are indeed depicted sexually attractive, but also because such strong and active depiction are treated as spectacles as well, and everything turns into spectacular images. This is largely prescribed by the postmodern condition, where people prefer dwelling comfortably on the visual surface, the spectacularization of everything. According to Turner, the cultural approaches to “film as representation” are ultimately to focus on the relations between films’ representational “languages” and ideology. He argues that there are two broad categories of culturalist approach to the relation between film and culture: textual and contextual. Textually, the ideological meanings are conveyed

through the conventions and codes for both narrative and image. This is the first, or rather traditional way of looking at the world, the A-World as argued by Bauman in his understanding of Baudrillardian simulacrum, a world in comparison with the new world order and logic, the B-World.

The A-World is preoccupied with the search for meaning. Meaning is, after all, the relation between elusive appearance and solid, yet hidden, reality. Meaning is the hard, yet invisible core wrapped tightly in what offers itself to the senses, what can be seen and heard: the signifier. That core can be recovered if the carapace of the signifier is broken. The A-World needs detectives; Sherlock Holmes, who never trusted things to be what they seemed, is that world's archetypal hero. Yet the detective true to his name never treats things lightly—however untrustworthy he suspects them to be. They may bear false evidence, but they are evidence all the same. Appearances lie; but to say that they lie is to corroborate (indeed, to construe) the existence of truth. Mistrust of appearances sustains (and is sustained by) the unshakeable trust in “real things”. However misleading, the appearances are charged with meanings. (35)

The A-World is thus the first or second order simulation, where a reality is still out there for what is false and fake. Whereas the B-world is subject to the new logic or the new apparatus stated above, and in this world, there is no reality,

The B-World, on the other hand, has no time for Sherlock Holmes. Not that the B-World agrees to live at peace with a lie (whenever alerted to a lie, the

residents of that world would be pushed off course and react angrily and neurotically); but having been awarded immortality at birth, all things stand ultimately for nothing but themselves—there is no division between things that mean and things that are meant. More exactly, each such division is but momentary, protean, and ultimately reversible. There is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida); there is no “outside” in the game of signs. It is just by linguistic inertia that we still talk of signifiers bereaved of signifieds, as signifiers; of signs which stand but for themselves, as “appearances.” (36)

Such is the world of third-order simulacrum, where the production, viewing and consumption of action heroine films take place. This conceptualization of two worlds does not mean there is a clear timeline between the A and B world, nor does it mean that now we are all living in the B world. It is not a question of “either-or” but that these specific movies in concern reflect the key features of the B world. Therefore, the ideological meanings said by Turner tend to disappear in the texts of action heroine films, but are replaced by a new set of “ideologies” of how to consume the images. This is not about that there is no narrative, but that the narrative is overridden by the spectacle, so the meaning (in the A-World) that can be made from narrative is quite minimal. According to the new set of “ideologies” (or logic, apparatus), the excessive presentation of images, or the spectacularization of images, entails mostly sensual amusement to be “looked at” but not to be “looked into.” The media intensify massification by producing mass audiences and massification of images, ideas and experience. The masses absorb all media content, the content such as the strong

agency of the heroine, neutralize, or even resist, meaning, and demand and obtain more spectacle and entertainment, thus further eroding the boundary between media and “the real,” spectacular movies and ideologies. In this effect, the media, the cinematic images implode into the masses to an extent that it is unknowable what effects the films have on the masses and how the masses process the films. Therefore, when we examine the contextual element of these films, we come to know that the textual failure to produce ideological readings is, for a large part, if not wholly, due to the overall cultural paradigm of the postmodern condition: depthlessness, the over-proliferation of commodified images, the obliteration of form and content, and accordingly, the sensation-seeking masses who endeavor to “mass-taste” everything.

This further leads to an overwhelming objectification of everything. As Tasker argues, in a patriarchal culture typically representations of the action hero which put his body on show allay the erotic and feminine qualities of his “to-be-looked-at-ness” by stressing his activity (23). By contrast, representations of the action heroines as the figure in the landscape allay their active masculine connotations by stressing the heroine’s sexuality and availability in conventional feminine terms. What I want add to this argument here is that, the action heroines’ masculine active connotations is allayed by their sexuality and availability stressed on screen with specific costume, scenario or shooting angle, but also and more by the overall cultural atmosphere to objectify everything, in which viewers primarily tend to focus on pleasurable images, and participate in this hedonic consumption. The to-be-looked-at-ness is generalized to anything, anybody. The case and logic now goes like this, first of all, I take an

objectifying look simply at everything, and the sexualization and eroticization is only a way to make the image of the heroine a more attractive object to look at. In other words, sexualization does make them spectacles for voyeuristic male gaze, but the reason why they are consumed as purely spectacle as sexual object regardless of their active agency is surely because they are sexualized, but the more important reason is people's urge to consumer spectacles as pure spectacles, and that people treat them habitually so. The so-called male gaze has turned into numb gaze, the amplified gaze that has become so habitual to take in anything spectacular, but not specifically at somebody or something, that it tends to neglects the further interpretation of how such representation of the heroine as active agency creates a discourse that put them in a subject position, despite the fact it does not neglect the spectacle of the heroine's high-profile appearance and awesome action.

This relates to the reversed look at male body and the rise of metrosexual mentioned earlier in this section. The neologism of metrosexual has now become an image more digestible for consumers: a heterosexual male who takes care of his feminine side – he color-coordinates, exfoliates, and cares much about his skin condition. However, metrosexual is more of a product from the postmodern consumer culture than of an ideological reversion against patriarchal masculinity. As Simpson puts it:

For some time now, old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism. The stoic,

self-denying, modest straight male didn't shop enough (his role was to earn money for his wife to spend), and so he has to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image – that's to say, one who was much more interested in *being looked at* (because that's the only way you can be certain you actually exist). A man, in other words, who is an advertiser's walking wet dream. (“Meet the Metrosexual”)

It is similarly about “being looked at” as what women have been through ever since the first consumer commodity invented for women to beautify themselves. And this male interest in “being looked at” is a result from the intersection where an exhaustive consumer culture and people's fascination with images meet each other. Companies and advertisers bend on selling any possible product while making desirable good looking an ultimate goal of one's lifestyle. While there are views holding that metrosexuality is a naturally occurring phenomenon, at least partly, resembling the Aesthetic Movement of the 19th century, and that the metrosexual is just a modern embodiment of a dandy, Simpson, however, strongly refutes such suggestion of metrosexual being “just a dandy”:

A metrosexual wouldn't be caught dead in a powdered wig – though he might be tempted by the stockings and buckled shoes. Sorry to be pedantic, but dandies were an 18th century phenomenon. Metrosexuals belong to the 21 century. Dandyism was the pursuit of an elite, mostly aristocratic, or want to be aristo group of men and was largely a way of advertising their wealth, idleness

and refined taste. Metrosexuality is a *mainstream, mass-consumer phenomenon involving the complete commodification of the male body*. It takes Hollywood, ads, sports and glossy magazines as its inspirational gallery, rather than high classicism. The metrosexual desires to be desired. The dandy aimed to be admired. (“Metrodaddy Speaks!”)

With the widespread phenomenon of male body on display, featuring handsome men with six or eight abdominal muscles in magazine cover, on poster advertisement, on television show, and in movies, either for homosexual desire or for female pleasure, is a commonplace in every developed city now. To give the example of eroticized male body here, however, is not intended to exemplify as consolation for the sexist representation of women that has been smothering for so long, nor as an counterbalancing gesture to “call it even”, but to draw attention to the expansion of look that is over gender³⁸ and penetrates into every corner of everyday life, and to the proliferation of spectacles, be it a nude male body, a nude female body, or a giant bomb and tremendous mushroom cloud. As long as these spectacles catch attention, fit the eye, satisfy fascination, and finally sell, it is a matter of “who cares whether it is a man or a woman, or a tree”. That is what the depthless culture of late capitalism requires.

In this discourse of objectifying everything for looking and for consumption, everything is thus commodified, and this everything even includes human subjects.

³⁸ It is certainly not only over gender, but also across sexuality, race, class, and so on, only that the focus of discussion in this study is on the issues of gender in action-oriented cinema.

Just as what Simpson says, the metrosexuality is a commodification of male body. Being commodified, men are thus turned into objects, objects for sale in exchange of looking, objects for display as an image appearing exactly under the directions signaled by the advertisements, the magazine features, and the whole media. The wide range of products advertised to metrosexuals(-to-be), which include clothes, shoes, accessories, skin products, hair conditioner, or even make-up, intend to build a group of individuals into that specific image by making them purchase the products. To become a metrosexual is rather a consumer choice than an identity choice, because to appear in certain images needs to be dressed up in certain brands of commodities according to the only information telling about metrosexual – the advertisements or the fashion magazine recommendations. That is to say, rather than saying that there is a spontaneous urge in some men to use wax, and then the market reacts to such demand and begins to sell men's wax, it is the opposite – that the media, overspreading advertisements in any form, constructs such a desirable image for men to pursue and purchase – a sign value that stands for one's taste in fashion, one's social status, and one's desire to be desired. This is quite a reversed consumer marketing, in that it is no longer consumer demand instructs what is to be produced, but the commodities instruct needs. As Baudrillard says, “everything has to be sacrificed to the principle that things must have an operational genesis”, which means, consumption is no longer the simple enjoyment of goods; it is having (someone) enjoy something – an operation modeled on, and keyed to, the differential range of sign-objects (*Transparency* 45). In this case, “communication is a matter not of

speaking but of making people speak. Information involves not knowledge but making people know. The use of the construction “make” plus infinitive indicates that these are operations, not actions” (45). The point in advertising and propaganda is not to believe but to make people believe. “Participation is not an active or spontaneous social form, because it is always induced by some sort of machinery or machination – it is not acting so much as making people act” (46). The wanting, therefore, to be a metrosexual is thus always preceded by being made to want to be a metrosexual, as said by Baudrillard,

These days even wanting is mediated by models of the will, by forms of making people want something – by persuasion or dissuasion. Even if such categories as wishing, being able, believing, knowing, acting, desiring and enjoying still retain some meaning, they have all been monopolized, as it were, by a simple auxiliary mode. Everywhere the active verb has given way to the factitive, and actions themselves have less importance than the fact that they are produced, induced, solicited, media-ized or technicized. (*Transparency* 46)

Therefore, in this age of the factitious, there is no more wanting, only getting people to want, getting people to want to condition hair, to use hair gel, to wear sunglasses, or to put on make-up. There is no more knowing, only letting know, which is the first step for advertisements in general. There is no more being worth something, merely getting something to be worth something, which is the ultimate goal of advertisements in general. And last but not least, there is not so much enjoying,

not so much taking pleasure, as getting people to enjoy, getting people to take pleasure – taking pleasure in being a metrosexual because the media tell you that it is pleasurable. It thus can no longer be said that the metrosexual is an identity as what a “hippie” could be. Hippie as identity is a movement and subculture that adopts a certain life attitude not specifically through consumer goods. The metrosexual, by contrast, is a look: it is oriented not towards a set of value systems that define their subjectivity (except for how they convey the sign value of the metrosexual), but towards the image’s (the image of metrosexual) “potentiality as a field of operations, as something that we cause to function because, just like any machine, it asks to be activated; because, just like any signal, it asks to be switched on” – that is, a field of consumer choices that must be made – “hence the deep vacuous-ness of the action’s content” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 47). And through those numerous consumer choices which seem to be made on their own, but actually subject the operational genesis, the metrosexual finally achieve a perfect look, a status of object to be looked at – in other words, the consumers become the objects, the objects to be consumed through the mechanism of looking.

And then, according to Baudrillard, what the compulsion to the operationalism gives rise to is an “operational paradox.” The order of the day is not only “making something worth something,” but also that if something is to be invested with value, it is better for it to have no value to begin with.

better to know nothing in order to have things known; better to produce nothing in order to have things produced; and better to have nothing to say if one seeks to communicate... The implications for communication and information networks are incontestable: in order for content to be conveyed as well and as quickly as possible, that content should come as close as possible to transparency and insignificance... Thus good communication – the foundation, today, of a good society – implies the annihilation of its own content ... (and thus) good data-handling implies a digital transparency of knowledge. Good advertising implies the nullity – or at least the neutralization – of the product being advertised, just as fashion implies the transparency of women and their bodies – and just as the exercise of power implies the insignificance of those who exercise it.

(Transparency 47)

As what is theorized about the society of spectacle, the spectacle is considered to be a tool of pacification and depoliticization which “stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real...” and “relegates subjects to the critical and creative margins of society and to obscure the nature and effects of its distorting power” (Best 47). The spectacle of male eroticization, thus, is not specifically to pacify women for making them sexual objects of men, but to pacify, to an overall effect, all individuals living in the society of late capitalism and thus subject to the living logic of such society. Spectacles are produced and reproduced to convey no message that is related to what is represented in that spectacle, but to

dedicate to one single effect of inculcating the consumption mechanism – indulge in the spectacular, look at the images, but never look into or look through them. Therefore, these films, being the vessel of depthless images when the “end of history and the end of social” prevails (Featherstone 98), have turned into something apolitical. The ideological implantation, if any, into these film texts is made invisible. According to Baudrillard, “representations, as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real, could refer to the depth of meaning” (“Simulacra and Simulation” 180). But here, these images of women are purely simulated images, i.e. simulacra, in which all sense of origin is lost in the play of endlessly replicating sign systems. For instance, the signs of Lara Croft are replicated into color print for hanging on the bedroom wall, into online graphics for downloading and remediation, into plastic action figure for fan collection, or into illustration in pamphlet for game walkthrough. Reality has entirely disappeared beneath the glossy, seductive, surfaces of simulation. These “representations” of women, not only conceal the fact that there is no such reality as what is represented (that women can be superheroes), but also blocking the possibility of finding out the real reality that women are actually exploited to boost box office. In this way, any feminist political engagement with the film texts is trivialized and invalidated.

The second aspect about the contextualization of action heroine is the composition of the movies’ extra-textual environment – the sequels, prequels, spin-offs, merchandising, and theme park ride, all that makes the title of each action heroine film a composite commodity that is elaborated in the first section of this

chapter. The process of moving the image of, for example, Lara Croft, from video game to cinema screen, then to printed posters, to action figure, to comic books has at the same time put her image in different shape, different scenario, different context, and different narrative, creating multiple signifiers of difference, which, however, point to nothing called the signified. In the movie, she is the attractive female lead played by Angelina Jolie; in the game, she is the voluptuous avatar for treasure hunting missions; in the poster, she is the pin-up babe for sexual fantasy; as action figure, she is the essential collectible for aficionados; in comic books, she is the two-dimensional character in another story; in theme park ride, she is barely there except for some transient appearance to remind the theme of the ride. Each appearance constitutes a simulacrum resulting from endless copying and replication. The real one (or the signified, if there is any), which is initiated as a digital existence for large-scale reproduction as discussed in the first section of this chapter, has long been inundated by the sea of images of Lara Croft.

When the image we see is no longer a representation, but multiple vacuum simulacra, the subjectivity the female hero is supposed to earn is dissipated as such with each copy of her coming into being. She could be, at once, the game avatar that has been undergoing instant change in graphic design, the movie protagonist whose featuring star holds “the public image of instability” (Polsky 35), the pin-up babe that might be Angelina Jolie in costume or any other hot model playing her, and the plastic miniature figure that comes out of the streamline of mass production. The fleeting and

unstable identity³⁹ of Lara Croft not only disintegrates her own subjectivity, but also makes it difficult for viewers to identify with her, no matter how fluid, complex and transient the identification might be. And such inability to identify is ascribed to, on one hand, the changing nature of the movie into composite commodity, which thus crumbles the wholeness of a certain identity, and on the other hand, to the ensuing changing nature of spectatorship as discussed before.

From the traditional spectatorship (or more of a psychoanalytical spectatorship) dedicated to a dark theater with the machine projecting from behind onto the big screen in front of the viewers, contemporary hyper-spectatorship comes from a knowing audience with a more fragmented experience that transcend media, time, and text. Watching *Tomb Raider* movie on a computer screen or a DVD player, no matter how hard the viewer tries to imitate the cinema environment by dimming the light or upsizing the screen, is ultimately different from the two-hour long fixation in movie theater. The viewer could pause to make a tea or have a small chat with friend on Skype, could fast forward to skip boring part, replay the favorite part in slow motion, or even go online to search for the film reviews at any time in the middle of the movie as he wants. The viewing as such is an interrupted and casual process that summons little possibility of identification. Even when the viewer watches the movie physically in a movie theater, the knowing hyper-spectator, who lives in an age when any content and information is one click away for consumption, and is quite familiar with

³⁹ The identity here is not a textual one defined by the narrative, such as where the protagonist comes from, what is the race, gender, class of that protagonist and so on, in which aspect, the movie actually has a clear account of Lara Croft's "identity". Here the identity means a stable image with a stable meaning.

the genre convention, the filmography of certain directors, actors, or actresses, could be engaged in a viewing process full of intertextual associations jumping from one scene in the present movie to that of another one, from the “real” Angelina Jolie to the character – Lara Croft – she plays, from the seeing Angelina Jolie to thinking of her other films or even the products, commercials, and gossips she is involved in. Based on the existent distractions from endless bombing and shooting spectacles within the movie text, the further distraction from this extra-textual reference reinforces the fragmentation of the viewing process and thus re-destabilizes the image of the action heroine. Given such fragmented references and chaotic contexts, the subjectivity of Lara Croft, however active in previous textual analysis, collapses into pieces. Identification on the part of viewers, consequently, has to become so weak that it will eventually be replaced by the sole mechanism of look.

For *Resident Evil* series, the Baudrillardian simulation and simulacra is even more apparent. In addition to the routine reproduction practices as spin-off and merchandising, Alice, the recurring action heroine of all the existent five episodes, is not a character of the games series where the movie is adapted from. As a wholly fabricated but the leading figure in the movie, Alice has no background, no reference, and even no memory in the first episode. She is primarily portrayed in *Apocalypse* and *Extinction* as “a supremely efficient killing machine” and bio-weapon, while in the first film, she is shown first recognizing her abilities as a highly trained yet human security operative. Although the name Alice was given as the character’s name prior to *Resident Evil*’s release and is listed in the credits, her name is actually not spoken

in the first film (it is first spoken in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, the second film)⁴⁰. What is also interesting to know is that from the third movie of *Resident Evil*, the story involves a literal reproduction of her – cloning of Alice in a mass production style for bio weapon experiment, which reveals that her lack of background is actually replaced by a background fabricated by clone technologies or the film technologies that is in line with the economy of reproduction. In the fifth episode, one of her clone used for disaster simulation is killed by zombie while the 6-year-old daughter of her clone is left alone. Alice, in the following happenings, takes the role of the little girl's mother and brings her everywhere she goes, despite the fact that she is not her mother in any sense. This further confuses her identity in that it is not easy to answer the question of which is the true Alice, or whether her clone's implanted memory could be considered as a part of her identity. After all, she is merely one of the objects for scientific experiment, which goes wrong. Although the only option for identification is Alice, the only survivor that fights steadfastly throughout the five movies, she is simply a killing machine just like any other characters, who, ironically, have their counterparts in the game, fighting against waves of zombies and monsters. We do not know who she is in the movie narrative, nor can we find any clue from the extra-textual source of the namesake video games. This is exactly how second-order and third-order simulacrum works – the image of Alice actually covers the absence of such existence of her as active agency wielding her subjectivity. Like any of her clones, she is only a shadow. In a similar manner, Aeon Flux, from the ever beginning,

⁴⁰ From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resident_Evil_\(film_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resident_Evil_(film_series))

is already a clone of her former-life genes with barely any trace of memory about that life. In herself, she is a simulacrum that comes out of nowhere, covering the actual non-existence of this action woman with superb abilities.

What is more, the fragmentation of the objects for viewers to look at and consume not only dissipates the subject position of the action heroine as character on screen, it also further crumbles the subjectivity of the viewers. Baudrillard argues in *The System of Objects* that in this postmodern consumer culture, “people define themselves in relation to objects” (16), but as objects lose their stable referent and take multiple forms, as perfectly exemplified by Lara Croft’s quilting and plural affordances in movies, in games, in prints, in polygons or in pixels. In Jameson’s view, “the loss of reality leads to reduction of the traditional autonomy of the self, since with postmodernism the individual subject is no longer able to define itself reciprocally against a reliable, exterior object” (qtd. in Easthope 22). Thus the self is “displaced in postmodern culture by ‘the fragmentation of subject’; there is no affect, no depth, because there is no longer a self present to do the feeling” (Easthope 23). As the totalizing consumerism and commodification together with multinational diversification corrode people’s awareness of reality through pastiche and endless copies, the individual subject thus disappears (23). The postmodern consumer is one that could be epitomized by television viewer, according to Baudrillard, sitting comfortably in front of a TV set – a metonymy for almost all the consumption of composite commodities.

The archetypal decentered subject with a maximum attention span of three minutes. Living in a world of schizophrenically fragmented instants, she cruises the surfeit of channels available to her, zapping her remote control and hopping between channels and programs unconnected by time, space or genre. She is unconcerned with narrative, coherence or rational understanding; rather, she constructs a largely random bricolage out of bits and pieces of television, which she connects with only in a bored and distracted fashion. She is the viewer, figured in a cryptic and almost science-fictional way. (qtd. in Sim 116)

As decentered subjects, individuals could find their relationship with the on-screen images that also lose the subjectivity quite tricky and perplexing. For one thing, the loss of subjectivity of on-screen heroines interrupts the spectatorial alignment. For another, the fragmented subjectivity of individuals suffers a similar tendency of becoming objectified by means of various consumer “action.” As discussed earlier about how the operational genesis works to forge the metrosexual into commodified objects, such “operational genesis” has actually long been in practice before metrosexual – on women (and of course on all consuming individuals regardless of gender). The long, wide and elaborate range of female-oriented products and services: skin care products (for different types of skin), hair products (shampoo, conditioner, dye, gel, and also dedicated to specifications for different types of hair), make-up (for eye lids, eye lashes, eye lines, brows, face, cheek, lips and so on and on), body products (again, for washing, nourishing, and care), , accessories (earrings, necklaces, bracelets, hats, scarves, belts, purses...), clothes (skirts, dresses, blouses, straps,

strapless, underwear, stockings...), and shoes (for different colors, seasons, brands, types, materials, heels...), and dieting pills, slimming salons, spas, plastic surgery for any part of the body. This list can never go exhaustive, the above illustration of which only provides a glimpse of the iceberg tip. It seems that women are enjoying a high professional and specific line of products which are claimed to better their life, and that they have the freedom to choose any of the combination to enjoy their life and body to whatever degree they want (this is also one part of what postfeminism advocates, but postfeminist agenda is more than a consumerist feminism, which will be discussed in the next section).

But the advertisements for all these products, and all related media images tell the otherwise – women are made to pay and to work on transforming themselves into a universal look of slim body with spotless skin, ample breasts and fair features, who would never appear in the same outfit (because that is not fashion). To achieve such goal pictured by media seems, ironically, to be the ultimate happy life women are supposed to enjoy, because that is the look by which women would find their confidence in work, in life, and in men. However, such a “perfect” image is imposed on the female consumers to turn them into pure “look” that is consumed by other lookers and looked. That is to say, through the seemingly “spontaneous action” on behalf of the female “subjects” to consume the intended commodities, the consuming women are actually making (or rather, made to make) themselves into objects to be looked at (be it male gaze, or female gaze). So the objectification not only exists in media representations as the action heroines, or advertisement they speak for, in

which certain stars or models are beatified into objects, but becomes generalized to the public who are instructed by the media representations to objectify themselves in a way that exactly looks like the media representations. So as Lara Croft/Angelina Jolie or Alice/Milla Jovovich, is objectified into all forms of images and commodities, the consumers follow the suit and scatter their subjectivity everywhere, and at the same time, the image of the action heroine provide a great example for female consumers to objectify themselves (for male consumers, their look is already an objectifying one): how to look as sexy as Angelina Jolie? Maybe a plastic surgery to make the lip look thicker and the breasts bigger; how to look as slim as Milla Jovovich? Maybe join a slimming salon and take some pills; how to look as young as Kate Beckinsale at her age? Maybe try the face-lifting cream she speaks for.

Such process looks like identification where the human subjects align themselves with the image of Lara Croft/Alice/Selene and etc., but it is only an imitation that focus exclusively on the look, the appearance, the image that involves only the objectifying look and no sense of subjectivity, because both categories of subjectivity are lost in the endless play of signs and objectification. If such process must be named under a certain term, it is no more than an operationalized identification, in which people are made to identify with the image, while the identification itself involves no content. The images on screen and the viewers sitting in front of the screen are engaged in, according to Baudrillard, a “performative interactivity” – “a set of objects makes the human individuals, who are also

objectified, to align, to identify, or to interact with them, the happening of which is only an operational performance” (*Transparency* 46).

For any of the action heroine in discussion, be it Lara Croft, Alice, Selene, Elektra, or Aeon Flux, each step of reproduction of her image has fragmented her one step away, thus fragmenting her subject position further. Each step of moving the her image closer to the masses through close-up magazine shooting or through super high resolution Blu-Ray release has removed her one step away from her unique aura, and one step closer to the “phony spell of commodity.” Her image travels fast across one’s eyes, jumping around at different platform, but barely touching one’s consciousness or memory. Thus the identification process is similarly an interrupted and distracted one, scattered apart everywhere, with the one on cinema screen, on computer screen, in poster, or with the one that moves at the tempo of one’s console. Her central position of subjectivity, as much noticed in psychoanalytical terms as it is, only adopts a nominal existence, and would eventually collapse for those actual consumers who have seen so many forms of her reproduction. It is impossible to locate which is the real or what is real, because every image is a copy of copy of copy, which can go on forever, a simulacrum like a mirror image after endless times of reflection, and no longer a reflection.

At times, with extremely incessant and highly tight-paced spectacles of action interlude by occasional showcase of female nude body for no narrative-wise “good reason”, and the no less spectacular reproduced games, spin-offs, posters, events, and

so on, the psychoanalytical configuration of the movie can be carried to an extreme extent that there is no subject in the movie but only numerous free-floating objects to consume, and that there is no identification occurring during viewing process, but only looking at the whole screenful of objects. The relationship between the viewers and the movie is now not revolving around the paradigm of identification, but mediated by the spectacles playing intertextually and extratextually. And moreover, as the human subjects lose their coherence as well, the relationship between the spectator and the image melts into a pool of objects, in a circle of confused look: it could be the spectator looking at the images, or it could also be the vice versa, the images looking at the consumers. This is a typical process of what Baudrillard calls implosion – “the proliferation of signs and information in the media obliterates meaning through neutralizing and dissolving all content... all distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory” (Kellner, “A New McLuhan”). If the classical analytical tool of film from the seventies of last century was largely characterized by semiotics and psychoanalysis, or, more specifically, by its exploration of the dichotomous relationship between subject and object, identification and look, the postmodern blockbuster cinema is, in contrast, marked by the collapse of distinction, the blurring of boundaries, and also what Jameson argues as the predicament of the postmodern schizophrenia – temporal disorder, pastiche, fragmentation, looseness of association. It announces the horizon where the dynamics of such binary opposition have reached their limits and began to draw inward and

absorb themselves due to the huge reproduction of spectacles and endless play of self-referentiality. The psychoanalysis based on sane and organized categories is then replaced by schizophrenia, or maybe “schizoanalysis.”⁴¹ This results in an implosive process devouring all relational poles of subject and object, identification and look, and in this implosive mix, subject is absorbed into object, identification is replaced by looking, and images are everywhere.

As the Idea of Feminism

In spite of the overwhelming preoccupation with the pure spectacular images that manage to pull the audience out from deeper association with the images by means of distraction, fascination, and satisfaction of pleasure/sensation seeking, we cannot say that the audiences are unanimously mindless creatures that only fulfill sensual desires and do nothing but look at the images for visual pleasure, though the postmodern depthless culture tends to nurture such an audience. By this, I do not mean that part of the audiences do think about what the movie tells them, and the other part are not engaged in any kind of thinking at all, nor do I mean that the thinking viewers are more intelligent and sensible, and the non-thinking part are simply shallow and stupid. After all, saying that industrial practice to produce endless spectacles “conspires” with the postmodern consumer culture does not exclude the diversity and complexity of audiences’ reception and processing of these films, for each individual viewer has his or her own different social, cultural and economic

⁴¹ A form of antipsychoanalysis devised by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their controversial study *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), based on the experience of the schizophrenic. The theory is that the schizophrenic provides a better model for resisting authority (as embedded in the procedures of psychoanalysis, for example), than such types as the neurotic. But schizoanalysis would not be the focus or the theoretical method of this study.

knowledge and different background in terms of gender, sexuality, age, class, race, education and all other demographic elements. In addition to an intertextual knowledge of the various media products, the contemporary knowing spectators as spoken before (which might be a specific group of people that are relatively young, have income affordable for movies and all other media products, have access to computer and internet, and receive a relatively high level of education), are social and historical beings as well, who have at least a basic knowingness of the movements, events, and ideas happening around, be it from the awareness through actual participation, or from media coverage – feminism would be one of them. Concerning the idea of feminism represented in films, the contemporary knowing spectators might have something to say, be it stereotypical or not. Therefore, they may make different or different degree of interpretation of the action heroine films while or after watching them. In terms of the gender issues, some might treat this type of films a pure image bomb and enjoy the spectacles of breathtaking actions and nudity of attractive actresses, some might deem that it is no big deal to see a super strong woman on screen and take it for granted that women can do everything now, some might find certain sense of female empowerment and simultaneously feeling offended (or perhaps also empowered) while seeing the unrobed female lead wielding her femininity and sexuality, and some might dismiss the films as total exploitation of sexy women but nevertheless watch them solely for entertainment.

However, that being said, I do not intend to categorize or elaborate on the different reactions and interpretations the different viewers get from watching the same action heroine films, for this study's focus is not on descriptive or empirical data of audience reception but on developing critical argument about how the social and cultural paradigm works within the viewing mechanism. Therefore, what I want to

start with for this section, in particular after what has been said before, is not an accusation that people do not think at all about any media messages and images, otherwise it would be illogical in view of the heated academic debates as well as the incalculable online user comments residing in various movie websites, and in view of myself also thinking it over. Instead, what I want to emphasize here is not specifically what they think, but how this thinking process takes place, not in the cognitive science terms, but from the perspective of the political economy of signs, that is, how their thinking, as diversified as it is, is affected and formed, again, by the cultural-economic logic. So the further questions can be taken as what analogy could be used for this thinking process, and how this thinking is different from that of the older times before the postmodern turn takes place. And I would argue, in this scenario of watching these action heroine film texts, to think is, again, to consume. It is just that the object to be consumed is an idea. That is to say, if anything can be extracted from the action heroine film texts concerning the idea of feminism, this something is consumed, in a quite similar way to that of consuming a pure image.

After the Orgy

When coming to the issues of feminism, it remounts to the debates between the second-wavers and the postfeminism concerning which is the “real” feminism, whether feminism has been the past as forgotten or as succeeded, and what feminism has become of. There is not a definite answer to such questions. But once again, it might be of use to disentangle the root of such insolvability by seeking from the inside to the outside, seeing from a detached but not irrelevant perspective, jumping out of the debate and relating to the larger contemporary cultural landscape pertinent

to what is after those vigorous liberations and movements back in the progressive ages of second wave.

Baudrillard characterizes the present state of affairs as “after the orgy.” The orgy in his terms refers to

the moment when modernity exploded upon us, the moment of liberation in every sphere. Political liberation, sexual liberation, liberation of the forces of production, liberation of the forces of destruction, women’s liberation, etc. This was a total orgy – an orgy of the real, the rational, the sexual, of criticism as of anti-criticism, of developments as of the crisis of development. We have pursued every avenue in the production and effective overproduction of objects, signs, messages, ideologies and satisfactions. *(Transparency 3)*

Now that all movements are over, everything has been liberated, “the chips are down,” Baudrillard says in *Transparency of Evil*, “we find ourselves faced collectively with the big question: WHAT DO WE DO NOW THE ORGY IS OVER?” (3) That is the same big question for the ongoing of feminism, since women’s liberation used to be among “the orgy.”

After the orgy, according to Baudrillard, we may pretend to carry on and accelerate in the same direction as how the liberation led us, but in reality we are accelerating in a void, “because all the goals of liberation are already behind us, and because what haunts and obsesses us is being thus ahead of all the results – the very availability of all the signs, all the forms, all the desires that we had been pursuing” (3-4). This goes back to what Baudrillard expounds as simulation – what all we can do is to simulate the orgy, to simulate liberation. What we are living in and for is the state of simulation:

a state in which we are obliged to replay all scenarios precisely because they have all taken place already, whether actually or potentially. The state of utopia realized, of all utopias realized, wherein paradoxically we must continue to live as though they had not been. But since they have, and since we can no longer, therefore, nourish the hope of realizing them, we can only “hyper-realize” them through interminable simulation. We live amid the interminable reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images and dreams which are now behind us, yet which we must continue to reproduce in a sort of inescapable indifference.

(Transparency 4)

In the same utopian scenario, the liberation of women is assumed as already realized, the goals and ideals of which are taken as achieved. But in order to maintain the moment of the orgy, to hold the gesture of being progressive, and to “nourish the hope” that we are still fulfilling the ideal of empowered women that are equal to men, we keep pursuing the goal of the liberation as if it were not realized, and we reproduce what we had pictured about the liberation as a fuel to simulate that exultant orgy. Such simulation of the orgy takes many forms in multiple media to the vast masses. Hollywood cinema, in view of its global influence and tremendous output, is one of the most important machines capable of producing all kinds of simulacra of that feminist myth. The blockbuster-y representation of women as super strong action heroines would be a perfect venue to replay the scenario that re-collects the ideals, fantasies and dreams about the liberation. For one thing, the blockbuster-ing image per se ensures the widest dissemination of an image that is not only a cinematic one, but also a media image, a cultural icon through its “composite commodifying” of circulation and reproduction. On the other, it literally allows for a function of replaying by virtue of its digitality that is translatable into any form of product

clickable to any kind remediation – pause, slow motion, enlarge, replay, or print. With the highest level of filmmaking technology and the inexhaustible star system, Hollywood machine is more than capable to produce an image absorbing all kinds of utopia-style positivity by the colorful and fabulous maneuver of lens and computer technology. A movie like *Tomb Raider: Lara Croft* could do anything to simulate the “success of feminism” – building a beautifully athletic female hero, exacerbating the obstacles that she faces with, and exaggerating the smoothness with which the female hero overcomes it – to hyperrealize the fierce spirit of the liberation through a famed actress’s fierce acting, and through the production staff’s gesture to simulate an active, strong, intelligent, and attractive woman (more specifically by the artificial mechanism of training, scripting, special effects, and make-up) to “represent” the icon of an ideal woman who is supposed to have achieved all feminist agendas.

The glory of the orgy is amplified in the pavonine and luxurious motion pictures where a perfect female figure of “history” is “represented” (let us put aside the debate on the eroticization of her body first). But the question is “which history? And representation of what?” Is the cinematic image a true reflection of what was achieved back in the second or the first wave (or any form of movement at any time)? The young feminists (or they may prefer “postfeminists”) do not know for real, for they were not there personally and everything around them keeps “hyper-realizing” the so-called feminist ideals. They acquire their answers only by watching television, going to the cinema, reading magazines, and surfing on the Internet – by consuming these media messages, the messages of simulation, of hyper-realization of feminism that insists on telling them what women have achieved, what women now deserve, and how a modern woman should enjoy her life through skin care products, hair-styling, cute dresses, and cute men, because those are exactly what they deserve after the orgy

of liberation – at least this is what the postfeminists generally believe in (Projansky; Helford). The answers sought here consist only of a media image of feminism, the media idea of feminism, and ultimately a simulation of the idea of feminism. Here I do not mean the media image is necessarily a false image, because false represents at least a hinge of the real; it is the opposite of the real. The media image now is a third-order simulacrum of non-reality – hyper-reality. This is similar to the doubt Baudrillard raised about the Gulf War. There might be no doubt whether women’s liberation truly happens or not, for Baudrillard admits as he says, “the fact is that the revolution has well and truly happened, but not in the way we expected. Everywhere what has been liberated so that it can enter a state of pure circulation, so that it can go into orbit” (*Transparency* 4). We can only understand events in their lifetimes – “any attempt at later discussion only adds to the simulacra – adds to the uncertainty” (5).

The question about feminism is a bigger one – even before we can be sure whether women’s liberation is over or not, and whether this “over” means completed and succeeded, or get rid of and forgotten, feminism is moved to the next step of “after the orgy.” So is it over? For postfeminists, they simply take it for granted that the feminist agenda has already been successful or outdated (no longer needed because of it is achieved) and assume women should be enjoying their life based on the empowerment and equality thus achieved. What the postfeminists are doing and the ways they are doing it is exactly, I would rather argue, the process of simulating the liberation, to move the feminism to the state of “after the orgy”, that is, postfeminism is a simulation of feminism. Postfeminism “takes advantage of” the fact that the feminist movement happened “not in the way we expected,” celebrates the demise (which they interpret as success) of feminism, and goes into the orbit of still and further fulfilling the idea and the title of “feminism”, because after all they have

far more means to circulate such idea of “feminism” with the thoroughness of contemporary media technologies. While seeing the attractive strong woman on screen as in action heroine movies, on magazines, or on any other media platform, and believing that women have done it, we keep carrying forward this belief, and creating and recreating more and more such images to further make us convinced of the realization of the liberation. In such a way, postfeminism keeps feminism both alive and dead, and that is how postfeminist discourse causes so much debate – which is the real feminism, is postfeminism a growing form of pro-feminism, or simply anti-feminism – but the case is no longer a matter of reality, nor of distinctive “pro” or “anti.” “Post” as well as “feminism” as in postfeminism is only nominal markers to justify its paradoxical existence as a simulation of the success of feminism by carrying on its ideas in endless uncertainty and indeterminacy (of whether it is successful or not, of how exactly feminism is conceptualized, and even these debates are also adding to circulation).

So about the previous questions concerning the “historicity” and “representability” of action heroine figure, there is nothing about “history”, be it there a potential, and there is no more representation – the “history” is simulated, the “representation” is just a simulacrum. The rampant image of Lara Croft or Alice or any action heroine in question defeating the villainy is only a simulation of women as super strong in the “after-the-orgy” spirit of keeping the ideal running. This is even not a simulation of the feminism, but a simulation of the idea of feminism, for in such a chaotic and incessant simulation of it, there is no reality about it, and “the fate of the things liberated is an incessant commutation, and these things are thus subject to increasing indeterminacy, to the principle of uncertainty” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 6). It is only a vague idea “with the benefit of a little hindsight” of the liberation (4).

Such idea of feminism keeps circulating in every cultural sphere and industries, in women's magazine, in television dramas, in reality shows, in film industry, in portal websites, in video games, in comics series, or even in the T-shirt designs, to pass around the idea of female getting toughened up, taking control of her life, doing what men can or cannot do, and to pass it over and over, again and again in whatever possible updates or sequels. So there is *Alien* with Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and its three sequels from the late 1970s all over to the late 1990s, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* with Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in 1991, *Tank Girl* in 1995, and there is a number of television series also featuring action heroine, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001)⁴², and the very popular *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)⁴³. Wrapped in different forms and appearances, these media images all seem to depict a female figure that is strong, independent, powerful, epitomizing the feminist ideal (suspiciously incomprehensible), though there are different interpretations of each action figure and different conceptualizations of feminism. The proliferation of these images formulates the circulatory networks fostered and provisioned by the "unavoidable goal of all liberation" (3).

With the images floating around as a part of the networks, what seems like the "signified" of those images – the ideas of feminism – ends up rootless signifiers as well, because they are simply simulated segments of uncertainty to form the circulatory network of "after the orgy," to keep going the liberation that is gone forever, to retrieve what is irretrievable out of total gesture, a gesture to simulate the orgy of liberation. The idea of feminism is what is simulated, a hollow existence to make the "network" appearing solid, thus floating together with the pure images

⁴² *Xena: Warrior Princess* is an American-New Zealand supernatural fantasy adventure series. Its narrative follows Xena (Played by Lucy Lawless), a warrior in a quest to seek redemption for her past sins as a ruthless warlord by using her formidable fighting skills to help people.

⁴³ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is an American television series. Its narrative follows Buffy Summers (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar), to battle against vampires, demons, and other forces of darkness.

freely to any possible sphere. The “idea” becomes a sign, too, another type of spectacle, as said by Baudrillard, which keeps coming at those who look. Raised in an age of computer technology and new media, women (and men) born after the vigorous 1970s second wave mostly get the general idea of “feminism” from all these images portrayed in media and cultural industries, which in turn, are mostly among their daily consuming products and activities. The whole idea of feminism, be it stereotypical or biased, when acquired through a process of consuming cultural products, has thus been closely linked with and entangled in the vast network and commutations of circulating consumer commodities. Ever since the 1990s, with the advance in filmmaking and reproduction technology and the tendency to sell spectacles pertinent to the postmodern culture, it becomes much easier and more profitable to proliferate action heroine genres (as after all, we have two kinds of spectacles to consume in action heroine movies!). That, in turn, makes the commodification of each image into a composite commodity become a prevailing practice, and the images like Lara Croft in movies or television series, or any media products, come to condensation and proliferate in recent decades.

In the process of watching an increasing number of such audio-visual products, purchasing more and more spinoffs and merchandising goods, the acquisition of feminist ideas has thus become even more inevitably intertwined with reproduction and consumption. However, the question is that whether the proliferation of action heroine films, besides the technology facilitation, results from people’s needs to watch action heroines, to know about the idea of feminism, or to know anything at all? That is to ask –“do objects instruct needs and structure them in a new way? Conversely, do needs instruct new social structures through the mediation of objects and their production”? (Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 18). It is, again, a question of

the “operational genesis” (see Section 3, Chapter 4) in people’s consumption practice. Production of such movies and all the other ancillary commodities is not a response from people’s actual needs to watch such movies, but it is quite the opposite – the production instructs needs in people and constructs them as what people need and want. In other words, it is inevitable for such a process of “acquisition” of idea to fall into the operationalized action. It is not so much watching the cinema as making people watch; it is not so much acquiring as making people acquire, or rather, making people consume whatever product is there. The actions of watching action heroine films, or perhaps the action of actually thinking about them have less importance than the fact that such actions are operationalized, or the fact that the advertising of the film is so successful that it manages to get people to come to cinema. If “there is to be no knowledge save that which results from having (people) know; no speaking save that which results from having (people) speak,” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 46) then there is no so-called acquisition of the idea of feminism in an operational to make people acquire. People watch, thus, for the sake of watching. People simulate the idea for the sake of simulating, nothing else happens – it “is operational or it is nothing” (46). The whole idea, the thinking of the idea, the thought about the idea, in this analysis, is nothing more than an operational consumption.

Thus, the need for the revolution and liberation is alive, except for that it is behind the theater door or on the dining table – it is simulated.

Only the idea is consumed. The revolutionary imperative is alive, but unable to realize itself in practice; it is consumed in the idea of Revolution. As idea, Revolution is in fact eternal, and will be eternally consumable in the same way as any other idea...All ideas, even the most contradictory, can coexist as signs within the idealist logic of consumption. Revolution is signified, then, in a

combinatorial terminology, in a lexicon of immediate terms, where it is presented as fulfilled, where it is “consumed.”

(Baudrillard, *System of Objects* 24)

What happens then, according to Baudrillard, is that the simulation of liberations through incessant circulations and commutations leads to disappearance of “the unavoidable goal of all liberation.”

Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear through proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary existence of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal. (*Transparency* 5)

So the liberation of women does not come to an end because it is in the past; feminism does not die because it is got over. Otherwise, all the debates on and complications of the prominent female figure in question would be groundless. But it disappears. It disappears by entering the lethal circle of simulation, by seamless penetration into every corner of everyday life. Feminism dies not because postfeminism replaces it, but because postfeminism popularizes it and simulates it with a commodity touch. It dies, ironically, with the rise in the number of action heroine films produced, with the expansion of the chain business encompassing video games, action figures, pin-up posters, and so on. The more we see the face of Croft-like figures, the more rapidly the feminism dissipates. The proliferation is an epidemic that kills along every business chain, along every transfer into simulation. With each specific product consumed, with each spinoffs coming into people’s hands, the

simulated existence of feminism become further vague, unreal, vacuum, and finally hyperreal to keep circulating on this secondary existence.

The representation of woman as either progressive or regressive as debated is not a representation at all in the first place. This is because such “representation” is a simulation of the idea of feminism. It simply simulates the idea of what we have once fought for and disperses it as much and widely as possible. What is “represented” to the audience is thus a hyperreal world composed of digital images. What is more important, “the logic of viral dispersal in networks is no longer a logic of value, neither, therefore, is it a logic of equivalence.” As Baudrillard says,

there is no longer any such thing as a revolution of values – merely a circumvention or involution of values... A centripetal compulsion coexists with a decenteredness of all systems, an internal metastasis or fevered endogenic virulence which creates a tendency for systems to explode beyond their own limits, to override their own logic – not in the sense of creating sheer redundancy, but in the sense of an increase in power, a fantastic potentialization whereby their own very existence is put at risk.

(Transparency 4)

All of this goes back to what Baudrillard terms as the fate of value. Baudrillard, mimicking the (social) science, once proposed a tripartite account of value in his famous “For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign”: a natural stage (use-value), a commodity stage (exchange-value), and a structural stage (sign-value). Value thus had a natural aspect, a commodity aspect, and a structural aspect. These formal distinctions are reminiscent of the distinctions between the particles in physics, in which case, a new particle does not replace those already discovered – it simply joins their ranks, taking its place in a hypothetical series (*Transparency 5*). So

Baudrillard, in his later writing of *The Transparency of Evil*, introduces a new particle into the microphysics of simulacra. After the natural, commodity, and structural stages of value, there comes the fractal stage. The first stage had a natural referent, with value based on a natural use of the world. The second was on the basis of a general equivalence, with value developed by referring to a logic of the commodity. The third is governed by a code, and value develops here by reference to a set of models (5). At the fourth, the fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value, however, “there is no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying all interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity. At the fractal stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general” (5). So to speak, there is now no law of value, but only “a sort of epidemic of value, a sort of general metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value” (5). Indeed, as Baudrillard says,

we should really no longer speak of “value” at all, for this kind of propagation or chain reaction makes all valuation impossible...Good is no longer the opposite of evil, nothing can now be plotted on a graph or analyzed in terms of abscissas and ordinates. Just as each particle follows its own trajectory, each value or fragment of value shines for a moment in the heavens of simulation, and then disappears into the void along a crooked path that only rarely happens to intersect with other such paths. This is the pattern of the fractal – and hence the current pattern of our culture. (*Transparency* 5)

In this analysis, what I expatiate before how in contemporary Hollywood blockbusters the sign value is not the opposite of the use value, but has become a replacement of the use value still stays at the third stage governed by the code. If the traditional apparatus theory requires the binary between denotations/signifiers and

connotations/signified to subject individuals to certain ideological positions by assimilating people into what is implied from the texts (for instance, either a sense of female empowerment or the quite opposite of exploitive sexism) and making them accept it as a natural, such binary disappears and is substituted by the visual pleasure and sensual satisfaction of obsessive look under the overall configuration of spectacles. However, when it comes to what Baudrillard terms as “after the orgy” and to what media products render as the simulation of feminism idea, the recurring ideals of past liberations belong to the fourth stage of fractal one, where values radiate in all directions in hazard proliferation, and where there is no speaking of value at all. The two arguments of mine respectively in the previous section talking about pure spectacle and this section about idea as a spectacle seem to contradict with each other, for one is refrained to the third stage of sign value (as if there were the opposite of use value), and the other goes on to the fractal stage of nullity – no value at all. However, this paradox, paradoxically, helps to move these two arguments one step further. For one thing, both repudiate the existence of use value in these movies. For the former, sign value overwhelms the so-called use value and become the defining feature of action heroine films as an object for display. My repeated use of the conditional clause, “if there is any (use value/deep meaning),” is not intended to indicate the affirmative possibility of “there is some (use value/deep meaning),” but is used for analyzing how the supposedly opposite poles of sign and use value actually implode into each other and ultimately replaced solely by the sign. And the latter completely entails no law of value by way of pure simulation, not only of images, but also of ideas, ideals, goals and fantasies, which, in Baudrillard’s analysis, also constitutes a spectacle, the spectacle of idea, of thought, the spectacle to be consumed.

Metastasis and Trans-state

It is what is said about the process of radical semiurgy all over again – when things (or signs) are liberated from their respective concepts, values, points of reference, origins and aims, they embark on an endless process of self-reproduction. This is where the order (or rather, disorder) of, Baudrillard uses another term, “metastasis” begins – the rule of cancerous proliferation – and the other point that pushes forward the seemingly paradoxical argument about the change in the stage of value. Baudrillard compares such an order to the immortal and asexual reproduction through code, and

today’s technological beings – machiness , clones, replacement body parts – all tend towards this kind of reproduction, and little by little they are imparting the same process to those beings that are supposedly human, and sexed. The aim everywhere – not least at the leading edge of biological research – is to effect a genetic substitution of this kind, to achieve the linear and sequential reproduction, cloning or parthenogenesis of little celibate machines.

(Transparency 7)

Baudrillard further compares the day when sexual liberation was the order and our present clone-loving society. The watchword for the former was “Maximize sexuality, minimize reproduction,” while that for the latter is just the opposite – “as much ... reproduction and as little sex as possible” (7). “Body” as a metaphor also goes through tremendous changes, from the metaphor for the soul in the past, then to that for sex, and at present to that for nothing at all. As for now, body is merely the “locus of metastasis, of the machine-like connections between all its processes, of an endless programming devoid of any symbolic organization or overarching purpose” (7).

This metastasis of proliferation and promiscuity is an aspect of a general tendency towards a state of transcendence which extends beyond any specificity and participates in a process of confusion and contagion by affecting all disciplines – “a viral loss of determinacy which is the prime event among all the new events that assail us” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 7). In this way, economics becomes transeconomics, aesthetics transaesthetics, sex transsexuality – all categories converge in a universal process of the transversal in which no metaphorical relationship exists between any discourses (7). The possibility of metaphor is then disappearing in every sphere, because for there to be metaphor, differential fields and distinct objects must exist. Metaphor has its beauty as it plays with difference or the illusion of difference. “But they cannot exist where contamination is possible between any discipline and any other.” Instead, metonymy – “replacing the whole as well as the components, and occasioning a general commutability of terms” – has replaced the dis-illusion of metaphor today. Then total metonymy overrules and goes viral by definition or more by lack of definition (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 7-8). In such sense, Lara Croft, for instance, while being the “iconic figure” of action heroine, becomes the metonymy of ideal woman, the metonymy of feminism, or rather of postfeminism perhaps. As people take the media image as the “reality,” there is thus no difference between an on-screen ideal woman and an actual ideal woman – the on-screen one becomes the actual one. Similarly, as feminism enters a simulated existence of postfeminism, there is not a definite definition of feminism. The media image of Lara Croft thus plays the spokesman role for feminism, and with Lara Croft’s abstract and unstable form (as discussed in Section One, Chapter Four), all these floating and oscillatory categories are contaminating and contaminated by each other. It is just because of the lack of definition and lack of difference that the play of metonymy goes viral – Lara Croft

could be the metonymy of feminism, while feminism could also be the metonymy of Lara Croft. In the similar manner, film becomes the metonymy of the whole culture; the film spectacle becomes the metonymy of the whole film industry, and so on. As such universal transversal process infects every sphere in which there used to be distinction between objects, feminism, while originating as a political movement for women's equal right, get contaminated when it enters the sphere of culture (which, in turn, incorporates everything else as capitalism, aesthetics, politics, sports, media, technologies etc., because "everything in our social life ... can be said to have become 'cultural'"), and becomes the metonymy of many things. In the metastasis of senseless and seamless proliferation and multiplication, the original idea of feminism that frames the embryo of what women once fight so rigorously for, is lost in such a process. Feminism, for its simulated existence in metastasis, is contaminated by fashion, by advertisement, by television shows, by films and film merchandising and franchising, and overall, by the cultural-economic logic of postmodern consumption.

As the confusion of types is total and everywhere, each individual category is subject to contamination and substitution is thus possible between any sphere and any other. "Sex is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere – everywhere else, in fact. Politics is no longer restricted to the political sphere, but infects every sphere – economics, science, art, sport ... Sport itself, meanwhile, is no longer located in sport as such, but instead in business, in sex, in politics, in the general style of performance" (Baudrillard *Transparency* 8). Thus, feminism is no longer located in women's movement, but anywhere else, in sex, in body, in performance, in capitalism, in style, in aesthetics, in media. Each category thus passes through a phase transition during which its essence is diluted in homeopathic doses, infinitesimal relative to the total solution, until it finally disappears, leaving a trace so small as to be indiscernible, like

the “memory of water”. While the dose of feminism drops in solvents of trans-state for spreading the word, for promulgating the spirit, it turns out to find itself diluted, diffused and finally disappeared. In the case of action heroine movies, that potential dose of feminist strength is not consolidated by the presence, or rather, the intensive presences of female figure, but on the contrary, it is diluted by the fact these presences is put on this high-profile stage of multiple interests that will traverse to endless following or previous stops on the proliferative streamline. These presences come as and with highly seductive generic spectacles – intense action, amazing special effects, incredible scenarios, striving for a moment’s passion and roaring. These presences are simultaneously presented at terminals more than the dedicated dark theater, but immersing people’s living rooms, bedrooms, desktops, walls, coffee table, computers, DVD players, television set, or even fashion taste. So the image of Lara Croft holding guns is hung on the wall, confusing feminism with sexualized body; the magazine interview with Angelina Jolie about her performance lies on the dining table or under a sofa cushion, confusing Lara Croft the character with Angelina Jolie the star; The Lara Croft signature dressing style – simple, scanty, and tight – is seen everywhere on street, confusing the screen with everyday life. Her overwhelming presences and ubiquitous traces find themselves located in Sex as pin-up posters, in Performance as the action lead to accomplish impossible spectacles, in Economics as box office number and ancillary gross, in Style as magazine interviewee, in Media as Ms. Everywhere. And such presences subjugate us, the audiences and consumers, to a fluid world devoid of fixed categories, but replete of free-floating images.

According to Baudrillard, our life is inflicted by the law of the confusion of categories. That is to say, everything is characterized by a multiple states of being all at once, while each state per se is subject to the confused categorization. So in

Baudrillard's terms, everything is simultaneously political, sexual, and aesthetic, while there are not fixed boundaries within which the political, the sexual, or the aesthetic could be confined. Especially since the May 1968 protests in France, the spirit of revolution and liberation seems to become a political epidemic that infects every sphere of life (*Transparency* 10). So the cultural representations begin to carry political meanings, as exemplified by feminists bending on criticizing how certain media images of women are demeaning or empowering to women politically. However, if that were the end of story, it would be much easier to have a definite happy ending. The thing is that, on one hand, as the political is infecting everything else, everything else is infecting the political as well – that is to say, the political is not purely what the term look like, but a bit of this and a bit of that, without a clear-cut definition and demarcation. And on the other hand, the cinematic representation of a certain figure, for instance, is also not only pertinent to the aesthetic and carries a political meaning, but also, especially in contemporary ages, to many other spheres like the cultural, the economic, the sexual, the media (while the media and culture seem to encompass everything in a simulacrum mode, showing people a hyperreal world). As Baudrillard says,

likewise everything has become sexual, anything can be an object of desire: power, knowledge – everything is interpreted in terms of phantasies, in terms of repression, and sexual stereotypy reigns in every last corner. Likewise, too, everything is now aestheticized: politics is aestheticized in the spectacle, sex in advertising and porn, and all kinds of activity in what is conventionally referred to as culture – a sort of all-pervasive media and advertising-led semiologization.

(*Transparency* 25)

In this sense, the image of action heroine could be sexual, political, economic, and aesthetical at the same time. As already elaborated in the first section of this chapter, the image of Lara Croft or Alice or any heroine concerned is the composite commodity that is located in multiple loci thus carrying multiple meanings through intertextuality and fragmentation. Therefore the image could be the products for sale (as DVDs, action figures, video games, and so on) and commercials promoting sale (as spokesman for skincare products or perfumes, and etc.), thus relating to the economic/capitalist sphere; while at the same time, the image could be aesthetical, as the dressing of heroines is affecting people's sense of fashion, or the dark lighting of *Underworld* revives a trend of Gothic; and also, the numerous shots of the heroines in fierce action with perfect maneuver could be political in that it seems to showcase a certain counterstrike to sexism. And most importantly, such image is all over the media – on one hand, it is ready for any kind of remediation or bricolage, which might leads to a more chaotic categorization, and on the other, the media is already using such image to simulate a world that acts as the non-signified “reality.” What makes things even more confusing and chaotic is that the capitalist economics, the aesthetics, or the political could be, at the same time, everything else in a never-ending circular cross-referentiality. “Each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 9). So the political is involved with a little bit of commercial, a little bit of entertainment, sports, or tabloid gossips. Likewise, the aesthetics is mixed with economic, commercial profit, everyday life, the sexual mixed with desire, advertising, spectacle and so on. But when such confusion and mixing is carried to the extent that it applied to everything, it ultimately reaches nullity, just as Baudrillard says,

When everything is political, nothing is political any more, the word itself is meaningless. When everything is sexual, nothing is sexual any more, and sex loses its determinants. When everything is aesthetic, nothing is beautiful or ugly any more, and art itself disappears. This paradoxical state of affairs, which is simultaneously the complete actualization of an idea, the perfect realization of the whole tendency of modernity, and the negation of that idea and that tendency, their annihilation by virtue of their very success, by virtue of their extension beyond their own bounds – this state of affairs is epitomized by a single figure: the transpolitical, the transsexual, the transaesthetic.

(Transparency 9)

In this light, the seemingly potential of the image of action heroine to carry some “political” meaning, then, is cancelled by the image’s entering into so many other spheres of uncertainties. The image is thus transpolitical, transsexual, transeconomic and transaesthetical all at once.

So here comes the furthered point of how the consumption of an idea must no longer base its analysis on Baudrillard’s third stage of sign value, how the sign value in relation to use value is not a binary, but a replacement, and thus how the traditional apparatus theory of film analysis loses its power in these blockbusters and an updated version of the apparatus theory is needed to dissect where and how the idea of feminism is located in such a metastasis. In addition to what has explained before that the severe distraction of endless spectacles instill in the audience the preference to dwelling comfortably on the surface of sensual enjoyment than thinking deep about the images, and that the mass reproduction of the female hero’s image undermines her subject position and identity and thus the spectator identification, the further cause of introducing a different set of apparatus results from the current state of transcendence.

Apparatus theory of the 1970s entails and follows an institutionalized mode of spectatorship. It deals with how mechanics of representations convey ideological meanings. Cinema, as an important kind of Ideological State Apparatus, interpellates individuals into a subject position accepting a certain set of rules, or, the dominant ideologies. For it to start analysis, apparatus theory must be grounded on stable and distinct categories and concepts (though allowing for certain complication and fluctuation along its development). For instance, the debate on the identification process, despite its varied arguments of how such process could be fluid and complex, is still based on the clear distinction between categories like subject and object.

However, in view of the chaotic state that anything could be political, aesthetic, economic and back forth, where confusion, contamination and indeterminacy of categories becomes the general ethos, how can a strongly institutionalized theory based on the stable be used to capture even the slightest grasp of fleeting and fractal ideas with no value at all? Everything, once analyzable, has thus been in endless mutation and commutation now. There is no sexuality, but the transsexual, there is no politics, but the transpolitical, there is no aesthetics, but the transaesthetics, there is no feminism, but ideas of it that could be the metonymy of everything. In this trans-state, what we have might be a vague memory of feminism or more of a fragmented idea of it scraped together from all source of media, as Baudrillard says,

Perhaps we still have a memory of sex, rather as water “remembers” molecules no matter how diluted. But that is the whole point: this is only a molecular memory, the corpuscular memory of an earlier life, and not a memory of forms or singularities (water, after all, can hardly retain the features of a face, or the color of someone’s eyes). So what we are left with is the simple imprint of a

faceless sexuality infinitely watered down in a broth of politics, media and communications, and eventually manifested in the viral explosion of AIDS.

(Transparency 9)

So what we have remembered or understood is a molecular memory of the “water” in which feminism has been dropped. The “water” could be anything that seems to carry the idea of feminism – media, commercials, or communications – but actually only contribute to diluting it because the “water” dissolves the strong concentration of that drop of feminism with endless images, indeterminate categories, and inter-contamination. And the action heroine movies are one of the anything (“water”) with the molecular memory which, in the endless circle of reproduction and merchandising, becomes so diluted that it disappears and turns into a simulation.

“Yet things continue to function long after their ideas have disappeared, and they do so in total indifference to their own content. The paradoxical fact is that they function even better under these circumstances” (*Transparency 6*). Baudrillard says, for instance, the idea of progress has disappeared, yet progress continues, and likewise, the idea of wealth once connoted by production has gone, yet production itself keeps moving even more vigorously. “Indeed, it picks up speed precisely in proportion to its increasing indifference to its original aims” (6), because it seems more free to go into any direction when everything around is simply free-floating signifiers rather than fixed boundaries of definition, and because “all individuals harbor a secret urge to be rid of their ideas, of their own essences, so as to be able to proliferate everywhere, to transport themselves simultaneously to every point of the compass” (*Transparency 6*). In terms of the political sphere, Baudrillard claims, the idea of politics has disappeared but “the game of politics continues in secret indifference to its own stakes” (6). When it comes to the women’s movement, the

ideal of what feminism sought for has disappeared, but the *idea* of feminism (the simulated ideal of feminism) continues, the games, the images of strong women continue to circulate regardless of the content, in indifference to whether the games and images “truly” convey it, or whether certain ways of playing the game is actually demeaning to women. This “sort of inescapable indifference” (*Transparency* 4) is, as incessantly and enthusiastically as the simulation of “the orgy” is going on, the key attitude we must adopt to keep this process of reproduction running with no stop, as well as the indispensable result of the endless reproduction.

Such indifference is in proportion to the proliferation of images showing stylish women “kick ass” stylishly. Such “stylishness”, however, does not have anything to do with the “aura” in Benjamin’s terms; on the contrary, it is spectacular images repeated across different movies and platforms by the mechanization of technological reproduction. The reproduction, as the root cause of the new apparatus, submerges people into stylish images that work to distract and thus to build up the indifference to what is before or behind such stylishness (if there is any). Therefore, the more we see such images, the less we are thrilled at seeing it, the less we are concerned with women’s issues. It is not because we are convinced that we really did it (accomplishing the goal of feminism), nor because we are bored of such images. But since indifference replaces difference and the law of referentiality, we just follow and enjoy the ride of “free floating.” The logic goes like this, look at her, strong, intelligent, and beautiful, how much more perfect she could be? We are doing it (showing images of strong women regardless of whether it is a “reflection” or a “simulation”), what else could you ask? That is, as long as we are doing it, it does not matter if it is in line with the original stakes, it does not matter if it is in line with anything. This is a process resembling the situation where the more people see the

images of war in Afghanistan, the less they care about it; the more people see TV series about revolutionary valor back in the old days against oppression or foreign aggression, the less valorous they get when they really need a revolution. A thing which has lost its idea is like the man who has lost his soul, like a piece of artwork loses its aura through the technological reproduction in Benjamin's terms. But the loss of idea, loss of soul, or loss of aura is exactly what is needed for and what facilitates its proliferation.

As the days of that revolutionary movement are gone, the glorious march of modernity has not led to the transformation of all values as the revolution once aimed at, "but instead to a dispersal and involution of value whose upshot for us is total confusion – the impossibility of apprehending any determining principle, whether of an aesthetic, a sexual or a political kind" (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 10). The updating of the apparatus theory for contemporary action heroine films, or of any other theoretical critique involving a serious dedication to a singular sphere of certainty and determinacy, is therefore inevitably a consequence after what Baudrillard says about the "impossibility of radical critique," as he says "the possibility of any radical critique – whether in the name of desire, of revolution, or of the liberation of forms – no longer exists" (*Transparency* 10) because there is no longer an avant-garde, political, sexual or artistic that embodies a capacity for anticipation. But Baudrillard himself is providing a radical critique – his simulation theories – which exactly deals with what he terms as the "impossibility of radical critique", and this is how the traditional apparatus theory should be renewed by one that enables simulation. It is thus in vain to engage the action heroine films with feminist critiques because both the films and the theories are in a confusion of mixing and transcending categories, ready at any moment or any juncture to jump in total

indifference. For the films, they are generic mixtures of action, adventure, fantasy, science-fiction, horror and thriller, as well as commodity mixtures of DVDs, action figures, posters and T-shirt etc. For feminism, it is the circulating and dispersing ideas that could be and/or could not be sexual, political, aesthetical, cultural, communicational etc.; it could be the metonymy of many things, and many things could be metonymy of it. What is left, then, is not to engage with the idea, but to consume the idea in all forms of commodity and in an act of keeping the simulation and reproduction going. But the confusion here seems to be “is it the product or the idea that we consume?” It is actually neither a question of “either-or,” nor of “first-second.” It is that the idea becomes a sign, a sign melting into the sea of spectacles to form a proper commodity. As Baudrillard says, “In order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign,” (*System of Objects* 22) thus a sign, or a spectacle is not restricted to the materiality as concrete lines, shape and color; it could be the spectacle of a thought, the spectacle of an idea.

What we consume today, therefore, is a “fragmented, filtered world... industrially processed by the media into signs” (Merrin, *Introduction* 40). Our emotions and reactions to the thought and idea are “a luxury of our distance from the event and our consumption of the simulacrum” (Merrin, *Introduction* 59). All that is needed, in order to induce affective responses, is the right lighting, editing, soundtrack and encouraging ending. Just like the May 1968 event, which ended up a “symbolic explosion of student protest by a mortal dose of publicity”, an event, once publicized, shall become “fixed, rooted, and part of an ongoing mediated narrative that moves towards a regulated conclusion” (Merrin, *Introduction* 60). The media, by processing the raw event into a finished product prepared for consumption, impose a single pattern of reception on us. “As soon as an event becomes news – it starts to die – to

become a non-event” (Baudrillard, *Terrorism* 23). This is exactly the same pattern in which media does to feminism – processing the idea of it into a finished product for consumption, be it a movie, a television series, or an MTV album. And as soon as feminism becomes representation, it starts to die, and to become a non-representation, a simulacrum. So in watching these action heroine movies, thinking about the female lead, the narrative pusher, is no more than a flashing spectacle of the thought of a strong woman, of the idea of her taking control – “only the consumption of signs with the individual propelled from the comfort of the sofa into a succession of spectacular images” (Merrin, *Introduction* 39).

This is also a process of what Baudrillard calls the aestheticization of everything. By the liberation of form, line, color, and aesthetic notions – as by its mixing up of all cultures, all styles – our society has given rise to a general aestheticization, beyond the materialist rule of the commodity, of everything by means of advertising, the media, or images.

It is often said that the West’s great undertaking is the commercialization of the whole world, the hitching of the fate of everything to the fate of the commodity. That great undertaking will turn out rather to have been the aestheticization of the whole world - its cosmopolitan spectacularization, its transformation into images, its semiological organization. (*Transparency* 16)

However marginal, or banal, or even obscene may it be, everything is subject to aestheticization and culturalization. “All the industrial machinery in the world has acquired an aesthetic dimension; all the world’s insignificance has been transfigured by the aestheticizing process” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 16). Such dimension even gains its value, for “the system runs less on the surplus-value of the commodity than on the aesthetic surplus-value of the sign” (16). The undergoing with feminism in

current state of affairs is thus the aestheticization of its ideas into signs like Lara Croft, Alice, Selene, Aeon or Elektra, who not only kick and kill on the big screen, but also travel to other wrapping in commercials, in *Vogue*, or in *Saturday Night Live*⁴⁴.

If traditional art forms, for instance, paintings, keep their difference and distance to be a piece of art, to be of aesthetic value – its aura makes its beauty unique, what is tricky with the whole “after the orgy” simulation and reproduction must keep what is presented to us both indifferent and enticing. Being enticing, however, is not by the criteria of aesthetics (because such criteria are disappearing), or in the sense of uniqueness and singularity, but, to the exact opposite, by means of the unavoidable spectacular ubiquity. Therefore, the contemporary age is a moment when art, rather than being colligated into a transcendent ideality, has been liquefied within a general aestheticization of everyday life, yielding to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality.

We see Art proliferating wherever we turn... But the soul of Art – Art as adventure, Art with its power of illusion, its capacity for negating reality, for setting up an “other scene” in opposition to reality, where things obey a higher set of rules, a transcendent figure in which beings, like line and color on a canvas, are apt to lose their meaning, to extend themselves beyond their own *raison d’être*, and, in an urgent process of seduction, to rediscover their ideal form (even though this form may be that of their own destruction) – in this sense, Art is gone. Art has disappeared as a symbolic pact, as something thus clearly distinct from that proliferation of signs *ad infinitum*, that recycling of past and present forms, which we call “culture.” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 14)

⁴⁴ *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) is an American late-night live television sketch comedy and variety show. The show mainly parodies contemporary culture and politics, and are performed by a large and varying cast of repertory and newer cast members (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturday_Night_Live).

Movies, especially contemporary blockbusters, are the leading force among the so-called “culture,” or what is phrased as the “cultural-economic logic” here. Under the same renewed apparatus, people are reproducing the transaesthetics through technological means in multiple commodity circles. When there are no more fundamental rules or criteria of judgment of pleasure, Art must be in circulation too, and at top speed, which leads to the loss of Art. So it is impossible to exchange “works” of art, be it for each other or against a referential value, and as what Baudrillard says, “they no longer have that secret collusiveness which is the strength of a culture. We no longer read such works – we merely decode them according to ever more contradictory criteria” (*Transparency 22*).

The days when films were appreciated from a perspective of aesthetics are, therefore, long gone (for Walter Benjamin, the aesthetic aura is lost even with the emergence of films). In the aesthetic realm of today there is no longer the gold standard of aesthetic judgment or pleasure. Streamlined movies compete on a basis of sped-up spectacularity. And such spectacularity is the whole cultural guidance that leads whatever signs (images, objects, ideas, thoughts) float away from a coherent benchmark; we are now lead to judge movies from the previewed hype, the pure spectacularity and the attached enthusiasm for franchise. The big-name directors was once the object for aesthetical evaluation of movies as in Auteur theory⁴⁵, while now, personal styles are as museum collections as the Louvre paintings and names like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg become the synonyms for blockbusters, big productions, Star Wars and franchises. All we can say about the spectacular

⁴⁵ In film criticism, Auteur theory holds that a director’s film reflects the director’s personal creative vision, as if they were the primary “auteur” (the French word for “author”). In spite of – and sometimes even because of – the production of the film as part of an industrial process, the auteur’s creative voice is distinct enough to shine through all kinds of studio interference and through the collective process. Although this way of analyzing films was subject many criticisms later and rarely used now, it indeed represents a way of looking at film as a piece of art whose aura comes from the director’s creativity, just like the painting and the painter (Thompson and Bordwell).

blockbusters is that at certain point of the movie, the stunts, the special effects are “nicely done,” but never “beautiful”; we can say that the Blu-Ray copy of *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* is much more HR (high resolution) than a regular DVD version, but this can never mean an improved “beauty” of movie, or that the movie becomes unique because the resolution becomes ridiculously high. All those changes are only a further improvement in reproduction technology. The fantastic graphic image is not from the creative brushes of a painter who could not even repeat one single touch even himself/herself, but from an ever more complicated composition of digital pixels that would duplicate with a mechanic click.

In the so-called sphere of art, Baudrillard says, there are Neo-Geometrism, Neo-Expressionism, New Abstraction, New Representationalism, and many others (*Transparency* 15). But nothing in this sphere conflicts with anything else, and “all coexist with a marvelous facility amid general indifference.” This is “because none of these tendencies has any soul of its own that they can all inhabit the same cultural space; because they arouse nothing but profound indifference in us that we can accept them all simultaneously” (*Transparency* 15). The recurring prefix of Neo or New is because Neo-Expressionism, for instance, is no longer Expressionism under its definition, because it is repeating and traversing Expressionism while unable to identify itself. The cultural sphere is inhabited by all such kinds of indifferent tendencies and “-isms” (in the case of action heroine films, there are capitalism, feminism, consumerism and more), each of which has a hard time being defined, so they become “post”feminism or “late” capitalism that might have something to do with time and phase, but more to do with their own confusion. Each of them is then co-inhabited by multiple categories as well. Thus, for feminism, as well as for capitalism and for consumerism, there are movies, TV series, DVDs, advertisings,

news event commentaries, talk shows, magazines, to name only a few. And even for a single movie, there is a co-existence of what is stated above and a generic mingling of action, adventure, fantasy, science-fiction, horror, thriller, and a gorgeous tough woman. The reason why we could accept simultaneously the whole package of myriad types, genres, objects – signs – is, like what Baudrillard says, that it arouses nothing but indifference, and accepting is nothing more than a gesture of consumption, we purchase tickets, we buy albums, we order DVDs, and we go into the cinema spending one and a half hours being tickled, coming out and throwing the tickets away. We cannot commemorate those spectacles, but only marvel at it for the time being, and at best reproduce it in follow-up purchasing.

This is the Art entering the metastasis as everything else. It is first as if art or artistic inspiration had been stuck in such a stasis that everything which had developed “magnificently for centuries had suddenly been paralyzed by its own image and its own riches” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 15). Likewise, Hollywood, the biggest industry in the world, seems to run dry and resort to the past for inspiration. That is the point when cinema takes a postmodern turn and play with pastiche, parody and intertextuality. “Behind the whole convulsive movement of modern art lies a kind of inertia, something that can no longer transcend itself and has therefore turned in upon itself, merely repeating itself at a faster and faster rate” (15). Then the situation goes like this, “on the one hand, a stasis of the living form of art, and at the same time a proliferative tendency, wild hyperbole, and endless variations on all earlier forms. All this is logical enough: where there is stasis, there is metastasis” (15).

Such a situation describes how feminism and postfeminism meets, not in terms of art form, but in terms of transferring of state of being. As feminism comes to a stasis (be it over, perished, or successful), postfeminism turns up to act as a metastasis

to circulate the idea, and this is done also with the “wild hyperbole, and endless variations.” With “endless variations,” postfeminism keeps pursuing a keen emphasis on femininity and sexuality that could always constitute a spectacle. And through all kinds of proliferative media tools, the postfeminist return to femininity and sexuality becomes what circulates as an “improved” idea of feminism, a life enjoyment females deserve (Projansky; Helford). With “wild hyperbole,” postfeminism makes it a naturally happening process to “boldly” assume feminism as something successful and “got over” and “proudly” put female body on spectacular display. But what is in intense circulation and reproduction has absolutely nothing to do with feminism. No matter how repeated and indifferent the spectacle of the idea of feminism is, postfeminism just manages to pull it off as an enticing one, because the banality of images is always backed up by the luxurious spectacularity, because there will always be erotic scenes awaiting where the carrier of the feminist idea, Lara Croft, for instance, takes off her clothes to showcase her eroticized and thus spectacularized female body as if such showcase acquired some aesthetical dimension. This is situation resembling what Baudrillard says about how our images are like icons. For the action heroine films, the images of those super strong, intelligent, brave female leads are like icons – they allow us to go on believing in feminism while eluding the question of its existence. So, according to Baudrillard, perhaps we ought to treat all present-day cinema simulating the idea of feminism as a set of rituals, and for ritual use only, considering the idea of feminism solely from an anthropological standpoint, without reference to any political judgment whatsoever (*Transparency* 17).

In this sense, in these action heroine films, we have no access to what is feminism or what is anti-feminism, “inasmuch as we have access to neither the beautiful nor the ugly, and are incapable of judging, we are condemned to

indifference” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 18). Beyond this indifference, however, another kind of fascination emerges, a fascination which replaces aesthetic pleasure. “For, once liberated from their respective constraints, the beautiful and the ugly, in a sense, multiply: they become more beautiful than beautiful, more ugly than ugly” (18) – that is to say, to become spectacles.

Thus painting currently cultivates, if not ugliness exactly – which remains an aesthetic value – then the uglier-than-ugly (the “bad”, the “worse”, kitsch), an ugliness raised to the second power because it is liberated from any relationship with its opposite: Once freed from the ‘true’ Mondrian, we are at liberty to ‘out-Mondrian Mondrian’; freed from the true naifs, we can paint in a way that is ‘more naif than naif’, and so on. And once freed from reality, we can produce the ‘realer than real’ – hyperrealism. It was in fact with hyperrealism and pop art that everything began, that everyday life was raised to the ironic power of photographic realism. Today this escalation has caught up every form of art, every style; and all, without discrimination, have entered the transaesthetic world of simulation. (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 18)

Similarly, there is a fascination going on with the sexual pleasure, and the hyperreality with sexual difference. According to Baudrillard, the sexual body has now been in an artificial state – transsexuality. It is not in the anatomical sense, but in a more general sense of playing with the commutability of sex signs, which is actually a play (rather than sexual difference) on sexual indifference – the lack of differentiation between sexual poles and sexual pleasure (*Transparency* 20). He sees the contrast between sexuality and transsexuality as essential: if sexuality is underpinned by pleasure, by jouissance (the leitmotiv of sexual liberation), then transsexuality is underpinned by artifice, no matter it is the artifice of surgically

changing sex or the one of the transvestism that plays with the sartorial or gestural signs of sex. But whether the operation in question is surgical involving organs or semiurgical involving signs, we are, nevertheless, concerned with parts of replacement, and the body is thus fated to become a prosthesis by such replacement. In the same way, our model of sexuality should have become transsexuality (20).

Baudrillard then claims that we are all transsexuals symbolically, and we are all transvestites of art or of sex. We no longer have aesthetic or sexual convictions, though we all profess to have them (*Transparency* 21). Just as the criteria of beauty is gone, but we are still saying something is beautiful; the reality about feminism disappears, but we are still celebrating a cinematic image is a feminist icon in a simulative spirit. “The myth of sexual liberation is still alive and well under many forms in the real world, but at the level of the imaginary it is the transsexual myth, with its androgynous and hermaphroditic variants, that holds sway” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 22).

For the action heroine films, the same fascination with sexuality as that with transaesthetics is that, once liberated from their respective constraints, the feminine and the masculine also multiply: the female leads become more feminine than feminine, while more masculine than masculine. Is the over-sized masculinity pointing to something that the feminist ideal is eager to encompass, that women are presented to the masses as overwhelmingly strong, intelligent and independent? If this is the case, isn't it contradictory in that the simultaneous extravagant femininity just points to the exact opposite of sexism which feminists are so eager to get rid of? The fact is that the excessive femininity and masculinity embodied in one single body of the action heroine is transported over to a hyperreal level of existence. Thus the movies cultivates, if not masculinity exactly – which remains a sexual value – then

the more-masculine-than-masculine, a masculinity raised to the second power because it is liberated from any relationship with its opposite. When it has nothing do to with its opposite, how could the hyperrealized femininity or masculinity form anything for anyone to encompass or rid of?

“This strategy for exorcizing the body by means of the signs of sex, for conjuring away desire through the overkill of its staging, is a good deal more efficient than good old repression founded on taboo” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 23). But the way this new system really differs from the old is that, in Baudrillard’s opinion, one cannot see at all who stands to gain from it, because everyone suffers from it equally (23). “The rule of transvestitism has become the very basis of our behavior, even in our own search for identity and difference. We no longer have time to search for an identity for ourselves in the archives, in a memory, in a project or a future” (23). Instead, we are supposed to have an instant memory from which we can have immediate access to “a kind of public-relations identity” (23). So if in terms of body function, what we seek today is less about health – an organic equilibrium, but more about “an ephemeral, hygienic and promotional radiance from the body – much more a performance than an ideal state” (23). If in terms of fashion and appearances, what we seek is less beauty or attractiveness than the right LOOK. “Everyone seeks their look. Since it is no longer possible to base any claim on one’s own existence, there is nothing for it but to perform an appearing act without concerning oneself with being—or even with being seen. So it is not: I exist, I am here! but rather: I am visible, I am an image—look! look!” (23).

This is not even an act of narcissist, says Baudrillard, but merely, a sort of self-promoting mechanism without depth, by which everyone becomes the manager of their own appearance (24), not only for women who are sexualized but also for men

who want to be metrosexual. That is to say, the excessive femininity and masculinity residing in the action heroine figure is not something founded on an interplay of differences, differences from each other, differences from the past, or from the concurrent others. It is no more than a look of the transsexual that plays at difference without believing in it – the total indifference. The extravagant signs of a voluptuous and tough body only work to epitomize her identity into a look, a spectacle, “a transient performance with no sequel, a disabused mannerism in a world without manners” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 24). The promotional ignition of excessive sexuality found in action heroines is therefore directly connected to the impossibility of any sexual pleasure. Just as “in the absence of value judgments, value goes up in flames. And it goes up in a sort of ecstasy” (19), the action heroines ignite their ecstasy by exploding endless spectacles.

Then how about the sexual liberation? As Baudrillard writes, the triumph of the transsexual over the sexual puts in an awkward situation the sexual liberation of the earlier generation. By its original discourse, this liberation should bring forth the body’s full erotic force, which is especially favorable to the principles of femininity and of sexual pleasure. But it now appears to “have been no more than an intermediate phase on the way to the confusion of categories” that has been discussed all along. “The sexual revolution may thus turn out to have been just a stage in the genesis of transsexuality” (*Transparency* 24). Baudrillard then concludes, the fundamental issue here is the problematic fate of all revolutions (24).

So in the case of the cybernetic revolution, in view of the equivalence of brain and computer, as Baudrillard asks, humanity is faced with the crucial question “Am I a man or a machine?” The vigorously ongoing genetic revolution raises the question “Am I a man or just a potential clone?” Likewise, the sexual revolution, by liberating

all the potentialities of desire, raises another fundamental question, “Am I a man or a woman?” And as for the political and social revolution, “it will turn out to have led people by an implacable logic – having offered him his own freedom, his own free will – to ask himself where his own will lies, what he wants in his heart of hearts, and what he is entitled to expect from himself” (*Transparency* 24). However, there are no answers to these questions, which characterizes the paradox of every revolution concerning the outcome – revolution opens the door to indeterminacy, anxiety and confusion but there is not another door to get a closure. “Once the orgy was over,” according to Baudrillard, “liberation was seen to have left everyone looking for their generic and sexual identity – and with fewer and fewer answers available, in view of the traffic in signs and the multiplicity of pleasures on offer” (24). That is how we became transsexuals, just as how Lara Croft always remains an abstract and altering image that is more masculine than masculine and more feminine than feminine. And it is also a same process as we became transpoliticals, or, politically indifferent and undifferentiated beings – “for by this time we had embraced, digested and rejected the most contradictory ideologies, and were left wearing only their masks: we had become, in our own heads – and perhaps unbeknownst to ourselves – transvestites of the political realm” (Baudrillard, *Transparency* 25).

So after the liberation, what is it exactly that feminists want as a perfect visual representation that fits its ideal, if here I can still use the term “feminists” or “feminism” to indicate a distinct group of people holding to a set of agenda and objective? Perhaps it is better to have no such perfect representation first to avoid an essentialist feminism that may exclude the considerations for different class, race, age, sexuality, nationality and so on. The absence of a perfect image also enables female representation to be open to criticism, and thus to the potential of change, which

seems to be the only way to prevent feminism from falling into stagnancy. But the problem is, in view of what has been said in this section, that feminism is not stuck by being stagnant, but by chaos, confusion, and the ever uncertain state of traversing back and forth between political, aesthetical, cultural and sexual. If feminism stayed in political sphere for its struggle, feminists would know who and what they are up against. To put it in simplified instance, if erotic objectification is an issue feminists want to get rid of through political means, no matter how difficult and impossible to achieve it, they at least know what they are striking is a hard rock – it hurts but it feels real, and the rock may be still there, but there is definitely changes to the rock because of the strikes, as small as might they be. But the current situation comes to that the issue is no longer solely a political issue, or solved through political means, but might be cultural, economic, aesthetic, and so on, and furthermore, there is no sphere distinctively called “political sphere” any more, but transpolitical, which can be at once cultural, economic, aesthetical...the confusion just goes on and there is no stability or certainty for any dedicated engagement. And now feminists raise up the issues of erotic objectification, they do not know where to engage – it is like punching water or air instead of rock, with too much fluidity to really engage with; they might not get seriously hurt, but the fluid water or air just resume the shape as how they were, and nothing might change at all. And what is worse, the water or air might be taken by them as essential to their living while themselves immersed in the water/air that erotic objectification is everywhere. As to the water/air, it is exactly what has been talked about throughout the whole study, the ubiquitous media, technology and signs, which make the trans-state an unavoidable chaotic situation feminism cannot help falling into. Therefore, it is actually too late to speak of “the perfect representation”, because the categories and the criteria to define perfect have gone, as

feminism is scattered all around in media images, in spectacular ideas, in postfeminism, in commercial chains, and elsewhere.

Chapter 5 The “Logical” Predicament: Feminism and Postmodernism

As action heroine cinema remains a heated subject for debate usually relegated to film studies, the issues involved have been inevitably expanded to a larger sphere by the changing structures of the social, the economic, and the cultural in contemporary age. The interrogation of this study, hence, goes beyond the dedicated textual analysis which feminist film study usually employ, to examine the contextual factors by looking towards the overall cultural-economic logic formed in the late capitalist society. Such a logic is characterized by the general mood of the postmodern consumer culture, where the image mechanism of the film industry is increasingly subjected to the configuration of technological reproduction. In the same vein, while action heroine cinema is figured out as a notable form of female representation in mainstream Hollywood, the object to examine cannot be restricted to the female character only. This is because what make these films stand out are not the heroines alone, but a combination of multiple processes and practices, which include franchising, merchandising, stars, special effects and most importantly, technologies – the whole media culture of today. While the feminist and postfeminist readings that solely concentrate on the textual depiction of women failed to see the whole picture, the examination of the cultural-economic logic is therefore key in pushing the entangled debates between feminists and postfeminists to another level.

Under the navigation of Jean Baudrillard's theories about radical semiurgy, simulation, implosion, hyperreality and consumerism, which provide trenchant critiques of contemporary media culture, this thesis has analyzed the watching of contemporary action heroine cinema in terms of multiple consumptive processes, in which these films are consumed in four ways, namely, consumed as the composite commodity, as the spectacles of technology, as the spectacles of the heroines' bodies, and as the idea of feminism. Through the serialization and merchandizing of the action heroine films into media franchises composed of commodities in multiple forms and providing multiple pleasures, these movies are, firstly, consumed as composite commodities. This leads to a viewing process that is highly fragmented and schizophrenic, travelling back and forth across endless play of free-floating signifiers and intertextuality. In the same way, the image of the action heroine is fragmented and reproduced across different media platforms, taking a plural, instable and abstract form. Secondly, the intensive uses of sophisticated filmmaking technologies to produce spectacular images, and the numerous scenes, shots and spectacles that directly represent the high technology make the movies consumed as highly seductive spectacles of technology. Swayed by their technological imaginary and a technoutopian mindset, people are not only consuming the technologies as a means to achieve certain cinematic effects, but are also consuming the technologies as an end to satisfy their fascination. Thirdly, as the major assets of these movies, the action heroines seem to act as both the subject to push forward narrative and the sexual object to be looked at. However, the potential of the image to become an empowering

representation for women is impaired by the cultural obsession with images, signs, spectacles, and the tendency to objectify everything. If the traditional apparatus subjugates individuals into dominant ideologies by interpellating them into a certain subject position, such a theory partly loses its power in face of a cultural-economic logic that crumbles its very foundation for analysis – the distinction between subject and object, between denotation and connotation implodes. Thus a new image apparatus comes into its place where signifiers are commuting in circular manner with no signified, the sign value becomes the overarching feature of contemporary consumer culture, and individuals are subjugated into endless play of images and simulacra. The action heroines lose their subjectivity and become pure objects for look, not only because they are sexualized, but also because the overwhelming objectifying look applies to everything. And as the images of action heroines travel across multiple platforms and take plural and unstable forms as the composite commodities, they are further fragmented and objectified. Likewise, the spectators/consumers, in the process of the mass consumption of images, fall into the “operational genesis” of consumption, and become objectified and commodified themselves. As the subject positions of the heroines and of the viewers both disappear, the identification process is thus replaced by a pure objectifying look. Last but not least, the viewing process is also a consumption of the idea of feminism. In the age of what Baudrillard terms as “after the orgy”, people are now simulating the ideals and goals of the glorious liberations in a gesture to maintain the moment of orgy, to hold the spirit of being progressive. And the action heroine movies are the perfect

machines to produce and reproduce the simulacra of feminist myth. But what exactly is feminism and how exactly is feminism now operating is put behind, and what is left is a circular void of uncertainty in which the postfeminism steps on to simulate a hyperreality that all the feminist agenda is achieved and should be celebrated with such images of both strong and sexual women all over the media. This is the situation of metastasis where signs free of fixed reference and categorization enter an endless self-reproduction that are contaminating and contaminated by other spheres and categories which are also full of confusion and uncertainty. It, then, results in a ubiquitous trans-state of beings – transpolitical, transsexual, transeconomic, transaesthetics and so on – which embraces a world of confused and undetermined categories, spheres, signs, and images, and thus further invalidates the power of traditional apparatus theory in analyzing contemporary action heroine films. The feminist ideal, as it inevitably enters this same trans-state and takes the form of Hollywood movies, media franchise, and endless composite commodities and images, is then dissipated, diluted, and finally gone in simulation. What happens to the spectator thinking process, which may not be an easy thing in front of the infinite and irresistible distractions of spectacles, is then assimilated to a similar consumptive pattern – the idea of feminism, as a sign, as a spectacular thought, is consumed just as any other spectacles.

As to the debate between the feminist and postfeminist reading of these movies, it is now clear to see that the root and the implication of their oxymoronic interpretations lies in this cultural-economic logic of contemporary society. For

postfeminists, they easily assume that the active agency of the heroines constructed by narrative provides ample support for their contention that this represents the achievement of feminist ideals, but they fail to see that the narrative, though not wiped out completely, becomes more of an expedient and provisional locus where endless extravagant spectacles could be displayed than an essential entity to wield ideological meanings. More importantly, this active agency is subject to the overall objectifying culture and thus consumed just like and together with all the other flamboyant spectacles. The so-called representation is nothing but a simulation of powerful women. At the same time, the embracing of femininity and heterosexual desire to enjoy life, which, postfeminists claim, is what women now deserve, is actually strengthening and facilitating the objectifying consumer culture that shall continue treating women as sexual objects. As long as women are participating in this culture, the look as an “empowered postfeminist” will be appropriated as a rightful advertisement to better worsen the situation, no matter what empowerment the postfeminists claim to have felt. For feminist readings, they fail to realize that it is not only women that are objectified, also not only men, but everything – the actions, the technologies, the explosions are equally pleasurable spectacles to look at. So while women are indeed still under erotic objectification, which indicates the fight against patriarchy is to be continued, the bigger issue is to recognize what predicament the cultural-economic logic has put feminists in during their fight. For women to get a voice in the mainstream media representation, it is inevitably to resort to technological reproduction, to composite commodification, and thus become a sign,

spectacularized by means of sexualization. But as immersed in the mainstream, that voice, if there is still any, only ends up consumed, dispersed, diluted, and sucked into the black hole of postmodern chaotic, where no dedicated engagement is ever possible. And what consolidates this predicament is that it is maintained by the media simulacrum – a hyperreal world depicting a relieving and almost utopian situation where women enjoy equality and life, a gorgeous look posed by postfeminism in cinema, TV shows, magazines, and advertisements.

This then leads to the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. This thesis suggests, by way of analyzing action heroine movies as exemplary of the cultural-economic logic, that there does exist common ground for feminism and postmodernism – both insist on the critique of the grand narrative and adhere to difference and incommensurability (Owens; Fraser and Nicholson). As an important anti-essentialist voice, Judith Butler contends that the very category of gender is simply a performance, the effect of repeated imitation of “a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity” (qtd. in Thornham, “Postmodernism and Feminism” 28). But the question remains how powerful this abandonment and subversion is in pushing the feminist cause forward. As Tania Modleski points out, Butler’s strategy is an “extremely individualistic solution to the problem of women’s oppression” (13). And more importantly, despite the similarity between feminism and postmodernism, feminism, as emphasized by Thornham, is itself a “narrative of emancipation,” and “its political claims are made on behalf of a social group, women, who are seen to have an underlying community of interest, and of an embodied female subject whose

identity and experiences are necessarily different from those of men.” And “if we remove gender (or sexual difference) as a central organizing principle – how can a feminist political practice be any longer possible?” (“Postmodernism and Feminism” 27)

The conclusion here is not to choose a stand between essentialism and anti-essentialism, but to caution what predicament there might be. While engaged with postmodernism thinking it as sort of therapeutic corrective to feminism’s universalizing tendency, feminists should be aware that the other aspects of postmodernism which form the contemporary cultural-economic logic – the technological reproduction, fragmentation, depthlessness of images, simulacrum, hyperreality, and the uncertainties of trans-state – might (or already have) become the next totalizing master narrative. This new logic is not easy to deconstruct, because it always exists on the very surface level and takes a fluid shape, unavailable for serious engagement. That is to say, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us, the postmodern condition, unlike feminism, does not offer a politics: it complicates strategies of resistance and usurps social and political change (in Thornham, “Postmodernism and Feminism” 41). That is the dilemma faced by feminism in its engagement with postmodernism, a predicament caused by the cultural-economic logic – the “logical” predicament, and the same conundrum that persecutes female representation and traps the images of action heroines in the destiny of reproducible simulacra for consumption.

Bibliography

- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999.
- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. 2nd ed. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1977.
- Arroyo, Jose. *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.
- Banham, Reyner. *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980.
- Barker, Martin, and Brooks, Kate. *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*. London: University of Luton Press, 1998.
- Barthes, Roland. "Theory of the Text." *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. Trans. Ian Mcleod. New York: Routledge and Kegan Pal, 1981. 31-47.
- Basinger, Jeanine. *A Women's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Trans. Chris Turner. London; New York: Verso, 1988.
- . *Art and Artefact*. Ed. Nicolas Zurbrug. London: SAGE Publications, 1997.

- . *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*. Ed. Mike Gane. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Cool Memories II: 1987-90*. Trans. Chris Turner. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996.
- . *Cool Memories V: 2000-2004*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Polity Press, 2006.
- . *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Trans. Charles Levin. St. Louis, MO.: Telos Press, 1981.
- . *Impossible Exchange*. Trans. Chris Turner. London and New York: Verso, 2001.
- . *Seduction*. Trans. Brian Singer. London: Macmillan, 1990.
- . "Simulacra and Simulations." *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. 166-184.
- . *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Trans. Paul Patton. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995.
- . *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*. Trans. Chris Turner. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005.
- . *The Perfect Crime*. Trans. Chris Turner. London; New York: Verso, 1996.
- . *The Spirit of Terrorism: And Other Essays*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 2003.
- . *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict. London: Verso, 1996.

---. *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. Trans. James Benedict.

London: Verso, 1993.

Baudry, Jean-Louis. "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema." Trans. Jean Andres, and Bertrand Augst.

Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film theory Reader. Ed. Phil Rosen. New

York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 299-318.

Bauman, Zygmunt. "The Sweet Scent of Decomposition." *Forget Baudrillard?* Ed.

Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Beasley, Chris. *What is Feminism?: An Introduction to Feminist Theory*. London;

Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 1999.

Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*. London: J. Cape, 1953.

Beller, Jonathan. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England,

2006.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Technology and Culture: The Film Reader. Ed. Andrew Utterson. London New

York: Routledge, 2005. 105-126.

---. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." *Reflections*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott.

New York: Schocken Books, 1986. 158-172.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *The Portable Postmodernist*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003.

Best, Steven. "The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Baudrillard, Debord, and Postmodern Theory." *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Douglas Keller. Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994. 41-67.

Booker, M. Keith. *Postmodern Hollywood: What's New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel so Strange*. London: Praeger Publishers, 2007.

Bordwell, David, and Carroll, Noel eds. *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.

Bordwell, D., Staiger, J. and Thompson, K. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Production to 1960*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

Botkin, James, et al. *Global Stakes: The Future of High Technology in America*. New York: Oenguin Books, 1984. 16-37.

Brantlinger, Patrick. "Reflections on Modernity and Postmodernity in McLuhan and Baudrillard." *Transforming McLuhan: Cultural, Critical, and Postmodern Perspectives*. Ed. Paul Grosswiler. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. 180-200.

Bruno, Giuliana. "Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner" *October* 41 (1987): 61-74.

Buscombe, Edward. "Sound and Color." *Movies and Methods*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Vol. 2. London: University of California Press, 1985. 83-91.

- Cancelon, Elaine D., and Spacagna, Antoine ed. *Intertextuality in Literature and Film*.
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994.
- Citron, Michelle et al. "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics." *New German Critique* 13 (1978): 82-107.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*.
Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Cohen, Alain J.-J. "Virtual Hollywood and the Genealogy of its Hyper-Spectator."
Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences. Ed.
Melvyn Stokes, and Richards Maltby. London: BFI Pub, 2001. 157-168.
- Comolli, Jean-Louis. "Machines of the Visible." *The Cinematic Apparatus*. Ed.
Teresa de Lauretis, and Stephen Heath. London: Macmillan, 1985. 121-142.
- Corbusier, Le. *Towards a New Architecture*. Trans. Frederick Etchells. New York:
Dover Publications, 1986. 89-101.
- Coulter, Gerry. "Jean Baudrillard and Cinema: The Problems of Technology, Realism
and History." *Film-Philosophy* 14.2 (2010): 6-20.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*.
London: Routledge, 1993.
- Dayan, Daniel. "The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema." *Film Quarterly*. 28.1 (1974):
22-31.

- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence." *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 70-82.
- . "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 418-436.
- . "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 86-99.
- Easthope, Antony. "Postmodernism and Critical and Cultural Theory." *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Stuart Sim. London; New York: Routledge, 2005. 15-27.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991.
- Featherstone, Mike. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007.
- Federman, Mark. "What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message?" 2004. Retrieved September, 2012. <http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article_mediumisthemessage.htm>.
- Ferriss, Suzanne, and Young, Mallory. *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Fiske, John. *Television Culture: Popular Pleasures and Politics*. London: Methuen, 1987.

Flanagan, Mary. "Mobile Identities, Digital Stars, and Post-Cinematic Selves." *Wide Angle* 21 (1999) : 76-93.

Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Fraser, Nancy, and Nicholson, Linda J. "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Nicholson, Linda J. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1983.

Frow, John. "Intertextuality and Ontology." *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Ed. Worton Michael, and Judith Still. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990. 45-55.

Gamble, Sarah ed. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Genz, Stephanie. "Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism." *Feminist Theory* 7.3 (2006): 333-353.

Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007):147-166.

- Gledhill, Christine. "Melodrama." *The Cinema Book*. Ed. Pam Cook. London: BFI Publishing, 2007. 316-324.
- Goldman, Robert et al. "Commodity Feminism." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8.3 (1991): 333-351.
- Gomery, Douglas. "Writing the History of the American Film Industry: Warner Bros and Sound." *Screen* 17 (1976): 40-53.
- Hall, Stuart. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham: Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973.
- Hansen, Miriam. "Miriam Hansen." *Camera Obscura* 20.1 (1989): 169-174.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Question concerning Technology." *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977. 3-35.
- Helford, Elyce Rae ed. *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso, 1991.

Jancovich, Mark. "Screen Theory." *Approaches to Popular Film*. Ed. Joanne Hollows, and Mark Jancovich. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. 123-150.

Jöckel, Sven, and Döbler, Thomas. "The Event Movie: Marketing Filmed Entertainment for Transnational Media Corporations." *The International Journal of Media Management* 8.2 (2006): 84-91.

Johnston, Claire. "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema." *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 31-40

Johnston, Keith M. *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers, 2011.

Jones, Amelia. "Feminism, Incorporated: Reading 'Postfeminism' in an Anti-Feminist Age." *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Ed. Amelia Jones. London: Routledge, 2003. 314-328.

Kaminer, Wendy. "Feminism's Third Wave: What do Young Women Want?" *The New York Times Book Review* 4 June 1995: 22-3.

Kellner, Douglas ed. *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*. Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994.

---. "Baudrillard: A New McLuhan?" *Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project*. Retrieved in January, 2013. <<http://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell26.htm>>.

---. "Jean Baudrillard." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Retrieved in January, 2013. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/ baudrillard/>>.

---. *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1989.

King, Geoff. *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000.

---. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2002.

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Kuhn, Annette, and Radstone, Susannah, eds. *Women in Film: An International Guide*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991.

Lee, Janet. "Care to Join Me in an Upwardly Mobile Tango? Postmodernism and the 'New Woman'." *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. Ed. Lorraine Gamman, and Margaret Marshment. London: The Women's Press, 1988. 166-172.

Liotard, Jean Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington, and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Mao, Chengting. "Just Look at it: The Cultural Logic of Contemporary Action Heroine Cinema." *Gnovis, Georgetown University's peer-reviewed Journal of Communication, Culture & Technology*, 11.1 (2010). <<http://gnovisjournal.org/journal/just-look-it>>.

Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Marx, Carl. *Capital Vol I: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990.

Mayne, Judith. *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London: Routledge, 1993.

McClellan, Shilo T. *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

McLuhan, Marshall. "The Medium is the Message." *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge, 2001. 7-23.

McLuhan, Marshall, Fiore, Quentin, and Simon, John. *The Media is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. Columbia: Stereo, 1967.

Meinhof, Ulrike H., and Smith, Jonathen. *Intertextuality and the Media: From Genre to Everyday Life*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Mendoza, Daryl Y. "Commodity, Sign, and Spectacle: Retracting Baudrillard's Hyperreality." *Kritike* 4.2 (2010): 45-59.

- Merrin, William. *Baudrillard and the Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Polity, 2006.
- . "Uncritical Criticism? Norris, Baudrillard and the Gulf War." *Economy and Society* 23.4 (1994): 433-458.
- Metz, Christian 1975. "The Imaginary Signifier." Trans. Ben Brewster. *Screen* 16.2 (1975): 14-76.
- Miller, Toby. "Apparatus Theory: Introduction." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Toby Miller, and Robert Stam. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2000. 403-407.
- Modleski, Tania. *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.
- Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- O'Day, Marc. "Beauty in Motion, Gender, Spectacle and Action Babe Cinema." *Action and Adventure Cinema*. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 201-218.
- O'Rourke, Ian. "The Lara Croft Phenomena." *Fandomlife.net: The Ezine of Sifi Media and Fandom Culture*, 16 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.fandomlife.net/article.cfm?ID=5> >

Owens, Craig. "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism." *Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. London: Pluto Press, 1985. 57-82.

Pfeil, Fred. "From Pillar to Postmodern: Race, Class, and Gender in the Mal Rampage Film." *The New American Cinema*. Ed. Jon Lewis. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998. 146-186.

Pierson, Michele. *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Polsky, Allyson D. "Skins, Patches, and Plug-ins: Becoming Woman in the New Gaming Culture." *Genders* 34 (2001): 1-62. Retrieved in Dec. 2012. <
http://www.genders.org/g34/g34_polsky.html#fig1 >

Poole, Steven. *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*. New York: Arcade, 2000.

Poster, Mark ed and intro. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. California: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York; London: New York University Press, 2001.

Read, Jacinda. *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Reader, Keith A. "Literature/Cinema/Television: Intertextuality in Jean Renoir's *Le Testament du docteur Cordelier*." *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Ed.
296

- Michael Worton and Judith Still. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990. 176-189.
- Rehak, Bob. "Mapping the Bit Girl: Lara Croft and New Media Fandom." *The Cybercultures Reader*. Ed. David Bell, and Barbara Kennedy. New York: Routledge, 2007. 159-173.
- Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973.
- Rutsky, R. L. *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*. London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Shaviro, Steven. *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Showden, Carisa R. "What's Political about the New Feminisms?" *Frontiers* 30.2 (2009): 166-198.
- Sim, Stuart ed. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London; New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Simpson, Mark. "Meet the Metrosexual." *Salon.com* Jul. 2002. Retrieved in Nov. 2012. < <http://www.salon.com/2002/07/22/metrosexual/>>
- . "Metrodaddy Speaks!" 2004. Retrieved in Nov. 2012. < <http://marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/metrodaddyspeaks.html> >

- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage, 1975.
- Slattery, Martin. *Key Ideas in Sociology*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2003.
- Smelik, Anneke. "Lara Croft, Kill Bill, and the Battle for Theory in Feminist Film Studies." *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Smith, Sharon. "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research." *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. New York: New York University Press, 1999. 14-15.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Cities on the Edge of Time: The urban Science Fiction Film." *East-West Film Journal* 3.1 (1988): 4-19.
- Stacey, Jackie. *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Storey, John. "Postmodernism and Popular Culture." *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Stuart Sim. New York: Routledge, 2001. 147-157.
- Tasker, Yvonne. *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Thornham, Sue. "Second Wave Feminism." *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Ed. Sarah Gamble. London: Routledge, 2001. 25-35.

Thompson, Kristin, and Bordwell, David. *Film History: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

---. "Feminism and Film." *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Ed. Sarah Gamble. London: Routledge, 2001. 75-83.

---. "Postmodernism and Feminism." *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Stuart Sim. London; New York: Routledge, 2005. 41-52.

Turner, Graeme. *Film as Social Practice*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Virilio, Paul. *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*. New York: Semiotext, 1977.

----. *The Original Accident*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

---. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso, 1989.

Waites, Kate. "Babes in Boots: Hollywood's Oxymoronic Warrior Woman." *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*. Ed. Suzanne Ferriss, and Mallory Young. New York: Routledge, 2008. 204-220.

Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 2-13.

Filmography

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. Dir. Simon West. Perf. Angelina Jolie. Paramount Pictures, Mutual Film Company, BBC, 2001. DVD.

Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life. Dir. Jan de Bont. Perf. Angelina Jolie. Paramount Pictures, Mutual Film Company, BBC, 2003. DVD.

Resident Evil. Dir. Paul W. S. Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich. Constantin Film Production, Davis Films, Impact Pictures, 2002. DVD.

Resident Evil: Apocalypse. Dir. Alexander Witt. Perf. Milla Jovovich. Constantin Film Production, Impact Pictures, 2004. DVD.

Resident Evil: Extinction. Dir. Russell Mulcahy. Perf. Milla Jovovich. Resident Evil Productions, Constantin Film Production, Davis-Films, 2007. DVD.

Resident Evil: Afterlife. Dir. Paul W. S. Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich. Constantin Film Production, Davis Films, Impact Pictures, 2010. DVD.

Resident Evil: Retribution. Dir. Paul W. S. Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich. Constantin Film International, Davis Films/Impact Pictures, Capcom Company, 2012. DVD.

Underworld. Dir. Len Wiseman. Perf. Kate Beckinsale. Lakeshore Entertainment, Laurinfilm, Subterranean Productions LLC, 2003. DVD.

Underworld: Evolution. Dir. Len Wiseman. Perf. Kate Beckinsale. Sreen Gems, Lakeshore Entertainment, 2006. DVD.

Underworld Awakening. Dir. Måns Mårind, and Björn Stein. Perf. Kate Beckinsale. Sreen Gems, Lakeshore Entertainment, Saturn Films, 2012. DVD.

Aeon Flux. Dir. Karyn Kusama. Perf. Charlize Theron. Paramount Pictures, Lakeshore Entertainment, Valhalla Motion Pictures, 2005. DVD.

Elektra. Dir. Rob Bowman. Perf. Jennifer Garner. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Regency Enterprises, Marvel Enterprises, 2005. DVD.

Appendices

Table 1: Genres and Stars of the 21st–century Action Heroine Films

(from www.imdb.com)

Title	Genres Involved	Stars in Casting
<i>Lara Croft: Tomb Raider</i> (2001)	action, adventure, fantasy	Angelina Jolie
<i>Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life</i> (2003)	action, adventure, fantasy, thriller	Angelina Jolie
<i>Underworld</i> (2003)	action, fantasy, sci-fi, thriller	Kate Beckinsale
<i>Underworld: Evolution</i> (2006)	action, fantasy, sci-fi, thriller	Kate Beckinsale
<i>Underworld: Awakening</i> (2012)	action, fantasy, sci-fi, thriller	Kate Beckinsale
<i>Resident Evil</i> (2002)	action, horror, sci-fi, thriller	Milla Jovovich Michelle Rodriguez
<i>Resident Evil: Apocalypse</i> (2004)	action, horror, sci-fi	Milla Jovovich
<i>Resident Evil: Extinction</i> (2007)	action, horror, Sci-fi, thriller	Milla Jovovich
<i>Resident Evil: Afterlife</i> (2010)	action, horror, Sci-fi, thriller	Milla Jovovich
<i>Resident Evil: Retribution</i> (2012)	action, horror, Sci-fi, thriller	Milla Jovovich
<i>Aeon Flux</i> (2005)	action, adventure, sci-fi, thriller	Charlize Theron
<i>Elektra</i> (2005)	action, adventure, fantasy	Jennifer Garner

Table 2a: Highest-Grossing Films in Recent Years

(From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films, retrieved in June, 2012)

Year	Movie	Worldwide Gross	Budget
2000	<i>Mission Impossible II</i>	\$546,388,105	\$125,000,000
2001	<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	\$974,755,371	\$125,000,000
2002	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i>	\$926,047,111	\$94,000,000
2003	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i>	\$1,119,929,521	\$94,000,000
2004	<i>Shrek 2</i>	\$919,838,758	\$125,000,000
2005	<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i>	\$896,911,078	\$150,000,000
2006	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest</i>	\$1,066,179,725	\$225,000,000
2007	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End</i>	\$963,420,425	\$300,000,000
2008	<i>The Dark Knight</i>	\$1,001,921,825	\$185,000,000
2009	<i>Avatar</i>	\$2,782,275,172	\$237,000,000
2010	<i>Toy Story 3</i>	\$1,063,171,911	\$200,000,000
2011	<i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows Part II</i>	\$1,328,111,219	\$250,000,000
2012	<i>The Avengers</i>	\$1,419,837,000	\$220,000,000

Table 2b: List of Worldwide Highest-Grossing Films in History

(From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films and <http://www.imdb.com/>, retrieved in June, 2012)

Rank	Title	Genre	Worldwide gross	Year
1	<i>Avatar</i>	Action, adventure, fantasy	\$2,782,275,172	2009
2	<i>Titanic</i>	Adventure, drama, history	\$2,185,372,302	1997
3	<i>The Avengers</i>	Action, adventure, sci-fi	\$1,419,837,000	2012
4	<i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2</i>	Adventure, drama, fantasy	\$1,328,111,219	2011
5	<i>Transformers: Dark of the Moon</i>	Action, adventure, sci-fi	\$1,123,746,996	2011
6	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i>	Action, adventure, drama	\$1,119,929,521	2003
7	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest</i>	Action, adventure, fantasy	\$1,066,179,725	2006
8	<i>Toy Story 3</i>	Animation, adventure, comedy	\$1,063,171,911	2010
9	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides</i>	Action, adventure, fantasy	\$1,043,871,802	2011
10	<i>Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace</i>	Action, adventure, fantasy	\$1,027,044,677	1999
11	<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	Adventure, family, fantasy	\$1,024,299,904	2010
12	<i>The Dark Knight</i>	Action, crime, drama	\$1,001,921,825	2008
13	<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	Adventure, family, fantasy	\$974,755,371	2001
14	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End</i>	Action, adventure, fantasy	\$963,420,425	2007
15	<i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 1</i>	Adventure, drama, fantasy	\$956,399,711	2010
16	<i>The Lion King</i>	Animation, adventure, comedy	\$951,583,777	1994
17	<i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i>	Adventure, family, fantasy	\$939,885,929	2007
18	<i>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</i>	Adventure, family, fantasy	\$934,416,487	2009
19	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i>	Action, adventure, fantasy	\$926,047,111	2002
20	<i>Shrek 2</i>	Animation, adventure, comedy	\$919,838,758	2004
21	<i>Jurassic Park</i>	Adventure, family sci-fi	\$914,691,118	1993

22	<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i>	Adventure, family, fantasy	\$896,911,078	2005
23	<i>Spider-Man 3</i>	Action, fantasy	\$890,871,626	2007
24	<i>Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs</i>	Animation, action, adventure	\$886,686,817	2009
25	<i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets</i>	Adventure, family, fantasy	\$878,979,634	2002

List 1 Firearms used in the film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (from http://www.imfdb.org/wiki/Lara_Croft:_Tomb_Raider)

1 Handguns

1.1 Heckler & Koch USP Match

1.2 Walther P99

1.3 Smith & Wesson 5946

1.4 Smith & Wesson Model 10

1.5 Beretta 92FS

2 Submachine Guns

2.1 Steyr TMP

2.2 Heckler & Koch MP5A2

2.3 Heckler & Koch MP5A3

3 Rifles

3.1 AKS-74U

3.2 Heckler & Koch G36K

4 Shotguns

4.1 Remington 870 Shotgun (Nickel-plated)

5 Machine Guns

5.1 Browning M2HB

6 Other

6.1 Lara's Manor Armory

6.2 Improvised Gun - SnapOn™ Impact Hammer (pistol)

List 2 Firearms used in the film *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*

(from http://www.imfdb.org/wiki/Lara_Croft_Tomb_Raider:_The_Cradle_of_Life)

1 Handguns

- 1.1 Heckler & Koch USP Match
- 1.2 Heckler & Koch P11
- 1.3 Heckler & Koch USP Compact
- 1.4 Browning BDA
- 1.5 Glock 17
- 1.6 Jericho 941 F
- 1.7 NAA Mini Revolver
- 1.8 SIG-Sauer P226
- 1.9 Taurus PT99

2 Rifles

- 2.1 AKS-47
- 2.2 AKS-74U
- 2.3 Blaser R93 Sniper Rifle
- 2.4 Galil MAR
- 2.5 Heckler & Koch G36C
- 2.6 Heckler & Koch G36K
- 2.7 Heckler & Koch HK33
- 2.8 Lee-Enfield No III* Mark I SMLE
- 2.9 SAR-80
- 2.10 Winchester Model 1892 Saddle Ring Carbine

3 Submachine Guns

- 3.1 Steyr MPi81
- 3.2 Heckler & Koch UMP9

4 Machine Guns (Imi Negev)