Ethics and emancipation in postfeminist Hollywood

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Abstract

The thesis develops new methods to critique postfeminist film by combining research into production cultures with an analysis of representations of women's ethical subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Tania Modleski, Angela McRobbie and Yvonne Tasker, the thesis argues that critiques of postfeminism centered on evaluations of “positive” and “negative” representations has resulted in a discursive stalemate. This stalemate signals the need to consider new ways of thinking about postfeminist film.

The first half of the thesis reports on original research of 700 films from 1980 to 2009. This research, supplemented with data from Martha Lauzen and Stacy Smith, demonstrates that men are overwhelmingly over-represented in key creative roles while women's participation rates have stagnated or are in decline. The data also reveals how traditional expectations of women's labour are repeated within creative industries and in particular Hollywood.

The second half of the thesis concerns the concept of ethical subjectivity. Starting with an overview of the philosophical category of the ethical, the concept is developed into a broad analytic framework with reference to specific feminist demands. A number of popular and high-grossing Hollywood films that are historically subject to feminist analysis are reconsidered using this new framework. This second look reveals the ambiguity that operates as a means to hide the regulation of women's ethical subjectivity in postfeminist film.

The synthesis of these two approaches demonstrates how postfeminism acts as a proxy for patriarchy in the management of the meaning and scale of feminism and women's emancipation in Hollywood. This result shows the potential value in considering labour and production as part of cultural analysis of postfeminism and indeed cultural studies more broadly.
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Introduction

In the definitive battle of *Kill Bill Volume 1* (dir. Tarantino, 2003) the vengeful Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman) takes on the “Crazy 88” gang in the House of Blue Leaves. In just under seven minutes she has dismembered, decapitated and cleaved a total of 57 gangsters. Kiddo ends her scene with her arms outstretched, a sword in each hand, as the blood of men sprays from their severed limbs and pours from their pierced bellies.

While promoting this film Tarantino is interviewed by Jan Wahl, a film critic and journalist for KRON-TV San Francisco. In the interview Wahl challenges Tarantino’s claim that the film, which features exaggerated and aestheticised violence, is suitable for children and empowers young women. In the exchange Wahl asks Tarantino how they would be empowered. Tarantino answers, with some exasperation:

[I]t empowers women... it empowers girls by the fact that Uma Thurman is a female warrior, a female avenger... this is a film about women, not about cute girls going teeheehee (Tarantino in Wahl, 2003)

Tarantino’s answer supposes that empowerment is a process through which socio-political power is diffused without mediation between image and audience. For Tarantino the “how” was understood as asking “by what narrative means are women empowered?”. That is to say, the *how* of empowerment is a mechanism within the storyline itself. What Tarantino fails to respond to is the “how” in Wahl's question which means “what are the mechanisms that constitute and mediate this empowerment?”. This second “how” cuts through a multiplicity of locations in what Metz (1986) calls the *cinematic institution*. The institution Metz refers to here is the whole of the cinematic process, from the moment of creative conception to the moment of consumption. Unlike apparatus theory, which emphasises the mechanical processes of cinematic representation (including the embodied experience of the cinema itself) this operates not just at the level of the industrial-mechanical but at the psycho-social level also. The cinematic institution is what Metz call the “psychoanalytic and sociological” of cinema (p. 7). It is in a sense the political economy of cinema combined with the “mental machinery” of the
audience. The “how” then asks how this cinema is formed, under what economic and social conditions it can come to being and how cinema reproduces and distributes power. Furthermore it contextualises these questions with respect to the affective, intellectual and psychological state of audience and creator. To answer this question one must follow the line from production to audience, and back again.

There is a third possible interpretation of Wahl's question which asks “to what end are women empowered?”. This is a more significantly *ethical* question. This ethical frame refers to something in addition to the *causal* relation between cinema and culture and looks towards what women *ought* to be empowered to do. So, while Tarantino puts Beatrix Kiddo centre-stage this does not necessitate that she is the subject which propels an ethical narrative. This disjunction between the ethics of what constitutes empowerment and the representation of that empowerment is a key theme taken up throughout this thesis.

Tarantino's answer is not without use, and Tarantino himself should not be simply written off for giving an arguably naive answer. Indeed it is *because* he attempts to put women in roles other than what he describes as the “girlfriend at the back” that he can be meaningfully discussed. Questions of whether Tarantino and his films are properly feminist or anti-woman, anti-racist or just a pastiche of racist stereotypes, have been numerously addressed in both scholarly work (e.g hooks, 1996; Coulthard, 2007; Waites, 2008) and in online feminist, anti-racism and film theory communities (for example; Wood, 2007 and Stuller, 2009). Yet if he were overtly racist or misogynist he could be easily dismissed on those grounds. It is the ambiguity of Tarantino's work that makes him the subject of so much feminist discussion. This ambiguity is between themes of transgression (women's violence, revenge, sexuality etc) and themes of tradition (motherhood, femininity, beauty etc). This ambiguity allows Tarantino to “empower” his female characters while keeping them within existing social structures. For example in *Kill Bill* the condition of having a transgressive, tough, violent woman is to retain her femininity through traditional motherhood. The audience is reminded of her femininity through conformity with already existing expectations of femininity, such as tender moments with her child in the closing scenes of the film.

While this ambiguity is important to discuss it does miss one point: What is the ambiguity in his
work *not* in relation to? What I mean by this is that ambiguity is an imprecision or contention in the relation between multiple ideas or images and as a consequence any discussion of ambiguity excludes that which lies outside the relation. It is not simply that in a film there may be pros and cons in the way women are represented but that the very notion of what might be a pro and con is indistinct or indeterminate.

**Ethics and Emancipation in Hollywood**

The hypothesis I test in this thesis is that there exists a broad culture (which Tarantino is symptomatic of) in Hollywood that does not advance the primarily *ethical* demands of feminism. In addressing the ambiguity of Tarantino’s work I claim that what is missed is the fundamental ethical imperatives of feminism which requires a critique of systematic structures of oppression felt by women. The thesis looks for what Hollywood misses and what it recognises in the feminist emancipatory demand. Taking the second and third understandings of Wahl’s question as a starting point I follow two modes of inquiry to investigate this hypothesis.

The first line of inquiry will be an empirical investigation into gender and creative labour in Hollywood over the last thirty years. By demonstrating the scale and scope of men’s over-representation in the industry I will establish the gendered contexts in which Hollywood produces its cinema. The results of this investigation prompt the question: can an industry which is demonstrably *patriarchal* ever be thought to be able to properly represent women and feminism? An empirical account of gender in Hollywood serves a number of wider purposes. First, it is an accessible and persuasive demonstration of contemporary gender inequality that can be used by advocacy and lobbying groups to advance the feminist struggle for equality. Second, it offers the opportunity to develop better targeted public policy through a nuanced understanding of the industry and third it demonstrates the ongoing need for feminism to engage with the politics of labour and production. This builds upon the work of theorists such as Tania Modelski, Sarah Projansky, Yvonne Tasker and Angela McRobbie who have primarily

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1 Chapter three takes up the matter of what I mean by ethical in more detail but broadly speaking here I am referring to the different kinds of formulations of feminism presented by Berfoggen (2006) - influenced by de Beauvior - that is grounded in “a feminist critique and ethical demand”, by Ahmed, particularly with respect to Levinas (1998) and Young’s discussion of communicative ethics and the ethics of care (1997). The ethical demands of feminism are not intended to represent all of feminist theory and activity.
focused on film as it appears on screen, and researchers such as Martha Lauzen, Stacy Smith and Vicki Mayer who have demonstrated the importance of production and labour in feminist media studies.

The second mode of inquiry will analyse the gendered representation of ethics in Hollywood cinema. To do so I will construct the ethical as a reference point for feminist analysis of cinema. While not meant as a universal and exclusive approach, the concept of ethical subjectivity is developed as a means by which certain fundamentally emancipatory demands are recognised in narrative and character construction. The hope is that this idea will add a means by which the ambiguity evident in Tarantino's example, and encouraged by broader aspects of postfeminist sensibility, can be reconsidered (see Gill, 2007 and McRobbie, 2007 on the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility).

Because Hollywood is part of a cinematic institution that is sociological, industrial and psychological a feminist response to cinema must also cover these three bases. If one is to subject what appears on screen to a particular feminist demand then the same question ought to be posed to the mechanisms by which that screen is populated. In this way the two modes of investigation – the empirical and theoretical – are linked not as a causal relation (though this may be the case) but by their mutual embedding in a feminist ethical demand.

Through an analysis of available data I will demonstrate the scale and scope of male over-representation in creative labour using the work of Martha Lauzen, Stacey Smith and my own original research. This will put a question mark over many positive representations of women that have appeared in mainstream Hollywood film. When feminism is itself under a male gaze, witnessed through the appropriation of feminist discourses within a patriarchal industry, then any representation of feminism from that industry, no matter how empowering, is suspect. This thesis argues that far from producing ambiguity this process ensures that the most radical, and unifying, aspect of feminism – its emancipatory politics - is lost.
Outline of chapters

In the first chapter I develop the problem of ambiguity, which I relate to the concept of postfeminism. I explore the ways scholars have approached postfeminism within Hollywood, the themes and narrative devices that are most frequently the matter of discussion. After describing the present state of feminist engagement with postfeminist Hollywood I argue that after three decades of ongoing critique there exists a kind of deadlock between the two discourses. I suggest that this deadlock could be circumvented by reconsidering the nature of postfeminist ambiguity through a synthesis of empirical and ethical modes of enquiry.

Where chapter one sets out to ground the theoretical problem, chapter two provides a contemporary engagement with Tania Modleski’s influential argument in *Feminism without Women* (1992). This chapter draws on existing research in the area in order to establish the scale and scope of male over-representation in Hollywood including an account of when and where this dominance has been broken, breached or reinforced. I will map the number of women working in the top grossing films as directors, producers and writers from 1980 until the present. The point here is not that male creative labour is necessarily anti-/non-feminist but that such gendered disparity poses a basic opposition: Either women are under-represented because they are innately inferior to men as cultural producers or women are under-represented on the basis of gender discrimination. This is significant because if cinema, as a mode of cultural reproduction, is itself discriminatory then the product of cinema, which is to say culture, is also compromised by this discrimination.

Chapter three turns from the empirical to the philosophical in advancing the structural perspective outlined above. Having demonstrated the scope of male domination in Hollywood I outline my conception of “ethical subjectivity” and its relation to feminism and cinema. I will construct a simple framework of ethical subjectivity around three key ideas - responsibility, sovereignty and radical choice. This is then used to evaluate the extent to which characters within films are represented as ethical subjects. The chapter will also explain how the ethical subject relates to feminism by arguing that ethical subjectivity is a necessary condition of emancipation. It further considers how the concept provides new insights into dominant
representations of women in mainstream cinema. I take the framework of ethical subjectivity and use it as an analytic tool in the discussion of a number of Hollywood films drawn from the data used in chapter two. These films will be discussed with respect to the common postfeminist themes identified in chapter one and the three key aspects of ethical subjectivity just identified. Each particular film acts as a practical application of ethical subjectivity as a critical tool. I discuss the ways that women’s ethical subjectivity is represented, mediated or ignored.

In the concluding chapter I synthesise the multiple threads of my argument. First I address the issue of the postfeminist stalemate by evaluating the effectiveness of the concept of ethical subjectivity to provide new avenues of critique. Secondly I suggest that the mediation of women’s ethical subjectivity identified in the films of chapter three reflects a necessary effect of the absence of women’s ethical subjectivity in Hollywood creative labour. Finally the chapter reflects on the value of synthesising studies of production and culture and proposes opportunities for further research.
Chapter One: The Postfeminist Stalemate

This chapter argues that current feminist engagement with so called postfeminist popular culture has reached a stalemate centred on a narrow range of discursive themes. I suggest that a resolution to this stalemate can be found in new avenues of empirical and theoretical research that re-emphasise feminist political/ethical demands in their framework. The chapter will first explore the term postfeminism, drawing primarily on the work of Sarah Projansky, Tania Modleski and Angela McRobbie to understand the structure and logic of postfeminism. It will then move on to identify three key narrative themes which function as points of ongoing antagonism between feminism and postfeminism. The narrowly defined and repetitive nature of this antagonism will be used to illustrate the need for new means to think through postfeminism. Finally I explain how the thesis seeks to do this through the synthesis of empirical and ethical enquiry.

The Logic of postfeminism

In the 1970s television audiences in the US began seeing small changes in the way women were represented on screen. As in the world beyond television women began appearing in roles outside the domestic sphere and as leading characters themselves. One example of this would be The Bionic Woman (1976-1978) which was a spin-off of male-centred The Six Million Dollar Man (1974-1978). The lead character in The Bionic Woman appeared first in The Six Million Dollar Man and proved popular enough to support her own show. As with the original, The Bionic Woman spin-off chronicled the career of a secret agent, Jaime Sommers, who had gained super-human powers through special implants. While still conforming to many traditional narratives (such as heterosexual romance), and often showing Sommers as weaker than her male counterpart, The Bionic Woman was new in that it represented the female body as something that could be considered tough, active and strong. It also demonstrated the audience demand for leading female characters and the television industry's willingness to respond to that demand. Similarly, Charlie's Angels (1976-1981) saw women replacing men as the primary source of action within a television series.

The diversity of these films; their different genres, narratives and aesthetic traditions hides a commonality between them. This commonality is sufficiently identifiable that they can be considered to form a distinct 'body' of cinema. What binds them is that though they transgress the social norms of their time they nonetheless retain an ambiguous relation towards those norms. More specifically they make use of a set of narrative devices that while transgressive in some sense nonetheless require that women remain faithful to a traditional set of archetypes. Feminism is kept at a distance, either explicitly or through omission. It is not the stories or aesthetic that brings these films together but the logic of their representation of women – a logic I will call the postfeminist logic.

The term postfeminism is a passionately contested one. For some, such as Brooks (1997), Genz and Brabon (2009), it represents a positive maturing of feminist thought. It is characterised by a recognition of the limitations of second-wave feminist politics, particularly in relation to the intersection of race, class and sexuality with what is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a middle-class white woman's feminism. For many others it represents a shift away from feminism rather than a progression of the movement. It is marked by distancing of women from feminism rather than a bringing-into. Although the criticisms of feminism that the likes of Brooks and Genz make ought to be addressed, there doesn't seem to be a particular case as to why those criticisms
must be made from a "post" feminist position. Springer argues that while these criticisms may be appropriate for second-wave feminism, it is feminism, not postfeminism that has done real work to address these problems:

postfeminism seeks to erase any progress toward racial inclusion that feminism has made since the 1980's. It does so by making racial difference, like feminism itself, merely another commodity for consumption (Springer, 2007, p. 251)

Similarly Nurka argues that postfeminism seeks to dissect a dead, failed, body of feminism while failing to recognise, or denying, its own relation to that body. In other words, postfeminism refuses the very matter it is “post” to:

Not only does postfeminism not ‘see’ the body it has so mercilessly killed off, but it reads this body according to its own representations of it. In other words, whilst postfeminism is busy claiming its authority on the basis of a dead, irrelevant feminism, it is founding this status on the idea of feminism as located in the 1960s and 1970s. (Nurka, 2002)

Indeed, some of the most vigorous critics of middle-class white feminism, such as bell hooks (especially hooks, 1984), still confidently refer to themselves as feminist while distancing their criticism from postfeminism. Postfeminism in this sense can be thought of as not a critical engagement with feminism but as a cultural distancing from it. Along these lines Projansky (2001, pp. 66-69), identifies five manifestations of postfeminism:

- Linear postfeminism, which positions feminism as an historical artefact;
- Backlash postfeminism, which is a clear and unambiguous attack on feminism;
- Equality and choice postfeminism, which declares that the goals of feminism have been achieved now that women have free and equal choice;
- Sex-positive postfeminism, which distances itself from what is perceived to be the anti-sex feminism; and
- The claim that "men can be feminists too", which places discourses of men's experience and masculinity within the scope of feminism.
In postfeminist cinema and the commentary that surrounds it, it is the equality and choice postfeminism and the "men can be feminists too" claim that are most common - as the following discussion will show. It will be these manifestations which will primarily inform the understanding of the term postfeminism throughout the thesis.

Modleski and McRobbie take up these three manifestations in greater detail. Both argue that postfeminism represents a particular means of rendering feminism redundant. Feminism is not necessarily rejected, but placed elsewhere. For Modleski, it is placed in (or perhaps more fittingly; returned to) the hands of men. For example by direct appropriation of feminism to the exclusion of women, where women's issues are re-articulated as men's issues or through the shift of women's issues to “gender” and then to “masculinity”. For McRobbie that elsewhere is in an indeterminate past:

postfeminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12).

McRobbie further argues that postfeminism does more than just suggest that feminism is no longer needed, it seeks to re-install many of the discourses that feminism seeks to overcome (McRobbie, 2004). Yet it differs from conservative anti-feminism in that it is not simply a call for a return to a pre-feminist state. It celebrates the victories of feminism; women's sexual liberation, economic independence, political representation but it does not celebrate these as feminist victories. In this sense it does not attempt an engagement with the political and cultural structures that feminism still contends are oppressive.

In Feminism Without Women, Modleski (1991) describes a symptom of the postfeminist logic as the use of male voices to articulate feminist politics, or more precisely, the interruption of a politics of difference by the appropriation of femininity/feminism by men. Modleski uses the film Three Men and a Baby (1987) to illustrate how this functions. In the film three straight bachelors find on their doorstep a newly born baby girl and attempt to, reluctantly at first, raise her. Modleski notes how this is a reaction to the feminist political engagement with unpaid
labour, housework and so on. Much of the humour in the film comes from the difficulties the men have with the work of raising a child, balancing work with the kind of affective labours required to raise children and maintain a home.

Modleski argues that on one hand, we can appreciate the film as an attempt to speak to fathers, to articulate the "legitimate desire on the part of women for men to become more involved in interpersonal relationships, to be more nurturing as individuals, and to assume greater responsibility for childcare" (Modleski, 1991, p. 88). On the other hand, Modleski notices the twist that the postfeminist logic entails. The outcome of male engagement with this demand is the complete erasure of women:

*Three Men and a Baby* demonstrates the insufficiency of this solution to the problem of misogyny ... it is possible ... for men to respond to the feminist demand for their increased participation in childrearing in such a way as to make women more marginal than ever (Modleski, 1991, p. 88).

The postfeminist absence of women that Modleski recognises can be seen not only in representations but also in the industries that produce those representations (Hollywood, television networks etc). As demonstrated in the next chapter, women are similarly erased in Hollywood as creators of culture and thus when films deploy feminist discourses, they are necessarily returned to us through a male voice.

Though McRobbie and Modleski talk about postfeminism in a slightly different way they nonetheless are referring to the same logic. Where Modleski situates feminism’s relegation to the past in the reassertion of a male voice as feminism, McRobbie concentrates on the re-inscription of prefeminist discourses in representations of women who have known feminism. This difference should not be read as a disagreement on the causes and effects of postfeminism. In some ways Modleski, writing a decade before McRobbie, uncovers the cause (or part thereof) and McRobbie, the effect. Postfeminism is in this case the result of twisting feminism back through patriarchy: a feminism that operates not in opposition to patriarchy but within it, as a contradiction that sustains existing power relations rather than disrupting them.
McRobbie uses the *Bridget Jones Diary* films as a prime example of how this logic works in popular culture. For McRobbie the films situate Bridget as simultaneously liberated (financially free, happy to wear merely functional underwear, drinking and smoking at the pub) but still operating within the same heteronormative patriarchal discourse (desperate for a husband, girlish, clumsy, emotional and irrational). The postfeminist suggestion that McRobbie identifies (2008, p. 19) in *Bridget Jones* is that while we may tinker with some lifestyle issues and offer equal pay or sexual freedom, sexed (as opposed to gendered) identities are fixed and feminine desire is, by natural inclination, in sync with the unacknowledged patriarchy. While Bridget's anxiety about finding a husband is one such example perhaps the most problematic is the way in which sexual harassment is deployed within the script. The following dialogue (through the office instant messaging system) takes place between Bridget and her boss Daniel, who is also one of her love interests, after he has commented on her miniskirt:

**BRIDGET:** Shut up, please. I'm very busy and important.

P.S. How dare you sexually harass me...

in this impertinent manner.

**DANIEL:** Message Jones.

Mortified to have caused offense.

Will avoid all non-P.C. overtones in future.

Deeply apologetic.

P.S. Like your tits in that top.

While arguably unprofessional, it is not Bridget's sexual advances which make the conversation problematic but that the conversation is framed in such a way that feminism is placed outside of or contrary to women's experience. Thanks to feminism both Bridget and Daniel know what sexual harassment is, but their recognition of this discourse operates as a means to dismiss it. In this interaction sexual harassment is something that interferes with natural sexual desire. Bridget explicitly deploys the defense of sexual harassment as harmless office flirtation:
Very bad start to the year.

Have been seduced by informality...
of messaging medium into flirting with office scoundrel.

And in doing so it reinforces a mythology in which women secretly want to be sexually harassed. As McRobbie notes, scenes like this discipline feminism (and feminists) for taking things too far:

>[P]ostfeminism in this context seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and re-instating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent (McRobbie, 2009, p.12).

The lesson of this scene from *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is that feminism risks spoiling the game by taking itself too seriously. It is recognised and accounted for (yes, everyone knows the politically correct terminology) and then dismissed (sexual harassment is a great way to flirt). Feminism just does not understand what women want.

*Disclosure* (dir. Levinson, 1994) gives a similarly precise example of Modleski’s take on postfeminism. The film deals with the issue of sexual harrassment by reversing the expected gender roles that would normally be expected. By comparing these two encounters with sexual harassment we can see how both McRobbie's and Modleski's account of postfeminism unfolds in popular culture. *Disclosure* is the story of Tom, a wealthy married man, who finds himself being blackmailed and sexually harassed by his female boss in an electronics company. As his position is facing scrutiny due to a failing product line she is able to coerce him into sexual activity by threatening his job. When he complains, the female executive accuses him of assaulting her. A female subordinate helps to clear his name and returns Tom to his former lifestyle and career. What makes this film especially interesting is not the simple inverting of gender roles, but that the film deploys identifiably feminist discourses throughout the film. For example; during an argument with his wife, the victim Tom declares "Sexual harassment is about power. When did I have the power? When?". The effect of this Nurka argues is to remove gender as a category of understanding power:
[T]he body in Crichton’s narrative—the site at which sexual harassment finds its
definition, and the site through which relations of power move and coalesce—is
unmarked by gender, race, or class (Nurka, 2002).

Disclosure tries to erase the female body as a sexually harassed body and refigure that body as
ungendered while at the same time it also fails to erase the female body as a sexualised body—
Meredith's body is continually re-inscribed as a sexual object (Nurka, 2002). So, where feminist
critique of male culpability is concerned, the body is universalised, but when it is the subject of
male desire the body has its (female) gender re-inscribed. In this way Disclosure illustrates the
way in which postfeminism manages to carry feminist issues without carrying feminism along
with it. The socio-political problem (in this case sexual harassment) is reconfigured not as a
gendered problem, which is to say it becomes about men, and the means by which that problem
is articulated and critiqued, which is to say feminism, is forgotten.

So long as a problem does not disrupt patriarchy, it can be accommodated. As with Three Men
and a Baby an issue which in reality affects women is turned into an issue for men to be
addressed by men. Sexual harassment is a joke to be dismissed in Bridget Jones’s Diary, but in
Disclosure it is treated as a serious matter. The problem for Modleski in these kinds of
circumstances is not that such things do not occur to men, but rather that feminism is co-opted
by those who make up the privileged class to tell their own stories (Modleski, 1991). This means
that feminism as a social movement becomes another vessel by which men can address their
own interests.

Films like Bridget Jones' Diary, Disclosure and Three Men and a Baby are undoubtedly successful.
Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (2008) argue that postfeminist 'chick flick' films may work
because they are able to articulate a number of the really existing anxieties that women
encounter: "it is just as likely that chick flicks allow women to enjoy imaginative possibilities or
to indulge in vicarious experience that assists them in returning to the challenges that face
them." (Ferriss & Young, p. 16). Perhaps what troubles ardent critics of postfeminism is that the
solution to the anxieties that postfeminism articulates is not a re-engagement with feminist
critique of patriarchy (which, confusingly, is precisely what Ann Brooks (Brooks, 1997, p. 4) calls
postfeminism), but a return to pre-feminist discourse.

Critical feminist responses to postfeminist films are not always negative. Holly Hassel, for example, considers that on balance postfeminist representations in film offer a ground from which more strongly feminist representations of women can evolve. She argues that at the very least the increasing numbers of female action heroines points towards a change in "the scope and trajectory of American action films" (Hassel, 2008, p. 208). Hassel notes how the emergence of the female "babe scientist", a sidekick to the male hero(es), paved the way for the possibility of the female action heroine, suggesting that from here there is the possibility of further evolution in the depth that cinema engages with feminism. Similarly, Carol Dole (2008) argues that though not without its own problems, films such as Legally Blonde offer a positive and encouraging narrative in which women can “have it all” (career, man, independence, money, education, shopping, fun) without sacrificing anything. However, I think McRobbie is correct to eye this accomplishment with some scepticism. By reducing the feminist project to simply the opportunity for women to "have it all" postfeminist discourse dodges the crucial question of what constitutes this “all” and who or what is at stake in taking it. In the case of Legally Blonde having it all is simply something that is not accessible for women outside of the white, middle class of the United States of America.

This combination of consumer freedom and heterosexual normativity recalls Projansky's (2006) choice and equality postfeminism. This consists of "narratives about feminism's 'success' in achieving gender 'equity' and having given women 'choice'" (p. 67). As Elspeth Probyn notes this choice is not a free one, but one in which only the correct choice is offered:

[T]he ideology of choiceoisie operates not on choice but as a reaffirmation of what has supposedly always been there, always already there for the right women. (Probyn, 1993, p. 279)

Though not at all absent in film, it is television that perhaps offers more accessible examples of this category. As Dow (2002) and Kaufer-Busch (2009) argue shows such as Ally McBeal, Sex and the City and Desperate Housewives offer audiences a postfeminist world in which the only task left for women is the discovery of happiness. To that end, the opportunities that equality and
freedom of choice offer are posited as the locations in which this happiness is to be found. The choice is between motherhood and career, between monogamy and promiscuity, between designer mini-skirts and designer shoes. However these choices are represented in such a way that the boundaries these choices establish are fixed. Possibilities outside these boundaries are considered foolish, naïve and outdated.

Take for example the character of Phoebe from the sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004). The humour that Phoebe brings to the series is to be found in her representation as a kind of modern day clueless hippy. Her critical reflection on her friends' performance of gender and consumerism is invoked only so that it can be regarded as the foolishness of a simpleton. So, as in the postfeminist logic, critique of existing socio-political structures is defused by the positioning of the critic as a ridiculous subject. Thus the choice to not choose, that is to say, the choice to not engage in freedom-as-choice, is painted as the domain of the ridiculous, hysterical and one-dimensional. Žižek identifies this phenomenon more broadly as "Enjoyment as a Political Factor", arguing that politics (in the sense of what politicians do) is more and more "concerned with ways of soliciting, or controlling and regulating, jouissance" (Žižek, 2006, p. 309). For Žižek, and so too with critics of postfeminism, this injunction to enjoy, what Dow calls the "politics of happiness" (Dow, 2002, p259), is necessarily post-political.

As I have shown so far, one of the key aspects of postfeminism is the seemingly contradictory framing of positive representations alongside narratives that seem to undermine or act as a disavowal of feminist politics. Much of the critical scholarship on popular representations of women has been of films that have been either marketed as empowering to women or popularly discussed as such. The scholarship therefore offers a response to a postfeminist assertion about women and their lives. The upside of this is that feminist scholars are able to specifically engage with topics and formulate precise critical responses, for example, on the representation of motherhood. The downside is that the scholarship has been focused on the kinds of representations that are put forward at the expense of those which remain impossible. As I will shortly demonstrate, postfeminist films tend to frame their empowerment in three areas: motherhood, sex and sexuality, work and economic independence.
Feminist encounters with the postfeminist logic

Earlier in this chapter I named a number of films that seemed to represent a shift in how women are depicted onscreen. At the following discussion shows, these films are frequent subjects of discussion in criticisms of postfeminism in popular culture. Their recurrence in the literature suggests two things. Firstly, and most troublingly, the body of work that can even stand up for scrutiny is quite small. So while scholars engage with the ambiguity of postfeminism in Hollywood, the engagement occurs on a very narrow field, meaning that responses to these works are themselves likely to be very narrow. Secondly, the repetition points towards an ongoing and unresolved antagonism between feminism as a body of social and political demands and the claims Hollywood makes about feminism. Addressing the first of these points I will look at the most prominent themes and films which emerge from existing work. After this, I outline my approach to the point of divergence between my work and existing scholarship.

Motherhood

The Alien series, in particular the first three films; Alien, Aliens and Alien3, are frequently discussed by feminist scholars. This is no doubt due to the lead character that is common to them all – Ellen Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver). The series brings out issues regarding motherhood, birth, monstrosity, race, violence and the gendering of (tough/violent) bodies. Penley (1986), Bundtzen (1987), Creed (1993), Berenstein (2004), Tasker (1993) (1998), Schubart (2007), and Waites (2008) are among the many who have discussed the Alien series, with particular attention shown to the status of Ellen Ripley as mother. To varying degrees these theorists all question the role motherhood plays as a central motivation for Ripley, and the consequences of doing so such as a failing to represent a transgression of the patriarchal, nuclear family. This is particularly evident in Aliens which sees two competing models of maternity, that of Ripley and that of the grotesque alien queen. As Penley says: "What we get finally is a conservative moral lesson about maternity, futuristic or otherwise: mothers will be mothers, and they will always be women" (1995, p. 77). More generally Tasker (1998) and Negra (2009) separately identify a frequently repeated plot device in which "motherhood recurs as a motivating factor, with female heroes acting to protect their children" (Tasker, 1998, p. 69). This maternal motivator sees that "determined women are likely to be driven by a righteous
maternity, as filmmakers seem unable to conceptualise any other imperative for female tenacity." (Negra, 2009, p. 91).

In addition to their discussion of Ripley-as-mother Creed, Berenstein and Bundtzen all investigate the relationship between Ripley and the other mother in the series - the alien queen. For Creed and Bundtzen the Ripley/alien dichotomy represents two manifestations of the Mother - on one hand the loving, caring maternal mother who feeds and protects, on the other, the mother who is too productive, overly present and unstoppably fertile - the “monstrous feminine”.

Mothering is precisely the configuration of this difference within patriarchal culture. Lacking an intrinsic understanding of the process, the patriarchy often represents it as 'powerfully horrifying.' (Berenstein, 2004, p. 66)

Although each account of the Mother opposes the other, Ripley and Alien Queen battling to the end for the sake of their offspring, for Berenstein it is the alien mother that represents a progressive representation in that it sits outside the reach of the patriarchal order - represented in the film by the military and corporate powers. Unlike Ripley, who still operates within the social norms of patriarchy, the Alien Queen exists on her own, her fertility and strength constrained only by the will of the creative labour that imagined her.

Waites (2008) and Coulthard (2007) consider Tarantino's Kill Bill through the ultimately maternal narrative of lead protagonist "The Bride/Mommy/Beatrix Kiddo". For Waites:

Kill Bill Vol. II also succeeds in putting the fierce, embattled warrior woman back in her proper place, ... by seeing her capitulate to the traditional paradigm of wanna-stay-at-home mom ... the choices available to her -mother or warrior- are not only cliched, but also extreme and finally moot, as each cancels the other out (Waites, 2008, p. 218).

Meanwhile Couthard expresses similar concerns:

there is [only the threat of] reunification and ingenerate wholeness acquired through
maternity. What was lost has been found, the action is over, and the lioness can return to her natural habitat of an eclosed, private, nonviolent, and passive domestic space (Coulthard, 2007, p. 166)

Thus for Waite and Coulthard the problem is that the transgressive female warrior ultimately returns to where she ought have remained in the first place. The maternal narrative is not transformative but rather restorative. This same concern surfaces in Tasker’s discussion of The Long Kiss Goodnight, in which the stern, sexually aggressive warrior-woman Charly is "ultimately overcome by the maternal" (Tasker, 1998, p. 69) and is thus re-established in her 'proper' role. Diane Negra labels this drive to place female agency in the maternal instinct as the "procreative epiphany" in which motherhood, or the impending prospect of it (that is, marriage and/or pregnancy) is used as an "all-purpose solution to relationship trouble and life course uncertainty and as a limp gesture of narrative conclusion" (Negra, 2009, p. 92).

In reference to Sarah Connor, mother of messiah figure John Connor in the Terminator series, Willis (1997) notes:

[Her] mastery of destructive technologies operates as a metaphor for women's continued, if increasingly limited, access to technologies necessary to maintain choice about reproduction ... this is why ... the film needs to stress that Sarah Connor really is the "good mother," ever ready to give her life to preserve her child's. T2 wants to have it both ways (Willis, 1997, p. 119)

This reading reinforces the idea that motherhood is essentially feminine and that women who tread outside the bounds of traditional femininity can find their way back through motherhood.

The insistence on the "procreative epiphany" is played out in genres other than action. Indeed, it is outside of the action genre, with its seductive violence-as-empowerment narratives, that we can most clearly identify the two profiles of postfeminism that Modleski and McRobbie construct. As previously discussed Modleski recognises the return to the maternal as frequently a male narrative in which women's positions in the film (in that men take lead roles) and the world (in that men become mothers) are erased. Prime examples of this are Mrs Doubtfire (dir.
Columbus, 1993), Junior (dir. Reitman, 1994) and Three men and a baby (dir. Nimoy, 1987). In films like these (all notably slapstick comedies) the ridiculous ineptitude of the men simultaneously reinforces the natural position of woman-as-mother (women would not fail so miserably, and if they did, it would be a tragedy not a comedy) while making her obsolete.

**Sex and Sexuality**

Tally (2006; 2008) explores the kind of ambiguous postfeminist logic that McRobbie presents through analysis of films in which a middle aged woman rediscovers her lost sexuality. This rediscovery is represented as a liberating indulgence on behalf of the woman, and traumatic for those who have to witness her as mother-who-fucks. In reference to films such as Thirteen, Anywhere But Here and Freaky Friday, Tally notes that:

> [T]he older female's sexuality is portrayed as toxic to the other family members, threatening to upend the fragile relationships within the family (Tally, 2008, p. 121)

So, while the feminist sexual liberation of women is seen in some manner as a positive, it is ultimately damaging to a woman and her family (especially her daughters). The postfeminist logic in these texts is clear: middle-aged women indulging in the sexual freedom that second-wave feminism struggled for is damaging traditional family establishments. In these films young women, daughters of second-wave feminists, are especially at risk of having their lives turned upside down by the assertion of their mother's sexuality. In these films a woman's sexuality is merely traumatic; elsewhere, such as in horror, it is outright dangerous - to both men and women.

In this latter trend Clover (1992) identifies the "Final Girl" phenomenon in the horror sub-genre of slasher films. This term refers to the tradition in the genre of having a single young woman come out of the film as the lone survivor, having defeated or out-witted the murderous villain. She is usually represented a little differently to the other young women, often less sexualised, more intelligent or otherwise feminised differently from her friends. She is always brutalised, often tortured physically and/or psychologically, but inevitably emerges victorious. Although a number of researchers have made both theoretical (Trencansky, 2001; Kibbey 2005, pp. 114-116) and empirical (Sapolsky, Molitor, Luque, 2003) objections to Clover's influential work we
should recognise this contention as symptomatic of the difficulty in untying the knot of postfeminist logic. The Final Girl opens the possibility of a postfeminist reading, since she does ultimately survive where others could not. But this comes at a cost as her sexuality is sacrificed. Those who are sexually active within the narrative are likely to come to a grizzly end.

What sets this final girl apart is, according to Clover, her purity - she is among her friends the virgin, the one who abstains. The work by Clover can be contrasted with that of Edwards (2004) and Tasker (1998) who both note that in the action genre the more physically aggressive a character is, the more sexually aggressive she will be and the more her body will be used as a scopic object. So, whereas Clover highlights narratives of salvation through purity, Tasker and Edwards see, in action films, heightened sexuality as a corollary to violence.

Inness (1999) argues that in action films sexuality is used as a mechanism to prevent a character from becoming too tough, risking an encounter with the out-of-bounds body of the butch. As Inness notes, in Aliens the ultra-tough female soldier Vasquez is readily identifiable as the stereotypical butch lesbian, with a hard body, short hair and cocky attitude, in contrast to the softer bodied, more feminine Ripley (1999, pp. 108-109). Indeed, Schubart (2007, pp. 299-307) argues that sexuality and the sexualised female body can be used to displace any possibility of toughness entirely, so the heroines in films such as Charlie's Angels and Tomb Raider are not transformed into tough bodies, but remain sexual bodies. Heinecken (2003) and Projansky (2001) argue that in these films women routinely use sex, or an implied offer of sex as a means to deceive or kill men, placing female sexuality within a patriarchal discourse that renders men incapable of resisting female seduction.

For Tasker (1998, pp. 3-47) this disjunction between tough violent bodies and sexualised feminine bodies raises the issue of the intersection of sexuality and class. The highly sexualised soft bodies in Charlie's Angels and Tomb Raider, which are coded as middle class, and are contrasted with the tough working class bodies of women in Terminator 2, Aliens and Silence of the Lambs. Outside of the action genre Tasker identifies a logic of encoding class onto women's bodies and sexualities in films such as Working Girl, Pretty Woman and Disclosure. The postfeminist logic in this encoding is identifiably in line with that which McRobbie outlines in her discussion of Bridget Jones’s Diary; feminism, represented by successful middle-class women,
loses sight of authentic feminine sexuality.

Work

The workplace is another significant site where feminist theory and postfeminist film come into contestation. Many recent television series and films have based their narrative in women's growing involvement in the workplace and the financial independence this has enabled. Films such as *Sex and the City, Bridget Jones's Diary, Working Girl, What Women Want* and television series like *Ally McBeal, Murphy Brown and Just Shoot Me* all feature women who have made it (or are making it) in the corporate world.

One of the earliest films in this sub-genre is *9 to 5* (Higgins, 1980). The film is especially notable because of its box office success. It was second only to *The Empire Strikes Back* (Spielberg, 1980) in terms of box office takings. Furthermore, the box office success was not built on a strong opening weekend (with lower weekend takings than many films it ultimately outperformed) but rather grew over time. The film depicts the lives of three women working in a corporate office, one a new typist Judy (Jane Fonda), the second a highly competent but under-appreciated administrator Violet (Lily Tomlin) and the third a sexually harassed secretary Doralee (Dolly Parton). All three are tormented by a boss, Frank Hart, they describe as “a sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot”. Tired of Hart stealing their ideas, sexually harassing them and treating them like children the three women plot their revenge. After trapping Mr Hart in his own home, the three women set about assuming authority in the workplace and enacting the reforms they think the office needs. Their reforms are successful and the workplace becomes a brighter, fairer and more efficient place to work for everyone. *9 to 5's* relationship to feminism in the workplace is anything but ambiguous. Gordon (2005) draws a notable link between the film *9 to 5* and the clerical labour union that operated at the same time. The reforms that the three women make draw on a clear labour politics – flexible working hours, family friendly environment, equal pay for equal work, equal opportunity and diversity, worker autonomy and so on. Importantly, while the women themselves manage to have these reforms instituted, in the closing scenes of the film the chairman of the board visits the office to see the reforms form himself. While clearly impressed by the changes as he leaves he notes quietly to his assistant that the equal wage provisions is taking the matter too far and would have to be abolished. In this scene *9 to 5* sets out the need for feminisms continued engagement with labour politics.
The pivotal scene in *9 to 5* is a shared experience between the three women. After each has had enough they meet more by accident than design at a bar and begin to recognise each others condition. As Murphy (2000) notes “encouraged by smoking marijuana, [the characters] begin to exchange experiences in a consciousness-raising session, realise their common oppression, and plot comic revenge”. Here the film situates feminist practices (e.g consciousness-raising, solidarity between women) as pivotal to narrative progression. The inclusion of this scene points to an explicit and deliberate articulation of a feminist politics.

Eight years later and another film set in a busy office has come around. *Working Girl* (Nichols, 1998) tells the story of a young woman, Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) trying to make it in a new job, more competent than those around her but rarely given the opportunity to demonstrate her ability and her successes ultimately undermined and appropriated by her boss. However, this time, the boss is a proclaimed “bitch” Katherine Parker (Sigourney Weaver). While Parker makes mention of the extra work women have to do in the workplace she is ultimately the antagonist in the film. Tess McGill’s key ally in her struggle are not her fellow women workers, but a senior executive who ultimately also takes the role as her love interest. *Working Girl* then signals a clear disassociation with the kind of politics that *9 to 5* engages with.

*Working Girl* is also notable as a film about class transformation. Tess begins as a “working class girl” who learns, through consumer activity (new clothes, nice restaurants), how to become a middle-class career woman without losing her femininity, something that Parker begins to lose over the course of the film, becoming increasingly unattractive and unwound. This transformation places *Working Girl* between *9 to 5* and *Sex and the City*. Whereas in *9 to 5* the site of drama is almost exclusively the workplace, and the transformation is of the workplace not of women themselves, by the time *Sex and the City* comes around the workplace has largely disappeared and the women are always-already middle-class. Consumption by this stage has replaced labour and workplace transformation as the site of “feminist” politics.

For Arthurs (2003, p. 95) *Sex and the City* offers "a sexually explicit and critical feminist discourse ... albeit within the parameters of a consumer culture and the limitations this imposes". The commodification of political (and specifically feminist) identity in postfeminism is a critical site of
interrogation, and thus represents a possible site for resistance. It "establishes a space in popular culture for interrogation of our own complicity in the processes of commodification" and "offers evidence of the deleterious effects of economic liberalism in a society where moral and religious values are in decline, with no alternatives to the hedonistic and selfish values of capitalism".

Garret see the same consumerist phenomenon not as a signal/site of contestation, but of a deeply problematic depoliticisation of feminism.

The feminist value placed on female alliance, self-respect and the desire for economic and career achievement is endorsed but placed within a framework of consumer power and individual achievement rather than collective struggle. The film is typical of postfeminism forms in that it studiously avoids the "f" word (Garret, 2007, p.10).

Willis (1997) and Lucia (2005) both provide analysis of the on-screen representations of female lawyers, recognising the same postfeminist logic that has been the background to this discussion. "Ostensibly feminist in their very positioning of a female lawyer as protagonist ...The female lawyer film\(^2\) often crumbles to expose deeply conservative, antifeminist underpinnings" (Willis, p. 4) As I have shown, the three themes of motherhood, sexuality and economic independence are well represented in the literature and frequently are the three frames through which feminist critics have engaged with Hollywood film.

**The role of absence and ambiguity in postfeminism**

The typical representation of women in mainstream Hollywood points to a particular logic in cinematic narrative which plays on ambiguity and irony to respond to and defuse feminist critique. As McRobbie says:

> [E]lements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to the undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed

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2 Examples of this genre would be films such as *The Client* (dir. Schumacher, 1994) and *The Pelican Brief* (dir. Pakula, 1993) and *The Accused* (dir. Kaplan, 1988)
and even well-intended response to feminism. (McRobbie, 2004, p. 411)

So far I have argued that postfeminism can be accounted for across three themes; motherhood - where women's public actions, heroism and so on are explained as manifestations of a maternal instinct; sexuality - where women are represented as sexually free agents, but nonetheless this sexuality is deployed for and by a male eye; and economic independence - where women are provided with equal opportunity, but they tend to exercise it in a way that conforms with male desire. These three themes are certainly important to feminism but their critical importance lies in their limited claims and images of empowerment. They are problematic because they are the only game in town.

While the work of ongoing critique of postfeminist cinema is necessary, there is a limit to what textual analysis can achieve theoretically. This is because the critiques are structured as responses to the material made present in specific films. For example a conversation about Bridget Jones' Diary will be firstly concerned with the images and themes that the film represents. The narratives and images that are of most interest to feminist critique will be those that are made part of the conversation. So the discussion responds to Bridget's relationship with her body-image, her hetero-normative desires and her social transgressions. There is also the discussion that occurs prior to the film, but which follows a similar line, that is the processes by which scripts and selected, supported and developed by producers and film studios. In the case of Bridget Jones' Diary, there is the translation from novel to script which involves another level of filtering. Although the themes that eventually appear in the films are important and of interest to (some) women, they are also themes that are easily accommodated within a broader patriarchal social/political environment. The limit of possibility, in terms of how women might live or want to live, is therefore confined to terms that Hollywood defines.

However, the ambiguity that postfeminist films deliberately invoke means that feminist scholars must either discuss the good (e.g female centred narratives) along with the bad (e.g repetition of problematic narratives) or struggle with arguing these two positions together. A particular problem here is that the responses to criticism about a particular film are already present in the narrative. To use Bridget Jones’s Diary again, a complaint that the film re-inforces women's natural desire for marriage can be rebuked by pointing towards the fact that Bridget is a
liberated woman free to make her own choices, as evidenced by her career successes and her penchant for alcohol and cigarettes (McRobbie, 2008, p. 12). Similarly, the postfeminist endorsement of consumerism limits the possibility of feminist criticism of capitalism by assuming consumer indulgence is a natural desire of women (as present in Sex and the City). This is the stalemate that postfeminism creates.

The solution is not to dispense with subtlety and simply reject ambiguity as a necessarily unwanted result. The world, and the films within it, are not always ready or able to be categorically judged as feminist or not-feminist. Indeed, one strategy in feminist critique, particularly in queer approaches, is to look for ambiguity where common (heterosexual) understanding says there is none (Doty, 1993) for example, by reading Thelma and Louise as a lesbian parable. However, what I hope to do in this thesis is bring into play some possibilities by which this ambiguity can be reconsidered.

As I noted in the Introduction, ambiguity involves an imprecision in the relationship between two ideas, images, understandings and so on. In the current context, this relationship is between Hollywood’s representation of feminism and feminist criticism of Hollywood film. However, as I have just argued, the boundaries of this critical relationship are defined by production cultures within Hollywood’s creative processes and these boundaries include neither the entirety of the cinematic institution nor the entirety of the feminist demand. Thus, one way to re-consider the nature of the ambiguity is to not just look at the relationships that are expressed but also those that are ignored. These hidden factors contextualise and define ambiguity without making themselves present. The making invisible of these matters is akin to their de-politicisation, in the same way as the personal is de-politicised by making it a hidden variable within society. Indeed, this is precisely what I propose is happening in feminist assessment of postfeminist cinema. Ambiguity serves to hide both real-world and narrative conditions.

What is absent in Hollywood’s postfeminist logic is an emancipatory politics. Unlike particular feminist issues, which are without reservation of tremendous importance in their own right, the feminist demand for emancipation is one which is necessarily incongruent with patriarchy. Women can be economically independent within a patriarchy, but they cannot be said to be emancipated subjects within one. It is important to note that this is not a demand that women
be represented as emancipated subjects in all films. To do so would be an equally problematic act of de-politicisation because it hides the really-existing conditions and their diverse forms of oppression and resistance. Further, emancipation is not something that can be simply observed, particularly within fictional narratives that often depict struggles for emancipation. In chapter 3 I will argue that the concept of ethical subjectivity is one way in which the answer to an emancipatory demand can be observed. Furthermore it achieves this observation through a recognition of the ethical imperatives common to actually exist oppressions, fictionalised accounts of emancipatory struggle and representations of liberation.

If emancipatory politics is one of the hidden variables in the ambiguity of the postfeminist logic, then a second is the conditions in which films are produced. As the next chapter demonstrates, creative labour in Hollywood is almost entirely male. This means that the modes of emancipation that are featured in postfeminist film are still under the auspices of a regime controlled and motivated by a male dominated cadre. It is not simply numerical domination either, but a situation of demonstrably intentional cultural exclusion. Patriarchy here is not an imprecise or naïve term.

In this chapter I have reviewed a variety of responses to postfeminist film over the last three decades. These responses have demonstrated that Hollywood offers three main categories of representing women’s emancipation. However, I have argued that the responses are limited because they are reactions to the narratives which appear in films. This means that they are always operating within a discursive framework set by Hollywood. By examining what is absent in the postfeminist logic and the resultant ambiguity in narrative it is possible to imagine some means by which the stalemate between feminist scholarship and postfeminist film can be re-considered and re-open to theoretical and political progress. Two of these absences have been made visible: the gendered divisions of labour in Hollywood and feminism’s emancipatory demand. In the next chapter I take up the first of these through an empirical account of creative labour in Hollywood.
Chapter 2: Gendered Divisions of Creative Labour in Hollywood

The previous chapter argued that the ambiguity of postfeminism accommodates the criticism of many feminist media theorists by including this criticism within its very structure. This has lead to a situation where responses to postfeminist film are locked in a stalemate with their subject. This has in turn to repetition in the structure and content of engagements between theorists of postfeminism and postfeminism itself. To that end I proposed a couple of possible alternatives which would allow this stalemate to be renegotiated. This chapter addresses the suggestion that a more complete empirical understanding of Hollywood would offer the opportunity to reconsider the nature of postfeminist ambiguity. Accordingly, this chapter will present the results of research into the gendered division of creative labour in Hollywood.

This research is comprised of a number of sources. My own empirical data, the existing empirical research of Martha Lauzen (2001-2010) and Stacey Smith (2007), the ethnographic work of John Caldwell (2008) and the personal stories of women working in Hollywood. The three empirical sources overlap in part, giving an opportunity to confirm existing results but also offer their own perspectives on a similar question. By combining these with ethnographic work that looks at men's experience of themselves in Hollywood and with women's own personal accounts, the over-arching empirical story is filled out with Hollywood's understanding of itself, and with women's stories about Hollywood. The research will demonstrate the extent of women’s exclusion from creative labour, practices that enforce that exclusion and sites of resistance. The labour practices and patterns identified in this chapter provide context for the later discussion of the films the industry produces.

This kind of research is useful in the development of a more complete understanding of women’s representations in Hollywood cinema, especially when considering that the over-representation of men as creative labour in the industry is not something in dispute. In relation to the specific questions this thesis raises, an empirical confirmation of patriarchy in Hollywood would render suspect any claim that Hollywood can be expected to provide fair and just representations of women’s experiences, let alone feminist films. Even if the on-screen ambiguity of postfeminism was somehow resolved (in the sense that narratives and characters...
satisfied feminist demands), there would still be need for a feminist critique of Hollywood labour practices. An empirical account of Hollywood is the first step in understanding the relationship between the under-representation of women in creative labour, patriarchy in Hollywood, and the appearance of postfeminist popular culture in Hollywood films. The data and analysis which follows demonstrates that the ambiguous nature of postfeminism appears as a result of an antagonism between the ownership of the means of cultural production and feminism as a body of political and ethical demands. As a result the interrogation and deconstruction of postfeminism can only occur with reference to these two factors.

More broadly this kind of research has benefits in its potential to address arguments that rely on the invocation of a few influential women as counter-examples to claims of male dominance. As Lauzen notes, one of the problems that exists in Hollywood is a refusal even to recognise women’s under-representation:

I've heard editors of major trade publications as well as the heads of studios simply say there is no problem. "They'll either say no celluloid ceiling exists or they'll rattle off four or five names of high profile directors who happen to be women and then with a shrug say, 'See - there's no problem' (Lauzen, 2010).

In this argument the exceptional status of some women serves to deflect any criticism of the established order by making the exceptional the norm. It is not without irony that Kathryn Bigelow’s ground-breaking Academy Award for Best Director in 2010 could potentially discourage enquiry into gendered labour in Hollywood. Indeed, Bigelow herself has already pre-empted this by stating that she is “ever grateful if I can inspire some young, intrepid, tenacious male or female” (Bigelow in Masters, 2010). She reportedly goes on to say “that barrier is down now”\(^3\). The refusal to acknowledge a gender politics, signified by Bigelow's need to refer to both future male or female directors, represents a significant part of the problem because without recognition of a problem, there is nothing to answer for. An empirical account immediately confronts claims about barriers being down. It provides a basis from which further questioning can be justified.

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\(^3\) Even if the reporting of Bigelow's reaction to her win are inaccurate, the media discourse is framing the win in this way.
What is Above-the-Line Creative Labour?

Throughout this chapter I will be referring to a number of roles within Hollywood that are significant in the creative process, namely, the director, the writer and the producer. These three roles form part of what is known in Hollywood as above-the-line labour. In order to give the following data context I will briefly explain what these three roles do, why they are important, and how they fit into the division of labour in Hollywood between above-the-line and below-the-line.

The terms above-the-line and below-the-line refer to an accounting practice used in Hollywood in which the film’s entire budget is split in two by “the-line”. Above-the-line are fixed expenses that are accounted for before production begins including: purchase of the screenplay, contracted fees for writers, directors and producers, as well as fees for actors. Below-the-line are ongoing costs of production; waged labour such as camera, lighting and sound operators, set design and construction, wardrobe and so on (Grillo in Squire, 2004). While technically only referring to an accounting practice the terms have also come to reflect a kind of class division within Hollywood with above-the-line considered the creative labour and below-the-line as trade and technical labour (Brooks in Squire, 2004 p. 32, Maltby 2003, p. 578 & Wasko, 2003 p. 33). This is a point that Caldwell (2003) and Mayer (2011) deconstruct extensively questioning both the self-serving mythologies of the “auteur” creative and highlighting the creativity implicit in below-the-line labour. The cultural identity attached to being above-the-line labour, as Caldwell further notes, has tended to override the accounting roots of the term (2003, p. 238).

This thesis uses the terms “above-the-line” and “creative labour” to refer specifically to the credited roles of writer, producer and director in film. This should be considered within the context of Caldwell’s critique of what he refers to as “creative commandeering” (2003, p. 239) – the practice of claiming creative control or personal investment (intellectual, financial etc) that is not necessarily warranted. Thus, while not the exclusive holders of creative input during the production process, these roles are nonetheless, by the very authority vested in their positions, primary drivers of the creative vision in film. For example, according to Maltby; “Conventional critical practice identifies the director as the primary creative force and governing intelligence behind the movie” (2003, p. 581), even when lesser acclaimed roles, such as the Director of
Photography, are arguably as responsible for the aesthetic of a film.

The writer is credited for the production of the initial screenplay, or for significant script development throughout the production process. Unless the writer is also the director, their influence is usually confined to the early stages of production, if it extends beyond the screenplay at all. Producers are responsible for the overall production process, including hiring (and firing) directors, selecting screenplays, and for the financial and administrative aspects of the film. The director is responsible for the shooting of the film, its overall visual style and progression, and possibly involvement in script revision and post-production (visual effects, for example).

Each of these roles are of particular importance to this thesis: writers because they are the creators of narratives and the characters within and therefore are central to determining what ends up on screen; producers because they have the social and financial capital to select and develop screenplays of their choosing and are therefore key regulators of the types of movies which can be made; directors because they shape the aesthetic of the film, decide on how certain characters are revealed visually and through narrative and project influence to all aspects of the production process. Because of this it is ultimately their vision, their translation of text to the screen, that is the focus of film criticism. While the selection of these three roles somewhat diminishes the role of other modes of creative labour - such as the aforementioned Director of Photography, but also editors, costume designers and lighting directors - they nonetheless represent a powerful force in cinematic production in terms of their artistic influence and the cultural recognition they receive in the public sphere.

**Data collection: Methods and sources**

In order to expand and confirm existing data I surveyed the creative labour of 700 films from 1980-2009. These films were arranged into three distinct sets, each with a particular empirical aim. The primary data set consists of 600 top grossing films, their box office earnings and the writers, producers and directors of each. I will refer to this set as the Labour set. The second set of data is comprised of the top 50 grossing films classified in the genre of “Action Heroine” and includes the same data fields as in the Labour set and will be referred to as the Genre set. The
third set consists of the top 250 grossing directors of all time, and is referred to as the Director set.

The Labour set is derived from the top 20 grossing films of each year 1980-2009. The box office earnings for each film were taken from the boxofficemojo.com database. boxofficemojo.com is a subsidiary of imdb.com, which is itself owned by amazon.com. Data extracted from this source was verified by cross-checking a sample with Nielsen EDI and Variety magazine reportings, both of which are industry recognised sources. All cross-checked data matched exactly. boxofficemojo.com was used primarily because it made data freely available and offered tools to easily sort the top grossing films of each year. Also, in conjunction with imdb.com, it categorises films by genre. While still subjective this removed the decision making process to a somewhat independent third party.

The names of the writers, producers and directors for each film were taken from imdb.com and a gender tag were assigned. For verification a sample of the imdb.com data was cross-checked against in-film credits and credits appearing on DVD cases. The data matched in all cases.

The gender for each position was tagged “M” for exclusively male held roles, “F” for exclusively female held roles and “MF” for films which had at least one of each gender in the role. For example; a film with two male writers and one female writer, and a film with two female producers and one male writer, were accorded the same value (MF) and a film with two female writers was assigned (F) and a film with four male writers was assigned (M). Only one instance of transgender filmmaker was identified, that of Larry/Lana Wachowski. Though imdb.com lists Lana Wachowski as co-director, writer and producer of the Matrix trilogy (along with brother Andy), the film was coded “M” in each category as the public gender identity at the time was male (as shown in the trilogy’s credits).

Directors were chosen only the basis of a credit listing as “Directed by”. Writing credits were recorded for “Screenplay” and “Written by” except in cases where the “Written by” credit referred to a novel or another source the film was based on. For example; the writing credit for Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (dir. Chris Columbus, 2001) is recorded as the male writer of the screenplay (Steve Kloves) even though J.K. Rowling, the female author of the novel,
is credited as a writer. Though ignoring the successes of women as writers more broadly (i.e. as novelists etc.) the advantage of this method is that it focuses the attention on the experiences of women writing from within and for Hollywood. No specific coding was made for instances where male writers had worked from texts written by women which were not screenplays. In hindsight this would have been a worthwhile addition to the project that would be able to further measure male intervention into women’s stories in Hollywood.

The Genre set used a similar methodology to the Labour set. The writer, director and producer was collected for the top 50 grossing “Action Heroine” films since 1980. In addition to this, the set includes the genre of films for which there is at least one woman working in at least one of the roles in the Labour set. This allows a focus on two aspects of genre. The first case explores gender in above-the-line labour of films that feature women as strong and active leads in films where they are the main or one of the main protagonists. The second case demonstrates what kinds of films women are involved in as above-the-line labour.

Complementing my own data are the results of a number of existing empirical studies of Hollywood. The principle source is the comprehensive work of Martha Lauzen, who has for the last ten years produced an annual report on above-the-line labour titled the Celluloid Ceiling (Lauzen, 1998-2010). In addition to Lauzen’s work I will also refer to data from a number of reports produced by Stacey L. Smith, whose research addresses related subjects such as on-screen representations of women, women’s participation in above-the-line labour and nomination rates for industry awards. A number of other sources, such as the US Department of Labour Women’s Bureau, are used to provide comparisons in specific circumstances.

Lauzen’s work offers a number of accounts of gender in Hollywood. The aforementioned Celluloid Ceiling reports on the top 250 grossing films each year. These reports also include data on roles in addition to those that I am looking at – namely cinematographer, editors and executive producers. The Celluloid Ceiling report of 2009 reports an overall decline in women’s participation in above-the-line labour of 3% since 2001 (from 19% to 16%) and a near steady rate since 1998 (Lauzen, 2009). Lauzen’s Independent Women reports (2011) show this inequity is less pronounced in American independent/festival cinema with women’s participation rates in all above-the-line labour significantly higher than in the Hollywood mainstream. The effect is
particularly noticeable with respect to Directing where women account for 22% of directors in independent/festival films while only accounting for 9% in the top 250 films of that year. (Lauzen, 2009)

Lauzen has also released data on a sample of below-the-line positions. The 2008 *Celluloid Ceiling II* report shows that women’s participation in below-the-line labour is significantly more gendered than above-the-line. Women were almost entirely absent from technical/trade roles (representing 5% of sound designers, 1% of gaffers and 1% of key grips) but significantly more visible in administrative /management roles (accounting for 44% of production supervisors and 25% of production managers) (Lauzen, 2008).

The 2009 *Women @ The Box Office* (Lauzen, 2008) report seeks to register any effect gender has on box office performance, both on-screen and behind the scenes. Lauzen’s conclusion is that:

> Overall, when women and men filmmakers have similar budgets for their films, the resulting box office grosses are also similar. In other words, the sex of filmmakers does not determine box office grosses (Lauzen, 2008).

This result is important. It substantially undermines a common argument that any gender imbalance in Hollywood is the result of a market preference for films by and featuring men. Lauzen’s work shows that there is a significant division of labour across gendered lines, and that this division intersects with issues of class as demonstrated in the segregation between managerial and trade roles. There are however some limitations to these results. Firstly, the time-frame of a decade is significantly shorter than the scope of my own research, which takes account of thirty years. This is not necessarily a weakness rather an effect of the depth of each study – Lauzen goes deeper (250 films per year versus 20) while I go further historically (30 years versus 10). This difference in scope offers some useful sites of comparison – for example, whether women’s participation is equally spread across the 250 films. Secondly, Lauzen does not track films by genre, which prevents an analysis of the kinds of films women are permitted and excluded from working on. This also makes it harder to track the effect of behind the scenes gender inequality on the narrative and aesthetic content that appears on-screen, an issue which is of particular concern to this thesis.
Where Lauzen tends to focus on behind the scenes labour, Smith’s research tends to look at the visibility of women on-screen. Her work measures the gendered rates of speaking characters, the use of women as “eye-candy” and the relationship between above-the-line labour participation and on-screen representation. The results most pertinent come from Smith’s 2007 “Gender Oppression in Cinematic Content” report which suggests that there is a causal relation between women’s participation rates in behind the scenes labour and on-screen visibility. However her sample size is relatively small (100 films from a single year) compared to both Lauzen’s (2500 films over 10 years) and my own (700 films over 30 years). Furthermore, while Smith establishes a connection between behind the scenes labour and on-screen speaking roles the analysis of what is said and done is severely limited. Likewise Lauzen’s concentration on the empirical means that her account of what might be loosely referred to as “patriarchy” in Hollywood depends too much on what amounts to a numbers game, ignoring the function of say, postfeminist narratives which encourage women to be the vessel of the rejection of feminism.

To expand what I mean by this, few of the scholars discussed in Chapter 1 engaged with, or themselves conducted, the kinds of empirical research just now mentioned. This is one of the main problems I suggest their conclusions overlook. Tasker, for example, devotes some part of a small chapter of Working Girls to the problem of authorship. Tasker argues for a critique of the notion of authorship - in particular the director-as-author model – which is lodged in a “hierarchical, gendered system” (Tasker, 1998 p. 201). While she hints at the kind of critique of the spectacle of the director-as-brand that Caldwell deconstructs in detail, her argument is illustrative of a tendency to make assumptions about the actual status of gendered labour in Hollywood:

women are now working in the American film industry as directors and producers, as well as in the more established roles of screenwriters and performers, on a scale unprecedented within classical Hollywood … how might feminist scholarship … make sense of the developing visibility of women in the popular American cinema? (Tasker, p. 198)
Tasker’s approach is limited for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it mistakes visibility for participation. The scale of developing visibility could be described as unprecedented only in the sense it is unprecedentedly low. As Mahar (2008) reports, the early years of Hollywood saw the promotion of women into writing and directing roles, a practice that subsided in the evolution of the so-called studio system. Secondly, and more importantly, the direction Tasker suggests feminist scholarship should go is away from an understanding of gendered labour practices that are at the heart of the problem with postfeminism and towards the “work of uncovering contributions which have not been spoken about” (p. 198). For Tasker one of the key tasks for feminist scholars is to re-present and re-value women’s historic labour. As such, she risks reproducing some of the problems seen in postfeminist discourse namely the assumption that equality has been won where it has not and the use of individual success stories as representative of women’s broader experience. This is not to say that the feminist task of uncovering women’s history is not valuable but rather that to do media studies by that method alone is to ignore the fact and the extent of how the problem continues today.

3% (Rounded Up): Gendered divisions in creative labour

If there is one figure that sums up the results of this research it is that women’s overall participation rate in the directors role is at best 3%. Of the 600 films that form the labour set in my sample just 17 were directed by women. This represents 2.83% of the total. The fact that Hollywood has an over-representation of men in this role is not surprising. What is surprising is how exclusive a club Hollywood is. Overall, women occupied just 5% of positions in the labour set. When broken down to specific roles women represented 6.6% of writers, 5.5% of producers and 2.8% of directors. This makes Hollywood comparable to other traditionally male industries in USA such as firefighting (where women represent 3.4% of the workforce) and construction labour (where they represent 2.7%, Department of Labor, 2009).
Figure 1, below, shows this overwhelming disparity between men’s and women’s participation rates as directors. No women were present as directors in sixteen of the thirty years surveyed. Men represented at least 90% of directors every year.

This near total domination is confirmed by the data available in Lauzen’s “Celluloid Ceiling” reports. As previously mentioned Lauzen’s work offers a shorter but more comprehensive sample so the minor differences in outcomes should not be surprisingly. Indeed, they provide an important means of comparison. Still looking at the role of director Figure 2 shows a comparison between my data, in blue, and Lauzen’s data in red.
Figure 2: Rates of participation 1980-2009

As the chart shows the rate of participation reported by Lauzen is slightly higher than mine. This suggests that participation picks up outside the top 20 grossing films. Indeed, this hypothesis is supported by data from 2007, the only year in which three sets of data are available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of films surveyed</th>
<th>Films with female directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 (Adamson)</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 (Smith)</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 (Lauzen)</td>
<td>6.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Relation between sample size and participation rates, 2007.

Consistent with Figure 2, as the sample size increases, so does the rate of participation. One explanation could be that women’s films are more likely to under-perform at the box office. However, as previously noted, Lauzen has demonstrated that the gender of the director has no significant effect on the commercial success of any given film. As Lauzen (2008) demonstrated the most reliable predictor for a film's success is its budget.

Furthermore, Lauzen also finds that gender does not play a role in determining a film’s budget. Since gender cannot account for commercial success then commercial success cannot account
for the massive disparity between rates of participation. The problem lies not with the films women are making but with the ways in which the industry distributes or denies opportunity. When reporting on the rates of participation of women in independent cinema Lauzen observes this problem directly. She found that outside the major Hollywood studios there was a significant increase in participation rates across the board. The top 250 films on the independent/festival circuit featured women as directors in 22% of the films (Lauzen, 2009), compared to her finding of just 9% for the top 250 films from Hollywood in the same year. The same pattern is detected in the other two roles (writer, producer) examined. Distance from Hollywood economically and culturally at least seems to lead towards increased participation rates for women.

This conclusion is further affirmed by examining rates of participation for similar work in other industries. Lauzen finds that women’s participation rates in American broadcast television are significantly higher than in Hollywood (Lauzen, 2011). Furthermore, unlike Hollywood, broadcast television boasts an ongoing positive trend over the last decade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Change 1997-2009</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Hollywood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Producer</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td>-1.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
<td>-5.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>-2.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Percentage change in key roles; broadcast television vs Hollywood.*

The effect does not apply consistently across all labour types. When investigating below-the-line labour Lauzen finds that women’s participation rates more closely match those reported by the US Department of Labour. Women are barely present in the technical trades in both Hollywood and the entire labour market (<1% of electricians, construction labourers, gaffers) and more equitably present in administration and management roles (e.g. 44% of production supervisors in Hollywood). This effect of distance would explain the changes in rates of participation across the different sample sizes. Higher budget films, as generally found in my top 20, can only be produced by the major studios. As the survey size increases, and budgets progressively reduce,
smaller studios such as New Line and Focus Features come into the scope of the research. Figure 2 above reveals another alarming trend. From 1980 until the mid 1990s there is a very slow increase in the rate of participation which then begins to reverse as it heads into the 2000s. Lauzen has detects this trend, noting in the 2009 *Celluloid Ceiling*;

A historical comparison of women’s employment on the top 250 films in 2009 and 1998 reveals that the percentages of women directors, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers have declined slightly (Lauzen, 2009)

The apparent decrease may be a result of a cluster of films in the decade of 1990-2000 which inflated women’s participation rates above Hollywood’s norm. This cluster represents almost half (8 of a total 17) of the films directed exclusively by women for the entire thirty year period studied. Of those films, 3 were directed and written by Nora Ephron. Ephron saw considerable success with a string of romantic comedies during this decade. Her breakthrough was as the writer of *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) which grossed just over $92 million. Her first film as director was another romantic comedy, *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), which grossed $126 million and was the fifth highest grossing film that year. Her second film, *Michael* (1996) was less successful but still did very well grossing $95 million. Her third film *You’ve Got Mail* (1998) was also well received, grossing $115 million. Her later films fared less well, *Hanging Up* (2000) grossing only $36 million and *Bewitched* (2005) $63 million. With Ephron’s relative lack of success after 1998 the upward trend reverses and returns to normal. This suggests that while commercial success was guaranteeing Ephron a place in Hollywood, it did nothing to alter the overall gendered divisions in labour, a possibility that will be worth reflecting on in light of Bigelow’s recent Academy Award success.

These statistical findings reinforce the stories of women’s experiences inside the industry. As Nia Vardalos, writer and actor in the critically acclaimed and highly profitable *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* recounts:

Lately, I’ve been in meetings regarding a new script idea I have. A studio executive asked me to change the female lead to a male, because... "women don’t go to movies." Really? When I pointed out the box office successes of Sex and The City, Mamma Mia,
Obsessed, he called them "flukes." He said "don't quote me on this." So, I'm telling everybody. (Vardalos, 2009)

Vardalos is not the only successful female director reporting this kind of resistance from within the studio system. Catherine Hardwicke, who directed the hugely successful film adaptation of Twilight (2008) recalls being knocked back on the basis of gender:

After Twilight, I thought, They can’t turn me down on the grounds that my films don’t make money,” she says. “I put my name in the hat for two different projects, and the response was, ‘We need a guy for that movie.’ (Hardwicke in Taylor, 2009)

In an interview with The New York Times, Lauzen describes this refusal to recognise women’s success as “the 'boy wonder syndrome'”:

After these guys do their first picture, they take on a presence larger than life. That does not happen for women. (in Kennedy, 2002)

This sentiment is echoed by other women in the industry, such as Mary Harron, who wrote and directed American Psycho (2000):

‘American Psycho’ ended up making a lot of money and if I was a young, hot male director, I definitely would have been offered some really big movies, (in Kennedy, 2002)

On their own these stories are anecdotal evidence, but the culture they point towards is reflected in the statistical evidence presented here. What is particularly intriguing about these women’s experiences is that they point towards a kind of disavowal within the industry. The data that the industry itself collects shows that the justifications that successful women receive for their exclusion are demonstrably false.

The situation is not much better in the roles of producer and writer. Although the overall results for writing credits were slightly higher than for directing, they were still remarkably low. Women accounted for a total of 40 (6.6%) exclusive writing credits for films from the Labour set. There
were 33 (5.5%) films that featured at least one male and at least one female. 527 (87.8%) were written exclusively by men. As can be seen in Figure 3 the trend for women in writing is static overall.

As with directing participation is clustered in the decade 1994-2004. Unlike the directing cluster, which centred on a single director, this is a much more diverse collection of films and writers. No single woman receives more than one individual writing credit during that period, suggesting that the development of the cluster is not necessarily attributable to the success of a single woman. Lauzen’s results show a slightly higher rate of participation and the slight negative trend from after 2001 is also replicated. There is no direct relationship between rates of participation in directing and rates in writing. There is however a relationship between producers and these two roles.

Of the three roles examined women were most prominently featured as producers, especially when considered non-exclusively. Women were the exclusive producers in 33 (5.5%) of the films surveyed and there were 90 (15%) additional films which featured at least one female producer. In total, women were involved as producers in 123 (20.5%) of films, compared to 73 (12.1%) as writers and 18 (3%) as directors. As shown in Figure 4 the strongest presence of female producers is in the same period where there is strongest presence of female writers and directors.
Since producers are, on paper at least, responsible for the hiring of directors and the selecting and backing of screenplays a relationship between the two would be expected. What the data reveals is that this relationship translates into changes in gendered participation rates. As seen in Table 3 the presence of a single female producer doubles the chance that there will be at least one female writer or one female director involved in the film.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Producer(s)</th>
<th>% Directors Female</th>
<th>% Writers Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excl. Male (n=474)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excl. Female (n=33)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one female (n=123)</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>9.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Relation between gender of producer and gender of other key roles.

Two points can be made about this. The first is that even though women working as producers results in more women in directing or writing positions, men are still massively more likely to be in those positions. Leading from this, the second point is that the effect of female producers can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, and this relates back to the problem of identity bias touched on in this chapter’s introduction, the result could be interpreted as female producers choosing women at twice the rate that men do because they are women. This interpretation assumes that female producers make an active decision to favour women, engaging in a kind of unofficial practice of affirmative action, while male producers remain neutral. On the other hand, the data can also be interpreted as saying the opposite, that is, male producers make an
active decision not to choose women because they are women, and it is the female producers that are approaching a neutral position.

One of the reasons why the links between the empirical and cultural research must be made is that neither methodology can by itself provide a complete account of the industry. For instance, a persuasive case for the exclusionary interpretation just mentioned cannot be made on account of an ethnographic or empirical study alone. The ethnographic is unable to contextualise specific cultural practices across the entire industry, while the empirical is similarly unable to fill out the details of cultural practice. Since it is not inconceivable that the industry could be dominated numerically by women but still reproduce sexist cultures a numerical account of gendered labour in Hollywood is not in itself conclusive. Similarly, the identification of particular work cultures and accompanying ideologies, such as racism or misogyny, within Hollywood need not problematise the entire industry (though, again, it certainly prompts further questions). A complete understanding of a cultural industry requires attention to be paid not only on the process of representation, but the representations themselves as situated in the context of the empirical and ethnographic.

This synthesis of methodologies is what Toby Miller (2009) describes as “Media Studies 3.0” which “blend[s] ethnographic, political-economic, and aesthetic analyses”. It is only through this synthesis that an assessment of each of the interpretations above can be made. For instance Caldwell’s ethnographic account of the “problematic sexual politics and gender assumptions” (p. 53) in Hollywood trade literature describes producer Burt Kearn’s self-identification with a "wolfpack". Caldwell's reading notes how this term “essentially allegorizes Kearn’s entire production company as a gang of sexual-professional predators” (p. 56). Add this to Smith’s findings that women account for barely 30% of on-screen speaking characters, Lauzen’s identification of increased participation rates outside the Hollywood system, and the long-term stagnation in participation rates that my own work identifies, this exclusionary interpretation is supported by a significant amount of evidence.

It is also interesting to note that of the three roles under investigation it is the role of producer that carries the least influence as a creator of cultural and creative content. In these three roles there is an identifiable and gendered distinction between the most creative roles
(writer/director) and the more managerial role of producer. This is further reflected in Lauzen's analysis of below-the-line labour, which shows women accounting for almost half of production managers. In this sense, as with other male dominated industries (such as the aforementioned firefighter/construction worker), the creative/culturally recognised function is performed within a masculine hierarchy, whereas non-cultural/non-creative contributions are feminised. This hints at the important connection between physical (re)production of society and cultural (re)production of society.

**Variations across genre**

So far the results reported have not taken into consideration the genre of the films being worked on. Genre is an important line of inquiry for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an area of vocal contestation within existing explanations as to why women are under-represented. As the stories of female directors quoted in the previous section show, Hollywood film studios have an established idea that some genres are not for women. It is this assumption that then justifies the skewed results in participation rates. Similarly, Lisa Cholodenko, director of *The Kids are All Right* (2010), argues that women are not attracted to the kinds of films that break box office records. While approaching from different directions these two responses evoke a kind of gender-essentialism. The starting point in responding to their claims is to learn what kinds of films women are in fact making, a question which I will address shortly. However it is worth noting that in the context of the overall problem this thesis approaches, genre establishes particular aesthetic and narrative practices through which agency, subjectivity and the body are represented. For example Clover’s (1992) concept of the “final girl” in horror evokes agency through a narrative of a survivor whose body is brutalised and desired but remains sexually inactive. As this goes to show certain genres are more likely to be marketed and constructed as representations of power and expressions of feminism albeit within particular limits. Focusing on these genres in detail provides the most abundant source of material to engage with and the most acute instances of representations of feminism and female agency.
To pinpoint what types of films women prefer to make is outside the scope of the research presented here since, as has been seen, women’s film-making is largely outside of the mainstream industry. A slightly different question can however be asked, and that is what kinds of films do the studios allow women to make? A focus on the role of director shows that women make a very limited range of films. Of the 17 films in my data directed exclusively by women, 13 were comedy or romantic comedy, 3 were drama and 2 were action films. There is a clear association here between films directed by women and the genre of film directed. The association is true across the three roles. Figure 5 shows the genres that women are working in, or not working in as the case may be. As can be readily seen women’s labour is most significant in comedy (and in particular romantic comedy) and almost absent in horror. While women’s labour as producer is more evenly spread across genre, appearing at some level in all genres, their labour as director is much more sporadic. As writer it is somewhere in between the two.

The horror genre is of particular interest given the amount of attention it has received from feminist film critics, such as Clover and Creed. This attention has often centred around the transgressive potential of the genre. Pinedo sees this transgression in the development of
female agency saying;

The slasher film does create an opening for feminist discourse by restaging the relationship between women and violence ... the surviving female of the slasher film may be victimised but she is hardly a victim. (1997, p. 87)

Clover sees similar potential in the genre to “go up front with its own brand of gender transgression” (Clover, 1992, p. 231), particularly in the cross-gender identification between the presumed male audience and the female on-screen. Creed argues that horror transgresses dominant discourses of femininity through the representation of the “monstrous feminine”. For Creed “the horror genre does not attempt to soothe over castration anxiety” (Creed, 1993, p. 151) which is to say it doesn’t hide male anxiety about women’s sexual agency. Furthermore, women appear on-screen in horror films much more often than they do in other genres. Yet, as has just been proven, this comes as a result of almost exclusively male creative labour. If Clover is right and horror is made for young male audiences, then this empirical research makes the situation seem more problematic than she represents. That is, older men are creating films that brutalise women and their bodies for the consumption of younger men. In this context women become bodies shared between men. If she is wrong, the problematic remains but in a different form since representations of women’s sexuality and agency, whether transgressive or not, are still being made through a masculine experience. Indeed, in this case, the question to ask is whether transgression is even a possibility if what undermines one male construction of femininity is another male construction of femininity?

Of the 50 films coded as being in the “action heroine” genre there is some indication that genre does play a role in the rates of participation. The number of women directing films increases to 8% (+5.2 percentage points), while the number of women producing and writing films shows no significant change (+0.5 and +1.5 percentage points respectively). There was a minor decrease (-4.4 percentage points) in the number of films produced solely by men which was made up mostly by films produced with a combination of male and female producers.

The increase in participation is worthy of further consideration. Does it suggest something in particular about the genre? When the already noted correlation between the producer’s gender
and director’s gender is taken into consideration the 5.2 percentage point increase in directors is in some part the result of the much smaller increase in women as producers. Unfortunately, with such a small sample size, a single film can account for much of the change. With these two caveats in mind the increase doesn’t seem to be of particular importance. Even without these caveats the higher figure of 8% is still illustrates a massively male dominated genre.

Many of the questions that derive from an analysis of the horror genre can also be asked of the action heroine genre, that is, how and why stories about women are produced by men for male consumption. There are however significant differences in the narratives and aesthetics involved in each, particularly when looking at a horror sub-genre like the slasher. Whereas women in horror films are often the victim (or victimised) escaping a more powerful tormentor the female action hero is more likely to be the one in pursuit. In this way her agency can be framed much more positively in action than in horror. The flip-side to these differing modes of agency is that the action-heroine’s sexuality, and her body as sexual object, is also framed differently. As Clover notes the “final girl” in the slasher film is sexually inactive, while her friends who do indulge in sex are murdered and their bodies revealed. In the action genre the active agency of the heroine is aligned with an aggressive sexuality and her body is revered as a object of visual pleasure (Schubart, 2007).

In this chapter I have show that for at least thirty years Hollywood has been, and looks set to remain, an industry dominated by men. The numerical domination of all key creative roles has been proved beyond doubt. This bolsters the research of Caldwell and the testimony of women inside the industry pointing towards a culture of misogyny, sexual objectification, exclusion and discrimination. A number of myths about women’s ability in these creative roles have been shown to be demonstrably false. The act of creative expression in Hollywood is a privilege held by men. To gain access to the means of cultural production within Hollywood requires foremost the possession of the correct gender. Women who come to accrue the financial, network and creative capital to overcome this obstacle are afforded less flexibility in their artistic pursuits, are punished more harshly and are undervalued. The few who make it to the top of the industry are heralded as proof of the absence of all the obstacles placed in their way on account of their gender.
This gendered discrepancy and male domination inherent to the industry ought to be considered when examining the on-screen representations of women. The discussion of the differences between women’s representations in horror and the action-heroine genre shows the problem that arises when attempting to understand representation from analysing only what appears on-screen. In both horror and action women are represented with difference agencies, different femininities and different sexualities, yet this chapter has shown that these differences all occur within the context of an industry that actively excludes women from the means of cultural production. Alternative and transgressive representations are still the product of male authority, male experience and male fantasy. As a result any representation of feminism and the demands it makes will necessarily pass through a system that privileges men and the expression of their experiences. In fact, it must pass through a structure that not only privileges men, but a structure that privileges men who privilege other men.

Given the evidence in this chapter it should be no surprise that representations of feminism that come out of Hollywood is a form of “feminism without women” (Modleski, 1991) . This is why the engagement with postfeminism can be considered a stalemate; the patriarchy in Hollywood is stabilised, the trend for women’s participation remains flat. Without addressing this massive deficit of women in Hollywood, mediatised visions of feminism will always be filtered through the eyes of men. Hollywood will deliver what men believe feminism wants. It is in this disjunction, where the oppressor (patriarchy) controls the means to (re)produce the demands held against it (feminism), that the ambiguity of postfeminism is produced. In the long term criticism which is simply a reaction to these representations becomes unproductive. To get around this problem I claim that feminist criticism of postfeminism must be formed as a feminist demand, rather than a response. With the introduction of the idea of ‘ethical subjectivity’ the next chapter illustrates the possibility for a more radical demand grounded in feminism that makes claims against both the content of particular films and the structure of Hollywood as a gendered industry.
Chapter 3: The Ethical Subject

In chapter one I argued that one of the more problematic features of postfeminism is the assumption that the feminist project has been completed at an unspecified point in the past. In declaring the battle for equality over, postfeminism establishes the status-quo as a normalised point. It isn't the case that postfeminism denies inequality, it just denies it exists here and now. The empirical research I presented in chapter two challenged this idea. Not only does it show massive levels of inequality in an economically and culturally influential industry. It further shows that this inequality is enforced as a matter of cultural practice rather than through financial imperative or artistic ability. In other words it is a product of sexism and active gender discrimination. Of particular importance for this thesis is the making visible of that which postfeminism makes absent: a social/cultural structure – patriarchy - that feminism necessarily engages with. Quantitative data however is limited in how much of the story it can tell. As outlined in my introduction, one of the premises of this thesis is that in order to get around the postfeminist stalemate there needs to be a re-engagement and re-centering of feminist emancipatory politics in the process of cultural criticism. The difficulty for film-makers (and creative labour in other forms of cultural expression like television) is that while there is an element of political pleasure in watching women represented as living post-patriarchy, this style of representation depoliticises and dehistoricises that emancipation. This means that the struggles that feminism seeks to account for, which are the real experiences that women have - of sexism, sexual violence, racism, and other forms of discrimination - are necessarily excluded.

At the same time representations that feature women’s non-emancipation may not properly represent women’s experience of this non-emancipation. For example the television series Mad Men, while showing the results of sexism on women’s careers and home life, is nonetheless primarily about (white) men operating in a (white) man's world4. Women are still objects (feeling, affected objects) of a male narrative, even if their oppression is witnessed. The representation of sexism here serves a documentary function, locating the narrative in a specific historical context, signalling corporate misogyny and office violence as an artefact of the past.

4 Although not a Hollywood film, Mad Men remains relevant and is indicative of shifts in the television industry towards cinematic aesthetics and sensibilities, especially in networks such as AMC (American Movie Channel) and HBO (Home Box Office).
This tension between unproblematic representations of women as emancipated subjects (such as in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*) and representations of women as unemancipated subjects (as in *Mad Men*) may appear to be a situation where film makers have nowhere to turn. They are in effect damned if they do (represent freedom), damned if they don’t (acknowledge non-freedom). In this chapter I argue that it is possible to reconcile this disjunction by identifying an antagonism common to both sides. I claim that the common antagonism comes from the absence of a feminist mode of emancipation in these representations, and more broadly across postfeminist Hollywood.

To show this the chapter moves from the empirical analysis of production into an ethical analysis of representation. I will argue that ethics, and specifically ethical subjectivity, is a critical technique through which this missing feminist mode of emancipation can be exposed. In doing so I hope to not only foreground what is missing in the current account of postfeminism, but also to offer a means by which existing representations might be extended.

**Thelma and Louise Are not Enough!**

The 1991 road-movie classic *Thelma and Louise* (directed by Ridley Scott, written by Callie Khouri) is one of the most celebrated and discussed Hollywood films with a narrative focus on women. It depicts two women forming an intimate, but not sexual, camaraderie as they help each other escape their lives and confront their different histories and experiences of sexualised violence. Their roadtrip across the American southwest is marked as both tragic and comic. Pursued by the law, unfaithful husbands and con-artists, they find themselves faced with a final choice – submit once again to male authority and turn themselves in, or send themselves plunging into The Grand Canyon. The final scene of the film sees them suspended mid-air, their certain death suspended indefinitely.

As Sturken (2000) notes, on its release the film was talked about “in the media, in film reviews, on television talk shows, in letters to the editor, over the dinner table, in the local bar, at the water cooler...” (pg 8). The conversation is still going, in film and feminist blogs, in academic journals, in books dedicated to the film. It is not always a celebratory conversation. From the start there was criticism, in the form of an anti-feminist backlash (see for example “Toxic
feminism on the big Screen” in Leo, 1991) which casts the duo as man-hating criminals, but also in feminist responses, particularly surrounding the films ending. In Film and Ethics (Downing & Saxton, 2010), Lisa Downing argues against the common-sense positive representations that appear in the film. She claims the escape offered by the final scene of the film – Thelma and Louise driving off a cliff – is "disingenuously utopian" because it avoids representing the consequences of Thelma and Louise's actions. For Downing the failure of the film is an ethical one: "the ethical work that needs to be undertaken to show that one cannot escape outside of power structures in a feel-good way is simply not followed through in this film" (Downing & Saxton, p. 43). In other words, while Thelma and Louise are an attempt to represent women as ethical subjects, the consequence of this cannot be fully confronted. It is instead left ambiguous.

Elsewhere Projansky (2001) reflects on both her own and others' critical reactions to the film as feminist scholars. She notes that the majority of these are ambivalent about the ambiguity of the film's ending (pp. 146-151). This ambivalence seems to be rooted in the tension between the pleasure of the spectacle set against the critical impulse of scholarly work, and reproduction of stereotypes such as the rape-revenge genre and the transgressive and redemptive agency of the female leads. The question of how to disentangle these two sets of ambivalence and move on from the repetition of what Baker refers to as "the logical and pragmatic limitations of ... role-model feminism" (Baker, 1995, p. 142) recalls the postfeminist impasse which I discussed in chapter one.

In this chapter I offer the critical framework of ethical subjectivity to explore Downing's idea of a "specifically Hollywood-constructed notion of freedom". Against the criticism offered by the scholars Projansky discusses, Downing's suggestion puts the feminist demand at the heart of criticism. More precisely, Downing attempts to shift the discussion of Thelma and Louise away from what is offered by Hollywood (the rape-revenge model of women's narratives, the promises of freedom on the American frontier, the agency of the gun) towards what is made absent: a critical politics/ethics of emancipation.

In what follows I do not address Thelma and Louise in detail, in part to avoid repetition of arguments given elsewhere (particularly with respect to Downing’s ethical intervention into the discussion). But this alternative focus is also set aside in order to make a more significant point –
that the highpoint for feminist political agency reached in *Thelma and Louise* is not enough. In the same way that Kathryn Bigelow is a singular figure who represents the empirically unsupported mythology of the absence of gendered boundaries in Hollywood's creative labour, the enormous attention that *Thelma and Louise* has provoked risks creating a similar mythology – that somehow Hollywood’s feminist credentials rests on a a single film.

The films I have selected for discussion have been chosen because they meet two criteria. The first is that they appear in the data collected in the empirical component of my research. This means that they have met a certain level of critical and commercial success, have reached a popular audience and have been subjected to the same kinds of gendered division of labour that I demonstrated in chapter 2. The second is that they in some way align themselves to a discussion of the attributes that define Ethical Subjectivity. If ethical subjectivity is to be considered a useful analytic tool it must first be proven to elicit new knowledge and perspectives of the films it is used to analyse. The failure to do so in films in which these three aspects of the ethical subject are readily identifiable would demonstrate a failure of the hypothesis when faced with its easiest test. A positive outcome in these circumstances would then open the way to explore deeper and more diverse applications of the idea.

**Why an Ethical Subjectivity?**

Before answering that question I would first note that my aim here is not to produce a comprehensive theory of ethics and ethical experience, as say, Kant (*Ground Work, Metaphysics of Moral*), Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil, Geneology of Morals*), Levinas (*Ethics and Infinity*) or Badiou (*Ethics: An Essay on the understanding of Evil*) have. Rather, I am more interested in bringing forward some broader ideas that have informed each of these thinkers. The purpose is to produce an accessible and versatile notion of ethical subjectivity that will be able to accommodate narrative diversity in cinema. Part of this versatility will come from drawing short of using the ethical to prescribe the good. The ethical subject I want to describe is not the subject who is morally good or evil or, lives the Aristotelian “good life”. Rather she is the subject who is counted among those who can make an act Ethical.

There are a couple of reasons to approach the subject this way. The first is that in the discussion
of individual films to come the aim is not to determine whether or not women are represented as fulfilling some normative ethical criteria. It is instead to see the ways in which their ethical subjectivity is mediated, represented and recognised. This makes room for cinema in which a woman might be an ethical hero, in the sense that she always manages to find the best course of moral action, but also a woman who might be recognised as immoral. Both Zupančič and Žižek recognise this capacity for ethical immorality in their analysis of literature and film. Zupančič cites Don Juan's ethical commitment to pleasure and nihilistic hedonism (Zupančič, 2000, pp. 121-131) which puts him at odds with normative standards. This she argues does not make Don Juan unethical, since he maintains a Kantian like commitment to duty. Rather he is made to be ethically immoral, doing the wrong things for the right reasons. Likewise in Interrogating the Real Žižek notes that Anakin Skywalker’s (the childhood name of Star Wars villain Darth Vader) commitment to the “dark side of the force” - demonstrated by his mass-murder of Jedi children - is a formally ethical standpoint while also being morally transgressive (p. 329). In both these cases the characters maintain, even in the face of death, a fidelity to a self-legislated maxim. This formal element keeps open the possibility of a diversity of ethical women in film.

The second reason for holding back from making normative ethical claims in the construction of the ethical is that the feminist struggle for the recognition of women to be included among those with ethical subjectivity does not entail the demand that women follow any particular normative notion of the good. The question of any particular “feminist ethics” and how it may be constituted (for example; as an ethics of care), is therefore set aside as a debate within feminism rather than a demand of feminism. Indeed, the example of an ethics of care works well to illustrate this difference.

The idea that women are differently ethical has worked its way from the enlightenment period and into modern discourses including, but not limited to, psychology, politics and as I shall discuss, cinema. For example, Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice (1982) critiques an assertion that comes from Kohlberg's research into moral development. Kohlberg (in Gilligan, 1982) claims that his research demonstrates that men mature faster in a moral sense on the grounds that moral reasoning between genders operates differently, with women being more adept at working with relational ethics rather than an ethics of justice. She claims that Kohlberg's own
research is flawed because it assumes justice to be a gender neutral term. Gilligan is thus operating at two levels. She is confronting a representation of women's ethical subjectivity (i.e. that their moral development is slower) and she then goes on to provide a normative ethics (i.e. the ethics of care). Here I am primarily concerned with the former rather than the latter, the question of representation of ethical subjectivity rather than the practical content of that ethics. The problem of confusing the formal and the practical in ethics is perhaps no more succinctly evident than in Kant. In the Preface to the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant distinguishes between the empirical study of ethics – the study of how people actually behave morally which he also calls “practical anthropology” and the rational (or pure) study of ethics, which is the study of how people ought to behave (p. 49). Kant warns against ignoring this distinction as it would lead to false conclusions when reasoning about ethics. However, in one of the great ironies of Kant, he later makes this claim about women – ignoring his own warnings;

I hardly believe the fair sex is capable of principles, and hope by that not to offend, for those are also extremely rare in the male. But in place of it Providence has placed in their breast kind and benevolent sensations (Kant, 1991, p. 81)

Kant’s error (and Kohlberg’s, by Gilligan's claim) is a fundamentally empirical one regarding women’s status as ethical subjects. It is not simply a normative claim that women are not morally good, nor capable of being good, but rather, that they are incapable of reasoning in the domain of the good (in other words, the ethical). Similarly Hegel, a critic of Kant’s ethics, (Hegel described Kants deontology as “empty formalism”) nonetheless agrees with this sentiment - “Women may have happy inspirations, taste, elegance, but they have not the ideal” (Hegel, 1821).

In contrast to the characters that Zupančič and Žižek identified as ethically immoral, women have been understood as unethically moral. This has implications for many feminist struggles. If it is understood that women are not able (or less able) to engage in ethical experience, which is to say they do not have ethical subjectivity and are not subject to ethics, then their ethical subjectivity must be delivered from elsewhere. In concrete terms, this is witnessed in legislation that seeks to impede a woman’s moral deliberation because it is assumed they themselves
cannot adequately do so\textsuperscript{5}. Thus morality for women is delivered from elsewhere – be it a natural disposition (“providence”, as Kant says) towards the good, or by force of law within patriarchy (e.g legislated restrictions on moral freedoms; divorce rights, sex work, abortion, men's rights to/over women's bodies etc). Furthermore the assumption leads to the belief that women are unsuitable to certain kinds of labor, such as political work. Even in circumstances where women have been traditionally thought to do good (the home and public charity for example) these operate as sub-spaces within patriarchy; i.e the nuclear family, the church. This is not to say that men are not also subject to legislated morality – laws against murder and theft bind men as much as women. Rather it suggests that women are subjected here because they are women - a situation further problematised by the fact that law makers are still primarily men.

The first step in my framework for ethical subjectivity is to have women recognised as those who do not simply do good but have responsibility for their own ethical reasoning. This is what Nietzsche calls, “the right to make promises” (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 57). Here Nietzsche implies that there exists a social element of recognition of ethical subjectivity. This is particularly illustrative. What a promise entails is not to be found in the content of the promise, the demand of the promise is to be found in the structure of what constitutes the act of promising. At its core a promise is an assumption of responsibility for some future event. But that is not all that a promise comprises. The right to make a promise comes out of the recognition that one is capable of taking responsibility for oneself, and is able to recognise the ethical demand a promise makes, which is to say a promise gains its meaning through a reflexive act of prescribing ethical meaning to promises. However, the promise is only truly meaningful when done in relation to another (even if that is the reflexive self of the promise-maker) who accepts the subject as one who has the right to make promises. In order words, to make a promise one must first be recognised as a subject who can make an ethical commitment to some action.

The self-affirming circularity of commitment in a promise, as an ethical act, is reflected in the way many key theorists describe ethics. Laclau, for example, refers to the “radical investment”

\textsuperscript{5} Reproductive rights are obvious examples – including abortion and contraceptive use – but other examples include laws that once restricted voting rights or representation in government, laws that permitted (or continue to permit) a husband disciplining his wife, and laws that criminalise sex-work.
that constitutes the ethical, which a subject bestows upon themselves. For Laclau this investment is radical because it is “incommensurable” with the existing normative order, which is to say, it “redefines the terms of relationship between what is and what ought to be...” (Laclau, 2000, p80-82). Badiou speaks of “fidelity” to the Truth of an Event (Badiou, 2001, p67-70). For Kant ethics merges from acting from duty “for the sake of duty”, that is to say, it is not sufficient to do the right thing, but one must do the right thing because it is the right thing (Kant, 2005, pp. 59-61. Simon Critchley takes elements of all of the above, even though they may not in totality agree with each other. He argues that even though the immanence of Badiou’s Event is contrary to the universality of Kant's categorical imperative, they nonetheless establish a simple circularity of “demand and approval”. In this circularity ethical subjectivity emerges in the witnessing and calling of an ethical demand which is then either confirmed or denied (Critchley, 2007, p. 15). As with the promise, this acts as a self-establishing circle: “Ethical experience is, first and foremost, the approval of a demand, a demand that demands approval” (p. 17). As with the promise, this circle is not only a matter of subjective experience, but it must be recognised socially. It is through this social recognition that an ethical demand is made meaningful in the sense that without this social recognition there is no Other of which a demand can be made. This recognition is what I claim is at stake in a feminist demand for ethical subjectivity.

The feminist demand is not just a demand for things (more jobs, better pay) but a demand that is placed universally on an existing way of being, namely patriarchy. For example; there is no particular salary level that would fulfil the demand for equal pay for equal work. In another example the ethical maxim (i.e a demand that is approved) that one ought to give to the poor as much as one can, then the rich person who gives a hundred dollars is not a hundred times more moral than a poor person who gives a single dollar. The giving of a dollar, or a hundred, is only ethical in relation to that maxim that it fulfils – bearing in mind the condition “as much as possible”. This is what makes the feminist demand fundamentally ethical in contrast to postfeminism. A feminist demand for say, equal pay, can only be met by that universal condition. It is not sufficient that this be reduced to some women, or simply more pay than is currently received. There is no room for contradiction in the ethical. By not making the same kinds of ethical demands as feminism, postfeminism can readily accommodate these contradictions. This is how postfeminism can co-exist unproblematically within patriarchy. The feminist demand for emancipation has to be abandoned to make this possible. This is how
feminism is in itself an ethical demand on patriarchal hegemony. Its mere existence upsets the status-quo by asking “why are you here? Justify yourself”.

So far this discussion has tried to define what I mean when I talk about ethical subjectivity. In the rest of the chapter I will draw out three key themes that advance this framework in application. The first refers to the notion of responsibility. In the following discussion responsibility is contrasted with agency, with the former necessarily holding an ethical element and the later referring merely to action. The second theme is sovereignty and choice. In this section I argue that the idea of the sovereign is necessary in ethical subjectivity because ethical fidelity or commitment must be one's own. The final theme is that of motherhood, which while quite specific, represents a significant means by which women's ethical subjectivity is framed. The discussion of these themes occurs in relation to several cinematic texts which are illustrative of the ways in which women's ethical subjectivity is represented, mediated or ignored.

Agents without Responsibility

The representation of violence as agency, and such agency as feminist, is clearly identifiable in postfeminist cinema. In the introduction I began with a claim from Quentin Tarantino where he suggested that his violent female characters represented a kind of immediately experienced empowerment for female audiences. Tarantino's proposition is that agency is demonstrated through a mastery of violent technologies (of the body and of machines) and that the acquisition of this mastery is inherently linked to feminism and female empowerment. As demonstrated by numerous feminist scholars (for example Tasker, 1993; McCaughey & King, 2001, Inness, 2004; Neroni, 2005; Schubart, 2007) this is not a formula proposed only by Tarantino but sufficiently widespread in Hollywood to be considered a genre of its own.

Agency that relies only on the capacity to perform an action speaks merely to a causal relation between an actor and an action. What is missing from this is an ethical dimension to agency. There is nothing in the female agent that makes her necessarily an ethical subject. Take for example the Terminator franchise. Over the course of four films, the series sees robots from the future sent back in time to assassinate the future (male) leader of the human resistance against the robot empire (both male and female). The first two films follow Sarah Connor and her son,
John Connor (the true target of the robots) as they are pursued by ever more advanced robots, known as Terminators. As robots with sophisticated artificial intelligence the Terminators are designed to be as human as possible. These terminators have a great deal of agency. Although self-aware, they are not subjects proper because they are dependent on their programming. What they lack is the self-reflexivity required to develop an ethical subjectivity. As such, they can be considered responsible for something, such as the destruction of a building, but they would not be thought to be responsible in an ethical sense, owing to their programmed nature.

Responsibility is not just the passive condition of being a causal agent. It refers to an active assumption of responsibility, of making positive acts precisely because one can be responsible. When responsibility is assumed, there is the effect of including oneself in not just a causal chain but an ethical one too. One is responsible insofar as one takes an ethical stance in relation to some action. This does not necessarily entail a causal relation to an outcome but rather situates a subject as assuming the position of one who can be responsible, as one who has the right to make promises. Responsibility is an ethical demand (in the form of a claim) as much as it is a metaphysical state on relation to an event. This claim of responsibility is also to be considered within a socio-political context. Though a subject may recognise themselves as responsible, the recognition of this responsibility is contested territory. This contesting over who can be considered ethical manifests in numerous ways.

In the criminal justice system for example guilt - that is to say the causal responsibility for a crime - can be mitigated by the non-recognition of the guilty party's (diminished) responsibility. Responsibility is socially regulated this way through categories such as mental illness, age or disability. Central to this thesis is the idea that this regulation of responsibility has a gendered manifestation. In the tradition of enlightenment patriarchy, with Kant and Hegel being the great examples, women have been assumed to be unable to act ethically, usually on grounds of their perceived limited ability to reason. This exclusion has then grounded their non-recognition as responsible subjects, as those who are not able to assume responsibility. As de Beauvoir (1972, pp. 729-730) argues in The Second Sex women are doubly bound by this exclusion. They are both denied the freedom of responsibility, that is, to assert their response-ability and yet they are also told that irresponsibility is in fact a privilege to be guarded, she is "free from troublesome burdens and cares". This failure to recognise women's status as ethical subjects,
and specifically as subjects-who-are-responsible is the territory of particular political struggles by feminist activists and thinkers. Luce Irigaray for example notes that with respect to political representation;

...one cannot demand 50/50 parity in representation at the political level without first of all demanding the right to responsibility towards the self and the community... (Irigaray, 2000, p. 189)

In the following discussion I look at female action heroes who negotiate (or are negotiated through) this disjunction between agent and ethical subject. Of particular interest is how the agency of the female characters is emphasised in contrast to how their ethical subjectivity is mediated. The two films I concentrate on are Joss Whedon's *Serenity* (2005) and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* [sic] (2009). These films are chosen because they come from directors who have made claims about the empowering nature of their work, and have a history of presenting female characters with a violence based agency indicative of the industry as a whole. For Whedon this history is found in his television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Dollhouse* (2010) and *Firefly* (2002). For Tarantino it is films such as *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Death Proof* (2007) and the previously mentioned *Kill Bill* series. Other movies, such as *The Fifth Element* and *Charlie's Angels* are used to complement the main discussion.

Joss Whedon's *Serenity* (2005), a movie length conclusion to the television series *Firefly* (2002) follows the adventures of the crew of spaceship Serenity, captained by the good natured but morally flexible Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion). Following from the television series with the crew moving from job to job – some legal, some less than legal – but ultimately ends with them taking a stand against a government conspiracy to hide the deaths of tens of thousands of colonists on the planet Miranda. The film evokes elements of both science fiction and western genres – with the frontiers of space being re-inhabited as if they were the frontier of the American west. In keeping with Whedon's geek chic (as seen in his previous for-television creations *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*) the universe Serenity presents is rich with intertextual pop-culture references.
Critical to the story of Serenity is the character of River Tam (Summer Glau). River finds herself aboard the Serenity with her brother Simon, who rescued her from a government laboratory. While in captivity River was subjected to experiments that have left her psychologically traumatised but superhumanly powerful – although the extent of her abilities are not initially understood by anyone but the man sent to reclaim her, The Operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor). As the narrative progresses, a series of incidents demonstrate River’s extraordinary abilities which include telepathic powers, superhuman strength and agility, and extraordinary fighting skills. It is through River’s apocalyptic visions and violent interventions that the narrative redirects from simple adventure into the uncovering of conspiracy. River’s power marks her as a kind of damaged, even hysterical messiah – it is she among all others who has the capacity to save the world and expose the corruption of the government. In the climax of the film, as The Operative and Mal Reynolds engage in hand-to-hand combat, River single-handedly wipes out a horde of psychopathic space-faring pirates known as the Reavers.

For all the agency that these powers afford River her position as a subject is maintained within a patriarchal hierarchy. She is subservient to first Mal and secondly her brother. This in itself is not necessarily improper – if patriarchy exists in the fictional universe of Serenity then it is justifiably represented. The problem emerges when expectations of women's subjectivity are built into the fictional universe. The framework of the ethical subject reveals these expectations by problematising the purpose of agency. In an attempt to show strong female characters, Whedon puts his emphasis on the brutality of strength, demonstrated by the fact that the majority of River's on-screen presence is during violent action sequences. This over-emphasis of violent agency leaves little room to develop River as a subject. Indeed her history as the product of a laboratory marks her as more technology than subject, a point not lost to the characters, but missed by Whedon himself:

You had a gorram time bomb living with us! Who we gonna find in there when she wakes up? The girl? Or the weapon? (Mal Reynolds to Simon Tam)

Signalled here as both girl (though more rightly a woman) and weapon, River is never properly constructed as the former. The vast majority of her screen time and character development revolves around preparation for or engagement in acts of violence. Her two longest scenes are
action sequences. River's being-woman and being-weapon is represented solely in the guise of the latter, so that her woman-ness is subsumed into her status as a weapon. Like the Terminator River never truly encounters herself as an ethical subject, nor is she ever approached by others as such (both in the sense of other characters, but also the writers and director who created her). Rather, she is a weapon whose ethical subjectivity is held elsewhere. In part it lies with her brother, who guides and protects her, but who can also literally shut her down with a spoken password. Ultimately though it is Mal, the patriarch proper on-board Serenity, who holds it. If River is the weapon then Mal is the one who wields (that is, owns) her. It is on his direction as captain that leads the crew to the planet Miranda and the eventual discovery that Miranda is the site of a global massacre caused by government experiments which were subsequently covered up. It is this discovery that leads Mal to reassert himself as an ethical subject through a renewed commitment to his political convictions. In fact, in a climactic speech, Mal not only reasserts the ethical duty of truth for himself, he asserts it for the entire crew (as Rowley [2007] notes, this also happens throughout the television series). In this act Mal is positioned as sovereign – his transition from loveable rogue to ethical subject is made on his own assertion, furthermore, through his position of power he imposes the same ethical injunction on others.

Another example is the major villain of the film. The Operative is a government assassin tasked with hunting down River with the intention of either bringing her into custody or terminating her. In contrast to River, The Operative finds himself acutely aware of his position within the socio-ethical world. The Operative finds his ethical subjectivity in his explicit and public assumption of his role. Unlike River, who fails to assert any kind of ethical stake in her actions, The Operative demonstrates his ethical subjectivity in his fidelity to a duty – to see to what he describes as a "A better world. A world without sin". Like River, The Operative features in a number of extended action sequences and fight scenes, but unlike River he articulates a commitment to an ethical maxim. His ethical subjectivity is demonstrated up front. Indeed, such is the Operative's fidelity to duty that he demonstrates the immoral excess that ethical subjectivity can entail. In their final confrontation Mal and The Operative take a moment to understand each other, a moment when the two competing masculinities (or patriarchies) acknowledge themselves, and each other, in the absence of women. In this confrontation The Operative reveals his ethical subjectivity as that of the "immoral ethical". Having laid waste to a peaceful religious community that once aided Mal, The Operative explains himself:
The Operative: I'm sorry. If your quarry goes to ground, leave no ground to go to. You should have taken my offer. Or did you think none of this was your fault?


The Operative: I do. If I have to.

Capt. Malcolm Reynolds: Why? Do you even know why they sent you?

The Operative: It's not my place to ask. I believe in something greater than myself. A better world. A world without sin.

Capt. Malcolm Reynolds: So me and mine gotta lay down and die... so you can live in your better world?

The Operative: I'm not going to live there. There's no place for me there... any more than there is for you. Malcolm... I'm a monster. What I do is evil. I have no illusions about it, but it must be done.

The Operative's role is cast as a profoundly ethical (if not immoral) act of fidelity to duty. Furthermore The Operative recognises himself as being responsible for the immoral excess that his ethical stance demands. Through this narrative The Operative is signalled as an ethical villain – an ethical subject of the kind Zupančič and Žižek would identify as ethically immoral. He maintains ethical fidelity even when confronted with the lies that ground it.

There is no comparative subjectivity for River. Her place is merely to act and disappear. If present at all, her representation as an ethical subject is only to be found in her violent actions against the Reavers. River is not a character who is able to articulate her own subjectivity as one that comprises an ethical component. Indeed, of the major characters in the film it is only the men who are permitted to represent themselves as part of an ethical/political community. As such, even when gendered norms are confronted or subverted (such as in the character Zoe, a battle hardened soldier who is second in command to Mal, or the sex-positive Geisha/Companion Inara) they fail to escape the overarching narrative as a conflict of competing masculinities (Rowley, 2007).

River's capacity to define the terms of her violence are never hers and she is unproblematically constructed as serving some other power first and foremost. She has agency in only the most
fundamental sense – she can act; indeed, her power enables her to act beyond the means of most. Yet the narrative prevents her from grounding her action with any constitutive ethical meaning. That meaning must come from elsewhere – the male intruder who, welcome or otherwise, puts this agency to work. Because of this necessary intrusion, agency based in action alone is an insufficient condition for ethical subjectivity.

The film's failure to represent River as an ethical subject of her own is compounded by the comparative over-representation of men with ethical subjectivity. Yet this failure is not limited to this film. If it were, then perhaps it could just be glossed over as a stylistic quirk. But the two oversights that Serenity features - the initial lack of ethical subjectivity in women and subsequent intrusion of patriarchal authority that fills the gap - are repeated throughout Hollywood. River's all-agency no-subjectivity representation is repeated in, to name a few examples, Leeloo (Milla Jovovich) from The Fifth Element, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) in the Matrix Trilogy and Fox (Angelina Jolie) in Wanted. It is perhaps most explicit in the rebooted Charlie's Angels (2000, 2003) franchise. This failure in Serenity is all the more notable given Whedon's acclaim as a writer and director of positive representations of women and his obvious appreciation of discourses of women's emancipation. Indeed, it is this expectation that makes it all the more difficult to properly dissect his work. Charlie's Angels by contrast holds no such expectation.

In Charlie's Angels a crew of three attractive and multi-talented women known as The Angels, are under the command of an unseen man known only as Charlie. Charlie sends The Angels on noble missions investigating kidnappings, solving murders and so on. Charlie, as a protagonist, is purely voice and is physically represented through a telephone or through his (male) assistant Bosley. In the same way that River is a weapon in Mal's ethical/political crusade, so too The Angels are weapons and agents of Charlie (hence the name of the franchise; Charlie's Angels). The ethics of the actions of The Angels reside in Charlie's largely unknown agenda. The Angels' agency is invested with an ethical dimension only through the assumption that Charlie himself is an ethical agent – as he is implied to be.

In these examples female empowerment is represented as the ability to fight, kill and destroy. As such it serves not as a transformative act but rather one that ensures that the world is able to
continue as normal. The characters of River, Leeloo, Trinity, The Angels and others like them play a kind of messianic role within narrative. Their purpose is to provide a means to an ends that they themselves do not choose. This defines them apart from male messianic figures in cinema of say, Superman or Neo, who not only arrive to save the day but themselves determine what constitutes the nature of that end.

The second film that I want to look at in detail with respect to the notion of responsibility is *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). This film shows another perspective of how responsibility, and as a consequence ethical subjectivity, is regulated in Hollywood cinema. The film is structured as a five chapter story detailing the convergence of two separate plans to assassinate Hitler. It draws from the cultural heritage of World War 2 action films such as the *The Dirty Dozen* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1967), *Where Eagles Dare* (dir. Alistair MacLean, 1969) and *Inglorious Bastards* (dir. Enzo G. Castellari, 1977). The first chapter tells the story of an encounter between SS officer Lando and a French farmer who is hiding a Jewish family in his home. Lando forces the farmer to betray the family to the Germans who murder the entire family except for Soshanna, who escapes into the countryside. Chapter two introduces the 'Basterds' - a group of Jewish-American soldiers air-dropped into Nazi occupied France to terrorise the Wehrmacht. The Basterds gain infamy within the Wehrmacht through acts of over-the-top violence and brutality (such as scalping, bashing prisoners to death with baseball bats). Chapter 3 finds Soshanna running a cinema she has inherited from her aunt. Her life appears almost normal until she comes to the attention of a German war hero, Zoller, who attempts to woo her. However she is forced to accommodate his interests when she learns that a film that glorifies his role in a battle will be premiered at her cinema. After learning that most of the German leadership will be present, including Hitler and the man who murdered her family, she decides to use this opportunity to exact revenge. In Chapter 4 the Allied high command learn of this film premiere and plan to bomb the cinema. While the operation does not go entirely to plan, the Basterds are able to get two of their men into the cinema. In the final Chapter the Basterds operation runs parallel to Soshanna's attempt at revenge. Soshanna's plan is to lock the German officers in the cinema and burn it down, the Basterds plan to blow the cinema up and machine gun anyone else. The end result is that Soshanna's fire begins but before she can witness her revenge she is killed and the Basterds' bombs explode – killing everyone.
Soshanna never realises her revenge. While she is preparing to run her film, Zoller accosts her in the projectionist's room. Though she manages to shoot him (through the pretence of sexual attraction), she herself is shot when she goes to check whether he is alive. It is at this point that her revenge on Nazi Germany begins, yet she is not there to experience it. Furthermore, it is the Basterd’s plan, not hers, that kills the German leadership. As fire engulfs the cinema, the two Basterds burst into Hitler’s private balcony and machine gun him and Goebbels before turning the guns on the audience below. Finally, Lando, the man directly responsible for the murder of Soshanna's family, escapes, but is caught again by the surviving Basterds.

Looking back to the definition of the the ethical subject, it is clear how Inglorious Basterds refuses this figure. Soshanna’s ethical duty, her drive to take revenge and her refusal to benefit from the advances of a German war hero, is ultimately made inconsequential and her act is forgotten within the larger battle between the masculine heroism of the Basterds and Lando. For all her planning, intellect and passion Soshanna will not be permitted to take revenge (this displacement is repeated in The Brave One, which I discuss shortly). Moreover, the duty that Soshanna assumes in the narrative is embedded in traditional ideas of women’s attachment to family. By contrast the all male Basterds take on the necessity of their duty as an exercise in public justice, which their leader, Aldo Raine, articulates in a classically Tarantino expression of masculinity:

“The members of the National Socialist Party have conquered Europe through murder, torture, intimidation and terror. And that’s exactly what we’re gonna do to them. Now I don’t know about y’all, but I sure as hell didn’t come down from the goddamn smoky mountains, cross five thousand miles of water, fight my way through half of Sicily, and then jump out of a fuckin' air-o-plane, to teach the Nazis lessons in humanity. Nazi ain’t got no humanity. They’re the foot soldiers of a Jew-hatin', mass-murderin' manic, and they need to be destroyed.”

Ultimately, the settling of the moral ledgers will be done by and between men. While justice is

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6 For example, Hegel's claim that “Womankind -- the everlasting irony in the life of the community -- changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into the work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family” (Hegel, 1977, p. 288)
personified as a blindfolded woman, it is men who get to tip the scales. In doing so patriarchal authority intercepts female ethical subjectivity at the moment it is most threatening to assert itself. In the context of a greater public responsibility that is carried by men, Soshanna’s agency represents the conservatism of postfeminism. While she can act bravely and violently within a certain ideological and cultural space she is not permitted to be the one who determines the nature of these spaces.

These two cases, *Serenity* and *Inglorious Basterds*, and the other films I have discussed so far demonstrate one way that female character’s ethical subjectivities are avoided or contained. By displacing responsibility for actions, female characters can maintain a position of being agents without having to engage ethical imperatives that might disrupt overarching patriarchal authority. As a result, agency is shown to be at best ambiguous in its relation to feminism. This ambiguity is drawn out through the consideration of the ethical content of agency and the ethical subjectivity of the characters who exhibit agency. This means that while the notion of agency can strengthen the ambiguity inherent to postfeminism the idea of ethical subjectivity can reveal this ambiguity for what it is, namely, a means to obscure really existing patriarchy.

**Sovereignty and the Ethical Exception**

The second manifestation of ethical subjectivity I suggest is that of sovereignty. The notion of sovereignty I have in mind here is drawn from Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922) in which the sovereign is defined as “he who decides on the state of exception”. In Schmitt the state of exception is the suspension of the foundation of Law (such as the constitution):

> [T]he sovereign stands outside of the normally valid juridical order, and yet belongs to it, for it is he who is responsible for deciding whether the constitution can be suspended *in toto* (Schmitt in Agamben, 2005, p. 35)

This means at the political/State level, the sovereign is the one (or the structure, or the collective etc) that is able to suspend the law and do so lawfully. The right to transgress (or suspend) the law is encoded in the law itself and embodied in the sovereign. In this sense the sovereign is that in the law which is more "The Law" than the law itself, or the law of the law
and what ultimately acts as the first and last guarantor of the law. As Agamben notes:

... a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to the law.

(Agamben, 2005, p. 1)

Agamben refers to this as a “topological structure” of “being-outside, and yet belonging” (p. 51) which alludes to the structure of the ethical as an excessive commitment that is sustained by an exception. The sovereign that Schmitt refers to is a state/political power which decides on the state of exception. The sovereign I consider in what follows is the one who decides on the state of ethical exception. Unlike Schmitt's sovereign, who opts out of an obligation (to the Constitution, to the Law) the ethical exception opts in. In this sense it is closer to Badiou's conception of the ethical as fidelity to the truth of an Event. Unlike say, Kant, who constructs an ethical subject who is always-forever bound in the universal ethics of the “kingdom of ends”, Badiou sees the ethical as contingent to a truth defined by the subject themselves. This he calls “being faithful to a fidelity” (Badiou, 2001, p. 47) of a moment. This moment of decision is the space in which the ethical subject emerges. In Badiou's notion of faithfulness to fidelity, one finds a recursive affirmation similar in structure to Critchley's reflexive cycle of approval/demand and Kant's fidelity to self-legislated duty.

The point of this discussion of sovereignty and the ethical is to introduce the idea that within a feminist ethical subjectivity is a claim for sovereignty. For a specifically feminist ethical subjectivity, the primary claim of sovereignty is against the intrusion/assertion of sovereignty of the patriarch over the body/subjectivity of women. In this sense sovereignty is not simply the act of determining self-legislated duty but the means by which the socio-political coordinates of that duty are determined/recognised. A woman can determine what duty or fidelity she remains faithful to, indeed that is held as an axiom of feminism, but the determination of the boundaries of this law is made elsewhere. This is the sovereignty of the patriarchy. In a patriarchy the exceptions and inclusions of the ethical are gendered categories. So, for example, a male parliament can make a determination at which point women are recognised as subjects able to make proper ethical judgement.
A contemporary illustration of this is the ongoing struggle to recognise women as subjects able to determine by their own reasoning the moral/ethical status of an unborn child they are carrying. In patriarchy the domain of ethical reasoning is denied to women and transferred into the public. Far from merely making this a matter of non-gendered public discourse the matter is in effect transferred from private women's reasoning into a public that is *de facto* masculine (recognisable for example by the male dominated domains of public discourse – parliaments, media and so forth). In her 1971 paper, *In Defense of Abortion*, Thomson suggests that the ground for debate regarding abortion is centred on two areas - both determined by and in the interests of patriarchy. The first is the status of the foetus: whether it can think and feel, whether it has fingernails, questions of potential and viability. The second is the ownership of reproductive labour, who has the right to the child, how is lineage formed, the economic and social imperative for reproduction. What is of course missing is the body and subjectivity of the woman. Thomson's response is to recentre the role of the woman, her body and her experience. By doing so she presents an opportunity to redefine the coordinates of the ethical that are otherwise excluded by the existing sovereign. In this re-centering Thomson begins to ask not about the status of the body of the unborn but rather the status of the woman. What rights do foetuses have to make a claim on her body, what right does the State have to make a claim on her body and so on. In this exercise Thomson begins with Woman as sovereign. Prescriptions made upon her (denial of her ethical subjectivity, demands on her body and so on) are not merely assumed as starting points for discussion, as they are by a patriarchal sovereign, but must be argued for – patriarchy must justify itself and in doing so, make itself present. Thomson asks, what right does one subject have in demanding the body of another? This question does not turn on the status of the foetus, since the demand for a body is already considered unreasonable in other circumstances, such as rape (and also slavery, conscription etc). Indeed, this contradiction between the right to one's body with regard to rape and abortion demonstrate the operation of patriarchy as sovereign. The exception being made here is the suspension of the maxim that declares the right to bodily integrity. This maxim is upheld in one determination (rape is, at least officially, prohibited even in a patriarchal society) and at the same time denied in the other (without the possibility of abortion women are not permitted to full bodily integrity). Though in no way making an equivocation between the two actions, the point is that the maxim of the right to bodily integrity is regulated not by the ethical subject herself but by an external sovereign body which decides for her. In patriarchy the sovereign
figure that determines when these ethical injunctions are in a state of exception is by definition male. The recursive nature of the ethical (Kant’s self-legislated maxims, Critchley's demand/approval cycle, Badiou's faith to a fidelity) means that the sovereign and the ethical subject must be one and the same. If an ethical subject is not sovereign, then they cannot approve their own ethical demands. They may share similar states of demand and approval as others, but the approval must be of an ethical demand they themselves experience. The notion of the ethical subject therefore refuses the external sovereign by necessity and as a consequence necessarily refuses patriarchy. What distinguishes the feminist from the postfeminist ethical subject is that only the latter can accommodate patriarchy in its ethical maxims.

This sense of the ethical subject as sovereign is another way in which cinema can be read through an ethical lens. Although not alone, there is one film which epitomises the regulatory nature of patriarchy as sovereign and that is The Brave One (dir Neil Jordan, 2007). The Brave One is of particular interest because of how far it goes to explicitly align itself with contemporary liberal feminism through the representation of a successful, independent and resourceful career woman. At the same time it draws from narrative/aesthetics of the rape-revenge genre that became popular in the late 1970's. The film illustrates how postfeminism never quite escapes the confines of patriarchy. In this case those confines are revealed when male sovereignty is threatened by an emerging female ethical subjectivity. As I will show The Brave One approaches this point but ultimately backs away.

The film begins with Erica (Jodie Foster) and her partner David being attacked in New York City while walking their dog. Erica is left bruised and battered while David is beaten to death and the dog stolen. The city police are largely unhelpful and Erica is left to grieve in a city that she no longer feels is hers. The anxiety of a city that is now filled with danger leads Erica to purchase a gun, which leads her to first become an unwitting but then a calculated vigilante. As Erica's narrative unfolds she finds friendship with the detective tasked with investigating her fiancee's murderers. Ultimately Erica finds revenge (or justice) through an act of violence.

One reading sees Erica as the epitome of what liberal feminism has delivered to women. She has a successful and respected career in radio, she has a healthy and respectful relationship with her
successful partner David, she lives in a beautiful New York apartment, is creative, forthright with her opinions and confident. She is sexy and flirtatious without being submissive. “I never understood people who lived in fear” she says of her life, refusing a sense of victimhood. When her peaceful, bourgeois lifestyle is shattered by David’s murder, and when the police are unable to help, she is driven to bring the perpetrators to justice. Erica exhibits strengths that are both traditionally feminine (caring, nurturing, creative, emotive) and masculine (intellectual, active, violent). Her journey grief to retribution, violent as it may be, carries with it the pleasure of watching the wronged stand up for themselves and overcome their oppressors. The audience cannot help but side with Erica as she summarily puts to death a string of bullies, thieves and abusive pimps. In this way the film aligns the audience with the detective unknowingly investigating both Erica’s crimes and the murder of her partner. Like Mercer the audience is asked to weigh up a drawn out commitment to lawful procedure against the immediate satisfaction and indeed pleasure of revenge. Such a reading of the film does however miss some crucial elements that the framework of the ethical subject can bring to light. This extra reading demonstrates that far from enabling Erica as an Ethical Subject the film offers her everything except the moment at which she would fully exert her proper ethical subjectivity.

The first question the frame of ethical subjectivity raises is by what means does Erica finds herself within an ethical domain? Her (ethical) journey does not really begin until she purchases a gun, and this purchase is predicated on the trauma of being brutally beaten and the loss of her partner. The acquisition of the weapon gives her a level of agency she did not otherwise have – she can now inflict violence she might have otherwise not had reason to contemplate. As the narrative builds, Erica is thrust into a string of encounters with generic “bad guys” - a subway mugger and a convenience store thief. These first two lives she takes are not motivated by an assumption of a particular commitment (revenge, justice etc) but accidents of the moment. It is not until her later encounter with an abusive pimp that she assumes responsibility (to some extent). This assumption of responsibility is the first gendered encounter in this context. While The Brave One loosely follows the structure of the rape-revenge genre (rape-recovery-revenge) it is not until Erica encounters the (threatened/implied) rape of a sex-worker by a pimp that the possibility of revenge is raised. It is through this encounter that Erica becomes a vigilante proper. The other killings were panicked reactions to a situation imposed on Erica, this particular situation however sees Erica imposing herself. It is in this moment that, in Badiou’s terms, Erica
realises the truth to which she will hold fidelity, that is, the necessity of justice. Whereas Kant sees the ethical as always-already present – maxims and categorical imperatives exist a priori, Badiou argues that the ethical (and the ethical subject) emerges in response to a particular event in which the subject recognises an ethical demand (Badiou, 2001, pp. 43-45). In this sense of the ethical Erica emerges into ethical subjectivity as a response to an ethical demand she recognises in the situation. It is as a result of this emerging ethical space that the narrative moves into the final act. So, unlike most films of the rape-revenge genre, it is not her own rape that sets this narrative arc in motion, but that of another.

As Read (2000) argues the rape-revenge genre can be understood as a negotiation of the transition between private (feminine) and public (masculine) spheres, reflected in the changes to the genre as feminism and society changed. In the context of The Brave One as a rape-revenge film the murder of the abusive pimp can be seen to signal Erica's transition from the private domain of violence driven by personal fear/anxiety/contingency to the public domain of violence driven by duty/justice/ethical necessity. It is this killing that marks Erica's moment of ethical subjectivity. Sexual violence here, and more broadly in the rape-revenge genre, plays a pedagogical role, teaching women to be (more) like men. Violence is the lesson through which ethical subjectivity (or, at the very least, agency) can be encountered. The transition through the personal/passive to the public/active binaries are on account of this experience of violence. This is the mode by which the rape-revenge genre unfolds. From I Spit On Your Grave (dir. Zarchi 1978) to Thelma and Louise (dir. Scott 1991) female characters find themselves learning through sexualised violence (learning about violence, about the failure of the legal system, about masculinity, about ethics). Since embodied trauma is often central to drama it is not simply the case that men and men's bodies escape brutalisation in Hollywood cinema, rather, the brutalisation often comes as a result of already being an ethical subject, not a requirement for it to happen. Films such as Commando (dir, Lester, 1985), Fight Club (dir. Fincher, 1999), Death Wish (dir. Winner, 1974), Rambo II (dir. Cosmatos, 1985) and Batman Begins (dir. Nolan, 2005) see the male body put in danger as a consequence of rather than as a trigger for a commitment to some duty or another. As Heller-Nicholas (2010) notes of a similarly constructed movie, Law Abiding Citizen (dir. Gray, 2009):

[These films] depart little from rape-revenge traditions where men act as agents of
vengeance for violence committed against female loved ones. This places the ethical logic of the film within the traditions regarding rape as property crime between men..."
(p. 159)

The ethical encounters in these male-centred films are between conflicting patriarchies (as in case of Serenity), which establishes a good, noble patriarchy as the counterpoint to a villainous one. This ethical encounter might result in violence but it does not require violence in order to occur. The male subject is one which always-already knows by birthright what women must be taught through the experience of violence. Rather than assuming women are ethical subjects from the beginning, Hollywood first inserts a narrative that must first educate them. This necessary encounter with violence signals two things. Firstly, that one path into ethical subjectivity comes at a cost – bodily integrity. Secondly, that as with the first set of films, women's ethical subjectivity is not assumed, and must be delivered by an encounter with (misogynist, violent) masculinity.

The second issue arises at the climax of the film. Erica has tracked down the man who murdered her fiancee. At the same time the detective becomes aware of Erica's double life as victim/vigilante and tracks her down to the killer's apartment. There is a dramatic stand off between Mercer and Erica and Erica and the murderer. Mercer has his gun pointed at Erica, and Erica has hers at the murderer. “You do not have the right”, Mercer yells at Erica, to which she responds “Yes I do”. Mercer than claims the right for himself - “I have the right to hunt him down and shoot him” -and urges Erica to give him her gun. As she relents and lets him take it from her he speaks softly to her as if she is a frightened child “Good girl, that's it, good girl”. Once she has submitted he then offers her his gun to make the shooting – allowing the murder scene to be presented as an act of self-defence by a police officer. What is interesting in this scene is the way in which ethics is regulated. Mercer's demand does not interrupt the causal chain as such – the murderer is nonetheless killed – but his intrusion does interrupt the ethical dimension of Erica's action. What Mercer shifts is the ground of responsibility. The killing is no longer purely Erica's but rather it is Erica-by-permission. Mercer forces Erica to firstly submit to him before she is permitted to act.

This conflict is anticipated in an earlier scene in which Mercer tells Erica that if it comes down to
choose the former. In the climax of the film Mercer manages to choose both but only through first forcing Erica to accept his will. That is to say, in order for Mercer to maintain his ethical status he must first rob Erica of hers. This is not represented however as a robbery but as a gift. Erica, who otherwise finds herself as an idealised liberated feminist subject, sees this liberation confined at the point of ethical subjectivity. The necessary mediation of duty and responsibility (re)positions the ethical authority within the domain of the existing patriarchal order, re-establishing the sovereign ethical subject as one which is necessarily male. In contrast to the films discussed earlier, in which the female heroine acts as a object-tool within another's struggle, The Brave One places the intervention much later. While Erica exhibits more than empty agency this is represented only as far as she remains within the existing socio-ethical order.

Žižek (2006) observes a similar patriarchal regulation of feminine violence in Lars Von Trier's Dogville. In this film a young woman named Grace escapes from mobsters by seeking refuge in the small town of Dogville. As the story progresses Grace becomes more and more ingrained in daily life, doing chores, making friends and so forth. This socialisation process begins to turn sour as Grace finds herself lumbered with more and more chores, is eyed with suspicion, and ultimately becomes a sexually and emotionally abused slave (first through false accusations, breaking of possessions, then being collared, then repeated rape). At the end of the film the heroine Grace is finally able to exact revenge on the townspeople that have tormented her by having her father's gang (from whom she was initially running) kill everyone in the town. Žižek argues that contrary to the standard reading of Dogville which suggests that Grace's revenge represents an act of feminist agency the film actually capitulates to patriarchy. Grace only finds her agency when she re-estabishes herself as her father's daughter, abandoning the principles that initially drove her from him. The socialisation that Grace goes through in Dogville is a lesson in the dangers of what happens to women when they take themselves seriously as ethical subjects.

The figure of an intruding male who re-estabishes patriarchal authority doesn't necessarily have to be as explicit as it is in The Brave One or Dogville, where a literal authority figure steps in. As already described in Inglorious Basterds (2009) the heroine is undermined by another by an
intruder that robs her of the moment that her ethical subjectivity is finally realised. Rather than preventing her from acting (and this reinforces the split between agency and ethical subjectivity) the intruder in simply erases her. These films fail to realise a feminist demand not through lack of “positive representation” - the films all feature intelligent, independent women - rather they fail at the point of ethical sovereignty. In this way, they offer everything except the one thing that would undo the privileged male position.

Ethics of Radical Motherhood

Motherhood continually finds itself represented as violence with duty. While in movies like *Serenity* and *Charlie's Angels* the ethical subjectivity of women is carried in a male authority, in films like *Aliens*, *Kill Bill*, *Terminator 2* and *Long Kiss Goodnight* the immediate male authority is supplemented by a role, namely, motherhood. Yet even in these films a masculine intruder is never far away.

In *Aliens* Ellen Ripley, a woman who has proven herself already as a capable and independent woman in the prequel *Alien*, finds herself returning to the site of the original alien infestation with a military escort. Ostensibly she is on a mission to destroy the monsters and rescue colonists but unknown to her the mission is a front for corporate bioweapons research. Over the course of the film only a single surviving colonist is found – Newt – a young girl that forms an immediate and mutual mother/daughter bond with Ripley. With her newly rediscovered motherhood under threat (it is revealed in the directors cut that Ripley once had a child of her own), Ripley straps on military hardware and sets out to destroy the alien menace, destroying the nest and escaping the planet with Newt, the last surviving marine Hicks and the android Bishop. What is of particular interest about *Aliens* is the way in which Ripley is reinserted into a traditional nuclear family the more intensely her agency is represented. This is to say, as Ripley starts picking up guns, making tactical plans and so on, her relationship with Hicks and Newt becomes more and more reinscribed as a traditional family. While planning their last ditch defence against the aliens Hicks and Ripley begin to assert their authority as mother and father. This culminates with Hicks picking up Newt and putting her on the table so that she can be included in the plans for the day, just as a father might do with a daughter. In the final scenes of the film, after Ripley has single-handedly defeated the giant alien mother, we see her putting
Hicks and Newt to bed and preparing the ship for the long sleep back home.

This kind of affinity between Ripley's position within traditional patriarchal femininity and her increasing physical agency does not occur in Aliens alone but is a motif throughout the series – in the first film Ripley's body becomes more and more exposed as she is represented more and more as authority, until in the final scenes she is literally in her underwear fighting the alien. In the fourth film, Alien Resurrection, a cloned Ripley takes on a motherhood role in relation to a young (android) woman, Call (Winona Ryder), through a growing protective affection and is mother of an alien-human hybrid, which she ultimately kills by having it sucked into space. Throughout the series motherhood which operates outside the patriarchal domain is horrific, from the alien queen herself, producing hundreds of eggs without the need of a male, through to Ripley's final grotesque child – the hybrid. While Ripley's encounters that operate within a patriarchal framework – her relationship with Newt and Hicks in Aliens, and with the prisoner Dillon in Alien 3 – offer moments of security and normalcy in the narrative. Motherhood as a motivation for violent action is not confined to the Aliens series and can be found in numerous other action films.

In Kill Bill, Beatrix Kiddo aka the Bride fights her way, with fist and sword, through scores of enemies in a quest to retrieve her daughter from her ex-lover and co-parent Bill. The female characters in Kill Bill are, much like Thelma and Louise, iconic figures of positive female representation. In the two Kill Bill volumes women, and mothers, are not just motivated to do good, but play villains too, each with a significant narrative arc. In The Long Kiss Goodnight Charly discovers her inner-assassin when her child comes under threat. In Terminator 2, Sarah Connor battles robots from the future to protect her son. The problem with this kind of representation isn't that motherhood should not be considered a duty that an ethical subject can legislate to itself. These action-hero mothers find their duty supplemented by a patriarchal structure or by an accompanying moral agent, by no coincidence a man, who keeps her maternal rage in check (such as in Terminator 2 or The Long Kiss Goodnight). This return to the masculine authority should be read in a broader context. Returning to the enlightenment construction of ethics and the ethical Hegel specifically identifies women's incapacity to act as public ethical subjects owing to their inclination to return to the pathology of familial interests. This ties into a history of privatising women's agency, as mother, homekeeper, and which
Hollywood has served to reinforce.

In the following discussion of motherhood I contrast two films that have come out of Hollywood recently. Both films deal with similar issues of unplanned pregnancy, abortion and impending motherhood. The first film I will discuss, Juno (dir. Reitman, 2007), is from outside the major Hollywood studio’s, though still embedded in the larger industry, and written by a woman while the second, Knocked Up, is a comedy produced within mainstream Hollywood and written by a man.

Juno tells the story of Juno McGuff (Ellen Page), an eccentric and intelligent teenage woman who falls pregnant with her friend and sometime boyfriend Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera). The narrative centres around Juno’s search for adoptive parents for the child and her growing relationship with them once they are found. Juno stands out as an interesting case in a couple of ways. Firstly, Juno's handling of teenage pregnancy was cause for both celebration and criticism within the media (Burson, 2008; Einsenberger, 2008; Lowry, 2008) and feminist scholarship (Willis, 2009). Juno, though still a teenager, is not represented as a “delinquent”, “slut” or otherwise “troubled teenager”. She is not a “bad girl” and her pregnancy isn’t the result of a traumatic relationship with sex or sexuality. Secondly is Juno's decision to proceed through the pregnancy. This aspect again drew both criticism and celebration. So called “pro-life” and “anti-abortion” advocates welcomed the depiction of a positive side to carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term, while pro-choice advocates criticised the apparently conservative decision to have Juno follow through with the pregnancy, and to have the abortion clinic Juno visits represented as a lifeless and hostile environment (Gaard, 2010; Latimer, 2009, Thoma; 2009).

In the context of this thesis the choice represented in Juno is a much more fundamentally radical one than the opposing discourses of “pro-life” and “anti-abortion” allow. The choice to keep a child to term gains an ethical dimension when it passes through the possibility of having done otherwise. While Juno indeed “chooses life” she does not do so on the terms of the kind of political dichotomy that is representative of the discourses used by political lobbies – Juno does not resist the idea of an abortion and she is not a conservative anti-abortionist. Yet what she does isn’t simply an act of omission as a result of not aborting an unwanted pregnancy. Juno's choice is an affirmative one against a background in which the “choice” of pro-choice is code for
“the choice to have an abortion”. Juno’s positive choice disrupts the neutral ground that lies between “pro-choice” and “anti-abortion” that is, that there is a natural course of action (carry the pregnancy to term) that the abortion is a divergence from. If, as Hoerl and Kelly (2010) argue, the film depoliticises abortion by “making both sides appear immature and inarticulate”, then it is a depoliticisation that rejects the existing frame of political “choice”. The decision not to abort is centred as Juno’s. Neither her father, nor boyfriend, nor the State interferes with her actions either in terms of aborting or carrying the pregnancy. This is an important recognition of Juno as an ethical subject. The narrative places trust in her capacity for ethical and practical reasoning – there is no need for any other figure to step in as a moral caretaker guiding Juno towards the correct decision. Indeed, her parents explicitly step back from the decision, giving Juno the opportunity to make a decision of her own.

The nature of Juno’s decision only becomes apparent through her initial desire to “nip this in the bud”. Early in the pregnancy she visits an abortion clinic, outside she encounters a high school friend staging a solitary protest. Once inside the clinic Juno becomes impatient with the wait. The clinic itself has been the subject of criticism from pro-choice campaigners – it is a dull and sterile place, the staff are disinterested, women sit around waiting their turn. This is not necessarily an accurate representation of how these clinics operate, and it is a criticism well made. But this should not detract from Juno’s decision. Rather than reading the scene as suggesting Juno has been dissuaded by the anti-abortion protest, it could also be read to represent Juno’s ethical subjectivity. It is only by encountering this aspect of the possibilities open to her that her decision to carry the child to term, and offer it for adoption, becomes fully her own. It is a means of signalling to the audience – yes, she could have an abortion, and that would be okay. Had this scene not been part of the film the meaning of Juno's decision to go forward would become something else entirely. Juno's commitment to the life of not only the child but the life of the parents she will pass the child on to dislodges the default position, but only because of the first encounter with the possibility of abortion.

This kind of encounter is not present in the much more conservative film Knocked Up which shares a similar theme of unplanned motherhood. Knocked Up subscribes to the more conventional postfeminist terms identified in Chapter 2 in its depiction of two strangers who fall pregnant after a drunken one night stand (which could arguably be considered sexual assault –
but this is interpretation absent in the film). The two people dislike each other, there is no identifiable attraction, and neither really wants the child. If any situation defines the circumstances of which an abortion might be useful, it is this. Yet, in *Knocked Up*, the word abortion is not even mentioned. It is alluded to once to each character, but is otherwise completed erased as a possibility. The audience never appreciates whether Alison has a reason to continue with the pregnancy, her ethical reasoning here is never addressed because it does not exist in the narrative.

*Knocked Up* an example of the problems this thesis attempts to address. The lead female is represented as a successful and intelligent woman with a flourishing career in television. She is also conventionally beautiful, white and middle class. She represents all that liberal feminism has achieved for women – breaking into male dominated industries, sexual freedom, economic independence etc. Yet at the same time her story is not her own. Though the film is titled *Knocked Up*, the centre character is not Alison, the person who is in fact knocked up, but Ben, the immature, insensitive, slovenly man-boy. The character who grows through the experience is Ben, the audience spends more time with him and his friends, his desires and needs shape the direction of the narrative. Rather than being a film about being knocked up (and therefore, a film about women) the film is about men’s experience of women being pregnant. This acknowledgement of all the successes of liberal feminism while having those experiences operate within a male-centred narrative is precisely the problem that postfeminist Hollywood represents.

*Juno* on the other hand places the female character at the the centre of the film. As the title suggests the film makes Juno and her experiences central to the narrative. However, Juno is not the only woman in the film that is written with the assumption of ethical subjectivity. Vanessa, the woman who along with her husband is to adopt Juno’s child, is marked by a radical difference from Juno, yet is a difference that is again grounded in her construction as a fully fledged subject. Vanessa is everything that Juno is not: she is proper, serious, conservative,

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7 Although Alison and Ben give explicity (though inebriated) consent, Alison also makes it very clear she wants a condom to be used. As Ben fumbles to put one on, Alison tells him to hurry up, which he interprets to mean for him to continue without a condom, which he does (without checking or telling her).

8 The titles of *Juno* and *Knocked Up* point towards another trend in Hollywood whereby film titles make named objects of women and subjects of men, a trend *Juno* bucks. For example; *Annie Hall* (dir. Allen, 1977), *Chasing Amy* (dir. Smith, 1997) and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (dir. Stoller, 2008).
considered. Yet this difference does not present an obstacle for their solidarity. Vanessa's ethical subjectivity comes from her desire to be a mother, but again, as with Juno's experience with abortion, this desire is not merely the replication of a default wish for a traditional role as mother. Initially Vanessa's plan is that she and her husband will raise the child, however when Vanessa's husband leaves her, both Juno and Vanessa are devastated because they each assume the deal to adopt the child is off. In Vanessa's case she has lost not only her husband but the opportunity to raise a child – her driving desire in life. And Juno appears lumbered with a pregnancy that will result in a child she will have to take care of herself. Vanessa's loss of the ideal patriarch in her nuclear family mirrors Juno's disappointment with her visit to the abortion clinic. Writer Diablo Cody and director Jason Reitman include these moments so that the choices that Juno and Vanessa make can ultimately be understood as radical in the sense that they exceed existing possibilities. It is not through reconciliation with the existing socio-ethical world that the narratives for Juno and Vanessa are sealed, but through the realisation of their (ethical) desire. It is through this ethical commitment and mutual recognition that Juno and Vanessa reconcile their disappointments. Juno reaches out to Vanessa, suggesting that the deal continue as planned. At the end of the film Vanessa is raising the child as her own, as a single parent, and Juno is a comfortable friend. Juno's women act in solidarity with one another, their relationships are built through shared experience and giving.

The historical role of motherhood within patriarchy means that it is often difficult to separate the two social norms. This is compounded by the ambiguity that postfeminist Hollywood wraps in its representations of motherhood. A critique of a representation of motherhood could be considered a rejection of motherhood entirely, while to refuse a critique means acceptance of the continual re-representation of women within the confines of patriarchal heterosexual motherhood. The category of the ethical subject shows this to be a false choice by establishing motherhood as a potential outcome of emancipation rather than as a symbol of returning to patriarchal oppression. The kind of radical motherhood that is seen in Juno posits motherhood as an ethical demand that operates beyond the scope of patriarchy. The ethical duty of motherhood is not a reduction to performing a role within an existing political and affective economy of heterosexual parenthood but rather liberates motherhood from the confines of the legislative and symbolic Laws.
The frame of the ethical subject therefore offers a means to distinguish between motherhood as an expression of an ethical subjectivity and motherhood as a domain through which patriarchal authority is re-established in spite of female agency. As a result of this the task of approaching these films from a feminist standpoint becomes clearer and more definitive. The ambiguity through which patriarchy sneaks back in – in the guise of postfeminism – is undone when considered in relation to ethical subjectivity, an idea that is contradictory to patriarchy.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to problematise a number of key themes used in postfeminist Hollywood cinema by bringing the notion of ethical subjectivity to bear upon them. I used the ethical notion of responsibility as a means to critique “agency” as a category of “positive representation”. In doing so I discussed how Hollywood uses violence, particularly violence without an ethical foundation, as a means to signal recognition of a set of feminist demands. However, the lack of responsibility inherent in this style of agency was shown to fall short of meeting the ethical demand of feminism because it does not necessarily require that patriarchal sovereignty be set aside. The films chosen as examples demonstrated how agency without responsibility tends to leave female characters as tools rather than subjects of their own right. As such, agency as a category is shown to be ambiguous in terms of a feminist emancipatory politics while ethical subjectivity has been shown to be without ambiguity and requires the setting aside of patriarchy.

Similarly I used examples of films about motherhood to show how feminist film critiques might approach narrative themes which at first glance may appear to be inevitably intertwined with postfeminism and traditional, patriarchal ideas of parenting and motherhood. The example of the film *Juno* demonstrates how ethical subjectivity can be a useful category for dislodging ambiguity from such traditional narratives by emphasising responsibility, sovereignty and radical choice.

Approached through the framework of ethical subjectivity the tension that opened the chapter - between representations of women as already emancipated subjects (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*) and
representations of women as unemancipated subjects (as in Mad Men) - dissolves. Ethical Subjectivity removes the arbitrary calculatio of emancipation postfeminist film implies: where enough positive representations can outweigh the problematic ones and centring feminist demands as themselves a critique of Hollywood. It is desirable that both the fantastic and the historic be available to artists to be used in cinema about women. The ethical subject allows this without compromising a politics of emancipation.

A shift towards the notion of ethical subjectivity does not only have an impact on criticism of what appears on screen. The structure of ethical subjectivity means that the demands it places on representations cannot be confined to the screen alone. When it comes to the issue of responsibility and sovereignty fictional characters are never sovereign. They are always creations of writers and as such there is always an intruding authority, and as I have shown, in Hollywood that is usually a man. This is precisely the point – it is not possible to simply read one side of the cinema screen without reference to the other. Ethical subjectivity exceeds the screen and poses a challenge to the broader cinematic institution. The conclusion to follow elaborates the possibilities for feminist cultural criticism that this challenge entails.
4 Conclusion

This thesis began with the idea that in its reproduction and representation of feminism Hollywood had missed the emancipatory politics that lies at the heart of feminism’s critique of patriarchy. I set out to determine whether this is true, and if so, propose some ways in which this could be identified and thought through.

In chapter one I identified the result of this missed demand as postfeminism. I argued that postfeminism was defined by an ambiguity towards feminism and that this resulted in feminist critique of film having to account for and tally “positive representations” and “negative representations” of women. Though this work is an essential, this approach focused too much on what films presented – ignoring the critical sites of what was not represented. I concluded the chapter by arguing that a stalemate had developed between feminism and postfeminist Hollywood and that new approaches were needed to get through it. Two approaches were identified, an empirical study of gender and creative labour in Hollywood and an analysis of the output of this labour using a framework that emphasised feminist emancipatory politics. This framework I called “ethical subjectivity”.

In chapter two I addressed the first of these approaches. I presented the results of an analysis of gendered divisions of creative labour in Hollywood through an examination of 700 films produced between 1980 and 2009. I drew additional data from research by Martha Lauzen and Stacey Smith, whose results I confirmed and extended.

The results demonstrate an overwhelming male dominance within creative labour in Hollywood. Women’s participation rate in the role of director was a little over 3% over the entire sample, rates for writers and producers were a little higher at 12.1% and 20.5% respectively. Furthermore it was shown that there had been no changes with respect to women’s participation rates in the last thirty years, with some signs of a decline over the period. This demonstration of a near total exclusion of women is vital in countering misconceptions of women’s progress in the field (as argued, this was made more evident after Kathryn Bigelow’s historic Academy Award). It shows the need for further research, scholarship and activism around these very basic labour issues and it prompts the simple question: why does this
inequality exist, how is it sustained?

In chapter three I turned to an explanation and theorisation of ethical subjectivity. I began by developing some broad ideas about what constitutes “the ethical” and how it relates to feminism and emancipation. I then used the framework of ethical subjectivity as a critical tool to better understand the nature of the ambiguity in postfeminist film. I found that postfeminism regulated and mediated women’s ethical subjectivity, sometimes making it entirely absent, with a variety of narrative devices. The method proved useful in revealing the means by which the ambiguity of postfeminism acts as a proxy for patriarchy within narratives. Three main mechanisms were identified in the sample that I studied. The first of these is the conflation of agency with responsibility. Here agency and performance of (violent) action is uncritically celebrated as emancipatory, even when it serves patriarchy and reinforces patriarchal values. The second is the undermining of ethical sovereignty, whereby male characters assume the ethical burden of narrative, taking it from female protagonists. And thirdly where the representation and activity of choice is reduced to those that do not contradict the patriarchal status quo.

The chapter ended with a question as to whether, in an industry so thoroughly dominated by male interests, it is ever possible to consider any female character to ever be considered properly feminist. This is a loaded, and open, question. The usefulness of the framework of ethical subjectivity is that it establishes a set of demands. It operates less as a means to describe a film and more as a prescriptive expectation of a film. This disrupts the “neutrality” of descriptive reading by inserting feminist demands into the mix. While it could be said that such a stance is biased or partisan, starting from ethical subjectivity exposes how neutrality (and ambiguity) is itself biased or partisan. As I argued in chapter one, it is not only what is shown on the screen that is important, but what is kept off the screen.

The nature of these demands are ethical, and as I discussed in the beginning of chapter three, the ethical is a category that tends to universalise. This means that not only does the category of ethical subjectivity make demands on screen representations, those demands extend beyond the screen. The ethical demand that drives a critique of a film would also drive a critique to the production of that film. When women’s sovereignty, responsibility or choice is constrained,
managed or erased on screen, then it is a matter of *ought* that the same demand be made of the means by which that film were produced. If it is good enough for fictional women, it is good enough for really existing ones too. The postfeminist stalemate exists not only at the visual aesthetic moment of cinema but in the means of cultural production; if the key to postfeminism is that it is “feminism without women”, then what this research establishes is that any feminism that appears on screen is always going to be postfeminist. It is not just narrative elements or discourses that can be kept off screens. The process of production itself is also off screen. This is partly what makes the fantasy of cinema possible. The work of Vicki Mayer, Toby Miller and John Caldwell shows that if media, cultural and women’s studies is to properly understand Hollywood cinema (or indeed, any cultural artefact) then there is an imperative for a more complete integration between the study of representation and analysis of the means of cultural production.

Renowned French director Jean Luc Godard notes the ethical aspect of production when he says “tracking shots are a question of morality” (Downing & Saxton, 2010). By this Godard means that particular constructions of cinema prescribe a perspective for the audience, the director bears the ethical responsibility for how they (he) chooses to represent the subject. The ethics of production extend beyond the aesthetics of particular representations. The place of women in this relationship between the aesthetic (of cinematic representation) and the ethical (as ethical subjects) encounters an injunction in Hollywood production – they are almost absolutely excluded from the construction of the aesthetic. The results reported in chapter two make the locations of this exclusion very precise, identifying which roles are more or less exclusively male.

The structure of the denial of ethical subjectivity that is witnessed on the cinema screen reflected production. For example, in constructing the framework of the ethical subject I argued the centrality of the sovereign in relation to the ethical. The results of the empirical research I have undertaken echoes the idea of the sovereign as determining the state of exception. If the cynical approach is taken and Hollywood is considered just in terms of pure business, that is to say, if corporate financial interests rule, then it is demonstrable that the sovereign lies within the men, but not the women, of the industry. How is this so? As discussed in chapter two, the profitability of women's films are equal to that of men's, yet profitability is a discourse used to justify women's exclusion. So, there is a disjunction between the commercial law and the
exception – the times when the commercial law is actually in effect. The empirical data shows
that the Law is suspended (by men) when accounting for women's success and men's failures,
that is to say, men except themselves from the commercial law, but not women. Looking then at
the ethical subject, it is clear that in this respect Hollywood denies actual existing women (not
just representations of women) the sovereignty required of the ethical subject.

Furthermore, by denying the opportunity of representation women are denied the opportunity
for responsibility – in terms of the cinematic act being an ethical act, women's exclusion here is
even more fundamental, the mere opportunity to express an ethical act is denied, just as it is
with regards to suffrage, or reproductive health and so on. The data demonstrates another
deply troubling issue for the ethical subject – duty. The ethical subject is one who is able to act
from duty, yet, the empirical evidence shows that, much like the angels of Charlie's Angels and
River Tam, women within Hollywood are confined to roles through which they may have
considerable agency, but nonetheless are afforded that agency within a particular patriarchal
authority. In line with this the roles which women are most represented in Hollywood – acting,
management, costume design, are all roles in which they are subject to another's (read: male)
authority – the writers, directors and producers.

Women behind the scenes appear to be denied ethical subjectivity by the very same
mechanisms that women on screen are (male intruder, lack of sovereignty, absence of duty etc).
The point is not that Hollywood is assumed to be a misogynist patriarchy, which may well have
been an instinctive starting point for any feminist investigation into the industry, but that it is
really in fact a misogynist patriarchy. Because of this, and its roots in the denial of women's
ethical subjectivity, the loaded question raised at the end of the last chapter has an answer,
there is strong reason to believe that the women on cinema screens are always going to be
portrayed as having no ethical subjectivity, not because men are not able to do so but rather
because Hollywood as an industry does not itself appear to believe really existing women have
ethical subjectivity to represent, and this can be witnessed through the empirical and analytical
evidenced provided in this thesis through the frame of the ethical subject.

While the empirical part of this thesis was one of the most comprehensive studies of its kind, it
looked at only a small, albeit definitively influential, aspect of production in Hollywood. Future
work would benefit from widening the range of roles studied and also looking to include cross-cultural and international comparisons. Work of this kind is already underway, such as Lisa French's work on the Australian film industry, which sees similar gender dynamics to Hollywood's. Outside of Hollywood the world's largest cinema industries are in India, Hong Kong and South Korea. These three increasingly important sites of cultural production are even less understood than Hollywood, particular from the perspective of Western feminist thought.

There is real opportunity for the framework of the ethical subject to be further developed and tested in both the Hollywood context and other areas of cultural production. It could be of particular use in other industries and debates which see apparent stalemates between positions. An example of this might be in approaching the issue of pornography and the porn industry, and sex-work where discussion of labour politics and production cultures can be overshadowed by moral, rather than ethical, arguments, particularly in mainstream discourse.

In conclusion, the synthesis of the empirical and the ethical/theoretical demonstrates how postfeminism acts as a proxy for patriarchy in the management of the meaning and scale of feminism and women's emancipation in Hollywood. Furthermore, this result shows the potential value in considering labour and production as part of cultural studies more broadly.
Filmography

Alien 3 (dir. Fincher, 1992)
Alien Resurrection (dir. Jeunet, 1997)
Alien (dir. Scott, 1979)
Aliens (dir. Cameron, 1986)
Ally McBeal (Tv Series 1997-2002)
Angel (Tv Series 1999-2004)
Anywhere but Here (dir. Wang, 1999)
Baby Boom (dir. Shyer, 1987)
Bad Girls (dir. Kaplan, 1994)
Basic Instinct (dir. Verhoeven, 1992)
Batman Begins (dir. Nolan, 2005)
Bewitched (dir. Ephron, 2005)
Bridget Jones Diary (dir. Maguire, 2001)
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Tv Series, 1997-2003)
Changeling (dir. Eastwood, 2008)
Charlie’s Angels (Tv Series, 1976-1981)
Charlie’s Angels (dir. McG, 2000)
China O’Brien (dir. Clouse, 1980)
Commando (dir. Lester, 1985)
Death Proof (dir. Tarantino, 2007)
Death Wish (dir. Winner, 1974)
Desperate Housewives (Tv Series, 2004-)
Disclosure (dir. Levinson, 1994)
Dogville (dir. Von Trier, 2003)
Fight Club (dir. Fincher, 1999)
Firefly (Tv Series, 2002)
Freaky Friday (dir. Waters, 2003)
Friends (Tv Series, 1994-2004)
G.I Jane (dir. Scott, 1997)
Hanging Up (dir. Keaton, 2000)
Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (dir. Columbus, 2001)
I spit on your grave (dir. Zarchi, 1978)
Inglorious Basterds (dir. Castellari, 1977)
Inglourious Basterds (dir. Tarantino, 2009)
Jackie Brown (dir. Tarantino, 1997)
Junior (dir. Reitman, 1994)
Juno (dir. Reitman, 2007)
Just Shoot me (Tv Series)
Kill Bill Volume 1 (dir. Tarantino, 2003)
Knocked Up (dir. Apatow, 2007)
La Femme Nikita (dir. Beson, 1991)
Law Abiding Citizen (dir. Gray, 2009)
The Long Kiss Goodnight (dir. Harlin, 1996)
Mad Men (Tv Series)
Michael (dir. Ephron, 1996)
Mrs Doubtfire (dir. Columbus, 1993)
Murphy Brown (Tv Series)
Rambo II (dir. Cosmatos, 1985)
Red Sonja (dir. Fleischer, 1985)
Resident Evil (dir. Anderson, 2002)
Serenity (dir. Whedon, 2005)
Sex and the City (tv series, 1998-2004)
Sex and the City (dir. King, 2008)
Silence of the Lambs (dir. Demme, 1991)
Sleepless in Seattle (dir. Ephron, 1993)
Terminator 2 (dir. Cameron, 1991)
The Bionic Woman (1976-1978) (Tv Series)
The Brave One (dir. Jordan, 2007)
The Dirty Dozen (dir. Aldrich, 1967)
The Dollhouse (tv series, 2009)
The Fifth Element (dir. Besson, 1997)
The Kids are All Right (dir. Cholodenko, 2010)
The Matrix Triology (dir. Wachowski)
The Orphanage (dir. Bayona, 2007)
The Six Million Dollar Man (1974-1978) (Tv Series)
The Terminator (dir. Cameron, 1984)
Thelma and Louise (dir. Scott, 1991)
Thirteen (dir. Hardwicke, 2003)
Three Men and a Baby (dir. Nimoy, 1987)
Tomb Raider (dir. West, 2001)
Tomorrow Never Dies (dir. Spottiswoode, 1997)
Twilight (dir. Hardwicke, 2008)
When Harry Met Sally (dir. Reiner, 1989)
Where Eagles Dare (dir. MacLean, 1969)
Working Girl (dir. Nichols, 1988)
Bibliography


