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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

## Article Publishing

The journal aims to provide rapid publication of research through a continuous publication model. All submissions are subject to peer review. Articles should not be under review by any other journal when submitted to *Gender forum*.

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There are no submission or page charges, and no colour charges.

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## Editorial

1 This issue of *Gender Forum* focuses on the representation of gender and gender relations, as well as sex and sexuality, in contemporary film. Movies – from mainstream blockbusters to low-budget indie films – present a mirror of our culture. They both consciously and subconsciously engage with cultural tropes and narratives and reflect the ways in which our behaviors and actions are governed by gendered expectations. Sometimes they do so by presenting opportunities for subverting normative categories and sometimes they cast a spotlight on everyday situations that otherwise often go unnoticed or uncommented.

2 The first of the diverse and insightful articles in this issue is Dr. Zoila Clark's contribution "Masks, Fans and Nu Shu in Chinese-American Female Love Relationships". Clark analyzes the films *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *Saving Face* to investigate the issue of saving face, which she argues is experienced differently among Chinese-American Lesbians than it is by Americans as a result of the cultural transmission of Confucian beliefs through first generation immigrants. The focus here lies on the use of the *Nu Shu* language, which was created for and used only by women. This unusual form of communication created a possible romance between women who shared a secret language.

3 The second article comes from activist and author Rita Banerji, and is entitled "Bollywood baffled over Sex, Rape and Prostitution". Citing a wide variety of popular Bollywood movies as examples, Banerji argues that though Indian films are often censored for depicting relationships based on sex, sex is still the main selling point of these films. This points towards a commoditization of female sexuality. In this denial of female sexuality as a woman's independent identity and choice, Bollywood films reflect a society's unchanging attitude toward female sexuality.

4 The third contribution in this issue is a collaborative work by Alison Happel and Jennifer Esposito, entitled "Pageant Trouble: An Exploration of Gender Transgression in *Little Miss Sunshine*". In this paper, the authors investigate the 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine* in terms of its representations of the relationship between beauty pageants and gender. Utilizing Butler's theory of gender performativity, Happel and Esposito explore how the main character, Olive, disrupts normative gender expectations and behaviors by performing her gender in transgressive ways at the pageant.

5 In her article called “Disciplining Deviant Women: the Critical Reception of *Baise-moi*”, Amy E. Forrest explores the socio-cultural reasons for the strongly critical reception of the contemporary French film *Baise-moi*, from an anarcho-feminist perspective. Her focus in this investigation lies on the limited ways in which violent women are generally represented in film, and the ways this is subverted in *Baise-Moi*, a film directed by two feminist, sex-positive women of color. The conflict between mainstream narratives and subversion is here shown via the reactions of journalists and film critics.

6 In our final article, "*The Sapphires* and *One Night the Moon*: Song, History and Australian Aboriginality", contributor Victoria Herche examines two Australian Indigenous film musicals that deal with the representation of Aboriginality and the painful aftermath of the Stolen Generations, colonial displacement and racism. Both films approach these issues differently, but they each use the elements of the musical genre, such as song and dance, to do so. Additionally, in both films a female presence acts as a reconciling power; the women's struggle towards cross-cultural understanding has introduced optimistic tones in the self-confidence of Australian Indigenous filmmaking.

# Masks, Fans, and Nu Shu in Chinese-American Female Love Relationships

By Dr Zoila Clark, Florida Atlantic University, United States

## Abstract:

In this article, I argue that the issue of saving face is experienced differently among Chinese-American Lesbians than it is for Americans as a result of the cultural transmission of Confucian beliefs through first generation immigrants. The fictional texts that will be analyzed in detail are: The film *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2011) by Wayne Wang and the film *Saving Face* (2007) by Alice Wu. Fans, masks, and the Nu Shu language indicate how ethnicity, class, and gender intersect in the construction of identity and how, in a fictional context, the above-mentioned historical works of art serve as archives to document the way female love relationships have struggled to exist. I investigate the use of the Nu Shu language, which was created for and used only by women, and show how it really existed in the province of Hunan, its last user dying in 2004. This unusual form of communication created a possible romance between women who shared a secret language.

1 On the basis of a recent library search, few research studies of Chinese-American lesbians appear to exist, and of those that do, most seem confined to the world of fiction, namely films and novels. Two such fictional texts are films and will form the centerpiece of this essay. The first, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2011) by Wayne Wang, is a free adaptation of Lisa See's best-selling novel by the same name, published in 2005, while the second is *Saving Face* (2004) by Alice Wu. The ambience of respectability and conservatism in which Chinese lesbians find themselves has meant that the issue of saving face is one they consider especially important, and this theme is given due prominence in both films. I consider that the concern with presenting a socially acceptable front to society is experienced differently among Chinese-American Lesbians than it is for Americans as a result of the cultural transmission of Confucian philosophical beliefs that date back to the sixth century B.C. This is a process that has continued despite the westernization and/or modernization of China and undergone modifications within U.S. culture since the first generations of immigrants set foot on American soil. In a fictional context, the above-mentioned historical works of art serve as archives that document the way female love relationships struggle to exist by the use of masks and fans with inscriptions in the *Nu Shu* language (*Nu* = Women, *Shu* = Language). These objects are indicators of ethnicity, class, and gender identity.

2 I believe that this study will serve a culturally relevant purpose by illuminating the ways in which the different representations of lesbian love relationships compare and contrast. I will discuss how the use of a language called *Nu Shu*, supposedly created and used only by women, did really exist in the province of Hunan in the South of China; in fact, there is evidence that Yue-Qing Yang, who died in 2004, was its last user. This unusual form of

communication enabled romances between women who shared a secret language. In the more recent film, two women make use of it within a friendship contract known as *Laotongs*<sup>1</sup> in order to mask their more intimate relationship. In traditional societies this kind of love was typically forced into some form of hiding. Such conditions are immediately evident in both of the above films through the inclusion of objects that cover the faces of women: masks and fans.<sup>2</sup> In more recent times, however, the westernization of China has emboldened and encouraged many Chinese-Americans to shed this veil of secrecy by revealing their stories and experiences and presenting them as part of the nation's cultural history and heritage. These tales have been channeled through various forms of artistic expression that portray the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. In this context, lesbians define themselves as *tongzhi*, which is an identifying label used by the Chinese-American queer community.

### **Face, Face Work and Family Status**

3 To the Chinese, the identity of a person is both relational and personal. In *Facework in Chinese Cross-Cultural Adaptation* (1997), Swi Hong Lee states that according to the Chinese concept of face, this division is represented by two categories: *mianzi* and *lian*. *Mianzi* relates to social achievement, reputation, prestige, and success, while *lian* relates to individual character, dignity, and moral behavior. Influenced by its origins in Confucianism, Chinese face work<sup>3</sup> considers that every interaction can be a face giving/face gaining act or a face saving/face losing act. Virtue is the key to good social relationships and the backbone of a solid social structure based on hierarchy. In order to achieve social harmony, individuals first have to learn about face work within the family before transferring that knowledge to the public domain, therein to create a similar harmony. The hazards of saving face can become especially acute when people from one environment come into contact with those from another, since misunderstanding and embarrassment may result from a mismatch in social conventions. If a face-saving breakdown should occur in such circumstances, families and

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<sup>1</sup> *Laotong* means kindred spirit. Two little girls would sign a contract by which they would be bound in friendship for life.

<sup>2</sup> Masks and fans are not only worn by performers in traditional Chinese opera and theatrical performances, but also by Taoists and Buddhists, who use them to be at peace with the spirits and ensure good luck. Actors continue to wear colorful make-up, and women protect their faces from the sun by using a face-kini or head mask with openings for the eyes, nose, and mouth when going to the beach. Such customs are testimony that masks empower women, as Joan Riviere has argued. Thus, women masquerade femininity to obtain male power and avoid being punished by performing weakness (303-13). Interestingly enough, the US made a highly criticized film in 1932 called *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, which expressed the fear of a Chinese invasion under an evil leader, who made himself powerful and invulnerable by wearing an ancient mask that helped him hold onto his traditions.

<sup>3</sup> This term is used for all the actions that affect the two aspects of face as *mianzi* (social) or *lian* (individual). People can give face or honor to others, take it away, improve it, etc.

even entire communities can be adversely affected. This loss of *mianzi* will mean that one has failed to uphold one's honor and will lose the approval and recognition of others, according to Swi Hong Lee. Moreover, while the cause for loss of *mianzi* could be another's insensitivity or ignorance in failing to recognize the subject's value, the blame for this loss and the resulting damage it can do to *lian*, is, however, placed squarely on the shoulders of the subject for committing a socially unacceptable act (Lee 1-6). The most unacceptable conduct for a woman is to refuse to marry and have children because these duties form part of her filial piety (Chou Wah-shan 25). Ordinarily, the marriage gives face to the parents and enables the woman to earn *lian* and receive *mianzi*.

4 It is in the context of face work that arranged Chinese marriages and foot binding can be understood; the purpose of these events, both of which victimized young girls, was to increase a community's store of *mianzi* and enable the girls to earn *lian*, which would grant them as much needed social capital in their future roles as wives within a hierarchical society. Unfortunately, Chinese daughters are at the bottom of the hierarchical social structure. As Gayle Rubin affirms, the origins of their lowly status are partly attributable to norms of kinship, which legitimized the traffic of women among men as a means of generating wealth within the heterosexual family structure. In this way, wife-trafficking became one more item on a list of institutionalized practices: "incest taboos, cross-cousin marriage, terms of descent, relationships of avoidance or forced intimacy, clans and section, taboos on names –the diverse array of items found in descriptions of actual kinship systems" (232).

5 In addition to being exploited as commodities by the family structure, young girls were also subject to its practice of age discrimination in that they were placed below their older sisters and female relatives in the family pecking order. Accordingly, their mothers were in a position to negotiate their futures with marriage-making old women. While such a system may appear abhorrent within our culture and times, a Chinese mother's greatest demonstration of love was, nonetheless, considered to be the binding her daughter's feet between the ages of 5 and 7, an operation guaranteed to transform them into perfect lotus flowers. In such condition, the girl would acquire the necessary pedigree to enter a good marriage and claim for herself the highest status available to a woman: to be a wife, perform her duty of having children, and become a favorite should she produce a boy. Her deformed feet, however, fulfilled a need that went beyond that of mere status. Mary Daly claims the lotus flowers were fetishes of phallic desire. Their passions inflamed, men would squeeze the stumps "to the point of causing acute pain, smelling them, whipping them, stuffing them into their mouths, biting them, having their penises rubbed by them. These men stole tiny shoes in



order to pour semen into them, and drank tea containing the liquid in which the stumps were washed” (143).

6 This patriarchal feudal system lasted until the birth of the Republic in the 1940s when the Chinese Social Revolution Agrarian Law of 1947 decreed that women should no longer be traded as chattel in male kinship deals. Before the Social Revolution, the absence of love and companionship in marriage meant that mothers endeavored to procure a best friend for the daughter. The successful girl candidate, who would need to match the young bride in age and character, was given the title of *laotong*. Lisa See, who travelled to the Province of Hunan to interview Chinese women and recover their stories for her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), provides her own definition: “a *laotong* relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage was not made by choice and had only one purpose – to have sons” (43). If there was no other girl available that shared the necessary 8 similarities with the bride-to-be in order that a lifelong *laotong* contract might be signed, she could still have a group of sister friends on the basis of affinity. Homosociality coexisted with arranged marriages to make life more bearable, especially for the wife, who was largely confined to a female room on the second floor of the house since her bound feet meant she was unable to walk around her husband’s house. However, as Lisa See shows in her historical novel, a bride with a *laotong* was blessed with a companion that, with her husband’s consent, could visit and even sleep with her sometimes. Julia Kristeva, who went to China in 1975 to study the social changes caused by the Social Revolution, states that:

what we think of as perversion seems to integrate itself easily into their customs: female homosexuality in particular. [...] Female sexuality and masturbation are not merely *tolerated*—they are taken for granted and considered to be perfectly *natural*. Sexual treatises provide detailed descriptions of lesbian and masturbatory techniques. (62)

7 Taken from her publication *About Chinese Women* (1977), this quote shows that Kristeva is aware of western attitudes towards lesbianism, and in our own approach to the topic, we should demonstrate a similar understanding of the data before us and the context that created it. A closer analysis of the situation in which these female love relationships took place reveals that the wife was subjected to considerable suffering, which included confinement, the constant pain of having crippled feet, unfair treatment at the hands of a mother-in-law who regarded her as a servant, the silence or violence she received from a husband who only cared about his sons and his work, and other hardships of daily life. Out of these experiences was born the wife’s need for love from someone who understood her pain

from first-hand experience. This need also reflected the near impossibility of loving a man who only communicated with other men and who used her as a mule to produce more sons. Such a relationship offered little else but sexual exchange, whether for procreation or pleasure. There may, of course, have been a few loving heterosexual relationships, but the conditions must have been unfavorable, considering that women were not only illiterate and prohibited from learning about the outside world, but even confined to a separate quarters of the house. Given the extent to which they were alienated from any external reality, it is hardly surprising that the female ghost became an enduring figure in Chinese literature.

8        However much a person is forced into a social role, certain basic needs will typically prevail. Chinese women may have been straitjacketed into an identity that combined wife and mother, but the desire for affection and a way to express emotions and ideas remained. The discovery in 1987 that women had created a way of communicating among themselves before the Social Revolution is thus hardly surprising. When, during the communist paranoia of the 1960s, Ms. Yang was found with some papers that seemed to contain a secret code, she was initially suspected of involvement with international espionage. Eventually, Gong Zhebing, a linguist and anthropologist studying minorities, claimed that it was a language called *Nu Shu*. This language dated back to the Song Dynasty (900-1279) in the Jianyong area in Hunan Province. The story told how a woman from an Imperial palace who had been punished created a new language and taught it to her parents so that she might complain to them about the lack of educational opportunities for women in her location. Since peasant women could not be accredited with creating a language, an educated woman had to assume the role, as this story attests.

9        Whoever the original creator(s) of *Nu Shu* may have been, it was a uniquely constructed language with interesting roots. Carolyn Lau informs us that it “was written in ‘mosquito-ant’ style on cloth, loose sheets or paper, folded fans, and handmade books” (1). It has only 700 characters and is written left to right in curves as opposed to straight lines, a feature suggesting that its execution required higher-level motor skills, and this rendered it more accessible to women who were proficient in sewing. Visually, it resembles Han script, as well as bone and tortoise shell inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (16th to 11th century B. C.), suggesting that the language may initially have borrowed from local sources before undergoing transformation at the hands of its female users, who needed a suitable medium for communicating their suffering and find some comfort in understanding their world by creating stories, songs, and poems. These enabled them to survive present hardships, influence the future, and heal past traumas. Lau had to pay for some translations of *Nu Shu*

with funds from her grant. The resulting fragments include stories of envy about how men lived, feelings of inferiority, deaths in the family that cause shame because there is no man left to put a name on a grave, and other sad themes.

10 Once established, *Nu Shu* was variously received. According to Yue-Qing Yang, the Communist feminist movement of 1949 denied the language its blessing on account of its message that the feminist movement in China was male-oriented. For Mao Tse-tung, a language like this, with its links to old traditions, would have seemed one more backward step and a threat to the modernization of China. However, the comments we find in *Nu Shu* about marriage are, in fact, anything but traditional: “‘This damn emperor made the wrong custom / why should I have to be married away?’ This statement to me is so enlightening. Confucians for thousands of years have been saying, *family under heaven*, [affirming that the family unit is blessed from above]. So if these women are saying Confucian marriage is wrong, then they are also saying the whole patriarchal system is wrong” (Lai and Huang 267). It is interesting to observe that Yue-Qing Yang, the last *Nu Shu* speaker, considered this language as a tool for empowering protest against the Confucian family and for strengthening female unions and community, regardless of whether or not these conformed to the norms of the Western heterosexual family.

11 As Loretta Wing Wah Ho suggests, it is important to recognize that “the formation and imposition of same-sex identities are significantly linked with the imaginary and collective powers of storytelling, heightened by China’s opening up to global sexual ideas and practices. These imaginary and collective qualities of storytelling are potent agents for the formation of new identities” (25). Consequently, we will need to observe how these sexualities are represented in mainstream films accepted by the general public. The two films under discussion fall within this category and have received favorable criticism leading to international awards.

### **Fans and Nu Shu in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan***

12 *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, by Chinese-American writer Lisa See, was published in 2005 and soon became a best-seller. Set in the nineteenth century, it explores the difficulties facing couples that belong to different social classes and the ensuing complications that arise regarding face work. The relationship dynamics of the story are, however, further complicated by the fact that it deals with the erotic desire between two women, Lily and Snow Flower. Their first nude encounter is narrated in the most natural way, as, in *Nu Shu*, their fingers trace the words they dare not put in print:

My feet –those places of so much pain and sorrow, so much pride and beauty –tingled with pleasure. [...] I wrote the character, which can mean bending over, kowtowing, or prostrating oneself. On her other ankle I traced the word I. I set her feet down and wrote a character on her calf. After this, I moved to a spot on the inside of her left thigh just above her knee. My last two characters were high up on her thighs. I leaned down to concentrate on writing the most perfect characters possible. I blew on my strokes, knowing the sensation it would cause, and watched as the hair between her legs swayed in response. (Lisa See 87)

13 Even though we are not told what the last two characters are, the context and Lili's reading of a poem communicate the meaning without our knowing the symbols which had special, intimate meanings for them: "Snow Flower was my home and I was hers" (87). Meaning is, therefore, subtle in *Nu Shu*, with characters that can have multiple meanings. For those in need of secrecy, this has the advantage that a text cannot later provide incriminating evidence through precise details. *Nu Shu* even uses fixed phrases from well-known poems, and these function as a mask for female desire, complaints, anger, frustrated dreams, plans to escape, etc.

14 When Chinese-American filmmaker Wayne Wang took Lisa See's novel to the big screen, he decided to make a series of changes. Firstly, he omitted the homoerotic love scene described above. Secondly, he decided to update the misunderstanding the couple experienced in the original story over written *Nu Shu* by substituting instead a more contemporary disagreement between the couple over the permissibility of two lesbians living together. In the film, we also have a visual comparison between the old world and the new. Present-day Shanghai is seen through a symbolic blue filter, while old Shanghai is in seen in a variety of colors. In the nostalgic blue present, he features a couple of female best friends, Sophia and Nina, who become separated through circumstance. Their paths cross once more when Sophia suffers a car accident. At the same moment, Nina is offered a job promotion where her boyfriend lives, but she lets it go in order to take care of her friend Sophia. In Sophia's belongings Nina finds a fan, as well as a man's suit. The mystery of their purpose is solved by the appearance of Sophia's aunt at an art exhibition of nineteenth century fans decorated with *Nu Shu* characters that belonged to the family. The presence of these fans enables Wang to make a second change to the story, which involves the rekindling of Nina and Sophia's relationship. Sophia awakens from the coma caused by the car accident, and, in the next scene, Nina experiences a vision brought on by handling Lily's fan, which belonged to Sophias' family. Looking through the glass window, she imagines or visualizes Lily and Snow Flower on the hospital balcony in a state of harmony. Pleased with the knowledge that

their *laotong* spirits are still together sewing *Nu Shu* characters on their own clothing, Nina returns the smile they give to her, and we see the two ghosts holding hands before the skyscrapers of modern times, envisioning their lives together. At this moment, the colorful characters of the past, Lily and Snow Flower, introduce new colors into the sad blue present, and the hospital room ceases to be blue.

15 This artistic tableau brings the ghosts of Lily and Snow Flower back to present-day China, a space where their female love relationship can be made flesh. One advantage of film is that a narrator's desire can be crystalized into a tangible image that may create a lasting memory, which, unlike history, can reveal more about the secret love stories that had previously been masked by *Nu Shu*. Tze-Ian D. Sang suggests that "double vision –the ability to see flickering and shadowy ghosts in addition to the literal, surface, and established meanings of things –is desirable" (41); such anachronistic images convey that homoerotic desire has a history that haunts us. Unlike the novel, which can be read in a private space and whose more extreme sections can be eschewed by literary criticism, mainstream films have frequently been obliged to make use of the double vision described by Sang. Operating, as they do, within a genre that is screened in public spaces and which is dependent upon the patronage of satisfied viewers, films have had to tread carefully in order not to outrage the public through explicit eroticism. In this case, what we have instead is a final image in which Nina is lying next to Sophia's bed in the hospital, both women holding the fan that has Lily and Snow Flower's story written in *Nu Shu* between them as signal that they share the same story. Their ending, however, is happier in that Sophia is able to return Nina's grip, there are tears of love and happiness, and all secrets are brought out into the open.

16 Such a harmonious outcome is not enjoyed by Lily and Snow Flower, and among the obstacles they face is their difference in social status. Their bond is initially set in motion when Snow Flower's aunt negotiates with Lily's mother that Snow Flower and Lily should become *laotongs*, a move that will enable them both to survive in the Chinese society in which they live. The honor of having a *laotong* from a respectable upper class family and the chance to gain perfect lotus feet will make Lily a desirably marriageable partner for a rich man. At the same time, Snow Flower needs to hide her family's poverty by dressing up in fancy clothes and being able to have a *laotong*, which will provide her with a stepping stone to the face-lifting benefits of a good marriage. Swi Hong Lee points out that "others assess you by the people you associate with [...] Social associates speak of social influences" (123). Successful networking requires that both girls be seen with people who are at least their social equals, or better, their superiors.

17 The overall negative critical reception of sex and sexuality in the film reveals unfulfilled expectations on many levels, namely: that the film comply with either cinema's need for aesthetic distance or pornography's purpose as a masturbatory aid; that the women engage in homosexual activity; and that the women conform to conventional, heterosexual, submissive, "natural" and non-violent femininity. Clearly, the issue of violence in association with women is central to socio-cultural reasons for the film's negative critical reception and the following section considers

### **Extreme Narrative Violence and the Taboo of the Violent Woman**

18 "To be aggressive: virile. To want to fuck loads of people: virile. To respond with brutality to something which threatens you: virile." (Despentes 128)

19 This film is, therefore, a criticism of face-saving behavior taken to the extreme insofar as two women choose paths that they ought to take rather than the ones that they truly desire. However, it is also a eulogy to the love between women. The difficulties they face extend beyond class to embrace the modern taboo of same-sex love, and it is this, which, in large part brings about the ensuing tragedy. Some atonement for this frustration is achieved when Snow Flower and Lily become ghosts and find a possible space for their love in the present through Sophia and Nina.

### **Masks in *Saving Face***

20 Alice Wu, a Chinese-American filmmaker, relived her experience of coming out as lesbian to her family in her first film, the comedy *Saving Face*. This story shows how the Confucian idea of protecting self-image continues to plague female love relationships. As we have seen, gaining respectability means that the person or actor needs to wear a face or mask that is approved by the family and the community. In Wu's exploration of this theme, the plot goes as follows: Wil is a twenty-eight year old Chinese-American New Yorker who works as a surgeon. She always takes care to wear her surgeon's mask at the hospital and her cream mask at home. Expected by family and friends to acquire a boyfriend and get married, she is in the habit of attending ballroom dances with her single mother. Wil, however, attends these balls in casual young boyish outfits and men's shoes, for which her grandmother congratulates her because she did so herself during the Chinese Social Revolution, which banned foot-binding.

21 Early in the film, the relationship between Wil and her single mother takes on a humorous and ironic twist. Although Wil plays her part in being the dutiful daughter who has

no private life on account of spending long hours busy at the hospital doing extra-work, her mother commits an outlandish act in getting pregnant and refusing to reveal the identity of the father. This outrage causes Wil's grandfather lose face before the community, so he humiliates and rejects his daughter by telling her that she can no longer live in his house until she finds a husband. When Wil responds by providing for her mother and letting her stay in her apartment, she effectively becomes her mother's mom, and this reversal of roles prompts the viewer to consider the extent to which family titles are mere masks that can be switched according to circumstance and which pay little heed to age or gender.

22 Sean Metzger argues that "Alice Wu's debut feature draws on the melodramatic to enact a kind of racialized masquerade, for while the diegesis ultimately repositions principal characters as daughters and mothers, it destabilizes the norms associated with such roles by reconfiguring time in relation to them" (225). This point has special relevance in the film because not only do we find Wil wearing white mascara, partly to show that she can pass for a white American, we also see Wil's friend, who is black, wearing a cream mask. His is green because he cannot pass for a white. Thus, we find that both of them are queer, both wear masks and both talk about Wil's trying to come out and talk to her mother about it. As Metzger observes, the derailing of role norms are highlighted through the numerous changes of masks the characters wear in different situations throughout the film. Wil's friend, who is a stranger to Wil's mom, is not initially welcomed by her because she likes to speak Chinese; however, he is eventually integrated within the family routine by eating Chinese food with Wil and her mother after work and by watching soap operas with them. It is by sharing time together that Wil's mom starts to miss Wil's friend, and, through their willingness and ability to communicate, racial issues are overcome in this alternative family of two Chinese women and a black boy.

23 Wu further pokes fun at the problem of saving face is by using camera angles that obscure Wil's face. For instance, when she and her lover Viv hold hands through a metal barrier at a park (See Fig. 1),<sup>4</sup> Wu alternates the view from both sides and ends the shot with Viv on the left side, so that Wil's face is made less clear by the rhomboid metal barrier, which serves the function of a symbolic mask.

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<sup>4</sup> I took all the photos included in this paper.

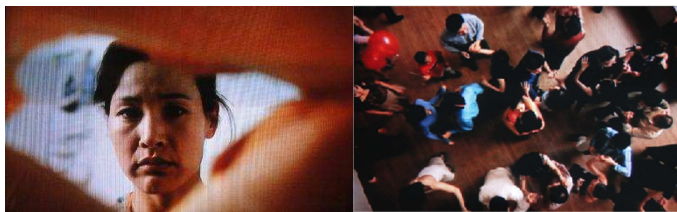


24 Many instances of the two women together show Wil's back and Viv's face or Viv's face and Wil's body, and our inability to see Wil's face clearly is indicative of her guilt at being a lesbian. She is, both literally and figuratively, saving face, an impulse that prevents her from declaring her love for Viv until the end of the film. Wil loves Viv, and although we hear Wil confessing to her African American friend that she is a lesbian, she does not do so to her mom. She tells the friend that her mother once caught her in the act with a girl and that her mom, perhaps acting on her knowledge of the grave personal consequences that accompany family dishonor, pretended not to have noticed anything. Thus, in her turning a blind eye to Wil's transgression, she may, ironically, have been attempting to protect her daughter from the same fate she herself comes to suffer at the hands of her own father when the news of her illicit pregnancy breaks. Wil, on the other hand, formulates a coping strategy of her own which involves seeking advice outside her family, and in this she mirrors the results of interviews included within Connie S. Chan's social study, in which, "respondents were more likely to come out to non-Asians than to other Asians (reflecting the pressure to maintain privacy within the Asian culture), and many had not disclosed their sexual identity to their parents, even though they had been out an average of 6.2 years" (95). In comparison with the Asian community, many westerners seem to demonstrate a deeper understanding of gender issues, together with a greater inclination to exercise individual freedom by acting on homoerotic desires. Moreover, their moral judgments are of less concern to Asians than those of their own people, which have the power to crush or exalt another Asian's social standing through the institution of gaining, saving or losing face.

25 The image of the social eye, an allusion to the inescapable stare of George Orwell's godlike Big Brother, has become an enduring and all-encompassing symbol for our fears that the social roles we play are being observed and monitored, as well as a warning lest we allow our good citizen mask to slip out of place. In the film, this scrutiny is seen to operate in two ways, and these are described by Foucault in his comments about panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*: "surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor" (196). In other words, those under the watchful eye of authority become enlisted to inform on each other,



and this is the exact process to which Wil's mother is subjected when the nurse that worked at the clinic reports the pregnancy to Grandpa, the Professor, who had previously been her teacher. Nothing escapes the patriarchal eye, and everyone is expected to adopt its position of vigilance and censure. Even we, the audience, become part of this surveillance mechanism when, in moral collaboration with the film's Chinese community, we sit in judgment of Ma's performance as a mother. In this capacity, our spectator's eye-view affords us greater disclosure than that allowed to Ma's community. We are present when, on the pretext of needing medicinal herbs, she receives intimate messages from her young lover in concealed "masked" envelopes. We learn that although she is tormented by the weakening of her *lian* and *mianzi*, she is unable to resist looking inside. We experience our Big Brother role once more towards the end of the film when Viv and Wil are being observed and judged by everyone at the party. We, the viewers, put on the mask and proceed to police the lives of the two protagonists (See the eye shape in Figs. 2 and 3).



26 Fortunately for Wil, she is, given a second chance at happiness when she meets Viv again in the same ballroom where they first met. On this second occasion, she summons the courage to ask Viv to dance with her in front of the whole Chinese-American community. Although a number of people are duly outraged and scurry out of the party, clucking in disapproval, Wil does not care, and she and Viv dance and kiss happily.

27 So, by the end of the film, both Ma and Wil, mother and daughter, emerge victorious after having experienced close moral scrutiny. We have joined the Chinese-American community in weighing their choices in the balance and neither has been found wanting, in the sense that they are both ultimately rewarded rather than punished. Granted, some people do pronounce judgment and leave the party, but we, together with a sizeable portion of the revelers, stay and grant the lovers our blessing. In the closing scenes, the camera provides an aerial view, and we see the remaining people on the dance floor group themselves into the shape of an eye, which serves as a gesture of approval for the lesbian couple at the center. Clips are then flashed on the screen of what happens three months later, and the envisioned future is bright: Wil's mom finally marries her younger lover, the secret father of her baby, while the old grandfather, once the standard bearer of oppressive social conformity, snorts his

disapproval unheeded and is forced into a grudging embrace of the new social order. Swept along by the tide of joy, Viv's father also loses track of the inflexible commandments that have ruled his existence as a prominent surgeon, and makes a joke about how proud he is that his daughter, a celebrity ballet dancer, has ended by marrying, Wil, a doctor and the most accomplished surgeon under his supervision. Both share the passion of changing faces instead of saving old faces. Wil's mother, once similarly in thrall to hostile society norms, asks Viv and Wil when they will have a baby. The ending is thus upbeat not only in the spectacle of successful relationship outcomes for the various characters, but also in its optimism for the continuing formation of alternative happy family groupings, ones that are able to face the world without having to save face.

### **Chinese-American Gender Trouble**

28 According to Chou Wah-shan, same-sex relationships were traditionally accommodated within Chinese society rather than demonized by it. Indeed, we observed that the problem between Lily and Snow Flower was caused by class difference and face work. It was, in fact, "through the encounter with the West in the mid-nineteenth century, which sparked a series of indigenous efforts to modernize China, that same-sex eroticism was gradually defined as pathological" (43). Colonized peoples have often been observed to exhibit more extreme or exaggerated versions of the norms owned by their oppressors as means of establishing themselves as truly integrated. Such mimicry of the "traditional" American worldview may explain why the two modern couples in our films get separated by their Chinese-American parents. Nina and Sophia are separated by their families before the accident in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, while in *Saving Face* Wil brings about the separation as a result of her strict traditional upbringing. In the film, both mother and daughter assume the role of second generation Chinese-Americans living with Chinese-speaking families who are consumed by a need to save face and maintain the community rules of saving face. Wil's mom eventually accepts Wil's African American gay friend and Viv as Wil's girlfriend, but only after she realizes that she herself was about to marry without love for a second time just to please her father. In these examples, it would appear that traditional Chinese notions of saving face are being applied according to a perceived rigidity and intolerance of unorthodox relationships within North American society.

29 A similar collision of cultural norms takes place in these films with regard to the use of Chinese vocabulary and ethnicity symbols such as masks, fans and *Nu Shu*. Masks, for instance, evoke the historical tradition of theatrical opera, as do fans. Both are objects that

cover the face and play with the idea of identity. For Norma Claire Moruzzi, “Feminine masquerade is a masquerade of social identity; other social identities can be enacted as well” (27). In these films, we have observed how women first put on the identity of obedient daughters to show Confucian filial piety, and then the roles of wives, mothers, and lovers. However, one departure from the traditional Chinese use of masks in role-playing sometimes occurs when one woman pressures other women to conform to patriarchal roles, and this I consider to be a masculine role. Again, what may be happening here is that a version of western patriarchy has infiltrated the Chinese theatrical tradition of masquerade and, in so doing, introduced a more threatening and oppressive component. One example is that in playing out the socially respectable role of doctor, Wil feels constrained to break up with Viv in order to save her face. The masks we put on and the roles we adopt are significant to the extent that they create the persona that we present to the world. Jung offers the following interpretation of this process: “the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, exercises a function, he is this or that” (Monte 8). This suggests that the persona is a mask and vice-versa, with no intervention from the real self underneath. However, my own understanding coincides more with that of Judith Butler, who argues that there is no real at all, and the self is the sum total of a discourse that includes masks, fans, and the *Nu Shu* language. In this sense, the incorporation of western patriarchy into the Chinese tradition of masquerade goes beyond the mere switching of masks to represent a reconstruction or transformation of social norms within the Chinese American community. I believe that this encounter of Eastern and Western philosophies enables us learn more about our identities and how gender connects to race, class, age, and other givens that form who we are. In the lifelong quest to know ourselves from our interactions with one another, these two films help us to understand better the importance of being aware of what masks we are wearing, why we have chosen them, and of feeling free to change them if necessary.

30 The fluidity of identity that accompanies the wearing and changing of masks is well exemplified by the community of Chinese American queers that call themselves Tongzhi.<sup>5</sup> People within this group use their own Chinese words, together with the covering of the face with masks in their pride parades as a sign of coming out, since this act illustrates how

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<sup>5</sup> *Tongzhi* can be broken down in two syllables: *Tong* = Same/Homo, *Zhi* = Goal/Spirit. The term was originally the name of an emperor of the Qing Dynasty (1856-1875). Later on, it was appropriated by the communist nationalists to mean “comrade” in the 1940, and finally it was chosen by a Hong Kong gay activist in 1989 as the title for the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, since then it means Chinese-American Queers. However, the specific word of lesbian is *Lala* or *Les*.

identity is a mask that can be changed. However, while some groups remove their masks as a sign of coming out, others keep them on to identify themselves. This variation suggests that actions, together with their attendant meanings, are not fixed to what we are, and this offers an array of possibilities as to who we are, who we were, and who we want to be. For Fran Martin, “the mask tactic thus enables *tongzhi* to perform a theatrically exaggerated enactment of the position of *tongxinglian*<sup>6</sup> itself” (194). He suggests that having no mask is like using an invisible mask of the not-out *tongzhi* in some cases. It is possible that in wearing a mask, the *tongzhi* are making themselves visible as queer while at the same time enabling them to observe their observers in an uncanny way that empowers them as subjects.

31 By wearing the same traditional mask, *tongzhi* manage to signal that it is the performance rather than the face which produces both identity and desire. The mask then has two functions. On the one hand, it fosters continuity in summoning the past to share the same space with the present, while, on the other, it creates a platform for possible future change. The ghosts of Snow Flower and Lily, played by the same actresses that represent Sophia and Nina, act as traditional masks for the modern Chinese Americans in the present. However, Sophia and Nina are the ones who, in their nineteenth century masks, look into a future in which they will come. In this way, masks stabilize ethnic tradition while at the same time destabilizing gender identity. *Tongzhi* identity challenges not only the notion of a binary gender system, but also the subjugation of women to heterosexuality as the only kind of love relationship.

32 Alice Wu’s film is an example of how we should be able to reconcile a respect for the old minstrel masks of the past with laughter at the masks society wants us to wear in the present. It promotes a more lighthearted approach towards masks in preference to an overly serious attitude embracing a belief that they give us a fixed identity to which we must conform. Upon becoming a doctor, Wil adopts a mask that she cannot remove and ends up a divided self, one that hurts her beloved and destroys her own happiness. Gender reality, says Butler, “is created through sustained social performances” (180), which means it involves the repetition of acts through which we create ourselves with the implication that we can remake ourselves at any time in any way. We might thus conclude that both Eastern and Western theatrical geniuses agree on the principle that the world is a stage and that the human face has been wearing masks and make up since the beginning of times. After all, humans are the only

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<sup>6</sup> This is the medical term for homosexual, which is appropriated like the word negro by African-Americans to overcome its negative connotation.

animals capable of self-reflection that think about themselves as another in order to variously entertain and scare themselves with their own ideas.

33 The idea that reason unmask the true unchangeable essence of everything is now being overcome. Masks have always been empowering objects in ancient civilizations. Masks represented the spirits of the ancestors who were worshiped as guides that interacted with the living. Says Yang Liu, to put on a mask “representing a mythological figure or spiritual force is to become that figure or force. A magico-religious transformation is brought about by wearing a mask” (37). This helps us understand the masking of *tongzhi* as a process of their becoming what they want to be and a demonstration that masks can be changed and are not fixed identities. Not even the past actions are able to define who they are in the present or future since people often repeat certain behaviors to please others, delivering performance they do not enjoy. In this spirit, the concepts of *mianzi* and *lian* are negotiated bi-culturally in both films, and the subjects acknowledge their freedom to perform any gender identity of their choice, providing they have the courage to do it.

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# **Bollywood Baffled Over Sex, Rape and Prostitution**

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## **Abstract:**

Beleaguered lovers forced apart by insurmountable boundaries of caste, class and religion: this has been a recurring theme in Bollywood films for a full century now. The scenes, settings and clothing styles have changed over the decades, but a hundred years on, these films are still raising the same objections, asking the same questions, and making the same appeal to the audience, and to society. Why has there been no resolution yet? Why does the issue of two lovers desiring each other, and wanting to be together continue to mystify Indian audiences? This paper argues that this is because Indian cinema has failed to address the underlying issue. While the general opinion attributes this to a traditional society's rejection of relationships based on 'sex,' and India's censor board affirms that idea by zealously censoring films, a close examination of Bollywood films shows that female sexuality is often shrewdly used to hard sell films. Sex is actually not the real glitch in the stagnant embattled lovers plot, nor is male sexuality. The idea that is unpalatable to Indian films, is the same one that Indian society cannot digest: that of female sexuality as a woman's independent identity and choice. The real villain in India's unyielding 'love' plot is India's patriarchy which needs to reduce women to sexual objects, to then place within whatever context serves the patriarchy's need and hierarchical power structure. The paper explores how the commoditization of female sexuality reflects in Bollywood's treatment of the issues of sex, rape, and prostitution, and how that in turn mirrors a society's unchanging attitude.

1 A man and a woman meet. Sparks fly. They date, then marry and raise a family. This story is as mundane as the rising and setting of the sun. But in India it is such a cataclysmic event that it's been the pivotal theme for one of India's largest industries, the Bollywood film industry, for the entire 100 years of its existence.

## **The Timeless Plot**

2 Two lovers cruelly parted by the old barriers of caste, clan, religion and /or economics, battle the odds of family and society, for a three-hours run time, just for the chance of a union at the end. The audience sings, laughs and weeps along with the lovers, and chews its nails to a climactic finale.

3 Usually the audience gets a reprieve in the reunion of the besieged lovers in a 'happily ever after' ending. But sometimes the ending is tragic, and the film lives on in the audience's memory as a reminder of the futility of such relationships. *Pakeezah*, *Anarkali*, *Mughal-E-Azam*, *Heer Ranja*, *DevDas*, and *Ishaqzaade* are some of the popular films that serve as tragic examples of the battle for love. In *Ishaqzaade* (Rebel Lovers) released in 2012, the young lovers, Parma Chauhan, a Hindu man, and Zoya Quereshi, a Muslim woman, battle out a more contemporary version of this plot. After a long flight, the couple is cornered on a roof

top by the men who've been hired to kill them, and who then proceed to attack them with semi-automatic weapons. Parma and Zoya valiantly try to defend themselves with a limited stockpile of arms. When they run short of bullets, they shoot each other dead, in a lovers embrace, as the last defiant act of their inseparability. In the final scene, their attackers are shown looking down with indifference at the young couple lying dead in a crumpled heap, and then walk off as if to say those deaths are inconsequential to society which continues on. A final message from the film maker on the screen informs the audience that countless young couples are killed by their families for falling in love outside established social parameters of caste, clan and religion.

4 If films are a creative medium via which a society engages with a baffling issue, and makes progress on it, then this shift hasn't yet happened in a major way in Bollywood films. For e.g. if a Hollywood film today were to examine the issues that crop up in an inter-racial relationship, it would be bizarrely out-dated if it were to address it as portrayed in the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*. The father of a white woman is hardly likely to put her black lover in an interrogation box in his office with a question like, "Have you given any thought to the problems your children will have?" In the film, Dr. John Prentice, the black suitor, played by Sidney Poitier, of Joey Drayton, the upper-class, white woman he planned to marry, responded with, "She [Joey] feels that all of our children will be president of the United States and they'll all have colorful administrations [...] Frankly, I think your daughter is a bit optimistic. I'd settle for secretary of state." Though delivered with humor this response was not a statement of plan, but one of hope in the face of the immense social rejection faced by inter-racial couples and their children at that time, which included unconcealed prejudice as well as threats of violence. Until 1967, the year this film was released, inter-racial marriages were still illegal in 17 states in the U.S. Today, with Barack Obama, the offspring of a biracial marriage, in the White House, both the question and the response would not have the same impact or significance to the storyline. By and large, inter-racial couples don't face the same legal and social hurdles in the U.S. today as they did then, and the racism they may have to still confront plays out differently, perhaps in a more nuanced and subtle manner, and would have to be treated accordingly on-screen. However the storyline of Bollywood's embattled lovers is almost timeless. The scenes, settings and clothing styles may have changed over the decades, but the dialogues are static. They raise the same objections, they ask the same questions, and they make the same appeal – to the film's audience, and to society.



## The Confusing Question

5 At the crux of this beleaguered lovers plot is the question that Indian films, alongside Indian society, have grappled with for a century without a full resolution. That question being: why should mutual attraction be a determinant in who a person shares his or her marital bed with?

6 In the parameters used in Indian society as acceptable guidelines for establishing mate compatibility, sexual and personal chemistry remain conspicuously absent. While it is considered important to ask whether the intended couples religion and castes are attuned, or how much the groom's, and nowadays, the bride's salaries may be, the question of whether or not they might be sexually attracted to each other is not only completely irrelevant, but also taboo. In the romantic comedy *Chitchor* (The Heart Thief), Geeta's parents are keen to get her married to an eligible bachelor who is about to visit their village for a work-related project. All they know about him, prior to his arrival, is that he is an engineer trained in Germany, and that he has a good job and a large salary. Based on that they are determined that he'd be the perfect groom for their daughter. However, they do not know what he looks like, and mistake his assistant, Vinod, who arrives before him, to be him. They shower an initially confused and bemused Vinod with the fervent attention they were reserving for their intended son-in-law, and encourage the blossoming attraction between Geeta and Vinod. In time, the actual engineer arrives, and Geeta's parents realize that the man they thought to be him, was actually just a low-paid assistant. They order Geeta, who they had earlier encouraged to spend time with Vinod, to stop seeing him, and prepare to get married to the engineer. This upsets Geeta, for how is she to undo the chemistry, the attraction that she now bears for Vinod, and marry someone she does not desire. How is she to put the genie back into the bottle?

7 In situations like this, the opinion generally is that once all other factors have been established, and the couple has been married, they will learn to find 'love.' Here 'love' is broadly defined and doesn't necessarily refer to any kind of surety that the couple will discover a mutually satisfying sexual chemistry. 'Love' in this broad cultural context, refers more to a man and a woman becoming habituated to the idea of living together, and falling into an established pattern of domesticity, which includes the production of children. In the Bengali film *Paroma*, by the acclaimed female director, Aparna Sen, this is cynically portrayed in a bedroom scene between Paroma and her husband. A dutiful wife and daughter-in-law in a large joint family, Paroma goes about tending to the children and various domestic tasks all day. At night she tends to her husband. In the bedroom scene Paroma lies almost like

an inert mattress beneath her husband, humming distractedly her limbs impassive, her eyes wandering towards the ceiling, and her mind cuing up errands, while her husband grunts and pants on top, and then rolls over and goes to sleep. Here sex is not a means by which two individuals establish intimacy or connectedness but rather it is a domestic service that a wife offers to her husband, in the form of her body. This premise is however shaken up in Paroma's life, when she experiences a startling sexual awakening when she becomes involved with an Indo-American photographer visiting the family for a photo project.

### **The Forbidden Word**

8 Paroma's storyline contains an important pointer to the concealed issue behind the unresolved Bollywood 'love' plot. Though words like 'pyar,' 'mohabbat' and 'ishq,' various words meaning 'love,' are often coyly used to refer to these traumatized on-screen relationships, the real issue is with the more powerful and primordial instinct that operates between two individuals when they are romantically attracted: that of mutual sexual desire. However, this remains a conspicuously mute issue on-screen in Bollywood films. A couple is allowed to express their attraction for each other in the language of 'love,' but never lust. There is an extraordinary effort to avoid even talking about it or referring to it in the script. There is no acceptable on-screen word for it in the Indian vernaculars, and even when sex is portrayed on-screen indirectly, via the couple in the same bed, or often as two birds or two flowers 'kissing,' it is spoken of as 'love,' not sex. Should the female protagonist get pregnant she refers to it as a symbol of her love and sometimes, depending on how the lover responds to her pregnancy, evidence of her 'shame.' Sex between lovers when spoken of by others, family, community, etc. is referred to as 'dirty acts' or 'shameless behavior.'

9 Perhaps this is where the deadlock lies in Bollywood's unchanging love plot. While 'love' can be contrived in a million different ways and made to suit any context, there is only one way to define sexual attraction between two individuals. It either is, or isn't. Nor can it be forced, controlled or ordered onto a prospective couple. India may well choose to propagate relationships and marriages only within the confines of acceptable caste, class and religious boundaries, but the natural law of mate selection, which outpowers social laws in both evolutionary and biological magnitude, cannot be contained by artificially drawn social boundaries. But how can Bollywood resolve this hitch in its plot if it won't even face up to it by calling the issue by name?

10 Perhaps the issue is even deeper than simply the recognition of sex as a biological drive and a natural mate selector. For this much is clear, even as the word 'sex' is shunned

and there is limited scope for an open exploration of its related issues on screen, there is no dearth of sexual innuendos in Indian films. These are incorporated into the song and dance sequences, where the hero romances the heroine. In the “Sarkaye leo khatiya” (Let’s move the bed) song sequence of the 1994 film *Raja Babu*, the lead pair, Madhubala and Raja Babu, assume various love-making postures in their dance steps to the tune of some very suggestive lyrics. An odd, silent pact is established between the film maker and the audience, which agrees to a voyeuristic showing and viewing of the sexual dynamics between the on-screen couple, while pretending it isn’t so.

### **The Sex "Item"**

11 Another feature in Bollywood films that has been long popular, and is seen as a must-add in films that aspire to be commercially successful, are sexually explicit song and dance performances by women, that earlier used to be referred to as ‘cabaret’ numbers. These sequestered sequences are far more sexually blatant than the song and dance sequences that involve the hero and heroine of the film, where the sex ‘talk’ is more subtle and interweaves with other interpersonal emotions. Usually unconnected and inconsequential to the central plot, the ‘cabaret’ song and dance sequences are deliberately evocative of the most primal expressions of lust, and are clearly meant to do nothing else except sexually titillate and entertain the audience. More specifically, to titillate and entertain the heterosexual male audience. These performances would earlier feature lesser known actresses. But recently, these not only feature the top actresses of Bollywood, they also have raunchier lyrics and dance movements than they did before. Now referred to as ‘item numbers,’ they are inserted into the preview clips of the film before its release, almost like an a-la-carte item served on the menu to whet the male audience’s appetite for the film. “Sheela ki Jawani” (Sheela’s youth), “Chammak Chalo” (sexy vixen), and “I’ll do the talking tonight”, are some recent examples of popular ‘item numbers.’

12 Clearly Bollywood sees it necessary to cater to male sexual appetite, and so despite the outward prudery towards sex, it deviously acknowledges its existence and need. But does it do so for female sexuality as well?

13 Unfortunately it does not. Female sexuality in the bulk of Bollywood films may be served up as an item, a commodity for the male audience’s consumption, and to gross money at the box office, but it is almost never acknowledged or allowed an acceptable expression in the female protagonists’ role and character definition. *The Dirty Picture*, that India’s censor board took an angry axe to, is a statement on Indian cinema’s hypocritical approach to female

sexuality. The film is based on the life of the South Indian actress 'Silk Smitha' whose sexuality was liberally used by film makers to give a pornographic edge to films to draw massive male viewership and create box office hits. Yet, the film fraternity never accorded her the dignity of the artist that she wanted to be recognized as. Instead they dismissed her films as "dirty" and denigrated her person for her choice of roles.

14 Hence, the only acceptable mode of sexual expression for lovers in Bollywood films is one where the hero, via his songs, expresses his sexual desire and physical arousal to his partner, while the heroine plays a passive receptacle or coyly desists, even if her body seems to be sending out contradictory signals. In the 'Jane Do Na' song from the film *Sagaar* the heroine in a red sari, her hair and body seductively wet, rolls and writhes on the ground as if in sexual ecstasy, while the hero gradually disrobes and caresses her and sings, "Let me come near you," to which she responds with, "Don't come near me....don't touch me, don't touch me!"

### **The Missing Identity**

15 Bollywood films where the female protagonist is able to candidly establish her sexuality and sexual desires as legitimate and integral aspects of her being, could probably be totted up on one hand. One of these is *Astitva* (Identity), which shows how a middle-class, urban house-wife, Aditi, bears the consequences of a one-night sexual tryst with another man. Aditi's husband, Shrikant, is an ambitious, overbearing man, who has his and Aditi's life charted out, and has instructed her not to have children till he has reached a certain pinnacle of success. He travels a lot for his work and Aditi who feels alone and sexually frustrated, and has no leeway to communicate this to her husband, has a one night stand with her music teacher. Ridden with guilt, she refuses to see him again. However, she also finds out she is pregnant from that affair, a truth she is unable to tell Shrikant who has bought a house the same day, and regards the pregnancy as a timely event in accordance with his life plans! Later he is elated when Aditi gives birth to a son who he treats as another of his ambitions met. The story line later also reveals that Srikant is infertile and the couple does not have any other children. However, the truth emerges many years later, when the music teacher dies and leaves all his property to Aditi, having realized that the child she had mothered was his. Shrikant is unable to bear the truth of Aditi's secret and initially devises a punishment where he would have her live in his house in misery for the rest of her life, so he would have the pleasure of treating her and her son, who he has now disowned, like trash. But when he realizes that if society found out he would be humiliated even more, he changes his mind and

orders her out of his house. Even though Aditi recognizes that the music teacher who took responsibility for his child was a far more decent man than her husband who by his own admission had affairs (which he claimed were a man's need) but did not care what happened to his ex-lovers, she still is hopeful of keeping her 'family' together. And so, even though, with her inheritance from the music teacher, she has the option of not taking Srikant's bullying anymore, she meekly complies with whatever he tells her to do. But when he finally throws her out, Aditi addresses him with a monologue just before leaving, where she tells him what she did not have the courage to say for all their married life; that women too have the same need for sex that men do. She asks him what a woman should do when her husband is unavailable to satisfy this need? She asks why it is that men can help themselves to their wives, anytime they want whether the wife wants it or not, but a wife cannot approach her husband with her sexual needs. Or for that matter, why it is alright for men to fulfill their needs with other women, but it is not the same for women. Why is what is right for a man not right for a woman, or for that matter what is wrong for a woman, also not wrong for a man?

16 The film *Rihaae* (Freedom), which incidentally was made by a woman director, Aruna Raje, has a similar plot. It is set in a village, where the men frequently migrate for work to the cities, and it shows how the husbands and wives deal with the sexual frustration that ensues from their long periods of separation. While it is a given that the husbands in the cities will frequent brothels, the wives left behind in the villages have few options. The central character Taku begins an affair with another man in the village, and eventually finds out she's pregnant. Even as she confides in her husband and also decides to keep the child, she is ostracized by the other villagers. Her husband Amar ji does not accept the situation immediately, but as he mulls over it he realizes that Taku has done exactly what he does when he is away from her. However, unlike Srikant, he accepts the truth of the situation and recognizes the social hypocrisy of how society views the sexual needs of women differently from that of men's. He also stands by his wife in the end, accepting her choices, and the baby she will have, as his own, and defends her when she's put on trial by the village judiciary.

17 While both these films explore the issue of how women deal with sexual frustration within their marriage, and acknowledge that wives have the same sexual needs as husbands do, the question of an unmarried woman's sexual desires are almost never addressed in Bollywood films. After all, this is not simply about sexual dynamics within a marriage, but sex drive as a biological need in both men and women, regardless of their marital status. In the rare film or two where this topic has been addressed, the conclusions are almost bizarre.

## The "Untamed" Woman

18 *Kamla ki Maut* (Kamla's Death) is one of those rare Bollywood films in which the the subject of sexual yearnings in unmarried women is obliquely addressed. Kamla, a young, single woman who, at the start of the film, commits suicide by jumping off her balcony, is supposed by her neighbors to have been pregnant by the man she was in love with. It is believed that Kamla's boyfriend had probably refused to marry her thereafter, and it was the shame and fear of being socially ostracized that drove Kamla to commit suicide. It is never ascertained, whether Kamla was actually pregnant, but other women in the building, who are sexually involved with the men they are secretly dating, are shaken up by Kamla's death and fear that that could have been them, even though outwardly they condemn and pity Kamla. This is a pointer to the hypocrisy in women's attitudes towards one another's sexual behaviors and choices. However, none of the female characters question why this should be considered a shameful issue at all for women, given that one of the male characters, Sudhakar, a father of two young women, mentally recounts the numerous sexual affairs he had with women, all of whom he consequently abandoned. One of the women who he had impregnated and who had to have an abortion, and had hoped he would marry her, later married someone else and had a child. He concludes that Kamla too could have moved on with her life like his jilted lover had, without a thought about his own responsibility towards the women he was involved with. Nor does he harbor any cynicism about the fact that he took the freedom of sexual exploration and choice for granted as a man, without considering that his female partners were not allowed the same by society.

19 Sudhakar's wife, Nirmala, whose grudge against Kamla seems relentless, has her own reason for taking Kamala's suicide so personally. As a teenager Nirmala too had been infatuated with her school teacher, for whom she was willing to commit suicide, and thereafter her parents had stopped her schooling and arranged her marriage apparently as a remedy. Nirmala thus believes that to control the sexual urges of unmarried girls their parents should marry them off quickly, and she is worried about finding grooms for her own daughters. Here, even though there is an indirect acknowledgement that women like men also have natural sexual desires, it is regarded as some sort of a malevolent force in women that needs to be contained and restrained through marriage. And if it is not contained in this manner, then it can end up destroying the woman and her family.

20 This view of women's sexuality is not only a justification for families wanting to marry off their daughters at the earliest opportunity, but it is also a depersonalization of a woman's relationship with her own body. Her sexuality is not a venue for her individual

exploration and choices, but an impersonal energy contained within her that can be externally caged, owned, and used by whichever man her parents marry her off to. This view of women's sexuality is also endorsed in another film, *Damini* (Lightening), oddly enough by the young woman's own decision!

### **The Terrifying "Choice"**

21 The film *Damini* acquired a special social significance in India in 2012, because the name of the protagonist of this film was also ascribed to the victim of the high profile Delhi gang rape case of a young woman in a bus. Like Damini in the film, the Delhi rape victim had also valiantly fought to bring the rapists to justice. However, in the film Damini fights for justice for another woman, a young maid in her in-laws house, who she witnessed being raped by her brother-in-law and his friends, and who later succumbs to her injuries. It is in light of the socio-sexual significance of both Damini the film and the character, that this particular incident in the film is oddly perplexing.

22 Damini's parents are unable to arrange the dowry that men are demanding to marry their daughters. In the meantime, Damini's sister, Devika, decides that she will elope with Birju to save her parents the trouble of finding a suitable man and paying him a big dowry. The problem is that Birju is not only a toxic personality—abusive, alcoholic and with a criminal past—but he had also been stalking, sexually harassing and terrorizing Devika for months. Devika explains to a puzzled Damini, that the reason for her choice is that he is the only man who seems to want her, and that she wants a chance at living—that is to be married, to have a sex life and to start a family. Damini also defends Devika's action to her parents, who seem more concerned about the 'shame' Devika has caused them in the community by secretly eloping, than about the psychopathic nature of the man that Devika has married. Damini reminds them of the many humiliations Devika suffered when grooms selected by their parents rejected her, and that unlike unmarried women who commit suicide when their parents cannot shell out big enough dowries to get them married, Devika had made a choice to live her life! This hints at the tremendous sexual frustration that builds up in unmarried women, because of the cultural restrictions imposed on them. But one also cannot help wondering that if this is the way women in India intend to get married, then should not they also exercise greater freedom to meet men and explore relationships before their marriage, so they can have a larger and more decent pool of mates to choose from?

## The Consumed Consent

23 As perplexing as Devika's decision to marry Birju may seem, it is nonetheless a choice she makes about her life. What is perhaps more concerning are the situations, of which there are millions, where parents believe that their daughter's sexuality needs to be harnessed by a certain age by marrying her to a man of their choice, whether she wants to or not, and whether she likes him or not! Furthermore, given that the Indian law refuses to recognize marital rape, and assumes consent by the woman upon marriage, it makes the institution of marriage one of the premiere legal channels for the organized rape of women India. There are films like *Balika Badhu* (Child Bride) that were immensely popular in India, and a current television series by the same name has one of the highest TRP ratings! This speaks volumes to the fact that India houses one-thirds of the world's child brides. The film *Zubeidaa* skirts around the issue of a woman's consent in marriage, and presents it more as an obstinacy and unruliness in *Zubeidaa*. In order to squash her ambitions for a career in films, *Zubeidaa*'s father forces her to get married to a groom he has chosen for her. *Zubeidaa* does not want to get married and she weeps, and begs and pleads with her father to relent. When he does not she lets him know he's trampling on her life and her rights, in no uncertain terms. She furiously informs him that she is not a cow that he can string a rope around her neck and hand her over to whichever man he pleases. Nonetheless, the wedding ceremony is held. In the Muslim tradition under which *Zubeidaa* was married, it is important to note that both the bride and the groom are officially given the option to accept or decline the marriage proposal, and they are both required to give their consent verbally by saying "Qubool hai," (I accept). If either does not, then the marriage should not proceed. Interestingly, even when there is a provision within a cultural system that allows a woman personal choice, her parents reserve the unsanctioned right to overrule it. When *Zubeidaa* refuses to say 'I accept' when asked by the cleric, her father says that she actually consented and the marriage proceeds.

24 Interestingly, the tendency of Bollywood films to make the forced marriages of Indian women look exotic and thereby acceptable within a cultural pretext, is also adopted by western film makers. In the film, *Eat, Pray, Love*, based on the autobiographical account of the same name by American author Liz Gilbert, the 17-year-old Indian girl Tulsi, who Gilbert meets during her stay in India, is shown being forced to unhappily endure a colorful Hindu wedding, with Gilbert assuring her that she will learn to find happiness, even though there is no such account of a wedding in Gilbert's book! Indeed, Gilbert whose travels are inspired by her own search for an independent feminine identity outside of the marriage and motherhood model, that women, even in the west, are still expected to aspire to, is what drew her to Tulsi



in the first place. Gilbert realizes that women's struggle to retain autonomy of their bodies and sexualities are universal, irrespective of the cultural context they occur in, and that's why she empathizes with Tulsi. She gives us a glimpse of Tulsi's frustrations with her family wanting to control her decisions and choices, wanting her to get married when she herself covets the freedom that Gilbert has of traveling and exploring the world. And in her book Gilbert affirms Tulsi's right to that autonomy of self, and the last we see of Tulsi, she's running in circles shouting she wants to go to Hawaii. Yet, when the film director, Ryan Murphy takes creative license with the book, he chooses to strip Tulsi of this freedom by forcing her through an Indian wedding ceremony, looking miserable – in a scene clearly intended to enchant the western audiences with its exoticism. One does wonder whether this is because the director is male and at some level there is a cross-cultural patriarchal endorsement for this kind of subjugation of female sexuality, especially when portrayed glamorously in an ethnic context?

### **The Dishonorable "Honour"**

25 Could there be anything worse than being pushed into institutionalized rape in the name of marriage by your own parents? Undeniably it would be being pushed into marriage with your rapist by your own parents! In the film *Humara Dil Aapke Paas Hai* (My Heart Is with you), Preeti who testifies as a witness in a murder trial, is raped by the main accused as a form of revenge. Despite the courage she has shown, and the consequences she had to bear, she is stigmatized and rejected by her community and even her own family. Later, when the rapist is allowed out on bail, he approaches her parents with a marriage proposal. In the Indian penal system, this is still a common practice, for a rape victim's family to drop the case against the rapist if he agrees to marry her. Preeti's parents see this as a golden opportunity to regain their status in society. It is the male protagonist, Avinash, who has been Preeti's friend and admirer all along, who intervenes and challenges her parents and indeed the society's corrupted vision of crime and "honour." What honour is there for a family to marry their daughter to a rapist, a criminal? -- he challenges Preeti's parents. And how could they be so cruel to their own daughter?

26 If the Indian patriarchy views women as sexual objects for its entertainment, or as domestic resource for sex and childbearing, how does an Indian woman raised within the context of this definition of female sexuality, view herself?

### **The Distorted Reflection**

27 The answer to that is revealed in a powerful scene in *Antardwand* (Inner Conflict) a film based on the practice of kidnapping grooms, prevalent in certain states in India. Fathers who want well educated grooms with good jobs for their daughters, but do not want to pay the massive dowries that such grooms command, often kidnap these men and force their marriages with their daughters (Deepali Gaur Singh). It is a practice that is catching on so fast, now there is a popular television drama series on it (The Times of India). In this film, Raghu Veer is thus kidnapped, held captive, tortured and forced into a marriage with Janki by her ambitious father. The couple is kept locked in a room thereafter in the hope they will consummate their marriage. When Raghu Veer stubbornly refuses to, he is told that if does not do the 'deed' that night he will be shot dead. Raghu Veer then plans to avenge his anger on Janki. Seeing the fury on his face, she realizes his intent and screams for help and desperately tries to get out of the room which is locked from the outside. Raghu Veer drags her back and brutally rapes her. However the following morning, he is remorseful and ashamed and apologizes to her. She modestly responds that it's alright, since he is her husband.

28 Disturbingly, rape, even in a woman's own mind, is not so much about her personal choice and consent, or even about violence inflicted on her, but about who is and is not allowed to "use" and "abuse" her body. Through deep-seated cultural conditioning girls in India grow up believing that their body belongs first to the families they was born into, and it is their ownership right to hand them over to whichever men they see fit. Similarly once a woman is married, whatever her circumstance, her body belongs to her husband, and it is up to him to do with it as he wishes. So what constitutes rape? Rape it seems is the "illegitimate sexual use" of a woman's body by men who have not been authorized by family and society.

### **The Legitimate Abuse**

29 This view of rape and female sexuality allows for various other culture specific and systematic forms of sexual violence on women. One of these is the practice of 'bride trafficking' in India, as depicted in the film *Matrubhoomi* (The Nation without women). This is essentially a form of culturally sanctioned gang-rape and sex-trafficking. Due to the rampant and misogynistic practices of female infanticide and feticide, there are regions of India where men cannot find women to marry, and they resort to buying 'brides' from distant regions. However, the bought 'bride' is treated like a sexual commodity for the use of all the men in the family regardless of who she married. In this film, Kalki who has had a carefree

and happy upbringing, finds herself imprisoned in a nightmarish hell after her marriage, as she is raped day and night, by all the men in the family, and not just her husband's four brothers, but his father as well. Later on she is left tied in a cowshed where random men from the village take turns raping her. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of her story is that her father, once aware of her in-laws plans for her, had freely struck a monetary bargain with them in lieu.

30 The film *Pranali* (Tradition) deals with another such established custom in India, that of the Dev-dasi tradition. Dev-dasi literally means 'servant of god,' and is a form of prostitution that has evolved in certain temples in India. Young girls are "married" in a formal ceremony to the god of a local temple, and are then raised on the premises of the temple where they are raped by the priests and other important visitors to the temple. In this film, though *Pranali's* mother attempts to raise objections saying the custom is now illegal, *Pranali's* father, who was reluctant at first, becomes adamant on giving *Pranali* to the temple, for he feels it would raise his social esteem.

31 A third form rape and sex-trafficking that's sustained in the guise of culture, and in which the parents of a girl or woman are complicit, is portrayed in the film *Rivaaz* (Custom). This is a tradition prevalent in certain communities, like the Bedia, for centuries, where the daughters are customarily prostituted, as a form of income for the family and the community. When the daughters enter puberty there is a ceremony in which the whole village participates, after which the parents negotiate a market price for the right to 'de-flower' their daughter, and sell that right to the highest bidder. Sociologists who have studied the cultural and economic dynamics of the Bedia explain that even at the lower end of earnings, a Bedia woman can earn up to four times what the average unskilled worker earns in India (Agarwal). In the film, Bela the daughter of Mangatram, a man from this community, falls in love with Rahul, a man from the city visiting the village. When Bela wants to get married and leave the village, she is violently beaten up by her father. Though Bela's mother wants to help her get out, she is terrified of the consequences, for she knows that it could get them both killed. One of the biggest hurdles for Bela is that her father is supported by all the men of the community who have become highly dependent on the income they get through pimping their daughters, and do not wish to work to make a living of their own. That is why this practice is not considered 'shameful' within the moral precepts of the community even though prostitution in India generally is.

32 Interestingly, none of the three practices mentioned above constitute rape or sex-trafficking even within India's legal jurisdiction. Often in cases of 'bride' trafficking the

police refuse to intervene because they believe it is a domestic matter for a married couple to sort out among themselves (IOL News).

### **The Invisible Suicide**

33 Still more disturbing is the response of women who are victims of these forms of sexual violence and exploitation, for it indicates a deep, self-destructive internalization of the abuse that renders it 'normal' and acceptable in women's minds, and thus helps its perpetuation. Though Bela in *Rivaaz* is shown to revolt against her father and the community, in actuality it is not usually so. Efforts by social workers and limited government programs to educate the Bedia girls and to try to wean them away from the community and its traditions have consistently failed, and there is now concern about increasing rates of HIV infection in the community. Pranali, who is trafficked by the temples into mainstream prostitution, a fate that befalls almost all the women at some point, in all three traditions mentioned above, joins up with a social activist to challenge the way society conveniently 'uses' and still ostracizes prostitutes and their children. Pranali wants legal rights for sex-workers, and she wants to hold a mirror up to society's conscience by challenging all parties involved – politicians, police, school teachers and businessmen. But she does not hold that mirror up to her own family, the people that compromised her life in the first place.

34 The response of Kalki in *Matrubhoomi*, who is gang-raped by her husband's brothers and father is particularly perplexing. Kalki is shown to have had a happy and carefree upbringing. Her father tried to keep the fact that she is a girl hidden, so desperate men did not try to grab her, by having her dress as a boy. This actually seemed to give her more freedom of movement, as she roamed the forest, exploring, singing, and jumping over walls. How would a woman like this respond if she was suddenly held captive and repeatedly raped by various men? What would be her physical, psychological and emotional response? Except for one instance, much later in the film, where she makes a failed attempt to escape, Kalki is shown to be almost completely passive. She is not just a sexual slave in the house, but also a domestic one, and she submits to all of it with a mechanical detachment. This is not an unexpected response in victims of captive violence, but it sets in gradually once the body and the spirit have been broken. Especially given the personality we meet when we first glimpse Kalki, we would expect her to resist, to fight back furiously, to challenge her abusers, to feel betrayed by her father, to be resentful, fearful and sad. But we see none of these responses in Kalki. Might this be a directorial oversight? To a degree, perhaps it is. The vision of *Matrubhoomi* is clearly male-centric and perhaps even narcissistically so. It seems interested

only in how men feel — their sexual frustrations and fears, their anger and deadly hostility towards each other in their fierce competition for mates. In a way it is ironic that the male narcissism that annihilates women at birth, and then proceeds to dehumanize and commoditize the ones that survive, is not able to look beyond itself, its own ego, interests and emotions, even when it attempts to grapple with this issue via a creative medium. It does not feel it necessary to ask – what does *she* feel? What does *she* think?

### **The "Real" Rape**

35 Yet, this is atypical of the manner in which rape is usually depicted in Indian films. The women are shown to be fearful and begging for mercy when cornered, and swearing vengeance if raped. Often the rape scenes are accompanied with thunder and lightning to show it as a catastrophic moment in the woman's life. In *Ab Insaf Hoga* (Now there will be justice), Janaki, who works at a construction site to take care of her sick husband, is raped by a wealthy man at the site. Unable to deal with his wife's rape, her husband commits suicide. Janaki exacts revenge by plunging a sword into her rapist's belly towards the end of the film. In many other films, *Noorie*, being a memorable example, the woman who is raped commits suicide. And often the lover or brother exacts revenge. However, the underlying premise of these rapes is not about the infliction of violence on a woman, but the besmirching of her "honour" and that of her family's. The logic here is, that since a woman's sexuality is regarded as owned by the family, its 'use' by a man who is 'unauthorized' is an infringement on family territory and needs to be avenged or righted in some way, either by killing the rapist, or the killing of the raped woman who herself becomes an evidence of the offense to the family.

36 However, the sexual violence on and exploitation of a woman by members of her own family, at some level still is an exercise in assumed privilege, and hence is not rape, and does not evoke the same catastrophic response on or off screen as rapes by 'other' men usually do. So possibly Kalki's response in *Matrubhoomi* could also be viewed as the culturally conditioned response in Indian women to rape within the family. It is seen that most women who are trafficked as 'brides' and held under conditions of sexual slavery and abuse often do not complain or want to bring charges against their 'husband' and 'in-laws,' which limits the scope of intervention and rescue of these women (IOL News). One young woman who had been 'bride trafficked' says, "It is all fate. What has happened has happened. What can I do? My parents didn't even get any money from this deal" (Agal 2006). Her concern still was not

about her condition, but the fact that her parents hadn't benefitted as she believes they rightly should, from the deal they made with her life!

37 Ultimately underlying Bollywood's baffled approach to sex, rape and prostitution is India's view of women's sexualities. Sex is acceptable as long as it has a commercial or domestic use for men, but it is not acceptable when women choose to express it in their personal identity or choices. Rape is about which man is and is not permitted to inflict sexual violence on a woman, but it is not about the violation of a woman's bodily integrity and human rights regardless of who the offender is. And prostitution is about the selling of a woman's body outside the hallowed institutions of family and marriage, not about the sale and sexual commoditization of a woman by her parents.

### **The Ultimate Freedom**

38 Yet, there is a consistency of purpose beneath all these apparent contradictions, and that is the intent or purpose of a patriarchal structure to maintain its power and hierarchy by owning women's bodies. Indeed the ownership and control of women's sexualities is integral to the very existence of the patriarchy and its powers. And this is the reason why:

An Institution] even when it involves an entire population, has an inbuilt mechanism of group control[...] [that] is indispensable to [its] survival [...] [and] legitimacy. A critical strategy is to control the members through de-individuation, a systematic stripping away of individuality[...] Human sexuality thus becomes a prime target of de-individuation[...]because it is a unique expression of individuality[...] The power of [human] sexuality is that it is far more than simply the mechanics of human physiology[...] [It is] a vigorous tool of self-expression. It assumes a person's distinctiveness and becomes his or her unique identity. It is complex and encompasses many [factors] [...]such as gender, sexual orientation, clothing, mannerisms, facial expressions, speech, preferences, thoughts, ideas, dreams, ideals, fallibilities, unconscious habits and interactions. It defies the rigid boundaries that institutions impose on people and [is] [...] constantly and fluidly changing, trailing a person's path of growth and assuming it. Sexuality, therefore is synonymous with individuality[...][and is] a potent anti-institution missile[...] It therefore becomes imperative from the point of view of institutional control that human beings be stripped of their sexuality. (Banerji 11-13)

39 Paroma (see para 7) who lived one part of her life like a passive sexual resource for her husband, not only discovers her deeply repressed sexuality through her extra-marital affair, but also discovers its powers; its ability to connect her to another person at a level she never connected with her husband on, or the new facets of her own personality, her dreams, desires and longings. In this powerful awakening of her sexuality, Paroma experiences the ultimate freedom of self which comes with its uninhibited release. In the end, when the

relationship is finally discovered, and Paroma realizes that she has also been abandoned by her lover, she tries to give expression to this discovery of freedom and self, by shaving off her hair and attempting suicide by slashing her wrists. Her suicide attempt fails and the family, in its inability to understand or accept her affair, decides that she must be mentally unwell and should be institutionalized. Paroma, even when she feels beaten back, challenges them and says she believes she has done nothing wrong.

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# Pageant Trouble: An Exploration of Gender Transgression in *Little Miss Sunshine*

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## Abstract:

*Little Miss Sunshine* is a recent (2006) film that was popular among various audiences within the United States. Because of its popularity, this film serves as an important representation of cultural norms and ideals since it is through popular culture we learn lessons about gender and race. The plot centers on a dysfunctional white family making a cross-country journey in order to enter their elementary school aged daughter into a beauty pageant. Utilizing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, we investigate the relationships between beauty pageants and gender. We also use the film as a site to explore interpellations of femininity and sexuality. We explore how the main character, Olive, disrupts normative gender expectations and behaviors by performing her gender in transgressive ways at the pageant.

1 *Little Miss Sunshine* is a recent (2006) film that was popular among various audiences within the United States. The screen-play was written by first-time writer Michael Arndt and was directed by Jonathon Dayton and Valerie Faris. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and received two, one for Best Original Screen Play and the other for Best Supporting Actor.

2 We argue that *Little Miss Sunshine* is an important text that needs to be theorized for its messages about normalized subjectivities and gendered expectations. Because of its popularity, this film serves as an important representation of cultural norms and ideals since it is through popular culture we learn lessons about gender, race, class, and sexuality. We begin our analysis by outlining Judith Butler's theory of gender performance. We then review the cultural significance of beauty pageants, paying specific attention to feminist critiques of beauty pageants and the cultural norms that they represent. Next, we explain our methods of film analysis that informed our interaction with the text of the film. We follow this with a brief synopsis of the film. Finally, we provide our analysis of the film and explore the implications of the gender representations and interruptions present within the text. Using Butler's theory of gender performance, along with a discussion of post-feminism, we offer our interpretation of the film, arguing that Olive's final performance illustrates important cultural ideals and expectations about gender.

3 It is important to note the social and political climate in which this movie was created and consumed. Many scholars have asserted that the turn away from critiquing and engaging with political power structures (including patriarchy) has created what has been termed post-

feminism. We argue that *Little Miss Sunshine* was produced within a post-feminist climate in which popular discourses about feminism assume that it is no longer necessary and relevant; these assumptions assert that social critiques of sexism and patriarchy are unnecessary. Angela McRobbie is one of the leading scholars who challenges and critiques post-feminism. Although this term has wide variation depending upon discipline (and even within disciplines), McRobbie defines post-feminism as:

An active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and '80s come to be undermined. It proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism. (258)

Post-feminism suggests that the goals of feminism have been attained and, thus, there is no need for further collective mobilization around gender. As McRobbie argues, in order for feminism to be “taken into account,” it has to be understood as having already passed away (259). Women are presumed to be free to articulate our desires for sex, power, and money without fear of retribution. The notion of choice discussed in terms of post-feminism takes the stance that women are free agents in their lives thus they are able to make choices free from sexist constraints and institutionalized oppression. The focus remains on the individual (the personal as split from the political) instead of how the individual is located within a heteropatriarchal culture (the personal is political). Arguing against notions of “victimization,” post-feminism assumes that women are now equal to men, and can therefore make agentic, rational decisions unencumbered by sexism (Hua 68). These discourses about gender, freedom, and individualism are present throughout the film, and an understanding of post-feminism is important when engaging theoretically about the social significance of the film.

### **Theoretical Framework**

4 Judith Butler has made substantial contributions to constructivist understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Utilizing her framework for gender performativity, we will examine how youth pageants are constitutive of gender norms and disciplined bodies. In her various texts on sex and gender, Butler seeks to reveal the socially constructed nature of binary sex categories. Interrogating the potentially constructed nature of biological sex points to the tenuousness of gender and gender categories. It has been assumed that gender and gender categories have been founded upon binary sex categories that have been based in essentialized, biological differences. Butler points out that the instability of gender and

gender categories is a natural consequence of questioning the constitution of binary sex categories. If gender is no longer thought to be reflecting biological essences, then gender itself is a performance that “regularly conceals its genesis” and is highly unstable (Butler, *Performative Acts* 903). This leads to her conceptualization of gender performance.

Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (Butler, *Performative Acts* 903)

Gender performance is a necessary fiction that naturalizes sex and gender. Butler does not believe that gender performance is a “singular deliberate act” (Gilbert 130). Rather, it is a “reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects it names” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 2). Gender identity is an imitative process whereby certain gender performances are socially sanctioned, while others are not. The imitation of certain gender performances reinscribes the seemingly naturalness of gender categories, again upholding the fiction of binary sex/gender systems. “Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Butler, *Imitation* 643). The constant imitation/reiteration of gender through socially sanctioned performances perpetuates normative views and beliefs about binary gender systems.

5 According to Butler, the fact that society has so many regulatory regimes that dictate and/or encourage certain gender performances points to the tenuous and unstable nature of these very same categories (*Performative Acts* 903). If these categories were natural and innate, no regulation would be necessary in order to maintain the distinctions. Because gender performance regulation is present in various institutions, social structures, and relationships, this shows that the categories themselves are socially constructed and not easily maintained. The instability of the categories suggests possibilities of agency and resistance. If gender is a performance and must constantly be imitating and repeating socially sanctioned performances in order to be read as natural and innate, resistance is possible by interrupting different forms of imitation or performing gender differently.

6 We utilize this theoretical framework about gender performance and transgression in our analysis of the film *Little Miss Sunshine*. We look to the film in order to better understand which gender performances are socially sanctioned and why. By examining Olive's gender (mis)performance, we can begin to investigate one of the many socially sanctioned gender regimes that perpetuate certain ideals and embodiments of gender. We approach the text asking, why was Olive's final performance so disturbing to both pageant officials and

audience members? How did Olive transgress traditional conceptualizations of gender, and what does it mean to interrupt normative gender expectations? How are girls and women simultaneously complicit and resistant to normative gender expectations and practices? By utilizing Butler's frameworks, we hope to examine how gender is regulated and performed within the culture of beauty pageants as represented by the film *Little Miss Sunshine*.

### **The Cultural Significance of Beauty Pageants**

7 Different variations of the modern day beauty pageant have been in existence for centuries, and the roots of the pageants can be traced to medieval Western Europe. Within the United States, the Miss America pageant is clearly the most significant beauty pageant currently in existence. Originally constructed as a tourist attraction in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the Miss America pageant has been a cultural event since 1921. Since its inception, the nature of the pageant has shifted according to its historical context. For example, following World War II, the pageant was wholeheartedly embraced for its role in upholding certain traditional norms of gender and femininity. Arguably the most significant change in the pageant structure and ideology followed the 1968 feminist protest of the pageant. Feminists protested the objectification of women at the Miss America pageant, and they drew attention to the ways in which women were oppressed by beauty standards and expectations. After the feminist protest, the pageant focused more attention on intellectual ability, individual talent, and civic responsibility. Currently, Miss America pageant contestants are judged on a numerical score based on several categories: the off stage interview, the spontaneous on stage interview, and the talent, swimsuit, and evening gown competitions. Since the feminist protest, the pageant has adapted an arguably liberal feminist<sup>1</sup> framework that facilitates meritocratic understandings of success, beauty, and individuality which seeks to counter the pageant's reputation that the competition only involves physical appearance (Banet-Weiser 88).

8 Although many believe that beauty pageants are outdated and consequently of little social significance, we argue that pageants are important and uphold critical ideals that are central to our cultural beliefs and practices. "Beauty pageants are a singularly unique site in which to study the production and representation of culture and power" (Mani 718). Socially

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<sup>1</sup> Liberal feminism seeks to equalize rights and opportunities between men and women. This branch of feminism focuses on equality within the home, workplace, and legal system. Liberal feminists often focus on the individual and individual rights and believe that women deserve the same rights and opportunities as men. Liberal feminists often focus on the importance of choice and autonomy. They have their roots in the second wave of feminism (for more, see Brown 2002).

sanctioned gender performances are legitimated through particular representations of ideal femininity at beauty pageants. As Sarah Banet-Weiser convincingly argues in her ethnography of the Miss America beauty pageant entitled *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, beauty pageants represent a very deliberate and particular version of femininity, one that upholds a nationalized identity, which serves to symbolize the cultural core of the nation (2). As Angela Latham shows, beauty pageants aren't just about physical beauty; instead, they also seek to construct and perpetuate “an image of the ideal attitude of femininity” (164). Beauty pageants in general, and the Miss America pageant in particular, serve to represent an ideal femininity that embodies very specific classed, raced, and sexualized gender performances. Banet-Weiser illustrates that diversity is represented in very superficial ways, and that white, middle class femininity still controls which gender performances are socially sanctioned, and which are excluded (19).

9 Beauty pageants are culturally significant because they teach us a number of highly contested lessons about gender and femininity, and child beauty pageants in particular have sparked a number of debates in feminist and academic arenas. The 1996 murder of JonBenet Ramsey put child beauty pageants in the national spotlight, complicating national understandings of childhood, innocence, femininity, and parenthood. The murder of JonBenet Ramsey highlighted the contradictory attitudes and practices surrounding the culture of child beauty pageants. As mentioned above, a number of academics have critiqued these pageants using feminist and cultural studies frameworks. Patrice Oppliger asserts that the main concern feminists have with child beauty pageants is that they sexualize young girls. She argues that little girls are being taught that they can and should be judged on their looks, and that their natural beauty is not good enough and must be enhanced by a variety of beauty products (Oppliger 77). She points to the beauty rituals enacted by girls in beauty pageants to illustrate the superficial and objectifying messages that beauty pageants perpetuate. Similarly, Henry Giroux argues that child beauty pageants sexualize and commodify children and become pedagogical sites “where children learn about pleasure, desire, and the roles they might assume in an adult society” (36). Pageants are sites where young girls are informally educated about gender roles and expectations; this includes lessons about being sexually attractive and complicit, and it also involves the objectification of the young female body. He further argues that child beauty pageants mimic liberal feminism when they utilize notions of self-esteem and autonomy when justifying the existence of beauty pageants (41). Like Banet-Weiser, Giroux points to the ways in which the second wave of feminism influenced the culture of beauty pageants.

10 Although she does not write specifically about child beauty pageants, Susan Bordo's work on Westernized notions of femininity is a useful critique of Westernized body practices and ideals that are present within pageant culture. Bordo argues that Westernized discourses surrounding gender serve to create disciplined bodies that, although agentic, conform to socially situated norms and ideals (166). She asserts that gendered norms and practices serve to homogenize bodies while simultaneously normalizing the very same practices (Bordo 25). The child beauty pageant is an overt way in which young girls are taught to discipline and control their bodies. The pageant offers emotional, social, and economic rewards to the girls who are able to control their bodies and present them in normalized and homogenized ways.

### **Methods**

11 Popular culture texts are important sites that teach us about ourselves and the social norms of society (Esposito and Love 33; Kellner 3). From engagement with these texts, people learn what it means to live particular identities (Kellner 263). For example, popular culture texts inform viewers on social norms involving race and gender. These texts are therefore educational and must consequently be analyzed, critiqued, and questioned. As Stuart Hall ("New Ethnicities" 200) has argued, popular culture texts are constitutive. These texts simultaneously reflect and create understandings about the world. Consequently, popular culture texts are an important influence that can have tremendous power over how people privilege certain ways of knowing and acting in their social worlds. The influence popular culture has over how people think and act points to the importance of critiquing popular culture texts, especially those that have mass appeal to young people.

12 The popular culture text and its meaning do not stand alone; there is no inherent meaning that the text contains (Fiske 1). Rather, the relationship between the consumers of the text and the text itself is an active process (Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" 447). Popular culture texts both reflect and construct our understandings of our worlds (Schildcrout 823). Viewers of popular culture texts are not passive; instead, viewers are engaged in a constant negotiation in which they posit how they view the world against the view of the world presented in the popular culture text. We viewed the film alone multiple times and noted instances of "gender trouble." Each author made a list of these instances in the film. We came together and discussed the significance of these moments and what we each had learned about gender, race, class, sexuality and beauty. These conversations formed the bulk of our analysis of the film.

13 We approached our reading of the film *Little Miss Sunshine* as feminist identified women. The term “feminist” is complicated and has been defined, contested, and redefined in a variety of ways. Yet, “we use the term *feminist*, with an acknowledgment of its troublesome history and usages, because we need it” (Pillow and Mayo 155). In our method of film analysis, we define feminism as a way of critiquing how regimes of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and beauty structure the lives of all of us. We also recognize how privilege and oppression are relational. One can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed based on varying subjectivities and how these subjectivities are interpreted at a given moment in time.

14 One author is White while one is Latina. Although we grew up in very different environments, we are both academics with similar interests and epistemologies. By divulging this information, we do not wish to essentialize or fix meanings or our identities (hooks 373). Our identities are not stable nor do they denote consistently particular ways of viewing the world. We divulge this information in order to suggest that our reading of the film have been shaped by our multiple subjectivities, and we acknowledge that our reading of the film is but one (Blair 244). Although it is difficult to know exactly how being a particular age, race, gender, or sexual orientation structured our meaning making of the film, we know that these identities have exerted some influence. For example, youth may make entirely different interpretations of the text thus, as Buckingham suggests, there are limitations to adult readings of youth culture (10). We recognize, however, that this reading is still crucial in an attempt to understand the power of popular culture texts and the ways in which gender regimes are constructed, negotiated, and maintained.

### **Film Synopsis**

15 The cast of the film centers around a lower-middle class “dysfunctional” white family who is determined to get their daughter from their home in Arizona to a beauty pageant in California. The story revolves around Olive Hoover (Abigail Breslin), a seven-year-old girl who finds out that she qualified for the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant after another contestant was disqualified for taking diet pills. Olive is not traditionally beautiful; she wears glasses, unfashionable clothing, and she is shorter and heavier than other pageant contestants. Richard Hoover (Greg Kinnear) is the father of the family and is a mediocre motivational speaker; he is constantly making references to being a winner and not giving up. Throughout the film he is ironically unsuccessful in trying to land a book deal for his self-help book. Sheryl Hoover (Toni Collette) is the mother of the family and is over-worked and over-stressed with her familial and economic duties. Because of her husband's lack of professional

success, she is the breadwinner of the family and she is also in charge of the emotional and physical work it takes to keep her family together. Dwayne (Paul Dano) is a teenage boy who has taken a vow of silence until he is accepted into pilot's school. He is Sheryl's child from a previous relationship or marriage. He communicates through writing notes, hates his family, and is an avid Friedrich Nietzsche follower. Olive's grandfather, Edwin (Alan Arkin), lives with the family because he was kicked out of his retirement community for his heroin use. Although he is foul mouthed and constantly talks about sex, he loves Olive and is the one working with her on her pageant routine. At the beginning of the film, Sheryl's brother, Frank (Steve Carell) comes to live with the Hoovers after attempting to commit suicide. He is a leading Proust scholar and fell in love with a younger man who did not return his love thus propelling him toward an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

16 Early in the film, after bringing Frank home from the hospital, the family learns that Olive has qualified for the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. Edwin immediately begins working with Olive on her routine for the pageant. Because the family does not have the money to fly to California, they decide to drive their Volkswagen T2 Microbus. The whole family, including Frank and Edwin, leave for California. During the road trip, the family encounters a series of substantial problems. Richard finds out that he did not land his book deal, Dwayne finds out that he is colorblind and consequently unable to go to pilot school, and Edwin overdoses on heroin in a hotel room on the way to the pageant and passes away. After his death, the family decides to continue on to the pageant because that is what they think he would have wanted for Olive.

17 Once at the pageant, Frank and Dwayne realize that Olive is significantly under-prepared for the culture of the pageant. They realize the time and effort necessary for the particular kinds of gender performances that are expected, and they leave the pageant to avoid witnessing Olive's embarrassment. Richard slowly realizes that Olive does not fit into the pageant culture, and he struggles with deciding how to make sense of the pageant and his daughter's obvious upcoming "failure". Sheryl is busy helping Olive prepare and does not seem to acknowledge the potential problems that Olive is bound to face surrounded by the thin girls who are applying spray tans, shaving their legs, and putting on make-up. She defends Olive's right to perform when confronted by Frank and Dwayne, who come back to help "save" Olive before Olive takes the stage for her final performance. She believes that Olive should be able to decide to perform even if she does not fit in.

18 The final scene of the movie consists of Olive performing a dance that is read by the audience as a strip tease. Her grandfather had taught her the dance and the rest of the family



was unaware of what she had planned. The pageant officials are infuriated and try to remove her from the stage. The audience initially is unsure of how to react, but many of them eventually leave, disgusted by Olive's overtly sexualized performance. Olive, however, is unaware of how controversial her final performance is, and she keeps dancing. Eventually her family joins her on stage in a final act of solidarity with Olive. The movie ends with the family sitting outside of an office where pageant officials are talking with the police, and the police let the Hoovers leave as long as they promise to never again enter Olive into a beauty pageant in the state of California.

### **Analysis**

19 The film opens with Olive studying the reaction of Miss Kansas when she was crowned Miss America. She studiously watches the clip over and over again, watching and re-watching the joy and excitement of Miss Kansas winning the crown. Olive finally sets down the remote, and she slowly and deliberately imitates the woman on the screen. Olive imitates her facial expression, her body posture, and the ways in which Miss Kansas flails her arms with excitement. This opening scene serves as an uncovering of gender performativity in that it shows Olive intentionally imitating a highly gendered performance. In this clip, we are shown the ways gender and race are interpellated through cultural practices, taught, and then lived. The Miss America pageant functions as an educative space for Olive as she learns appropriate and culturally sanctioned practices of femininity. As Lesko has suggested, a curriculum of the body exists for young girls. They learn how to become feminine through multiple teaching tools. "Becoming feminine involves learning sets of attitudes and actions conceived and completed upon and through the body" (Lesko 123). As viewers, we witness a seemingly very influential and educative experience for Olive as she learns how to perform femininity by imitating Miss Kansas.

20 Televised beauty pageants are, of course, just one educative space about gender. Throughout the movie, Olive is taught, often through social interactions, covert and overt lessons about gender and gender performance. For example, on the road trip to the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant, her family eats at a diner for breakfast. Olive orders waffles a la mode. Her mother asks incredulously, "for breakfast?" Olive, like the rest of the family, has been given a monetary limit to spend on breakfast, and she replies, "Yes, it's under four dollars." As viewers, we are not sure why Sheryl (Olive's mother) questions her daughter's breakfast choice. We know, however, based on Richard's (Olive's father) response that he attempts to manage her choice in order to manage her gender performance:

Richard: Olive, can I tell you something about ice-cream? Ice-cream is made from cream, which comes from cow's milk. And cream has a lot of fat in it. Sheryl: Richard...

Richard: What? She's gonna find out anyway. Right?

Olive: Find out what?

Richard: Well, when you eat ice-cream, the fat in ice-cream becomes the fat on your body.

Sheryl: Richard, I swear to God.

Olive: What? What's wrong?

Sheryl: Nothing, honey. Nothing's wrong.

Richard: So if you eat lots of ice cream, you're gonna become big and fat. But if you don't, you'll probably stay nice and skinny.

Grandpa: Olive, Richard's an idiot. I like a woman with meat on her bones.

This dialogue is complicated for multiple reasons. Most noticeably is Richard's interruption of Olive's breakfast choice. He tries to use the moment to "teach" Olive about the dangers of eating too much fat. Yet, he does not explain why fat is not culturally acceptable and skinny is. He just tells her that if she does not eat a lot of ice cream she will stay "nice and skinny," thereby letting Olive know that being skinny is the privileged position. It appears Richard is trying to help discipline Olive's body so that she performs a femininity that is sanctioned by the dominant culture. In this clip, there is evidence that Richard's teaching of his daughter helps support Sandra Lee Bartky's argument that, "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment" (72). In this situation, Richard is the literal panoptical male connoisseur using his gaze to teach Olive about the tyranny of slimness, and it is assumed that eventually Olive will internalize this information as she learns to regulate her own choices in the name of hegemonic femininity.

21 The Grandpa's role is less clear. He remains supportive of Olive as he dismisses Richard's insinuation that fat is a bad thing. Yet, because the film has positioned him as sexist and vulgar (he told his grandson to "fuck a lot of women"), his support of Olive is suspect. That he likes a woman with "meat on her bones" is a testament that he is also a panoptical male connoisseur and it is Olive who is left to negotiate between their desires for how her body should look and her own desire for ice-cream. Both of these conflicting opinions are driven by the physical/sexual preferences of arguably the two most important men in Olive's life.

22 Sheryl's response in this scene is the most difficult to read. She has been "pro-honesty" in terms of Olive up until this point, opposing a common stance in this society that childhood innocence must be protected from the "harsh realities of the adult world" (Jenkins

2). For example, when Olive saw the bandages around Frank's wrists (where he slashed them in a suicide attempt) she inquires about what happened. While Richard says that Uncle had an "accident," Sheryl, instead, asks her brother to tell Olive the truth because she believes seven year old Olive is old enough to know what really transpired. Thus, Frank tells Olive about his suicide attempt and his failed love affair with another man. Yet, in this scene, while Sheryl certainly "advocates" for Olive in that she interrupts her husband's paternalistic attitudes about weight, she does not afford Olive the honesty she had been previously entitled. Instead of teaching Olive about dominant beauty norms in relation to weight, Sheryl merely silences Richard but tells Olive that nothing is wrong. She could have, instead, utilized the moment as Richard tried to do to teach Olive what the culture often requires of the White female body.

23 In other instances, Sheryl is less than honest with Olive. She appears to be unable to critique dominant gender norms herself, or, an alternate reading could be that she embodies post-feminist beliefs and ideals. This would explain why she privileges Olive's desire and agency to make choices over a critical engagement with institutionalized oppression. She seems to suggest that Olive's happiness in her own self-expression is the absolute. Sheryl's attitudes about the pageant itself, and Olive's role within the pageant, are an embodiment of post-feminism. Sheryl believes that Olive has the right to make her own individual choices about the pageant, and she does not engage Olive with any discussions about the gendered and class dynamics obviously present at the pageant. Even though it is obvious Olive does not fit into the pageant's culture, Sheryl refuses to acknowledge this and instead believes Olive's individual rights and choices should be protected and honored regardless of the emotional costs. Embodying post-feminist ideology, Sheryl does not engage in political or cultural analysis of gender relations and norms because ultimately she believes if Olive is able to express herself then that is all that matters. Sheryl relies on tropes of post-feminism which posit individual choice and autonomy as more important than critiques about institutionalized oppression. In other words, post-feminism helps create the situation whereby gender is discussed in terms of individuals, choices, and freedom instead of institutions, oppression, and patriarchy.

24 It is important to note that Sheryl looks traditionally feminine in the sense that she was of average weight, had long hair, and dressed in form fitting clothing. So, while she acquiesces to gender norms, she does not expect her daughter to as long as it is her "choice". Yet, this lack of attention to a critique about gender norms ultimately serves male interests and perpetuates patriarchy. This is because Olive's eventual consumption of the ice cream (encouraged by all of her family members except Richard) could have material consequences

on her body and, thus, her status in heteropatriarchy. By not equipping Olive with the tools to understand gender oppression, Sheryl remains complicit within the system<sup>2</sup>. By not teaching Olive about how fatness and other hegemonic beauty standards are socially constructed, she helps create a situation where Olive may later view her own “fatness” as an individual problem instead of a problem with how gender oppression has created hegemonic standards of beauty. It is, however, when Olive asks the current Miss California if she eats ice cream that the post-feminist trope is reified. She tells Olive that she does, in fact, eat ice cream and we learn that even beauty queens make the “choice” to indulge in ice-cream. Though, in keeping with hegemonic beauty standards, Miss California goes on to tell Olive that technically the ice cream she likes is actually frozen yogurt. While the adults understand that frozen yogurt does not have the same fat content as ice cream, the point is lost on Olive who just feels validated that a beauty queen enjoys ice cream.

25 Throughout the movie, Olive receives and negotiates various messages about gender and socially sanctioned gender roles and performances. As mentioned earlier, Butler's theory of gender performance offers a way to conceptualize gender interruptions and gender norm resistance. Because our society is so intent on constructing and maintaining very specific forms of gender performance, there is space for resistance that is determined by social, historical, and personal circumstances. Gender is an imitative process that must be constantly negotiated and regulated, and this allows for gender interruptions that highlight the socially constructed nature of traditional gender regimes. We argue that Olive's final performance in the pageant is an example of one such gender interruption. For example, when her family arrives at the pageant, it is obvious that Olive's body does not “fit” in with the rest of the girls. She is heavier and shorter than the other contestants, and her outfits do not fit appropriately because of her weight. As viewers, we see immediately that Olive and her family are outsiders to the pageant culture that exists to represent femininity in particular ways. As girls are being prepared for performances, we witness the incredible amount of work and time invested in their femininity. Little girls are having makeup applied, hair done, and even getting their almost hairless legs shaved. It becomes obvious that Olive did not have the same training for the pageant as the other girls. Instead of a professional pageant coach, Olive relied on her drug-addicted grandfather to help prepare her routines for the pageant; thus, she arrives at the pageant with very little preparation.

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<sup>2</sup> We do not mean to engage in “mother blaming” that occurs all too often within patriarchy. We recognize that ALL of Olive's family members have a role in teaching her about gender oppression not just her mother. It is Sheryl, however, who has the “pro-honesty” stance and so it is Sheryl who we believe would be the most capable of engaging in honest dialogue with Olive about the system.

26 Upon her arrival to the pageant, Sheryl does not immediately recognize the type of work and time required for a socially sanctioned (and class specific) performance of femininity. The other family members, however, are made aware of the types of femininities that get privileged. Olive's uncle and brother leave because they cannot bear to watch Olive embarrass herself. They eventually come back to the pageant to try to stop Olive's performance. Olive, however, remains oblivious to her family's concern. It is not clear to viewers whether or not she overhears her brother demanding that Sheryl intervene:

Dwayne: I don't want Olive doing this.

Sheryl: Oh, my God!

Richard: See?!

Dwayne: Mom, look around. This place is fucked. I don't want these people judging Olive. Fuck them.

Richard: Exactly. Fuck them.

Sheryl: No, Dwayne. It's too late.

Dwayne: It's not too late. You're the mom. You're supposed to protect her. Don't let her do this. She's not a beauty queen mom. I'm going to tell her.

This dialogue positions Sheryl as potentially sacrificing her daughter's dignity in the name of autonomy and choice. While Richard and Dwayne recognize the cultural norms demanded of beauty queens and that "beauty pageants are not only places where queens are chosen but where they are *made*" (King-O'Riain 75), Sheryl is determined to prove that it "doesn't matter." She believes that her daughter should have the right to attempt to be a beauty queen even when the rest of the family understands that Olive has not been adequately educated in how to do it. In addition, for all of Olive's and Sheryl's other honest dialogues, they have not, to viewers' knowledge, engaged in conversation regarding the meaning of beauty pageants and the cultural norms and hegemonic performances of femininity expected of beauty queens. As such, Olive cannot truly make an informed choice about whether or not she wants to participate.

27 During her final performance, Olive puts on a top hat and takes off her glasses. She dedicates her performance to her late grandfather who taught her the moves. The DJ plays "Can't Touch This" and Olive performs a dance that is basically a strip tease. Olive spans her butt and throws her hat off. Her long hair tumbles down. She then pulls off her pants and twirls them around. Her smile is huge and it is clear she is enjoying the dance. She becomes increasingly more sexual with her moves as she removes her tie and places it in her mouth. Her father, standing in the audience, looks on in disbelief (as does everyone else) and mouths, "No, no." When some of the audience members leave in disgust, her father and uncle stand up and slowly start clapping. One of the pageant officials asks Richard what his daughter is

doing and he replies, “She’s kicking ass, that’s what she’s doing.” At this point Olive crawls on the floor growling with her mouth open. The Emcee of the pageant tries to pull Olive off the stage. Her family rush to the stage and Richard tackles the Emcee so that he cannot interrupt Olive. Richard then pretends as if he will remove Olive and, instead, he starts dancing with her mimicking some of her sexually suggestive moves. Uncle Frank joins in and defiantly stares at the pageant official. Soon, her brother and mother are dancing as well. More audience members leave and eventually the family ends up dancing in a circle, solidifying their love and support for Olive. Olive’s final performance can be read as an ironic commentary on the sexualization of girls in pageants. The audience and pageant directors, as gender police, resist her performance and try to discipline both Olive and her family for their overt interruptions of gender performance. What is sinister about the pageant officials “policing” the sexualization of Olive’s performance is that the sanctioned femininity relied on sexual undertones as well. Little girls were made-up to look like adult women. They wore make-up, had their hair done, and wore revealing outfits (including a swimsuit). They stuck out their butts and their non-existent breasts when they posed. Yet, this conception of femininity as “good girl” beauty queen was allowed. Olive’s performance exposes the sexual undertones of the pageant by exploding them. She interrupts the sanctioned performance of femininity by hypersexualizing her performance and acting as the (ironically unknowing) “bad girl.” It is this interruption that effectively exposes all of gender as a performance, especially as a socially and culturally mediated performance.

## **Conclusion**

28 As feminists, it is important we utilize theoretical frameworks that help explain the complexity of gender in application to real life situations. Beauty pageants have been a source of contention within the feminist movement. It was a protest of the 1968 Miss America pageant that earned 2nd wave feminists the titles of “bra-burners.” Yet, these pageants have been an enduring part of life and culture within the United States. As such, they are in need of gendered and racialized critiques. The text, *Little Miss Sunshine*, teaches us (and all viewers) about femininity. Beauty pageants have seen an increase in popularity as evidenced by the TLC reality show *Toddlers and Tiaras* (a look at beauty pageants for young children). Studying beauty pageants in general, and children's beauty pageants in particular, is important because “children's ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality develop gradually and are greatly influenced by information that their environments provide” (Levin 78). Because popular culture is one of the main sites in which young people form their raced, classed, and

gendered identities, it is important for feminists to investigate ideologies being encouraged or at least represented in popular culture texts.

29 The *Little Miss Sunshine* text satirizes gender performances in general and beauty pageant performances in particular. Throughout the film we are witness to the immense work and time invested in the process of “becoming feminine.” We watch as mostly mothers help discipline their daughters’ bodies to be socially acceptable. The film illustrates through visuals and dialogue the ways gender is a performance. Yet, we also learn what are socially acceptable and sanctioned versions of femininity. We learn that femininity has been defined in narrow ways and that the punishment for transgressions and interruptions of femininity is severe. In fact, the family faced the police after Olive’s performance was over. They were allowed to leave on the condition that they were never to enter Olive in a beauty pageant in the state of California.

30 *Little Miss Sunshine* exists as a satirical examination of the tyrannies of beauty standards upheld by beauty pageants. Yet, the film ultimately reifies hegemonic notions of femininity because it does not engage in honest dialogue about the ways these notions are informed and shaped by heteropatriarchy. We see this as an effect of the social and political climate of post-feminism in which the film was created and consumed. Yet, our interest in the film remains because it provocatively illustrates gender interruptions in performances of femininity. Olive’s performance was a literal performance (i.e. she was participating in a beauty contest and thus performing on stage). Yet, her literal performance also allowed us to see the ways gender is figuratively performed in everyday lives. We were witness to the ways Olive learned about femininity and how multiple players (popular culture and family) participated in her education about femininity. Olive interrupted hegemonic norms by not constructing a normative “body project” (Brumberg 98). We know this because, throughout the film, Olive was positioned in opposition to the young women who were disciplining their bodies and creating body projects that enabled them to be properly surveyed by the panoptical male connoisseur as well as the beauty pageant judges. We hope that feminists will continue an exploration of how gender is negotiated, lived, and transgressed in literal and figurative ways.

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# Disciplining Deviant Women: the Critical Reception of *Baise-moi*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

Since the emergence of the New French Extremity genre, the depiction of both non-simulated sex and extreme violence in the medium of film has become a perennial issue that calls for new feminist discourses. This is even more so when a film includes subversive female sexuality and women perpetrators of violence. These topics need to be explored in relation to gender issues, as it is only when one radically subverts conventional cinematic representations of sex, violence, and women that the pervasive “mad” or “bad” dichotomy restricting our understanding of violent women in film can be weakened. The role of marginalised women directors who make subversive films must also be considered as it invites an exploration of the interventions that radical women can make, especially pertaining to the issues of sex, violence, and dominant aesthetics in film. Reviews by amateur and journalistic Anglophone and Francophone film critics are especially revealing of the dominant attitudes facing subversive, sex-positive, radical, and provocative feminist films and women directors. From this backdrop, this paper explores the socio-cultural reasons for the strongly critical reception of the contemporary French film *Baise-moi* (dirs. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000), from an anarcho-feminist perspective.

1 Anette Ballinger notes in *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence* that “[f]eminism has shown a marked reluctance to deal with female violence, perhaps concerned that the subject will harm the feminist cause” (1). This unwillingness is with good reason because women are still considered either “mad” or “bad” when they kill. Nonetheless, we need new feminist discourses outside this dichotomy as our understanding of violent women is inadequate. Much can be learnt by exploring recent cases of radical artistic endeavours that treat the issue of women perpetrators and push the boundaries of established feminism. The contemporary French film *Baise-moi* is one such case that conveys a radical, sex-critical, and subversive discourse. As such, it is subjected to intense yet divided amateur and journalistic film criticism from the Anglophone and Francophone media, while its co-directors, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, are heavily critiqued.

2 Released on 28 June 2000 and based on the novel by the same name published by Despentes in 1994, *Baise-moi* portrays the story of Manu (Raffaëla Anderson), an occasional porn actor, and Nadine (Karen Bach), an occasional prostitute, as they separately experience traumatic events which drive them to murder. They chance upon one another and embark on a sexually charged killing spree across France until they meet their equally separate fates.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on material submitted as part of my Bachelor of Arts dissertation at the University of Manchester in 2012.

3 The film provokes a range of reactions that mostly centre on its inclusion of non-simulated sex, and which, along with its extreme violence, places it in the *New French Extremity* genre. This term, coined by James Quandt, denotes the relatively recent category of French films which include a predominant amalgamation of violence, torture, and sexuality (17). *Baise-moi* stands out from this recent trend since the late 1990s for art house films with graphic content (Downing, “French Cinema’s New ‘Sexual Revolution’ Postmodern Porn and Troubled Genre” 265). This is because, despite sharing such taboo features with its contemporaries, it is one of the few which garners such vehement opposition: the film has a 21% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and a “generally unfavourable” 35 out of 100 Metascore on Metacritic.

4 Films are a highly accessible visual medium and are products of specific social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. They play a role in the reflection on, and validation or contestation of, socio-cultural norms and expectations. The polemic critical reception of *Baise-moi* indicates the extent to which dominant contemporary occidental attitudes are still quite conservative and relatively untouched by radical feminist and anarchy-feminist ideas.<sup>2</sup>

5 From an anarchy-feminist perspective, this paper explores the socio-cultural reasons for the strongly critical reception of the film *Baise-moi*. As non-simulated sex in mainstream cinema is still somewhat provocative, and film reviewers often evoke the corresponding matter of female sexuality, the first section explores these issues. The second section is concerned with another overtly denounced element of the narrative: the extreme violence. As women commit many of the obvious instances of violence, this is logically followed by a consideration of women perpetrators. Finally, although the essay largely maintains a narrative perspective, the effect on the film reviewer of both the film’s aesthetics and its wider context cannot be ignored, thus the third section explores the grainy filmmaking techniques and the critique of the co-directors.

### **The Taboo of Non-Simulated Sex and Disruptive Female Sexuality**

6 “Femininity is whoring. The art of servility. We can call it seduction and make a glamorous thing of it. [...] Overwhelmingly, it’s just about making a habit of behaving in an inferior way.”<sup>3</sup> (Despentes 126)

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<sup>2</sup> Anarchy-feminists oppose all forms of hierarchy and relationships of power, including class and race, and view patriarchy as a symptom of involuntary hierarchy, whereas radical feminists consider patriarchy as the primary and most profound source of oppression.

<sup>3</sup> All translations are my own.

7 Having undeniably offended some members of the public, the portrayal of non-simulated sex is easily the most *overt* reason for which the film is subject to intense critical reviews. This is explored with a focus on: the label *pornography* and its financial and cultural implications in contemporary French society; and the cinematic taboo of non-simulated sex on-screen.

8 The original un-cut version of *Baise-moi* is often labelled as pornography as it contains extreme and vivid scenes of a sexual and violent nature. The meaning of the term *pornography* is disputable, however, and the implications of its usage are financially and culturally important in contemporary France. Originally released with a 16 rating, the right-wing religious group *Promouvoir* and members of the *Front National* campaigned against the film. The French state council responded by replacing its commercial certificate with an X certificate, which effectively made it the first banned film in France in 28 years. Catherine Tasca, the Socialist Minister for Culture from 2000 to 2002, finally awarded the film the newly reinstated 18 certificate around a year later, after much protest led by the French novelist and filmmaker Catherine Breillat. In a documentary on the making of the film, Trinh Thi saw this as “an indirect economic ban” (Santarelli) because in France, pornographic films, unlike other French films, are not eligible for an advance against the box-office from the National Centre for Cinema and Animated Images (CNC). An X certificate meant that this early payment would have to be paid back, and that Philippe Godeau, the producer, would lose his investment and risk bankruptcy (Reynaud 3). The cultural implications of banning a radical film are equally important when considering the extent to which such radical ideas are permitted to enter, and have an effect on, mainstream culture. A film with an X certificate would not have benefitted from promotion of any kind; it would only have been allowed to be sold by sex shops which, Trinh Thi argues, would effectively have silenced their voices as the typical clientele of these establishments would not be interested in their film (Santarelli). With an 18 certificate, the film could be more widely shown in mainstream and art house cinemas around France, thus widening its prospective audience.

9 Concerning the label *pornography*, Despentès, Trinh Thi, and R. Anderson argue that *Baise-moi* does not fall under this category as, unlike their film, pornography is made for erotic and masturbatory purposes (Santarelli). Nevertheless, one must note that cinematographic pornography is generally defined by law as the inclusion of certain sexual on-screen acts including erection, fellation, penetration, ejaculation and incitement to violence (Nettelbeck 7), most of which the film includes. Yet labelling the film *pornographic* is a simplification. As Lisa Downing, Professor of French Discourses of Sexuality, maintains,

“[p]ornography displaced, fragmented, relativized, undermined is not pornography” (“French Cinema’s New ‘Sexual Revolution’: Postmodern Porn and Troubled Genre” 278). The film could instead be considered *post-pornographic*, in that it fulfils most of the expectations for pornographic content, but contains a highly polemic, sex-positive discourse that critiques pornographic representation. Indeed, French queer theorist Marie-Hélène Bourcier suggests that *Baise-moi* is post-pornographic because the co-directors appropriate modern pornographic codes of representation and denaturalise them (380).

10 One of the reproaches made of the film is that it is pornography masquerading as “legitimate” cinema. “Nix,” for *Beyond Hollywood*, writes: “The flick is controversial only in the sense that it shows hard-core sex in what purports to be a mainstream film” (1); and “Grim Ringler,” writing for *Jackass Critics*, laments: “It seems as if its deep, but isnt. Seems as if its a porn, but isnt. Seems as if its a social satire, but isnt [sic]” (5). There is distinct frustration from reviewers that the film does not staunchly conform to the narrative and/or aesthetic expectations of either hardcore pornography or traditional, art house cinema (MacKenzie 317–318). In short, despite having had a relatively unremarkable first screening, the film immediately drew the attention of film reviewers thanks to the initial ban and the label *pornography*, which was undisputedly linked to the public’s oversimplification of the visual inclusion of non-simulated sex.

11 Despite the polemic surrounding the labelling of *Baise-moi*, such a vivid portrayal of real sex in cinema is still taboo and faces strong opposition based on aesthetic and narrative reasons. The French cinema magazine *Studio* gave the film two stars in 2000 and called it a hard-core version of the American film *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1991) that challenges the taboo about sex in mainstream cinema (Anon 30). This remark is rather justified, yet it requires further explanation. It is the *method* of using digital video to depict real sex in cinema, as well as the *representation* itself, which makes for unsettling viewing. Neil Archer, writing in the postgraduate electronic journal *E-Pisteme*, argues that the pornographic tropes in the film, which include not only what is depicted but also how it is depicted, are aesthetically disconcerting – the use of digital video “transgress[es] the line of past-ness and aesthetic distance necessary – paradoxically – to the illusion of filmic reality” (74). Concerning both the aesthetics and the narrative, Philip French, who reviewed the film in the *Guardian*, claims that the film is not erotic, but that the inclusion of non-simulated sex only “distracts the audience from other matters, torpedoing the overall sense of reality” (3). One could therefore conjecture that the film reviewers did not appreciate the conflation of the

porn genre with art house cinema that arguably attempts to open up a debate for serious, social commentary through its narrative.

12 Similarly, but specifically concerning the combination of sex and violence, it is possible that unfulfilled aesthetic, thematic, and generic expectations play a role in the reception of non-simulated sex in film. Jeffrey M. Anderson, for *Combustible Celluloid*, argues that “[t]o the film’s detractors, the sex makes the violence seem more graphic and the violence makes the sex seem more unappetizing” (5). The overt portrayal of the sexual act, especially in the graphic rape scenes, removes its allure (the second one is in the scene of the sex club massacre, where Manu uses a gun to anally penetrate a man. The massacre begins when he gropes her non-consensually, implies that she should accept it because they are in a sex club, and then makes a racist comment). This point was picked up on by Richard Scheib, writing for *Moria: The Science-Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review*: “The film interestingly co-opts porn style filmmaking, although the intent is clearly to do anything *other* than show the sex scenes in an erotic or titillating light” (3). Overall, the conflation of two such provocative issues – sex and violence – arguably sets it apart from films that depict only one or the other. Linda Ruth Williams, writing for BFI’s *Sight and Sound*, suggests:

that this is neither a horror film nor a porn film may be part of the problem. [...] What’s unusual is the conjunction of real sex and unreal violence, the confusion of authenticated pornographic fantasy and simulated violent spectacle. (11)

13 The uneasy relationship in cinema between the real and the simulated, as well as the film’s conflation of genres, is therefore recognised by some film reviewers and academics as aesthetically and narratively disturbing. Accordingly, reviewers treat non-simulated sex in film as a problematic and taboo issue to which the film overtly draws attention. However, the inclusion of real acts of a sexual nature is not the only issue that incites less than favourable reviews. The film depicts the women’s sexuality in an unconventional, potentially unexpected, and disruptive manner. This second part therefore concentrates on: the lack of female homosexuality; autonomous female sexual desire; and aggressive sexuality in the film.

14 Bérénice Reynaud, a French film critic, historian, theoretician, and film and video curator, accuses Despentès and Trinh Thi of not representing female homosexuality in the growing complicity between Manu and Nadine, thus not shattering this particular boundary (11). Perhaps it is true that the co-directors have a limited vision of female sexuality and are too phallus-centred for their film to be truly transgressive in all domains. Yet if these two seemingly heterosexual characters then become intimate – effectively for the spectator –

around the same time as they commit murder, it could be too easy to associate female homosexuality with misandry. In the scene where Manu and Nadine pick up two men and take them up to a hotel room to have sex, one of the men suggests that the women engage in homosexual activity with each other, effectively for his visual and sexual pleasure. Manu promptly throws him out. Within the narrative, Manu is rejecting the sexual desires of anyone other than herself and Nadine. In doing so, she is affirming her right to dictate her sexual encounters (in sharp contrast to her earlier experience of rape). Outside of the diegesis, the film hints at the contradictory heteronormativity of a contemporary occidental society by refusing to provide an explicit onscreen portrayal of homosexuality. This is a society in which female homosexuality is often evoked in the media merely for the visual pleasure of men and not for the erotic pleasure of the women themselves. In *Salon*, Charles Taylor – although adamant that the film is pornography – recognises this expectation and proposes that “the point of the [earlier] sequence [in which the semi-clothed women dance together], though, is that they don’t have sex, thus defusing the male gratification that’s the point of porn’s ubiquitous lesbian scenes” (10). The characters are not going to become temporarily homosexual just because others (the men in the scene as well as the male heterosexual spectator) expect this, and their complicity does not automatically make them homosexual either. In “Des Marchandises Entre Elles,” Luce Irigaray, Belgian feminist and cultural theorist, argues that female homosexuality is recognised only to the extent to which it is prostituted to man’s fantasies (189–193). Therefore, despite what Reynaud deems as a limited vision of female sexuality, it is important, in this instance, that the film does not overtly depict any potential homosexual relations between Manu and Nadine within the narrative. This is so that the film may maintain its stance that women should have complete control over their sexuality (including the freedom to reject). This clearly involves denying the heterosexual male spectator the visual pleasure of an expected - but ultimately temporary and superficial - female homosexual performance. It is not only an example of the women defining their own limitations, but also a strong rejection of the normalised imposition of men’s desires.

15 Not only does *Baise-moi* attempt to thwart narrative expectations of on-screen homosexuality, but it is also essentially a deconstruction of conventional heterosexual femininity. This is because it contradicts traditional gender roles, which can provoke subconscious opposition from a more conservative spectator. The definition of a “natural” woman stems from that which is considered un-masculine in dominant discourse. Despentes argues that women who know their sexuality, and who profit from it, are excluded from the

group as they do not respect the rules of behaviour for girls (105). It is in relegating women to the “inferior,” “weaker,” “fairer” sex and, most importantly, in normalising the belief that women are that which men are not, that taboos form concerning women’s “unnatural” behaviour. P. French epitomises the misogyny inherent in many critical reviews when he labels the women in the film “whores” (2), implying with such terminology that their promiscuity sufficiently encapsulates them and explains their violent and unfeminine transgressions. As Anne Cranny-Francis et al. note in *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*: “[H]eterosexist norms [...] assume a compliant femininity devoid of autonomous sexual desire” (40). The film rejects many of the dominant socio-cultural codes and conventions of an occidental patriarchal society in which women are not expected to *actively* seek sexual gratification. After they meet, the film portrays Nadine and Manu as *freer* sexual beings who now instead attempt to exercise their sexual freedom (including, as previously mentioned, the freedom to reject). The dismissive and reductive labelling of the main protagonists by numerous film reviewers reveals the latter’s adherence to the conventional expectations of “natural” feminine behaviour.

16 Connected with many film reviewers’ unease with the women’s unconventional autonomous sexual desire is their focus on Manu and Nadine’s aggressive sexualities. Maximilian Le Cain, in *Senses of Cinema*, calls the film “an almost apocalyptic view of heterosexuality, a loveless, predatory sexuality” (10), and Marc Savlov, for the *Austin Chronicle*, disparagingly summarises the film as “chock-full of the most unexpressive [sic] and predatory sexuality I’ve ever seen” (1). Any violence on the part of the women, which is reserved for the male realm, is not only treated as inherently sexualised, but also unfeminine and therefore unnatural. The close-up of Nadine’s black stiletto heels covered in blood after having kicked to death the “dickhead condom guy” (the *only* man with whom they had a sexual encounter who they kill, contrary to many reviews) draws attention to this inevitable association. Nadine and Manu – as violent women forcefully creating their own path in public – are dangerous to traditional expectations about natural, docile, feminine sexuality. Nadia Louar, Literature and Francophone studies Lecturer, argues that it is the sexuality inherent in their violence which reveals the women’s attempts to reposition themselves as subjects and not objects: “By sexualising the violence which is inflicted upon them, the women make themselves the wretched subjects of their objectification” (9). Likewise, Breillat, in an interview, insists that “[t]he two heroines in *Baise-moi* reclaim their sex through violence. Nadine and Manu actually go through with it” (Grassin 2). With the incorporation of this sexualised violent behaviour in the narrative, the film subversively



denounces an important oppressive element of our society: the sexist expectations of gender roles and “appropriate” behaviour. This may have contributed to the negative critical reception as the film disturbs conservative viewpoints.

17 The overall negative critical reception of sex and sexuality in the film reveals unfulfilled expectations on many levels, namely: that the film comply with either cinema’s need for aesthetic distance or pornography’s purpose as a masturbatory aid; that the women engage in homosexual activity; and that the women conform to conventional, heterosexual, submissive, “natural” and non-violent femininity. Clearly, the issue of violence in association with women is central to socio-cultural reasons for the film’s negative critical reception and the following section considers this.

### **Extreme Narrative Violence and the Taboo of the Violent Woman**

18 To be aggressive: virile. To want to fuck loads of people: virile. To respond with brutality to something which threatens you: virile.” (Despentes 128)

19 While the non-simulated sex and the disruptive manner in which female sexuality is portrayed are both essential factors in the often negative critical reception of the film, another element of the narrative is brought out in reviews: the violence. The first half of this section consequently concentrates on: gratuitous, glamorised violence; arbitrary violence as nihilism or contestation of social injustice; and the revision of certain violent acts in filmic adaptations.

20 *Baise-moi* has come under particularly harsh scrutiny for its depiction of violence, most of which film reviewers and the censors deem “gratuitous” or “eroticised.” This is especially evident in the cuts made to the initial rape scene, which, in the filmic release for British audiences in February 2001 and in the first British video release in May 2002, underwent a vital cut at the moment of penetration. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) gives the following explanation:

Cut required to an explicit close-up shot of a penis penetrating a vagina during a violent rape sequence, in accordance with BBFC guidelines on sexual violence which [sic] state that portrayals which eroticise sexual assault [sic] may be cut at any classification level. (BBFC, “Baise-Moi Film Release 26/02/2001”)

However, the use of this penetration shot within the overall context of the film is a way to reappropriate a stereotypical pornographic trope, therefore undermining the idea that the visual moment of insertion is automatically erotic. Furthermore, this initial reading is

supported by the reasons given for *waiving* the cuts in the latest February 2013 British release of the video (BBFC, “Baise-Moi Video Release 07/02/2013”):

neither the nudity nor the real penetration are portrayed as sexual or titillating. On the contrary, the rape is presented as violent and horrific, and, in this context, the shot of penetration reinforces the violation and brutality. [... The] sequence [does not] make[] sexual or sadistic violence appear normal, appealing or arousing. There is never any suggestion that the victims enjoy the experience, and the audience is led to identify and empathise with the victims, not the perpetrators. (BBFC, “Baise-Moi” 2)

One could easily construe cuts to the initial rape scene as an effort to gloss over the horrific experience of sexual assault. The co-directors, by including the penetration, are explicitly *de-eroticising* shots of penetration; indeed, overt depiction does not automatically render the image erotic – context is vastly important.

21 In the British reviews preceding the latest 2013 uncut release, there is an expectation that the sexually violent sex scenes should not be portrayed as explicitly as they are in the film’s other scenes of consensual sex, lest the violence be rendered erotic. Joshua Dysart, who reviewed as recently as August 2011 on *MUBI*, proposes that the film “gleefully fetishizes violence [and] rape” (2). While J. R. Gregory, writing for *Digital Retribution*, refutes this reading and instead argues that “the use of actual penetration during the rape makes for an uncomfortable viewing experience [and the film] depicts rape as unglamorous[,] ...] completely unsanitised and confronts the audience with what is the reality for many women” (7). Noticeably, there are inconsistent interpretations of the same scene, but it is important to be aware of the reasons for this. Gary Morris, writing for *Bright Lights Film Journal*, suggests that it is the voyeurism felt by the spectator that makes for uncomfortable viewing (8). This feeling of complicity and voyeurism invites provocation, even if inadvertently, which could explain some less than favourable reviews.

22 The presence of gratuitous violence remains problematic for some reviewers who deem that certain “superfluous” acts of violence weaken any “serious” meanings conveyed by the narrative. Morris argues that the two most gratuitous scenes – that of the cash machine murder and the sex club massacre – “undermine the film’s feminist/liberationist stance” (6). Anthony Julius, writing for the *Guardian*, agrees with this, suggesting that the “makers of *Baise-moi* [are] both feminist and misogynist” (12), which, however, signals an unsubstantiated contradiction within his review. He proposes that this polarity is due to the film’s “fascination with what women are capable of when freed from constraint” (Julius 12), thus implying that the nihilistic side of the murders and violence is inherently unfeminine. This simplistic reading fails to take into account the institutionalised physical, emotional, and

psychological violence the women have had to face on a daily basis (particularly demonstrative of this point is the scene with Nadine in the bar at the beginning of the film, involving, separately, the misogynist boyfriend, and the man who objectifies a nearby woman). The sex club massacre may at first appear to be gratuitous, glamorised, and as detracting from any “serious,” “feminist” meanings. Yet it can also be read as a violent denunciation of the middle classes - a reading that is even more supported by the juxtaposition of the wealthy businessman's murder in the preceding scene. The massacre reveals the contempt that the women have for a regulated and falsely constructed world in which the middle classes need to designate a place to free their inhibitions. Ultimately, as some of the violence in *Baise-moi* is not explicitly or sufficiently endorsed by particular narrative events, several film reviewers automatically think it is gratuitous without considering any deeper motivations for its inclusion.

23 As well as often being considered “gratuitous,” the violence contained in the film is frequently deemed “nihilistic” due to Nadine and Manu’s violent – but ultimately self-defeating – rejection of society’s laws, norms, and conventions. Julius rightly notes that Manu and Nadine are not revolutionaries; however, he does not associate their “arbitrary violence” with its socio-cultural context (5), and nor does Paul Clarke for *Kamera*: “any intended message or intellectual vigour is lost amid an unrelenting, nihilistic atmosphere” (7). Many film reviewers saw only unjustified, socially unacceptable violence, and deemed the film “nihilistic” without searching deeper for the reasons for such a representation of violence and extreme outlook. This is arguably because of one (or both) of two reasons: the film was not explicit enough in its intended meanings and therefore does not stand alone as a cultural piece; and/or the public is not familiar with contemporary anarchist theories about the use of violence to contest social injustice (Gelderloos, for example, makes a case for violence). Focus by critics on the nihilism obscures the more political reading that their violence could also be an extreme contestation of social injustice. Howard J. Ehrlich, a sociologist and social psychologist, notes:

Politics [...] encompasses everything we do in our daily lives, everything that happens to us, and every interpretation we make of these things. All of them have political meanings, because they are integral parts of the culture in which we live. (233)

Arguably, the film illustrates the radical feminist principle, “the personal is political:” Nadine and Manu’s actions are a violent and personal protest against society’s inability to protect them. Nevertheless, Downing warns us that “the deliberate postmodern play, signalled by the nod to Tarantino [in the sex club massacre scene], urges us not to take seriously the promise

of the possibility of freedom and transcendence through lawlessness and violence” (“Baise-Moi’ or the Ethics of the Desiring Gaze” 54). Their violence has roots, therefore, but the film does not portray this violence as a path to liberation. Although they do resort to a form of nihilism, their violence is not meaningless, but is instead a message about the social and cultural context for their behaviour. The film situates the characters in an unquestionably oppressive kyriarchal<sup>4</sup> society so that we may draw conclusions about the intertwined processes, oppressive structures, and ideologies involved in reducing an individual to view the world and human life as pointless. Those film reviewers who consider that the film’s nihilism renders it less articulate about the effect of oppressive structures in society on the individual are simplifying and unreasonably dismissing the revolutionary and political potential of the film’s narrative.

24 Even less acceptable for some film reviewers is the radical revision of a particularly violent scene from the source novel: the sex club massacre in the film replaces child murder in the novel. Reynaud identifies a truism in commercial film production that the murder of a child is the only thing for which most film patrons will not forgive you. Thus, replacing this scene from the novel with mass murder in a swingers’ club in the film is, she asserts, a “cowardly compromise for simple reasons of mass marketing” (Reynaud 7). On a cultural level, *Baise-moi*, as a filmic adaptation of a novel, is therefore criticised in comparison with the literary source. Ginette Vincendeau, Professor of Film Studies, notes that “fidelity stubbornly remains the critical criterion” (xiii) by which a film based on a novel is most judged. In the documentary, Despentès and Trinh Thi explain that their motivations for cutting the scene of the murder of a child were both practical and ethical: “We’d have had to find a three-year-old kid to do it, but he can’t decide this kind of thing” (Santarelli). It would be conceivable that it is precisely *because* of this particular truism that Reynaud mentions, that the film does not portray infantile murder. In his study on the different codes of literature and film, Brian McFarlane compares the “conceptual” nature of literature and the “perceptual” nature of film (26–27). In the novel one could *conceive* of such an event, whereas in the film the visual shock and *perception* of the act could eclipse the co-directors’ underlying intended meaning that no-one deserves to die (Santarelli). Instead of inciting a debate about women perpetrators of violence, this scene could have arguably reduced the

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<sup>4</sup> Kyriarchy is a feminist analytical category coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992. It is a neologism “derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (kyrios) and ‘to rule or dominate’ (archein) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is a socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression” (Schüssler Fiorenza 211).

focus down to the shock of a child's murder on-screen. It may well be for mass marketing, as Reynaud disparagingly declares, but replacing this incident with another of high shock value allows one to depict, as closely as possible, the complete lack of limits on the part of the heroines, without transgressing the aforementioned truism of cinema.

25 However, it is not solely the extreme violence that is addressed by critics but also, most importantly, the women perpetrators. Anne Gillain, Professor of French *emerita*, notes that “the film's directors gave voice to something as new as it was revolting to the established order. [...] *Baise-moi* violates a taboo in the perception of the feminine” (203). For this reason, the second part of this section contemplates: society's notion of femininity in relation to the taboo of the violent woman; and the link between power, violence, and reviewers' focus on gender.

26 While many critics focus on non-simulated sex and graphic violence in *Baise-moi*, there is another central, but less often consciously identified, taboo: the violent woman. Cranny-Francis et al. note that the gendering practises of certain genres – in this case, the New French Extremity – are often “embedded in readers' expectations” (108). The disgust and the negative criticism shown by many film reviewers illustrate the extent to which this is the case. That is to say, it is not the violence itself which is disliked, but the violent *women*. In an interview with Despentès for the *Guardian*, Elizabeth Day notes that Manu's violent (albeit delayed) reaction to being raped is the “traditionally male response of undiluted aggression” (12). Men are socially conditioned to behave in a certain way and to accept these particular behavioural patterns as “normal,” with aggression and violence being perceived as “an important means of achievement among men” (Baker 127). Moreover, *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence* deals with real examples of women perpetrators of violence and can be rethought to apply to the medium of film. Sean French, in the same work, points out: “the horror of crimes, especially murders, committed by women is [...] understandable, if not rational. We react more strongly to rare events” (40), and J.M. Anderson also states that violence only becomes an “outrage” when committed by women (7), even as a last-resort reaction to continual oppression.

27 In the film, Manu fires a gun at her brother after his repeated taunts of “whore, whore” and the accusation that she enjoyed being raped. She clearly did not intend to kill him but had quickly fired in order to silence his verbal abuse. Violent women are inextricably linked with society's notion of femininity as they are commonly accused of either suffering from an excess of femininity: hysteric; or a lack of it: unnatural (Myers and Wight xiii). In some reviews, Manu and Nadine are perceived as unemotional, that is to say, as lacking in

“natural” feminine behaviour: “all they can really be, are written to be, are monsters. Manu and Nadine never connect with anyone outside of each other” (“Grim Ringler” 4). In *No Angels*, Elizabeth Stanko and Anne Scully note: “when women offend, their actions are assessed within traditional notions of appropriate femininity. [...] Self-control and non-violence are assured via suitable femininity” (61). Violent women disrupt these established assumptions about women that anchor the gender divide (Myers and Wight 22). Their violence is portrayed as a taboo to enable the mainstream definition of femininity to dominate, thus limiting their acceptable forms of “feminine” behaviour. It is probable that this taboo of the violent woman has had an effect on the reading of the film in some of the negative critical reviews.

28 Another way in which the gender of perpetrators of violence features in film reviews is concerning the link between power and violence. In her feminist manifesto, *King Kong théorie*, Despentès relates rape to the capitalist system by arguing that “[rape is] a precise political programme: the skeleton of capitalism, it is the raw and direct representation of the exercise of power” (50). The film also explores this intrinsic link between power and sexual violence committed by men, notably in the initial rape scene. Yet film reviewers dispute the extent to which this is successful in terms of clarity, with some, such as Raphael Pour-Hashemi, posting for *The Digital Fix*, evoking the inadequate treatment of this connection in the narrative:

when the rapist relinquishes his forceful intercourse after noticing Manu will not put up a fight, he loses interest. This strong notion however, of rape being fuelled by ownership of power, fizzles in the air like most intelligent claims *Baise-Moi* suggests. [...] Rather than being a debate, *Baise-moi* should have rammed its ideology down its viewers [sic] throat. (3–5)

Yet other film reviewers either did not mention or did not recognise the aforementioned relationship in *Baise-moi*, which also includes a focus on pervasive “structural” and “cultural” violence against women (Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”; and “Cultural Violence”). It is clear *either* that the film does not adequately portray the violence inherent in sexism, classism, *or* that many film reviewers are not sufficiently perceptive or educated in the matter. We can further contemplate this latter possibility.

29 To reappropriate the words of Cranny-Francis et al., the narrative addresses sexism “by the taboo act of speaking what sexist discourse attempts to silence” (93), especially through the use of resistant subjects (Nadine and Manu) who are aware, however inadvertently, of the oppressive nature of their kyriarchal society. The film does, in fact, consistently deal with the issue of power and violence – two such examples: the opening

scene where Nadine witnesses common misogyny as she sits at the bar; and the crude sexual harassment from the man in the street who asks Nadine: “Wanna feel my balls slapping your arse?”. The initial rape scene, above all, treats the relationship between power and violence by subverting conventional pornographic expectations. Wencke Mühleisen, a Norwegian writer, gender and media researcher, recognises “the ‘neutral’ registration made by the camera, which systematically avoids the point of view of the assailant and the eroticization of the assault, as well as [Manu’s] unexpected reaction” (119). This gang-rape scene is a remarkable portrayal of the horrors of sexual assault. The polar-opposite reactions from Manu and her friend suggest a variety of responses to rape, and the focus on Manu’s impassive face de-eroticises the forced intercourse (in comparison to common hardcore heterosexual pornography in which the women visually express and verbalise their supposed pleasure, if not merely their presence (Johnson)).

30 Sexism, classism, racism, heteronormativity, and misogyny are arguably present in contemporary occidental society. It is because of the normalisation of these attitudes, and precisely *because* the co-directors’ discourse is feminist and non-mainstream, that film reviewers may find it difficult to recognise them: their socio-cultural education may have taught them otherwise. What is more, film reviewers do not question the legitimacy of such normalised psychological, emotional, and physical violence against women, which the film exposes (especially through the aforementioned examples). Instead, it appears more shocking to some critics that these women are demonstrating their rage *physically and overtly* (instead of staying within their designated gender role, and internalising the anger or suppressing it). For example, Roger Ebert, an influential American journalist, film critic, and screenwriter, argues:

A case can be made that *Baise-Moi* wants to attack sexism in the movies [... but] Manu and Nadine are man haters and clinically insane, and not every man is to blame for their unhappiness – no, not even if he sleeps with them. (4)

Ebert problematically formulates this form of defensive assertion as a “truth” rather an opinion (as countless critics are wont to do). Overall, it is the women’s acts of murder, rather than the acts of everyday violence *against* women as an assertion of power, which reviewers primarily address and denounce.

31 The critical reception of the narrative violence reveals a focus on – and sometimes a condemnation of – its gratuity and the overall nihilistic tone of the film. Either the film lacks clarity or film reviewers are not attempting to consider the contextual reasoning behind this nihilism. With aggression considered a naturally “masculine” behaviour in contemporary

society, film reviewers respond more strongly to instances of female violence as it is a rejection of societal norms. They also choose to focus on the gender of the perpetrators more than the film's denunciation of an inherently violent kyriarchal system. Having explored the issue of *narrative* violence, the next section will concentrate on violence outside the diegesis of the film, namely, in relation to the filmmaking and the treatment of the co-directors.

### **A Rejection of the Dominant Textual Genres of Cinema and the Critique of the Co-Directors**

32 “Stepping out of the cage has always been accompanied by brutal sanctions.” (Despentes 22)

33 Following on from the issue of violence portrayed *within* the film's narrative, Archer maintains that the violence “perpetrated on the spectator's vision, the film's deliberate resistance to easily readable (and therefore redemptive) aesthetics, forms part of a strategy aiming to complicate one's relationship as reader to the film's textual subject(s)” (69). The beginning of this section therefore focuses on: aesthetic relativism; and counter cinema as the visual rejection of the dominant textual genres of society.

34 Although reviewers often cite the cinematic aesthetics of *Baise-moi* as “proof” of inferior quality, this merely indicates an elitist, “absolute” view of filmmaking. Aesthetic relativism – the “doctrine that [...] truth [of beauty] itself is relative to the standpoint of the judging subject” (Blackburn 314) – is instead at play here. The gritty *mise-en-scène*, fairly simple script, natural lighting, low budget, use of a hand-held camera, low quality digital video, and punk-inspired soundtrack incite film reviewers to come to the conclusion that the film's grainy “look” either reveals the unprofessionalism of the crew or successfully mirrors the film's graphic themes. Edward Guthmann, from *San Francisco Gate*, argues: “[w]hatever message it wants to impart is overwhelmed by shoddy technique” (6); and Julius claims that “the film's visual language is lurid and tawdry, the acting is perfunctory, the script is uninventive and the soundtrack music dire” (9). Yet other reviewers propose that it is precisely *due* to the grainy filmmaking techniques that the narrative is intensified. For example Alix Sharkey, a British free-lance journalist, notes that “[t]he film's grainy, pseudo-documentary texture makes it even more provocative and disquieting” (7). Gregory also proposes that “[t]he use of digital camera giv[es] everything a grainy, washed out look, adding to the realism and downbeat tone that permeates everything” (11). Furthermore, within the film, the co-directors covertly acknowledge their focus on content rather than form – after having killed the gun shop owner, Manu laments, “Fuck, we've no feeling for



language at all, we're not coming up with good retorts at the right moment", to which Nadine replies, "We've got the actions right though, that's already something." Scott MacKenzie, in *Screen*, notes that this self-consciousness "signals an awareness about the ways in which critics and the public interpret and react to violent images" (318). It is clear that there exists a polemic surrounding the use of "real-life" aesthetics in the film, yet some film reviewers do not take into account the absolutist nature of their judgements of *Baise-moi*, and in doing so betray their dogged adherence to the dominant textual codes and conventions of contemporary mainstream cinema.

35 Following on from the vital consideration of aesthetic relativism, it is not only through a graphic, unsentimental narrative, but also through DIY punk aesthetics and *counter cinema* that Despentès's work challenges "the unquestioned supremacy of the male viewpoint in both film and literature" (Day 18). Despentès's and Trinh Thi's use of unknown actors, sometimes shaky camerawork, natural lighting, and digital video instead of film is a strong visual rejection of the dominant textual genres of cinema. Despentès notes that they encountered much opposition, even before the film was made, based on their aesthetic and cast choices (Santarelli). Despite many professionals trying to persuade them to use particular lighting, they resisted, in some part thanks to the support of the director Gaspar Noé. *Baise-moi* is essentially an example of punk aesthetics and ideology centred on anti-establishment values, individual freedom, and, most importantly, a "do-it-yourself" attitude to the creative process, which is intended to encourage self-sufficiency and self-empowerment. J. Hoberman, from *Village Voice*, recognises this when they associate the filmmaking techniques and this DIY, sometimes nihilist, counter-culture: "this journey to the end of the night derives a certain amount of punkish energy from its crude editing, cruddy-looking close-ups, strident soundtrack, and overall volatility" (6). This rebuff to the dominant cultural group and rejection of the cultural canon is also a radical rejection of the universalisation of masculine experience. Indeed, in *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*, Claire Johnston, a feminist film theoretician, explores how some women's cinema can be considered "counter cinema" (133–143). Using what can be considered as a subversive choice of style, Despentès and Trinh Thi challenge a sexist discourse that defines what is possible to do or not do in film, and by extension, what is possible to say or not say as marginalised women in society. It is by drawing attention to the production methods used in their film and by opposing sexist ideologies – among other dominant and oppressive ideologies – that Despentès and Trinh Thi have rejected the notion that there is one "correct" method of filmmaking. Taken as a whole, film reviewers' dislike or public condemnation of these

unconventional and rebellious methods reveals their tenacious belief in the cultural supremacy of the dominant masculine textual genres of society.

36 While the violent rejection of dominant aesthetics evokes negative reviews, one must also address complex socio-cultural factors pertaining to the implicit critique of the co-directors themselves. Thus, this second part looks at: the transgression of the co-directors' social positions; and the intense media coverage as a form of male "privileged hysteria."

37 Although *Baise-moi* has an undeniable "trash" aesthetic, the negative criticism of the filmmaking appears to be linked more to the co-directors' and the actors' transgression of their social positions – marked through the depiction of aggressive female sexuality and violent women perpetrators – than the actual cinematic aesthetics of the film. Despentès, as a former prostitute, peepshow hostess, and outspoken punk, and Trinh Thi, as a former hardcore porn star, do not have any traditional training in cinema and come from marginalised backgrounds. This exposes them to harsher critique than they might otherwise receive, as "Stéphanie," in *Les Fées du Logis*, argues:

This pornographic auteur film reveals the quandary raised when one shows, displays, and films sex – but not only that. The film shocks because two women made it. [...] From the reactions it aroused, one can deduce that a desiring woman, a violent woman (and a desiring woman inevitably does violence) must stay in front of the camera, must be kept at a respectable distance, or must be watched by the careful eye of the filmmaker. Once the object of desire - this woman - becomes the subject of desire, and when this desire doesn't correspond to the idea that society has, everything is seen as going wrong. (1)

The real problem is that the film is about violent, non-white, working-class women (Karen Bach is half-Moroccan and Raffaëla Anderson is half-Berber), and is made by marginalised women, all of which is disturbing to the cinematic and media mainstream. This point is also made by Despentès: "we were simply too raw, too real for them" (Sharkey 31).

38 On a visual level, the co-directors' use of DIY punk aesthetics disturbs and undermines established gendered and hierarchical conventions in both society and the film industry. While on a narrative level, reviewers consider violence and hardcore sex, especially, as inappropriate subjects for women directors, which Despentès identifies:

It's not that the book [*Baise-moi*] isn't good, according to [the] criteria [of the first critic in *Polar*], that disturbs the man. He doesn't even speak about the book. The problem is that I'm a girl who is directing a film with those kind of girls. [...] It's only my sex that counts. (117)

Hark recognises this taboo: "the establishment, I suspect, is outraged at women not only directing but acting in the genre traditionally reserved for its gender, that of violent, wanton

slaughter” (4). Essentially, the co-directors have transgressed the imposed socio-cultural limitations of their gender and class and have denounced these very same limitations in public. Desportes notes in her feminist manifesto that Trinh Thi received much condemnation because she defied her social positioning. Her transition from in front of the camera to behind it disturbed the sexist heterosexual male populace as she was no longer their sexual object: “She had to disappear from the public sphere. This, to protect men’s libidos, who prefer that the object of their desires remains in her place, which is to say disembodied and, especially, silent” (Desportes 97). Equally, Desportes argues that the female porn performers’ appearance in a non-pornographic film destroys the illusion that they are sexual toys (Sharkey 33). They take on a fuller and more realistic character. A woman can therefore face disapproval because she dares to refuse the gendered boundaries consigned to her by society. It also explains the overall negative critical reception of the film as the transgression of one’s position in society disturbs established hierarchies.

39 Indeed, one must further explore this social reaction from film reviewers. In *No Angels* Laura Grindstaff and Martha McCaughey propose that the intense media coverage can be explained as a form of male hysteria. Using a psychoanalytical framework, they suggest that due to a cultural inequality between men and women, their psychosexual neuroses are displayed differently. This reaction to violent women is termed “privileged hysteria,” which, “because of straight men’s greater cultural authority, [i]s primarily discursive and textual rather than bodily or somatic, and therefore never seen as neurotic or a form of ‘acting out’” (Grindstaff and McCaughey 144–145). Not only can this theory apply to the – mostly male – critical reaction to the sexuality and violence of the characters and the narrative, but also it is relevant to the underlying critique of the filmmakers themselves. As we have seen, many male film reviewers have responded negatively to the film, citing narrative flaws and poor quality aesthetics as the fundamental reasons for this. Yet it is possible that they are demonstrating a form of male “privileged hysteria,” which, as it is supported institutionally, socially, and culturally, is not as easily acknowledged as such. Therefore, in the face of film reviewers’ and the general public’s oppressive ignorance, the filmmakers and their film are censured and accused of poor quality work.

40 Film reviewers either dismiss the film’s aesthetics as poor quality or believe that they augment the coarse realism of the narrative. A negligible number of critics also recognise the film’s visual origins in various counter-cultures, including punk and women’s cinema. Overall, the negative criticism levelled at the film’s aesthetics emanates from a persistent belief in the superiority of the dominant textual genres of society. However, there is also an

implicit critique of the co-directors themselves, which is linked to their transgression of their gendered social positions through their insistence on treating “unfeminine” subjects in film. The intense critical reception of the film can be explained as a form of male “privileged hysteria,” both in response to the film and the women filmmakers.

41 The critical reception of the film’s three key areas that incite polemic reactions (sex, violence, and cinematic aesthetics) is further understood with a consideration of gender in each case. Having explored the non-traditional manner in which the film depicts female sexuality and women perpetrators of violence, the negative critical reception of the sex and violence of the film is more comprehensively understood. It is possible that without the overwhelming controversy caused by the brief ban and the label *pornography*, the unconventional and grainy cinematic aesthetics would have invited less disparaging readings of the film. Also conceivable is that without such a dissident and condemnatory feminist discourse, film reviewers would not critique the co-directors as aggressively.

42 Ultimately, the media plays an intercessor role in maintaining the dominant cultural and social consensus by speaking superficially about *Baise-moi*. The narrative can potentially open up sites of negotiation for a critique of society and its inherent sexism and violence. Unfortunately, due to a number of socio-cultural reasons rooted in the inequalities and power struggles of a kyriarchal system, this debate has been largely one-sided. The critiques of the film constitute a nexus of polyvalent texts that, for the most part, support each others’ largely negative reviews by making reference to, and focusing on, only a handful of unusual, subversive, or radical narrative and formal elements. What is more, many film reviewers have judged the film using the conventional and dominant textual codes and conventions of cinema, which are overwhelmingly influenced by the universalisation of masculine experience. It is therefore no surprise that (mostly male) film reviewers’ reactions to the film often involve immediate defensive retorts and brief cutting comments expressed as evident truths, rather than considered explorations of the issues the film raises. Fortunately, a form of criticism that is decidedly more considered substantiated certain reactions, although usually these commentators were film theorists and academics rather than journalists or general members of the public. Nevertheless, film reviews often made numerous errors on the level of the narrative and credentials of *Baise-moi*, which not only clearly perverts the reading of the film on several occasions, but also reveals a distinct lack of professionalism and accuracy on the behalf of the film reviewers and journalists.

43 Once one explores a more extensive context – especially concerning the lived experiences of the filmmakers themselves – the scope for greater comprehension is widened.

Indeed, one must strive to understand its importance for a profound reading of the film. More research needs to be conducted on the ideal viewing conditions for particular films, whether this exposes their inability to stand alone as cultural pieces or merely acknowledges the possibility that more accurate outside influences on the reading of a film should be taken into account. A study of the influence that film reviews and critics have on others' readings of a film is imperative. This would allow one to specify further the impact of outside influences on a film's reputation. What is more, although heterosexuality and monogamy (versus promiscuity) in relation to the film were touched upon in the first section, this paper did not consider other privileges more substantially (for example, middle-class, white, cis<sup>5</sup>, able-bodied, size). Further research in these areas would be welcome, especially including a more detailed consideration of intersectionality<sup>6</sup> and the kyriarchal system in which the ignorance and abuse of such privileges are intrinsic.

44 The reviews of Anglophone film critics reveal the dominant conservative tendencies pervading contemporary, occidental attitudes to films made by marginalised women. Consequently, radical feminist and anarcha-feminist ideologies are still considered deviant. In order to further feminist discourses on the subject, instead of limiting ourselves to the “mad” or “bad” dichotomy when exploring violent women in culture and society, one must instead focus on those who judge and label them. Overall, it is due to this subversive feminist discourse on a socio-cultural level (concerning non-simulated sex, female sexuality, extreme violence, women perpetrators, DIY punk cinematic aesthetics, and the marginalised socio-cultural status of the directors themselves) that the film receives such a negative critical reception. Through their critiques, film reviewers are attempting to discipline the deviant women of *Baise-moi*. Despentes puts this most pertinently, in her distinctly *trash* literary style:

The real censor, evidently, doesn't pass through legislation. It's more a piece of advice that they give you. [...] Of course it must be forbidden for three hard-core porn stars and a former prostitute to make a film about rape. [...] Can't be having a film about a gang rape in which the victims don't whine about it as their noses run down the shoulders of the men who will avenge them. (120)

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<sup>5</sup> *Cis* (which encompasses both *cisgender* and *cissexual*) is the term used to describe “individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt and Westbrook 461). This is opposed to the umbrella term *trans\**, whose asterisk is intended to make it an inclusive term for “all non-cisgender gender identities, including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderfuck, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third gender, two-spirit, bigender, and trans man and trans woman” (Killermann 2).

<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality is “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash 1)

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# *The Sapphires* (2012) and *One Night the Moon* (2001): Song, History and Australian Aboriginality

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## **Abstract:**

The two Australian Indigenous film musicals, *The Sapphires* (Wayne Blair, 2012) and *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001) concern themselves with the representation of Aboriginality and by using song, dance and music, address the painful aftermath of the Stolen Generations, colonial displacement and racism. Showing the genre's typical testing of bonds of friendship and making use of the romantic subplot, *The Sapphires* brings the audience back to the utopian core at the heart of the genre. The historical lost child drama *One Night the Moon*, on the other hand, conceals the reconciling harmonies in the disharmonies of the music, the sadness in the lyrics and the polyphonous form and thus creates an awareness of the 'unfinished business' between Indigenous and white Australia. It is the female presence in both films that conveys the reconciling power; the women's struggle towards cross-cultural understanding has introduced optimistic tones in the self-confidence of Australian Indigenous filmmaking.

1 The film musical is predominantly perceived as an art form of pure entertainment, where everyone "may burst into magnificent, breathtaking song and dance in order to give unhindered expression to their emotions" (Grant 2). Musical entertainment hence seems to "effectively den[y] the legitimacy of other needs and inadequacies, and especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles" (Dyer 184). However, two Australian musical productions by Indigenous filmmakers have successfully shown that the genre can productively discuss urgent social issues of racial and gender politics and the question of reconciliation. Through the use of song, dance and music these productions address the painful aftermath of the Stolen Generations, colonial displacement and racism.<sup>1</sup> Both films advertise with the truthfulness of their stories and refer to real people and events (*One Night the Moon* set in the 1930s, *The Sapphires* in the 1960s). The films, despite their distinctive historical narratives, heighten the addressed problems by appealing to the universality of emotions and histories of oppression for instance through references to race issues in the USA. The commercially successful musical comedy *The Sapphires* (Wayne Blair, 2012) more closely follows the genre's conventions than the musical drama *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001). However, both films follow a heroine's musical journey towards reconciliation, in *The*

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<sup>1</sup> The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was official government policy from 1909 to 1969. It is estimated that 100,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families and raised in homes or adopted by white families, up until the 1960s. The policy was designed to 'assimilate' or 'breed out' Indigenous people. These children became known as the 'Stolen Generations' (cf. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission fifth report 1997).

*Sapphires* through the search for her Indigenous roots and identity and the struggle for (sexual) liberation, in *One Night the Moon* through her role as non-Indigenous cultural mediator.

2 In the essay “Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation,” Marcia Langton credited the legacy of Australian film with a “dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people” (Langton 2005). In an assessment of estimated 6000 fiction and non-fiction films in the history of Australian cinema that have in some way addressed Aboriginality, Langton sees neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous filmmakers challenging colonialist representation because they are trapped in “the power of the visual realm to conceal social and political conditions” (ibid.). In the growing ambition to appeal to mainstream movie-going Australia and to provide narratives about Aboriginal people which are popular and commercially successful, many film-makers favour narrative themes which have proved popular in the past, but also popular genres such as melodrama, comedy and musical. If producers stick to the conventional styles and constructions of melodrama, documentary and popular genre, they are, according to Langton, bound to reproduce conventional racism and sexism. By contrast, Rose Capp argues that in the recent decade, a number of fiction films by Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers have “redressed that representational imbalance in some small measure and in the process, produced some of the most commercially and critically successful Australian films in recent decades” (“Seriously Funny: History and Humour in *The Sapphires* and Other Indigenous Comedies”).

3 In 2001, *One Night the Moon* reached a mainstream Australian and international audience, winning several local and international awards (including two Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards). The musical comedy *The Sapphires* has achieved a great box office success after its premiering in an out-of-competition screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012. It was picked up for American release and subsequently acquired for release all over the world. In its first two weeks it grossed around six million dollars (cf. Karena 84). Both films are written and directed by Indigenous filmmakers, dealing with Indigenous life under the impact of white settlement and racism.

4 Indigenous filmmakers have demonstrated that the issues debated in representations of Indigenous life can especially be deployed to express a range of universal modern human experiences, from psychological trauma (e.g. *Night Cries*, 1990) to the specific realities of social deprivation (e.g. *Samson and Delilah*, 2009). *The Sapphires* and *One Night the Moon* focus on the extraordinary achievements of Indigenous girls in the 1960s and the sufferings

of a white mother in the 1930s. Through humour, emotional appeal, and especially music, it is precisely the musical genre that has led to the universal success of these exceptional Indigenous films, and at the same time, enabled a different approach towards Australian particularities and reconciliation.

5 The adaptation of Tony Brigg's 2004 stage musical *The Sapphires* was inspired by the experiences of Brigg's mother as a member of the Aboriginal girl band that performed for US troops in Vietnam during the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> In Blair's film adaptation, the three young Aboriginal sisters Gail, Cynthia and Julie, plus their cousin Kay, are spotted in a rural talent show by the scruffy Irish wannabe manager Dave Lovelace. He persuades the girls to switch from their preferred country-and-western repertoire to soul, as he believes it is the more appropriate music genre for black singers ("Can you make it sound blacker?" 28:57) With their new look, dance moves and sound, and renamed from the Cummeraganja Songbirds to *The Sapphires*, the girls go on to win a competition to entertain American forces fighting in Vietnam. The trip to the battlefield in Saigon proves to be a formative experience as the film's taglines indicate: 'It's what's in the groove that counts.' 'Follow your heart. Discover your soul' (imdb). Through the use of flashbacks we find out more about the girls' past and the daily racism they are confronted with. Yet, despite the historically relevant themes addressed – Stolen Generations and disrupted families; racism, prejudice and hostility; the Vietnam War – the film's mood is celebratory and cheerful as its protagonists "approach obstacles with good-humoured determination (Yatman 9)." *The Sapphires* is a "feel-good movie about bad things" (ibid.).

6 The film musical as a distinct genre refers to films that involve the performance of song and/or dance as an important narrative element (Grant 1). In the combination of popular music and cinema, both providing familiar stories about the relationship between our social and private life, the musical genre serves the ideological function to cast social debates into narratives making sense of the "large, abstract social forces that effect our lives" (4). Grant argues that most of the genre movies address the wider social context through the theme of community. Lead performers singing in the company of others; supporting players or a larger chorus joining as a diegetic audience in the dance and musical numbers, express a sense of communal solidarity, which then represents an "idealized folk culture" or tends towards "a vision of social integration" (44). Thus, a sense of social utopia is fulfilled: "[C]haracters are able to satisfy their desire or at least to feel better by dancing and singing. [...] And when

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<sup>2</sup> The story is set in 1968, a year after the 1967 Federal referendum that belatedly delivered Australia's Indigenous population the right to vote.

others join in, it is as if the entire world has become attuned to their *feeling*” (46, emphasis added). The performance embodies the *emotion* that a utopian depiction of community would create. Musicals, therefore, do not, present concrete models of unknown utopian worlds, but rather contain the utopian dreams in the feeling they embody, in an everyday, well-known setting (Dyer 177). The reconciling individual and group values thereby appeal to us “as cultural ritual, replaying the same narratives with slight variations time and again, and offering us comfortable narrative resolutions for irresolvable questions” (41).<sup>3</sup> In restoring this harmonious vision of society, the role of gender construction is essential to the ideological work of musicals, reinforcing heterosexual, monogamous couples and marriage as the status quo (43).

7 The categorisation of a film as ‘Australian’ raises issues of images and sounds that, according to cultural perception stand *for* Australia. Rebecca Coyle, in her anthology of Australian Feature Film Music, studies the relationship between music and Australian film and argues for the significant relationship of film to national identities, and therefore of film music to national identities (2). If one assumes that particular locations are charged with particular stories and hence certain musical acts and narrative rhythms only make sense in these locations, then Coyle clearly marks the absence of a special Australian ‘flavour’ in Australian music and film music. “Outside of Australia’s indigenous artists there really has never been a homegrown sound, a musical groundswell that is distinctively Australian, easily recognised the world over. [...] our popular music has been massively derived from the American and British artists we have been listening to and looking at” (Gudinski cited in Coyle 12). The musical numbers in *The Sapphires* are, indeed, relying on established soul classics rather than original (Australian) compositions. The group performs upbeat jukebox renditions like ‘I’ll Take You There’, ‘Land of One Thousand Dances’, ‘I Heard it Through the Grapevine’, ‘People Make the World a Better Place’ and ‘I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch)’, a Motown mix of “good-natured, life-affirming songs about love and independence” (Yatman 13). Coyle, however, also argues that certain connotations within the lyrics of film music will be particularly accessible to Australia-raised viewers, even though the musical texts do not originate in Australia (12). So despite the US-origin of those ‘black’

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, examples of Hollywood musicals that do not end happily and do not resolve in a harmonious solution of all imposed problems, examples including *Les Miserables*, *West Side Story* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Grant and Dyer, however, clearly argue that the majority of film musicals embody the optimistic spirit

soul pieces, it is their message of loss, relentless struggle for justice and independence that these girls appropriate for their own background as the Stolen Generations.<sup>4</sup>

8 Tony Brigg's approach to issues such as racism, oppression, voting rights and the Stolen Generations is deliberately light in tone: "I always wanted politics in there, but never on a soapbox about our plight. Ultimately this is about enjoying your life, especially your youth. But you can't tell a story about blackfellas in that time and ignore politics. [...] I don't want to belittle our past and our people" (Briggs cited in Karena 86).

9 Briggs and director Blair manage to tell a universally accessible story with an Indigenous focus. When the young women go to Vietnam in 1968 – a time when young people all over the world started rebelling against the conservatism and racism of society – the battles for Indigenous rights and battles for black America's civil rights are paralleled. As Kay and Cynthia embark on affairs with the African American soldier Robbie and the band's drummer, the girls learn to identify with the struggles of African Americans. Hence the film explores the common ground of various minorities and further implies the shared dream for independence and equal rights. This culminates in the scene when the Sapphires sing for the American troops on the day of Martin Luther King's murder.

10 In a very brief but effective match cut, the correlation between the circumstances of the forcible removal of children in Australia and the violent wartime events in Vietnam is emphasized. In one of the flashbacks to 1958 the girls run away from the authorities who have come to pick up Kay, one of the so-called 'half-caste' children, to be fostered, adopted or put into an institution or mission dormitory. At one point we see children's feet jumping over a barbed wire fence, a hopeless last attempt to escape from their fate (61:22). In a similar shot, the grown-up women run away and jump over sandbags to escape the rifle shots, when a bombardment strikes during the climactic high-stakes concert in front of the troops in Vietnam, (78:44). The similarity of the two scenes – probably the most horrifying and threatening events in the women's lives – parallels the devastating and traumatic legacy of the policies of the Stolen Generations in Australia and the gruesome effects of the Vietnam War.

11 In contrast to the depiction of the shared fate of ethnic minorities such as Indigenous Australians or African Americans, the film strangely ignores the plight of the local Vietnamese. Apart from one minor appearance of a Vietnamese hotel boy and a grim-looking

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<sup>4</sup> Dave favours soul over country for the following reason: "Country and western music is about loss. Soul music is about loss, too. But in country and western music, they've lost and they've given up and they're just whining about it. In soul music, they're struggling to get it back and they haven't given up" (32:00)

group of Vietcong by the wayside, there are no other Vietnamese characters involved in the narrative. A subplot, originally included in the stage-version, about a Vietnamese boy searching for his family, has been removed (cf. Yatman 12). Nor is there any mentioning of Australian military presence in Vietnam. The emphasis falls on the link between the black experience of oppression and segregation in the United States and Australia and, by highlighting the musical convention of romance, on the difficulties arising from a mixed-race relationship.

12 The importance of romance in film musicals inevitably raises further questions about the genre's representation of gender and sexuality. Barry Grant argues that the film musical's highest concern, the maintenance of the social order within a community, is mainly regulated by defining the parameters of sexual desire and hence the regulation of sexuality (46). Typically, the romantic plot in a film musical involves a "developing attraction between the protagonists that is [...] eventually resolved with the couple getting together in marriage or its promise" (ibid.). *The Sapphires* conservatism and genre-conformity in terms of Gail and Dave's romance has been widely criticised, for instance by Ross Miller: "[W]hile you might hope that it would avoid the type of clichéd romance trappings often associated with this type of film it ultimately can't help itself, piling on romantic subplots that just feel forced and unneeded" ("The Sapphires Movie Review").

13 Characteristically in musicals, the narrative conflict is resolved when the couple reconciles after a series of delays and obstacles, and reunites through the mediating power of a dance or musical performance. "Before we know it, the leading players are smoothly in step" (Grant 47). Wayne Blair's musical uses this musical convention precisely whenever the story starts to unfold the girl's sorrowful past and hence uses a group dance, song performance, or a humorous remark by Dave, to return to the upbeat nature of the film. This happens most disruptively in the scene when Gail, in flashbacks and supported by dramatic instrumental music, tells Dave the events of her cousin Kay's removal by the government authorities from their community in 1958. She further explains that Kay was then raised by a white foster family and after years of distance has denied her Aboriginal heritage, expressed in Kay's harsh remark towards their grandmother and Gail: "If you people worked as hard as you fished, you'd be really rich, you know" (62:51). This flashback gives an insight into the disrupted relationship between Kay and her Aboriginal family and comments on the remaining gap between Gail and Kay ("I've never been able to forgive her, or myself" 62:52). Dave's only and sudden reply, clearly in an awkward attempt to cheer Gail (and the audience) up, is "We should dance!" (62:59). After a comical discussion about Dave's dance



skills and whether or not Gail's belief that white men cannot dance is “racist”, they eventually do end up dancing in close embrace and there is no further mentioning of the past events. The scene thus combines a self-conscious reference on the genre’s romance conventions and the dance as expression of a sense of solidarity. The film refuses to further debate the political and historical situation of the protagonists and thereby avoids the victimisation of the Aboriginal young women. According to the playwright’s intention, their Aboriginal past is neither ignored nor “belittled”, although this treatment eludes the complexity of the protagonist’s unpleasant experiences.

14 Moreover, in film musicals, dance scenes are used to unfold the metaphorical connection between dance and sex.

When a couple dance well, often ‘spontaneously’ [...] their bodies move in graceful harmony, their synchronization a sign of their spiritual and physical union. This state is, of course, also the ideal experience not only of being in love but of making love, and so this metaphorical meaning of dance has been common in popular culture since the 1920s. (Grant 47)

Cynthia is surely presented as the most sensual and sexually liberated member of the group. As her confidence grows during her time in Vietnam, she closely interacts with the soldiers during performance and backstage. She develops her sexy dance moves and refuses to listen to Gail’s warnings concerning men. Set in 1968, the film makes recourse to the sexual revolution of the time that unleashed the fight against gender discrimination and heteronormativity. Cynthia’s behaviour promotes a sexual liberation and acceptance of sex outside of traditional heterosexual, monogamous relationships. Her behaviour, however, is presented as a ‘phase’, a delightful excursion into independence and sensuality (“Hey sis, if you want something, you gotta go get it” 46:11) without having a long-lasting effect after their return to their home mission in Australia. Both Kay and Cynthia have affairs with men during their time in Vietnam, but according to the genre’s romance convention, only those couples who are promised to get married, end up happily. Gail and Dave’s mixed-race relationship seems the most unconventional at first, but their engagement is the most foreseeable in the course of the genre-compliant narrative. Gail is dismissive of Cynthia’s passion for men. When Cynthia engages too candidly with the soldiers during a gig, she is even unanimously suspended from the group. Therefore, the band only then unites in the utopian mode of a harmonious, ideal community when all members behave appropriately and within the assigned gender roles. It seems inevitable that all girls opt for marriage as soon as they return to Australia. Even Cynthia, although being left at the altar before the trip to Vietnam, returns with the promise to give her ex-fiancé Jimmy a second chance, who is

already waiting for her remorsefully. The free-spirited younger members of the group experience the time of their lives, yet without any consequences for their gender roles. However, the girls do not seem to be upset or to be the victim of this regression. In keeping with the constraints and conventions of the musical genre, the positive final song of the film emphasizes the importance of bonding and family reunification.

15 The *Sapphire's* musical numbers, along with the rehearsal scenes, present the message of group unity. In each song they join together in harmonious and mostly cheerful melodies, which contrast their familial disharmony. The three sisters have not seen their paler-skinned cousin Kay in ten years as she grew up in the city with a white foster family. It is Kay's journey from denial of her roots to identifying with her Aboriginal identity that provides the most powerful scenes of the film. In one of the last scenes of the film, Kay reunites with her Indigenous grandmother and celebrates a tribal ceremony to become reincorporated with the land and spirits of her ancestors.<sup>5</sup> In the background, the song 'Ngarra Burra Ferra', which the young girls had performed in 1958 before Kay's disappearance, is played. This reconciling scene appeals emotionally, through the use of a children's song and the grandmother's words, to an international audience, although spoken and sung in an Indigenous language. Across the boundaries of a specific Indigenous Australian context, the process of Kay's musical and personal coming of age and search for identity adds depth to the predominantly comic narrative.

16 Nonetheless, *The Sapphires* has been extensively criticized for its perfunctory attempts to deal with delicate and complex racial and political issues. At the end, all conflicts and open questions are alleviated through the power of song, which hardly does justice to the hardship of Aboriginal Australian life in the times of the Stolen Generations. For Dyer, this is precisely the ideological function of musical entertainment, the escapist capacity to present complex and unpleasant feelings in a way that makes them seem "uncomplicated, direct and vivid, not 'qualified' or 'ambiguous' as day-to-day life makes them" (Dyer 182). Seemingly uncritical of the film musical's escapist conventions, the film's mix of comedy and social commentary has in its recall value led to the accessibility and international success of the film. However, at times *The Sapphires* contrasts the escapist take on issues of racism with the subsequent, genuinely shocking depiction of racism, such as when a dying white US soldier refuses treatment by the African American soldier Robbie.

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<sup>5</sup> In subtitles we get to know the grandmother's words during the ceremony: "With your country/I cleanse you/ and return you home/ and make you one/ with your land once more./ No one can ever remove your spirit from here again/ This is where you belong/ This is where you will always return/ Where your spirits will remain" (86:40-87:39)

17 *The Sapphires'* ambiguous approach on racism expands on the genre's constraints, also by the use of subversive Aboriginal humour. The way in which Aboriginal humour works cross-racially is what makes *The Sapphires* a genuinely entertaining work. Anne Brewster, in her article on the impact of humour in the work of Nyungar writer Alf Taylor, argues that in literature, humour has been a highly effective strategy by which Aboriginal authors and performers have intervened in white public spheres (235). Especially in the use of gallows humour, "Aboriginal humour challenges the distance established by racialized stereotyping and the authority that this distance shores up" (250). This subversive use of stereotypes also can be found in *The Sapphires*. When Gail and Cynthia try to hitchhike to the talent show and Cynthia wonders why a car passes them without stopping Gail replies, "It's because we are black, stupid." Cynthia then remarks: "No, it's cause you're ugly" (07:05). These comic moments enable the director to address issues of racism that otherwise are difficult to be raised overtly, because "in circumstances where a direct critique of coloniality might be rebuffed, humour can be efficacious in gaining a white public's attention" (243). Gallows humour, according to Brewster, skates for a white audience along the borderline of pleasure and discomfort, as they may consciously notice the foregrounding of white people's investment and stake in the stereotyping of Aboriginal people (243/250). Also in filmic representations, Rose Capp notices a small but significant number of filmic works that have harnessed comic conventions to engage in a substantive way with the events and consequences of Australia's past. She is hereby referring to Richard Frankland and his explanation for directing the "first Aboriginal comedy ever in Australia", *Stone Bros.* (2009), and his belief in the crucial role humour can play in this cultural context: "I think that reconciliation is a great way to laugh, and laughing is a great way to reconcile. This film is about saying to the world, 'Ok, so you've seen and heard sad stories, and it's important to keep telling those stories, but Aboriginal people laugh too. And it's ok for you guys to laugh with us'" (Frankland in Wotzke). Capp acclaims *The Sapphires* as a "surprisingly sharp-edged contribution to the Indigenous comedy genre" ("Seriously Funny").

18 Blair's use of archival black-and-white footage as historical reference, effectively intercut with the storyline, gives the impression that *The Sapphires* deliberately refers to the past and true events. This is also emphasized by the incorporation of photographs of the real Sapphires, Lois Peeler, Naomi Mayers, Laurel Robinson and Beverley Briggs. Since the early 2000, many films based on historical events have aroused debates about national identity, the status of Aboriginal people, and the continuing effects of European settlement through child

removal and frontier violence.<sup>6</sup> The filmic versions of the past serve as springboard for present political struggles between Aboriginal and white Australians. Lydon claims that the visual discourse constituted by film is an immediate, emotionally compelling and accessible way to understand the past (137f). This may, however, also enforce distancing strategies because the violence portrayed in these historical films stand for the injustices of the colonial past, and can ultimately, release the modern Australian viewer from responsibility to acknowledge the larger and continuing effects of colonization (cf. Lydon 141).

19 Rachel Perkins' film musical *One Night the Moon* (2001) also deals with a 'true story' of the Australian past. It is based on the life of the Aboriginal tracker Riley who had received considerable recognition for his contribution to the New South Wales Police Force during the 1930s. The film deals with the events of an incident in 1932, the true story of a young white girl who went missing in the Australian outback. The parents turn to the local police for assistance with the search, yet the father Jim rejects the help of Aboriginal tracker and police officer Albert because he insists on having "no blacks on my land" (12:45). Much later, the mother finally overrides the husband's commands and allows Albert to lead her to her daughter, who by this time has perished. The father, unmasked as the stubborn white settler, walks off and takes his own life. In the last scene we see the daughter's funeral, conducted by her mother with the help of Aboriginal women.

20 The duration of the film is a brief 57 minutes of which the musical elements make up a significant proportion. Director Perkins herself has asserted that the film operates in a space between the genre of Hollywood film musicals and contemporary music video clips (cf. Millard).<sup>7</sup> The film relies strongly, in accordance with Hollywood film musicals, on lyrics and musical numbers to produce its narrative and all characters also engage in musical soliloquies. Unlike other film musical's overly-glamorous, colourful and bright general tone (e.g. *The Sapphires*), *One Night the Moon* emphasizes a very bleak, melancholic atmosphere. Through the process of bleach-bypassing, pink tones have been drained out in postproduction to create a visually gloomy and rugged mood that supports the dark content matter. Time-lapse photography, close ups and lingering landscape shots also add to the stylised cinematography. The visuals, together with the inclusion of musical numbers (but no dance),

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include *Rabbit-Proof-Fence* (Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (de Heer, 2002), *Black and White* (Lahiff, 2002), and *Australia* (Luhrmann, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> For Sue Gillet it is precisely this tension between the historical subject matter and the contemporary music video style that is fruitful, for "it retrieves history from the completed past and immerses it in the contemporary and ongoing movement for reconciliation" (86)

create a surreal effect, an in-between twilight zone or metaphorical landscape, a melancholic setting to represent the mother's point of view and inner state (Perkins in Millard).

21 Also unlike the genre's conventions, the sense of communal unity is challenged. In *One Night the Moon*, the musical pieces do not relieve the spectator with harmonious, happy moments. The disharmonies in the music, the sadness in the lyrics and the polyphonous form rather create an awareness of the 'unfinished business' between Indigenous and white Australia and signal "the effectiveness of harmonies which both acknowledge and celebrate differences of viewpoint, producing what might be called *reconciling harmonies* that rely on a sympathetic discordance of voices and sound" (Probyn; "'This Land Is Mine/This Land Is Me': Reconciling Harmonies in *One Night the Moon*"; emphasis added).

22 The narrative is situated within debates about land and belonging, the trope of the lost child, gender relations and the relations between settlers and Indigenous people. The father's character is portrayed as an angry racist who has nothing but hostility towards the Aboriginal population. His rejection of the black tracker is underscored by the general settler's fear that Aboriginal people's knowledge of the land casts doubt over his rightful ownership of it (cf. Probyn). The unease of displacement of the 'unsettled settler' is in particular visualized in the figure of the black tracker, "as a haunting figure of colonial history (in the settler's mind), and as a challenging figure of 'true belonging' who looms over the settler's derangement" (ibid.). The paradox of the settler's anxiety is verbalized by the white police officer who cannot understand the father's refusal to make use of Albert's expertise: "This is Albert's country, he knows this land" (12:39). This remark exactly confirms what it is that unsettles the settler in the first place: Albert's expertise is denied *because* it is 'his land'. The father therefore simultaneously knows and refuses the knowledge of the Indigenous relationship to the land. What follows is the song 'This land is mine/The land is me', a disharmonious duet that juxtaposes the settler's and the Indigenous people's attitudes to land ownership. Their discordant beliefs are expressed both lyrically, and musically. The instrumentation of the song highlights the racial and cultural differences between father and tracker. Strings and flutes are employed alongside the father's vocals, the didgeridoo is used to introduce Albert's vocal signifying the spiritual presence of an 'other' turning into "a sonic metaphor for Aboriginality as a whole" (Winchester 182).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Winchester further explains that despite the fact that the didgeridoo was traditionally used only in a relatively small area of northern Australia it has become the dominant symbol of Aboriginality and it is associated with representations of Aboriginality in general (182)

23 The music in *One Night the Moon* emphasizes difference in culture and perspective by drawing on instruments as cultural signifiers. Winchester believes that this use of cultural stereotypes caters specifically to a white audience, and that this is why “however stylistically imaginative, the film has not attempted to ‘push the boundaries’ of the representation of cultural identity” (185f). Thus the tracker Albert can be read as a stereotypical representation of the noble native (Palmer and Gillard 132). Rekhari stresses the underlying link that exists between racist and romantic representations of Aboriginality. Filmic Aboriginal representation “often reinforce romanticised, if not racist, clichés of Aboriginal identity” (7). Hence, the representation of the hostile and sad settler father on the one hand, and the heroic wise black tracker on the other hand, hover between the critical redefinition of the settler’s failed beliefs and the reinforcing of well-known cultural stereotypes.

24 The film conveys the possibility of reconciliation once the mother Rose and Albert’s wife approach one another. Initially, the mother accepts the racist position of her husband and responds towards the Aboriginal people with hostility. In the prologue of the film, while passing the tracker and his family, the mother turns her daughter’s head away to stop her from smiling and waving at the Indigenous family. In the course of the events and her growing despair about the daughter’s disappearance, she becomes of increasing importance and potency for the film, as she slowly overcomes her prejudices. Again, shown through musical disharmonies, one of her first encounters with Albert is accompanied by jarring dissonant string tones (20:30) reflecting her inner state of fear and revulsion. Once she collaborates with the black tracker to locate her daughter after the failure of her husband’s search, the sounds between them are more harmonious. In the duet ‘Unfinished business’ they each sing a verse separately and then, while tracking the daughter, reunite in the chorus and sing in unison. The lyrics “represent the unfinished business of locating her daughter’s body, the unfinished business of apologies over the exclusion of the black tracker from the search and the ‘unfinished business’ which the Reconciliation movement continues to draw attention to” (Probyn).

25 It is the role of the white mother to articulate the personal and domestic fear caused by the loss of the child. Perkins, as director, shifted the script’s original focus from that of the historical figure tracker Riley to the mother’s journey and the loss of a child (cf. Millard). For much of the film, we see the mother sitting on the veranda of the homestead, wrapped in a shawl, many close ups returning to her grieving face while looking out and awaiting news. Probyn emphasizes the importance of the veranda-bound position of the mother; “it is an ambiguous space neither wholly in nor out of the domestic scene which enables her to

imaginatively wander and stare across the land in search of her daughter while being enclosed and protected by the homestead” (“This Land Is Mine/This Land Is Me”). Moreover, the woman’s liminal position on the veranda also signals the cultural position of cultural mediator. In her equivocal position as the settler woman she makes use of the limited power she has in overcoming the comfortable safety zone of her homestead, goes to the tracker’s house and approaches the Indigenous people.

26 It is through the song of another female character that the film presents a case of appropriation of culture and how it connects the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community. In the last scene of the film, Albert’s wife sings a Christian hymn at the funeral of the little daughter Emily. This implies the influence of Christian missionaries on Aboriginal beliefs, yet the wife’s intense and unusual performance gives also the impression of a revitalisation of the song through its adoption into Aboriginal culture (cf. Winchester 187). The Indigenous women’s song consoles the mother as she can understand and relate to the lyrics. Regardless of the words, the women’s unique performance conveys grief and sadness which appeals to emotions shared in any culture. Hence, the means to present the receptive and interactive way of sharing cultures is through song.

27 At the end of *One Night the Moon*, the mother sits all alone by the grave, in silence. The musical genre’s classic elements of dance, romance and sense of community all remain unfulfilled. The melancholic atmosphere and sad outcome of the story evolve from the role of the mother. In the attempt to rescue her child, the mother takes the courage to approach the Indigenous community for help who in the end mourn the white child just as much. “Perkins at once heightens and represses the power of race symbolism by entwining universal human emotions of distress and concern through the variety of characters, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal” (Langton 2006 63). According to Dyer, one of the major purposes of musicals is the presentation of alternatives, hopes, wishes of ‘something better’ (177). *One Night the Moon* fulfils and at the same time challenges this convention as it results in the possibility of an utopian reconciled community between the settler woman and the Indigenous family, but on the other hand ends with the image of the lonely mother. The despair of mother and father and the pain of the tracker evoke emotions in greater depth and harshness than *The Sapphires*, as the film addresses the universal ‘unfinished business’ between black and white, and the remaining issues of racism.

28 These two very different examples of Australian film musicals have shown how to expand the generic frame of the musical and to use the possibilities of the film’s power of evoking emotional reactions. Through the focus on female characters as cross-cultural

mediators, we see the difficult birth of new heroines like the Sapphires girls or the white settler woman, which leads to a shift in how Australians perceive Aboriginality (cf. Lydon 148). These films were internationally successful in appropriating historical stories which, albeit set in the past, do not close it off but rather link it to the present by appealing to emotions, shared also by a white audience. *The Sapphires* avoids the victimisation of the female protagonists in their search for identity, by using Aboriginal humour and the notion of romance, but confined in the inherited narratives and common Hollywood genre conventions, the gender roles are hardly challenged. Despite the tendency to replicate cultural stereotypes, in *One Night the Moon* the remaining disharmonies in the music are a strong expression of the continuing political struggles between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. But the musical's culture of optimism has rewardingly introduced new reconciling tones in the self-confidence of Australian Indigenous filmmaking.

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