Women Willing to Fight
Women Willing to Fight
The Fighting Woman in Film

Edited by
Silke Andris and Ursula Frederick

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Why Women Willing to Fight?: An Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silke Andris and Ursula Frederick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: The Neomyth In Film: The Woman Warrior from Joan of Arc</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Ellen Ripley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Creed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Just a Woman Among the Cyborgs: Sarah Connor in</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminator 2: Judgement Day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Summerhayes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: Past, Present, Future: Finding Treasure in the Lives of</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara Croft</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula Frederick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Violence, Duty and Choice: The Military Woman in</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Hollywood Cinema</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne Tasker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six: Million Dollar Baby: The Making and Unmaking of the</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Boxer’s Body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silke Andris</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven: Fighting to be Seen: Looking for Women in the West,</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from The Searchers to The Missing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Flanagan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eight</td>
<td>Belles with Attitude: Genealogies of the New Hollywood Wisecracking Action Heroine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Nine</td>
<td>Zhang Ziyi, “Martial Arthouse” and the Transnational Nuxia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Ten</td>
<td>Superheroine: Women as Martial Artists in Early Twenty-First Century Cinema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS*

One: Women Willing to Fight poster.................................................................1
Two: Milla Jovovich in The Messenger: The Story of Jean of Arc (1999).......15
Three: Sigourney Weaver in Aliens (1986)......................................................29
Five: Angelina Jolie in Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life (2003)....55
Seven: Hilary Swank in Million Dollar Baby (2004)...........................................95
Eight: Cate Blanchett in The Missing (2003)....................................................112
Nine: Sandra Bullock in Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous (2005)...128
Ten: Zangh Ziyi in House of Flying Daggers (2004).......................................144
Eleven: Uma Thurman and Gordon Li Jiahu in Kill Bill: Vol. 2 (2004).........149
Twelve: Maggie Cheung in Hero (2002)............................................................161
Thirteen: Halle Berry in Catwoman (2004)......................................................167

* All images, besides Illustration One, are reproduced courtesy of The Kobal Collection. Illustration One was produced by The Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people we would like to thank for their support and encouragement throughout the development and completion of the *Women Willing to Fight* volume. First and foremost we are extremely grateful to the contributors, not only for their incisive work but their good-natured willingness to participate in this project and to remain steadfast and responsive at all times.

We would like to thank the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University, which helped us lay the foundation stone of this book by funding the “Women Willing to Fight” workshop in 2005. Thanks to all the participants and presenters of the workshop for their invaluable comments, theoretical insights and inspiration. We are grateful to Alison Macgregor, Carolyn Strange and Jill Julius Matthews who made important contributions to this event. We sincerely appreciate the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, and its director Professor Howard Morphy, for support in numerous aspects of this publishing venture. Monique Skidmore deserves special mention for advising and guiding us through the unknown vagaries of publishing. We are also deeply indebted to Pip Deveson and Katie Hayne for helping to shape and finish this volume. Various forms of assistance were provided by John Carty, Suzanne Groves, Alison French, Maria-Suzette Fernandes-Dias, Jodi Parvey, Victoria Parkinson, Celia Vuckovic, Alan Wyburn and Karen Westmacott. Thanks are due to all the friends, family members and colleagues who have helped and encouraged us in publishing this book including Michael Andris, Jeanette Avins, Olwen Beazley, Roger Frederick and Karin Schneider Andris. Our appreciation is extended to the editorial staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, particularly Amanda Millar, for her support, patience, and encouragement throughout this project. We are grateful to Alison Walker at The Kobal Collection for her kind assistance with illustrative material.
CHAPTER ONE

WHY WOMEN WILLING TO FIGHT?:
AN INTRODUCTION

SILKE ANDRIS AND URSULA FREDERICK

Figure One: Women Willing to Fight poster

The woman willing to fight is by no means a new film character. Her antecedents have appeared in numerous guises since Kate Kelly brandished a gun in the first feature length film of the silent cinema, The Story of the Kelly Gang (1906). Traces of warrior women and revolutionary figures of myth, archaeology, art, literature and early history are discernible in many of the representations of the fighting woman in film, yet the figure at the centre of this volume eludes easy categorisation. It is not the purpose of this volume to imprison the woman willing to fight in a comfortable archetype. Our aim, rather, is to explore the diverse contemporary and globalised manifestations of the human, singular, female fighter who is physically willing to engage in her fight and in doing so contribute to the investigation of the fighting figure as a focus of film study.

These attributes—contemporary, human, singular, female who is willing to engage physically in her fight—function as an analytic lens through which the contributors can respond directly to the numerous cinematic representations in the New Hollywood era that portray women to be violent, aggressive and powerful, often militantly engaged in physical fights (and often victorious over their opponents) whilst contextualising their subjects in the wider history and recent development of the active heroine in film. They take this important figure as a guide for refocusing and refining ongoing discussions about the place of gender, action, violence, narrative and bodily spectacle in contemporary film. While the following set of essays expand, by analysis, our understanding of this figure, they also offer a series of intellectual engagements that move towards
demarcating a place for her—in terms of origins, influences and meanings—within the context of contemporary cinema and society.

**The Contemporary Female Fighter: Genres and Transnational Flows**

The Hollywood action and adventure genre has become an important vehicle for the representation of the fighting woman. Indeed, the increased inclusion of women in action roles has been a key in conceptualising how this particular “genre” has evolved in recent times. Some contributors discuss representations of the fighting woman in Western, sports, military, and martial arts films and demonstrate how the figure of the fighting woman is shaped by their distinctive narrative modes and conventions. Conversely, authors are also concerned with the question of how the woman willing to fight challenges generic traditions and form.

Martin Flanagan explores the representations of women, broadly, and fighting women, more specifically, in the genre of “The Western”. In his discussion of The Missing—a reworking of John Ford’s canonical The Searchers (1956)—Flanagan shows how the genre has traditionally established oppositional relationships between women and men leaving little or no place for the portrayal of the independent, active woman with ambition and agency. The Missing, argues Flanagan, while expanding the representation of women in Westerns by transcending some important gender dichotomies, simultaneously sets clear limits to an utterly radical reinvention of their role by carefully leaving some dichotomies intact.

Yvonne Tasker’s focus is another male-dominated preserve: the military or war movie. Her analysis of G.I. Jane illustrates in detail what is required of an assertive woman in the combat genre. The emphasis on physical training, humiliation and testing of the female body demonstrates, according to Tasker, how the boot camp story of G.I. Jane makes physical struggle emblematic of sexual struggle, and further, how the transformative quality of a woman’s body holds the key to her success and potential for gender equality. A similar reading is found in Silke Andris’ exploration of the female experience of entering the so-called male domain of boxing.

The arena of the fighting woman is quite clearly delineated in certain spheres of the action and adventure cinema, such as Westerns, military and boxing films. Yet other female fighting characters may be found across the broad spectrum of Hollywood productions, including sci-fi, comedy and romance, in addition to films that may also be broadly classed as action and adventure films: martial arts, criminal/detective, thriller/mystery films. The prevalence of the fighting figure offers the opportunity to consider female characters within the
context of a specific type of fighting, just as it demands a comparative and cross-culturally inclusive framework for discussion.

While this volume builds on the existing literature examining the fighting woman in action and adventure cinema it goes beyond the analysis of particular genres. In this way, it explores the complexities ascribed by different narratives as alternative vehicles for the female fighting figure. Such an approach is necessary for considering New Hollywood films which are characteristically multi-generic or hybrid. Globalisation, coupled with innovations in technology such as CGI animation, has seen the emergence of films that defy the parameters of established genres, creating genre-hybridity across the cinematic landscape. Recent advances in the digital arts, with their renewed emphasis on visual style and form, have had further impact on the way the Hollywood film industry operates to create and distribute film and associated audiovisual material. Consequently, fighting women in film are crossing over, circulating around and within increasingly complex networks of global media. Leon Hunt and Catherine Driscoll, in their analyses of the “Martial Arthouse” of Hollywood/Asian crossover, explore the potential effects of a transnational cinema on Hollywood as a two-way flow. There is little doubt that Hollywood’s global reach has provided opportunities of expanded scale for International talent and more obscure auteurs. Yet the flourish in wuxia (martial chivalry films) and other martial arts references is less indicative of a Hollywood turn towards cross-cultural filmmaking as it is a reflection of individual trans-Pacific connections. Both Driscoll and Hunt allude to the influence of particular film identities and industry players in forging the orientations of this alliance. Clearly, growth in the production and reception of Hollywood filmmaking has been advanced by new technologies of distribution and consumption.

The ongoing development in multi-media platforms, online environments and mobile devices, as well as home-info/entertainment systems has altered the viewer’s experience of cultural forms. While partially shifting the cinematic event from the traditional movie theatre it has laid new ground for the accessibility, reception, and analysis of the fighting woman in film. This in turn has created enormous scope for the appreciation and reiteration of the fighting woman as heroine icon. Ursula Frederick points to the creative interactions that audience participation with such icons may yield. She observes that while retaining a celebrity poster-girl status, Lara Croft also operates with an “Everywoman”-like appeal. This belies singular readings of hyper-sexualised form precisely because of her conglomerate identity as multi-media text and her ambiguous conflation of “norms”. Not only have developing technologies serviced existing demands for film production and consumption in different ways, new media has, according to Frederick, also challenged our expectations
of cinema and reconfigured our understandings of nationality, gender, body and the self.

Through their collective focus on the contemporary female fighter, these essays, offer an important avenue for the analysis of particular genres, their traditions as well as their developments. They also contribute to an understanding of the broad spectrum of Hollywood productions, consumptions and transnational flows, including the strong presence and influence of martial arts fighters in the action cinema.

The Woman Willing to Fight as Human Being

Many of the action heroines of contemporary cinema are supernatural figures. The focus of this inquiry is the human female fighter. The exclusion of the supernatural fighter, we believe, illuminates the agency and ambitions of the woman who, more or less, chooses to fight. By contrast, the supernatural fighter is generally depicted as fighting to fulfil her destiny. Her fight is pre-determined and her ability to fight merely a means to a fated end. And while the viewer may often feel assured that the female heroine cannot lose, regardless of her mortal or supernatural status, the difference between them may be best described as a distinction in the way the fighter’s motivational cause and power are acquired.

The skills and “tricks” of the supernatural figure are characteristically passed on through a mystical transference of magical ability (*Elektra* [2005]), genetic manipulation, or procreative inheritance (*The Incredibles* [2004], *Aeon Flux* [2005]). Whether it is a gift or a curse, the superheroine’s fight is rendered as an act of bestowal.

The flesh and blood woman in film that is willing to fight is marked with a signature difference. From the outset her fight is inflected with a different order of agency. The choice to fight is her own, even when it appears shaped by other characters, or a sense of manifest destiny. This depiction of agency has a powerful effect on the meanings one may attribute to the fight and the ways in which the parameters of the fight is circumscribed. It also raises the fundamental question of motivation—why does this woman fight? For whom or what is she fighting for?

The answers to these questions may be connected to her experience as a mortal being and it is often this very humanity that constitutes her cause. On the one hand, she is often fighting for the preservation of humankind or for what it means to be human (*Alien* [1979], *The Terminator* [1984], *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* [2003]). On the other hand, her fight may be portrayed as emerging from personal motivations that come with being human (strong emotional feelings of love, revenge, maternal feelings or ambitions and dreams). The mortal fighter, however, unlike her supernatural counterpart, must operate within the
limitations and vulnerabilities of the human body. Barbara Creed shows how the
death of the heroine is instrumental to the interpretation of her fight and her
conceptualisation as saint and martyr. The fighter’s mortality, Creed argues,
enhances the magnitude of her challenge—it foregrounds the possibility and
threat of death and has significance with regard to the choice, effect and
outcome of her fight. The extent to which the death of the female fighter is
aligned with failure and the way the success of the fight is measured is central to
Silke Andris’ discussion of the making and unmaking of a fighter’s body in
*Million Dollar Baby*. Andris asks what happens when a boxer’s dream goes
awry and the body seems to “fail” the heroine in the end? Thus, the fighter’s
mortality points to the magnitude of her fight.

While the greater emphasis in the volume is on the female fighter as a mortal
human being, several of the papers explore the boundaries between the “real”
and the “unreal” woman. They examine the inherent powers or potential of the
body and the way it may be trained and transformed. In her analysis of
*Terminator 2: Judgement Day* [1991] Catherine Summerhayes considers how
the anxieties of posthumanism are played out—as human versus machine—
through the characters of Sarah Connor and the Terminator, played by Arnold
Schwarzenegger, and their respective transitions between being human and
machine. Summerhayes uses the dynamic between these characters to draw
attention to the way conventions are used to train and challenge the viewer in
recognising particular (cross-over) performances of gender, cyborgs and
humans. While Summerhayes study points out that Sarah Connor’s humanity is
instrumental in grounding the viewer’s experience to the narrative force of the
film, she also addresses the way the woman willing to fight is rapidly morphing
in representational form. She is becoming anime, game avatar, replicant, cyber-
heroine. Polygons, pixels, disembodied voices or transgenic beings—these are
the future bodily manifestations of the woman who is traditionally portrayed as
virgin, martyr, warrior or bitch. It is through this amalgam of competing
manifestations—the nature of what she becomes and what she represents—that
the female fighter becomes a contested site.

**The Woman Willing to Fight as Singular Figure**

Fighting in film has always been a gendered arena. The action film,
according to Gallegher, “has historically been a ‘male’ genre, dealing with
stories of male heroism, produced by male filmmakers for principally male
audiences”.

Prior to the 1980s, the majority of female characters in action films
were limited to roles accompanying, or oppositional to, the leading action hero;
appearing as the sidekick, comic foil or “evil” other. When women were central
to the plot it was rarely as the sole and independent protagonist of the film. The
femme fatale and outlaw occasionally dominated the stage but the majority of fighting women were relegated to the background, as the buddy or support, or as part of a team. The singular female fighter began to emerge in 1970s and 1980s characters, such as the gun-toting “mama” of gangsta/blaxploitation (*Cleopatra Jones* [1973]) and the “final girl”/victim of the slasher/rape-revenge film (*I Spit on Your Grave* [1978]). By the early 1980s the fighting heroine with distinctly global gravitas had claimed centre screen. Thus despite their rich ancestry, in terms of sheer number and diversity of expression, these stand-out women are arguably a product of late twentieth century blockbuster production.

This singular fighter, has become a core protagonist through which the action narrative is played out. She holds the plot together, drives the narrative and shapes the fight’s purpose and style with her own distinctive persona. The fight has become both personified in the singular fighter and individuated through her. The star persona status of the actress further supports this impression. Leon Hunt’s attention to Zhang Ziyi illustrates the fighting female persona as it develops in conjunction with the rising stardom of a particular actor (currently favoured for her Asian-Hollywood action cross-over appeal). That certain celebrities are attuned to the reiterative powers of the female fighter within their own star persona and film careers demonstrates a degree of demand for such portrayals. Alongside Zhang Ziyi, there is a burgeoning group of award-winning actresses for whom the strong singular woman/fighting female character is easily identified. Included amongst these alumni are Jodie Foster, Angelina Jolie, Halle Berry, Geena Davis, Jamie Lee Curtis, Meryl Streep and most recently Charlize Theron and Hilary Swank. That star biographies may be so significantly shaped by the presence of the fighting woman is further suggestive of the growing presence and place cut out for, the fighting woman on screen. Frederick demonstrates in her essay how the audience may be complicit in the construction and demand for such (iconic) characters and the possibilities for subjective identification that they offer.

Being the centre of attention is to be at the core of the action, yet, paradoxically, the singularity of the female fighter tends to isolate her within the film’s frame and narrative. She is often forced to assert herself in places that exclude other women and which, therefore, present her as an exception to the norm. That is, she displays exceptional behaviour often physically challenging the dominant (patriarchal) order. In other configurations of fighting her challenge is less about decimating the dominant order and more about securing a certain place or status within it. Demi Moore has performed all of these scenarios. Consider her portrayal of a corporate femme fatale in *Disclosure* (1994) with the role of female soldier in *G.I. Jane* or with the avenging, fallen angel in *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* (2003). In all three films she is an exceptional character, fighting alone and often choosing to do so.
Women Willing to Fight

However, as Polona Petek points out, a fighter’s singularity does not necessarily mean that she must be solitary. She observes that Asian fighters are often seen to forge alliances with other women and men to improve their odds in combat. This doesn’t detract from their core status, rather it keeps them in the fight and thus at the centre of the film. By comparison, Western female fighters are often represented alone, not easily accepting help or making friends. Petek proposes that this behaviour is both a reflection of Western individualism and symptomatic of her outlaw status and the failure of (male) colleagues to come to her aid.

The Fighter’s Body: Transformation and the Embodied Fight in Female Form

The contemporary cinematic articulation of the energised, tough female figure centres on the body of the female performer. Traditionally, male action stars required a radical bodily transformation to act the part of the protagonist, whereas a women’s central role was largely conveyed through make-up and costuming. The recent transformation of the female body into the exemplary body of the fighter has set the contemporary female fighter apart from her predecessors. In order to survive and, more importantly, to triumph over her opponents, the modern heroine does not only “speak up” but also trains her main instrument, her body, in combat techniques and martial arts.

Her empowerment intensifies as she masters fighting skills and the effective handling of fighting tools. The spectacle of physical exercise, such as training sequences and fights, indicate the fighter’s readiness for physical confrontation and reveal her dedication to personal transformation and embodiment. In his discussion of the wuxia, Leon Hunt alerts us to the fact that every fight is a form of practice since it helps to refine skills and psychologically prepare the fighter for the final confrontation with an opponent. Even in the absence of such preparatory spectacles, the fluidity of her movement and strategic manoeuvring imply a certain investment of time and training. This investment is clearly visible, after the action stops, in the contours of her sculpted fighter’s body and in the marks of workout—wounds, muscle, scars—that her body bears. Thus, the body becomes both a weapon and a target. A circumstance which clearly spurs on the physical action and violence as well as propelling the narrative structure comprising fights, chases and explosions. In short, the fighter’s body is the key element of the film’s exceptional spectacle and narrative force.

The female fighter’s body has appeared in film in a variety of forms donning a vast array of apparel, ranging in physique from the “musculine” tough to the androgynous, and in costuming from the discreetly attired to the scantily-clad ultra-femme. Costuming alters the visual impact of the fighter’s appearance,
reinscribing or disguising shapes, revealing the tone and colours of muscle and skin and emphasising contours and gestures. Clothing can distract from the sincerity of the fighter’s intentions (Petek), be used as a weapon (Driscoll), as defensive armour (Creed) or integrated with life-saving technological mechanisms (Frederick).

Uniform apparel, such as combat clothing, may be used to evoke either the culmination or the sublimation of an individual identity. Thus, costumes and with it the acquisition and handling of weapons are crucial markers for an analysis of a fighter’s embodied transformation. These points are well exemplified in Petek’s discussion of Miss Congeniality (2000) which promotes a particular notion of the body as an instrument to be moulded and shaped into something different or “other”. The customised body makeover of Sandra Bullock’s character—from tomboy to beauty queen—shows how costuming plays a significant role in signalling to the viewer this process of “becoming”. The expression of the “other” through the “self” is akin to the alter egos of the superheroine, a point alluded to by Catherine Driscoll. The significance of the superheroine’s costume, Driscoll explains in her account of the catsuit, lies in the ways the costume reflects the transformation of her body into a weapon, incorporating metal claws and pointed boots, as well as the fashioning of herself as a wounded body.

Like the props and setting, the protagonist’s clothing may be influenced by the aims and codes of a particular genre to visibly link her to the iconography of that genre. The smoothing finish of the cling-wrap style bodysuit, for example, indicates the futuristic or technologically superior, in part because it adapts hard edges into vector-like graphics but also because it is linked to the lush, yet minimalist, style of cyborg or other science-fiction creatures (such as Pris, Trinity, Elektra, Aeon Flux, Leeloo to name a few). Even with the repetition of such fashions, however, specific manifestations of styling become iconically embedded within a fighter’s distinguishable character, particularly when it evokes their fighting attitude or is coupled with a particular gesture. Rather than fetishising the fighter’s surface qualities, this emphasis on appearance demonstrates the extent to which a fighter’s sensibility is encoded within their representation.

If we stop to consider the most memorable and monumental apparitions of these figures, we find ourselves returning, not surprisingly, to the well-circulated freeze-frames of climactic moments. It is in these stills, that the character is encapsulated and, significantly, it is her fighting persona that is conveyed. It is in the details of these representations that one finds the analytical clues to describe how fighting becomes embodied in a woman. Most obviously, these images present fighting as a female and (sometimes also) feminine activity—an emphasis that has initiated debate and controversy given that
physical fighting is often seen as behaviour that is harmful and causes injury. Although fighting need not express violence, it is largely in the physical embodiment of challenge that the “fight” is construed. While the contributors to this volume mainly devote their attention to women who fight on physical terms, the emotional, psychological and spiritual states of being cannot be easily dislocated from the embodied encounters they engage in. That being said, the fighting woman may also be seen in the Norma Raes, Karen Silkwoods, Erin Brockovichs and Vera Drakes of film—women for whom the primacy of the fight is not expressed through the corporeal frame. There is no exchange of fists, feet or weapons; these women use alternative routes to gain their goals, yet they seem equally willing to fight and may be motivated by a similar cause to their physically combative sisters. These women, although beyond the scope of this volume, deserve further scholarly attention.

Death and injury are not the only consequences of the (physical) fight in film. The threat of injury, harm and death are often as disturbing as the physical attack or its outcome and can result in psychological harm. Some films present and explain the heroine’s action as a result of extraordinary circumstances, adopting the rationale of self-defence—sometimes this motif is expanded to include the defence of the whole of humanity. Other films fold violent actions into the definition of a particular profession (soldier, boxer, police officer, tomb raider) and thus present it as a legitimate means to an end. The extraordinary lengths to which some films go to explain (away) the actions of the fighting women reveals the unease, horror and threat caused by her physical actions and violence. Entangled in the efforts to situate her actions and behaviour are complex socio-cultural and ideological processes which mark, at different times and in different social and cultural contexts, some actions and behaviours as violent and others as not, making violence an extremely expansive and interesting notion to work with.

Equally varied are the audience’s responses to the actions of the fighting female. Some viewers might refuse to look, others enjoy violence and find it fascinating. Some dismiss it, shriek or laugh—violence causes visceral effects in the audience. Fighting, in its diversity of expression—Western showdowns, boxing fights, slapstick falls, acts of noir sadism, and balletic martial arts confrontations—necessarily elicit different responses and therefore demand different kinds of critical approaches to explicate and interpret the function, context and representational form of the physical behaviours displayed by the female fighter.
The Theatre of a Woman’s Fight: Narrative and Spectacle

The display of practiced martial movement often deserves the label martial “art”, qualifying the movement as especially skilled. The martial art fight scene tends not to be created through the postproduction editing together of a series of otherwise unconnected attacks and parries, rather, the actors, and sometimes stunt doubles, execute authentic attack and parry techniques from different martial art traditions (Aikido, Wing Chung, Hapkido, Tai Chi), which in their filmed form can extend to a great number of attacks and counter-attacks. These theatrical fights are highly stylised and although they look authentic they are not necessarily closer to “real” fights than those produced in postproduction. The cunning of the fight as spectacle is that “it begins and ends with its own artifice; as such, spectacle is simultaneously both display and on display”. The primary purpose of these theatrical fights sometimes ceases to be the immediate damaging or overpowering of an opponent and, instead, “becomes a highly stylised and choreographed performance conveying a narrative of conflict through representational movement”. In this way, spectacle becomes a narrative device.

This dimension of visual display is of course not limited to the spectacular display of the body but may also be seen in films where fighters might use weapons and other machinery. One prominent example is the so-called “technical thrills movies” which are laden with special effects. As Andrew Darley claims, “such films are, arguably, the principle emblem of the recent turn to image and form”. Technical thrills movies, martial arts and other action movies seem to award spectacular imagery and action equal status with respect to their narrative content and meaning. Most importantly, as Darley explains, “this does not mean that narrative content or ideological significance disappear in such films” but rather that this “dimension of visual display is now so distinctive that it requires recognition and analysis as a formal aesthetic element in its own right”. Hence, analyses of the spectacle of the fight—the fighting techniques, methods and tools as well as the ways the fight is presented—are important to an understanding of the meanings and motivations of the female fighter’s actions.

The spectacle of the fighting female is a source of significant controversy amongst feminist and gender studies scholars. Laura Mulvey’s postulation of a generic gender equation in classical film narratives constitutes the nexus of much of the feminist criticism. At the core of Mulvey’s analysis lies the claim that representations of gender traditionally centre around binary oppositions of active/male and passive/female, encouraging a “male gaze” which leads to the eroticisation of the female star. It juxtaposes, as Tasker explains, a peculiarly charged idea of a “male subject of power and agency” with a “female object of
powerlessness and passivity” which, in turn, imposes clear limitations on the
interpretation of visual display, especially the visual display of women in film. Women are simplistically connected to eroticism, while men are fixed in the
position of onlookers. The female, non-heterosexual and non-eroticising gazes and desires are, inevitably, unexplored and overlooked. Thus, as Tasker
suggests, “what once may have provided an enabling critical concept, now seems almost completely disempowering in its effects, operating as a term which fixes and analysis within the restrictions of the very gendered system it seeks to question”. 

This is not to deny that female fighters display their bodies, provocatively or otherwise. They are often depicted in various states of undress, exposing their
well-conditioned musculature and physique. Their bodies become the core focus of the camera, turning them into objects of an appraising gaze. The resulting
images have given rise to the “wholly justified objections of various groups—in recent years blacks, women, and gays, in particular—to the ways in which they
find themselves stereotyped [and objectified] in the mass media”. Some, therefore, argue that the depictions of female fighters in film leave a lot to be
desired in terms of encapsulating a feminist ideal. These contemporary representations, despite their ample configurations, are often seen as instances of (feminist) backlash, if not defeat.

Others are far more optimistic. They believe that the growing presence and
popularity of the fighting women in film in recent years is a creative force that is
mediating and generating a new cinematic form which is promoting transgressive and empowered visions of femininity. The wide scale diffusion of
the female fighter across film genres and cultures is, they argue, testament to this phenomenon. It is perhaps no coincidence then that this transgressive figure
is encoded with “rebellious”, “lawless” and “revolutionary” traits and is thereby
subject to the appeal of such qualities (Aeon Flux, Run Lola Run [1998], The
Messenger: The Story of Jean of Arc). The female fighting figure is certainly
presented as “outstanding” in her apparent rebelliousness, and the
representations of her transgressive acts are often judged as signs of female
liberation and empowerment. However, to take sides within these debates, or to
position a particular female fighter within these debates is problematised by the
figure’s own fluidity or ambiguity. She (successfully and sometimes
unsuccessfully) embodies paradoxical or contradictory extremes such that
feminist, as well as post-feminist, notions of femininity and empowerment are
displayed within a single persona.

Our woman willing to fight is therefore a valuable barometer of the
ambivalence that marks the production, representation and circulation of femininity in our present socio-cultural climate. She is therefore not only
inherently marked by her willingness to fight but also by the ways she herself
spurs on a lively and at times heated battle over her meanings, readings and interpretations.

Notes


2. The image of Kate Kelly brandishing a gun is in fact one of the few surviving fragments of the The Story of the Kelly Gang (1906), the world’s first feature length film.

3. From the numerous examples to draw, Amazons, martyrs and outlaws are amongst the most cited classes in film and televisual media. Mary Anne Doane argues that the femme fatale’s emergence as a central figure around the time of the Industrial Revolution, is a clear indication of the extent of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century.” Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis. (New York : Routledge, 1991), 1-2.


6. Tasker, Spectacular Bodies.


12. Ibid., 103.


15. Ibid., 115.

16. Richard Dyer, The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 11. We have specifically set Hollywood as our site of production. This is in part due to the global reach of the texts it produces and because of the power of those texts as a barometer of mainstream sensibilities. It is disparaging then to note how few of the fighting protagonists from which we could draw are women of
colour, queer, transgender, or even non-American. The obvious exception is the marked influence of the Asian cinema.
There is a scene in Jean Luc Godard’s 1962 masterpiece, Vivre Sa Vie that presents a daring comparison between two universal and mythical female figures—a Saint and a Prostitute. Vivre Sa Vie/It’s My Life: My Life to Live (1962) tells the story, in twelve episodes, of Nana (Anna Karina), a Parisian wife and mother who wants to become an actor but instead drifts into prostitution. In episode three, Nana goes to the cinema to see Carl Dreyer’s 1928 silent classic, La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc. The comparison between the
two women might appear at first glance a little tenuous. What might a twentieth
century prostitute have in common with an early fifteenth century saint?

Joan of Arc is heralded as the saviour of her country, a fighting woman and a
fierce virgin who refused to compromise her beliefs in order to save her life. Nana is a pretty but otherwise unremarkable woman who saves no one and lives
a life that some would regard as immoral. Critics have commented on the way
both directors have recorded, in close-up, the faces, looks and private grief of
the two women. Nana sits perfectly still, tears falling down her face as she looks
up at Joan who also weeps silently, realising she is soon to die. Joan tells one of
the clergy that her deliverance will be her death. Nana is herself drawn to the
idea of death. In the first episode, she tells her estranged husband two things. “I
exist too!” and “I want to die”. This indeed is Nana’s fate. In the final scene the
pimps and gangsters she has defied shoot her in a street brawl. Because Nana is
an ordinary woman, living an unexceptional life and earning her living as a
prostitute, it does not follow that her life should not be viewed in heroic terms.
Although she does not set out to defend her beliefs with her life, this is what
happens. Nana is on an existential journey in which she, a lone figure, is trying
to save her own soul.

Rarely if ever are these two characters, Joan of Arc and Nana, discussed in
relation to the mythical journey of the female hero. Joan is viewed as a warrior
and saint but not usually discussed in such terms. Yet, although very different
from their male counterparts, both women in their own ways are heroes each
undertaking the classic journey, in which each struggles against obstacles in the
quest for self-identity. Joan and Nana each reject the roles society has carved
out for them. They both set out on a journey, struggle against dominant
stereotypes of female sexuality, and come into conflict with male power in their
attempts to define their own identities. This analysis could equally apply to a
range of female characters in the cinema, literature, myth and popular culture
from Joan of Arc to Mata Hari, Nana, Madame Bovary, Thelma and Louise,
Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor. These women represent, respectively, a range
of female roles including the conventional stereotypes of saint, prostitute,
femme fatale, wife and mother. If we re-define all of these roles in term of the
female hero, that is, the woman who undertakes a mythic journey in order to
discover her identity, values and beliefs, then all could be seen, in varying
degrees, as heroic.

There is another reason why Nana might have been drawn to the cinema that
night to watch Joan of Arc. As well as identifying with her suffering, Nana may
well have admired Joan, regarding her as a female hero to emulate. Nana herself
wanted to be a film star—perhaps she wanted to star in roles such as Joan of
Arc. Godard represents the cinema as a place where young modern women,
adrift in the personal anonymity of the twentieth century, can go to identify with
and worship their own female heroes. A contemporary form of myth-making, the cinema celebrates ancient mysteries in a modern way; particularly the ritual journey of the heroine and hero portrayed in larger-than-life images, flickering in the half-light in a communal place where strangers come together to embark upon a journey into the unknown, sharing similar fears and desires. This essay will explore the representation of female heroism in the cinema. It will set down a new structure—the neomyth—with which to analyse the journey of the heroine as a mythic quest. Finally, it will focus on an analysis of one form or transformation of the heroine—woman as warrior.

### Woman as Hero

Why has so little been written on woman as hero or saviour figure in film? Why is woman rarely seen as embarking on a journey of self-discovery, which, like the journey of the male hero, assumes mythic status? Why is her journey often minimalised, discussed mainly in relation to the tropes of melodrama, domesticity, madness, romance and sexuality? Why have feminist writers and critics spent so much time debating female heroism (as I am doing here) when male heroism is taken as an unproblematic category? The immediate and obvious answer is that in a phallocentric world, the heroic journey has become thoroughly masculinised. There are no formal narrative structures to use as a template for the mythic journey of the female hero. Consequently, discussion and analysis of hero myths have historically been produced in relation to the male. These narratives invariably draw upon masculinised spaces (exterior, outside domains), masculinised tests of courage (battle, combat), masculinised obstacles (the enemy as “other”), masculinised desire (for the femme fatale, forbidden woman), masculinised victories (saving the kingdom/preserving the status quo) and masculinised rewards (power, fame).

I am not arguing, however, that the female hero should be “masculinised” so that her journey becomes the same as the journey of the male hero. Nor am I arguing that when the heroine does take up arms, she becomes a pseudo-male. Rather, I am arguing that we need to define a completely new structure for the heroine’s journey—not just the journey of the female action hero but of the hero in all of her manifestations. When woman decides to embark on a journey of discovery, which might involve the taking up of arms or occupation of traditionally masculinised spaces, she does so for reasons that can only be fully understood in relation to her traditional role as an “other” in a phallocentric world. While there should be room for areas of overlap with man’s journey, the structure of woman’s heroic journey needs to be one which draws, in the main, on feminised notions of space, courage, obstacles, desire, victory and outcomes. Freud argued that there is only one libido (and I agree) but this view must take
into account that society attempts to regulate the various ways in which the libido speaks its fears and desires and this in turn affects its many forms of expression—for female and male hero alike.

**Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth**

The classic work on this topic is Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The cover states that this is “a brilliant examination, through ancient hero myths, of man’s eternal struggle for identity.” Campbell described the journey of the mythological hero as cyclical and argued that it enjoyed universal applicability, that is, every hero myth to some degree followed a similar pattern which he described as “the monomyth”. Drawing on Jungian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory, particularly the notion of the archetype, Campbell elaborated the structure of this journey as based on three key stages: **Departure**, **Initiation** and **Return**, each of which was divided into various sub-categories.

It is important to stress that Campbell’s analysis focuses on ancient hero myths. He is primarily concerned with the past and its relevance, or lack of, to the present. In the Epilogue, in which he discusses “the hero today”, Campbell laments the collapse of the “timeless universe of symbols”. In the modern secular state, with its focus on scientific rationalism, “all of these mysteries have lost their force; their symbols no longer interest our psyche”. “Not the animal world, not the plant world, not the miracle of the spheres, but man himself is now the crucial mystery”. Man’s journey is now one of individual self-discovery in which the existential forces of “personal despair” dominate the quest. Campbell would probably not agree that the cinema offers an alternative mythic space that celebrates ancient and modern mysteries in a new way. Although Campbell’s analysis focuses on the past, his ideas, particularly the structure of the hero’s journey as represented in the monomyth, has exerted a marked influence on popular Hollywood cinema through the writings of Christopher Vogler.

Although Campbell refers to both male and female heroes (and the “hero” as male and female), his focus is predominantly on the male figure. Woman does not fit comfortably into the structures of the hero’s mythic journey as set down by Campbell. He cites as instances of the hero’s journey, the narratives of King Arthur, Buddha, and Odysseus; for the heroine’s journey he cites the stories of an unnamed Arapaho girl from a North American tale and the unnamed princess from Grimm’s fairy tale of *The Frog King*. The above cited male heroes are universal figures of heroic stature, all possessing proper names; the female heroes are unknown and unnamed figures whose stories share some elements in common with those of the male figures, but also cry out for a different set of
terms or structures to provide us with a proper understanding of their journeys. In addition, the monomyth in several of its phases is gender specific. For instance under “Initiation” there are two phases, which refer specifically to gendered aspects of the hero’s journey: “the Meeting with the Goddess” and “Woman as Temptress”. In relation to the latter, the hero is called upon to resist the temptress and her many seductive offerings that are designed to lead him astray before he can continue his journey. He is the active, questing figure, whereas woman is positioned as an “obstacle” in his path, a trial or temptation to be overcome.  

Finally, the monomyth ignores the different faces of the female hero. In the section entitled “Transformations of the Hero”, Campbell discusses the hero under a series of personae: the hero as warrior, the hero as lover, the hero as world redeemer, the hero as saint. All of his examples are of male heroes whom he selects from myths from around the world. These include Jesus, Buddha, Charlemagne, Krishna, the Irish warrior, Cuchulainn, and the Pueblo hero, Water Jar Boy. He does not discuss ancient female heroes such as Echo, Psyche, Demeter, Penthesilea, Antigone, Joan of Arc, Boedicea or Heloïse. This suggests that woman cannot be easily assimilated into Campbell’s monomyth because it does not recognise that the female hero from earlier epochs might follow a different path from that of the male. Central to the heroine’s journey from all eras are events associated with her generative or reproductive life (love, desire, the body, pregnancy, birth, motherhood) as well as her vocational life (saint, prostitute, wife, mother, boxer, soldier). 

Some feminist writers have criticised narratives that focus on woman’s sexuality as “reducing” woman to her body, but I believe that woman’s physicality and sexuality, like man’s, plays an essential part in her journey, influencing its direction and outcome. This is evident in the Joan of Arc narrative in which Joan proudly asserts her identity as a virgin in *Dishonoured* (1931), in which Dietrich in the role of Mata Hari defends her identity as a prostitute, and in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) in which the heroine, Sarah Connor, courageously embraces her identity as a mother. Rather than dismissing the part played by the heroine’s sexuality, it is more productive to define this as central to her quest. Such an approach means that we are compelled to reject the monomyth and formulate a separate, but related, mythic structure for the female hero. 

The Neomyth

I have used the term “neomyth”, or new myth, to describe the structure of the heroine’s journey. Although this paper focuses on the cinema, the neomyth can equally be applied to the female hero of myth and legend, literature, popular
culture and the arts. The neomyth is divided into three parts and consists of eight main structures that apply, in varying degrees, to all manifestations of the female hero in the cinema from the silent period to the present. The key paths in the heroine’s narrative journey are: Journey, Threshold, and Self-discovery. The various paths/events do not necessarily occur in the order set down and of course may vary in terms of their importance from film to film. This structure is designed to focus on aspects of female heroism that might otherwise be ignored. Discussion of the neomyth also reveals that the female hero is different from the male in a number of key ways. The female hero is not necessarily a battlefield figure—particularly in the twentieth century. As well as warriors in the field such as Joan of Arc, Ellen Ripley and Xena, there are women who qualify as warriors because of their single-minded devotion to a cause; women who are prepared to sacrifice their lives in order to defend others, their personal beliefs and the course of action they have chosen. In this context female heroes, whose fight is almost always with the phallocentric order, include heroines as diverse as Thelma and Louise, Dian Fossey, Veronica Guerin and Vera Drake.

The Neomyth – Journey of the Female Hero

Part 1: The Journey

i. The Call
ii. The Cause
iii. Obstacles

Part 2: The Threshold

iv. The Paternal Symbolic Order
v. The Threshold

Part 3: Self-discovery

vi. Assertion of a New Identity
vii. Female Hero as “Other”
viii. Death & Rebirth

Part 1: The Journey

Stage i: The Call

“The Call” refers to an event that changes the status quo for the heroine. It may change her everyday life causing her to alter her usual circumstances (*Vivre Sa Vie* [1962], *Now Voyager* [1942], *Pretty Woman* [1990], *Kill Bill: Vol. I* [2003]); or it may refer to a call to pursue a personal ambition (*The Red Shoes*, [1948], *My Brilliant Career* [1979], *A League of Their Own* [1992], *Girlfight*
or it may refer to a call to arms in which the heroine must physically fight to save her life or the lives of others or the nation (Joan of Arc [1948] [1999], Alien [1979], The Terminator [1984]), or it may refer to a social or political or species injustice in which the heroine fights for a cause (The German Sisters [1981], Vera Drake [2004], The Constant Gardener [2005], Gorillas in the Mist [1988]).

Stage ii: The Cause

The heroine is called to fight for a cause for which she is prepared to place her life in danger or even to sacrifice her life. This is true of Joan of Arc, Ellen Ripley, Thelma and Louise, Mata Hari, Veronica Guerin and Vera Drake. She is also called to fight for love—as distinct from sexual desire. In contrast to the hero, love is more likely to play a central role in her journey. She may have to sacrifice her own personal life for that of her child or family (Mildred Pierce [1945], Stella [1990]); she may be forced to separate from her child (The Old Maid [1939]); or protect her unborn baby or child whether her own or a surrogate (Chinatown [1974], Blue Velvet [1986], Terminator 2 [1991], Aliens [1986], Kill Bill: Vol. 2 [2004]). In the love story, including “the woman’s film”, her emotions become an integral part of her quest. Sometimes this is because the loved one is not necessarily a socially acceptable figure, making her journey even more perilous (Marnie [1964], November Moon [1984], Far From Heaven [2002], Mulholland Dr. [2001]).

Stage iii: Obstacles

The heroine invariably encounters obstacles along the way—events that test her resolve, determination and courage. In contrast to the hero, the obstacles invariably put her into an antagonistic relationship with the male symbolic order. These obstacles may include emotional issues such as pressures or threats from an overbearing parent or partner, or a hostile protagonist (Now Voyager , Rebecca [1940], The Burning Bed [1984]); internal doubts which cause anxiety, hesitation and delay (The Hours [2002], Portrait of a Lady [1996], The Piano [1993]); institutional and legal obstacles (Joan of Arc, Blonde Venus [1932], Blue Steel [1990]); physical threats of violence (Alien, The Terminator, Kill Bill, Vols 1 & 2); or barriers created by the fact she is a woman (Gilda [1946], Million Dollar Baby [2004], G.I. Jane [1997]).

Part 2: The Threshold

Stage iv: The Paternal Symbolic Order

This passage takes two major forms: one is open conflict with the paternal symbolic order, the other is endorsement of the same order. Three different but
related female heroes emerge in terms of their relationship with the symbolic order: the anti-heroine, woman warrior and action heroine. In contrast to the hero’s journey, the heroine’s sex and gender are often central to this stage.

(a) Anti-Heroine:
In many films, the heroine comes into direct conflict with an authority figure (male or female) or institution (religious, legal) that represents the values of a patriarchal world. I have used the term “anti-heroine” to describe her. Conflict with male authority is central to her struggle and in the end she almost always renounces phallocentric values. The heroine may refuse to adopt the proper feminine role in relation to dress, career, motherhood and procreation (The Ballad of Little Jo [1993], My Brilliant Career, Blonde Venus); or she may reject heterosexuality (The Killing of Sister George [1968], Desert Hearts [1985], Boys Don’t Cry [1999]); or she may reject marriage and monogamy (Mata Hari [1931], Vivre Sa Vie, Pretty Woman). The femme fatale of film noir almost always comes into conflict with the paternal symbolic, testing the limits of the law. This conflict almost always leads to her death. The anti-heroine may also, but not necessarily, enter the category of the woman warrior or action heroine. The male anti-hero rarely falls into this category. Male protagonists often enter into conflict with a father figure, but almost always in order to take his place.

(b) Woman Warrior:
A significant number of anti-heroines also belong to the category of woman warriors. The woman warrior exhibits exceptional bravery and intelligence and is prepared to die for her beliefs. Although prepared to die, the women warrior is not necessarily a soldier or fighter. Nor is she necessarily an expert with weapons or skilled at martial arts and other forms of combat. In the end, her battle is frequently with the dominant male order. She comes into direct conflict with male beliefs and values which she sees as inimical to her own ethical position. In the majority of instances (but not always) the warrior woman sacrifices her life rather than submit to a system in which she does not believe. Further, the woman warrior who sacrifices herself—does so not in the traditional sense—in order to protect the kingdom—but rather to make clear her total and complete opposition to the phallocentric values of the existing society. In many instances, her sacrifice guarantees her transformation from mortal woman to myth.

Women warriors in film include Joan of Arc, who clashed with Church and State; Mata Hari, who rejected male ideals of patriotism and war; Diane Fossey, who turned her back on anthropocentric values; Thelma and Louise, who rejected Patriarchy and the Law; Ellen Ripley, who refused to obey the wishes