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Research Article:

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Rosemary Briseño

A woman's formative sense of self, when it should be centered on the principle of strength of character, is instead authenticated only if she measures up to a hyper-sexualized model of unattainable perfection, and/or when she fits neatly in the box marked "F": as lover, mother, wife, and caretaker. Women adhering to traditional gender roles are considered "good girls" because they don't make ripples in the waters of the patriarchal pool of the gender status quo; while women who violate traditional gender roles, fall under the "bad girl" category. This binary system of the Madonna/whore dyad is limiting and dissimilar to the nature of "real women" who are as complex as their male counterparts.

Since traditional gender roles are created and perpetuated by a patriarchal system, it is men who create and justify the acceptability and appropriation of which category they believe women ought to occupy; thereby, creating and sustaining a cycle of male-dominated sociopolitical, cultural system of the gender status quo, which asserts men as the purveyors of women's bodies and women as producers and commodifiers of their own form. "To suggest that the Self can only be determined with reference to what it is not" it could be argued that "[m]an therefore proceeds to confirm the woman as Other in the process of identifying himself as Subject" (McCabe 3). This idea of binary opposition, identifying an entity by comparing and contrasting one idea to its opposite value, reinforces the displacement of women. This displacement is reinforced via the objectification of the female body, so that woman is not only used to verify maleness, it also (re)establishes preeminence.

Perhaps heroines are that rarity in the system of gender binaries, a “safer,” more pleasing alternative to the tough as steel “bitch” as seen in comics, “chick flicks.” Lara Croft and Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* franchise saga, are two examples of leading ladies who are strong and unafraid, yet also maintain varying degrees of attractiveness and sexuality. Since gender is created by a patriarchal system; that is, the notion of woman as she exists and functions in popular culture, it seems logical not to antagonize the hierarchy that has created and controls the very system which limits them. In this sense, heroines who brave villains while sexified—when they are sexualized for the male gaze, have not entirely invented a refreshing (re) version of the heroine; rather they subvert their own power via the objectification of their sexualized bodies.

The act of objectification is often contested, among feminists and non-feminists alike because the act of putting women’s bodies on display may not always consider the discourse of sexuality, specifically in terms of dominator/dominated, as is the case of lesbian pornography, where the sexualization of women’s bodies is visited upon by both men and women. If we understand cinematic space as a frame in which to study the sexualized female form, the space she fills becomes a politicized site of sociopolitical cultural expression, production, and consumption, especially where “sexualized language, imagery, and representation” exists as part of the *mise en scene*. The deconstruction and reframing of politicized spaces has been happening “[s]ince the 1970s” where “feminist artists have been crucial in fostering such reframing” (Stehle 230). It is this vein of discourse of politicized cinematic frames in which the objectification and commodification of a sexified heroine is examined.

Lina Papadaki clarifies what objectification is, stating that “[it’s] treating a person as an object, in the sense of a mere instrument for someone else’s purpose, and consequently reducing this individual to the status of a mere instrument. Objectification, then, is a necessarily negative phenomenon because it involves

seriously harming a person's humanity. In being reduced to a mere thing for use, the objectified individual's humanity is diminished" (*Journal of Moral Philosophy* 716). Hence, woman's agency and subjectivity are compromised because these values aren't usually associated with objects, and so, a sexualized woman's body is relegated to a mere form for the utilization of men.

Papadaki further states that, "Being a man or a woman, is socially constructed, whereas sex, being male or female, is biologically defined" (4). The normalized notion of masculinity—tall, strong, handsome, financially capable, is created through the images we see in popular culture, attached to the products they sell. What this means is that men are the objectifiers and women are the subjects of their objectification; thereby, any display of women's sexuality, overt or otherwise, commodifies the female body, reducing it to a means to an end. Since the center of power is normalized from a patriarchal stance, not from a feminist one, women's bodies become sites of consumption, "tools for the ends of others" (qtd. by Papadaki 20). Patriarchy assumes appropriation of the cultural production, even when it's meant for the consumption of Others.

Another example of male-dominated cultural appropriation is the notion of exhibitionist lesbianism; the masquerade of straight girls "playing lesbian," on-demand for men (*Full Frontal Feminism* 54). When young women engage in the public sport of girl-on-girl kissing, pretending as an act of enticing men, it subverts power from the girls engaged in the public display of theatrical affection, further situating men as the producers and consumers of women's bodies. When women function under the guise and direction of the male gaze, they lose. Therefore, when heroines fight antagonistic forces as a sexualized entity, they compromise the integrity of a true heroine. Tragically, a sexified heroine in the "face of adversity or from a position of weakness, display[s] courage and the will for self-sacrifice for all humanity" is socially, culturally, and politically oppressed because she sacrifices her self for a system which regulates her sexualized female form in terms of whether it

suits and complements the masculinized sites of commodification. The “heroine” is relegated to a space carved from the limits and confines of patriarchy, and such is the ugliness of the “fighting fuck toy.” At first, this seemingly, feminist heroine comes across as an independent, strong, tough-as-nails, different from a damsel in distress, or princess, or mother/ nurturer. The fighting fuck toy *is* formidable. But then, the position and functionality of her character is revealed, one layer of clothing at a time, and we realize the heroine we’ve been championing is just an illusion.

The validity and authenticity of the heroine in popular culture is a contested one. She is a “complicated figure in that she can be viewed as a regressive symbol of male fantasy and fetishism or as a powerful individual who controls the narrative and assumes the traditionally male active role” (McCracken 66). By definition, a heroine is central to the narrative. She might partake in male-driven preoccupations, such as playing protectorate, leader, and survivalist; but if she’s also projecting hyper-sexualization, she functions in satisfying and appeasing a male audience, and thus, her heroic performance is reduced a mere illusion, an act.

For example, Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise and Lt. Ripley from the *Alien* series project non-threatening sides of themselves, as provocateurs, sometimes overt, sometimes not, as a way of deflecting the negativity which accompanies a strong, confident, woman in control. Angelina Jolie and Sigourney Weaver who play Croft and Ripley respectively, are no doubt, strong, capable characters. One embarks on journeys taking her into dark, unknown spaces where she alone is responsible for her safety and ultimate survival. She sojourns through these dangers in body-revealing costumes, while also proving her mastery of weaponry—a masculine ideal. But where a male character is expected to be comfortable around guns, Lara Croft’s expertise in advanced weaponry is titillating and suggestive. In several advertising stills, Lara Croft’s hands firmly envelope the girth of the gun grip, while a seething, satisfied look on her face reinforces the American practice of gun fetishization. Because guns are masculine more than

feminine, Lara Croft connects with male audiences, on two different levels which (re)establish cinematic protagonists as masculine, and therefore, a site of controlled expression: 1) the spectacle of her body becomes the key site of narrative transmission, a characterization normally applied to male characters; 2) while maintaining the male gaze with the sexualization of her female form, she further negates her position as a stand-alone hero.

While Lara Croft is clearly a sex symbol, Sigourney Weaver's "Ripley" is not. In fact, the protagonist in the original screenplay was gender neutral, but it was assumed that a male character would play the lead role. When Weaver tried out for the part, she so impressed director Ridley Scott with her calm and quiet fortitude, even in the face of a relentless alien life-form, that he "flipped convention" and gave the role to a woman. This might account for why audiences of the first film in the *Alien* franchise don't know Lt. Ripley's first name (Ellen), until the 1986 sequel, *Aliens*.

In the climactic scene, Ripley thinks she has finally defeated the alien, but it turns out that it has not been terminated; it has been merely hiding, stowed in Ripley's escape pod. The audience watches Ripley strip down into a thin, white, tank top and string bikini bottoms. There are several memes and YouTube videos dedicated solely to that scene. In one such clip, titled "RIPLEY'S PANTIES," the person who put posted the clip states: "*Alien* is an amazingly tense, terrifying movie, but nevertheless it yields this drool-inducing, perfect moment. Sigourney Weaver in her UNDA PANTS." The limits to what a strong, intelligent heroine can accomplish are stymied by her free-fall into objectification. There is no reason to see these heroines in skimpy costumes, let alone in their underwear, other than to regard them as objects of sexual desire. They need only prove themselves without compromising their capabilities by performing for the male gaze. What does this say to young girls? Kick ass, but be sure to show yours? As long as these "fighting fuck toys" sexify their heroic actions, they will negate their full potential as bonafide heroines.

In sharp contrast to Lara Croft and Lt. Ripley, there is Maria, the protagonist of the 2004 independent film, *Maria, Full of Grace*. Maria (Catalina Sandino Moreno), is an independent-thinking, resourceful young woman who displays strength, razor perceptiveness, and the gift of insight into the human condition, in order to escape the abject poverty of her native Colombia, and she projects this heroic strength without compromising her respectability. Maria challenges cultural gender restrictions without succumbing to them. She rejects several boundaries including sociopolitical, geographical, and metaphorical borders in order to secure economical and emotional stability for herself and unborn child.

Throughout the film, Maria proves a quiet strength, both engaging, and inspiring. Her coolness in making quick decisions forms a bedrock of calm and common sense in the face of severe complications, which could easily relegate lesser heroines toward the damsel in distress archetype; or worse, confine her to a “fighting fuck toy,” where she is forced to survive by sexifying her body. Maria is at once a complex female character who doesn’t fall short of true grit and sophistication. Her heroic actions do not seek the approval of the male gaze, and it’s clear she doesn’t need a man to legitimize her sense of self.

The opening scenes of the film capture her quiet, astute nature. She gazes out into pre-dawn light, the lush Colombian countryside drifting lazily outside the window of the crowded bus she takes to work, and rides silently in contemplation of the meager living she ekes working at a rose plantation. Surrounded by fragrant, perfect long-stemmed blossoms belies Maria’s reality. As Maria’s mother exclaims, “*Tú sabes que aquí solo tenemos rosas* [You know that all we have here are roses].” We soon realize something else troubles Maria because she becomes ill, and ruins several dozen roses. It is also at this moment when Maria realizes she can’t continue working at the factory.

In one important scene, Maria tells Juan she is pregnant, and he responds with the typical, “Do you want to get married?” Her first reaction is a smile, but not

one of happiness, it's a smile relaying her incredulity at his proposal. They discuss where they might live, and he matter-of-factly explains that they would live in his. Maria coyly suggests they should live at her house, knowing Juan's reaction would be typical. He says, "A guy living in a girl's house. No way." To which she responds with, "You're so fucking stupid." But Juan doesn't understand her frustration.

Maria knows Juan is only offering marriage because that is what society and his Latino culture tells him he should do. He persists saying, "Sorry to break it to you, but you have to [marry me]." Slowly, Maria turns to look at him and she says quietly, "I don't have to do anything." Juan, sensing he's losing the argument says, "That's how you are. Stubborn." She says matter-of-factly that she doesn't love Juan and walks away.

But Maria's money problems remain, and now that she is pregnant, the last thing she wants is to become like her older sister, unmarried with a baby, living in a small, remote village offering little chance of a fortunate future. Maria stumbles on a unique but dangerous financial opportunity: international transportation of drugs for a local Mafioso-type. Her job as a drug mule is dangerous business, as she must swallow 60-70 pellets of latex-wrapped cocaine, and since she is pregnant, the risks increase. Landing in New York, Maria proceeds through Customs; and agents are immediately leery, so they frisk and relentlessly question her. Through the entire ordeal, though Customs know she is lying and carrying drugs inside her, Maria remains calm. Frustrated, the agents want to X-ray Maria to prove she is carrying drugs inside her, but because she is pregnant, she is not subjected to one, and she is released.

Maria is taken to a hotel where she meets her drug connections who were hired to collect the drugs. She is given laxatives, later defecating in the tub, and she passes the pellets. Maria considers this just a part of the job; so even squatting in a hotel tub, passing large, non-lubricated pellets of drugs, she is calm, even graceful. She does this behind a locked bathroom door, with the water running into the tub, so

as to maintain her modesty. Most importantly, Maria is nearly fully clothed; the audience only sees flashes of a thigh, and nothing more. In this scene, fighting fuck toys would have been naked, perhaps clad only in their bras.

Although Maria uses her body as a vessel in which to carry illicit drugs, she is not using her body as a fighting fuck toy might. The key difference is that Maria doesn't advertise her body as a sexual vessel to complete the job, rather her body functions as a utilitarian mode of transportation. The way she uses her body isn't sexualized, it's sacrificial, and though fighting fuck toys are also sacrificing their bodies—for the good of humanity, the latter are surrendering their agency and personhood, and become mere objects to be sexually desired.

Maria never purely engages in any of the major categories which define the act of objectification including: instrumentality, inertness, or denial of subjectivity, though some could argue she does subject herself to fungibility, where “the objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types” as when Maria is a part of a small group of drug mules (qtd. in Papadaki 36). Maria also partakes in violability, when Maria swallows the drugs, and in ownership, since she uses her body as transportation for someone else's cargo. It is the nature and quality of how she allows herself to be treated by others, her conscious decision to be instrumental in the transport of drugs, not instrumentalized by others, which differentiates Maria as a genuine hero. The film ends with Maria waiting to board a plane back to Colombia, but at the last minute, she decides on taking her chances in America. After all, if she can successfully negotiate her way into the U.S., a country to which she is a stranger, she can certainly succeed in making a better life for herself and unborn baby.

Maria, Full Of Grace exerts the plausibility of a heroine immune to the restrictions of a gender identity and expression dependent on social construction. The film reminds us that “there is no real and biologically determined self at the core of our being” and that our behavior and (re)actions are not necessarily dependent on

a system made of binaries (Brown 23). The gender status quo is performative, reflecting not only a heterosexual norm but also a sexualized feminine form; it is a masquerade reinforced and perpetuated in the aesthetics of popular culture which subverts authentic personhood. Whether a form of escapism or not, a more pleasing cinematic experience is one in which the leading lady survives without needing or seeking approval of the male gaze.

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