Fiction, Crime, and the Feminine
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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

The form of art called fiction—whether we refer to prose, poetry, or film—has always been the privileged framework, the other scene in space and time (“not here, not now”) providing the perfect alibi—literally, an elsewhere—for facing, framing, and containing the Other’s desire and the strange libido attached to violence: in other words, there is an ambivalent dimension inherent in the scenarios and fantasies we enjoy by proxy. Are not the fairy tales of our childhood full of images of death and violence, whose fascinating presence, contained at the core of the tale, is paradoxically meant to make us feel all the more safely tucked up in bed? After all, the wolf or the Little Red Riding Hood, the monstrous killer or the unfortunate victim are but fictitious characters, mere shifting positions: they are “not me”—therefore, thanks to the willing suspension of disbelief process, any reading “I” may shift into their speech or thoughts on the fictional screen, a stage both for projection of and protection from such forbidden enjoyments.

Crime fiction has also for a long time been the genre for such containment. Ever since Victorian “craniology,” criminal violence has remained as resistant as ever to scientific measurement—even to the more recent techniques of investigation of the brain. The classic Agatha Christie story is based essentially on the pleasures of epistemological resolution and mastery of the horror, safely held within a narrative frame. Where women are concerned they were first and mostly fascinating victims but they also nowadays feature in the role of the criminals, adding to the first fascination the mystery of a woman’s desire beyond the pale of societal expectations. The essays in this volume clearly demonstrate that the modalities of containment have also changed through time, for the simple reason that the frames have either collapsed or become uncannily porous. And if we follow Edward Coke’s famous saying which is the basic principle of English law (actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea, “an act does not make a man guilty of a crime unless his mind is also guilty,” 1797), it is undeniable that the true lies of fiction have been instrumental to explore the dimension of the mind, especially, concerning female crime, and to convey truths so far repressed or unacknowledged. More and more pieces of crime fiction nowadays refuse to grant the simple pleasures of old: what if, for example, the text refuses to comply to the ‘whodunnit’
introduction? What about those stories that instead of closure, will diffuse a mist, a sense of unrest by their emphasis on the inexplicable lure of violence? In other words, gone are the days of the satisfaction granted by traditional closure and return to a solidly structured society, made safe again by the disposal of the scene of violence.

At first sight, the notion of containment is synonymous with that of keeping within limits, of controlling and checking—for example, the spread of a deadly disease. Crime involving female characters has always been the object of ideological and cultural control, especially through the dominant male gaze. Early or popular crime fiction provides the ideal stage for more or less patent stereotypes of romance, set within voyeuristic fantasies where the woman murderer or victim cannot have a voice because she is the object of attention and discourse. The first thing to do for the contemporary, post-feminist novelist will be to shift her position from object of the gaze, to that of viewing/perceiving subject. The structure of the imaginary scenario changes, and the modalities of vicarious enjoyment shift, too. Most of the papers in this volume insist on the innovative montage effects produced by a wide range of narrative and linguistic strategies: spatial and temporal fragmentation of information which no longer follows a linear pattern, new economies of gaze and voice, pastiche and parody that deconstruct the frame, whose effect, among others, is to make the reader’s epistemological stance far more insecure.

**Containment as framing: generic, scientific, ideological**

The most obvious forms of ideological containment concern the representation of women according to a fixed set of binary opposites and stereotypes that both reflected and dictated their place as bourgeois mothers and wives, servants, housekeepers, and so forth—like the silent “angel in the house” or the raving “madwoman in the attic” in Victorian culture. As is well known by now, woman in nineteenth century expectations will be either angel or devil, at best a heroine of some stature enmeshed in a tragic pattern—but nothing in between such extremes, like a simple human being with her own sufferings, responsibilities and acts.

The prevailing popular Victorian image of the ideal woman and wife is indeed best represented by the figure of the “angel in the house,” originally the title of a long narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, where the poet, who sees in his own wife the perfect Victorian lady, consecrates the virtues of the self-sacrificing, compassionate, submissive and especially pure feminine figure. This ideal woman was, indeed, as Virginia Woolf says
in a paper read to the Women’s Service League titled “Professions for Women,” (1931)

intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. (Woolf)

Purity refers of course to the absence of sexual desire. As the poem goes, it is woman’s duty, or rather pleasure to please her husband, not herself: “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure. […]” (Patmore 135) Woman absorbs and transfigures her husband’s sins:

And if he once, by shame oppress’d,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers. (Patmore 136)

“The Angel in the House” went nearly unnoticed when it was first published in 1854; yet it became increasingly popular through the last decades of the nineteenth century, and came to symbolise in feminist criticism the very expression of repression. Virginia Woolf denounced this popular image:

[…], while I was writing this review [about a novel written by a male writer], I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. (Woolf)

This is not a personal problem; it is the problem of any woman writer: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.” (Woolf)

Strange or anachronic as it might seem, bringing the Angel back to life has been the main preoccupation of science fiction movie directors. As Danièle André’s study shows, science fiction movies make it difficult to identify significant features of women characters involved in crimes, whether they are criminals or victims. In general, they are “either ghostly
presences or archetypal female characters (the damsel in distress, the woman as reward);” and “unlike other film genres, science fiction does not let women be mean or cruel.” Hence, if woman is denied sexuality as a pleasure (and not as a reproductive function), she is at the same time denied the possibility of being a criminal. The parallelism is worth being examined. What we have here is a denial that concerns the interference of the death drive with the sex drive. It is as if woman were on the side of the instinct, which implies a reduction of human libido to a mere force of reproduction whose aim is to perpetuate the species. If, then, woman indulges in pleasure, she endangers the cycle of reproduction. If she indulges in criminal activity (especially murder), she not only subverts the social order, but annihilates the life cycle. When pleasure and crime are united in the subversive act, woman then becomes satanic and monstrous.

This is what the so-called “Newgate novels” show. These narratives, that belong to the intense production of crime literature in the Victorian era, make women part of the criminal world as well as men, but, while criminal men are considered as heroic, “criminal women are seen as corrupted, or even corruptive,” as Hubert Malfray contends. The fiction is here overdetermined by reality, and the novel is nothing but the representation and conditioning of this reality, not its critical probing. The novels dealt with in Malfray’s study show how women are “encapsulated in an ideological circle from which they cannot escape.” Women are confined to traditional patterns and rules that have to be obeyed, not discussed, let alone transgressed. Ideological discourse considers female crimes as being mechanically linked with their sexuality, that is, the very mark of their bestiality. These novels might be said to be ideologically mimetic insofar as they reproduce the social condemnation of female criminality. Moreover, they seem to enhance the criminalization of women, thus producing in turn a sexually marked discourse which follows a “law of gender.” Deviant women are seen as natural, not cultural beings, that is, on the side of the real that should be repressed or kept at bay. Dispossessed of their speech, reduced to screams or groans, they give the impression that they are dangerous beings whose disorders continuously threaten society.

Only uneducated women are involved in criminal activity (contrary to men: even the educated among them are likely to commit crime). Women from well-educated backgrounds cannot commit crime. The “sensation novels,” that followed on from the Newgate novels also deal with this question. Victorian readers were thus encouraged to read the fictionalised stories of sensational criminals, in parallel with those published in newspapers. Most of these novels are centred on criminal biographies and
focus on a whole range of transgressions: bigamy, theft, insanity, murder… They appear to subvert the idealistic vision of woman and mother, and to recognize the universality of the death drive. Hence the existence of two “clashing visions” of womanhood as Marion Charret-Del Bove has it: the idealistic and the realistic. According to the first one, well-mannered and lady-like women are beyond the shadow of suspicion. Indeed, says the author, “the very notion of female criminality is impossible to maintain because it would shatter the whole system of beliefs and values.” A lady is a poor creature and a sentimental victim not a criminal. The second vision recognises feminine guilt. Sensation novels, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) or Wilkie Collins’s Armadale (1866), present the “truth” beyond the idealistic façade. The “angel in the house,” albeit well educated, turns out to be as dangerous as the common female convicts that were being tried at the time in open court for murder. Hence, beneath angelic and beautiful smiles, there hide the most horrible secrets, namely their criminal activities as bigamists, arsonists and murderesses. The two narratives gradually focus less on female criminality than on female insanity, thus following the current medical discourses about women and crime. By calling into question the notion of feminine mens rea, sensation fiction manages to displace the threats posed by female characters and female criminality in general into the less menacing domain of female psychiatry. “Sensation novels helped their readers rethink the unspeakable truth at the heart of the paradoxical Victorian ideology, and translate female criminality in the very language of insanity.”

The literary quality and range of Braddon’s and Collins’s works are different, and one might be well advised to share James’s opinion when he says in a review of the New York edition (1865) of the recently published Aurora Floyd by Braddon:

[… ] Although Mr. Collins anticipated Miss Braddon in the work of devising domestic mysteries adapted to the wants of a sternly prosaic age, she was yet the founder of the sensation novel. Mr. Collins’s productions deserve a more respectable name. They are massive and elaborate constructions—monuments of mosaic work, for the proper mastery of which it would seem, at first, that an index and note-book were required. They are not so much works of art as works of science. (James 122-123)

Maybe a much more firm distinction should be made between Dickens and the other Newgate novelists. This said, the critic might wonder why serious writers such as Collins and Dickens wrote novels that were or could be associated to the Newgate fiction and the sensation novel. Their interest lies in theme not in genre, and proves that “something” else is at
stake in these texts. The theme of criminal femininity says more than what is seemingly allowed by the genre. This “something” has to do with the fascinating feminine jouissance, that these serious writers tried to probe while wearing the mask of the sensationalist or Newgate novelist.

**What does a woman want? Paradigmatic shifts**

Françoise Couturier and Jeffrey Storey’s essay concentrates on Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, the story of Grace Marks, a 16 year-old housemaid who was an accomplice in the double murder of her employer and his housekeeper in Northern Ontario in the 1850s. Atwood’s fiction is always based on documentary evidence and archival work, but this is only where the novelist’s task begins: the reading contract of what first looks like a “historical novel,” the authors argue, changes into a “highbrow romance” raising questions like: what is the kind of truth delivered by the newspapers, does it not often include the reader’s/spectator’s own generic bias, is it not itself contaminated by beliefs on women, religion or early psychiatry? What about the voyeuristic gaze, the limits between reality and fantasy within the scientific observer? Atwood chooses to destabilize the ideological frame by her own narrative geometry, based here on the model of a patchwork fabric, beautifully crafted out of skilfully arranged scraps: thus Grace is given a voice of her own, its elf juxtaposed with other contradictory voices as the novel’s feminist and didactic purpose “tend to get lost in a maze of erotic fantasies.”

The greatness of fiction lies in the mutability of the medium, on its capacity for renewal and subversion of the alibidinal scenario. Jean-Charles Perquin’s essay on Browning’s *Men and Women* (1855) underscores the potentialities offered by the dramatic monologue delegated to speakers enjoying fully the narration of some criminal fantasy, and among them women endowed with a freedom of speech and thought unknown so far: “Whether woman is a victim or a criminal, whether she is the one who transgresses the rules or trespasses the limits, or the victim of such a transgression,” she seems here to materialise the uncertain threshold on which Browning’s soliloquists stand: “Our interest is in the dangerous edge of things,” one of them claims, and Browning’s women do have their say in terms of the mens rea, without being presented as “errors of nature” for all that: they are just criminals, able to plan the murder of a rival, deriving eerie enjoyment, enjoy-meant in their tale of sadistic fantasy. We witness a turning point in the representation of woman as she now responds for her own murderous act or intentions.
But is the change of focus and transfer of agency enough? Can a feminist version of the crime novel be reduced to a mere reversal of the basic plot structure, asks Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon in her essay on contemporary Scottish female writers of crime fiction (Denise Mina, Louise Welsh, Val Mc Dermid)? Their novels do eliminate “safety and closure, moving away from the traditional reliance on the figure of the detective,” who may, for example, turn out to be a murderer. As to the representation of the victim, Denise Mina mentions the interest of such an accessible medium as a possible vehicle for diffuse anger at the mutilation and abjection of the tortured female body, a favourite topos for the voyeur. An unheard history of women appears in filigree through the female voices that deliver their actual experience often in terms of sexual abuse in childhood, and marriage with a violent partner. Lesbian crime fiction often combines the parodic with the erotic, something quite different from the simple pleasures afforded by epistemological resolution. The shift of women into subjects rather than objects, the play with sexual and gender orientations, the revenge against the complacency of the genre can then be a satisfaction of its own, another kind of cathartic purgation of the affect that breaks through the old stereotypes about both victim and murderer.

Much of the disgrace that befalls Hardy’s heroines, namely Tess of the d’Urberville and Eustacia Vye, draws on the way their “enjoyment” is perceived and denied by society. For, as Annie Ramel shows, though adultery is not committed, the female protagonist is branded adulteress. Indeed, Tess of the d’Urberville is labelled right from the beginning a murderess, and her feminine “fate” leads her unmistakably to the gallows. Eustacia Vye symbolically “kills” her mother-in-law by a Medusa-like gaze, a silent look through a windowpane. She too is a murderess, the “adder” whose evil eye stings to death the older woman. Annie Ramel raises a relevant question in her paper: for what real crime are these female characters punished? And why should feminine enjoyment be tangled up with crime? The author is aptly aware of the limitations of literature, let alone two novels, in unriddling a problematic question that involves, at the least, the history and anthropology of feminine repression. Yet, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides one part of the answer. The two heroines experience forms of enjoyment or jouissance that are complex and enigmatic. Their enjoyment is structurally “adulterous,” insofar as women, being “non-all” and having consequently access to an Other jouissance which is “more than” phallic jouissance, men feel betrayed by this jouissance which is “beyond the phallus.” In this regard, as Philippe Julien has it, “feminine adultery” is a structural truth. Eustacia and Tess form red stains on reality because they are “points of contact with the Real
of enjoyment,” silent “spots” loaded with a surplus jouissance that comes in excess of symbolic reality. The “spot” fills the place that is normally left vacant by the extracted “object-gaze.” These figures of feminine enjoyment are quite logically turned into scapegoats, whose tragic exclusion achieves the purgation of passions.

The purgation of passions is also at the core of Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All. Here woman uses her own voice, not as a writer, but at least as a narrator, in order to tell her story and her husband’s. In fact, she takes revenge on the nineteenth century patriarchal order that led to the Civil War and to racial segregation in the American South. The heroine not only kills the “angel in the house,” but literally puts to death her jailer. Marie-Agnès Gay’s study explores the complex pattern of crime, guilt, and confession in Allan Gurganus’s novel, where the narrator, ninety-nine-year-old Lucy Marsden, widow and confident of “the final vet of the War Betwixt States,” is the repository of first-hand tales about the Civil War. She thus initially sets out to pass on her husband’s stories of soldierly pain and guilt. Yet the reader soon realizes that the real fight and killing happen on another front, that of the text itself. From a mere intermediary, Lucy Marsden gradually takes centre stage. No longer a mere widow but a full-fledged individual, and breathing as much life into her narrative as most veterans in their war tales, Lucy engages into a telling act that proves less innocent than first meets the eye: using her narrative as a weapon, Lucy Marsden wages a war against white patriarchal discourse and turns into a symbolic murderer. When, in the final twist of her long winding tale, Lucy kills her husband, the textual murder is actualised and Lucy’s metamorphosis from confessor into murderer and confessant completed.

**Containment and transmission**

To contain may also mean to enclose, to accommodate, to hold something without crowding or inconvenience. Here the emphasis is less on control and restraint, than on giving room to, on harbouring some unwanted host—both a friend and an enemy, as the etymology indicates—who needs to be wrapped in a fictional semblance to be acceptable, and yet welcomed. The more we move into the area of the contemporary novel, the less constraining narrative frames seem to be, and the more porous and receptive to such disturbing knowledge as the erotic stimulation of death, the ambivalent co-presence of Eros and Thanatos among men and women.

Elisabeth Bouzonviller’s essay on Louise Erdrich’s novel The Master Butcher’s Singing Club is particularly relevant to this modality of diffuse
containment whereby an unspoken truth oozes through, in half words and remote echoes, raising the question of responsibility beyond the terms of the ‘whodunnit’ convention. This novel of an American lady Macbeth set in the context of American Indian history is a case of reconstruction, this time more in the way of the irregular crazy quilt pattern where some scraps may retrain traces of blood or old wounds. The multiple focalisation, the ghostly effects of the textual voice, the “insistent metaphor of meat and butchery” outline an opaque, traumatic kernel, a vanishing point in the picture which is both a stain and a soft spot, aligned against the dark background of American Indian history. Erdrich’s writing, which “often relies on derision and humour as antidotes to tragedies, pictures an America that is not idealistic and forgetful, but mixed, like her heritage.” Here the novelist mingles fiction and history to produce another kind of family romance, focused on the symbolical mother figure as purveyor of identity, based on the oral passing on of memory. Erdrich’s story of rescue and survival does not seek to erase the blood stains quilted into her pattern, it is a humanizing labour whereby the blood that was shed is channelled back into the living pattern of a new creation.

To Joseph Conrad, who once said that the “true anarchist” in his Secret Agent was Winnie Verloc, the “feminine” he deals with cannot be understood by scientific discourse or knowledge. Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s study explores the textual and thematic subtleties and complexities of Conrad’s novel. She demonstrates that the underlying question raised by Conrad concerns the “artist’s response to the feminine forces of anarchy.” The Secret Agent does not allegorise the “new woman,” but shows how her crime breaks through the rigid, oppressive ideological Victorian frames. In point of fact, Conrad shows in his writings that the world, society are unreadable, and that the truth comes forth “through some punctum-like object whose hyper-reality provokes a flash of insight.” The novel highlights the other side of reality, not what lies there, far from the sphere of the subject, but what lies here, within reach, those subversive and disruptive forces that partake of the same reality. These forces (at work in the covert plot) reverse the surface plot where political anarchy is represented. Winnie Verloc kills the Angel when she leaves behind the Victorian woman she has been so far. And yet, she does not “step into freedom for all that: the blind hole will catch up with her and suck her in.” Yet, what Paccaud-Huguet’s study is interested in is not the nature of Winnie’s crime, but the gaze as silent object that prevents the representation of truth, and the feminine forces of anarchy that act upon the text. One of the study’s merits is the way it examines the truth that radiates from the “sinister marvel” this anarchy is.
Crime fiction, with predominantly female transgressors, also provides the ground for probing further into the Freudian question of what a woman wants—both in terms of desire and lack—and we are not at the end of our surprises here. Edna O’Brien’s novella *Johnny I hardly knew you*, Claude Maisonnat argues, harbours the unpalatable truth that if there is no such thing as the perfect romantic fit between men and women, there is such a thing as unlimited feminine jouissance beyond the law of desire, precisely based on lack. Nora, a middle-aged woman inexplicably kills her young lover, and it is impossible to reach a logical and definitive conclusion as to her responsibility. There is ample evidence of extenuating circumstances in her gloomy childhood, and marriage to a violent man. The first-person narrative revolves around a traumatic event, the murder, approached “in a circular, roundabout way, because the narrator is confronted with the impossibility of telling.” Nora’s quasi-incestuous relationship with her young lover, obviously a son figure, is based on the delusion of ideal communion and fusion, the true guilt, Maisonnat argues, being that of denying alterity in the partner, thus giving up on what made her a desiring woman: “She gives up on her desire, which ought to be the desire of the Other, but turns into an irrepressible longing for the imaginary plenitude and fulfilment of deadly jouissance.”

Which leads us to the artist’s own responsibility of accommodating the unspeakable, the deadly disease whose symptoms are no longer a matter of repressed meaning that should be told fully in order to be dealt with, and then forgotten. The symptom, rather, insists as the ciphered trace of unconscious satisfaction, the remainder of an ambivalent bliss beyond meaning, which writing alone will contain within the circle of repetition, and host in the very substance of the letter, in *dying falls* that spoil the reader’s ear. The luscious prose of Toni Morrison is exemplary here. It reveals, Rédouane Abouddahab argues, the ontological knot binding together crime, love, and the feminine. Even though Morrison’s work is historically well documented, most of the time the causes of violence and crime cannot be simply seen on a socio-symbolic plane, however deficient the Name-and-No of the political father. Her figures of the majestic, aural “Other woman” are both extremely loving and violent, determined to have the last word: to put it differently, unsubjected to the symbolic law of speech that initiates the circuit of unsatisfied desire. We move into the area where the angel in the house would not tread: where the sensual and the deadly interlock beyond the pleasure principle, where the motifs of scapegoating and sacrifice are insufficient to appreciate the complexity of what a mother wants. Ultimately what forcefully determines writing, Abouddahab observes, is “not the historical trauma (whose active presence
in the fiction cannot be denied), but some unresolved traumatic event or exclusion that makes one write and, through the writing, quest bliss, but that also makes one renounce the attachment to the inevitably lost bliss.”

Crime fiction involving female writers and figures actually makes it clear that, beyond the dialectics of crime and punishment, the symbolic order is unstable, and needs to be endlessly reasserted and refigured by the writing act which is itself a mode of containment: more disturbingly still, it appears that transgression and criminal activity are constitutive of the symbolic order. Fiction alone will be able to convey a truth that does not necessarily please civilisation and therefore needs to be robed within semblances. As to the ethical task of the novelist as artist, it will precisely consist in shaping out the unspeakable, making you feel the presence of the real of enjoyment at the core of human activity. If, in the case of crime fiction, female writers find a ground to give free play to the jouissance in excess of symbolic ordering, it will not be without the latter, because the symbolic order is first and foremost the power of the word that both divides and unites, moderating thus human relations: this is the only meaning of what Lacan calls the paternal metaphor.

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CRIMELESS FEMININITY: 
WOMAN’S IDENTITY IN SCIENCE 
FICTION MOVIES

DANIÈLE ANDRÉ,
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Strangely enough it is not very easy to give any defining features of women involved in crimes—be they criminals or victims—in science fiction movies, for they are mostly absent from such stories. Indeed, science fiction movies borrow from different genres, thrillers and detective stories among others, yet women are either ghostly presences or archetypal female characters (the damsel in distress, the woman as reward…). Unlike other film genres, science fiction does not let women be mean or cruel, and we can wonder why. This is one among other questions that we will raise and analyse.

To shape our study on criminal women in science fiction, and show to what extent science fiction female characters are, in fact, depicted as harmless, it seems quite necessary to give the definition of ‘crime’:

1. An act committed or omitted in violation of a law forbidding or commanding it and for which punishment is imposed upon conviction.
2. Unlawful activity: statistics relating to violent crime.
3. A serious offense, especially one in violation of morality.
4. An unjust, senseless, or disgraceful act or condition. (The Farlex dictionary)

This will enable us to show that there may be an evolution in the roles given to women in science fiction movies, but it has to be put in perspective.

We will see how they first corresponded to the archetypal female figure, i.e. the beautiful and not very smart woman who needed male protection, to then take on more important roles. This second generation seems to have acquired some independence, but by doing so they have also lost some of their feminine characteristics, and have not reached a true feminine heroic status. However, television has altered the female
figures in science fiction and has offered the younger generation more complex personalities and more dangerous characteristics. Yet, even if women in science fiction may be accused of unlawful activities, they are still very rarely criminals. It seems that society or/and film companies are not ready to accept a female character whose characteristics could be as rich and diverse as a male’s.

The first generation or the grandmothers: women in ornamental roles

If there was one example that epitomizes the role women have played in science fiction movies for a long time, and for most of them still do, it would be *Galaxy Quest*. Indeed, this 1999 film by Dan Parisot is no doubt a parody of the first *Star Trek series and films*, but it does also pinpoint what science fiction is about and what stereotypical roles women have in science fiction films. There are not many female characters, and funnily enough the female lead is played by Sigourney Weaver. Her character is quite the opposite of her role in the *Alien* films and no doubt this means a lot. In *Galaxy Quest* she has the part of an actress playing in a science fiction series called « Galaxy Quest », she is the female on board the ship and her part is limited to repeating all the time what the main computer tells the Captain. For the Trekkies, and most fans of science fiction, this is an obvious reference to *Star Trek* and the parts women played in it; but, somehow, by employing parody and metafiction, the film more generally criticizes the roles given to women in science fiction movies.

This is really obvious when noticing that the second female on board is an alien, that is, not really a woman but an alien taking the appearance of a woman who falls in love with the Doctor, and whose only actions are to follow the Doctor and talk to him in jabberwocky. It clearly means that in most mainstream science fiction movies women do not say anything intelligent or important, they are only present to underline the male lead. Moreover, Sigourney Weaver in this film plays a rather unheroic character who can be quite frightened and would not brave danger to save anyone, she only follows the captain because he can save them and because she has become infatuated with him. Of course, at the end she is so captivated by the captain that he wins her as a reward: the hero is rewarded with the female (in the same way the Doctor will bring the alien with him on planet Earth).

This already shows that females are seldom offered to play important parts, and they have really fewer opportunities to play criminals. Indeed, science fiction women can be victims of crimes (even though less often
than in other film genres); however, they are not usually threatened by criminals, but, most of the time, their lives are in danger because they must face an alien or a very dangerous situation just like Gwen De Marco in *Galaxy Quest*—her life may be threatened, but she is not a victim. Nevertheless, female characters still need to be saved by the beautiful male hero.

They may seem to be heroines, and one has to be very careful in saying that, but they cannot be criminals. This is quite logical for criminal figures are maybe even more important than heroic figures. A hero has to face a villain at least as strong as he is if he wishes to achieve a heroic status. Since there are very few heroines, it is thus quite logical that there are even fewer female criminals (if any) for as Philip Green says in *Cracks in the Pedestal—Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*:

> Female violence as a normalized role, unlike that of male violence, is and remains unacceptable. [...] The problem with her figure [the heroine who fights with and defeats men] from the standpoint of the dominant ideology is equally as great: if female violence can be imagined as normalized, the essentialist understandings of patriarchalism are seriously undermined. (Green 1998, 172)

So our society still finds it difficult to accept the image of the woman as criminal because it questions the traditional role of women and men in the patriarchal society: women are caring, tender and gentle, men are violent and tough. However, most films cannot ignore reality; changes have occurred over the years with women fighting to conquer some rights and obtain new responsibilities. Nowadays, more films show women in different parts, even though females are never as free as men can be. Yet, there is one genre in which women seem incapable of acquiring independence and a criminal nature, and it is science fiction.

**The Mothers: Women’s apparent rebellion**

Of course, there are the counter examples of *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) and *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) since, in these films, the female characters are violent and two of them are perceived as heroines. Indeed, Sarah and Ripley can be described as strong women, however there is an evolution in their behaviour, and it is not only linked to a sense of survival, but more likely to a sense of motherhood. Indeed, from passive women and even, in Sarah’s case, from a rather foolish and uninteresting character, they turn into substitutes of the male absentee. When common women in science fiction are depicted as violent they are
usually given masculine traits such as toughness, violence, muscular bodies and crude language while in the meantime they lose their feminine appearance.

In *The Terminator*, Sarah will learn to behave like a man, she will train to be fit and muscular and she will learn how to use guns and how to be violent, even towards her own son. She no longer embodies the typical female character but more the substitute male figure, as she takes the place of Kyle Reese who died trying to protect her and their son. This inability for women to fight without masculine help is strengthened in the second episode, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) in which Sarah needs the help of a Terminator. The cyborg is made in the image of the male and so he is the hero, she is not. At the same time she is dispossessed of her own legitimacy: being a woman she cannot be a heroine nor can she be violent. That is also why she is locked up in a lunatic asylum: society cannot take the risk of having such a well-trained and dangerous woman running amok in the streets. This film character cannot be allowed to become the icon of the strong independent woman, nor can Ripley who is only a heroine when in space. As soon as she comes back on Earth, she is nobody as *Aliens* explicitly tells us.

Ripley and Sarah are almost one and the same character in the Cameron movies. Ripley only becomes a real hero when Hicks is wounded, he teaches her how to use the weapons and she does so mainly to protect Newt, the little girl, once again as a mother. She is violent for the same reason as Sarah is, i.e. to save a child. Ripley in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) is not identified by her gender and is introduced as a survivor, but, in Cameron’s films, she is defined by her womanhood (she is in love with Corporal Hicks and she has to protect Newt the way a mother would).

Thus Sarah and Ripley are less heroines than mothers who fight to save their children, it may be seen as heroism in a traditional way, but it has nothing to do with male heroes. Moreover, they never fight men, either they fight females and/or animals (the queen which gives birth to the aliens), or machines (the Terminator). Their violence is not inherent, on the contrary, they have to learn to be violent and of course men do teach them how to. Violence is transmitted by men. This way of seeing women as non-violent, but of considering men as bringers of violence, is pervading in science fiction. As is the impossibility for a society to accept violent women whatever their motivation, so they have to be kept on the margin of society (Ripley lives in outer space and Sarah lives on the road).

In science fiction films and series, some women just try to have a life of their own, with violence being part of their daily life. They can be
defined as soldiers, women who obey orders and whose femininity is just a weapon to reach a goal they have been given.

In *Aliens*, Vasquez is a soldier and as such it seems she is a very tough woman, but she is dispossessed of any femininity: she behaves and talks like a man. She has the attributes of a military (clothes, muscles, language, humour, sense of honour, of duty, of comradeship) and so she could be said to be no longer determined by her sex, yet the behaviour of some of her fellow soldiers proves she cannot escape from being defined as a woman. Though she tries hard not to be looked upon as a woman, the film manages somehow to insinuate she can be homosexual. As she does not embody the traditional female values (femininity, tenderness, heterosexuality, whiteness), she is doomed to death and unsurprisingly she dies.

In *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), Lori is no doubt violent and she is likened to a villain; in fact, she only does her job. She has been employed to keep an eye on Douglas Quaid and she just follows the orders she has been given. She is not violent for the sake of it but because of her job, in the same way her lover, Richter, is, though he is much more sadistic. Yet she dies as in *Star Trek Voyager* (1995-2001) another seemingly female villain, Seska, does. She is a treacherous female character of some importance, but she is not really a villain since she is a spy. Thus her actions are partly dictated by her mission, and partly by her will to go back home away from the Quadrant Delta.

Then the women who come closer to being criminals are soldiers or soldier-like. They usually die because they have lost their gender identity, or because they have failed to accomplish their mission since they fought against male heroes or against those on the good side. But women must also die when they lose the feminine characteristics that define them as human beings.

These female characters are usually represented as aliens or as cyborgs. For instance, in *Aliens*, although the alien queen has the feminine qualities associated to motherhood (caring for her children), she is the image of the invading illegal immigrant mother. She is violent and criminal since her progenitor is dangerous for the American society and since she represents a fringe of society (the minorities, mainly the Hispanic and Latino Americans and the Black Americans) labelled as more criminal than the WASP. She is a woman who has gone beyond femininity—she has too many children (compared to the standard birth rate of the WASP population), and a deformed body (likened to a reproductive insect with a disproportionate abdomen and womb). This alien queen, assimilated to a female figure because of her reproductive and maternal capacities, is
animalized when it comes to defining her/it as a criminal. She loses the archetypal feminine physical attributes defining the mother and the woman (the beautiful wife and mother taking care of her two or three children and loving her husband) to become monstrous and dangerous (she is a huge womb, there is no masculine presence, she keeps giving birth to children and she kills human beings including men).

When they do not lose feminine physical attributes, this type of women lose feminine qualities and thus become robots. In *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow, 2003), the Terminatrix or T-X has the required feminine physical attributes since she is a beautiful blond-haired woman, but she has been programmed to kill, she has no pity and no feelings at all. The T-X is a threat because she is the violent and criminal woman who is dehumanized, since, according to the stereotypical patriarchal society’s standards, she has none of the feminine qualities required from a woman: gentleness, patience and kindness.

The worst of these ‘almost’ female criminals would seem to be the Borg Queen in *Star Trek Voyager* as she is a mixture of the Alien queen and of the T-X, both in her lack of feminine characteristics and in her motivation: she is at the head of a community who do not biologically reproduce, who destroy to increase their power and the perfection of their species, and in which there is no notion of gender (i.e. sexual identity)—the members are assigned specific tasks according to the needs of the community. Yet since her features liken her to both robots and animals with no trace of humanity left in her (once she has turned into a Borg, she has been deprived of any feelings or of such notions as good and evil, she acts as she has to for the well-being of the community), she cannot be identified to a female criminal. She is just part of a genderless aggressive species.

Thus women seem to have little choice in this man’s world, or let us say in this world shaped by males (who fall victims of their own making). For society to feel safe, women have to be brought back to the traditional roles they have known for centuries; indeed,

The sexual order is not just a family order. It is also a moral order, and in the most frequently encountered version of that moral order […] female aggression (unauthorized by any male) is female transgression […]. Sometimes […] simply being a lesbian signs one’s death warrant. More commonly, though, it’s additionally the relationship of protagonists to children, and thus to the ideological ideal of family, that links characters to destiny […].

In this way the centrality of female heroism is disavowed in favour of the woman’s familial role. A female protagonist’s rejection of that possibility
either signifies villainy […] or […] functions as a death-warrant for otherwise morally sympathetic characters (Vasquez in Aliens). (Green: 64-65, 84)

**The daughters: growing female dangerousness**

Television may be as reactionary as cinema since it depends on profits for its subsistence; however, some channels and some authors have managed to alter genre characteristics, though in a limited way. Thus even if there seems to be no difference with the previous cases, female characters who are half-human half-other present a new characteristic symbolizing the power they have and the danger they represent.

In such cases, women being partly from a different ethnic group or partly cyborg, this otherness which is the dangerous face of the character and which has to be tamed, is no other than their femininity. That is why most of the time either they become completely human again or they silence the wild part of their personality so as to fit the stereotypical image of womanhood. Whatever the case, otherness leaves its mark and some features remain such as their scientific abilities or their physical difference.

*Star Trek Voyager* for instance does not radically change the representation of women’s role in society. Still it introduces strong and intelligent women who, most of the time, are on an equal footing with men, who are leading characters and who can be violent or insensitive as, for instance, Seven of Nine and B’Elanna Torres.

Thus Seven of Nine, who is a former borg (half-machine half-living being), is rather machine-like (showing no emotion, looking for pure efficiency) and has no gender. To be part and parcel of the crew, she must accept to fit the image of the stereotypical woman, and, of course, her main teachers will be men. So, to become human again, she must first undergo a physical change. She will turn into the typical beautiful blond-haired and sexy female character of science fiction series and movies, who wears tight-fitting outfits to underline her perfect female body. Now, even if she is very efficient and intelligent, she is ignorant of human relationships and so she has to be educated. What she lacks, as a borg and as a newborn human being, is human warmth; her speech and behaviour can be violent, but her actions seldom are. Indeed, she always follows what reason, intelligence and efficiency dictate and she does not listen to feelings. She is a threat since this abnormal behaviour shows she does not have characteristics mostly defined as feminine: caring for others, tenderness, vanity and superficiality. She will be taught how to behave towards others, mainly towards men. Yet, even if she learns what friendship means and
how valuable life is, she is not wholly tamed. She remains a quite atypical character who bases her actions on reason and science.

Seven of Nine is the counterpart of B’Elanna Torres. B’Elanna is half-Klingon half-human, and her Klingon side makes her a quick-tempered woman. She is quite independent, efficient and intelligent, but she does not really know how to behave towards others. She can be quite violent and, as was the case with Seven of Nine, this violence stands for the character’s lack of some stereotypical feminine features. Only when she meets Tom Paris, does she calm down and becomes the kind and caring woman she should always have been, her Klingon independent side being partly tamed. There again, she does remain a very efficient female scientist.

So maybe female characters in science fiction cannot easily break free from stereotypes, but these examples already show there blows a wind of change: women are no longer helpless and shallow beings. They can have strong personalities, be efficient scientists, and have major parts. This is a first step towards independence and a representation of female diversity, but it is not the only means to achieve them.

Indeed, there may be female characters whose only crime is to be women living with their times, and so having their ‘modern’ femininity acknowledged (being a woman nowadays, i.e. an independent woman, a ruthless working mother, a sexy female scientist, etc.). These ‘special cases’ are the science fiction super-heroines (in fact female superheroes) whose powers—mostly, as we will see, their accepted femininity (they are women and do not try to act like men)—represent a threat to society which then depicts them as dangerous characters doomed to die.

Heroes (Tim Kring, 2006-2008) introduces us with the double-faced female character: Nicky Sanders/Jessica, who seems to suffer from what may be called Multiple Personality Disorder. When she behaves as Nicky Sanders, the female character is a good mother who has to work to raise her child, yet her job assimilates her to the former image of the whore. When she behaves as Jessica, she is dangerous and pitiless. As a true criminal, she kills people without remorse and lets her husband be jailed for a theft and for a crime she committed. Moreover, her motherly side is almost absent (she even endangers her own son), and so she is bound to disappear. However, it is because she is a criminal—she dare kill others and break the law—that she survives both as Jessica and as Nicky Sanders, even if in the end Nicky wins the game and patriarchal order is restored.

Nevertheless, this series offers a very interesting image of a criminal woman as does The 4400 third season with the violent and dangerous Isabelle Tyler (Echevarria/Peters, 2004-2007). Isabelle has the body of a
woman, but she is in fact a child who has grown up too quickly (in some months from a baby she turns into a woman). Thus her violent temper is more temper tantrums than meanness. But she uses her powers to get what she wants and she becomes quite violent, dangerous and uncontrollable: she is the stereotypical image of the criminal woman, all the more since she is Black. As could be expected, she is defeated because she endangers the male heroes.

No doubt that is also what the film *The X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Ratner, 2006) is about. Phoenix questions both the frontier between good and evil and the ultimate use of violence. Like Jessica/Nicky (or vice versa) in *Heroes*, she is double-faced: as Dr Jean Grey she uses her power to help others, as Phoenix she uses her power to calm her anger down. Professor Xavier, who acts as a father to Jean, has managed to control Jean’s powers for years; however, when she comes back to life as Phoenix, she is a violent and destructive woman. One can read in this story the patriarchal society limiting women’s freedom and access to power; only when women realize they have been dead to their own selves, can they break free from male domination and assert their personalities and identities. When Phoenix unleashes her powers, her femininity, which has been restrained for too long, is shown to be all-powerful and dangerous, of course especially for men. Unfortunately, this invincible female character and the world are saved by a male hero and one of the most gender determined, Wolverine.

Somehow, Phoenix is lethal to women’s liberation. Indeed, what the story says is that even if women managed to be free from any gender restraints, and obtained real power in society, in the end they would have to be stopped. They would endanger the world because they are not meant to be endowed with strong powers. As the film shows with the male heroes, only men know how to check human feelings so as to keep control of the situation. The end of the film acknowledges the failure of female emancipation and reasserts men as protectors (of women and of society).

However, in a strange way, a female character is for once representative of both men and women. Indeed, the violence Phoenix gives free rein to symbolizes the human impulses and drives that are controlled and checked by behavioural social frameworks and codes. Thus Phoenix is none other than the darker side of each and everyone’s personality that craves for violence, vengeance and unrestrained freedom. Phoenix’s dichotomy between her two selves embodies the genderless aspect of violence, since her femininity is not determining: she is not violent because she is a woman but because she has been deprived of her freedom and rights. Violence inhabits everyone and being a woman does not prevent one from
being a criminal. It is paradoxical that the film should end with a murder, even if it is justified (done out of love and incidentally to save the world). On the one hand, the film says violence leads to violence; on the other hand, it justifies a murder showing how society plays with its morality.

So Nicky, Isabelle and Phoenix are among the most violent and dangerous female characters science fiction movies and series have met, all the more since the danger comes from their powers. Indeed these powers can be seen as the embodiment of a femininity which, set free, jeopardizes masculinity and the patriarchal society that is based on it. Hence, they have to be controlled, and none of them is the leading character, for the series and the film propose male characters as heroes. Even the villain, whose part is essential to enhance the hero’s part, is a man. Supreme villainy is masculine. In Heroes, for instance, Sylar uses his powers to kill, and he does so out of pleasure and to become even more powerful, and the only one who can stop him is, as expected, a man.

Thus, once more, criminal women cannot win or have the leading part, yet they do exist now in science fiction movies and series, even if it seems that it is not women criminality which is the issue but femininity. As long as there is not a faithful representation of females in science fiction on the screen, there cannot be a faithful representation of female criminality; but the different elements studied here make it obvious that cinema has a social role, and depicting reality in a distorted way helps shape or maintain a specific vision of society since

realism in Hollywood performance must, like other self-effacing codes of filmmaking, draw spectators into a certain ‘normal’ vision of reality. Hence star roles, such as violent women in the movies, which do not easily fit a status quo (as conceived by anyone, feminist or not), would not mesh easily with codes of the serious and the real. (Knobloch 126)

Society: when patriarchy and economy check female violence on the screens

Other genres present violent women or dangerous women or criminals, even though once again most of the time there are different explanations to prevent people from being frightened by such an atypical image. Some exceptions may include Kill Bill (Quentin Tarantino, 2003-2004), yet Black Mamba wins because she was pregnant and wished for a normal and decent life. Still the female squad are all criminals killing for money without any sense of remorse, and are very efficient in their work.
So why is science fiction so reluctant to show violent or criminal women? We may suppose that science fiction is not different from other film genres (be they action movies, comedies, etc.); it aims at making money, and it does not want to alienate its possible consumers. What is paradoxical is that science fiction is supposed to offer other visions of society and yet it seems to be quite reactionary. This must somehow be restrained to movies and series, for science fiction literature is quite different from mainstream science fiction movies and series which by nature comply to other restraints: their success depends on catching straight away the audience’s attention, and not only science fiction fans who could be more open-minded considering the nature of this literature (people go and buy books, they know what they can expect, they can choose).

Following Philip Green’s analysis on how women and men are perceived, it can be said that women in science fiction movies are more than usually there to enhance the male hero part, even in *The Terminator* series or in the *Alien* series, it is not the woman who is the hero but either the robot or the animal as the film titles show. Moreover men are always present in science fiction films, whereas women can either be ghostly presences or be totally absent.

Our patriarchal society is based on the idea that males make sure the family is safe, they go hunting and they protect the clan in case of an attack, and nothing has changed in these representations or stereotypical images. Female viewers have been used to seeing that for so long that the identification of a woman to a male hero is not problematic, whereas the opposite changes the archetypal roles society has imposed on each and every one of us.

Though Laura Mulvey’s ideas have been much criticized over the years, somehow what she stated in different essays seems to highlight why there are so few heroines and female criminals in science fiction films and series. She explained why men can satisfy themselves with seeing heroines on the screen, and how visual pleasure and phantasms can induce men in watching these movies, but she added that, nevertheless, they would not acknowledge the fact that a woman can be a match to a man or be more dangerous than a man. She cannot be a threat to a well-ordered society, so she must die. Women can only be surrogate heroes or surrogate violent characters. Science fiction seems to be even more reactionary than other genres, certainly because, as Philip Green says, it targets a specific audience. As they rely on special effects and aim at a younger audience, and most of the time a male audience, most science fiction movies offer no great roles to women or only stereotypical roles. So it would mean that
economic considerations prevent women from having major and violent parts in science fiction movies simply because this is traditionally a boys’ genre, and men cannot accept to see their leading role in society be challenged: “Most men will not voluntarily watch women’s movies [...] because for many men to identify with women is to be demeaned or worse yet unsexed. To them it represents the worst of downward social mobility.” (Green 11)

But the screen of supposed unreality defining science fiction—though rooted in contemporary societies, it is interested in developing their possible evolutions or in imagining other types of social and political organizations, other worlds, etc.—makes it easier for the genre to be the locus for thoughtful criticisms and analyses of society. So it can be argued that by negating the existence of criminal women (by their absence), science fiction, more than other genres in which women can sometimes be heroines and criminals, reveals that deep down society or/and the film industry try to maintain a status quo on the roles women can play in daily life.

Maybe analyzing parts in movies and series according to their being female or male already establishes a difference that perverts our analysis. Maybe, in some movies, even the attempt to make both males and females different can be quite complex because society is deeply anchored in a gender opposition. Thus, it is very ambiguous to know how much women would bear seeing themselves represented as violent and criminal women (as Kathy Bates in Misery [Rob Reiner, 1990] for instance, or Charlize Theron in Monsters [Patty Jenkins, 2003]). There is at the same time a craving for equality, and a fear of acknowledging female darker sides. Being the hero is one thing, being the villain is another. The craving for heroism is counterbalanced by the craving for being protected, and if violence is feared, it is also attractive, which is however felt not to be right, all the more since it is disapproved of.

Then there is a huge difference between being violent and being a criminal woman. Violence has pervaded our daily lives and even if in science fiction movies there are few violent women, there seem to be even fewer women criminals and that is the point. Indeed even if science fiction increasingly offers images of violent women, their violence is, as said above, most of the time justified. Sometimes, however, as in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Joss Whedon, 1997-2004), which is a mixture of different genres, this justification is shown to be biased or questioned: society says what is moral or not, but society can be questioned and its morality too, then justified actions can become criminal actions.