

Complementarity and Its Discontents

An Overview of Violent Women in American Film

Since the late 1980s, the violent woman has become a staple in contemporary American cinema. In looking at films from *Thelma and Louise* (1991) to *Strange Days* (1995) to *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) to *Girlfight* (2000), we quickly see that action and violence are no longer the exclusive province of men. Rather than waiting for men to protect them, female characters have begun to protect themselves. When we first look at the emergence of the violent woman in the films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, we cannot but be startled by the dramatic change that her emergence seems to indicate in cinematic representations. She seems, in short, to have sprung into existence as if shot out of a cannon, taking the cinema-going public completely by surprise (as the very public debate about *Thelma and Louise* seemed to suggest). Even though the current phenomenon is unprecedented in the number of films that contain a violent woman, this figure itself is not unique to contemporary cinema. The violent woman has antecedents throughout the history of film and an investigation into the significance of the violent woman's emergence in the films of today must therefore begin with a brief look at the history of the violent woman in American cinema. I aim in this chapter not to provide a comprehensive history of the violent woman but instead a survey of her various historical manifestations in the cinema in order to highlight better the theoretical, cultural, and aesthetic foundations of her origins.

An overview of the violent woman in cinema allows us to see more clearly the various ways in which the violent woman has been not only present throughout the history of cinema, but also connected to the historical situations of women from all backgrounds within American society. The earliest filmic manifestations of violent women are the heroines of the Serial Queen Melodramas, films that Hollywood produced in large numbers (nearly eight hundred series) between 1912 and 1925, as Ben Singer has detailed in his pathbreaking article "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama." Each series consisted of anywhere from six to twelve episodes that were shown each week as viewers anticipated the twists of their extended plots. In these series—the soap operas of their day—the action inevitably revolved around a heroine in danger who went to unusual lengths to save herself or someone she loved. The films were filled with action—adventure, car chases, melodramatic villains, and close calls—and were aimed primarily at women (who made the serials a viable cinematic product for seventeen years). Moreover, the heroines in these films participated in many activities usually reserved for male characters. They used guns, took part in car chases, and held jobs (such as a detective or a novelist, occupations that few women of that time had an opportunity to pursue).

In films starring violent women, the *mise-en-scène* that surrounds the violent woman is almost as important as the actual violence itself in shaping our ideas about the woman and subsequently about her violence. In the Serial Queen Melodramas, the woman interacts with the *mise-en-scène* by setting out in each episode to investigate and conquer her surroundings. More often than not this means that the films depict her at first in the domestic sphere and then depict her adventure in various rural or urban environments, as she follows her free spirit and investigates mysteries. The typical serial heroine is able to master both domestic spaces and rural or urban spaces, for she fears very little of what she encounters. In this way, the Serial Queen Melodramas are more like the Western, in which the adventure lays somewhere "out there," and any perils are expected and even eagerly anticipated. In the end, the *mise-en-scène* of the serial queen melodrama serves as a kind of playground for the heroine, which is an unusual scenario for a female character in Hollywood. Traditionally in Hollywood, women characters are more

often trapped by their *mise-en-scène*, either emotionally or physically.

One of the best known and most popular early serials, *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) depicts a young woman who wants to pursue her own adventures before she settles down and marries.¹ Though Pauline (Pearl White) herself is not actually violent, she is certainly a precursor for the violent woman. Even though she is a single young woman with a guardian, she is also extremely rebellious. For example, in "Deadly Turning," Pauline signs up for a car race against the will of her male guardian. In the end, her guardian agrees to her demands, on the condition that he drive the car during the race, and she sit in the passenger seat. Although this seems to indicate a taming of her original desire, her rebellion nonetheless continues to exist and have an effect on others: by desiring nonfeminine adventures she calls into question feminine norms. In the years before and after World War I, women faithfully attended serials depicting such freedom and adventure. In "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama," Ben Singer argues, "The clearest and most interesting indication of the genre's address to a female audience lies in its sustained fantasy of female power. Every serial-queen melodrama, without exception, places an overt polemic about female independence and mastery at the center of its thematic design."² In this way, early films did at times cater to female fantasies of empowerment.³

What is even more significant for the history of violent women on film, however, is that eventually such independent behavior did lead to violence. A good example is the serial *The Woman in Grey* (1921). A mystery surrounds the serial's main character Ruth Hope (Arlene Pretty), who happens herself to write mystery novels. The mystery involves a fortune buried in an old house, numerous relatives, love interests, and hidden identities, all of which have Ruth constantly probing and investigating. Haviland Hunter (Fred Jones), the main villain, tries to thwart Ruth's investigation and even attacks her throughout the series. And although a friend (who becomes Ruth's lover at the end of the film), Tom Thurston (Henry G. Sell), is always there to save her at the last minute, Ruth does quite a bit of violent fighting with Hunter. She also jumps from a fast moving car, is thrown from a bridge, and is almost killed with a dagger (in "The Deadly Dagger" episode, of course). Firing a gun,

and defending herself during fights with Hunter, Ruth appears far more daring and independent than Pauline was just eight years earlier. This heightened quality of independence is indicated in some ways by her ability to be violent. Although not discussing violence per se, Ben Singer echoes this thought when he points out that “the depiction of female power self-consciously dissolves, sometimes even completely reverses, traditional gender positions as the heroine appropriates a variety of ‘masculine’ qualities, competencies, and privileges.”⁴ One of those qualities is obviously the ability to handle oneself in a fight, to be violent. Nevertheless, all these serials had men who saved the heroines in the end, ostensibly because they couldn’t save themselves. Likewise, even though these women were capable of being violent, rebellious, independent, and adventuresome, the serials invariably depicted their heroines as completely virtuous and entirely bereft of any tendency toward promiscuity. Clearly, having chastity and a male protector were two commodities that allowed these women some latitude in the direction of adventure and freedom—and even violence. These commodities blunt the disruptive power of her adventurousness and violence.

Since the period of the Serial Queen Melodramas, the violent woman has continued to crop up in isolated instances in the history of American cinema. She is never entirely absent from the American cinematic landscape, but it is when depictions of the violent woman appear in large numbers and in similar roles that they tell us about the functioning of ideology. That is to say, insofar as she appears in a historically related group of films, the violent woman is most clearly related to social problems and contradictions—and to the ideological response to these contradictions. The violent woman appears at moments of ideological crisis, when the antagonisms present within the social order—antagonisms that ideology attempts to elide—become manifest. Though antagonisms always exist within the social order, they emerge most forcefully at moments of ideological crisis.

Such an ideological crisis occurs when strictly defined gender roles—roles that give a logic and a sense to sexual difference—break down. Ideology works to produce clear gender distinctions in order to provide stable symbolic identities for both male and female subjects. Without this kind of coherence, identity loses its guarantees:

male and female subjects begin to question, rather than invest themselves in, symbolic identities. This process destabilizes the social order, and popular culture often responds by producing cultural images that work through, contain, or expose, this destabilization. One powerful example—one that almost always acts as a nexus for concerns about gender identity—is the violent woman in film. If there is one characteristic that defines masculinity in the cultural imagination, it is violence. The depiction of a violent woman upsets this association of violence with masculinity. Yet, at each moment when the violent woman emerges on a wide scale in film history, the films in which she appears go to great lengths to frame her violence within the very symbolic system that her violence threatens to undo. In this way, these films are an effort to ameliorate the social antagonism at the same time as they are explorations of it.

After their appearance in the Serial Queen Melodramas, the next filmic trend in which the violent woman emerged *en masse* was in film noir (from the late 1930s through the 1940s); she reappeared in horror and blaxploitation films in the 1970s and early 1980s; and she has most recently appeared in full flower in a wide range of films from the late 1980s through to the present. In these current films, the violent woman has undergone a fundamental transformation from her earlier incarnations: when she appeared in Serial Queen Melodramas, film noir, blaxploitation films, or horror films, the violent woman was strictly a generic figure, limited to a particular kind of film. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, depictions of the violent woman began to cross generic boundaries. She has appeared in action films, neo-noirs, comedies, and dramas. This widening of the violent woman's berth suggests that the antagonism—the ideological disruption that the appearance of the violent woman marks—has become more dramatically exposed than in the earlier eras. Because the violent woman in contemporary films has escaped the confines of isolated (and often marginalized) types of film, her violence indicates that the antagonism of the sexual relationship has become imagined to be increasingly precarious. But each of these contemporary manifestations of the violent woman owes a debt to the femme fatale and film noir.⁵

Masculinity and violence were intimately linked in Hollywood during the time of the classic film noir. Westerns, gangster films, and war films concentrated on masculinity, and they all connected

violence with masculinity.⁶ Westerns depicted men using violence to bring law and civilization to the lawless while conquering untamed parts of the country. Gangster films showed how honor and masculinity stem from proving oneself violently. Similarly—although not as prolific or widespread as the other genres—war films during this time clearly connected honor and respectability with professionally administering the kind of violence that would crush the enemy and save American lives. With all these images of masculinity and violence covering the American screens, what provoked the image of the femme fatale?

Outbreaks of violent women in film—such as the femme fatale in film noir—occur at moments in history when a clear difference between genders ceases to be operative. There are, of course, many different characteristics that we associate with maleness and many that we associate with femaleness, but, as I have said, one of the most significant is the identification of violence with masculinity. The very idea of masculinity implies, to some extent at least, the propensity to be violent, to protect oneself and one's family. In *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*, James Gilligan, a psychoanalyst who spent much of his career working within the Massachusetts prison system, points out that "Violence is primarily men's work; it is carried out more frequently by men; and it is about the maintenance of 'manhood.'"⁷ Violence—or at least the ability to be violent—is one of the main ways that men differentiate themselves from women. If gender difference becomes elided, then there is seemingly nothing to stop a woman from taking up violence as well, from being as violent as a man. In a sense, the appearance of the filmic violent woman, then, is a cautionary tale about the elision of difference. It is as if films with violent women are saying: "If we continue to disregard the proper difference between the genders, look at what kind of chaos will erupt." These films are also dealing with the problem of their own existence—that is, they offer violence as a cautionary tale on the level of narrative, but also as an attraction on the level of spectacle. This contradiction, between narrative and spectacle, underscores the conflict between the violent women as cautionary tale and the violent woman as role model. In the last instance, films with violent women remain ambiguous insofar as they struggle with the ultimate possibilities of the elision of gender difference and the ideological crisis that it signals.

The years of classical film noir—the late 1930s through to the end of the 1940s—were years of rapidly changing gender roles. These revolutions/transformations were, of course, not new: women had been making active moves to change their lives and to enter the public world for decades. During World War II large numbers of women, however, were called upon to work for the factories left vacant by men who had gone off to war but were subsequently fired once the soldiers returned.⁸ At the conclusion of the war, the United States government called upon women to willingly take up the feminine position once again. But the demand did not immediately create the reality. Women could not take up their previous position so easily, and men and women both were left with a growing understanding that the female “role” in life was no longer well defined.⁹ Women had now—simply because of the exigencies of the war—shown that they could work and support themselves without men, and the job of provider no longer seemed uniquely male.

The new violent woman of the 1940s cinema, the *femme fatale* in film noir, became a site for the exploration of the angst and fantasies that surrounded this elision of gender difference. The influence of the *femme fatale* on the history of violent women in film is far reaching. From Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992) to Renny Harlin’s *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), there are many films today whose leading female characters either are influenced by, are in direct conversation with, or are recapitulations of the *femme fatales* of film noir. Film noir has become a much disputed category among film scholars because unlike genres (such as the Western or the gangster film), noir does not have as fixed a set of patterns or criteria. In fact, noir’s styles and themes often run across genres. Certainly the long scholarly debate on whether or not noir deserves its own generic category indicates the uncertainty of its status. Indeed, film noir was not even a category (unlike Westerns, gangster films, etc.) that the studios themselves used.¹⁰ It was, of course, French theorists who coined the term and created the category.¹¹ In “American Film Noir: The History of an Idea,” James Naremore suggests the amorphous quality of this category. He claims:

If we want to understand it or to make sense of genres or art-historical categories in general we need to recognize that film noir

belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema; it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.¹²

One of the main elements found in noir—whether it is a genre or just a style—is the femme fatale. Just like the category of film noir itself, the category of the “femme fatale” does not involve rigid definitions. She is an ambiguous character who varies dramatically from film to film. She has also been the nexus for much theoretical work concerning sexual difference. For instance, Elizabeth Cowie claims that “femme ‘fatale’ is simply a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference and the demands and risks desire poses for the man.”¹³ What continues to feed this theoretical work on the femme fatale is her ambiguous status: she seems to be both society’s fantasy screen and, on the other hand, she seems to be a hard rock of the real that threatens the stability of patriarchy. She is both a manifestation of society’s fantasy of the underside of femininity (and thus in the service of ideology) and also something more elusive (and thus undeniably threatening to society). But there are characteristics that remain constant: a self-centered nature, an overt sexuality, and an ability to seduce and control almost any man who crosses her path mark the femme fatale of the late 1930s and 1940s. She is almost always glamorously beautiful and wears highly stylized clothes (from long trailing gowns to cocked hats and trench coats). Trapped in the famous *mise-en-scène* (influenced by German Expressionism) of highly contrasting shadows in an urban setting, the femme fatale seems to spring to life from the depths of these city shadows that eventually swallow her up. The extreme *mise-en-scène* that provides the backdrop for the femme fatale works to emphasize that she is the embodiment of a “bad girl.”¹⁴ In Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) perfectly captures this image when she tells Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray): “I never loved you or anyone else. I’m rotten, rotten to the core.” One of the main characteristics of the femme fatale is her inability to maintain a romantic relationship. And this is the reason—along with her proclivity toward violence—why she is unacceptable to society. In “Women’s Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir,” Sylvia Harvey points out the position love occupies in society as depicted

in film noir: "And if successful romantic love leads inevitably in the direction of the stable institution of marriage, the point about film noir, by contrast, is that it is structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family."¹⁵ As a result, if the femme fatale does fall in love—usually with the detective character—this relationship ends up ruining both herself and the male character (although, on rare occasions, love can also have the reverse effect and end up making an honest woman of the femme fatale).¹⁶

The fate of the femme fatale usually involves violence: either she meets a violent death or resorts to using violence on someone else. Of course, not all femme fatales turn to violence, but a large majority of them evince a capacity and a willingness to be violent. The femme fatale's violence often appears to be a last resort for her, but she nonetheless performs violence proficiently and without compunction. Within the context of the films, her violent act marks the femme fatale as truly bad and dangerous. Often the narrative trajectory of the film noir gradually reveals an explanation of how and why she resorts to violence. But I would not claim that the femme fatale's violence is the one thing that defines her character and makes her dangerous. If anything, violence is just a by-product of the overall persona of the femme fatale. For example, in *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Dietrichson seduces Walter Neff into helping her in an insurance scam in which he kills her husband, and they split his insurance money. Essentially, she lies, cheats, flaunts her body in front of Walter, and generally acts promiscuously, all in order to get the money that she wants. Billy Wilder famously introduces Phyllis dressed only in a towel at the top of the staircase. When she returns after dressing, the camera follows her legs only as she walks down the stairs and then displays her again as she finishes buttoning her shirt and putting on her lipstick while looking in a mirror. The dialogue here also calls attention to her looks as she asks Walter if her "face is on straight," forcing Walter and the viewer to stare one more time at her face and lips before the plot continues on.

All these moves are cleverly executed by a woman who is well aware of society's ideas about femininity and women. Phyllis plays upon social ideas of femininity to entice Walter, and every other man, to help her. In the first half of the film, Wilder depicts Phyllis as clever and manipulative (even Walter is aware of this, and yet he doesn't care), but she still pretends to play second fiddle to Walter,

who directs the murder plans. Because he is the man, the film suggests, he understands how to deal with violence and how to set up plans that involve violence. Hence, the initial machinations of the femme fatale leave the traditional relationship between the sexes in place and do not make any antagonism between the sexes evident. The relationship between the femme fatale and her man usually begins with an image of sexual complementarity, as it does in *Double Indemnity*.

In the second half of the film, as Walter begins to lose his nerve, Phyllis reveals that she is actually calmer and more prepared for this murder—and its aftereffects—than Walter. When the plan has gone somewhat awry and Phyllis realizes that she is in trouble, she calmly and quickly turns to violence—placing a gun under her seat cushion in order to kill Walter and continue with her scam to get her dead husband's insurance money. It is at this point, when the femme fatale becomes violent, that the antagonism between the sexes manifests itself. The film presents a glimpse of the insurmountable stumbling block that exists in the sexual relationship, allowing us to see that this relationship involves incompatible desire and cannot work out. Any implicit complementarity that existed between Phyllis and Walter is shown to be pure fantasy. In other words, the film uses the viewer's assumptions about an innate complementarity between masculinity and femininity to explain the characters and their attraction to each other. It also provides the tension in the plot as the viewer realizes that this complementarity was manufactured by the femme fatale. Phyllis has coldly calculated all the options and, by hiding the gun, is taking the next step she deems necessary in her plan. Because Phyllis is entirely selfish and cold-hearted, the film emphasizes, she is able to behave violently in her relationships with others. Ultimately, then, the film depicts her, as a femme fatale, as so far from the "average" American woman that she inevitably ends up turning to violence. This distancing of the femme fatale from the average woman blurs the antagonism that the femme fatale's violence engenders. In other words, if we can dissociate her from all other women, then we can protect ourselves from the trauma that she represents.

In Joseph H. Lewis' *Gun Crazy* (1949), Annie (Peggy Cummins) is also far from an average woman. She is a sharpshooter in a circus. When Bart (John Dall), a man obsessed with guns, sees her, he feels

he has found his perfect mate and joins her act. After running away and getting married, Annie tells Bart: "I've never been much good at least not up till now. You're not getting a very good bargain." The film does not go into detail as to why she is "no good." That she is in a circus, that she likes and is good with guns, and that she sleeps with her boss seems self-evident enough, according to the film, to explain her "badness." Soon after they are married, Annie tells Bart that she wants more than they have, and she coldly demands that they commit crimes to get more money. She doesn't care whom she hurts in the process, in this manner, her "badness" has been firmly established before she is violent.

Importantly, female violence at this period in film history is always the exclusive province of the licentious femme fatale. These women, of course, represent quite a shift from the virtuous heroines in the Serial Queen Melodramas. In film noir, no other woman—only the wayward woman who has already transgressed social mores in her dress, behavior, and life style—is considered capable of violence. Yet, even for this woman, violence is considered her last action, a last resort (whether or not this action comes at the end of the film). In this group of films, any woman depicted as violent must first be securely identified as a femme fatale.

By limiting female violence to the femme fatale character, film noir makes a gesture toward dulling the trauma involved with female violence. If we know that only bad women become violent and if we connect the violent woman to the social antagonism (the failure of complementarity), then we can deduce that the emergence of antagonism in the social order—manifested by the loss of clear gender definitions—is not the result of the inherent functioning of the social order itself, but of a few bad women. In short, we can reduce an ontological problem to an empirical one. What's more, even in the case of these women, violence is not something intrinsic to their femininity; it is a last resort—the result, not the cause, of the failure of their femininity. But this is not the only way that the film noir attempts to situate and symbolize the femme fatale's violence. It also puts clear restrictions on the violence itself in order for the idea of the feminine to be preserved.

The femme fatale hardly ever commits actual physical violence, such as engaging in hand-to-hand combat, stabbing someone with a knife, or choking someone with a wire. Instead, she almost always

uses a gun. One of the famous images from classic film noir is that of the femme fatale with a smoking gun. This sleek, cold, phallic weapon is the perfect accessory to the femme fatale; it both matches her highly stylized representation and her insensitive demeanor. The prevalence of the gun, however, also reveals that these films could not conceive of women—even the coldhearted femme fatale—as strong enough to do anything more than pull a trigger. This weapon also allows the femme fatale to continue looking beautiful when committing violence. She doesn't need to sweat, grunt, move into awkward positions, or even mess up her hair while killing someone. Hence, her violence doesn't completely disrupt the traditional gender categories; on the contrary, it leaves much of femininity intact. To continue with the example of *Double Indemnity*, we can see how Phyllis retains her femininity even in her moment of lethal violence. In the crucial scene, she does not hesitate to use her gun as soon as possible when she realizes that Walter intends to kill her. Again Wilder uses the dark shadows to highlight the deranged depths of the femme fatale. Phyllis has drawn all the shades and turned out the lights. When Phyllis shoots Walter, the camera remains on Walter, who is giving a speech revealing that he knows about her sordid past. As he talks, shrouded in the darkness of the room, we see him being shot rather than Phyllis shooting him. The next reverse shot is a long shot of Phyllis, backlit, standing in the middle of the living room with the recently fired gun pointed at Walter. She still looks elegant. Her long white dress flows down to the floor, and her striking hair remains in perfect condition. She just stands there—glamorous and silent—waiting to see what Walter will do next. Oddly enough—after all her “badness”—Phyllis is suddenly overcome with a love for Walter (a love she says she has never felt for anyone before), and during this moment of “weakness,” Walter shoots her twice and kills her. This ending to their relationship, and to the femme fatale, is a dramatic example of the horribly destructive nature of the relationship between the femme fatale and the “detective” figure (an insurance agent in this film). By not allowing the femme fatale and the detective to stay together (and often even to live) film noir highlights social antagonism by making clear that there is an insurmountable divide between men and women. For in the end, what each does best is destroy the other's life.¹⁷

After the femme fatale in film noir, the violent woman appears *en masse* again in the 1970s, concurrent with another widespread elision of sexual difference. It was during this decade that the feminist movement reached its apogee, with the push for the Equal Rights Amendment and the proliferation of consciousness-raising groups. Second-wave feminism dramatically transformed the American social landscape. At the same time, women pushed further into the public realm by joining the workforce. In *The Employment Revolution*, Frank Mott states: "In 1960 only 15 percent of married women with children under the age of 3 were in the workforce, but by 1970 this percentage had grown to about 16 percent and by 1980 fully 41 percent of women with preschool children were either on the job or looking for one."¹⁸ For all the importance of consciousness-raising and challenges to masculine modes of discourse, it was perhaps this movement of women into the workplace that had the greatest ideological impact. By going to work, women deprived men (and other women) of one of the crucial markers of sexual difference. The 1970s also saw women experimenting with appearance and sexuality. Feminists made clear that femininity was a construct that they no longer believed in and intended to destroy.

In response to this new crisis of the elision of gender difference, a different kind of violent woman made her appearance in film. Even though the feminist movement was very public in the 1970s, violent women on film during this time can be found more toward the margins of cinema, in horror and Blaxploitation films.¹⁹ Though some were very successful and popular, these films were not entirely mainstream. This marginalization allowed for a certain amount of experimenting that wasn't possible in mainstream cinema, which depended so much more on appealing to a wide audience. Oftentimes, films at the margins of cinema are able to experiment with fears and desires that would be too controversial for mainstream cinema. And this is certainly the case with both Blaxploitation and horror films in their depictions of the violent woman.

Typically, Blaxploitation films are characterized by black-centered low-budget action films that featured ultramasculine men who inspired cult-like followings, in films such as Gordon Parks' *Shaft* (1971), Gordon Parks, Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972), and Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971).²⁰ But there was also another

side to Blaxploitation. In films such as Jack Starrett's *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), Jack Hill's *Coffy* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974), and Arthur Marks' *Friday Foster* (1975), it is a woman who violently saves the day, cleans up the streets, or pursues her own adventures. As Ed Guerrero, who has written extensively on Blaxploitation films, says in *Framing Blackness*, "Between 1973 and 1975, Tamara Dobson and Pam bolted into Blaxploitation stardom as they cranked out a series of cheap ghetto action adventures that on almost every count replicated the values, visual style, and exaggerated sex and violence of their male-focused counterparts."²¹ Starting on the margins, Blaxploitation films quickly became box office hits, and many film historians credit them with saving some Hollywood studios from going bankrupt.²² The movement, however, lasted only from 1969 to 1974. While relying financially on the box office returns from Blaxploitation films, Hollywood did not see these films as targeting mainstream America. Instead, they considered Blaxploitation as tapping into an as yet underutilized African-American consumer base. Hoping to make fast, easy money off these cheaply made films, Hollywood did not pay a great deal of attention to the content of these films, which allowed for a degree of experimentation. It is no coincidence, I would contend, that the first "contemporary" violent women in cinema—after the explosion of new violence marked by the appearance of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*—occurs in Blaxploitation films. Within this particular genre directors could explore with impunity the subject of the violent heroine. In other words, the generic exigencies themselves elide any apparent threat.²³

Ed Guerrero argues that the films, and especially their representations of violence, were clearly tied to the political struggles of that time period. He explains: "No matter how imperfectly rendered its narratives, violence in much of Blaxploitation either depicted or implied the shaking off of the oppression of 'the Man,' and, significantly, the movement toward the dream of a liberated future."²⁴ I would add that the very presence of a violent heroine marks a political statement of feminist implications as well. Combining the political purposes of the Civil Rights movement and radical black movements with feminist politics, the Blaxploitation heroine's violence often serves her community. Blaxploitation films with a violent woman are a complex combination of over-the-top stereotypes, gritty realism, standard action plot lines, and political messages.

The heroines of these films are characterized by their independence, toughness, violence, and intelligence. Like the femme fatales of the 1930s and 1940s, they are also glamorously beautiful, and the films emphasize their beauty throughout, even during the acts of violence. Similar to the femme fatale, the Blaxploitation heroine uses her beauty to get what she wants or to get closer to what she is looking for. But unlike the virtuous and sometimes violent heroine of the female melodramas, and unlike the cold and vicious femme fatale, the Blaxploitation heroine is neither virtuous nor vicious. She is a complex combination of the desiring woman and the upstanding detective or community protector, which does not mean that she is immune, any more than the heroine of the melodrama or the femme fatale, to the female stereotypes of the time, stereotypes that allow for the films to symbolize the antagonism that she represents.

Blaxploitation films often seem to be predominantly “camp” precisely because of their overly sexualized depictions of women, and this applies even to violent women in these films. The heroine’s bared breasts often appear, and exploitative scenes appear throughout the blaxploitation world, such as a scene with a bar full of rowdy lesbians presented as spectacle in *Foxy Brown* (1974).²⁵ But the films all also involve story lines about a woman fighting against the dominant structures of society to clean up her streets and save her family and friends. She is often propelled into these adventures because someone in her own family—or someone she loves—is killed by drug pushers or other criminals.²⁶ Thus, whereas the most popular male leads in Blaxploitation films are frequently heroic outlaws who purposely take up the position of the criminal (even if it is to further “good” causes), female heroines in Blaxploitation are more on the side of the law. They may not be working *for* the law, but somehow the police are not against them; in the end, they usually deliver the criminals to the authorities. In *Foxy Brown*, for example, Foxy Brown’s (Pam Grier) boyfriend, a police detective, testifies against a criminal group, and they subsequently murder him in front of Foxy. Foxy then proceeds to go after this group for revenge, but along the way she becomes concerned about the women whom this group has enslaved as call girls—and thus Foxy’s quest takes on a feminist as well as a personal meaning. While the police do not help her (she doesn’t call on the police but instead asks for aid from the “neighborhood committee,” a group of neighborhood men who create

their own justice), they do not try to stop her, and in the end the film suggests that the criminal mastermind will get her comeuppance in court, as well as in life, once Foxy has finished with her. In Jack Starrett's *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), Cleopatra Jones (Tamara Dobson) is more literally on the side of the law. She is a special agent working for the United States government and has the police on her side (although she still looks more toward neighborhood friends to help her get things done than to the police, who were known and depicted as the primary violent servant of white patriarchal power).

In many ways, these heroines are *forced* into situations where they must use violence. They are violent—and have learned how to be violent—because of the extreme circumstances in which they live. In other words, the criminals and racists that surround her provoke the Blaxploitation heroine to learn violence and to use it. Her violence is much more physical and bloody than that of the femme fatale. She does use a gun on occasion, but the gun is by no means her only available weapon. She often fights in hand-to-hand combat and gives out more punishment than she receives. Cleopatra Jones, for example, is a martial arts expert, and she deftly uses any available object in her battles. Foxy Brown, to choose another example, at one point makes use of a bunch of hangers, which she fashions into a weapon. And unlike any of the femme fatales, the Blaxploitation heroine always survives and *almost* always triumphs in her quest for justice.

Importantly, male heroes from Blaxploitation films never appear simultaneously with these violent heroines. Each has their own film, and it seems impossible to imagine them being able to share the screen. Indeed, most of the men with whom the Blaxploitation heroine is linked romantically die violently, disappear early in the film, or play a very small role. This clearly allows the heroine not only to be sexual with more men throughout the story, but it also eliminates the problems or conflicts that would arise if the male partner were around. The insinuation in each of these films is that if her male partner were still alive or still present, the violent heroine wouldn't have to do all that she does. For example, Foxy Brown, while she is clearly a tough woman, learns to shoot a gun only because her boyfriend gave it to her and implored her to learn to use it in case she needed to protect herself while he was gone. In the 1970s, then, strong, violent women could appear in films, but only if

they lacked male protection and their violence arose from absolute need. In fact, Foxy's most gruesome violence arises only after she has been horribly raped and abused by two white redneck racists. In retaliation, Foxy brutally wounds one of the men with the hangers, and then she incinerates them along with their house. The extreme circumstances that surround this eruption of female violence instantly make it more comprehensible within the structure of contemporary ideology, thereby limiting its disruptive power.²⁷

The violent woman in the 1970s was not confined solely to Blaxploitation. Many of the same themes and violent acts appear in horror films, though it is usually white adolescent girls who are violent in these films, not black women. In horror films, as in Blaxploitation films, the woman's violence most often arises only after much abuse. But unlike the Blaxploitation heroine, the violent woman in horror films seldom transcends the position of victim and only becomes more violent with the slow progression of the genre throughout the decade of the 1970s. By consigning the violent woman to the position of victim, horror films leave her in a traditional female role. But horror films also produced many different types of violent women. In her *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover points out that women in horror films of the 1970s and early 1980s exist in three categories: "not only figures like Carrie, whose power somehow derives from their female insides, [but also] the boyish knife-wielding victim-heroines of slasher films and the grim avengers of their own rapes in films like *Ms. 45* and *I Spit on Your Grave*."²⁸ Slasher films, such as Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), Tom DeSemone's *Hell Night* (1981), Amy Jones' *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), and Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), represent their violent women as more boyish. In her extensive study of horror films, Carol Clover calls the women in slasher films "victim/heroines" and "final girls." This "final girl" is usually the only person to escape a murderous criminal who has killed all her friends. The killer hunts her down, but in the end she defends herself enough to escape or even kill the attacker. She is a combination of the investigator, the rescuer, and the female victim—clever and determined to live, but also young and innocent. As Clover explains: "She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). But in either case, from

1974 on, the survivor figure has been female."²⁹ This young woman is almost always beautiful and usually of middle or lower class.³⁰ Her youth, beauty, and innocence tend to deflect the trauma of her violence by highlighting her victim status and in this way, justifying any means she uses to save herself.

Like the Blaxploitation heroines, all of the disparate horror film heroines deal with violence in a way significantly different than the femme fatale. In general, their violence is far more gruesome, physical, and bloody than that of the femme fatale, and it is usually based on physical strength (rather than the act of firing a gun). These women tend to rely on weapons besides guns (knives, chainsaws, and knitting needles—really anything handy, including their own hands). In fact, women's violence in horror takes on a physical dimension that would have been unthinkable in the 1930s and 1940s. But these films can only imagine a woman as capable of violence if she is entirely enraged, and this anger can only occur when she is tortured, violated, and pushed into a state of total fright. It is the *mise-en-scène* itself that provides much of the terror in horror films. The final girl in slasher films is most often trapped and terrorized by her surroundings. And it is the *mise-en-scène* that illustrates her violence and the violence done to her through bright red blood and gruesome attackers. It is these half-psychotic, half-monster men who push the women to such extremes. Any normal men in these films either die early or prove feckless in protecting the female victim. The men who do try to protect the woman in danger often end up dead before the end of the film; if they survive, they do not have much of an overall presence, appearing only in the last two minutes to save the final girl. This marginalization of the "normal" man allows us to see the violent woman without immediately thinking about her implications for gender roles.

In many of the earlier horror films, the young woman—although at points violent—does not kill the male monster in the end. In *Halloween*, she survives, but the monster's psychiatrist arrives in the end and shoots him. In *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, she makes it through a night of torture, escapes to the highway, and gets away in a pickup truck that happened to be driving down the road. But the late 1970s slasher films and rape revenge films depict the woman triumphantly killing her torturer in the end. The violence that these women commit (a final response after enduring torture from men) is a direct result of

the feminist movement of the time.³¹ Feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s served to make women aware of their oppression and, at the same time, aware of their strengths. Thus, rather than emanating from the worst attributes of a wayward woman (as in film noir), violence now emerges out of women's burgeoning consciousness and desire to protect themselves. Instead of depicting the woman's violence as just another malicious and manipulative act, as is the case with the femme fatale, the 1970s horror films depict the woman's violence as something she must resort to as the victim of horrible things that men do to women. Nonetheless, female violence remains, in the 1970s, a response to victimization, and in this sense, it continues to fit with a traditional image of femininity.

A more ubiquitous violent woman burst into mainstream cinema in the late 1980s.³² Resembling a combination of the femme fatale, the blaxploitation heroine, the final girl, and the monster, these new violent women both shocked and fascinated the public as they became the center of a debate about feminism and filmic representation. In fact, the 1980s was the first time in the history of violent women in film that the public reacted so loudly to the violent woman. The fervor also made for box office success. Violent women in contemporary cinema make up a large trend in mainstream American film (at least three to ten major films each year feature violent women). When Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* opened in 1987—and even more so four years later when Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* opened in 1991—people began to have conversations about violent women that were qualitatively different than any that came before.

The violent woman in *Fatal Attraction*, Alex Forrest (Glenn Close), is as malicious as the femme fatale and, at the same time, her violence is as gruesome as that depicted in horror and Blaxploitation films. Here the violent woman is definitely one to fear, and yet audiences who flocked to see the film seemed to enjoy hating her more than they feared her. The film stages a typical opposition—especially for the 1980s—between the good housewife, Beth (Anne Archer), and the bad career woman, Alex. The film depicts Alex as essentially a psychotic. But rather than suggesting that this is a part of Alex's individual makeup, the film suggests that it is her lifestyle that makes her psychotic. In other words, a woman who has chosen to pursue her career instead of a family life will eventually be so depressed and unhappy that she can become psychotic and violent.

Director Adrian Lyne uses the *mise-en-scène* to define Alex through her home décor (as well as her business-oriented attire). Alex lives in a cold barren loft and this—it is hinted—will be the state of her reproductive organs if she does not hurry up and find a mate fast. Even Alex emphasizes that point when she says, “I’m thirty-six years old. It may be my last chance to have a child.”

Her violence stems entirely from her desire to coerce Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) into a relationship. She directs her first violent act toward herself—slitting her wrists—in order to elicit Dan’s sympathy and encourage him to stay with her. Later, she kills the pet rabbit that Dan bought for his daughter, and, finally, she tries to kill Dan’s wife, Beth. In many of the scenes, common household items become weapons, and the film confines the violence to a domestic space. In one of the final scenes of the film, Beth prepares to take a bath, but as she wipes the steam off the bathroom mirror, she sees Alex standing behind her. Alex immediately attacks her and tries to kill her. Alex’s other violent acts occur in reaction to Dan’s violence. On one occasion, he attacks her in her apartment, and she brandishes a huge kitchen knife, which he easily takes away from her. And in the very last scene of the film, Dan saves Beth and fights with Alex. He almost drowns her, but she retaliates, and in the end, it is Beth who shoots Alex. The violence Alex initiates, then, is only directed toward women (herself and Beth), children, or animals (the daughter’s pet rabbit); in other words, she aims directly at the heart of the family. And although she fights back when Dan attacks her, she is never able to triumph in these fights. In the end, however, it is the housewife, Beth, who breaks from her femininity to fire a gun at Alex and save her family.

Fatal Attraction shows us an out-of-control, violent, and promiscuous woman—a woman who is hell-bent on destroying the family—as the logical outcome of a woman choosing career over family.³³ It is easy to see why this film emerged when it did. After the feminist movement of the 1970s, the 1980s put feminist ideas into practice. Women entered the workforce in droves and either chose not to have a family or tried to juggle family and a fast-paced career. These changes, of course, affected the whole family, and by the end of the 1980s, much of America began to grumble and complain. *Fatal Attraction*’s director Adrian Lyne was only echoing many others when he said,

You hear feminists talk, and the last ten, twenty years you hear women talking about fucking men rather than being fucked, to be crass about it. It's kind of unattractive, however liberated and emancipated it is. It kind of fights the whole wife role, the whole childbearing role. Sure you got your career and your success, but you are not fulfilled as a woman.³⁴

Obviously Lyne's definition of a woman is particularly limited to traditional ideals.³⁵ But these feelings are also representative of a larger backlash against the feminist movement that *Fatal Attraction* embodied and fueled. As Gabriele Griffin points out in her *Feminist Activism in the 1990s*, many women felt that the women's movement was dead by the end of the 1980s. She contends, however, that "feminist activism [in the 1990s] is still very much in evidence and perhaps more diverse, far-reaching and impact-achieving than ever before."³⁶ This activism has taken place not on the spectacularly large scale that 1970s and 1980s feminism (such as mass mobilization and general political spectacles in the public domain) relished but instead has taken on a multiplicity of forms. In other words, if the 1980s saw public attempts to define and assert the women's movement—marches on Washington and so on—it also saw public backlash in the form of films, magazines, and newspapers constantly recounting the problem with the working woman and her relationship to femininity and domesticity.³⁷ This seemed to have led not only to the death of the activist-oriented women's movement in the 1990s, but it also gave birth to the more complete infiltration of institutions: women's studies became more fully ensconced in academia during the 1990s, and women became much more of a mainstay in the workforce. In this way, the appearance of the violent woman *en masse* and across genres during this time could be seen as partly triggered by the more permanent change in gender relations.

Thus, for a third time in the history of film, violent women appeared *en masse* in reaction to an elision of gender differences, which—as in the 1940s—occurred in the workforce and then had ramifications in the family. But this time the image of the violent woman did not remain in the realm of the psychotic female killer where the initial film, *Fatal Attraction*, attempted to confine her. Instead, she began to show up in many different genres of films and television shows—that is, from action, to drama, to comedy and

even to video games—becoming an established presence in the universe of contemporary media.³⁸ The continuation and proliferation of films starring violent women was also a reaction to the continuation of and proliferation of ways in which gender differences were elided. Whereas in earlier decades the elision of gender difference was either temporary or confined to a particular group of politically active women, in the late 1980s and the 1990s this elision of difference touched upon all aspects of society and all aspects of the relations between men and women. During the Gulf War, for example, the public realized for the first time that large numbers of women were a mainstay of the military. And women also gained attention in the world of sports. The 1990s also saw the inauguration of the first large-scale female professional basketball league. In addition, we no longer singled out the career woman in the 1990s, and, instead, it became more common for women to have careers than for women to stay home. During the 1990s, therefore, women's roles continually changed, and each change seemed to have further emphasized the elision of gender differences. Hence, it is not surprising to find the violent woman—the filmic response to the elision of gender differences—across all genres and in all types of film.

Before this proliferation really settled in, however, one film appeared that both provoked the most reaction and solidified the trend: *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Films like *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Basic Instinct* (1992) did occasion some public discussion, but neither elicited the kind of response produced by *Thelma and Louise*. In fact, the reaction to *Thelma and Louise*—a film about two friends who begin a vacation together but end up running from the law after killing a man who tries to rape one of them—more closely resembles society's past reactions to actual female murderers than to other films. The public tried hysterically to define real life femininity, feminism, and violence in reaction to this film. It is easy to understand why these issues would be important to work through in the public realm, but why would this particular film provoke such a response at this time?

Some viewers asserted that they were reacting strongly to *Thelma and Louise*, because they thought that the violence committed by the women throughout the film, as they raced across the country eluding the police, was purposeless and worked to glorify violence. And while it is true that the violence *Thelma and Louise* committed

in the film was both aggressive and extreme—from killing a man, to robbing a convenience store, to blowing up a tanker truck, and so forth—compared with other standard action films in which the body count often ranges between fifty and two hundred, *Thelma and Louise* is practically nonviolent, with its body count of only one. Others said that *Thelma and Louise* were antifeminist representations of women, and still others said that they were too radically feminist. It's possible that the public was taken aback by the "averageness" of the characters: *Thelma and Louise* are working-class women who, besides being very feminine, live very normal lives. After considering the important role that *mise-en-scène* plays in defining the violent woman throughout her history, it is no surprise that much of the film's impact is a result of the *mise-en-scène*. *Thelma and Louise* seem trapped by their domestic and working-class environments at the beginning of the film, as director Ridley Scott cuts back and forth between *Thelma's* suburban home and the busy, crowded diner where *Louise* works. Later, however, *Thelma and Louise* drive through the wide-open spaces of the west as they shed the trappings of femininity and enter a new realm of freedom and open spaces.

The public outcry over *Thelma and Louise* was fueled in part by the film's attempt to explore how the *average woman* could be involved with violence (rather than the wealthy psychotic woman), a topic that perhaps hit too close to home. The outcry was also provoked by the way the film connected violence so directly with femininity and feminism. To begin a more in-depth analysis of this public reaction, one must locate both these interpretations within film history and within the political and cultural climate at the time it was released. *Thelma and Louise* came out during a time of transition from films depicting psychotic and maniacal violent women to an era in which a violent woman could appear in any profession, situation, or environment. Audiences experienced violent women in films before *Thelma and Louise*, I think, as particular occurrences tied only to certain current issues, not as simply "violent women." For example, the media discussed *Fatal Attraction* (1987) as a response to the emergence of the career woman.³⁹ Film scholars analyzed James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) as tied to a fear of loss of humanity in the face of burgeoning technology. And films like Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990) and Stephen Frears' *The Grifters* (1990) originally seemed more tied to past violent women in horror

and noir than to an incipient filmic trend. By the end of the early 1990s, however, the theme of the monstrous career woman had run its course (after also spawning films such as *Basic Instinct* and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*), as had the rape revenge film, and violent women characters began to appear in many forms. From quirky leading ladies (*To Die For*, *Fargo*), to straightforward action heroines (*Strange Days*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Broken Arrow*, *Charlie's Angels*), to dramatic heroines (*Set It Off*, *G.I. Jane*, *Girlfight*), today it is rarer to see a woman who can't fight for herself or help out in a fight than one who can. *Thelma and Louise* signaled the beginning of this transition, and allowed us to recognize a trend that had been building. That is to say, by the time we recognized this cultural transformation, it had already occurred. In other words, even though we were noticing it for the first time, the underlying transformation had already fully flowered, making it impossible to stop. Reviewers, critics, and the public at large recognized *Thelma and Louise* as representative of a new trend (including the films, like *Fatal Attraction* and *Blue Steel*, which had previously only been thought of singularly). In reaction to this burgeoning trend—and trauma—of violent women in cinema, *Thelma and Louise* provoked a frenzy of symbolization. Whether the media represented this female violence as antifeminist, unladylike, feminist, or liberating, all these descriptions dealt directly with the representation of the violent woman as such. This frenzy of symbolization should then be recognized as not only a marker that points to the importance of the violent woman, but also as a way to contain her. The symbolization anchored her image into a more specified universe of meaning so that films with violent women that came after *Thelma and Louise* would make sense.

To put it in another way, *Thelma and Louise* tapped into unconscious anxiety—both because of the time in which it was produced and the content of the film—and this eruption of the unconscious manifested itself in an onslaught of film analyses, proclamations about womanhood, and heated arguments about gender roles—all of which ended up solidifying some meaning for what seemed traumatic about *Thelma and Louise*. This intense public response indicates the importance of *Thelma and Louise*, revealing a break from the way that the public had previously interacted with films featuring violent women.⁴⁰ After *Thelma and Louise*, the violent woman herself became a figure in the landscape of contemporary film. And

because of *Thelma and Louise*, and public reaction to it, society had an opportunity to symbolize the violent woman as such. Once symbolized, the appearance of the violent woman in film ceased to be traumatic. Now she existed within a symbolic universe of meaning, one which worked to obviate the underlying antagonisms that the violent woman had the potential to reveal. I say this to explain why *Thelma and Louise* was the only film with violent women to provoke the kind of reaction that it did, but this does not mean that after *Thelma and Louise* the violent woman's radicality completely disappears and that she no longer represents an attempt to grapple with the trauma of the elision of sexual difference. In fact, as I will argue in detail in the following chapters, I believe that the trauma exists instead—in the rest of the films in the 1990s and 2000s featuring violent women—in the cinematic manner in which the violent female is represented and the disruptive effect that the violent woman has on the narrative. In other words, the trauma of the violent woman manifests itself in the defense mechanisms that films must utilize in order to depict this figure.⁴¹

In this chapter, I have illustrated the most important episodes in filmic history for the emergence of the violent woman as a filmic element, and described the historical circumstances (including especially the conflicts and antagonisms of these moments) behind these emergences. Here, however, we must again consult Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's understanding of such cultural eruptions, as they articulate it in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. They suggest, "The usual descriptions of antagonisms in the sociological and historical literature [. . .] explain the *conditions* which made antagonisms possible, but not the antagonism as such."⁴² Laclau and Mouffe go on to say that theorists often describe these conditions by saying that this or that "*provoked* a reaction." In other words, we can see what provoked the reaction and we can see what the reaction is, but this does not necessarily explain or describe the antagonism itself. For example, I have explained how large numbers of women had jobs during World War II, which unsettled and provoked fear among society at large. This was accompanied by a huge push on the part of the United States government to reconstitute the traditional roles of masculinity and femininity. These feelings of anxiety, at this particular time, also manifested themselves in a spate of films featuring violent women. The violent woman is, then, a way to displace

this anxiety into an aesthetic realm, but she also provokes more anxiety and very complex defense mechanisms within the film in which she appears. Regardless of this outcome, her place in history seems particularly tied to moments of crisis in male and female gender roles. But all this still does not get to the “antagonism itself.” I have given an overview of the historical context and the cultural product but not yet theoretically elaborated on antagonism itself. The violent woman in American cinema reveals that there is an antagonism between masculinity and femininity that is both essential to the working of society and also its potential undoing. In order to approach this antagonism and to grasp its relationship to female violence, we must look at masculinity and the central role that violence plays in its construction.