Female action heroines and career women: A discourse analysis of leading female roles in Hollywood
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Introduction

This essay will discuss action movies as a genre and the appointment of female action heroines, exploring justifications of this appointment and societal impacts. Explaining how society shapes this genre and how the audience forms conventions. This essay will use cultural study tools such as discourse, genre, intertextuality and readership, to analyze the genre. This essay will also discuss the portrayal of career women in Hollywood, in a cultural studies context, critically analyzing meanings through the film Baby. It will critically discuss the ways the film Baby Mama (2008) constructs identity and embodiment.

The decision to focus on Hollywood movies as a medium of investigation was chosen for the following reasons. Firstly sociologists from the beginning of the nineteenth century have studied and recognized the social and political influence of mass media (Couldry, 2004). Secondly women’s activist film researchers specifically have noticed the impacts of media depictions on the self-perception and social regulation of ladies (Cole and Daniels, 2005). It is no surprise that leading scholars in this field use
terms such as the perception women and the social regulation of women. According to Lauzen (2011a), women made up only 16 per cent of all editors, writers, cinematographers, directors, executive producers and producers working in the top 250 domestic grossing films in 2010. This deficit of women behind the scenes resulted into a deficit of female characters in the top 100 films of 2011, accounting for only 33 per cent (Lauzen, 2011b). It is evident to see the paucity of women in Hollywood.

**Discourse analysis of women in Hollywood**

It follows that it is important for us to understand the ways in which our culture limits female roles, in particular female action heroines and how our culture represents career women as a way of understanding the cultural factors that may limit career success. Discourse analysis in cultural studies identifies the meanings that motivate the text, text is not just confined to written work, it also includes “all practices that signify, which can be can be images, sounds, objects and activities” (Baker 2008, p.91). Gunther Kress’s first criteria to analyzing discourse is “Why is the topic being written about?” (Kress, 2003). This topic has been written to discuss the decisions regarding the use of female action heroines in Hollywood and their subsequent impact on society. Gunter Kress’s second criteria questions “How the topic is being written about” (Kress, 2003, p. 14). The topic is written in reference to societies readiness and reaction to those movies. It cites debate about the political status of the films and the heroines appropriateness. It is evident in this text that the gender of the lead role is the topic being articulated. Furthermore exploring the discourses that are operating in the society at that particular time.
An argument can be made that action heroine movies and their popularity appeal to a broad audience. Tasker (1993) claims that action movies are a male dominated genre, with the exception of *Thelma and Louise* “where female actors take the place of their male buddies which are familiar to Hollywood cinema” Tasker (1993, p. 85). The explanation is that there is a discursive formation within Hollywood action movies, that the viewers have a predetermined expectation to seeing males lead roles in action movies, not to say every Hollywood movie is the case but it’s an assumption that almost everyone has to negotiate around this social practice.

A common definition of genre is a system of classification, however in cultural studies it’s extended to types of text and practices (Mittell, 2001). Action movies have a set of meanings to them, which derive from the history of the genre. The director’s appointment of female actors presents an alternative. Takers (1993) discusses “the image of women-with-guns” is a generic reference to identify and furthermore grounds to evaluate of it. The article defines the genre as “symbolically male” she is talking about the convention of male action hero’s and the social conventions associated with them (Tasker 1993). Tasker (1993) discusses feminist writers which “have dismissed the genre as reactionary in familiar terms”, she is discussing the convention of the action movie genre and the social function of the genre and exposing its possible limitation of a “male genre”. Tasker (1993) talks about the “diverse range of female protagonists has begun to generate a debate as to the political status of these films and their heroines” she is discussing the history of the genre of being male dominated and how it has become the convention to see males as the hero’s. Action movies are gendered, which is being debated as to it’s suitability. The recent changes
have created a variation in the characteristics of the convention. She is talking about how the genre is sociological and the changing of the gender is a transformation in the genre in relation to the impetus of societal change.

Intertextuality refers to the accumulation and comparison of different texts, where all meanings depend on other meanings (Baker 2008, p.204). Texts in this case are the movies *Aliens and Thelma and Louise*, Tasker (1993) mentions the voices of these individual texts have become part of the social *heteroglossia*, that those texts have become active participants in social practice (Baker 2008, p.186). They carry ideological and societal meanings, plus they characterize the society and encompass beliefs and values, feelings and attitudes. Tasker (1993) eludes to this when she discusses the various films acceptance, success, debate and critique’s. She refers to the intertextuality of the films as a “historical moment’” raising questions to do with “sexuality, violence and relations between men and women”.

The relationship between the text and audience is referred to as a readership in cultural studies (Kovala, 2002), the relationship between female action movies and their audience. The audience has picked up on the gender change, in fact the audience is active in producing the meaning. Feminist theorists and critics have been active in curtailing and critiquing this text and firmly establishing viewers engagement in this genre. Tasker (1993) analyses the reading position as a deliberately resistant reading nature, that the female ‘gun toting heroines’ are resisting the macho man stereotype reproduced in familiar narratives that the directors have tried to construct something different. Feminist re-working of a male genre. Where the women are taking the place of the male buddies” Tasker (1993). Awarding the movie “the surprise hit of the summer of 1991” in the article
is arguing that the resistant reading was a desired alternative discourse.

Discourse analysis can be used to discuss the meanings that motivate the texts, why and how the topic has been written. Exploring the action movie genre, in regards to the social conventions, characteristics and how it’s incorporating them into society. Also discussing the audience’s relationship to the genre and how they are active in producing the meanings.

**Career women in Hollywood**

This section will discuss how sexuality impacts on social, gender, class, economic and motherhood. Using references from relevant essays, theorists and movie critics within the field of cultural studies to explore these topics. This section will define terms from the recent Hollywood move *Baby Mama* (2008) such as essentialism, anti-essentialism, postmodernism, sexual socialization and constructionism. Critically analyzing meanings through the film *Baby Mama* (2008)’s representation and to argue that the main character is represented as being naive in social sexuality.

The film *Baby Mama* (2008) represents the main character as a ‘career woman’, this is the subject position constructed. Kate declares this in the opening scene by saying “some women got pregnant I got promotions” (*Baby Mama*, 2008). Kate identifies with the cultured norms of that social status. Her role typifies a career minded woman, her values are goal orientated, professional achievement, affluent possessions and her life style choices. Kate lives in an inner city penthouse apartment with a doorman, always wears formal attire, she drives an Audi and she’s the vice president of a large corporation. The film seems to represent an ‘essentialist’ view of a career woman. Suggesting that a fixed, collective identity of a career woman
exists. Cultural studies uses the term essentialism, to refer to descriptions of essential identify traits, that there’s a fixed essence of teenagers, femininity and all other social categories (Baker 2008).

Focusing on films, I argue that negative portrayals of professional women can weaken women’s career aspirations and threaten the maintenance of a gender-diverse pipeline necessary to conquer the glass ceiling (Helfat et al., 2006; McCarty Kilian et al., 2005). One under-acknowledged, yet potentially powerful, contributor to the glass ceiling is the media’s portrayal of career women, when media imagery constitutes “material evidence of cultural fantasies, discourses, and realities” (Kaplan, 2004, p. 237). Exploring media depictions, stereotype threat, career attitudes and behaviors, and the glass ceiling’s persistence. The glass ceiling, a term first introduced in the 1980s (Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986), describes the barriers that women face in pursuit of career advancement (Haveman and Beresford, 2012; Bendl and Schmidt, 2010).

When Kate aspires to be a mother, this challenges the essentialist fixed description of a career woman. Perhaps the narrative of a career women pursuing a relationship and having a baby whilst maintaining a professional career, is the films attempt to construct that there isn’t an overarching organized identity of a career women. That Kate can have multiple identities, subscribing to an anti-essentialism view. The film’s lack of a concrete career woman representation, leans towards a “postmodern” definition of identity. ‘Postmodern identify’ refers to a shifting, fragmented multiple identity (Baker 2008, p.220). With several, sometimes even contradictory identities. Kate embodies this in the film “The argument that identities are fractured discursive constructions is widely held within
cultural studies” (Baker 2008, p.231).

Kate embodies the western modern career woman and likely mother through diverse social relationships, and various sites of interaction. This way it makes her difficult to pin her down to a fixed identity. She attends board meetings, casual dates, nightclubs and purses various methods of medical assisted procreation. “The proliferation and diversification of contexts and sites of interaction prevent easy identification of particular subjects with a given, fixed identity”. (Baker 2008, p.231). The films narrative is a representation of current social structures, embodiment and the evolving identity of the modern day women. That Kate wants everything a career, social life and a baby, furthermore on her own terms. Giddens (1987), argues that social order is constructed in and through the everyday activities and accounts in language.

The film represents Kate unsuccessful in finding a willing partner to reproduce, as though she’s views sexuality as solely a means of reproduction. Kate represents this by saying “I’m 37 and I desperately want a baby, isn’t want they want to hear on a first date” (Baby Mama (2008)). Kate is presented as though she is oblivious to sexual activity and western cultural social dating etiquette. “Most erotic interaction, even between those we easily call heterosexual, does not lead to procreation. (Weeks, 1986 p.20). Western culture continues to define appropriate behavior in terms of a limited range of acceptable activities” (Weeks 1986, p.25). Thematic analyses of film portrayals revealed negative and stereotype-threatening characteristics and contexts of career women, including their mean and conniving personalities, promiscuity, isolation, failures at intimacy and inability to balance work and family (Ezzedeen, 2015).
She is presented as failing to grasp the social construction of ‘sexuality’. Foucault describes sexuality as a relationship of elements, a series of meaning-giving practices and activities, a social apparatus requiring sensitivity. “the intricate and multiple ways in which our emotions desires and relationships are shaped” (Weeks 1986, p.23)

The film represents characters to illustrate how sexuality is shaped through social forces and forms. Kate’s surrogate mother and friend Angela together with her love interest Rob both critique her ‘sexual socialization skills’. Sexual socialization refers to social forces that organize sexuality through social forms and social organization. The characters embody western middle class societal heterosexual forms, beliefs, ideologies and behavior. “sexuality is shaped by social forces. Indeed I would go so far as to say that sexuality only exists through it’s social forms and social organization” (Weeks 1986, p.24)

The film constructs a career woman’s sexual misadventures, to illuminate how work conditions can shape sexual lives. The film chose an upper management working woman in her late 30’s struggling to find time to devote to romance and the pursuit of a family life. Kate expresses her commitment to climbing the corporate ladder “I did everything I was supposed to do. Didn’t cry in meetings, didn’t wear short skirts, I put up with the weird upper management guys”. Kate reflects pessimistically on her subordinated social and sexual life as “I still aspire to meet someone and fall in love” (Baby Mama, 2008) This reflects the current epoch of economic conditions and how sexuality is impacted by the mode of production. “Sexuality is not determined by the mode of production, but the rhythm of economic life provide the basic preconditions and ultimate limits for the
organization of sexual life” (Weeks 1986, p.28). The films lack of religious discourse, indicates the relevance placed on it in contemporary western social sexuality. “One of the critical shifts of the last hundred years has been the move away from moral regulation by the churches to a more secular mode of organization through medicine, education, psychology, social work and welfare practices” (Weeks 1986, p.29).

Class sexuality differences are represented in the film, in the scene where Kate receives outfit advice from her friend Angela, in preparation for going out to a nightclub with the ambition to find a man. Kate embodies the bourgeois middle class professional and her friend Angela and surrogate mother embodies working class. “The complex sexual patterns that exist in the twentieth century are a product of a social struggle in which class was a vital element” (Weeks 1986, p.37).

Is the film’s representation of an independent woman pursuing a partner solely as a means of reproduction a power struggle of sexuality? Is her initial lack of success in bluntly finding a willing mate to conceive, evidence of the oppression of women? Sexuality is deemed male dominated, where men can decide and categorize what constitutes an acceptable mating etiquette. “For instance, there are usually different rules for men and women, shaped in ways which subordinate women’s sexuality to men’s (Weeks 1986, p.27).

The film represents motherhood, single women and pregnancy, through the eyes of heterosexual women. “An important comedy film for and about women and This is the most important 96 minutes of Ms. Fey’s career, but also in the history of our gender war” (Lawson 2008, p.1). The film’s construction of an independent career woman defining her own terms of motherhood separate from tradition, opposed to attracting a
partner, courting, mating and giving birth. This allows her to control the binding elements of social pressures. “Female sexuality has been limited by economic and social dependence, by the power of men to define sexuality, by the mitigations of marriage, by the burdens of reproduction and by the endemic fact of male violence against women” (Weeks 1986, p.39)

Kate is unsuccessful in finding a male companion to procreate; she later finds out that she is unable to conceive through artificial insemination. She considers adoption however this was met with criticism, from her mother who refers to it as an “alternative lifestyle”. She decides to hire a surrogate mother to carry her sperm-donor-fertilized eggs this was also met with criticism by her boyfriend come partner as “selfish science fiction shit”. She embodies the modern independent woman seeking to define her own needs and desires, through considering medical assisted birth but is reminded that she is going against male dominated traditions of family. We look at the world through male centered sexuality according to Dyer (2013). Kate’s mother and partner’s severe reactions, embody the current male dominated sexuality. They represent her as pursuing diversion; Kate is identified negatively as a “bad” woman, pursuing nontraditional heterosexual means of conception. “Gross and public departures from” good” woman status’ such as lesbianism, promiscuity or non-traditional heterosexuality – still invite, and are used to justify, violation” (Weeks 1986, p.39).

Filmmaking is perhaps a constructionist model of representation, meaning that it uses narrative and characters to construct reality. Not prescribing to the notion that merely representing something doesn’t reflect reality (Rajala, 2017). When Kate hires Angela to be her surrogate mother, she defines a responsible mothers’ role. Kate embodies a suitable
representation of motherhood, such as the way mothers should supposedly look like, behave, eat and dress. Angela however embodies the bad mother, the film represents her as disorganized, unsanitary, unhealthy and ignorant about being a mother. The viewers identify her as not conforming to the role of the mother. The viewers allocate a negative identity to Angela, that she isn’t an ideal mother. In cultural studies she is branded as “other” the viewers identity her as “not like me”, different. The viewers feel I wouldn’t smoke, drink caffeine or eat high sugar snacks if I were pregnant, she embodies “otherness”. Identity is never autonomous it’s relational. One’s sense of self is formed through the continual identification with or against others (Said, 2012).

The Film’s characters all seek heterosexual sexual relationships, between people of the opposite sex. The characters embody natural sexual appetites, in which culturally reflect modern western culture. Gayle Rubin (2009) argues that sexuality is cultural constructed. The Film’s characters embody what is called in cultural studies ‘good sex’. Kate is seeking coupled sex, in a relationship, heterosexual married and for procreation. According to Rubin’s (2009) diagram “the sex Hierarchy” which draws a line between good and bad sex, she embodies good sex. Where working mothers are concerned, they are portrayed as inept in the homemaking and parenting departments, including comical portrayals of mothers neglecting their children (Grown-Ups, 2010), unsuccessfully balancing career and childcare demands (One Fine Day, 1996; Sex and the City 2, 2010), spoiling their children (The Devil Wears Prada, 2006), emphasizing their academic achievements over their psychological health (Love and Other Pursuits, 2009) and interfering in their personal lives (Prime, 2005).

Overall, the portrayals presented here converge to depict career women “as
women who had failed at being women” (Reynolds, 2009, p. 222), re-enacting gender-based stereotypes and highlighting the incongruence between a career orientation and physical, sexual, maternal and relational aspects of femininity.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this essay was to examine negative and stereotype depictions of female action heroines and career women characteristics in contemporary Hollywood films, furthermore, to hypothesize on how such depictions may discourage women from career interests, fortifying the unreasonable impediment. The interpretation of films as “social texts” (Turner, 2006) provided a unique opportunity to investigate the cultural attitudes towards career women conveyed by a popular means of entertainment.

This essay has focused on identity, embodiment and sexuality to highlight the relevance sexuality plays in society. This essay has argued that Kate embodies a postmodern example of identity, which is multifaceted and contradictory at times. The film represents Kate from an anti-essentialist point of view, that the career woman construction is not rigid it’s dynamic and flowing in the particular social setting. This essay has argued that Kate is represented as being inept in social sexuality; the other characters such as Angela and Rob are included to socialize her in sexuality.
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References


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