A Transgressive Figure or a Puppet of the Patriarchy?
The Action Heroine in *Atomic Blonde*

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ABSTRACT

Although women's empowerment has progressed, various media products still represent women in a negative light. They are commonly stereotyped and shown as sexual objects in these media products. Nonetheless, major breakthroughs have been made in the action film genre. Female action heroes have begun to be represented as transgressive women who oppose the patriarchal notion that masculine qualities are exclusively for men. The film Atomic Blonde *features a lead action heroine and presents her as a strong woman who embodies characteristics of both masculinity and femininity. This study aims to discover how this heroine is represented in this action film. A qualitative approach with narrative and non-narrative analysis was applied to conduct this study. In doing so, the writers used Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity that scrutinizes performances of masculinity by female subjects. The theory of gender, sexuality, and toughness by Jeffrey Brown was also employed to examine the aforementioned aspects of action heroines. One research finding is that despite being characterized as a powerful and tough woman, this action heroine is still subjected to hypersexualization and subordination. It demonstrates that regardless of how much power an action heroine possesses, she is still bounded by the patriarchy.*

KEYWORDS
action heroine, female masculinity, femininity, hypersexualization, masculinity

Introduction

Representations and images dominate every culture and society. These images are constructed and represented through mass media, for instance, radio, film, and newspapers.[1] Since the media, especially positions of power, are dominated by men, the images of women represented by the media may contain abundant gender stereotypes. Margaret Marshment[2] argues that if women remain underrepresented in the field which constructs the meanings of gender and gender relations, they are unable to voice their interests.

The underrepresentation of women in the film industry is manifest both on-screen and off-screen. Hitherto it has been difficult for women to take part in production in the mainstream film industry.[3] On the other hand, many women who appear on the screen are often presented as sex objects or adherents of traditional gender roles.[4] In 2014, it was found that there were only 12% of female protagonists in the 100 top grossing films, in which gender stereotypes are still embedded.[5]

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1   Tony Purvis, *Get Set for Media and Cultural Studies*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 41.

2   Margaret Marshment, "The Picture Is Political: Representation of Women in Contemporary Popular Culture," in *Introducing Women's Studies*, ed. Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson, 2nd ed. (Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), 128.

3   Lalitha Gopalan et al., *Introduction to Film Studies*, ed. Jill Nelmes, 5th ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 267.

4   Marshment, "The Picture Is Political: Representation of Women in Contemporary Popular Culture," 132.

5   Martha M Lauzen, "It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2014," *On-Screen Representations* (San Diego, 2015), 1–3.

Action films with lead female characters are uncommon. This is due to the fact that action films are inseparable from violence, which is a traditionally masculine trait. Therefore, Jeffery Brown[6] defines action heroines as strong and transgressive women who are able to broaden the roles and capabilities of women on the screen. Even when they are represented, action heroines are depicted in ways that undermine their strength and power. Furthermore, they are frequently portrayed as excessively masculine or hypersexualized.[7] Hypersexualization refers to the addition of obvious element of exploitation to an object or a person to create images containing sexual appeals.[8] Due to their masculine qualities, action heroines are often considered as figurative males. Hence, they are hypersexualized to reinforce their female attributes or to emphasize that they are women. Brown[9] contends that "in their sexualized hyperfeminine depiction they not only compensate for assuming traditionally masculine roles but combine the symbolic 'manliness' of toughness with the most basic symbols of 'womanliness.'"

This type of action heroine is represented in *Atomic Blonde,* directed by David Leitch and released in 2017. The film stars Academy Award winning actress Charlize Theron. This film focuses on Lorraine Broughton, one of the best MI6 agents, in her undercover mission in Berlin, November 1989. Her objective is to capture a double agent and recover a list that can extend the Cold War for 40 more years. Broughton succeeds in recovering that list and bringing it back to MI6 headquarters after putting her life on the line. In the end, it is uncovered that the double agent that the MI6 and KGB have been tracking down is herself. She works for the CIA and eventually hands the list over to her superior in the agency.

Atomic Blonde was chosen for this study because female lead characters in action films remain rare and the film is quite recent. Furthermore, Lorraine Broughton as the main character is depicted as a non-heterosexual woman with both masculine and feminine characteristics. *Atomic Blonde* reinforces Broughton's femininity with her costumes and physique. With a remarkable female character working in a male-dominated field, it seems that this film promotes gender equality. Nevertheless, regardless of Broughton's skills and characteristics that show her capability of being equal to men, she is hindered by hypersexualization and subordination to men. This makes the film interesting to be analysed.

The hypersexualization of Broughton's body is seen in the scenes in which she appears without or with minimal clothing. Scenes which are unrelated to the main story of the film expose her body as she is doing nothing of importance from her first appearance in the opening scene, which shows her naked while taking a bath. The opening scene of a film is more important than other scenes since it determines whether the audience will stay to watch it.[10] The fact that

6   Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 1st ed. (University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 43.

7   Gladys L. Knight, *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television*, 1st ed. (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), x.

8   Christine Mace, "Fashion or Porn?: The Hyper-Sexualization of Western Culture and the Commodification of Sex" (Parsons The New School for Design, 2012), 28.

9   Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 55.

10 Randee Dawn, "Screenwriters on Nailing That All-Important Opening Scene," Variety, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/awards/screenwriters-first-scene-lena-waithe-greta-gerwig-noah-baumbach-1203456297/.

Broughton is hypersexualized from the beginning of *Atomic Blonde* indicates that her character has the purpose of fulfilling voyeurism or male fantasy, especially taking into account that sex sells[11] and the majority of action film audience is male.[12] Therefore, it is likely that the director uses sex to get the attention of the audience in hope that the audience watches this film until the end. The hypersexualization of characters such as Broughton, a woman whose skills and abilities are traditionally regarded as masculine qualities, is problematic. She becomes a subject and an object simultaneously, as hypersexualization requires body objectification to satisfy the sexual pleasure of the audience.[13] Thus, the action heroine's progress to become equal to male heroes may be regressive.

The hypersexualization of action heroines as a form of empowerment remains a topic of debate, with hypersexualization some scholars considering it empowering. Elizabeth Hills perceives such hypersexualization as transformative and transgressive, showing that action heroines are not a man in a female body and challenging the dichotomy of active-male/passive-female.[14] From this perspective, Jeffrey Brown argues that such hypersexualization is a source of power, as the female body functions as a weapon to seduce men.[15] Moreover, Inness and Schubart regard that hypersexualized action heroines are empowered due to their overt sexual appeal, which defies traditional feminine passivity.[16]

Contrary to those arguments, other scholars consider hypersexualization to undermine the power of these heroines. In their article that examines 173 female action leads, Heldman, Frankel, and Holmes conclude that hypersexualization is a mode of restricting the transgressive power of action heroines within a patriarchal system.[17] Wendy Arons also states how it reduces the symbolic threat that the heroines pose by "reassuring the (male) viewer of his privileged position as the possessor of the objectifying gaze."[18] A more radical stance is taken by Judith Newton, who contends that these heroines lose their transgressive power when they are sexualized because they are invested with traditional feminine characteristics.[19]

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11 Ilaria Boncori, "Mission Impossible: A Reading of the after-Death of the Heroine," *Culture and Organization* 23, no. 2 (March 15, 2017): 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2016.1206548.

12 British Film Institute, "Audiences" (London, 2017), 7–8.

13 Caroline Heldman, Laura Lazarus Frankel, and Jennifer Holmes, "Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)Evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960–2014," *Sexualization, Media, and Society* 2, no. 2 (2016): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/2374623815627789.

14 Elizabeth Hills, "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema," *Screen* 40, no. 1 (1999): 38–50, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/40.1.38.

15 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 57.

16 Sherrie A. Inness, *ACTION CHICKS: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981240; Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema.*, 1st ed. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2007).

17 Heldman, Frankel, and Holmes, "Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)Evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014," 11.

18 Wendy Arons, "'If Her Stunning Beauty Doesn't Bring You to Your Knees, Her Deadly Drop Kick Will'": Violent Women in the Hong Kong Kung Fu Film," in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, ed. Martha McCaughey and Neal King, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 41.

19 Judith Newton, "Feminism and Anxiety in Alien," in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn, 1st ed. (New York: Verso, 1990), 87.

In *Atomic Blonde,* Broughton does not utilize her body as a weapon. Instead, she strives and succeeds to achieve her objectives by using her wit and skills. The hypersexualization of her body does not benefit her in any way. Thus, this hypersexualization may undercut her power.

Furthermore, the film shows male dominance over women since the action heroine repeatedly seeks help from men. Broughton could work alone. In fact, she even chooses to work on her own even though she has been assigned by her superior to work with a Berlin-based MI6 agent, David Percival. Nevertheless, she tends to ignore Percival. Instead, she seeks help from a man named Merkel, who continuously helps her to complete her mission. She also chooses Merkel to assist her over another female agent in the film, Delphine Lasalle, who is also her ally and lesbian partner. This suggests that regardless of Broughton's strength and independence, she still requires assistance from a man to succeed.

The character of Lorraine Broughton seems to have a paradoxical representation. While she has the qualities of a transgressive female figure, she is also hypersexualized and portrayed as dependent on men, which can be disempowering. Therefore, the researchers have sought to discover whether the hypersexualization and dependence disempower the action heroine and, if so, how she is disempowered.

Data and Method

The object of the study is *Atomic Blonde* (2017), an action film based on Antony Johnstad's graphic novel *The Coldest City,* directed by David Leitch, written by Kurt Johnstad, and produced by A. J. Dix, Eric Gitter, Beth Kono, Kelly McCormick, Peter Schwerin, and Charlize Theron.[20] The reading of this film is focused on its main character Lorraine Broughton, particularly on the scenes displaying Broughton while fighting, as well as on her hypersexualization and dependence on male characters. The interpretation of the findings was carried out by applying the theory of female masculinity by Judith Halberstam and the theory of gender, sexuality, and toughness by Jeffrey A. Brown.

The theory of female masculinity can be used to identify and explain the form of female masculinity Broughton possesses. Female masculinity can be defined as a mixture of femininity and hegemonic masculinity performed by female individuals. Halberstam states that female masculinities "promote different kinds of anxieties in both the women who embody them and the cultures that rejects them."[21] Because masculinity carries the power and privilege traditionally reserved for men, female masculinity is seen as a threat. Masculine women, therefore, are rejected by society for longing to possess the power held by men and masculinity. The society then contains this threat by absorbing female masculinity into male hegemonic masculinity's structures. For that reason, masculine women are more likely to reconstruct masculinity's mechanisms. Rather than collecting what has existed in male masculinity, masculine women create new masculinities. They

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20 IMDb, "Atomic Blonde."

21 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1st ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 112.

generate either novel versions of male masculinities or original forms of a developing subculture.[22] This theory is appropriate since it focuses on lesbian masculine women and the subject of this study is a non-heterosexual masculine woman.

      The theory of gender, sexuality, and toughness can be employed to discover the empowering characteristic of Broughton's hypersexualization. This theory asserts that action heroines are women with coexisting masculine and feminine characteristics who are transgressive and capable of expanding the roles and abilities of women.[23] Brown contends that an action heroine's masculinity is visible in her actions and behaviors, whereas her femininity through images of hypersexualization. He claims that action heroines maintain a position of power while simultaneously being a sex symbol. The fighting skills of the action heroine are not the sole reason of why she is dangerous. Sexual appeal also plays a role.[24]

Results

Female Masculinity of the Action Heroine

Lorraine Broughton's gender identity can be defined as an amalgam of emphasized femininity and dominant masculinity. The masculine identity of Broughton is more dominant compared to her feminine identity. It is because her behavior and action in *Atomic Blonde* exhibit courage, toughness, violence and power, along with distinctly minor displays of pain and vulnerability. She also speaks in a calm and rather emotionless manner almost throughout the entire film, including when she asks why Percival murders Lasalle. These traits are traditionally included as masculine.[25]

      On the other hand, the only expressions of Broughton's femininity are through her body and costume. Broughton has a slim and tubular body that conforms to the traditional feminine body ideal,[26] which is a social construct that deems physical attractiveness as one of women's most essential assets and therefore should be possessed and maintained by women.[27] Moreover, Broughton's clothing items are predominantly dresses, jumpsuits, thigh-high boots, and stockings, all of which denote femininity.[28]

      Broughton fighting in feminine outfits, with or without a weapon, is not a rare occurrence in the film, as it is the main evidence of her female masculinity. In the event that weapons are

22 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 276-277.

23 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 43.

24 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 57.

25 Robert J Zeglin, "Portrayals of Masculinity in ' Guy Movies ': Exploring Viewer – Character Dissonance," *Journal of Men's Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 46–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826515624390; Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek, "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses," *Sex Roles* 64, no. 7–8 (2011): 558–559, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7.

26 Fiona Monro and Gail Huon, "Media-Portrayed Idealized Images, Body Shame, and Appearance Anxiety," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 38, no. 1 (2005): 85, https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.20153.

27 Joan Z. Spade, Catherine G. Valentine, and Mary Nell Trautner, *The Kaleidoscope of Gender: Prisms, Patterns, and Possibilities*, 6th ed. (SAGE Publications, Inc, 2019).

28 Mary Celeste Kearney, "Tough Girls in a Rough Game: Televising the Unruly Female Athletes of Contemporary Roller Derby," *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011): 285, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2010.535309.

unavailable, she turns ordinary objects into weapons. Her first fighting scene, for instance, is not a mere performance of masculinity, but also a resignification of a feminine symbol. In this scene, she aggressively assaults a KGB agent with her red high-heeled stiletto. Instead of being a common symbol of femininity, this stiletto becomes a threat to her male opponent as Broughton utilizes it as a weapon. The color of the stiletto symbolizes energy[29] and it is framed in a close-up shot with black-colored background when it is about to be weaponized, further reinforcing the significance of the stiletto. This shift of function and meaning indicates that the stiletto is not a usual instrumental property being used according to its general function.[30] When the stiletto is utilized to attack her enemy, it becomes a metaphorical property. Its function is reinvented to demonstrate that a feminine symbol can be powerful.

Female masculinity is a synthesis of masculinity and femaleness, which results in an outcome that is unpredictable.[31] On this subject, Broughton's version of female masculinity is distinct to the types of female masculinity discussed by Halberstam, which include women whose behavior and appearance are both masculine, as the feminine appearance conceals her masculine behavior. In a patriarchal society, women are considered weak and incapable of engaging in masculine activities. Broughton benefits from this stereotype, as do some other women involved in male environments who use femininity as a masquerade to hide their masculinity.[32] Her feminine body and clothing lure her male opponents into underestimating her abilities. The most noticeable example of this masquerade is when Broughton exits an apartment building where she has just fought a number of German policemen and has encountered other officers who have just arrived to search the building. These policemen are unsuspicious; they calmly approach her before being easily defeated by Broughton without any weapon. Through her action, she defies the boundaries of femininity that requires her to be passive/weak and demonstrates a masculine performance while also appearing feminine.

Her masculine behavior and feminine appearance show how Broughton's gender expression cannot be identified based on gender stereotypes, which traditionally show male- and female-bodied subjects as maintaining their own exclusive set of gender expressions. It is in accordance with Halberstam's statement that masculinity and femininity as gender expressions are not mutually exclusive. Female individuals can perform masculinity and they possess female masculinity—a mixture of femininity and dominant masculinity. Moreover, although Halberstam does not explore the type of masculinity that Broughton performs, the researcher mentions that masculinity, particularly physical toughness, does not always occur with a reduction of femininity.[33] Broughton shows that one is not required to appear masculine to be perceived as a masculine woman, since possessing masculine traits is already sufficient.

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29 Kenneth R. Fehrman and Cherie Fehrman, *Color: The Secret Influence*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004).

30 Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience: An Introduction.*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 72.

31 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 29.

32 J. C. Bernthal, "Femininity and Masquerade," in *Queering Agatha Christie* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 127, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33533-9.

33 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 270.

When Broughton performs masculine acts, she is depicted as superior. In *Atomic Blonde,* Broughton is evidently presented as a strong and tough woman who can survive a high-risk clandestine operation during which she is hunted by male KGB spies and framed by a male MI6 agent who has gone rogue. Broughton possesses the characteristics of the action heroine mentioned by Brown, namely intelligence, confidence, fierceness, and strength. In addition, the masculinity Broughton performs is a means to achieve power. As stated by Brown, "by assuming male traits, they gain access to a form of power (both physical and social) that has been systematically denied to women, while simultaneously demonstrating that the association of 'maleness' with 'power' is not innate but culturally defined."[34]

The film's non-narrative aspects also support her superiority. While performing masculine acts, the camera always shows her from low angle, a framing which is commonly utilized to reinforce a character's superiority and dominance.[35] This is true except for one scene that employs an eye-level angle. The dominant color of her costumes in these scenes is black, which also symbolizes power.[36] Furthermore, the blocking, camera distance, and use of deep and shallow focus contribute to reinforce her power in these scenes.

Female masculinity is usually rejected, as it threatens the patriarchal power structure. Halberstam explains that masculine women generate anxiety for the patriarchal society, endangering the power and privilege reserved for men.[37] Masculine women can intimidate men and make some of them feel less like men. However, because Broughton presents a better performance of masculinity through her actions and behavior than do the male opponents she defeats, the film approves female masculinity, showing that women can be as strong, as tough, as brave, as independent, as masculine as men. Unfortunately, this "approval" comes with a price, which is hypersexualization to reduce the threat that female masculinity poses.

Hypersexualization, Female Masculinity, and Male Superiority

Action heroines are commonly hypersexualized, although this does not always have negative implications. Hypersexualization that is intended to empower heroines and balance their masculine characteristics usually occurs when they allure and use men to their advantage. When this occurs during their masculine acts, it demonstrates that toughness is not a gendered trait. Thus, it makes hypersexualization one form of empowerment.[38] Traditional femininity and hypersexualization thus can become a form of empowerment when the feminine body is utilized as a defense to conceal the heroines' masculine behavior or violent capabilities, since her opponents are prone to underrate the heroine's abilities due to her feminine cover.[39] This is relevant to Broughton's case, since her physical appearance enables her to delude her all-male opponents. With such a body,

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34 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 50.

35 Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, 11th ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 18–19.

36 Fehrman and Fehrman, *Color: The Secret Influence*.

37 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 49.

38 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 55.

39 Boncori, "Mission Impossible: A Reading of the after-Death of the Heroine," 26

men are less likely to suspect that she possesses strength or power that is akin to the strength or power of men.[40] In addition, Broughton's blonde hair may also lead people to presume that she is not an intelligence agent due to the dumb blonde stereotype. This can cause people to think that she does not have the intelligence to become a spy. In addition, being sexually attractive is another stereotype of blonde haired women.[41] With respect to the eminence of female spies as femme fatales, this is instrumental for her, since being perceived to be sexually attractive makes her able to seduce men easily in order to gain intelligence, as did Mata Hari.[42]

With such a feminine appearance, Broughton is able to allure men to complete her mission and this action may result in hypersexualization. Interestingly, she still experiences hypersexualization although her femininity is not employed to help her succeed. Broughton's hypersexualization then serves as a weakness that reduces her transgressive power as an action heroine. In certain circumstances, action heroines are "both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object."[43] However, this argument is not applicable to Broughton's situation, as her hypersexualization does not show power nor earn it for her. In fact, the camera angle in the scenes of hypersexualization is mainly a high angle, which is utilized to indicate inferiority and powerlessness.[44]

Hypersexualization is common to action heroines, who possess masculine and feminine characteristics at once. Between 1960 and 2014, out of 173 action heroines, 43.9% were hypersexualized. 65.6% of them are hypersexualized in the action films released between 2000 and 2010. This number falls to 40% in films released between 2010 and 2014.[45] Despite their rather masculine physique, muscular heroines are still sexualized and objectified.[46] These heroines are hypersexualized to punish them for their power and independence.[47] In other words, the hypersexualization of action heroines is a means to shackle women within the control of patriarchy.

Furthermore, Broughton's feminine clothing and physical appearance apparently relates to male domination. Broughton is distinct from other masculine women because of her feminine appearance. Usually, masculine women are masculine both in terms of behavior and appearance.[48] There are several explanations as to why Broughton is presented differently. The first is the film's

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40 Amanda Roth and Susan A. Basow, "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 28, no. 3 (2004): 245, https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723504266990.

41 Shifman and Lemish, "'Mars and Venus' in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet," 261.

42 Julie Wheelwright, "The Language of Espionage: Mata Hari and the Creation of the Spy-Courtesan," in *Languages and the First World War: Representation and Memory*, 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 164–165.

43 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 47.

44 Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, 17.

45 Heldman, Frankel, and Holmes, "Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)Evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014," 4.

46 Andrea Wright, "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing? The Problematic Representation of Women and the Female Body in 1980s Sword and Sorcery Cinema," *Journal of Gender Studies* 21, no. 4 (2012): 403–404, https://doi.org/10.1080/0958 9236.2012.681183.

47 Wright, "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing? The Problematic Representation of Women and the Female Body in 1980s Sword and Sorcery Cinema," 410.

48 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 41–43.

target audience. As *Atomic Blonde* is an action film, its main target audience is male individuals.[49] When action heroines are "both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object,"[50] it is also related to the male gaze.

She is objectified from the very first scene of this film by showing her with minimal or no clothing at all and in sexual intercourse. As an object, she is displayed for the visual pleasure and enjoyment of the male audience.[51] The idealized image of feminine body is more appealing to male gaze.[52] The masculine body of a butch female does not attract the male gaze; it is not a body to be consumed or objectified.[53] Conversely, Broughton's feminine body attracts the male gaze, which results in projecting the inferiority of woman as a passive object who is being looked at, and the dominance of men as the controller of the gaze. While her masculinity portrays her as a superior figure, her femininity portrays her as an inferior figure because it reduces her capacity to be a transformative figure into a mere object of gaze.

Broughton's feminine body also relates to other male characters, particularly Merkel, from whom she constantly receives help. Her female masculinity is visible only in terms of action, not appearance. This is to demonstrate the dominance of men in this film. Broughton has masculine traits and capabilities, as do other male characters. Broughton has power, but hers does not overpower Merkel's. It is as if the film wants to show that male domination is maintained by showing that women can be as tough, as strong, as capable as men, but also limiting their abilities so much as to not exceed the ability of men.

Atomic Blonde does validate female masculinity. However, it stops at the level of masculine acts. Her physical appearance still represents traditional femininity and it emphasizes that she is a woman—indicating that she will never be like a man. Thus, female masculinity can exist, but its position might never surpass the position of male masculinity. This is because masculinity is regarded as the property of men.[54] In addition, most of the time when Broughton performs masculinity, her face cannot be clearly seen. It is either blurred, covered by a mask, or covered by her hair. It is hard to notice that it really is a woman performing masculinity when the only hint is her feminine clothing. It seems to indicate that masculinity is preserved for men that when a woman performs masculinity, she is made to look less like a woman. If she does look like a woman, she is hypersexualized to compensate her masculinity. Blurring and covering the character's face may due to the purpose of concealing the face of the stunt double. However, Charlize Theron as the actress playing Broughton did almost all of her stunts,[55] so the blurring and covering of Broughton's face is more likely to occur due to a possible ideological reason instead of a technical one.

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49 British Film Institute, "Audiences," 7–8.

50 Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, 47.

51 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 62, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

52 Monro and Huon, "Media-Portrayed Idealized Images, Body Shame, and Appearance Anxiety," 86.

53 Athena Nguyen, "Patriarchy, Power, and Female Masculinity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 55, no. 4 (2008): 677, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360802498625.

54 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 2.

55 Katie O'Malley, "'Atomic Blonde' Stunt Double On The One Thing That Makes Charlize Theron A Badass Fighter," Elle, 2017, https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/culture/news/a37508/atomic-blonde-stunt-double-monique-ganderton/.

Apart from hypersexualization, Broughton's transgressive abilities are further undermined by her constant need for assistance from male characters. Ideally, action heroines work without the help of anyone.[56] However, it is shown that Broughton needs help from other characters who are male, and the most help she receives from Merkel. Broughton depends on Spyglass, a male Stasi agent, since he memorizes the list that she needs to complete her mission. This dependency is mutual, as Spyglass also needs Broughton to protect him. Nevertheless, such interdependency does not exist in her relationship with Merkel.

Merkel is the one she asks for information about East Berlin, the one she asks for help to plan her operations, and the one who eventually saves her life. This is in contrary to Broughton's statement in the beginning of the film that she prefers to work alone and "trusts no one," not even her contact in Berlin, Percival, whom she is meant trust. Her relationship with Merkel shows that she is indeed cooperative and trusts him enough to plan her operations and rescue her, a trust which would have gotten her killed if he turned out to be a villain.

If the filmmakers wanted to show empowering female characters in this film, they could have done it by giving a more significant role to the only other female character, Delphine Lasalle, Broughton's lesbian partner. Lasalle could be the one Broughton asks for help, rather than Merkel. Broughton's character becomes inferior during scenes that include her and Merkel at the same time, although she is the lead character who possesses the capacity of being a transgressive figure. Whereas Broughton is ill-informed, Merkel is knowledgeable. When Broughton is unable to create documents to help transfer Spyglass to West Berlin, Merkel does it for her. When Broughton and Spyglass require cover, Merkel provides it. When Broughton is exposed, unarmed, and physically vulnerable after she almost drowns, Merkel takes her to safety. Broughton and Merkel only appear together in five scenes; in only one of these scenes Merkel does not help Broughton. This indicates that she has a dependence on Merkel. This is in accordance to what Boncori[57] explains: when male and female heroes are present in the same scene, the female hero is regarded as inferior to the male hero. By creating non-mutual dependency between Broughton and Merkel, the film demonstrates that however strong a woman is, she still needs assistance from male individuals.

Considering the ways in which female masculinity is undermined in Broughton's representation, the film simultaneously shows ongoing social change as well as the refusal to accept it. Broughton is among the type of female spies represented as the New Woman whose most valued characteristic is their skill instead of sensuality, which is the most valued characteristic by female spies represented as the femme fatale, a trope based on the myth of Mata Hari. This represents a change that has been developing for around two decades, i.e., shifting the image of female spies who are dangerous merely because they are alluring and seductive into those who are dangerous because they are able to perform the work of male spies.[58] On the other hand, the film suggests its resistance to change by hypersexualizing the female spy and preserving male supremacy through its lead character/female spy's dependence on men.

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56 Inness, *ACTION CHICKS: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, 13.

57 Boncori, "Mission Impossible: A Reading of the after-Death of the Heroine," 13.

58 Rosie White, *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture*, *The Washington Monthly*, 1st ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 1–4.

The Paradox of the Hypersexualized Masculine Action Heroine

By depicting that women can be men's equal without diminishing their femininity, this film gives women an empowering position. This can help to answer the aforementioned question about action heroines that is still debated among scholars. Some scholars argue that action heroines are figurative males because of their masculine traits. Within this view, they are regarded as merely imitating the hegemonic masculinity embodied by typical male action heroes.[59] Other scholars argue that these heroines are transgressive and transformative figures who are able to extend the roles of women.[60] Broughton's character, therefore, cannot be defined as a figurative male due to her own distinct female masculinity traits. Furthermore, she does not cross over the gender binary, but rather embodies both masculinity and femininity simultaneously. She proves that women have the capacity to be more than their gender stereotypes. She is a liberated woman who challenges the strict division of gender binary and surpasses this gender dichotomy. Thus, Broughton's character deserves to be considered as a figure of a transformative woman.

Nevertheless, Broughton demonstrates a paradox of the action heroine within the gender framework. On one hand, she becomes a subject that successfully performs masculinity while maintaining a feminine appearance. This is an empowering stance for women, since not only does it equalize the positions of men and women, it also validates female masculinity as an independent force, giving Broughton's character an opportunity to become a transformative figure. On the other hand, her transgressive abilities are reduced by hypersexualization and her dependence on a male agent. This makes Broughton a regressive figure instead of transgressive, making the position of the action heroine in the action film problematic.

Broughton possesses the abilities, skills, and traits to become a transgressive and trans-formative figure, but they are constrained by the patriarchy. As Heldman, Frankel, and Holmes[61] have argued, women in traditionally masculine territories, such as action films, who perform masculinity will remain inferior, i.e., within the restrains of acceptable femininity. In this case, it refers to hypersexualization and dependence on men. This paradoxical representation of the action heroine can be inferred as a reflection of reality, wherein women's empowerment has progressed, but women in male-dominated fields still face gender-based problems, although the problems are not exactly similar to those presented in the film.[62]

59 Jane Chi Hyun Park, "Fighting Women in Contemporary Asian Cinema: The Celebration of the Inauthentic in My Wife Is a Gangster and Chocolate," *Cultural Studies*, 2013, 254, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.738670.

60 Hills, "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema"; Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*.

61 Heldman, Frankel, and Holmes, "Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)Evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014," 11.

62 Fiana Dwiyanti, "Pelecehan Seksual Pada Perempuan Di Tempat Kerja (Studi Kasus Kantor Satpol PP Provinsi DKI Jakarta)," *Jurnal Kriminologi Indonesia* 10, no. 1 (2014): 29–36; Luísa Saavedra et al., "Looking through Glass Walls: Women Engineers in Portugal," *Women's Studies International Forum* 45 (2014): 27–33, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.04.005; Tessa Wright, "Women's Experience of Workplace Interactions in Male-Dominated Work: The Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Occupational Group," *Gender, Work and Organization* 23, no. 3 (2016): 348–62, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12074; Tasneem Raja, "The Secret History of CIA Women – Mother Jones," Mother Jones, 2013, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/11/women-cia-history-sexism/; Antonieta Rico, "Military Women

Conclusion

Portrayed as a strong, tough, and intelligent action heroine, Broughton can be considered as a transgressive figure. Broughton as an action heroine embodies her own version of female masculinity, which is the hybridization of masculinity and femininity. Her masculine identity is shown through her physical strength, toughness, and behavior, yet it is disguised by her clothing, hairstyle, and physique, all of which adhere to traditional feminine ideals. The film appears to defy the prevailing patriarchal ideology and its traditional gender roles entrenched in society.

Nonetheless, a more critical analysis reveals that as a figure of transgressive woman, Broughton is still represented as a hypersexualized and dependent woman. First, she is portrayed as a sex object in scenes that display her character with minimal and no clothing. Broughton's hypersexualization is not utilized as a source of power. Instead, it is a shackle that restricts her transgressive power by presenting her as an object. Lastly, despite her strength, Broughton is shown as not strong enough to survive on her own to the extent that she depends on men. The implications of these insights are that, although the action heroine is considered a transgressive figure, she is still inferior to men. This is because she is shown as a sex object that is controlled by men as the lookers, and she is not as strong or as tough as male heroes. This film still conveys strong patriarchal ideology.

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