

# Looking like a hero: constructions of the female gun-fighter in Hollywood cinema.

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the aesthetic and semiotic issues of dress, agency and desire as they are articulated around the figure of the female gun-slinger in action-driven genres. It explores the problems that this complex figure presents for feminist critics, in relation to the fetishisation of the female action figure, the potential for readings of cooption or resistance embodied in the transvestite heroine, and the celebration of cinematic violence. It also explores a number of strategies whereby film-makers and narratives contrive to contain the transgressive potential of the female gun-slinger. With particular reference to *Salt* (Phillip Noyce 2010), it highlights issues of transformation, performance and identity, focusing on the operation of costume as an 'alternative discourse' within the text. It considers the limitations and potential of the contemporary action heroine as an empowering female figure within popular culture.

**Keywords:** representation, gender, performance, costume, action-adventure

## Introduction

"A hero is one who looks like a hero" (Robert Warshow 1970:56)

Recently, in preparation for this paper, I re-watched *Mr and Mrs Smith* (Doug Liman 2005) with my 17 year old daughter. In the middle of the first big shoot-out scene, as the heroine prowled through her ruined house bristling with heavy-duty firearms and ammunition, my daughter spontaneously cried out "I want to *be* her!. Seizing the opportunity for a little impromptu audience research I asked her to explain why. "Because she's so *cool!*" was the reply. I lapsed momentarily from the role of academic to that of parent and moral guardian to point out that Mrs Smith was in fact in the unenviable position of trying to kill her husband, and simultaneously to avoid being killed by him – to which my daughter replied with withering and unanswerable logic "But she's *Angelina Jolie!*" Robert Warshow has explained the allure of the Western hero in terms of his distinctive style – a style that is best expressed though violence, although in fact it is the style, rather than the violence, that is the point. It struck me that, in essence, my daughter's tweet-length analysis offered a remarkably similar insight into the appeal of the modern action heroine.



Image 1: Angelina Jolie in *Mr and Mrs Smith*

In this paper, I will address the representation of the gun-fighter heroine in the contemporary Hollywood action movie, with particular reference to *Salt* (Phillip Noyce 2010), in which Angelina Jolie plays the eponymous lead. I will explore how issues of agency and desire are articulated around the aesthetically powerful juxtaposition of 'woman' and 'gun', and how questions of empowerment, cooption, essentialism and constructions of gender are worked out in the iconography of the text, asking: what should the feminist critic make of these films? Carole Dole, in her essay "The Gun and the Badge", remarks that, despite the appeal of strong media images of women, "mainstream film viewers and academic feminists alike have hesitated to celebrate cinematic women with guns" (2001:78-79). This hesitation is understandable; violent women, and female gun-slingers in particular, present a number of dilemmas from a feminist perspective. These largely fall into three interrelated areas which can be characterised as the problem of women who commit violence, the problem of women who appear to 'be', or to identify as men, and the problem of the fetishised phallic woman. For film-makers, too, the gun-fighter heroine presents difficulties, as they strive they attempt to steer a course between these representational issues and an unpredictable audience.

Having outlined some of the theoretical and critical problems pertaining to the representation of the gun-fighter heroine, I will go on to discuss in more detail how they are articulated in relation to *Salt*, a film which combines a violent heroine, a realist aesthetic and an explicit engagement with alternating constructions of identity. While the marketing the tag-line: "Who is Salt?", referred to the heroine's role as a double, or even triple agent, straddling the divide between East and West, from a critical perspective the same question may be asked with reference to the manner in which *Salt* seems to straddle the gender divide, and the potential for the feminist critic to read her representation in terms of resistance and female empowerment on the one hand or cooption and reinforcement of patriarchal values on the other.

### **The problem of women who commit violence**

Martha McCaughey neatly summarises the philosophical 'quagmire' which images of violent women represent for the feminist critic, and the difficulty in deciding whether they "contribute to resistance or replication". On the one hand, feminism tends to oppose violence per se, characterising it as "patriarchal and oppressive" and seeing female adoption of violent methods as reproducing male domination. On the other hand images that associate women with pacifism can serve to normalise the construction of women as victims, unable to fight back against (largely) male violence (2001:2). McCaughey argues that images of violent women in films, while characterised as "tarnished prizes" (2001:6), nevertheless have a useful role to play in raising questions around gender models, pleasure and fantasy.

The issue of fantasy is key to any analysis of the gun-slinger heroine. Cinematic violence must be understood in its dramatic and generic context. As Jason Jacobs has demonstrated, the gunfight in the action film is largely bound up with fantasies of control and loss, so that "pleasure in gunfire sequences simultaneously reflects our recognition of our vulnerability and our desire to fight back" (2000:14). The iconic figure of the gunfighter hero, he suggests, represents a positive, even subversive, will "to gain mastery over one's life" (2000:13). While Jacobs speculates that this might be a specifically male pleasure - although only because "in a patriarchal world men have more to lose" (2000:13) - its capacity for appropriation by feminism cannot be ignored.

Judith Haberstram (2001) offers a useful concept of 'imagined violence', modelled on Benedict Anderson's characterisation of nation as imagined community (1983). She argues that images of women with guns in popular culture have "the potential to intervene in popular imaginings of violence and gender", suggesting "not that we all pick up guns, but that we allow ourselves to imagine the possibility of fighting violence with violence" (2001:251). Thus cinematic violence becomes a powerful rhetorical device, challenging hegemonic mythologies and establishing resistance through a form of collective fantasy.

The responses of actual female spectators to on-screen female gunslingers seem to bear out the potential of cinematic violence as empowering fantasy. McCaughey's own reaction as "a feminist activist against violence" to watching Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* (James Cameron 1991) makes it clear that the pleasures associated with the action hero are far from being exclusively male. She describes how she drove home after the movie, flexing her arms and realised "that men must feel this way after seeing movies - all the time..... I could understand the power of seeing ones' own sex made heroic on-screen." (2001:21). The potential of such action heroines to inform a shared rhetoric of resistance is illustrated by

the anecdote recounted in *Newsweek* [June 17 1991] and subsequently cited by Sharon Willis (1993) of four women in a Chicago street who reacted in unison to the obscenities shouted by a passing truck driver by aiming imaginary pistols at him, while one yelled "Thelma and Louise hit Chicago". That real women, moreover, can interpret such violent cinematic metaphors in entirely constructive ways is further demonstrated by Charlene Tung's interviews with women after watching *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson 1990): one interviewee, for example, resolves "to be more assertive in life in general. I'm not literally going to twist someone's arm or threaten them..... but there's nothing wrong with standing up for yourself" (2004:106). In a similar vein, Tiina Vares' study of female audiences' responses to female violence on screen demonstrates that women may strongly oppose real-world violence at yet enjoy female-led action movies (2001), again suggesting an important role for fantasy. The same study, however, makes it clear that for some women on-screen violence remain problematic, largely because it is associated with masculinity.

### **The problem of women who perform masculinity**

The second, rather more complex set of problems for the feminist critic concerns the idea of the female action hero as symbolically male: either an androgynous figure or a phallic woman who is, in effect, a man in drag - or is so male-identified, so thoroughly co-opted by patriarchy that she might as well be. The theoretical waters are further muddied by the endemic, and often diegetically under-motivated, cross-dressing associated with action women generally, and gun-slingers in particular. These transvestite heroines can be read as transgressive figures, who, by performing gender reveal it to be, as Judith Butler suggests, "an imitation without an origin" (1990:138). Alternatively they can be read as essentially conformist, reinforcing the notion of gendered roles by constructing their own difference as exceptional, their performance as unnatural, their status as temporary or borrowed and their abilities as 'learned'.

Jeffery Brown has challenged the critical tendency to read the action heroine as a man in drag, citing in particular Carol Clover's construction of the 'Final Girl' in Slasher movies (1992) and Peter Lehman's analysis of rape-revenge narratives (1993). He rejects the assumption that "because women defeat the villain on their own they somehow represent men in drag" (2001: 57) and indeed has argued elsewhere that such binary, deterministic readings are "over simplified, pessimistic, dualistic and paranoid" (1996:53), overlooking the potential of these movies to redefine our cultural understanding what constitutes appropriate female behaviour. Brown develops the argument made by Elizabeth Hills (1999) that the dominance of the psychoanalytical model within feminist film theory has made it difficult to conceptualise a female action hero, except in terms of performing masculinity. He offers an alternative interpretation whereby "rather than swapping a biological identity for a performative one, she personifies a unity of disparate [gender] traits" (2004:49) The action heroine is transgressive, he suggests, "not because she operates outside of gender restrictions, but because she straddles both sides of the gender divide"(2004:52). Marc O'Day makes a similar case, citing Yvonne Tasker's account of the complex interplay of 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities in action heroes of both genders whereby hyperbolically masculine male leads are feminised by their 'to-be-at-ness' and female heroes develop 'masculinity'(Tasker 1993). For O'Day "the action babe heroine", of which Jolie's Lara Croft is given as a prime example, "is simultaneously, and quite brazenly, both the erotic object of visual spectacle and the action subject of narrative spectacle.... (2004:205). Without wishing to revert to pessimism or paranoia, it could be argued that this new orthodoxy is in danger of leaning a little too far in the opposite direction, towards a somewhat idealistic reading of the contemporary 'action babe' as presenting a seamless combination of characteristics which are thus liberated from the binary logic of gender. While welcoming the transgressive potential of the action heroine, I would suggest that considerable tensions persist both in the construction of this complex cinematic figure, and in the texts she inhabits, manifesting themselves in both structure and the iconography of the contemporary action film. These tensions, however, are themselves productive in challenging assumptions about the meaning of gender in its cultural and social contexts.

In terms of structure, it is precisely because the female hero does *not* simply enact the male role that tensions appear in the text. Placing a woman at the centre of an action-driven film, as Mulvey has demonstrated (1981), results in subtle but significant changes to the shape of the narrative as it shifts to accommodate her. For the feminist critic such adjustments open up questions about the gendering of narrative within popular culture – a phenomenon that is often invisible until challenged by the 'problem' of the female action hero. In terms of iconography, the problematical concept of the action heroine as a

man in drag finds its mirror image in the cinematic trope of cross-dressing which persists, in various forms, throughout the action-adventure genres, from the post-war Western, to the exploitation movies of the 1970's, to the development of 'musculinity through the 1980's and early '90s, to the twenty-first century 'action babes' admired by O'Day. Yvonne Tasker has convincingly argued that, on some level, whatever the diegetic pretext, "for women in the cinema, cross-dressing is always about status" (1998:26), and indeed the association between transvestism and Tasker's concept of performativity is clear. However it would be a mistake to read these images as simplistic impersonations of the male. Indeed Tasker, in *Working Girls* (1998), has developed the idea of performance with reference to cross-dressing, transformation and role playing across boundaries of class, race and sexuality as well as gender.

I would extend the idea of dressing a part still further, to accommodate the range of narrative functions an action heroine may be required to fulfil in the course of a film (hero, victim, villain etc) as well as the specific, culturally defined roles she may be required to play – many of which are, indeed, traditionally male (rancher, gun-slinger, cop, explorer, soldier etc) and her dramatic progress through the story. Drawing on Stella Bruzzi's characterisation of costume as an alternative discourse (1997), I would suggest that the action heroine's changing wardrobe serves to provide a commentary of sorts on her emotional, social and narrative status through the course of a film, wherein gender is always an issue, but never the only one. This is a phenomenon seen in films as diverse as the Joan Crawford Western *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) and the self-conscious cop thriller *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow 1990). To ask whether the action heroine who (cross-) dresses to perform a role is thus usurping male power, re-inscribing gender norms, externalising her character's emotional journey or simply responding pragmatically to the internal logic of the diegesis is perhaps to ask the wrong question. What appears on the screen, and the readings made by audiences, I would argue, are manifestations of the productive tensions between these various positions.

### **The problem of fetishised/ phallic women**

The third problematic area for feminist analysis of the action heroine is around the issue of fetish and the Freudian idea of the phallic woman. Tasker, in *Spectacular Bodies* (1993) recognises the difficulties presented by women with guns, in particular, and the reductive tendency in some quarters to read them in terms of male fantasy. A laudably pragmatic response to such concerns is suggested by MCAughy who argues that "most images in Western culture are white male fantasies" but that that is not to say they cannot be appropriated for feminism. Thus even where gun-toting heroines are over-sexualised to a degree that borders on the pornographic, Jeffrey Brown argues for their transgressive potential, particularly in his discussion of stripper movies (2001), and of the dominatrix (2004), which he interprets as a complex, parodic figure, having the power to confound gender boundaries and challenge constructions of gender difference.

There is however an alternative perspective, I would suggest, that has been somewhat overlooked, or overshadowed by a Freudian focus on the gun-as-fetish. Lacan theorises the phallus as the signifier of power and desire, heavily implicated in the development of subjectivity, which he conceives in terms of entry into 'the symbolic', the domain of law and language; he stresses that the phallus is an arbitrary signifier, having no natural relationship to the male, and cannot, by definition be possessed. A number of feminist critics have observed that, in practice, within existing structures of patriarchal power, the signifier of agency and subjectivity is hardly a neutral term, being inevitably aligned with the signifier of sexual difference and thus privileging the male; nevertheless the fact remains that if no one can truly possess phallus then anyone can play at possession, and adopt the position of the speaking, acting subject. In the case of the gun-slinger heroine, I would argue that, without assuming a straightforward relationship between the gun and the phallus, a relationship of some kind is clearly indicated on the levels of iconography, real and symbolic power and the capacity for agency and desire. Brown notes that "the action heroine who exhibits a mastery of guns represents a woman who has usurped a particularly phallic means of power" (1996:61) From a perspective founded on Lacanian understanding of the phallus, such a 'phallic' woman can be read as neither fetishised nor male-identified, but as taking control of the subject position – the protagonist in her own story.

### **The problem for Hollywood**

As well as proving problematic for feminists, the gunslinger heroine has proved problematic for Hollywood – not least because so many viewers and critics from across the political spectrum are uneasy

or undecided regarding women, guns and violence. Carole Dole describes how, in the commercially critical case of the action film, the industry has struggled to resolve the “clash between generic expectations and gender assumptions”, experimenting through the late 1980s and ‘90s “with various levels of violence, muscularity, and erotic appeal” in its efforts to appeal to and, presumably, to avoid offending a mainstream audience (2001:79). Dole’s study explores the evolution of the female cop film in particular, as offering some of the most interesting versions of the action heroine, and some complex narrative strategies whereby the “troubling figure of the Woman with a Gun” (2001:79) is rendered acceptable within mainstream culture.

She observes how the heroines of the late 1980’s-early 1990s tend to replicate the extreme violence seen in their male counterparts, but off-set “this masculine power with feminine psychological vulnerabilities” (2001:80). These include a need to constantly explain themselves (*Blue Steel*) a tendency to justify acts of violence in terms of self-defence, defence of others - preferably female children and maternal instincts (*Fatal Beauty* (Tom Holland, 1987)), dependency on (sometimes multiple) father-figures to validate, license or support their activities (*V.I. Warshawski* (Jeff Kanew 1991)), sexual vulnerability, particularly to seduction or attack by the enemy (*Betrayed* (Costa-Gavras 1988)) and inveterate singleness. This latter point is significant as it makes explicit a key difficulty in relation to the representation of action heroine: how to empower women without disempowering men. Whereas the male action hero, particularly in the late 1980s and early ‘90s, is often defined by his ability to protect, defend or rescue his wife and family, the female action hero cannot be put in a similar position in relation to a male partner without upsetting the traditional dynamic to a degree that is self-evidently a step too far for the mainstream film industry.

Through the late 1990’s Dole identifies a subtle change in Hollywood’s approach, tracing the development of a new breed of heroines who largely rely on brain more than brawn, and whose transgressive potential is contained by a variety of “splitting strategies”(2001:80). These strategies include split personalities such as Geena Davis’ Sam/ Charly in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Remy Harlin 1996), split roles, such as the doubling of the female hero in *Copycat* (Jon Amiel 1995) and split genres such as the slightly awkward collision of cop film, heist film and romantic comedy in *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh 1998). Nevertheless, Dole argues, these films “test the possibilities for women to insert themselves in arenas of power from which they have long been excluded.” (2001:102), marking a positive trajectory in the career of the Hollywood action heroine. Arguably, however, the promise of the female cop film, in particular, has not been fulfilled within a mainstream cinema increasingly driven by high concept spectacle and correspondingly high financial risks. In this environment, where the young male audience is frequently the industry’s chief target, the female action heroine has struggled to hold her own.

### **A new kind of action heroine?**

Looking back from the vantage point of 2012, it seems that the turn of this century marked a distinct splitting between two models of action heroine. Female cop heroes have, for the most part, found their natural home in TV crime dramas such as *Criminal Minds* (CBS), Jerry Buckheimer’s *CSI* franchise, and Dick Wolf’s *Law and Order*. Increasingly the female characters in these series match their male counterparts in terms of institutional rank, dramatic status, range of characterisation and tough, gun-toting professionalism. Arguably the contemporary successors to Jodie Foster’s Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme 1991) are not to be found in cinema at all, but in heroines such as Poppy Montgomery’s Carrie Wells in *Unforgettable* (CBS). Meanwhile action-led output for the cinema is increasingly dominated by, franchises originating in comics or games, variations on the sword and sorcery genre, martial arts films, post-apocalyptic science fiction, and movies that combine elements from across this spectrum. The heroes of such spectacular high-concept action-adventure films typically feature improbable bodies accomplishing impossible feats - often displaying an equal disregard for the laws of physics and those of narrative coherence, in their quest for the ultimate cinematic ‘ride’.

In this context, Phillip Noyce’s spy thriller *Salt* offers an apposite case study. Very much a high-concept action film, privileging spectacle over characterisation and the ‘emotional and viscera ride’ over plot coherence, *Salt* has, nevertheless, a realist aesthetic that marks it out as a very different kind of film from the *Tomb Raider* franchise which established Jolie as the most recognised ‘action babe’, and the biggest female box office draw, of contemporary Hollywood. While in some ways very much of its time (not least given the discovery of actual Russian sleeper spies in America around the time of its release), in others this film feels more in keeping with the developments of the 1990s, featuring a protagonist who

seems to have more in common with the professional action heroines discussed by Carole Dole in "The Gun and the Badge"(2001) than with the fantastical 'action babes' of the last decade.

Jolie, in her press interviews, depicts her character as being something entirely new "because there's never really been a female action movie based in reality" (Woerner, 2010). *The Independent* takes up the theme, enthusing that "we've never seen a woman on screen like Evelyn Salt before." (Hoggard, 2010). Without entirely endorsing the self-serving claims of the publicity machine, it must be allowed that the film offers a particularly twenty-first century, post-feminist take on the problem of the action heroine. The narrative tropes whereby the transgressive potential of the action heroine is contained in the films of the 1980s and 90s, are radically reworked, even reversed in *Salt*. This may be partially attributable to the origins of the script. The publicity and press coverage of *Salt*, when it was released in 2010, made much of the fact that the film had originally been written for a male lead (rumoured to be Tom Cruise) and had been (minimally) rewritten for a female Salt when Jolie expressed an interest. Thus the film sets out quite literally to position a female gun-slinger in "same narrative slot" as a man (Dole 2001:79).

### **Singleness and sexual vulnerability**

The original protagonist, Edwin Salt, was required to rescue his wife and child from danger – a circumstance that was erased from the final script. Given the propensity of earlier films to introduce a maternal motivation, and preponderance of single heroines, the choices made by the producers of *Salt* in this respect, and the repercussions for the text, are interesting, for in adapting the script for a female lead, they decided to keep the spouse and lose the child. Jolie's own explanation for the latter was that if Salt has a child "...it would be very hard for us not to imagine her holding on to that child through the entire film...", something she acknowledges would not have been an issue for a male lead. (Palmer 2010). Salt's marriage, however, serves an important function in the film, helping to dramatise her de facto defection. The difficulties this caused for the producers was much discussed in the press at the time, after the director admitted that the scene in which Edwin Salt saved his wife from danger had been cut from the new version of the script as "it seemed to castrate [the husband's] character a little." (Mendelson, 2010). In fact the film finds a way to reverse the relationship by making her (at that point future) husband Mike (August Diehl) responsible for negotiating Salt's release from her imprisonment in North Korea at the very start of the film.

Nevertheless the need to accommodate the "potential affront to traditional views of the family" (Dole 2001:82) inherent in the marriage between the tough (female) CA agent and the gentle (male) scientist leaves its mark on the narrative. Thus the one scene in which we see Evelyn Salt and Mike at home has them playing stereotypically gendered roles: him working, her preparing to make breakfast and chivvying him to move his "bugs" off the table. Then, later that day, the CIA agent is caught somewhat implausibly learning to fold napkins on company time, as she prepares to make her husband a 'perfect' anniversary dinner. The film flirts with the idea of Salt protecting her spouse when it is made clear, on being betrayed by Orlov (Daniel Olbrychski), that her first concern is for his safety: indeed this is given some emphasis as she repeatedly pleads with colleagues to call "protective services", tries to reach him by phone and risks capture by returning to the flat (as her closest colleague, Winter (Liev Schreiber), predicts she will). However, when she does actually catch up with her husband and his captors Salt is positioned in the traditional role of helpless, stoically suffering heroine to witness his murder. Only after the threat of 'castration' has passed does she resume an active role and avenge his death.

Given that *Salt* features a married action heroine, it is perhaps to be expected that the narrative trope of sexual vulnerability is effectively reversed. Again the film flirts with the idea, offering the most explicitly sexualised images of Jolie in the opening scenes where she is tortured in a North Korean prison, and where, prone and half naked on a cell floor, she seems vulnerable to sexual threat. In fact the greatest 'threat' to her sexual autonomy comes from the man who has arranged her rescue – the scientist who, as Winter reminds her, she was intended to recruit, not to fall in love with. However, her relationship with him seems to represent her salvation, rather than her undoing – associated, as it is, with her defection to the 'right' side of the East/West divide.

### **Self justification and self defence**

In fact it is never entirely clear whether her marriage is the cause or the effect of Salt's switched loyalties, because she never tells anyone anything about this, or indeed any other aspect of her past. The requirement to constantly explain and justify her profession and use of the gun which Dole observes in a number of action heroines is exaggerated to the point of pastiche in *Blue Steel*, where rookie cop Megan

has to explain her career choice "to nearly every man she meets" (2001:81). Evelyn Salt, by way of complete contrast, never explains herself - although, ironically, others are keen to explain themselves to her. In fact this absence of self-justification represents a structuring elision in the narrative. The audience, along with her colleagues and handlers on both sides, are kept guessing at Salt's motivations as well as her true identity throughout the film. (Where she does appear momentarily to explain herself - protesting to her Korean captors in the opening scene that she is just "a business woman", to her CIA colleagues that she is not a spy, or to her Russian handler that her marriage is just part of her cover - she lies.) Even in the final scene, she refuses to tell her story, leaving her ex-boss, Peabody (Chiwetel Ejiofor) to figure out, with the help of a timely text-message, which side she is really on.

Despite her reticence it is clear by the final scenes of the film that Salt's primary motivation, like that of any male action hero, is to save the world. Initially, however, she appears to be motivated by self-defence, another common strategy for limiting the transgressive potential of the action heroine. Thus, when Salt is accused of being a Russian spy on a mission to assassinate the Russian president on US soil, she runs - apparently in fear for her life. As a fugitive, however, she is primarily the victim rather than the perpetrator of violence, shooting at windows to make her escape rather than people. Once she has escaped her pursuers, she transforms herself into a professional assassin, her body-count consisting principally of those who get in her way.

### **Phallic Guns & Oedipal fathers**

Salt's methods for eliminating her enemies are varied, with much use of hand to hand fighting and some recourse to improvised weapons (notably the home-made cannon she puts together in the early scenes). However she shows a distinct, and entirely pragmatic preference for guns: in almost every hand-to-hand encounter it is her first priority to obtain a gun - invariably that of her opponent. Dole observes that some action heroines seem to experience difficulties keeping possession of the phallic gun, associating this "instability of ownership" (2001:97) with a lack of control, and a tenuous grasp on their subjectivity. *Salt* reworks this theme around a heroine who, rather, produces an 'instability of ownership' in the men unfortunate enough to stand in her path. Rather than losing guns or being disarmed by her opponents, Salt helps herself to other people's guns - using them up, dropping them and moving on - almost as if to provide an excuse for the serial emasculation of a succession of unnamed men. In fact only one of the guns she uses in the course of the film actually belongs to her: that with which she appears to assassinate the Russian president - although, as we later discover, he is unhurt - and takes aim at Peabody, but without firing.

It is perhaps significant that the two named male characters she kills, Orlov and Winter, she does not shoot, but kills at close quarters with a bottle and a pair of handcuffs respectively. Dole notes the tendency for films involving action heroines to evoke actual and figurative fathers to legitimize their violent actions. In keeping with this trend, Salt at first appears to have two such father figures - one on either side of the East/West divide: Orlov, the spymaster responsible for her upbringing and Winter, her CIA mentor, whose large build and seeming concern for her safety serve to emphasise this quasi-paternal relationship. In the event, however, both prove to be 'bad' fathers, the kind who routinely stand in the path of the male action lead. Thus Salt is aligned more with the Oedipal hero who challenges patriarchal authority than with the 'good daughter' who relies on it as a guarantor of acceptability.

### **Splitting, performance and transformation**

The final strategy of containment Dole notes in the films of the late 1990s is that of splitting: here again, *Salt* offers a reworking of the theme, and one that bears some detailed examination as it relates to issues of costume and performance. From her self-conscious opening line: I would argue that the character of Salt is not so much 'split' as 'fractured' into several alternative identities, in keeping with a fractured narrative that invites the audience to suspend logic and disbelieve in order to experience the visceral force of the 'ride'. Her opening line warns us: "I'm not who you think I am", yet the succession of costumes she adopts, whether subtle reflections of narrative function or explicit disguise, encourage us to accept and engage with each fresh manifestation as though it were, 'for now', real.

*Salt* is not a narrative of transformation: its protagonist starts and ends the film as a tough professional action woman. She does not need to learn how to fight or shoot, and indeed, like most male action heroes, is far too busy doing both to indulge in character development of any kind. However Salt's wardrobe seems to tell a different story entirely, offering just the kind of 'alternative discourse' Bruzzi has described. According to this story, *Salt*, in common with many of the narratives described by Yvonne

Tasker (1993), sees its heroine gradually transformed from 'feminine' to 'masculine' as she grows into the heroic role.

The opening scenes of the film find Salt, as a prisoner, at her most vulnerable and sartorially at her most explicitly 'female', in ripped underwear, exposing more of the famous, fetishised body than we will see again in the course of the film. Back at the CIA offices, her softly tailored grey suit simultaneously conveys both professionalism and femininity, complemented by the ash-blonde hair which was a conscious decision on the part of the creators to soften Salt's image. The deeply slit skirt seems a little unlikely in a work suit, and is reminiscent of the outfit worn by Jennifer Lopez's cop heroine in *Out of Sight*, which Dole interprets as an instance of how "the movie insists on her desirability to the point of improbability" (2001:99). It is in this softened, sexualised persona that we find her taking online tutorials in napkin-folding. It is also in this guise that Salt first becomes a fugitive – trapped in the CIA building, unarmed, vulnerable – and worried about her husband. That she is far from defenceless is clear when she manufactures a makeshift cannon and breaks out of the building – however the image of her running barefoot across the street in a manner that can only be described as 'girly' tends to belie this.

Like the slit skirt, the outfit Salt adopts to continue her flight makes a great deal more sense when seen as part of an 'alternative discourse' of costume than it does in terms of practicality. Over her sensible choice of trousers and shoes, she wears a light coloured, three-quarter length coat. This, along with the hat which partially – but only partially – covers her blonde hair, creates an ambivalent image. While allowing her to perform athletic leaps onto moving vehicles as required, it both retains elements of the previous, feminised, image and makes the fugitive appear rather small, young and vulnerable. This look is briefly replaced with the fairly effective, and rather less 'feminine', disguise of 'Hernandez' – a look, involving a short jacket and hair tucked into the hat, which might have been a little more practical in the previous sequences, had diegetic practicality been the main concern. This is swiftly followed by another transformation, which is explicable only in terms of costume as 'alternative discourse' and Jolie's star image.



Image 2: The changing personas of Evelyn Salt

The 'disguise' Salt adopts to perform the assassination of the Russian President, perform a series of violent action sequences and generally cause mayhem during the middle section of the film is, as a number of reviewers have commented, hardly a disguise at all. In fact it is, for Jolie fans, rather the opposite. With her long black hair and tight black clothes the figure she presents is reminiscent of Lara Croft: with her coat flapping around her as she strides along, guns blazing, she also owes something to the back leather chic popularised by *The Matrix* (Andy & Lana Warkowski 1999) and its sequels. On the level of fractured identity, this transformation, which unlike the 'fugitive' costume eschews any reference to the previous version of Salt, represents her transformation from CIA agent to Russian assassin. On the level of gendered imagery, it offers just the combination of active protagonist and fetishised spectacle that Brown and O'Day identify in the 'action babe'.

Salt's next disguise is temporary and partial, but works on a number of levels. As she escapes pursuit after, apparently, carrying out the assassination, she grabs a hat from a street stand to cover her hair. By sheer (diegetic) coincidence, it is a fur hat, in a style that Hollywood associates exclusively with Russians – and principally Russian spies. In the next scene she has added a fur wrap to the ensemble (this time with absolutely no attempt at diegetic justification) to create the image of a Russian *femme fatale*. On the level of the fractured narrative, the subsequent scene with Orlov temporarily confirms Salt's identity as a double agent; on the level of gendered imagery, it temporarily renders Salt helpless – passive: the tragic heroine of melodrama, whose mask cracks only enough to allow a single tear to fall



for her murdered husband. It also functions as a kind of diegetic disguise, of course, reassuring Orlov that she is still as 'Russian' as her costume. Significantly she removes the 'disguise', together with the persona, reverting to the role and image of fearless assassin, before wreaking her revenge on Orlov and his crew.

The disguise that Salt is to adopt next is simultaneously predictable and surprising: in common with many action heroines before her she dresses as a man to do a 'man's job'. Once again, however, the film reworks and reinvents a well-worn narrative strategy, mobilising a range of confusing and contradictory readings. As is usual with cross-dressed heroines, there is a diegetic justification (Salt must be disguised as a NATO officer to gain access to the president's bunker); as is almost as common, the diegetic justification is inadequate (why go to the excessive trouble of disguising her as a male officer, when a female officer would serve as well?). In terms of the 'alternative discourse' of costume, however, this is the next logical step - the apparent culmination of Salt's sartorial journey from 'femininity' to 'masculinity'. The spectre of the female action hero as 'man is drag' is inevitably raised as the female star effectively impersonates Tom Cruise to play the 'Tom Cruise' part.

On the other hand there are a number of oddities and reversals that undermine this reading. For one thing, while most cross-dressed action heroines are clearly presented as women in masculine garb (open to charges of being fetishised and/or phallic women), Salt is convincingly disguised as a man, complete with an elaborate set of (diegetically acknowledged) prosthetics. For another, the trajectory towards masculinity is reversed when, having gained entry to the bunker, Salt removes her prosthetics and shakes loose her hair to create an new androgynous, gender 'straddling' identity. Needless to say there is absolutely no diegetic rationale for this: only the requirement that the audience is able to recognize and empathise with the female action hero as she sets out to fulfil her narrative function of killing the enemy, with maximum collateral damage, and saving the world. Rather than 'stripping down' for action, divesting herself of the furnishings of femininity as Tasker's heroines do, Salt actively builds up a masculine persona; it is then the accoutrements of masculinity that she (quite literally) peels away in preparation for the final action sequences.

The most interesting reversal is that, in contrast to the many action heroines who find themselves inexplicably more powerful when cross-dressed, and in contradiction to the apparent logic of the 'alternative discourse' or costume evinced in the film, Salt is seen at her most impotent in these final scenes, as she tries and fails repeatedly to get into the President's safe-room, unsuccessfully pleading with Winter to let her in, then shooting ineffectually at the bullet-proof glass. Of course she ultimately saves the day, but she gets thrown bodily about the room, shot, and arrested as the villain in the process. Rather than being recognised as a hero, Salt ends the film on the run from both sets of masters.



Figure 3: stripping away the mask / straddling genders

### **The star persona and the fetishised figure**

As a film, *Salt* suffers from a degree of narrative incoherence, which it survives, in common with many examples of its genre, only due to the force of the cinematic 'ride'. By the same token, I would argue, the film's heroine can function as the emotional centre of the film, despite her fractured identity and inconclusive motives, only because of the force of the star image. The star persona of Angelina Jolie is as critical to a reading of *Salt* as it was to marketing the film. Despite a filmography that demonstrates as

rather broader dramatic and generic range can be claimed by most male action stars, this persona, I would suggest, is largely defined by Jolie's role as Lara Croft in the two *Tomb Raider* films (Simon West 2001; Jan de Bont 2003). Arguably the character of Croft underpins the way in which Jolie's roles are imagined and understood in *Mr & Mrs Smith Wanted* (Timur Bekmambetov 2008) and even (especially) the animation *Kung Fu Panda* (Mark Osborne & John Stevenson 2008).

Feminist critics have been very much divided in their response to Jolie/Croft. On the one hand she is celebrated as a progressive figure, an 'action babe', to quote Marc O' Day, able "to produce potent fantasies of female empowerment..." with a cross-gender appeal (2004:216). On the other she is critiqued as a fetishised heroine, the embodiment of a male fantasy whose appropriation for female empowerment is regarded with a suspicion exemplified in Claudia Herbst's caveat: "For now, Lara may look like a sexy and powerful messenger; nevertheless, the voice of the female remains suspiciously absent from her mission." (2004:42). Significantly the lack of a specifically female voice, story or motivations in movies like *Tomb Raider*, is seen by Marc O'Day as their greatest strength. He argues that,

Virtually unmarked by the rape or patriarchal abuse motifs which underpin the figure of the avenging heroine and less obsessed with rage, resistance and fighting back against white male oppression than much woman-centred action cinema, these films assume that women are powerful (2004:216).

I would suggest that, with her 'action babe' star image Jolie brings to *Salt* both the assumption of power (predicated largely on the capacity for violence) and the assumption of desirability (predicated on a catalogue of pre-existing images); she is already constructed as both subject of the narrative and object of the gaze. *Salt* transposes the 'action babe' from a world of fantasy to one of (relative) reality, where the skin-tight costumes designed to re-create Lara Croft's animated original are exchanged for outfits that look at least plausible on a twenty-first century CIA agent, and where bloodless, balletic fight routines are replaced with something rather grittier. In creating what the popular press promoted as a female Bond, Jolie's star persona is arguably both her greatest asset and her greatest limitation. On the one hand it lends credibility to Evelyn Salt's extraordinary physical prowess; on the other it makes something of a mockery of Jolie's much cited insistence that the character is not prettified or sexualised in the film; the notion that either the producers or audiences of *Salt* would disregard the fetishised face & body of its star is as implausible as the plot.

## Conclusion

The tensions around gender identity in *Salt*, I would suggest, embody something of a post-feminist dilemma – and one that finds resonance in the popular press, where writers are divided as to whether *Salt* is an empowering text for women or simply irrelevant. By some it is welcomed as a barometer of progress, on the grounds that the substitution of a female for a male lead in a present day Hollywood action film with a realist aesthetic, would not previously have been viable; others are more sceptical. Stella Bruzzi, for example, in an interview with *The Independent*, observes that by casting women in originally male roles, Hollywood appears to address the issue of sexism, and potentially extends its audience, without actually having to alter its products (Johnson, 2010). Meanwhile an article in *Entertainment Weekly* point out that *Salt*, with its single female character, does not pass the first criteria of the "Bechdel test", a rough and ready formula devised by the cartoonist Alison Bechdel to identify films, regardless of artistic worth, that take women as seriously as men, by asking whether (firstly) there are two or more named female characters who (secondly) talk to each other, about (thirdly) something other than a man. (Schwarzbaum, 2010)

Jolie herself is at pains in her interviews to stress that the film is "not about being a female" (Hoggard, 2010), clearly seeing this as a positive feature. And indeed O' Day's notion that such films assume women are powerful is seductive. Yet it is not entirely clear whether *Salt* makes this assumption of women in general – or just of its hero – who is, after all, the only (named) woman in it. Does the narrative position her as the exception that proves the rule? Or does the powerful star image create an empowering experience for the female audience? Certainly *Salt*'s violence lacks the political force that characterises many films of the 1990s, giving rise to the transgressive 'imagined violence' described by Halberstam. The 'gun in the handbag' films, discussed by Barbara Miller, although not based on real-life stories, challenged "popular attitudes toward real-life situations" (2001:215); the gun-slinging women in many movies of that period, exemplified by *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott 1993), arguably, fought back

not just as individuals but, specifically, as – and on behalf of – women. Without this politicised sensibility, can Evelyn Salt still function as a transgressive, empowering figure? Or does the removal of this context, as O'Day suggests, make her more so? Does the film effectively “challenge both cinematic and cultural assumptions about what constitutes natural or proper female behaviour” (Brown 1996:56)? Perhaps we should not expect too much, after all, of what is director describes as a “rollercoaster summer popcorn movie” (2010) Perhaps Jolie/Salt offers an empowering image to a post-feminist generation as long as she is ‘cool’ and as long as her audience want to ‘be’ her and as long as she contrives, in all her guises and transformations, to look like a hero.

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