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Alamat
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Universitas Sebelas Maret
Jl. Ir. Sutami 36 A Kenteangan, Surakarta, 57126
Telp./Fax. +62 271 632 488
c-mail: englishdept@uns.ac.id

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Gender and Action Cinema

Sri Kusumo Habsari
Sebelas Maret University

Abstract
The paper discusses the construction of female action heroes in films. The heroines are considered to take over the male positions, although the image they constructed is in contrast to the codes of femininity and owns a challenge to women's conservative roles. Several heroine characters from Hollywood films were selected to answer the problem of such a construction.

Keywords: heroine, femininity, conventional social roles.

Introduction
Feminist scholars have been attracted to discussing the construction of female action heroes who take up space that is usually occupied by male heroes, since their image contradicts the codes of femininity and poses a challenge to women's conventional social role. Most critics of female action heroes focus on the representation of female bodies and female power. The body in action cinema refers to an active physical body that signifies power in Western culture, whereas the female body is conventionally thought of as a passive object, to be looked at rather than in powerful activity.

Body is a social and cultural construction. Both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have argued that the body is the "practical, direct focus of social control". Foucault has also argued that "not chiefly through ideology, but through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity". The theorising by Bourdieu and Foucault indicates how the construction of the body is shaped by the culture. The body is, in Anne Balsamo's words, "a product in that it is a material embodiment of ethnic, racial, and gender identities as

well as a performance of personal identity”.

Moreover, as well as a ‘product’ and a ‘performance’, the body may also be considered as “a process in that it is ‘a way of knowing and marking the world, as well as a way of knowing and marking a self’ ”. The question is then how the body of female hero is constructed in action cinema. In this article, I want to examine the construction of heroic female characters and the context from which they emerge. I will explore the emergence of female action heroes and discuss the problems that feminist critics have seen in the way they are represented in Hollywood action adventure.

Discussion

Mulvey, in her groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” argued that the narrative structure of Hollywood cinema positions the male characters as active and powerful while the woman is the object of desire for the male characters. Through the three levels of cinematic gaze — camera, character, and spectator women are established as “to-be-looked-at”. However, in relation to action-adventure cinema, Tasker has disagreed with Mulvey’s idea of “active/passive division of labour” because both male and female figures are subjects in the narrative as well as objects of spectacle.

The spectacle of the Hollywood action cinema is principally in the presentation of male and female bodies. According to Heinecken, the hero of action cinema is presented as a figure that is able to control his own body and to “overcome all physical suffering”. The spectacle of the male body in terms of his scars and wounds shows that the body is actually vulnerable. The body of the male hero conveys the image of power because of his ability to control his pain. “The hardness of the hero’s body works to define him - as man, as master over the environment” while the female body is defined traditionally as passive, soft and weak with a limited capacity for physical activity.

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4. Ibid.
Because impenetrable hard bodies are required of heroes, the representation of the female hero becomes problematic in Western action-adventure cinema and TV series. A question such as “can the ultimate girl be the ultimate warrior?” is often addressed because the woman warrior contradicts the traits and qualities of “softness, curves, passivity, intuition, indecisiveness, and powerlessness” which conventionally belong to women and femininity. Haskell has written that “precisely because women have traditionally been more peace-loving than men, it’s more ambiguous and more a story when they do take up arms or pursue an enemy into dangerous territory”.

To some extent, the emergence of the action heroine, according to Tasker, is a response to the criticism of images of gendered identity raised by feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Christine Gledhill, Barbara Creed, Tania Modleski, or Mary Ann Doane. However, in her study of Hollywood action cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s, Tasker found that representations of the action heroine were marked by “ambiguities of identities and desires”. In her opinion, “this blurring of categories is crucial to understanding the play of femininity and masculinity over the bodies of male and female characters, a process that has been inflected significantly in the action cinema of recent years”. The blurring of gender categories emerges as a central concern of feminist critics of action-adventure.

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12 Tasker, Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema, 16-17.
Female Body: Sexualization and Victimization

Many scholars criticize the sexualisation and victimisation of the female body. However most of them also stress that action heroines "demonstrate such traditional heroic qualities as determination, self-sacrifice, stamina, and physical strength". Helford has argued that "they are not traditional pin-up, stripper, or model types". However in her perspective, in spite of their "non-conventional femininity" and "sexualization", these female heroines are still constructed as the object of the male gaze. This suggests that the sexualization of the female body continues to be a central component in the construction of female action heroes. In this view, Mulvey's theory of women's image, man as bearer of the look is still applicable.

Most Hollywood action-adventure cinema of the 1970s, in response to the women's movement, provide more images of independent and sexually free heroines, Tasker notes. However, these active and independent heroines are also presented as "fashion plates" with "glamorous sexuality" and thus, she argues, the image of active heroines "does emerge from existing traditions of representation". The interplay between masculinity and femininity emerges in the form of already-existing types and conventions such as "the leather-clad dominatrix" which is "drawn from a stylised cartoon or comic strip tradition". The image of "the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality" and "her availability within traditional feminine terms" produced as a compensation for "the sexual presentation of the hero body through emphasising his activity". In Tasker's opinion, looking at the sexualization of the figure and the comedic aspects to "explode" her heroic actions and "to reassert her femininity", w

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14 Helford, "Postfeminism and the Female Action-Adventure Hero: Positioning Tank Girl".
15 Ibid.
exploitative, and were directed at male rather than female audiences.¹⁴ Schubart develops this idea. She argues, like Tasker, that the action heroine “is a figure of ambiguity; She is beautiful and feminine, yet active and lethal.” However, Schubart is not convinced that these heroines transgress conventional gender roles, or that the pleasures of identification with them are equally open to female and male viewers.¹⁵ She disagrees with “naïve” male critics who argue that “male audiences identify with action heroines ‘in the same way’ they identify with male heroes”. In her opinion, “male identification is not ‘being like them’ but rather fantasizing about ‘being with them,’ sexually.”¹⁶ In her interpretation, the construction of powerful sexy women is not to inspire female counterparts but rather to fulfil the male fantasy that “women are agents of male pleasure”. This mysterious female figure, she argues, is “neither woman nor man but man’s masochistic fantasy of a woman”.¹⁷

In contrast, Edwards challenges the idea that the objectification of the female body is merely “an erotic spectacle”. In her opinion, with “an unusually powerful and active heroine” like the heroine of the film Barb Wire (see Figure 1), who is something of a sadistic dominatrix, the male viewer might not desire her so much as identify with her.¹⁸ Otherwise his masculinity might be compromised by occupying the position of the masochist in her power. Edwards sees Barb Wire, an ‘excessive’ figure with her big breasts associated with weapons (she has “guns and guns”), as having the potential to undercut patriarchal expectations. She proposes that “the

¹⁴ Tasker, Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema, 18-20.
¹⁶ loc.
¹⁷ ibid.
very existence of ‘perverse’ female figures like the dominatrix in traditional representations of femininity points to the inherent instability of binary categories of gender”. 21

So there is no ready agreement among Western feminist critics about the meanings of the sexy female body in action films and the kinds of identification that are available to male and female viewers.

Female Body: Masculinization and Muscularity
In the 1980s, in response to feminist criticism of Hollywood representations of powerful women, Tasker noted “the heroine’s move from her position as a subsidiary character within the action narrative to the central role of action heroine, figure who commands the narrative”. She also noted that the heroine’s “muscular appearance responded to “the growth of women’s involvement in bodybuilding as sport and what this means for the development of shifting ‘masculine’ identities for women”.22 Similarly, O’Day has also noted that “a series of gender transactions, and sometimes, gender theorizing, can be seen to take place ... traded on the bodies of action heroes and heroines”.23

Figure 2: Muscular female action hero
This new representation, according to Tasker, shows that gender identity was “being inscribed almost exclusively over the tortured figure of the white male body” and that “masculinity” was not limited to the construction on the male body.24 Although in Tasker’s view the emergence of muscular female action heroes signifies a positive response to feminism, indicating the possibility of developing musculature on the female body, she has argued that this female masculinity poses problems for the binary concept of gender identity. The question she has raised is how to read a hard female body. 25

21 Ibid., 47.
22 Tasker, Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema, 132.
Brown has also noted the problematic masculinisation of female heroine, which in his view is caused by the binary structure which "situates men as active, women as passive; men as violent, women as having violence done to them". He agrees with Jeanine Basinger that the representation of female heroines should be concerned with changing their psychology so that it does not mean "really only boys in girl clothing". In Brown’s opinion, the heroine’s possession of guns and muscle, which are considered male icons, shows the "masculinisation of the female body that is equated with the masculinisation of the character’s performed gender role". With this in mind, he has further asserted, "masculinity is so essentially linked with “natural” superiority of men in power relations that it semiotically overthrows biological identity. The muscular woman is seen as a gender cross-dresser".

Brown has also argued that “masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive identities". The masculine undershirt (see figure ...16) The masculine undershirt (see figure 2), which the female hero wears, “is reconfigured dress as feminine dress, and the feminine body is equipped with a masculine gun”. This image reduces “the apparently conflicting signifiers of feminine and masculine iconography”. With this image: “(Just because) she looks like a woman does not mean she is a one, and just because she acts like a man does not mean she is one”, it also suggests “the artificiality of both masculine and feminine roles” and “the manipulation of gender identity” in action cinema.

In her later book, Working Girls, Tasker argued that the exploitation of the stereotypes of the butch, the tomboy and the feisty heroine for building female characters as fighters proposes “an articulation of gender and sexuality that foregrounds a combination of conventionally masculine and feminine elements". With the muscular development in her body and in her “masculine” costumes the heroine represents the well-established images of tomboy and butch; she represents an image of independent women who do not display passive and hysterical

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17 Ibid., 62.
18 Ibid., 65.
19 Ibid., 94.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 67.
22 Tasker, Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema, 68.
femininity. However, she has also argued that the power of the female action hero is undermined when the “motivating factor” that is provided to explain her performing such heroic actions, defining her as exceptional, is that she is acting as “a mother to protect the children” or as “a lost or loved father to mobilise the stereotype of the tomboy” or as “a fetishistic figure of fantasy derived from comic books and soft pornography”.

Action Chicks
In the 1990s, American action movies allowed a space for female characters to take on more central action roles, and “central male/female partnerships are increasingly common although solo female protagonists remain relatively rare”. The interesting point about these action heroines is that they are depicted as “beautiful, sexy and tough”. They “command their narratives, invariably driving vehicles, shooting guns, wielding weapons or fighting in hand-to-hand combat better than their (frequently male) adversaries”. However, they are “no longer the masculinised muscular body rather the slim yet strong body, which may be excessively feminised or boyish”. Tasker considers this figure as a post-feminist action heroine because of the combination of glamour and action. According to O’Day, this portrayal shows how Mulvey’s thesis of feminine qualities linked to passivity, sexual availability and to-be-looked-at-ness can be deconstructed and these qualities “can also be seen as a source of active femininity and strength”. They are sexually attractive but their sexy performance is not linked to weakness or passivity, rather they use their appealing body to get what they desire.

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35 Ibid., 69.
36 ——, Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema, 74.
37 O’Day, “Beauty in Motion: Gender, Spectacle, and Action Babe Cinema,” 20
38 Yvonne Tasker, “Family/Romance: Reading the Post-Feminist Action Heroine” (paper presented at the Media Research Conference, University of Tampere, 31 January 2004),
www.uta.fi/laitokset/tiedotus/Mediatutkimuspaivat/PAPERIT/MTP04YvonneTasker.pdf
39 O’Day, “Beauty in Motion: Gender, Spectacle, and Action Babe Cinema,” 20
historically, the 1990s signified the emergence of girl power in America, "the newly aggressive and confident girl cultures." To some extent, the emergence of a generation of girls and young women who refuse "the dutiful, gentle, and invariably good" traditional heroine manifests a post-feminist movement. These girls are characterised by the "physical strength and stamina, superiority and dominance, courage and determination" associated with masculinity. However, at the same time they embody "the contradictions of the post-feminist era: she is both radical and conservative, real and unreal, feminist and feminine".

The continuing debates within feminist film criticism stem from the assumption that representations are bound to the logic of a gendered binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. As most accounts are based on the framework of this binary opposition, the representation of female action heroes is often criticised as "phallic, unnatural or figuratively male". Against the traditional binaristic logic, Hills argues that "action heroines represent something of a methodological crisis for feminist film theory and its theorizing of active and aggressive female characters". She suggests that because the representation of female action heroes changes over time, following historical changes in the definition of gender, the feminist theorist needs to "transform some of her habitual responses on how to read the active women when confronted with the image of the action heroine".

Conclusion

The emergence of female action heroes who take space in action cinema in some ways shows the responses to the feminist film criticism to the construction of action heroine, however, feminist critics have considered that these constructions were problematic. The "problem" presented by the female action heroine concerns the lack of fit between gender and body, when body and gendered behaviour do not correspond as they should - the masculinised female body, the feminised male body. This problem in Western action cinema has

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2. Ibid., 4.
3. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 51.
usually been discussed in terms of a binary understanding of gender, whereby one gender is understood as the polar opposite of the other, which is developed from Western epistemology the philosophy of dualism.

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Yvonne Tasker, "Family/Romance: Reading the Post-Feminist Action Heroine" (paper presented at the Media Research Conference, University of Tampere, 31 January 2004), www.uta.fi/laitokset/tiedotus/Mediatutkimuspaivat/P ERT/MTPO4YvonneTasker.pdf