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Department of Communication and Cultural Studies**

**Masculine Girls in a Feminised Patriarchy: Negotiating the  
Sex/Gender System in Twenty-First Century Cinema**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
Curtin University**

**February 2016**

## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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February 2016

## Abstract

This thesis examines the figure of the girl in a selection of films emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Films such as *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Hanna* (2011), *True Grit* (2010), *Juno* (2007), *Suburban Mayhem* (2006), *Somersault* (2004) and the *Millennium* trilogy (2009) all contain memorable depictions of girlhood. These representations are notable for the way they represent the gendered identity of the girl in more ambivalent terms than those traditionally ascribed to this passage of female development. In particular, this thesis explores the ways in which the narrative development of the girl's gendered identity is intertwined with the gendered identity of a significant adult male character in each film. The representation of the girl/man dyad is read in relation to structural shifts in the sex/gender system, where these shifts are understood as a response to changes in the socio-economic context of the West since the latter part of the twentieth century. It is argued that this girl/man dynamic registers increasing cultural anxieties at the beginning of the twenty-first century in relation to these contextual shifts, specifically the feminisation of working culture, through the way the narratives structure the girl's potential for power in terms of a presumed disempowerment of the white male subject.

The narrative trajectory of these characters is interpreted through a body of theory on gender that focuses on the effects of discourses of patriarchy and heterosexuality on the gendered identity of the female subject. This theoretical approach is brought to bear on the power dynamics between the male and female characters in relation to the sex/gender system at play over the course of each film. While the figure of the girl is characterised by her empowerment or unruliness, this potential for agency is recuperated or accounted for by the narrative's end. In contrast, the representation of the adult male, characterised as feminised or vulnerable, is finally remasculinised. Tracing the relationship between these characters and their respective gendered identities as they develop and shift throughout each text makes it possible to identify how, as the girl's position of cultural priority is closed down over the course of the narrative, the interests and politics of white masculinity regain a position of privilege. It is argued that the focus on the girl – as a protagonist in film or as a figure that has received significant attention in popular culture – deflects cultural

anxieties over the waning of paternal control and more broadly, the hegemony of white masculinity at the turn of the millennium.

This analysis of cinema in relation to broader anxieties in the culture is based in the understanding that popular culture is a site where power relations between the sexes and the meanings attributed to the sex/gender system are played out. The threat posed to the hegemony of white masculinity, and registered in these films, originates with the liberationist movements from the second half of the twentieth century – the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the civil rights movements of the 1960s such as Black Liberation and Gay Liberation. These tensions intensify at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the context of neoliberalism. Socio-economic changes under neoliberal culture have resulted in a greater focus on the individual at the same time as working culture has been increasingly interpreted as feminised. Such developments have produced different effects on the discursive formation of gendered identities for the sexes understood within a binary logic. As the personal intensifies at the expense of the collective, with the neoliberal insistence on the autonomy and independence of the subject, the feminist understanding that reads the girl as imbricated in a network of social, economic and political meanings is undermined, whereas masculinity is increasingly defined as being imbricated with the social. This process of depoliticising feminism in the media, which is characteristic of postfeminist popular culture, has the effect of reframing the representation of the girl's social inequalities as personal problems and pathologies and/or of celebrating success as an individual achievement in service of promoting the ideal subject for neoliberal culture. In foregrounding the girl as autonomous the films obscure the subtle politicisation of white masculinity articulated by cultural representations of men. It is through the narrative trajectory of these characters' respective gendered identities and the political implications of those trajectories that the representation of the empowered girl can be read as symptomatic of cultural anxieties around the hegemony of masculinity and its structural support in patriarchal law.

**Keywords:** cinema, gender, gendered identities, girls, masculinity, neoliberalism, patriarchy, popular culture, postfeminism, sex/gender system

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## Acknowledgements

Given the solitary nature of this pursuit, and the unexpected difficulties this brought me, I was both surprised and delighted to receive so much genuine interest and kind support from my family and friends. This casual warmth fortified me in ways I was unaware I would need when I began. Thanks especially to my Dad for his frequent phone calls and lengthy commiserations over the pain of writing; to my siblings for regularly checking-in; to my friends for understanding my frequent absences; and to my in-laws who are, as always, a steady and comforting presence.

There is no way I could have written, never mind completed, this dissertation without the dedication and investment from two incredible supervisors: Dr Ann McGuire and Dr Christina Lee. I cannot thank Ann enough for the painstaking attention to detail she has brought to so many drafts and for the countless hours she has devoted to instilling in me the importance of being circumspect and precise in order to maintain integrity in scholarship. Her academic rigour and theoretical poise has been a vital source of inspiration. Christina has my deepest gratitude for being such a steadfast, reassuring and gracious presence over the last five years. Her cogent insights, obsessive editing skills and love of deadlines sustained and encouraged me to take this to completion. All mistakes that remain are my own and are in no way a reflection of these two remarkable women.

Finally, my biggest thank you is to my husband, Darryl Flintoff. His unwavering confidence in my abilities, together with his emotional, mental and financial support, carried me through the PhD experience. Virginia Woolf famously argued that a writer needs a room of her own and economic stability; to this I would add that she also needs a best friend. Darryl has been that friend to me and for that, most of all, I thank him.

## Introduction

Since the final decade of the twentieth century there has been a significant increase in the representation of the girl in popular cinema. According to Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance, girls have become key figures in American popular culture, with the most profound shift in the mass media's investment in girls taking place in the film industry in the mid-1990s (15). This proliferation of girl-centred films has continued into the twenty-first century. As the figure of the girl has gained in popularity in cinema over the last two decades, scholarly inquiry has begun to focus on this figure as a visual signifier for the cultural fears, desires, multiple investments and somewhat contradictory meanings implicit in contemporary girlhood. A close analysis of a range of filmic texts of this period suggests that significant cultural anxieties are being articulated in these representations of girlhood. These anxieties focus on the emergence and extent of the girl's power now and seem to be an instantiation of key shifts in the functioning of the sex/gender system.

A notable figure in cinemas of girlhood emerging in this period is the empowered girl. Disrupting the cultural assumption that certain kinds of behaviours are the privileged domain of men, this girl is represented as performing masculinity better than the boys. In challenging what is traditionally expected of her sex, the girl's struggle for power is imbricated with patriarchy. Little girl avengers, like Hit Girl in *Kick Ass* (2010), Mattie Ross in *True Grit* (2010) and Hanna in *Hanna* (2011), unsettle the idea that girlhood should be innocent. In choosing to kill, like the "little girl murderers" Steven Woodward analyses, these girls perform an excess of masculinity and carry "an impossible weight of moral responsibility, one that no boy or man killer ever carries in the movies" (319). The representation of the empowered girl in *Juno* (2007) works against the belief that adolescence is a dangerous passage of vulnerability and enforced passivity for young women. Instantiating a new trend for narrating reproductive pathways, this tomboy navigates her unplanned pregnancy with humour and decisiveness. The representation of Kat in the 2006 film *Suburban Mayhem* explores anxieties around a girl liberated from paternal constraint. As this teenage femme fatale rampages through the middle-class suburbs of Australia, using and discarding men, her disregard for paternal law culminates in an act of patricide.

And Lisbeth Salander, a figure typical of female revenge fantasies, is the masculinised heroine of the Swedish adaptation of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy (2009). Weaving Lisbeth's performance of masculinity into a resistance against the paternal figures responsible for her childhood abuse, the story expands to encompass systemic abuse at the highest levels of Sweden's patriarchal institutions<sup>1</sup>.

The popularity of this empowered girl in the cinematic landscape of Western cultures at the beginning of the twenty-first century provides evidence for the assertion of those working within sociology and girls' studies that girls have become the highly visible signifier of success in late-capitalist culture. Sociology analyses the actual lived experiences of girls, while the discipline of girls' studies draws on the way girlhood is represented and constructed in the culture in order to examine the way girls live. This thesis is interested in the representation of girls in cinema; however, there are significant overlaps with the findings being made in the disciplines of sociology and girls' studies and the textual analyses of cinemas of girlhood undertaken in the following chapters. Research on girls' lives helps to make sense of the way representational culture disseminates certain meanings, while obscuring or ignoring others. Given that this thesis operates from the assumption that filmic texts are one site where the renegotiation of gendered identities occurs, utilising research on the lived experience of girls broadens understandings of the relationship between context and representation. The figure of the "real" girl is pivotal when considered in relation to her positioning as the vanguard for the new socio-economic order. It is now girls, rather than youth in general, who underpin the new global capitalist economies of neoliberalism (Harris 2-3). Young women occupy these new positions of visibility because of cultural shifts in the late twentieth century; specifically the de-industrialisation of Western economies that needed women to work and the feminist push for equal opportunity that gave women this option (Harris 6). Decontextualised from this history of economic changes in relation to feminist politics, the image of the exceptional, independent and visually appealing girl promises power in late-capitalist culture.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015), the *Twilight Saga* (2008-2012) and the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011) all also have figures like this at their centre. However, these texts have already been heavily discussed in scholarly literature and so for the purposes of this thesis less mainstream films pose more illuminating and insightful case studies.

The increasing visibility of young women in popular culture has led scholars to interrogate the presumption that this phenomenon correlates to increased gender equity for female subjects. For example, they note that postfeminist<sup>2</sup> culture appears to take the gains of feminism for granted while simultaneously repudiating feminist politics as a necessary contemporary practice (McRobbie; Gill and Scharff; Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*). Since the 1980s, images of the successful female lawyer, newsreader and detective in television dramas, the sexually “progressive” pop star, and the assertive cinematic heroine have stood in as the hyperreal fantasies for gender equality. As Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff point out, the postfeminist themes of “individualism, choice and empowerment ... coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to race and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender” (4). The presumption which accompanies the increased visibility and focus on the girl, that empowerment equals gender equality, is therefore undermined when this gendering of the girl is considered as a discursive formation existing in a chain of signification with other socio-economic factors. The general consensus within the scholarship on postfeminism is that contemporary representations of female subjectivity in Western culture are bound up in a broader socio-economic shift. This shift is characterised by the displacement of the collective political movements of the liberationist era onto the individualising principles of the economic, political and social model of neoliberalism (Negra, *What a Girl Wants?* 4; Gill and Scharff 4; McRobbie 11). Postfeminist ideas in popular culture register this political and socio-economic shift through a particular form of female power and desire: the highly visible white, middle-to-upper class young woman embodied as able, disciplined and surveilled. This figure repudiates feminism and as an idealised model of femininity is underpinned by a politics of exclusion (Negra, *What a Girl Wants?* 4-5; McRobbie 11; Gill and Scharff 4). Representations of empowered girls register a similar trend. The girl’s power is measured against this idealised form of femininity, with the

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<sup>2</sup> The term “postfeminism” has accrued multiple meanings since it emerged in the 1980s. It is understood variously as an epistemological break with feminism, an historical and temporal shift coming after second wave feminism, as a “backlash” discourse, and as an object of critical analysis (Gill and Scharff 4). It also takes two different grammatical forms, with some theorists adopting the hyphen, post-feminist (McRobbie) and others not, postfeminist (Negra; Gill and Scharff; Negra and Tasker). This thesis will employ postfeminism, without the hyphen, using the concept for critical analysis of female subjectivity in relation to the socio-economic context. When it is necessary to emphasise the break with the politics of second wave feminism this will be done explicitly.

extent of that power determined by which side she occupies of this raced, classed and sexualised divide.

Empowered girls are more complex than a postfeminist analysis alone can suggest, however, because girlhood has a history inseparable from paternal rights. Paternal figures are traditionally understood as the gatekeepers to this passage of female development. This traditional stance endures in contemporary culture; for example, millennial fathers can now express their customary function on a popular (and polarising)<sup>3</sup> T-shirt – “Top 10 Rules for Dating my Daughter” – created by the club called “Dads Against Daughters Dating (DADD)”. Key examples of this traditional stance can be found in “Rules” 1, 4 and 8: “1. Get a job” inscribes the sexual economy into the socio-economic; “4. Hurt her I hurt you” defines the girl as requiring protection; and, “8. She’s my angel not your conquest” works within the tradition of patriarchal exchange. Operating in subtler ways than “DADD”, representations of girls in films throughout the twentieth century were also structured by paternal constraint, a point documented by scholarship on cinemas of girlhood in the late 1990s. Gateward and Pomerance open their edited collection on the topic with a feminist agenda that highlights the significance of these limitations on the girl for patriarchal culture:

It is the girl who is the most profound site of patriarchal investment, her unconstrained freedom representing the most fearsome threat to male control ... Much contemporary feminist theorizing stands on a critique of paternalist constraint of girlhood. (Gateward and Pomerance 13)

Reflecting on filmic constructions of girls throughout the twentieth century, such as Dorothy in the 1939 adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gidget* (1959) and Cher in *Clueless* (1995), scholars established that the increased visibility of girls does not necessarily correlate to increased power or liberation from patriarchal control (Rae Hark 29; Whitney 69; Wald 111). Nor does this conspicuous representation of girlhood signify the impediments of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and ability also encoded in the films. Nevertheless, the emergence of the “tough girl”, the

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<sup>3</sup> “Feminist Fathers” responded with their own T-shirt, with their “Rules for Dating my Daughter” summed up in rule 4: “Her Body, Her Rules.” Both shirts, and the online debates that followed their circulation, position the daughter as a subject in relation to a paternal figure: to be protected or to be liberated.

“bitch” and the “angry girl” in films from the late 1980s and 1990s opened up a space to articulate frustration with the constraints placed on girlhood (Shary 110; Lee 78; Roberts 217)<sup>4</sup>. The appropriation of male coded aggression and rebelliousness characterises the anger of these girls, instantiating a trend in cinemas of girlhood that articulated resistance against paternal restrictions while also signifying the socio-economic limits on this type of rebellion, given that these films provided limited evidence of future possibilities for the girl by their narrative conclusions (Roberts 231; Lee 94).

The representation of the empowered girl emerging in cinema in the 2000s is in some ways a continuation of this rebellious heroine from the 1990s. However, these depictions of girl power suggest that paternal constraints on girlhood, rather than abating, have taken a different form which is intertwined with the foregrounding of the girl as the ideal subject for the neoliberal economy. The contemporary version of this heroine challenges stereotypical gender roles through acts of violence, aggression and revenge in much the same way that girl figures from the 1990s did (Roberts 224). But the increasing focus on the girl as the ideal subject for the new global economic order has meant that representations of girls on film, as instantiated by the films analysed in this thesis, now register the broader implications of the girl subject as liberated and therefore, presumably, endowed with future potential. Moreover, the ongoing and intensifying threats to masculine privilege in the face of female empowerment (Buchbinder 9; Negra and Tasker 2) now see emerging representations of men that appear to be a renegotiation of their position of authority as patriarchal subjects, a narrative development distinct from earlier constructions:

More often the changed female subject [post-second wave feminism] was accentuated by contrast with, and constructed in relation to, the men with whom she came in contact, who were almost invariably patriarchal, masculine subjects. Male (and female) writers seemed to have little interest in reconstructing the masculine subject, other than portraying him as sympathetic (an interesting mixture of paternalism and sentimentality which is stereotypically patriarchal). (Cranny-Francis 118)

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<sup>4</sup> Both Christina Lee and Kimberley Roberts use the 1996 film *Freeway* and the character of Vanessa Lutz as their prime example; in Roberts’ terms, *Freeway* is the “angry girl film par excellence” (217).

The construction of men as sympathetic, and thus, stereotypically patriarchal, endures in contemporary representations; however the way the masculinity of men is guaranteed in the films analysed in this thesis is imbricated with the way these figures are constructed *in relation to* the girl in the text. Gender, as an ideological and discursive product, is a relational concept: the meanings inherent in the masculine/feminine binary are dependent on their relationship to each other (Connell, *Masculinities* 43; Buchbinder, *Studying* 92; Butler, *Gender* 10). Representations reproduce this relational aspect: the gendered identities of the characters make sense in relation to “other” gendered identities. In the exemplary films considered here the girl is represented as free and autonomous, while the representation of paternal constraint is renegotiated in a way that emphasises the vulnerability of the male figure. It is this vulnerability, this thesis will argue, that allows the interests and politics of men to be recentralised as part of a collective, while the political potential of the girl is arguably reduced because this figure’s autonomy isolates her from political considerations. This strategy marks a shift in the textual/sexual practices identified by Anne Cranny-Francis in the early 1990s. Cranny-Francis noted that representations of women in fantasy and science fiction played a large part in the women’s movement in the 1960s. The use of alternative discursive strategies in narrative in this context disrupted patriarchal femininity by constructing female subjects not in terms of patriarchy, but rather in relation to patriarchy. These strategies, in effect, represented a renegotiation of women’s gendered identities in relation to the dominant sex/gender system (Cranny-Francis 119). In the films analysed here, however, it is men who renegotiate their gendered identities, not only in terms of patriarchy but also in terms of a presumed female empowerment.

Films such as *Gone Girl* (2014), *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Hanna* (2011), *True Grit* (2010), *Juno* (2007), *Suburban Mayhem* (2006), *Somersault* (2004) and the *Millennium* trilogy (2009) exhibit this gender dynamic as the various characters struggle for a position of cultural priority that can be understood, in part at least, through the lens of gender. The female/male dynamics represented in these films register cultural shifts in the sex/gender system as they renegotiate positions of power in terms of the presumed autonomy of girls and, as will be argued throughout this thesis, the culturally sanctioned vulnerability of men. *Gone Girl* centres on the mysterious

disappearance of a “girl”, albeit a thirty seven year old<sup>5</sup>, Amy Dunne, and the media-driven focus on her husband, Nick Dunne, as the prime suspect. Shifting from the present to the past, the film charts the deterioration of a marriage as the audience learns that Amy, femme fatale that she turns out to be, staged her disappearance in order to exact revenge on her inattentive husband, the now doubly encoded victim of both the global recession and the manipulative wife. Hit-Girl (*Kick Ass*), Hanna (*Hanna*) and Mattie (*True Grit*) are all young girls on the cusp of adolescent sexuality. Although Hit-Girl occupies a supporting role to Kick-Ass/Dave Lizewski’s struggle as a would-be superhero, her fighting skills, foul language and precociousness make her the most memorable character in the film. Constructed in relation to Kick-Ass and her father, Big Daddy, Hit Girl’s commitment to exact revenge for her mother’s death on the corrupt Mafioso, Frank D’Amico, is brought into sharper focus because of the comparative vulnerabilities of Kick-Ass and Big Daddy. Similarly groomed by her “father”, Erik Heller, to be an assassin, Hanna enters the civilised world for the first time to assassinate Marissa Wiegler in revenge for murdering her biological mother. Riding through the untamed Indian Territory of the Wild West in the Coen brothers’ adaptation of Charles Portis’s novel, *True Grit*, Mattie Ross hires the tough, alcoholic and rambling U.S marshal, Rooster Cogburn, in her quest to avenge her father’s murder and kill the perpetrator, Tom Chaney.

*Juno*, a comedic narrative of the pregnant teen, invites consideration of girlhood sexuality, nascent in the cases of little girl avengers. Juno’s proactive approach to her pregnancy and the adoption of her baby allows her easy-going father, Mac, to step up into a paternal role, her considerate boyfriend, Paulie Bleeker, to be absolved of responsibility, and the would-be adoptive father who refuses to “grow up”, Mark, to be marginalised by the narrative conclusion. *Suburban Mayhem* brings the femme fatale into the Australian context. After Katrina’s brother is jailed for murder (he beheaded a store clerk for calling Kat a “slut”), she arranges the murder of her father, a gentle figure unable to discipline his daughter. Kat evades conviction and retires to an idyllic beach-side cottage with her father’s money, money she does not use, as promised, to appeal her brother’s conviction. *Somersault* is the story of teen runaway, Heidi, and her coming of age in relation to the “wounded Aussie battler”

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<sup>5</sup> A seemingly curious text to include at this juncture, given the age of its protagonist, but its usefulness in the context of this thesis will become apparent.

figure, Joe. Heidi's lower-class status and sexual promiscuity both entice and threaten middle-class Joe. But in the end it is Joe who undergoes significant personal growth in terms of his place in the public sphere through their brief romance, while Heidi returns to the single-mother household and to a presumably unchanged future. Lisbeth Salander, heroine of the *Millennium* trilogy, is the boyish, detached and computer-hacking side-kick to investigative journalist and politically gender aware, Mikael Blomkvist. *Millennium* follows the pair as they solve cases of corruption and male abuse, with Lisbeth the victim of this institutionalisation of patriarchal logic in the central crime of the films.

*Gone Girl* seems an aberrant text to include in a thesis on "girl" films, however the dynamic between Amy and Nick presents such a clear example of the diminishment of female power in relation to the elevation of male power over the course of a narrative that it works as a productive framework for later chapters. Opening the textual analysis portion of the thesis with a woman is in some ways to begin at the end: the logic governing the order of the chapters that follow is based on age within the developmental narrative – from the prepubescent to the adolescent to the young woman. But by beginning with the fear of the adult woman's power, Chapter Two foreshadows the superficial nature of the cinematic girl's power in subsequent chapters. Specifically, it examines the way this power is trivialised and then eroded because of its relationship to an insidious form of male power embedded in the traditional family and the adult pair at the heart of this dynamic.

In a culture dominated by the visual, cinema operates as a key space for registering changes in gender politics. As Yvonne Tasker puts it: "gendered identity is formed and transformed through our consumption of images" (*Spectacular* 13). Feminist interventions and claims to public space have meant that men's interiority, embodiment, sexuality and emotion have increasingly become marked as gendered (Kegan Gardiner 10). As a result, feminist film criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century has begun to focus on how "deliberations about femininity throw into relief the ways in which masculinity as its analytic other is itself an unstable and contested category" (Radner and Stringer 5). In addition, the emergence of masculinised female heroines in cinema in the late twentieth century, such as Ripley from *Aliens* (1986), Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and Samantha/Charlie from *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), had already complicated

binary conceptions of gender identity (Tasker, *Working* 3). Cinema, then, becomes a site of negotiation over gendered meanings. Ideology is not imposed by the institutions and texts, and audiences do not necessarily take up the proffered viewer positioning (Gledhill 114). Rather, films represent a site of struggle and renegotiation over gender identification. A close analysis of the girl's power in relation to the signification of male subjectivity as emotional, interiorised and embodied reveals that this renegotiation reproduces the hegemony of patriarchy nonetheless. The foregrounding of the girl encodes this figure with agency and power, but, as will be demonstrated, this occurs in exchange for forfeiting a critique of patriarchy.

The cinematic depictions of girlhood analysed in this thesis provide evidence that patriarchy continues to operate as a key force in the production of gendered identities. The maintenance of this patriarchal authority can be understood through Angela McRobbie's theorisation of the new sexual contract as a regime of gender power that emerged in the 1990s in response to the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s – a situation that has intensified at the turn of the millennium<sup>6</sup>. McRobbie postulates several subject positions now available to young girls from her analysis of popular culture. She argues that these subject positions function as evidence of “a new form of gender power which re-orchestrates the heterosexual matrix in order to secure, once again, the existence of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony” (McRobbie 64). The post-feminist masquerade, one of these positions, encourages girls to adopt excessive beauty and fashion regimes, disciplining their bodies in service of the fashion-beauty complex in ways similar to a pre-feminist deferral to patriarchal authority. The phallic girl, another available position, confirms masculine hegemony: while behaving like “one of the guys” the girl must remain desirable within the terms of heterosexual desire and she must not criticise men.

The representations of the girl to be analysed in this thesis are in many ways distinct from the examples given by McRobbie. They are not usually hyper-feminine but if they are, they perform this in a self-reflexive manner. Moreover, they undermine some of the rules attached to the phallic girl's performance of masculinity – they do get pregnant, they refuse feminine accoutrements (preferring tomboyish attire) and they are, to varying degrees and in complex ways, critical of some men. On the

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<sup>6</sup> The proliferation of scholarship on postfeminist popular culture over the last decade provides evidence of this intensification.

surface this distinction might suggest these girls disrupt the resecuring of patriarchal authority in the form of the new sexual contract outlined by McRobbie. This thesis interrogates that distinction, demonstrating that they have more in common than seems obvious at first. That commonality is the way this figure ultimately functions to secure a new sexual contract, and, in particular, how this is achieved through the representation of the girl's gendered identity in relation to a significant adult male character in each of the films.

The relationship between the cinematic text and its socio-economic/historical context helps to explain how a patriarchal resurgence is registered in representations of empowered girls. Shifting gender dynamics are represented in a range of media – film, social media, television and print fiction – where these texts form part of a response to, and help give meaning to, wider structural shifts happening in the culture. In the latter part of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first those changes in society have unfolded in the sex/gender system as an intensification of notions of sexual difference. This thesis will analyse contextual elements to show how responses to shifts in the socio-economic sphere are articulated through the construction of gender in film, and how these constructions perpetuate notions of sexual difference as a placebo for wider cultural anxieties. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008-2009, with its subsequent recession, as a seemingly gender-neutral economic event, is a useful example.

Taken at face value the GFC was solely an economic occurrence, bound up with the institutions that control the global financial markets. This event is embedded in a factual, historical explanation<sup>7</sup>. The tightly controlled financial regulation that had maintained economic stability since the Great Depression was deconstructed in the 1970s and 1980s through radical deregulation which facilitated the now “globally-integrated deregulated neoliberal model of capitalism” (Crotty 564). The acceleration of deregulation led to legislation in 1999 that separated investment and commercial banking and facilitated the creation of huge financial conglomerates. These conglomerates were legally employing creative accounting practices, such as writing up financial projections as actual assets and granting mortgages and loans without

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<sup>7</sup> This summary of the events that led to the GFC is taken from James Crotty's paper on the topic: “Structural Causes of the Global Financial Crisis: A Critical Assessment of the ‘New Financial Architecture.’”

adequate assessment. Together these practices of deregulation led to the collapse of financial institutions, the need for government bail-outs and a crisis in the housing and lending sectors. This explanation provides a rudimentary understanding of the economic collapse that has been understood in the culture as the Global Financial Crisis, the effects of which continue to be felt and understood as a global recession.

As the above summary shows, the GFC and the recession have nothing directly to do with the sex/gender system. However, the way the culture makes sense of these events and ascribes meaning to them is at least in part through gender. Moreover, the gendered meanings that circulate in response to these structural changes in politics and economics have cultural and historical precedents. Current events provide an opportunity to circulate old gender myths in new ways. “Man-cession” was a term deployed in the mass media and used by some economists post-GFC to suggest that the recession may have been “bad” for women, but it was a “catastrophe” for men (Perry qtd. Gorman-Murray 214). Positioning men as the victims of a socio-economic event was not a novel occurrence. As this thesis will show, men have been positioned as “victims” in the culture in response to seemingly neutral cultural events since the latter part of the twentieth century. Women, by contrast, in the post-GFC context, have largely been understood as “coping.” One of the recurring tropes emerging across media in recessionary culture is “the dyad of the failing man and the adaptive/coping woman” (Negra and Tasker 13). The representation of women as transforming, even thriving, in response to an economic downturn, together with the perception that men are suffering, perpetuates an older myth of gender inequality that has been circulating since the 1980s as part of the broader undoing of the women’s movement. This myth is that the empowerment of the female sex occurs at the expense of the white male subject. Significantly, this repositions male suffering as the consequence of female power rather than, in the case of the GFC, as the result of poor economic decisions by policy makers and financial institutions. This gendering of cultural events has also been registered in representations of the empowered girl in the new millennium. Representations of exceptional, empowered or unruly girls are constructed in relation to a variety of wounded, sensitive or emotional men and this reproduces sexual difference in new ways as part of the response to wider shifts in the culture.

This representation of the girl/man dynamic can therefore be read as a response to broader changes in the socio-economic order: the threat posed to patriarchal authority by the girl's empowerment is managed by a foregrounding of the girl which obscures cultural anxieties around the waning of masculine authority, and, in a seemingly paradoxical move, recentralises the interests of white masculinity through the traiking of these characters as more feminised than their girl counterparts. The word "feminised" generally refers to the patriarchal definition of femininity as masculinity's negative "other" and with it the culturally entrenched assumptions, historically linked with the mind/body dyad, that femininity is the weak, passive, victimised and emotional other to masculinity's strong and active status as victimiser and rational subject (Cranny-Francis 117; Grosz 13-14). As this thesis will show, however, the feminisation of men in these films unsettles this patriarchal definition of femininity, with the appropriation of these traits working for a patriarchal agenda, whereas representations of girls appropriating masculine traits reproduce a quite different set of cultural meanings.

In order to investigate how the girl's autonomy is represented, and then accounted for, in the context of the twenty-first century since feminism, this thesis will pay careful attention to how representations of male characters support the meanings attached to the girls. This shifting focus to men, as subjects represented in relation to women and girls popularly perceived as the beneficiaries of feminism, is a developing area of interest in scholarly feminism. Bonnie J. Dow, for example, reflects in her essay, "The Traffic in Men and the *Fatal Attraction* of Postfeminist Masculinity", that the lack of analysis of men and masculinity in her earlier work was a "glaring omission" (121). In this paper Dow elucidates how representations of sensitive and supportive men in prime time television in the 1980s implied that women's problems were their own responsibility (121). If men were presented as "sensitive new age guys" what did women have to complain about? In other words, the problems women experienced were represented as a consequence of their independence, not as the product of male behaviour or patriarchal authority. But if the representations are analysed together, where the meaning implicit in one sex is dependent upon its relationship to the other, then it becomes evident that representing men as "sensitive and supportive" is imbricated with its own political position, namely, a perception of "crisis" in white masculinity, while repositioning female

subjects as independent and “liberated” functions to further distance these figures from feminist considerations.

A central aim of this thesis, then, is to explore and analyse how the representation of the girl as independent, aggressive, violent and sexually active (in short, appropriating traditionally male coded behaviours) becomes a site of struggle over those meanings – where for the girl independence becomes isolation, aggression becomes bitchiness, violence becomes hysteria, and sexual activity becomes sexual promiscuity. In order to understand why these meanings shift when appropriated by a female body it is necessary to read gender as an identity category that is produced through a range of cultural discourses. Gender, Judith Butler has argued, is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” which intersect with discourses of race, class, sexuality etc. in order to form a culturally intelligible and coherent gender identity (*Gender* 33-34; 4-5). The performance of gender, and its manifestation in film, is constituted by its intersection with these discourses, which in turn produces recognisable gendered identities. The above pairings, independence as isolation, aggression as bitchiness, violence as hysteria, and sexual activity as sexual promiscuity, need to be read for their classed, raced and patriarchal implications for the sexual identity of the girl.

Thus the “girl” in this thesis is not defined in terms of an age bracket, but rather as a figure emblematic of a range of discursive formations converging at this particular historical and cultural moment. The foregrounding of the girl as “empowered” illustrates how, in Michel Foucault’s terms (substituting the term “sex” for “girl” for the purposes of the current argument) “we are dealing less with *a* discourse on ... [girls] than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions” (italics in orig. *History of Sexuality* 33). As such, this figure becomes a productive space through which to read contemporary anxieties around the sex/gender system, in relation to both its historical origins and its current destabilisation. This figure registers the power dynamics operating from a range of institutions that constitute it and are constituted by it. In this sense the girl becomes symptomatic of the apprehensions around the gendered identity required of young women under neoliberalism, but also, significantly, is the figure that works to smooth over the wider threat presented to the hegemony of masculinity and patriarchy when it is faced with cultural shifts that

should undermine its dominance, such as equal opportunity, feminism and economic crises. Reading representations of girlhood through the way the girl's "empowerment" is weakened or accounted for reveals the way the sex/gender system negotiates and renegotiates power within a global economy that now requires girls to claim some degree of power and visibility.

This figure of the girl, like its predecessor in the cinema of the 1990s, occupies the space between empowerment and the sexual double standard (Farrimond 87). It is a figure emblematic of the narrative slippage between feminist agency and patriarchal recuperation, a condition that has frequently troubled representations of females (Munford 148-149 qtd. in Farrimond 79). There are layers of cultural work at play in these representations of the girl's gendered identity. That they are celebrated is evidence of the securing of the individual identity required by late-capitalism, but that they are problematic, indeed that their "empowerment" is complicated, suggests the ongoing power of the heterosexual matrix – a key structural support for patriarchy – as the dominant framework through which subjects become culturally intelligible. Thus the assuming of a masculine identity – the signifier for power and privilege within a patriarchal economy – is a productive gesture in so far as it confirms the existence of this power; that it cannot be maintained is productive in so far as it returns such power and privilege to the domain of men. These representations of girlhood can be read as necessary subversions that (re)produce the heterosexual matrix in service of a patriarchal resurgence.

This thesis reads sex, gender and sexuality in discursive terms and yet "sex/gender system" has been chosen as the preferred phrasing. "Sex", in this context, is understood via Butler as an effect of the heterosexual matrix, not as a cause; with the argument herein following her point that the implications of gender must come before any consideration of identity (*Gender* 32; 22). The gendered identity of a person sexed female must negotiate with the implications of a discourse of patriarchy in producing that sexed/gendered identity (with its inevitable recourse to the heterosexual binary and the subordination of the "feminine" within those terms). Using Gayle Rubin's phrasing is a matter of foregrounding, at the outset, the fact that the production of this capitalist-patriarchal system is a historical and cultural phenomenon and her clear assertion in "The Traffic in Women" that it is possible to think otherwise. Rubin's "preliminary definition" of a "sex/gender system" as "the

set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (159) allows for an understanding of the current patriarchal-capitalist system as structuring sexuality and gender roles in terms of a reinvigoration of the notions of sexual difference in ways that subtly re-produce male dominance. If the “girl” is to be successfully read as an index of cultural anxieties around the crisis in masculinity and as signifying postfeminist ideas of empowerment in response to the socio-economic changes brought about by neoliberalism, then the ways in which “sex” has been re-emphasised under the current sex/gender system needs to be taken into account. Thus in employing sex/gender system the aim is not to produce an essentialist account of gender relations. Moreover, as Rubin notes, “it is important – even in the face of a depressing history – to maintain a distinction between the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organized” (168). Using “sex/gender system” places the analytic focus on the current arrangement, with its distinctly neoliberal articulation of postfeminist and masculine identities, in order to highlight the oppressive ways in which the current sexual world has been organised.

A notable absence in this thesis is a discussion of non-white characters. Given this is a discursive account of gender, then the racial implications of identity certainly could have worked here. As Butler demonstrates, if one is a “woman” then that is not all one is; gender intersects with race (among other identity categories) to produce an “identity” (*Gender* 4-5). In the formative stages of this thesis, the initial survey of films critiqued did include a selection of non-white characters such as *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) featuring a Mexican-American teenager in a narrative of female empowerment; *Colombiana* (2011) whose Dominican-Puerto-Rican-American female lead seeks revenge on behalf of her dead parents; *Precious* (2009) which narrates the abusive and disturbing life of a teenage African-American girl<sup>8</sup>; and *Samson and Delilah* (2009) that focuses on the brutal trials of a pair of indigenous, Australian teenagers in contemporary society. In addition, a number of films with a white, postfeminist protagonist and a non-white girl figure that functioned as the “buddy” or aid to the white girl’s agenda were considered. Among them were *The Hunger Games* (2012), *The Help* (2011) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003). These films

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<sup>8</sup> This film, in particular, would have worked as a poignant point of comparison to the treatment of the white girl’s pregnancy in *Juno*.

were finally omitted from the discussion for several reasons. In terms of the non-white protagonist, there were significantly fewer films to choose from, with the four protagonists noted above all produced in the independent (“indie”) genre. This was not in itself problematic, indeed several chapters deal with indie films. But in focusing on these “stereotypic ‘women’s films’” where “from a certain point of view, one could say that Hollywood is to indies as male is to female” (Ortner 177), rather than further complicating the implicit marginalisation of the female protagonists of this genre by introducing the dimension of race, the argument focused instead on the socio-economic implications of the girl’s whiteness in this neoliberal context. Extending this line of inquiry to encompass how the non-white girl is further disempowered (or apparently “empowered”) was beyond the scope of this dissertation. For as much as the neoliberal, postfeminist narrative of the girl’s success or failure would purport to erase obstacles relating to race and class, this was found to not be the case; the coding of whiteness in terms of class was a significant factor relative to how the girl’s power was ultimately eroded.

The first chapter examines the sex/gender system in relation to socio-economic changes since the 1960s and elucidates how these shifts in the wider culture have been registered in representations of girls and men in cinema. This chapter argues that masculinity has been represented as “in crisis” in response to cultural changes in the socio-economic sphere, but this “crisis” has resulted in the politicisation of white male subjectivity. In contrast, the political aspects of feminism have been increasingly understood as outdated, because already accomplished, and this has resulted in a depoliticisation of the female subject. This politicisation/depoliticisation of male/female subjects is evident in cinema and exemplified by the tropes of the white male victim and the empowered girl.

The second chapter examines *Gone Girl*, a film which is, as already suggested, an anomaly in the context of this thesis because it represents a heterosexual couple in a sexualised, “romantic” marriage and a thirty-seven year old woman (albeit a figure that is at times positioned problematically as a girl). However, it is this irregularity that allows the representation of protagonists Amy and Nick to be read as a clear illustration of the gender theory that will help explain what is occurring in subtler ways in later films. Theories of gendered identity that focus on the power of patriarchal discourse and its expression as heterosexual desire are explicated in this

chapter through an analysis of *Gone Girl*. The effects of this sex/gender system on the gendered identity of the female subject demonstrate how the concept of empowerment for the girl is complicated because of the pivotal function of the female sex for maintaining patriarchy. The perception of crisis, imbricated with the post-GFC setting and Nick's masculinity, can be interpreted in the film as an opportunity to recirculate myths of gender inequality and facilitate a renegotiation of white male power.

The arguments established in Chapters One and Two are then brought to bear on the analyses of the films in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six. Each of these four chapters examines the girl in relation to her function for patriarchy together with contextual/theoretical understandings of how masculinity has been represented as "in crisis." It is argued in each of these chapters, through this combination of theory and contextual analysis, that the representation of the girl's power provides an opportunity to renegotiate positions of white male privilege.

Chapter Three analyses three films that feature "little girl avengers": *Kick-Ass*, *Hanna* and *True Grit*. The increased emphasis on representing the girl as her father's daughter since the mid-eighteenth century, together with the psychoanalytic understanding of the girl who identifies with her father/the masculine, is applied to these representations of girlhood. It is argued that because these girls operate on behalf of their father's cause, rather than their own agendas for power, they function as "patriarchal daughters." In this way the girl is permitted her power, as an idealised subject for late-capitalist culture, but at the same time she confirms the masculinity of men by legitimising the paternal role. The representation of paternal figures and mothers is here contextualised with reference to late-capitalist culture, and together with the girl they perpetuate a new configuration of a much older fantasy of the family: the sentimental father and his asexual and capable girl register an ideology of patriarchy unfettered by the problematic sexuality of adult women, with mothers variously represented as absent (dead or remaining in the home), demonised (the antagonists) or as anachronistic feminists (eventually disposed of).

Chapter Four brings insights from theoretical postfeminism and girls' studies to bear on the representation of the pregnant teen in *Juno*. The chapter argues that the representation of Juno intersects with discourses of patriarchy and neoliberalism and

that the disruptive potential of this figure is undermined because of the shifting emphasis in the narrative to her role as daughter and future-directed postfeminist subject. Anxieties in relation to masculinity are registered in the film through the way each of the key male characters develops in response to the presence of the pregnant teenager. This girl allows for the paternal figure to reaffirm his role as protective father, the boyfriend to perform an alternative “innocent” masculinity that, while endearing, absolves him of responsibility; with positions of white male privilege renegotiated through the rejection of Mark, the would-be father, representative of a “softened”, infantilised masculinity from the 1990s.

Chapter Five examines representations of the unruly and sexually promiscuous girl in relation to national subjectivity and gender relations. This chapter addresses the gendering of the Australian national identity and explores how this gendered hierarchy is dependent upon a particular positioning of the white girl in this context. The sexualised exploits of Kat in *Suburban Mayhem*, and the unsettling permeability of Heidi’s sexuality in *Somersault*, are analysed in relation to the function they perform for threatening and then resecuring a white, male and middle-class ideology through their relationships with male characters. This chapter argues that these films register the perception of crisis in Australian masculinity and links this to a perception of crisis in national identity. The representation of the girl in these films is indicative of the role of the sexually promiscuous and lower-class girl more broadly for reaffirming the necessity for paternal law and rehabilitating white masculinity in service of a white male nation.

Chapter Six contains a figure that, of all the girls analysed, is the one that most represents significant potential for disrupting a patriarchal sex/gender system. Unlike the young girls analysed in Chapter Three, already disenfranchised by their youth, or Juno in Chapter Four, a pregnant adolescent and thus unsurprisingly encoded with anxieties over teen sexuality, and the sexually promiscuous girls in Chapter Five, obviously threatening to an active male sexuality, Lisbeth is not so easily accounted for. Drawing on the butch aesthetic found in cinemas of female masculinity from the mid-twentieth century, the trope of rape-revenge identified by Carol Clover in 1970s horror films, as well as the location of this figure in a set of films drawn from novels written with direct reference to “men who hate women”, the representation of Lisbeth is a recognisable trope of female revenge on men and patriarchy. And yet,

even here, as will be shown, part of Lisbeth's function is also to make possible the renegotiation of white masculinity. In analysing the way the viewer is positioned to gaze with Lisbeth at certain men suffering, and the way certain male characters are positioned to gaze at her, it is argued that the trilogy registers precisely how difficult it is to imagine a culture with powerful female figures emancipated from the patriarchal meanings that also structure the female sex.

**Chapter One**  
**Exceptional Girls and Vulnerable Men:**  
**Personalising the Political in Neoliberal Cinema**

The intertwining of the girl's gendered identity with a significant adult male character in each of the films analysed in this thesis invites consideration of whether patriarchy continues to position female characters in terms of their function for this sex/gender system, regardless of contextual changes since feminism. On the surface the traditional notions of sexual difference that support a patriarchal sex/gender system appear to have been radically reversed, with the girls constructed in more active, masculine terms and the male characters passively feminised. But rather than overturning the power of patriarchy, this configuration of sexual difference structures the girl's power in terms of a presumed disempowerment of the male subject, where his waning of power is understood as a consequence of feminism. This chapter suggests that socio-economic upheavals in the West since the 1960s and 1970s help to explain, at least in part, this restructuring of sexual difference in cinemas of girlhood. Elucidating the influences of a revived ideology of individualism under neoliberalism for the girl subject, and considering the implications of the idealisation of the victim function for representations of the male subject, this chapter argues that while the sexual difference that supports a patriarchal gender identification has changed in response to these shifting understandings of the subject these changes do not significantly disrupt the hegemony of this sex/gender system. Now updated to fit with the expectations of a late-capitalist economy and a culture enamoured with victimhood, the power of patriarchal discourse is maintained through a re-emergence of sexual difference. This chapter will explore how shifting notions of subjectivity have reproduced divergent expectations on the gendered identities of the sexes, while subsequent chapters will provide evidence of the effects of these changes through the textual analyses of each film.

The proposition that cinema operates on behalf of a patriarchal ideology has been widely articulated since the 1970s. Feminist film theorists from this period such as Laura Mulvey argued that patriarchy structured film form (198). According to Mulvey, mainstream Hollywood film constructed the female body as passive in relation to an active male gaze, which meant the female character functioned

ideologically as the bearer of male narrative meanings (198-200). Problems with Mulvey's thesis aside<sup>9</sup>, her argument directed attention to the way cinema constructs male and female characters in terms of sexual difference. Defining women as men's other in the cinematic text positioned women in a way that supported and naturalised a patriarchal ideology (Hollinger 10). Robin Wood, too, notes a privileging of patriarchal meanings in popular Hollywood cinema from the 1970s and 1980s. Claiming that there had been a destabilisation of patriarchal capitalism in American culture Wood asserts that, ideologically, in cinema of the Reagan era restoration of the Father: "constitutes ... the dominant project, ad infinitum and post nauseam, of the contemporary Hollywood cinema ... The Father must here be understood in all senses, symbolic, literal, potential: patriarchal authority (the Law)" (italics in orig. 172). Taking Wood's comment at face value<sup>10</sup>, if this is the dominant project of Hollywood cinema of the mid-to-late twentieth century, then it is perhaps unsurprising that the girls analysed in this thesis function as a means through which the masculinity of men is negotiated, as well as the figures through which patriarchy is reaffirmed as the dominant sex/gender system. In Yvonne Tasker's terms:

It is also a cliché of Hollywood cinema, pulp fictions and psychoanalysis that tomboys or active heroines somehow identify with their fathers. In action films, the heroine is presented as either motivated by her maternal instincts or as taking over/inheriting her father's position. This suggests very little space for the heroine as articulating an identity for herself, one that is beyond the terms of the masculine, mother or Other. (Tasker, *Working Girls* 102)

Like the heroines of the action genre, many of the girls discussed herein follow this clichéd narrative trajectory, inheriting the father's position, literally or symbolically, and therefore reaffirming the suggestion that film's dominant project is restoration of the Father. In Mulvey's terms, such girls would remain the bearers of male narrative

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<sup>9</sup> Mulvey's thesis was much contested. Karen Hollinger's *Feminist Film Studies* provides an overview of these objections (11-12). In response, Mulvey revised her thesis in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Victor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)" proposing a "transvestite identification" for the female spectator; a position more aligned with a negotiation of gender identification in cinema.

<sup>10</sup> Wood is discussing *Star Wars* specifically, but he views the film as emblematic of a trend in Hollywood cinema from this period, which he terms, "the Lucas-Spielberg syndrome" (165). He notes that women are repositioned in support of this restoration of male characters by downplaying their narrative trajectories or returning female characters to their traditional functions. For example, there is little interest in Princess Leia's parentage compared to Luke's or to her character development beyond the union with Han Solo (Wood 174).

meanings. However, the rethinking of cinema as a site of struggle over ideology, together with the understanding of gender as a relational concept, means male characters can now too be read as bearing the narrative meanings of the girl.

Indeed restoration of the Father in contemporary cinema arguably depends upon a specific positioning of the girl that encodes those “masculine, mother or Other” categories in new ways. This differs from Wood’s analysis; while more recent cinema may still “put women back where they belong (subordinate or nowhere)” these films also appear to account for the repositioning of the girl since the 1990s in terms of the role she performs for a neoliberal economy (174). Moreover, Tasker, focusing on female cop narratives from the 1980s and 1990s (*Blue Steel*, *Cagney & Lacey*, *Backstreet Justice*) argues that these films disrupted those clichéd narratives of father-identification because what these “violent”, “alcoholic” and “corrupt” figures signified was “uncertain” (102-103). The films of this thesis, by contrast, demonstrate a more assured positioning of the male characters in relation to positioning the girl as his “masculine, mother or Other” (Tasker, 102). As Chapters Three and Six will argue, the masculinisation of the girl in *Kick-Ass*, *Hanna*, *True Grit* and the *Millennium* trilogy is connected with presenting a character capable of handling the demands of the new economic order. Chapters Four and Five illustrate how those maternal instincts become a measure of the girl’s success or failure in terms of the postfeminist ideal, where *Juno* contains representations of successful navigations of this trajectory and Kat in *Suburban Mayhem* its failure. As the male’s Other in each of the films, the girl’s masculinity supports the feminisation of the male characters in ways that implicate his apparent disempowerment in terms of her presumed power. In other words, the girl’s power is complicit with male disempowerment. These films suggest that patriarchy continues to operate as a significant force on the structuring of film form; however the construction of sexual difference that supports this patriarchal ideology now looks different. Changes to these representations of female/male characters in terms of sexual difference draw on shifting notions of subjectivity in the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Shifting attitudes toward personhood in this period are derived from the new materialist analyses of the economic, the psychic and linguistic structuration emerging in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and their interrogation of the

confident centrality of the autonomous self. Wider economic, political and social upheavals in Western culture since the mid-nineteenth century and the concomitant destabilisation of beliefs that the self is a unified, self-directed and independent category of personhood have culminated in late-capitalist culture in the latter part of the twentieth century, with the individual subject theoretically destabilised by a “disappearance” (Jameson 16). The cultural anxieties provoked by this decentring of the subject, the fact that the subject has been “exhausted” by (European) logocentric and homocentric philosophy since modernity, have resulted in a postmodern resurgence of notions of individualism (Peters 126). A revival of an ideology of individualism forms part of this postmodern trend. The individual has become the centrepiece of Western political culture since the mid-1990s in response to neoliberal economic restructuring since the 1970s (Connell, *Masculinities* 254). Marnina Gonick defines neoliberalism as:

a term more frequently used in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia than in the United States, although its usage there is increasing. It references the dismantling of the welfare state, the cumulative effects of the globalization of capital, the changing nature of labor processes and local labor markets, new technologies, and the resulting changing family forms, the feminization and racialization of poverty, and the decline of the trade union movement. (Gonick 19-20)

A revived individualism, as a central feature of this neoliberal model, purports to be gender-neutral. One of the much touted features of this economic restructuring was “equal employment opportunity (EEO)” which, in theory, is a degendering principle, expressed as individualism (Connell, *Masculinities* 254). Nevertheless, in the 1990s the desired attributes of the individual were coded masculine in gender ideology – the ruthless, competitive and focused entrepreneur (Connell, *Masculinities* 255). Examinations of postfeminist popular culture show, however, that at the turn of the millennium the individualising and masculinising principles of this idealised neoliberal subject coalesce around a desirable form of female subjectivity. Embracing the economically required traits of masculinity, this figure is also very much a girl.

Related to the emerging focus on the individual there was, in the 1960s, the development of an identity politics that personalised and marked the bodies of subjects that were visibly different from the norm. The “norm” in this sense is the understanding of white masculinity as coterminous with individualism. The rise of liberationist movements such as the women’s movement, gay liberation and the civil rights movement drew their power from a form of embodied difference at the same time as these movements became understood as a master narrative of white male decline in post-sixties American culture (this narrative developed in conjunction with the effects of deindustrialisation) (Robinson 2-3). Sally Robinson demonstrates how these seemingly disparate movements – the identity politics of the “marginalised” and the subsequent perception of “crisis” in white masculinity – in fact allowed white masculinity to reappropriate this now desirable position of “subject-in-crisis” in ways that recentralised their interests through the newly emergent symbolic currency of identity politics (2-9). This positions white masculinity as drawing on a politics of collectivity through a similar narrative of personalised, victimised embodiment.

These developments in subjectivity – the revival of individualism and the centralising of the victim – have reproduced diverse expectations on the gendered identities of the sexes which are being registered in cinema as a new form of sexual difference. Foregrounding the girl as an ideal subject for an ideology of individualism occurs simultaneously with the waning cultural legitimacy of feminism. Taken together, these cultural influences work to depoliticise the female subject: individuality isolates this subject as an autonomous figure, while the collective politics once associated with the female sex come to seem unnecessary given her apparent empowerment as an individual. At the same time, announcements of crisis in masculinity, because of the presence of “empowered minorities” in the culture, recentralise the interests of white men in ways that can be understood as a politicisation of white male subjectivity. This chapter suggests, following Foucault, that what lies anterior to a discursive formation – in this instance, a discourse of gender – structures its coherence. The intensified interpellation of the subject as an autonomous figure, the individual thriving under neoliberal capitalism or the victim suffering from deindustrialisation and minority rights, is one such anterior force which imbues the discursive formation of gendered identities with specific, and, as noted, different implications for the sexes. This is not to suggest that the plight of the

individual was not being registered in earlier cinema. Carol Clover, in her influential study of American cinematic horror from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, concurs with Andrew Tudor's suggestion that the emergence of the girl hero since the mid-1970s "is the structural effect of a greater investment in the victim function. For whatever reason, modern horror seems especially interested in the trials of everyperson, and everyperson is on his or her own in facing the menace, without help from 'authorities'" (17).

Different since the 1990s, however, is the way discourses of masculinity and male crises have become a central concern informing understandings of gender. The resurgence of the individual as part of the new landscape of the neoliberal economy, together with the idealisation of the girl in this context, occurs concurrently with these shifting attitudes toward masculinity since the 1990s. A significant number of popular films and mass media narratives engender the victim function as increasingly the privileged domain of men, while the positions of presumed empowerment and capability are occupied by women and girls. This suggests a renegotiation of gendered identities occurring along the lines of the personal, but with rather different results for the representation of the sexes. Changes in the cinematic tropes of the empowered girl are supported by the depiction of more sensitive male characters in ways that register this trend in subjectivity. And it is through this particular reconfiguration of sexual difference that patriarchal authority remains encoded in the films analysed in this thesis.

### **Individualism and the Girl**

Representations of the girl as an empowered figure conceal the way autonomy for the girl is undermined by the splitting of female subjectivity. Contemporary individuality and traditional femininity both require the spectre of the "other" girl. Narratives of the empowered girl are dependent upon her representational other in the unsuccessful or ordinary girl in ways that are both patriarchal and socio-economic. Celebration of the girl as empowered, as exceptional, is achieved at the expense of denigrating other girls, as Sarah Projansky explains in her examination of the "four most talked about girl films of the decade [2000-2009]", *Mean Girls* (2004), *Juno* (2007), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *Precious* (2009). Projansky surveyed the discourses that

proliferated in relation to these girl films – the discussions, the popular and academic attention they received, and the star power of the girls themselves – and found that the celebration of these figures as “unique girls”, as smart girls who rejected romance and beauty culture, were derived from “the belittling of girls more generally” in the culture (107). Bifurcation of the girl’s gendered identity – a dichotomy of the good girl/bad girl – and the way the girl is celebrated/denigrated within these terms allows her to be understood as an autonomous figure responsible for where she fits within the sexual economy. Moreover, this dichotomy is not simply patriarchal; it also registers socio-economic factors relative to the individualising tendencies occurring in the culture more broadly. Representations of empowered girls contribute to the circulation of meanings of girlhood as a binary configuration split by “can-do”/“at-risk” (Harris, *Future* 10)<sup>11</sup>, here defined by Gonick as “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia”, which support the production of the individual required for the neoliberal economy:

My argument is that both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate in the production of the neoliberal girl subject with the former representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way. Both participate in processes of individualization that ... direct attention from structural explanations for inequality toward explanations of personal circumstances and personality traits. (Gonick 2)

Thus the patriarchal dichotomy now also works as a socio-economic binary for the girl subject. The “unique girls” that operate at the expense of the “typical girls” therefore perform similar cultural work: they rewrite the narrative of the girl as an individual responsible for her choices – both sexual and economic.

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<sup>11</sup> Two prominent cultural discourses contribute to the production of the gendered identity of the girl during the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. The specific name of each discourse depends on the theorist – “can-do”/“at-risk” (Harris); “Girl Power”/“Reviving Ophelia” (Aapola et al); protection/empowerment (Willis, “Sexual Subjectivity” 244) – and while each is articulated slightly differently, they identify girlhood as a passage of transition built on seemingly contradictory discourses of adolescent femininity. For one body of theory this passage is configured as trauma (Marshall 118; Aapola et al. 41; Willis, “Girls” 9; Gonick 1) and for others it is seen as empowering (Gonick 7-9; Lee 59-75; Aapola et al. 18-32). Yet several theorists, particularly those in sociology, have argued that these seemingly contradictory constructions, the vulnerable, voiceless, wounded and fragile girl in need of protection, and the empowered, assertive and dynamic “new girl,” represent a broader contextual shift to an intensified individualism, where the tendency is to focus on personal experience as an explanatory context for inequality, rather than structural concerns (Gonick 2; Aapola et al. 39; 55; Harris, *Future Girl* 14).

The representations of girls in the films to be analysed in the following chapters, their status as empowered, appear different from “typical” girls through their traiting as masculine, unruly and generally disruptive to the hegemony of white male privilege. But this status of empowerment in fact works to downplay the critical attention that could be brought to bear on issues of masculinity and patriarchy because they give the appearance of subverting the constraints that afflict the “typical” girl subject. As generic hybrids of both earlier and current representational tropes, such as tomboys, femme fatales, action heroines, tough girls, bitches, angry girls and chick dicks, these girls similarly push against the constraints of patriarchy, but they also now register the intensification of the personalisation of culture in ways that neutralise their political potential. Changes to these tropes can be understood through contextualising the history of their original and their contemporary re-emergence.

These tropes, in their contemporary form, are indicative of the increasing emphasis on individualism for the girl and the way this perception of individualism masquerades as gender equality. This presumption of individualism as commensurate with equality situates these representations within a broader trend of distancing the female subject from the capacity to critique patriarchy. An examination of how these figures change depending on their context of emergence provides evidence of the waning legitimacy of a feminist critique in popular culture. The tomboy film, at its height of popularity in the 1970s, illustrated the fluidity of gender, permitted the girl an active identity as a masculine character and included the erotic potential of a lesbian sexuality (Halberstam, *Female* 5-6; 187-188). The threat this erotic potential presented to the family explains, at least in part, why this figure faded from view toward the close of the 1980s (Halberstam, *Female* 6). In the 2000s “tomboy identity” becomes “a matter of style, rather than substance” (Skerski 471). Likewise, the “angry girls”, “tough girls” and “bitches”, popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, depicted hardened teenage girls vocally rebelling against patriarchy, but by the mid-1990s these films shifted focus to more solo depictions of girlhood while their popularity was arguably subsumed by the rise of the action heroine and the appeal of her youthfulness, femininity and distinct lack of political commitments (Shary 82; 85; 112; 122; Hopkins 1; 122). While the femme fatale seems to have evolved with an ideology of individualism, no longer killed off by the narrative

conclusion as a means to assuage the threat she poses to the family and adult masculinity, the teenage femme fatale of the late 1990s and early 2000s has her motivations, desires and backstory foregrounded (Farrimond 79). However, in straddling the binary of sexual objectification and empowered agent she is a quintessentially postfeminist figure: her performance of sexual agency is explicitly directed at male sexual desire. In their apparent differences from other contemporary depictions of girlhood these figures alleviate the anxieties provoked by these “other” girls – as hyper-sexual and frivolous figures concerned with traditional femininity – while in fact occupying a space of similar gender renegotiation in terms of the new sexual contract. Unruly girls, too, perform the cultural work of restabilising patriarchy as the dominant sex/gender system and foreground the individual as the subject par excellence for neoliberal culture.

The changes in representing the girl in cinema to be discussed in subsequent chapters reflect shifting understandings of girlhood and femininity since the 1990s. The relationship between the action heroine and the Girl Power movement functions as a microcosm to explain this wider shift. The emergence of the girl action heroine intersects with the broader discourse of Girl Power emerging in the 1990s and the way this discourse developed a focus on the girl as an empowered individual increasingly detached from broader socio-economic considerations. This representation of the active girl heroine is closely aligned with the postfeminist sensibility in its championing of individual power and its repudiation of feminism:

For better or worse, the girl action heroine represents a type of post-feminist character who operates in a world where earlier feminist concerns are seen as outdated. This is an era in which the media embraces a rhetoric that declares girls are unquestionably empowered. Girls can be anything they want, and they can do anything they want. (Brown, *Dangerous* 142)

The circulation of this figure in the media, cinema and popular television programming at the turn of the twenty-first century perpetuates a narrative of girlhood that is particularly neoliberal in that it “promises unbelievable happiness and achievement – girl power – for the girl who embodies can-do status through career, fashion, and lifestyle choices” (Projansky 5). As this discourse developed

cultural currency in popular culture in the 1990s, it lost the political potential with which it was originally imbued:

With its origins in the riot grrrl movement and third wave feminism, Girl Power began as an explicitly political concept. By the 1990s, the discourse of Girl Power had also been deployed by various elements of popular culture and the mainstream media in a way that constructed a version of girlhood that excludes girls' political selves. (Taft 69)

Jessica K. Taft elucidates four separate yet intertwining meanings or versions of Girl Power that contributed to the depoliticisation of the Girl Power movement. It is the broader depoliticisation of this movement that helps explain, in part at least, the way representations of empowered girls help to valorise an autonomous version of female subjectivity while simultaneously covering over ongoing inequalities. The first version is anti-feminism: this means embracing sexiness and strength as a celebration of girl-positive feelings while rejecting political rebellion (Taft 71). The second is postfeminism: this version asserts that the feminist project is over because girls are doing fine (Taft 72). The third is consumer power: this version understands girlhood as a space for consumption, rather than social or political engagement (Taft 75). The fourth version of Girl Power, "individual power", is linked with contemporary theories on postfeminism:

Closely related to Girl Power's postfeminist meanings is its invocation to describe the world as a meritocracy void of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism. Magazines and advertisements aimed at girls use the discourse of Girl Power in a way that reflects the ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility, and has a noticeable disregard for social systems and institutions. (Taft 73)

This version of Girl Power helps to make sense of the way the active and assertive heroine is represented. The quintessentially postfeminist heroine reflects ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility because this figure is represented as a free and equal subject no longer requiring intervention from social systems such as feminism (Braithwaite 418). In her performance of empowerment, which draws on her position as a spectacular individual, the active heroine in fact preserves the ideologies she appears to overturn: "the rhetoric of empowerment contributes to

rearticulating dominant patriarchal and capitalist values, while not substantially disrupting power relations” (Riordan 282). Representations of empowered heroines emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century form a discursive relationship with these developments in the Girl Power movement in so far as they are constituted by it and help to perpetuate and circulate the meanings that constitute it.

There is a fundamental conflict in representing the girl as empowered in a neoliberal and patriarchal culture: on the one hand, the more masculine girl disseminates the ideology of individualism now required of female subjects in this neoliberal economy, but on the other, the girl’s masculinity threatens the status of masculinity as the privileged domain of men under patriarchy. Strategies in cinema reveal how this conflict is resolved through narratives that purport to valorise gender equality. These representations of the girl share masculine traits and concomitantly, in different ways and to varying degrees, the need for a contextual rationalisation of this masculine identification. This masculinisation has a dual consequence: it reaffirms the superiority of masculinity as the privileged gender identity and supports the assumption that gender equality has been achieved.

The narrative strategies that contextualise the girl’s masculinity do so either through an emphasis on her “exceptionalism” or through the need to “explain away” her position of power and privilege, sometimes both. Strategies of exceptionalism or explanation are significant narrative elements in the films analysed over the course of this thesis. The female protagonist operating in a man’s world must be exceptional: through the adoption of masculine behaviours she must prove herself to be as good as, indeed better, than her male colleagues (Hopkins 1; 150; Jowett 20). Thus, “taking such protagonists as a sign of progress, ‘masculine’ attributes come to be seen as heroic and ‘universal’” (Marshment and Hollows qtd. in Jowett 20). Moreover, the narrative strategy of explaining away her empowerment – as a response to childhood trauma, a reaction to being a survivor of abuse, a response to the father’s death and the need to take over his responsibilities (Inness, *Tough Girls* 91; Shary, *Generation* 111; Tasker, *Spectacular* 20-21) – do not disrupt binary conceptions of gender. As Lisa Purse argues, speaking specifically of exploitation films from the 1970s and 1980s:

female anger born of a very personal, gendered suffering became an explanation for female violence and aggression – the implication being that women would not do ‘this kind of thing’ except in response to a devastating and physically invasive assault, a hypothesis that does nothing to dismantle dominant binary conceptions of gendered behaviour. (Purse 193)

Such narrative strategies remain in evidence in contemporary cinema and perform similar cultural work; the depictions of exceptionalism support the notion that gender equality has been achieved through the emphasis on the girl as capable, indeed now superior to her male counterparts, while the gender binary is maintained by explaining away the girl’s empowerment as the effect of circumstance, rather than ability. In emphasising the girl’s masculinity as exceptional and thus reframing her in a socially sanctioned position of empowerment alongside her male colleagues, the appropriation of masculine attributes as a means to claim visibility comes to seem unnecessary. This supports the narrative strategy of explaining away the girl’s power because it situates the girl’s claim to power as occurring within a discourse where forms of empowerment are already available to her. Cumulatively, this has the effect of suggesting that the girl is always allowed to behave like one of the boys, which then functions to erase the underlying obstacles in claiming this position of power. The persistence of the gender binary as structuring and restricting the girl’s behaviour is significantly downplayed via these narrative strategies, while the ways in which the performance of masculinity by the girl presents a threat to the masculinity of men and boys is obscured.

One area where this position has become curiously salient, and indeed perpetuates a similar discourse of presumed gender equality, is the way girls and boys are positioned in discourses of education relative to the new sexual contract. This contemporary situation in education represents the intersection of the perceived crisis in masculinity with the presumed empowerment of girls. Examinations of how discourses of gender in education structure the ways girls and boys are understood as navigating the sex/gender system, and especially the concept of gender equality within that system, provide further evidence of the discursive formations of gender this thesis identifies in cinema. In particular, the circulation of the narrative that gender equality has been achieved, alongside the generation of a narrative that when girls win, boys lose, helps to make sense of the way this reasoning also underpins the

representation of gendered identities in film. Media panics around boys' performance in school have been articulated in relation to girls' improved performance – producing a discourse that suggests the empowerment of girls occurs at the expense of boys (Buchbinder, *Studying* 7-8; Walkerdine et al. 165). These cultural anxieties contribute to the broader circulation of assumptions that gender equality has been attained and the subsequent silencing of the ability to articulate perceived gender inequalities.

This mirrors McRobbie's argument that urging the girl to come forward as a capable and autonomous subject for the new economy means she must forgo the critique of masculine hegemony. There is further evidence of this development in schools in gender balanced approaches to bullying: girls become unable to articulate inequalities in terms of patriarchal repression and instead language that constructs girls in relation to other girls is privileged (Lind and Irwin 50; Renold and Ringrose 325). This situation echoes the discussion of "unique girls" in cinema: the celebration of the girl pursuing her own self-interests occurs at the expense of denigrating the frivolous, beauty-conscious and romantically invested girl (Projansky). In favouring the interests of boys while simultaneously insisting that girls are now equal based on the girl's scholastic ability (in ways that do not consider factors such as class and race, see McRobbie 74), girls are effectively silenced in their ability to discuss inequalities in terms of patriarchal oppression. In forwarding the girl as the empowered heroine, as the highly visible and capable subject for a neoliberal economy and as the figure succeeding in discourses of education, a new narrative of gender equality/inequality emerges. This narrative is based on the assumption that girls now have equality, while boys are now presumably experiencing inequality as a result of the girl's empowerment. Such an assumption limits the capacity for a political, feminist critique. The language of critique does not disappear, as will be shown; instead it is arguably reappropriated as a perceived crisis in masculinity in popular culture.

Assuming gender equality has been achieved, and the consequent silencing of critique, is part of a broader trend for female subjects in the culture. Rosalind Gill, speaking specifically about female employees in the media production industry, cites a new form of sexism in the postfeminist climate where equality is assumed, yet men remain privileged ("Sexism Reloaded" 62). Gill argues that a key way this sexism

operates is through the “invalidation and annihilation of any language for talking about structural inequalities” (63). Her term for this is “*unspeakable inequalities*” because they go “largely unnoticed and unspoken about even by those most adversely affected by them. For in the media workplaces rhetoric of the meritocracy prevails and ‘not making it’ is interpreted through a toxic discourse of individual failure” (italics in orig. 63). This is indicative of feminism’s loss of cultural legitimacy and the renunciation of feminism that characterises the postfeminist sensibility. The unavailability of language to articulate structural inequalities extends to the aforementioned discussion of education, and is also recognisable in representations of girls in visual culture.

### **Depoliticising Feminism**

This inability to speak of gender inequality rests on the assumption that women and men are now equals because the feminist aims of the second wave have been achieved. One way of understanding how the intensification of ideas of the personal and the individual subject in the culture come to mean different things for the sexes is through Foucault’s theorisation of discourse. The logic that unifies a discourse of gender equality is the retrospective interpretation of the feminist project of the 1960s and 1970s in the postfeminist era (since the late 1980s and 1990s) as successful. Looking back at the rights successfully gained, feminism is now understood as a completed project because the female sex presumably has equality: full rights to the status of personhood by law. Thus, the argument goes, the culture no longer needs feminism. But what actually comes to prominence is this category of personhood. This is problematic for two reasons: firstly, as will be discussed, personhood has its own history as a category associated with white male subjectivity and secondly, the personhood that is privileged for the girl is the “individual”, which is a neoliberal economic construct of subjectivity divorced from considerations of ongoing structural inequalities. This figure is constructed as economically neutral: non-classed, non-raced and non-gendered in a world of global capitalist logic where “opportunities” are available to all who “work hard.” The language of “equality” and “individuality” undermines the political potential for the girl because it is this language that comes to be the unifying element of the discursive field: sexual

difference in the world of economics is supposedly swept away beneath this rhetoric of choice, equality and individualism. The discursive unity stands as self-evident, as an already given equation of a claim to power already achieved: feminism has granted women equality as “persons” but this is in fact the surface effect of a “more firmly grounded unity” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 29). That unity is personhood, which is historically linked to white male subjectivity.

It is this retrospective interpretation of the history of second wave feminism, together with the visibility of the empowered girl as one of the privileged objects of this discourse in contemporary popular culture, which helps to silence a critique of patriarchy. The contemporary discourse of gender equality is unified by what is, in Foucault’s terms, one of the historical “unquestioned continuities” that maintain a discourse but must be renounced if the power of said discourse is to be interrogated: the “already said” and the “not said” (*Archaeology* 27). Linked with a “secret origin” of a discourse – that fundamental beginning that can never really be grasped but is the apparent foundation for a historical event – is the presumption that discourse is based on written and spoken words that have already been articulated in this mythic past (27-28). This is supported by the idea that there was before this a “not said” and so history, and the apparent origin of a discourse, is the moment at which the “already said” entered the “semi-silence” of the “not said” (28). “The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this ‘not-said’ is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said” (28). The politics of feminism, in this context, now manifests as the “already said” and the discourse of postfeminism the “repressive presence of what it does not say” (28). In making the empowered and masculinised girl the privileged object of this discursive formation this figure functions to seal up the potential to speak of inequalities through the power of the “already said”: the feminist project has achieved its aims. And in fact the “already said” becomes unspeakable by the very nature of it being already said and thus, a taken for granted discourse of gender equality.

To put this another way, in McRobbie’s terms a process of “disarticulation” in the 1990s (and gathering momentum in the 2000s) has undermined a collective, feminist politics (among other collective politics, such as those pertaining to race, class and LGBT rights). McRobbie introduces the term “disarticulation” in order to explain

how feminism has come “undone” and to add depth to the anti-feminist backlash discourse by illustrating how the gains made by feminism have been gradually eroded over the last thirty years in the name of “modernisation” (24-25). Developed in relation to Stuart Hall’s work on “articulation” – a politics whereby progressive social movements might forge connections and alliances with each other – disarticulation reverses those possibilities for alliance; not only between broader social movements, but also between women across lines of generation, class, race and sexuality as well as non-Western cultures. Disarticulation is a force, largely occurring in the sphere of popular culture and dispersed by institutions such as the media and the government, which devalues, negates and makes unthinkable collective politics on the basis that such action is no longer necessary (McRobbie 26). McRobbie uses Lisa Duggan’s work to show how in making the economic sphere seem neutral, by interpellating working subjects with the rhetoric of confidence and capacity (such as self-esteem, empowerment and personal responsibility), neoliberal market culture appears non-racist and non-sexist (28-29). This disarticulation of feminism is linked with the highly visible figure of the young woman in the public domain, and her representation as “empowered” rests on the definition of this figure as educated, free to work and sexually liberated (McRobbie 27). The combination of these socio-economic changes with the visual emphasis on the exceptional girl has the effect of foreclosing the girl subject’s capacity to speak of perceived inequalities relative to patriarchy because that complaint is now the domain of the “already said” of a now outdated and seemingly anachronistic feminist movement.

This manifests as a discourse around girlhood at the beginning of the twenty-first century that includes an implicit agreement that girls and women forfeit their critique of masculinity and patriarchy. Girls and young women regularly make bargains with patriarchy in exchange for the veneer of equality. Bargaining with patriarchy is based on a double manoeuvre: girls are not able to directly name a patriarchal sex/gender system for its part in the inequalities they experience, but at the same time they openly criticise “other” forms of femininity against which they define themselves. Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin’s sociological inquiry into the apparent increase in “bad girls” and “mean girls” in American schools illustrates how girls make bargains with patriarchy in order to avoid being marginalised on the basis of

their sex. Girls routinely confirm negative stereotypes of femininity in order to personally escape them: they become “one of the guys” (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 45). This finding confirms McRobbie’s assertion that the postfeminist sensibility is in part characterised by an implicit, and unspoken, agreement that young women can have phallic power on the condition that they withdraw a critique of masculinity. They are entitled to be “one of the boys” provided they do not complain about the sexual double standard that continues to undermine their claims to phallic privilege within a patriarchal economy. Thus in order to understand fully the discourses that produce representations of girlhood, the way this critique is repressed or redistributed is significant.

### **Politicising the White Male Subject**

The depoliticisation of the girl subject and of the feminist project since the 1990s has occurred within a similar temporal frame as the subtle politicisation of the white male subject. As the political consciousness articulated by the women’s liberation movement and the ability to articulate structural concerns through a politics of visibility wanes for the female subject, white men have been increasingly represented as in crisis in popular culture. In the closing decade of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first there has been a growing perception and anxiety that white masculinity is threatened. Closely linked with this is the assumption that Western (especially English-speaking) culture is therefore undermined – with the stability of these nations presumably suffering as a consequence of this decline in white male privilege (Kegan Gardiner 6-7; Buchbinder, *Studying* 3; Robinson 3). However, what underpins this perception of a decentring of white male privilege is the broader destabilisation of gendered identities since the 1960s interventions by the feminist and gay liberationist movements. Masculinity studies grew out of feminist studies (Kimmel i) and then “queer theory enables one to theorize masculinity as a system of power relations *among men* as well as [sic] as a system of power relations *between women and men*” (italics in orig. Kimmel xi). As a result the cultural anxieties around the stability of white masculinity are interconnected with the way gender and sexuality as identity categories have been interrogated. As David Buchbinder puts it:

the so-called ‘crisis in masculinity’ of the closing decade of the twentieth century and the opening decade of the twenty-first may thus be understood as a reaction to shifts occurring structurally in the culture, shifts that affect the way people understand and respond to notions of sex, sexuality, and gender. (Buchbinder, *Studying* 6)

The depoliticisation of the Girl Power movement, as part of the marginalisation of feminism in the culture, is arguably evidence of a cultural desire to restabilise gendered identities within a binary logic in response to the similar structural shifts that have produced this perceived crisis in masculinity. But in order to restabilise the gender binary, masculinity too must renegotiate its position in response to these shifts occurring structurally in the culture.

As suggested in the opening of this chapter, in this struggle to maintain a position of cultural priority there is evidence in representational culture that white masculinity utilises the most prominent form of visibility politics available. And the available discourse of privilege since the 1960s is the position of difference – bodily difference, vulnerability, marginalisation in relation to the status quo. This is further evidence that what unifies a discursive formation, in this instance the discourse of gendered identity, is what lies anterior to it:

This dispersion itself [that characterises the unity of discourse] – with its gaps, its discontinuities, its entanglements, its incompatibilities, its replacements, and its substitutions – can be described in its uniqueness if one is able to determine the specific rules in accordance with which its objects, statements, concepts, and theoretical options have been formed: it resides, well anterior to their formation, in the system that makes possible and governs that formation. (Foucault, *Archaeology* 80)

Lying anterior to the formation of a masculine identity for men and boys since the liberationist era is the intensification of the idea of the personal subject, which, post-liberation, is idealised as the position of the victim. This reappropriation of the “subject-in-crisis” in the representational regimes of white male subjectivity forms that double manoeuvre outlined by Robinson: white masculinity assumes the position of the marked victim as a class, a collective; yet the body of the white male is not so readily disentangled from its historically verifiable and culturally entrenched position

of the unmarked, the signifier for personhood. Robinson stresses the importance of strengthening this equation at the outset of *Marked Men*:

the strategies through which white men represent themselves as disempowered depend on the systematic erasure of ways in which white and male power are socially and institutionally embedded. What makes that power so deeply embedded is, precisely, a historically verifiable, if somewhat tenuous, equation between white masculinity and a disembodied, unmarked, abstract personhood. (Robinson 21)

That historically verifiable position of white male subjectivity relates to the binarisation of sexes at the “threshold of Western reason” (Grosz 5), that is, the inception of Western philosophy in ancient Greece (Grosz 5). Patriarchal oppression has been justified, at least in part, because of the philosophical and historical link from Plato to Descartes that split the subject in terms of mind/body, soul/nature and designated the masculine/feminine, male/female positions in terms of that binary where the body or nature was understood as more connected to women, and the mind or soul with men and reason (Grosz 5-14). This relationship between male subjectivity and personhood can also be seen in the production of the social contract during the Enlightenment. The civil freedom that has governed the Western world since modernity is grounded in an unspoken connection between the sexual contract and the social contract. Civil freedom was based on this conception of freedom, where all adults were understood as individuals able to enter into contracts freely, such as employment; however, it was also based on a presumed freedom to enter into marriage contracts, but this in turn depends on patriarchal rights (Pateman 2). In Carole Pateman’s terms this social contract mystifies the fact that: “Only masculine beings are endowed with the attributes and capacities necessary to enter into contracts, the most important of which is ownership of property in person; only men, that is to say, are ‘individuals’” (5-6).

Thus in assuming the position of the “marked”, “in representing a materialized, wounded white male body as the new norm of white masculinity in the post-liberationist period” and thereby seemingly forfeiting individuality in order to occupy the symbolically powerful position of a collective, the white male subject also, paradoxically, recuperates “the fiction of abstract individualism and

unmarkedness” (Robinson 9). The representations of white male characters in this thesis arguably draw on this wider discursive shift in understandings of white masculinity. As will be demonstrated, they therefore bring with them through the personalisation of their narratives this collective identity politics, while at the same time representing that position of autonomous personhood. As has been argued thus far, the same anterior forces operating on girlhood – the individualising tenets of neoliberal economics – do not afford her the same political potential because firstly, the collective politics of feminism have been silenced, and secondly, the female subject does not enjoy a similar two millennia history as an unmarked signifier for personhood.

Instead, female subjectivity has always been marked. The masculinity of the male subject is threatened by being similarly marked as feminised, and yet, paradoxically, this assuming of a more feminine and vulnerable subject position allows for a position of cultural priority. Feminisation of the male subject becomes a productive space for recentralising the interests of white masculinity. For example, the cultural anxieties provoked by deindustrialisation in the mid-twentieth century are based on assumptions that this has emasculated the male subject. Interpreted as “feminising”, this fear of emasculation in fact reimagines older fears about an “essential” and “embodied” masculinity under threat from the feminising principles of civilisation since modernity (Forth 5-11). But this fear of feminisation worked to legitimise the idea that there was in fact an object of essential masculinity to be lost in the first place (Forth 6). There was evidence of this belief recirculating in the early 1990s with the success of Robert Bly’s book, *Iron John: A Book about Men*. This text popularised the notion that men’s “deep masculine” selves were suffering and that this was directly attributable to the empowerment of women since feminism and their “sapping” of this masculine energy (qtd. in Buchbinder, *Studying* 8-9). This assumption reads male disempowerment in relation to femininity, suggesting that the female sex is responsible for undermining male power.

Contemporary understandings of “masculinity in crisis” are structured by similar assumptions. As Buchbinder notes, the common thread running through this supposed crisis is that these anxieties around masculinity proceed from the sense that men have lost power to women (*Studying* 9-16). At the same time as this perception that women are empowered at the expense of men, there has been the interpretation

of working culture (in the new global economies of post-industrial society) as feminised (Walkerdine et al. 5; Gill and Scharff 7). This change in the socio-economic context has meant that “it is men, and particularly working and lower-middle-class men who now have to face the necessity of constant self-invention and to produce for themselves a marketable (feminised) image, perhaps for the first time” (Walkerdine et al. 9-10). This feminisation of men unsettles the assumption that white masculinity occupies the position of privilege in the culture; however, as argued thus far, the appeal of the “victim narrative” in the culture more broadly has meant that, in representational terms, white men can appropriate a position of vulnerability and therefore re-assume a position of cultural priority.

The significance of films that represent the girl as the central character and/or as empowered is that the cultural work performed by these texts is similar to those that centralise a male figure: the feminising of the male character ensures that the interests attributable to this figure are prioritised through victimhood. The representation of these gender dynamics registers the renegotiation of the sex/gender system in Western cultures around the beginning of the twenty-first century as a response to changes in the economic and social structures of society. This is a product of the post-liberationist era and the increased interest in and discourses on girls since the 1990s, but it intensifies at the beginning of the twenty-first century as neoliberalism, and the requisite gender identities that support this economic and social regimen, become more entrenched. This escalation of the policing of the gender binary and the subsequent reassertion of traditional feminine identities is a focus of much of postfeminist research (McRobbie; Gill and Scharff; Negra). Indeed Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue that “neoliberalism *is always already gendered*” (italics in orig. 7). One of the key features of the neoliberal era is how the new global economies are understood as feminised. It is the requirement that subjects must now be the masters of the self-invention and transformation that characterise this new working culture, traits that are read by Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody in *Growing Up Girl* and Gill and Scharff in *New Femininities* as feminine. Fluctuations in the global labour markets are managed in a neoliberal context by interpellating the neoliberal subject as a psychological subject able to transform and respond to changes, a form of reinvention that Walkerdine et al. argue

women have long been invited to undertake, as the mutable objects of male desire (5-9). What is new is that men are now required to perform similar self-reinventions:

In the new labour market there are huge salaries to be made, but equally there is massive unemployment of men, who used to be the backbone of the working class. As the 1997 hit film *The Full Monty* made clear, men who formerly worked in factories are struggling to reinvent themselves in the light of a new economy in which some women have the economic power they have lost. (Walkerdine et al. 1)

Changes in the postindustrial age (or post-Fordist or late-capitalist or Sonyist) are characterised by the shift from working-class manufacturing as the dominant model in Western economies to the service sector, technology and communications industries, and financial sector (Robinson 2; Walkerdine et al. 1). Though these circumstances affected women as well as men, and races and ethnicities other than whites, the focus has largely been on the unemployment of men. In the American context the image of the “disenfranchised white man has become a symbol for the decline of the American way” (Robinson 2; Walkerdine et al. 1). This shift in the socio-economic order illustrates “what Žižek has identified as the failure of the Father function, the crisis of the paternal superego in late capitalism” (Fisher 71)<sup>12</sup> in so far as a sense of a strong centralised paternalism was once the backbone of industrial modernity. In Harris’s terms:

[this] previous era was characterized by a system of industrial capitalism built around manufacturing; strong centralized government; enduring social ties based on shared identifications with community, class, and place; and, in the post-war era, the development of both liberal welfare states and robust social justice movements. (Harris 3)

The representation of the more benevolent and stable paternal figures in some of the films analysed in this thesis may offer evidence of a nostalgia for this earlier model of capitalism – especially the “daughter”/“father” dynamics analysed in Chapter Three. When this paternal figure is analysed alongside a representation of girlhood

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<sup>12</sup> This thesis follows the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault in so far as it views the Symbolic Order, to which the Fisher quote is referring, as part of discourse. Butler interrogates Žižek’s premise in *Bodies That Matter* when she argues that the power of paternal law cannot be isolated from the paternal economy within which it operates and the heterosexual institutions it serves (163-164).

that is emblematic of the ideal individual this pairing represents a desire for certainty through a nostalgic turn (a knowable paternalism) and an apparently ideal present (the individual and capable girl). Together, this configuration is perhaps metonymic of the ideal sex/gender system for the current socio-economic order of the West.

This explains why, in order to understand the undermining of the girl's power, it is important to explore the way interests of masculinity become prioritised over the course of the narrative. The personalised and victimised figure of white masculinity requires specific positioning of women and girls in relation to his status as victimised. Erica Arthur's analysis of the figure of Lester Burnham in the 1999 film *American Beauty* and the figure of William "DFENS" Foster in the 1993 film *Falling Down* is instructive in this regard. Arthur demonstrates how the supposed crisis in masculinity is played out in both films, arguing that whereas in the early 1990s white male victimhood in *Falling Down* was caused by a situation outside of the individual, in the context of local and global economic conditions, by the close of the decade this victimisation was internalised with Lester (129-130). The way *American Beauty* deals with Lester's crisis of masculinity is suggestive of a very different political climate to *Falling Down*:

This is not to say that the controversial issues that DFENS confronts are absent or resolved in the later film but rather that they are repressed and internalized. The film [*American Beauty*] evidences a withdrawal from political engagement as protest is channelled into domestic drama. Where the external nature of DFENS's grievances demand that his complaints are negotiated outside, on the streets or in public spaces, Lester's complaints, which focus on the personal, not the political, are accordingly contained within the relative safety of his office, home, or all-white, unnamed suburban neighbourhood. (Arthur 129-130)

That Lester's narrative is personalised, not politicised, can be read as evidence of the broader trends that have had an impact on the identity of the cinematic girl as well. Lester is ultimately triumphant in his remasculinisation even though this occurs through a regression to immaturity, a rejection of a capitalist work ethic, and through the pursuit of an underage girl. Even his death functions to signify masculine redemption – as an act of self-liberation his remasculinisation, while short-lived, was

“worth dying for” (Arthur 140). On the surface, Lester’s narrative trajectory is the antithesis of the ideal subject of late-capitalism. However, the construction of Lester in relation to key female characters allows this figure, and the politics of white masculinity he represents, to reassume a position of cultural centrality while these female figures are repositioned as responsible for his victimisation. For example, Angela Hayes – Lester’s underage love interest – is positioned as complicit in his sexual objectification of her because he becomes the victim of her desire, while Carolyn Burnham – Lester’s wife, an ambitious real-estate broker driven by materialism – has her work ethic parodied in relation to Lester’s more enlightened approach. By utilising a liberal discourse of “self-discovery and emotional honesty” (Arthur 141) and situating the drama in the domestic sphere, essentially removing Lester from the broader implications of his socio-economic context, this narrative allows patriarchal dominance to be rearticulated as an act of self-liberation (Arthur 141). The victimiser becomes the victim (Arthur 138). This privileging of the male character demonstrates how: “In allowing Lester to manipulate this artificial position of victimization at the expense of those he oppresses, *American Beauty* upholds sexual prejudices as an acceptable strategy for masculine empowerment” (Arthur 138). These sexual prejudices empower the male character because the gendered identities of the male/female characters take on certain meanings as a result of the relationship they form with each other. For example, the girl’s sexual power slips into seductive temptress that victimises the male (Angela/Lester); the adult woman’s strong work ethic slips into a hysterical obsession that highlights the male’s more enlightened position in turning away from work (Carolyn/Lester); and the daughter’s white middle-class privileged girlhood is rearticulated as spoilt (Jane/Lester’s daughter<sup>13</sup>). A victim narrative with a male at the centre comes to have very different meanings than a narrative with a female figure at its heart. Thus the personalisation of identity politics under neoliberalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century takes on varying forms that equate to different power dynamics depending on the sex of the body that assumes them. Moreover, the way those meanings make sense is dependent on the configuration of the other sex.

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, it is Carolyn who berates Jane for being ungrateful. However, given that Lester’s working-class origins are also emphasised in the film Carolyn’s lecture arguably represents a generational stance on the sense of entitlement represented by Jane. That Carolyn delivers the rebuke violently further demonstrates the way Lester is able to elude representation as the direct oppressor, occupying the position of cultural priority through more sympathetic means.

## Popular Culture and the New Double Standard

Films that foreground an empowered girl and construct this figure in relation to significant male characters represent both a privileging of a preferred ideology of girlhood and a renegotiation of male power and privilege. Andrea Braithwaite has shown, for example, how the girl in “chick dick” narratives, so popular since the mid-1990s, occupies a narrative space otherwise populated by male figures and how the representation of the personalised and psychological dramas of these male figures “does not necessarily indicate the decline of white male privilege. Representations of a masculinity in crisis often renegotiate rather than relinquish male power” (419). These male characters now register the broader undermining of hegemonic masculinity, the popular cultural assumption of a “crisis in masculinity.” In contrast, the rhetoric of empowerment attached to the girl “demonstrates the cultural machinations that reduce female empowerment to a superficial level that ignores larger concerns about politics, race, community, and misogyny” (Brown, *Dangerous* 143). Taken together, these cinematic representations of the girl/man offer evidence of the complex ways the sex/gender system renegotiates power in a cultural context where the traditional meanings once ascribed to the masculine/feminine binary have been destabilised.

Films depicting empowered girls register the broader cultural assumption that girls are no longer afflicted by a sexual double standard, at the same time as men claim to be victims of a double standard. Focusing on the representation of men makes it possible to analyse more thoroughly the complexities and contradictions implicit in the construction of the girl’s gendered identity. As Maria Garner points out in her discussion of the sexualisation of culture: “most current debate positions men, male practices and masculinities at the periphery. In the main discussions around concern are played out through the lives and bodies of women and girls” (328). In analysing masculinity and patriarchy in relation to the girl the aim is to avoid “the pitfall that so many feminists fear – and rightfully so – that any guilt assigned to Eve in the Garden has the immediate and predictable effect of absolving Adam of responsibility” (Haaken 209). Because the female sex under patriarchy is constructed as a double bind – “spiritualized or demonized, woman was the symbolic bearer of interior existence – registering various patriarchal projections and fantasies” (Haaken 205) – it is difficult for the female sex to maintain a position of privilege without this in turn

coming to mean something negative. In her discussion of late-nineteenth century commentary on male discourses of femininity, Janice Haaken argues that:

It was difficult for patriarchal authority to hold multiple representations of women in mind without suffering an existential crisis of its own, particularly in that virile manhood rested so heavily on its counterweight in female passivity and virtue. (Haaken 205)

There is evidence that masculinity, since feminism, continues to find its counterweight in female passivity and virtue, but they are now articulated slightly differently. Passivity is arguably manifested in the disavowal of feminism and the rejection of social rebellion, and virtue is perpetuated because the girl's sexuality continues to be produced through its policing by other girls as well as men. In order to understand how these texts may slip into valorising men at the expense of girls, thus perpetuating the idea that "when girls win, boys lose", whenever the representation of the girl provokes anxieties for masculinity such instances in the narrative need to be analysed with careful attention to their function in relation to the hegemony of masculinity and patriarchy. This is the point at which Robinson's argument – that men slip almost imperceptibly from victimiser to victim – illustrates how and why it is so difficult for girls to sustain a position of power.

In each of the films analysed in this thesis the representation of the distribution of power between the female/male characters operates as if power were a finite resource: if one sex has it, the other must have ceded it. But this does not account for the way the girl, while seemingly empowered, is still structured by the traditional patriarchal dichotomy as well as a newly emerging socio-economic dichotomy. For example, what is arguably appealing about the little girl avengers analysed in Chapter Three and Lisbeth in the *Millennium* trilogy is that their success, their exceptional skills in fighting or in navigating the public space, is not only coded as masculine, but measured in terms of other girls. The audience understands this superiority through the culturally entrenched assumptions of traditional femininity – these masculine girls are appealing because they subvert such assumptions. The traditional patriarchal dichotomy is in evidence where the girl is understood as a "slut", such as Kat in *Suburban Mayhem* and Heidi in *Somersault*, an understanding that is only possible against other representations of more "virtuous" sexual

autonomy, such as in *Juno* (one partner in a heterosexual romantic relationship with one sex scene).

In contrast, the representation of male characters appears to draw on a perception of a similar “double standard” afflicting masculine privilege. For example, Mikael’s masculinity is undermined at the outset of the *Millennium* trilogy because he has been framed and convicted. He therefore appears to be the victim in ways that are tied to the undermining of his status of male power and privilege. But because of his position as a signifier of unmarked personhood as well, his disempowerment is not commensurate with Lisbeth’s because she is further undermined by the patriarchal logic also operating in the narrative. Nevertheless, as will be shown, male victimhood is articulated in terms of female power in ways that distance that disempowerment from the actual patriarchal and socio-economic regimes of power that produce it. This, in turn, positions male disempowerment as if it were commensurate with female disempowerment.

Two movements that emerged online in 2013-2014 exemplify this equation of power succinctly: the “meninist” movement and the “Women Against Feminism” movement, circulating on twitter, Tumblr and Facebook as #meninist and #womenagainstfeminism respectively. The latter was initiated by young women who took photographs of themselves holding signs that read, as an example, the following:

equality [is not equal to] superiority

I am not oppressed – I am free!

I am not a victim – I am a person!

I love my BF [boyfriend] – and he loves me too!

I believe in respect and equal rights

Modern FEMINISM is SEXIST and I don’t need it

When I dress feminine it’s for me<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> This example is from twitter, “Federica Pili @FedePili” posted on 26 July 2014. It was picked up as a key example of the movement by the mass media.

The juxtaposition of these statements demonstrates how this interpretation of feminism structures young womanhood in terms of other women. This movement constructs feminists as understanding themselves as victims, positioning themselves against men, and suggests that in having power they recognise that they are taking this power from men. There is also here the rhetoric of choice. But, as this chapter has shown, those choices do not take into account the way “freedom”, “personhood” and “equal rights” are contested and complicated categories because of their historical relationship with white male subjectivity. The “meninist” movement performs a similar juxtaposition of propositions that encode male disempowerment in terms of female power. For example: “If a girl shows sideboob in a picture she gets 100 likes, but if I show a bit of my nuts I get reported?”<sup>15</sup> What is interesting about the majority of posts within the Meninist hashtag is that often the sentiment is reasonable, with men suggesting that they are being subjected to a “double standard” in terms of bodily freedom, body image and the economic expectations placed on them by heterosexual dating rituals (the claims relating to domestic violence, rape and abortion/pregnancy are more difficult to defend, however). That the contributors to these online forums structure these statements in terms of a presumed privileging of female interests – girls can display their bodies, girls can judge men in terms of their bodies and girls can date for “free” – rather than with the patriarchal sex/gender system (and the socio-economic system that supports it) function as further evidence of this understanding of power as an equation of sexual difference. What is problematically missed in this equation is the historical and culturally entrenched link between white male personhood and its position as always-already entitled to power because of the prior claim to this category of personhood. This in turn demonstrates how white male subjectivity is now claiming some of this space of articulation through their positioning as victims in representational culture, while at the same time young women claim a space as individuals – but only on the agreement that they withdraw a critique of masculinity and patriarchy. The inherent logic of the “women against feminism” movement is this bargain: the girl’s power in this medium is based on the agreement that she forfeit a critique of patriarchy and masculinity. In contrast, the Meninist movement is largely configured by the understanding that female autonomy is to blame for male disempowerment: not the

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<sup>15</sup> This post is taken from the Tumblr blog, “Meninist Movement”, and was followed by 715 notes.

heterosexual matrix of desire that structures desirable body image, not the patriarchal and economic situation that positions men in terms of their ability to “provide” for a woman, and not biological understandings of male sexuality as a potent force with the potential to lose control.

These movements in the social media sphere are quite clear. However, what they clarify is how claims to power in contemporary culture are understood through this intersection of the sex/gender system with understandings of the subject as either victimised or empowered in terms of sexual difference. The discourses of postfeminism and white masculinity in crisis operate through these movements in ways that suggest the struggle for power in contemporary popular culture is being waged in gendered terms where the emphasis on sexual difference becomes a means to claim the position of cultural priority. The films analysed in this thesis encode these positions in subtler ways, but what these online discussions illuminate is that contemporary understandings of gender equality structure power as a finite equation between male and female subjects in ways that inevitably return to this gender binary. It is also further evidence of a patriarchal resurgence based on sexual difference as a broader trend in the culture, even where patriarchy itself is nowhere named.

The aim in analysing the foregrounding of the girl in the films in the chapters that follow is to assess in each instance what the focus on the girl as an exceptional and empowered figure might imply. In each film elements of class, nationality, race and sexuality nuance the politics of gender, but in a broader sense the focus on the girl draws attention away from the representation of the male characters as sympathetic in ways that personalise structural and systemic inequalities and therefore rearticulate “old sexism” as “the new man’s” vulnerability (Braithwaite 429). The representation of the empowered girl, through that anterior structure of personhood, legitimises this positioning of male characters because of what this figure signifies in the current context. In Foucault’s terms, in an analysis of a discursive field what is excluded is what is of importance:

We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse; we must show why it could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive to any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and

in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy. The question proper to such an analysis might be formulated this way: what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else? (Foucault, *Archaeology* 31)

Thus below the figure of the empowered girl is not the search for some presumed power, the presence of actual political agency or evidence that the feminist project has been achieved. Rather, the emergence of these figures in contemporary popular culture arguably signifies “power” that is tied to the valorisation of the individual in the current context. This is, in part at least, its cultural function. It may also, because of the relational nature of gender, be considered as a necessary display of power from the female subject in order that white masculinity may in turn appear to assume the now culturally desirable position of the disempowered. This is not to say that there is some sort of conscious relationship between the two occurrences, simply that when they are read together, as separate discursive fields operating from within similar external pressures – that of the individual and the personal – the effects are quite different. Foucault explicates this phenomenon in his discussion of the emergence of a “reverse discourse” of “homosexuality.” This discourse of homosexuality used the same language and strategies from nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence and literature that advanced social controls over this “perversity”, to argue on the contrary for its own legitimacy of “naturalness” through the very same vocabulary and categories “by which it was medically disqualified” (*History of Sexuality* 101). As he goes on to claim: “Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy” (*History of Sexuality* 102). Strategies of personhood, such as individualism and the personal discussed in this chapter, circulate and are taken up by the bodies of male and female subjects in contradictory ways. The claim to power, however, is further contestable for the female subject because, as the next chapter will demonstrate, patriarchy remains a dominant force alongside the notions of subjectivity constructing sexual difference. This further undermines the girl’s claim to power while simultaneously advancing the male character’s culturally entrenched position of centrality.

**Chapter Two**  
**Postfeminist Heroines and White Male Victims:**  
***Gone Girl* and the Gendering of the GFC**

The preceding chapter established that patriarchy continues to operate in cinemas of girlhood, arguing that the sexual difference in support of this patriarchal authority now structures female power in terms of a presumed disempowerment of the male subject since second wave feminism. This chapter builds on that premise by analysing how the girl's power is undermined in relation to the renegotiation of the male character's power in a single, exemplary film. As argued in the introduction, the way patriarchy operates in textual and sexual practice, as a process of renegotiation over the course of a narrative, is structured by an overarching logic that positions male/female subjects as culturally intelligible in terms of the other sex/gender. The problem for representing the girl in this context, and thus for her claim to power, is that this manifestation of a gendered identity by way of its other is embedded in the pivotal function the female sex performs for patriarchy. While this is an obvious point to make, it is nonetheless an important one, since it is the way the girl's power is undermined, the way the patriarchal meanings of her gendered identity are woven into the wider socio-economic context, that provides the male character the opportunity to renegotiate a position of cultural centrality in the text.

The narrative of *Gone Girl*, David Fincher's 2014 film of the 2012 novel (scripted by the novel's author, Gillian Flynn), tells the story of a married couple, Amy and Nick Dunne, the disappearance of the wife, the investigation of this disappearance, the accusation that her husband is her murderer, and a surprising denouement which reveals that the reader/viewer has been positioned to misread key elements of the plot. This misreading implicates the reader/viewer in complex reassessments of gender positioning. The surprises of the plotting are achieved by a manipulation of point of view. The wife's diary, which in the film is constructed through the first half of the text through voiceover and which is the point of view upon which the reader/viewer relies for information, proves unreliable. At the same time as the audience becomes familiar with Amy, constructed through flashbacks and voiceover prior to the disappearance, the *mise-en-scène* of Nick's present signifies a legitimate disappearance – a bloody crime scene in the couple's kitchen, a murder weapon in

the fireplace, and evidence of exorbitant credit card debt – thus positioning the viewer to read Nick as her murderer. Amy’s diary/voiceover stands in for her as the missing wife in the first half of the film. In contrast, Nick, during this same portion of the film, is shown in real-time (the present) as he realises his wife is missing, reports the crime scene and increasingly appears, to the police and the media, as the prime murder suspect. Halfway through the film, the diary together with the *mise-en-scène* – the crime scene at the Dunne’s house, the murder weapon, and the “money problems” – are revealed to have been an elaborate construct intended to implicate Nick and position Amy as a victim in the eyes of the all-important media. At the halfway point the film reveals that Amy is still alive through her voiceover as she drives to freedom and explains to the viewer: “I am so much happier now that I’m dead, technically missing. Soon to be presumed dead, gone.” This scene is captioned by the same sub-heading that opened the film, “one day gone”, retrospectively constructing Amy within the same temporal frame as Nick and thus announcing her duplicity. What even this basic summary makes clear is that the figure of the wife exerts a highly deceptive control as she orchestrates events and manipulates her naive husband into the position of victimiser and murderer in the eyes of the authorities and the media, and therefore the viewer.

While on the surface then, it would appear that the female character in the male/female dyad has the ultimate power, this chapter will argue, through a close reading of the film, this is not in fact the case. Rather, precisely because of its complex point of view, this empowerment is problematised and ultimately undermined. This undermining of the girl’s power in relation to the renegotiation of the male character’s position of privilege can be seen very clearly in *Gone Girl*. At the conclusion of the film is a talk-show interview titled<sup>16</sup>, “Amazing Amy and the Humbled Husband.” It is a fitting caption for the gender dynamics characteristic of postfeminist media culture: the capable postfeminist heroine and her average yet likeable and (as the film’s audience learns) much victimised spouse. This interview with Amy and Nick provides narrative closure to the story of Amy’s disappearance. Amy, perceived by the media in the diegesis as a genuine “America’s sweetheart”, vanished from the couple’s Carthage, Missouri home on their fifth wedding

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<sup>16</sup> This is the title of the interview in the novel. In the film the character Go (Nick’s sister and Amy’s nemesis) makes this quip in response to Amy’s self-reflexive production of a sympathetic television persona shortly before the interview.

anniversary under the aforementioned circumstances. Her charming, yet suspiciously unfazed, husband is the assured perpetrator because of the way Amy has orchestrated events that lead to the revelation of Nick's affair with a student and created false diary entries. The decisive clue, the evidence that can be used in the absence of a body, is Amy's faked diary – a document that seems to chronicle the decline of a marriage and the behaviours of a monstrous husband. This text, part of which has constructed Nick for the viewer thus far in the film, charts the emergence from the charmingly “average” guy Amy met in New York who thought “quinoa was a fish”, into the man he becomes at home in Missouri; a dissatisfied husband at best indifferent to his lonely wife and at worst physically violent.

Amy too is configured as multiple girls throughout this film. The varying constructions of Amy anchor the narrative as the plot shifts temporally from the time gone in the present, “one-day gone”, “twenty-eight days gone” etc., to flashbacks of the past – lonely wife in a cold marriage, the “cool girl” when first meeting Nick, the perfect girl as “Amazing Amy” in her parents' books, and both the girl on the run and then the femme fatale once it is revealed that she was not murdered by Nick, rather she is framing him as an act of revenge. This revenge is for his cheating, but of greater importance for Amy is what this dishonesty signifies for wider perceptions of their relationship. Once the audience learns Amy is alive, that she is driving to freedom, leaving her husband and setting him up for a murder conviction, she explains in a voiceover that Nick's affair was only one of the ways he thought he could dismiss her, but of more significance is the way this contributed to what she perceives as his desire to “destroy” her: “Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed. That's murder. Let the punishment fit the crime.” In the end, however, Amy returns to Nick, claiming that she was kidnapped and raped by her college boyfriend, Desi Collings, a man she frames and murders so she can reunite with Nick – the one man who “truly knows” her.

The film appears to explicitly critique gender expectations – from the traditionally passive wife and the contemporary phallic girl, to the clichéd mid-life crisis for men – but ultimately offers narrative resolutions that literally demonise the heroine as the femme fatale and subtly champion the hero as the endearing victim. The film is paradigmatic of the way anxieties in relation to the decline in white male privilege

are structured in relation to female empowerment. Moreover, the film articulates the way the threat presented by the powerful female is managed in terms of male recognition and heterosexual desire.

In many ways *Gone Girl* is distinct from the other films analysed in this thesis. The girl/man dynamic is a heterosexual romantic coupling, as opposed to dynamics that foreground a configuration of father/daughter, brother/sister, mentor/mentee or a friendship. Moreover, the suggestion that Amy is a “girl” is debatable. Indeed, Amy is not only quite old to be considered a girl (relative to the other girls in this thesis), she is also older than Nick: in the novel Amy is thirty-seven when the couple move to Carthage, turning thirty-nine when she disappears; Nick is thirty-four at the time of the disappearance, five years younger than Amy. The title’s use of the word *Girl* and the construction of Amy in relation to the little girl character of her parent’s children’s books, “Amazing Amy”, foregrounds a childlike quality to this characterisation that fits with the narrative tendency to provide the girl with an explanatory context. In this instance, the way her parents not only “literally plagiarised” her childhood but also “improved upon it” is offered as a partial explanation for her adult pathologies. And yet as a girlfriend, wife, lover and soon-to-be mother there is something distinctly “womanly” in the way she knowingly navigates these subject positions. Moreover, not only is she constructed as intuitively producing a masculine identification in order to be the “cool girl” Nick will want, she also pushes against patriarchal constraints in a way that is, like the femme fatale, calculated and controlled, rather than unruly.

The representation of Amy as negotiating with the terms of the new sexual contract and ideas around traditional femininity is quite explicit, whereas this negotiation of gender in the other films seems to be more a product of the relationship between the culture and the text within which it is produced, rather than a deliberate narrative strategy that calls attention to the way women and girls produce themselves in terms of male desire. The representation of Nick as the victimiser who almost too neatly assumes the position of the victim mid-way through the narrative is exemplary. As the figure of the white male “wounded” by his wife’s superior intellect, together with the explicit positioning of this figure as suffering from the fall-out from the economic recession, Nick embodies Robinson’s assertion that:

wounded white men ... perform the cultural work of *recentering* white masculinity by *decentering* it. In other words, in order for white masculinity to negotiate its position within the field of identity politics, white men must claim a symbolic disenfranchisement, must compete with various others for cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded. (Robinson 12)

This differs from the other representations of men analysed in this thesis, where the symbolic disenfranchisement of these figures blends into the background of the girl's narrative. The unambiguous way that *Gone Girl* privileges the interests of white masculinity over the story of a girl against a backdrop of the GFC and subsequent recession makes the text a useful example, indeed point of departure, through which to explore a narrative trajectory that remains in evidence in other texts in complex and less obvious ways.

### **Postfeminist Heroines**

Unlike analyses of postfeminist popular culture which are often restricted to examinations of female subjectivity, this analysis of *Gone Girl* considers how a patriarchal resurgence operates through the female/male dynamic. A central tenet of this thesis is the suggestion that in the absence of an obvious disavowal of her power, the female character's position of priority is still undermined because she is shadowed by a particular representation of the white male. The theorisation of a resurgent patriarchy by McRobbie, which acknowledges the presence of male subjects in more general terms, provides a useful framework through which to read how this occurs. Key to McRobbie's argument is the suggestion that a patriarchal resurgence structurally requires restabilisation of the gender binary. This stability of the gender binary has been threatened since women began functioning as "subjects in language" as early as, in Joan Riviere's analysis, the early twentieth century (Riviere; Butler; McRobbie). Specifically threatened is the position of female subject as sign upon which male dominance depends (McRobbie 67). Riviere noted in 1929 (and McRobbie has argued in relation to millennial popular culture) that the emergence of the capable female subject unsettled gendered identification not only for the male

subject, but for the young woman as well, given that her identity had been traditionally based on her desirability to men (Riviere 1; McRobbie 67).

The destabilisation of the feminine signifier and the subsequent anxieties this presents for both male and female subjects is now managed, according to McRobbie and others (Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*; Gill and Scharff), through an intensification of the performances of femininity by young female subjects across a broad spectrum of popular culture. In order to secure a new sexual contract, one that maintains patriarchal hegemony at the same time as it allows for the increasing presence of young women in the popular and public domain, the feminine signifier must be resecured. McRobbie argues that the Symbolic order of the culture – where the Symbolic is understood via Butler’s interpretation of Lacan as the source of patriarchal authority – responds to the possible destabilisation of gender hierarchy through the resecuring of the terms of heterosexual desire (62). In this context McRobbie understands the Symbolic as operating in similar ways to power. Just as power in late modernity is increasingly dispersed across numerous institutions and agencies, so too does the Symbolic allow itself to be dispersed or governmentalised (61). The Symbolic order discharges into the commercial domain and through these institutions regenerates patriarchal authority onto the bodies and gendered identities of young women. In McRobbie’s formulation this has resulted in a “post-feminist masquerade” emerging “as a new cultural dominant”:

What I propose here is that a key containment strategy on the part of the Symbolic, faced with possible disruption to the stable binaries of sexual difference, and to the threat posed therein to patriarchal authority, is then to delegate a good deal of its power to the fashion-beauty complex. (McRobbie 63)

This “post-feminist masquerade”, controlled by the fashion-beauty complex in place of patriarchal authority, maintains power over the young woman by interpellating this subject into a position of hyper-femininity. This protects the young woman from revealing her desire for masculine power (as an economically independent subject) through overtly feminine displays and an air of “being foolish and bewildered” (Riviere qtd in McRobbie 67; McRobbie 66-67). By assuming this masquerade the young woman remains recognisable within the terms of male desire (McRobbie 68).

In other words, McRobbie is arguing that in a culture anxious over the gains made by feminism in the 1970s and 1980s young women respond by colluding in their subjugation as part of a broader restabilisation of the gender binary through overtly feminine performances of gender. The subject position of the post-feminist masquerade is more akin to the “typical” girls of cinema. As suggested earlier, the girls analysed in this thesis are frequently perceived as resisting this position. However, as the new cultural dominant, these positions of hyper-femininity become the standard which representations of empowered girlhood must negotiate, as well as the female subject position in relation to which audiences arguably make sense of these figures.

The narrative construction of Amy in the first half of *Gone Girl* provides evidence of this negotiation with, and resistance to, the new sexual contract because it calls attention to the constructed nature of femininity in terms of patriarchy. Sixty-three minutes into the one hundred and thirty-eight minute film, the audience learns that the Amy presented in the first hour – the sympathetic, maligned and passive wife – is Amy’s own creation. Through her diary, a fabrication strategically planted for the police to find, Amy has invented a version of herself that ensures suspicion will fall on Nick. The diary presents Amy as the traditionally passive wife: “I feel like something he loaded by mistake. Something to be jettisoned if necessary. Something disposable.” This Amy is also the acquiescent partner: “Nick uses me for sex, when he wants. Otherwise I don’t exist.” A self-reflexive construction of femininity, this Amy highlights the ways women produce themselves in terms of male needs in a traditionally patriarchal dynamic. In Freudian psychoanalytic terms, the girl that proceeds normally through the Oedipal phase supports this patriarchal configuration of femininity: “She has become a little woman – feminine, passive, heterosexual” (Rubin 196). In terms of the textual construction of the patriarchal feminine, this configuration of Amy accepts her femininity as a site of powerlessness and recognises that her needs and desires are subordinate to patriarchal masculinity (Cranny-Francis 125). However, once the audience learns that Amy has staged her disappearance and left enough of her blood to suggest a murder, the narrative shifts from Amy the patriarchal feminine to a representation of the other ways Amy has self-reflexively constructed herself in terms of male needs. In a flashback, when

Amy meets Nick at a party in Brooklyn, she decides what Nick is looking for in a partner is the “cool girl”:

Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be. Cool Girl. Men always use that don't they? As their defining compliment, 'she's a cool girl.' Cool Girl is hot. Cool Girl is game. Cool Girl is fun. Cool Girl never gets angry at her man. She only smiles in a chagrined, loving manner and then presents her mouth for fucking. She likes what he likes ... If he likes Girls Gone Wild, she's a mall babe who talks football and endures Buffalo wings at Hooters. When I met Nick Dunne I knew he wanted Cool Girl. And for him, I'll admit I was willing to try. I wax-stripped my pussy *raw*. I drank canned beer watching Adam Sandler movies. I ate cold pizza and remained a size 2. I blew him, semi-regularly. I lived in the moment. I was fucking game.

This construction is closely aligned with the “phallic girl” of McRobbie’s analysis, another figure of femininity alongside the post-feminist masquerade that is a means through which the new sexual contract makes itself available to young women. The “urging to agency” for this figure is expressed through “the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasure” (McRobbie 83). But the hegemony of masculinity and the resurgence of patriarchy are maintained through the way this performance of masculine pleasure is bound up with policing the girl’s femininity:

Luminosity falls upon the girl who adopts the habits of masculinity including heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, flashing her breasts in public, getting arrested by the police, consumption of pornography, enjoyment of lap-dancing clubs and so on, but without relinquishing her own desirability to men, indeed for whom such seeming masculinity enhances her desirability since she shows herself to have a similar sexual appetite to her male counterparts. But this is a thin tightrope to walk, it asks of girls that they perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men. (McRobbie 83-84)

The construction of Amy as the “cool girl” calls attention to the way the phallic girl is a subject position produced for male pleasure. It could therefore function in the narrative as a critique of the way the new sexual contract appears to have granted agency to women who behave like their male counterparts but in fact turns out to be

another way young women are positioned in terms of male fantasies and desires. However, this critique is not sustained – Amy shifts into the femme fatale; the self-reflexive voiceover narrations from Amy’s point of view diminish in the second half of the film and the audience is left, presumably, with the “real” Amy. Meanwhile, the construction of Nick shifts into the position of victim to Amy’s scheme. This is the point at which the narrative turns to an articulation of male disempowerment in terms of female power. As the femme fatale Amy “unsettles deeply entrenched gender roles” (Lee 79), and through the appropriation of destructive aggression she operates as “succor for masculine paranoia” (Haaken 213). In contrast, the characterisation of Nick shifts from Amy’s victimiser into her victim:

But Nick got lazy. He became someone I did not agree to marry. He actually expected me to love him unconditionally. Then he dragged me, penniless, to the navel of this great country and found himself a newer, younger, bouncier Cool Girl. You think I’d let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? No fuckin’ way. He doesn’t get to win. (Amy’s voiceover)

From this point on Nick is constructed as the victim in two ways: firstly, when it is revealed that Amy is framing him for murder in Missouri in full awareness that this carries the death penalty, and secondly, at the narrative’s conclusion when Nick plans to leave Amy and is then entrapped in the marriage because she is pregnant<sup>17</sup>.

The representation of Amy instantiates a significant deviation in relation to the new sexual contract because this figure similarly restabilises the gender binary without disavowing her claim to masculine power and privilege. This is because she does not need to: Nick performs this function for her. Returning to the formulation of the post-feminist masquerade (as a key subject position that underpins the new sexual contract): as the girl comes forward as a subject in postfeminist culture she is required to simultaneously disavow that claim to power through a specific performance of femininity. In the absence of an obvious disavowal by the female character, the male character can arguably stand in and disavow this claim to masculinity for her. The feminisation of the male character works to resecure the

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<sup>17</sup> Nick is unaware that Amy has obtained his sperm from their fertility clinic – he believed it had been destroyed after Amy decided earlier in the marriage that she did not want children. This twist at the narrative conclusion further cements her repositioning as the femme fatale and echoes the construction of an earlier femme fatale, widely understood as a key representation of the “backlash” against feminism in the 1980s, the pregnant adulteress, Alex in *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

new sexual contract in similar ways to the post-feminist masquerade, because his perceived “castration” at the hands of her power renders monstrous her claim to power and thus, her masculinity.

As argued in Chapter One, this reconfiguration of sexual difference is an emerging pattern in popular culture. The changing dynamics between male and female characters in cinema have been noted elsewhere; for example, in Judith Halberstam’s examination of “mumblecore” films the relationship between the sexes is characterised by “smart women/slacker men couplings” (*Gaga* 21); and in Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker’s analysis of “bromances” and romantic comedies (17). These films grapple with questions about the status of male privilege and heterosexuality in a context where women are increasingly defined as being capable and independent subjects (Halberstam, *Gaga* 20-21; Negra and Tasker 17-18). Negra and Tasker, discussing postfeminist media culture in the context of “recessionary culture” following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007-2008, posit that:

In contrast to these cinematic assertions of masculine authority [the male heroes of corporate melodramas], one of the most discernible shifts in recessionary postfeminist culture is the transference of some of the anxieties and obligations once attached only to female subjects to male ones ... [This] underlies the way in which *movies continue to register male anxiety in terms of female empowerment*, both economic and reproductive. (emphasis mine, Negra and Tasker 17-18)

The construction of Amy as the accomplished and highly intelligent young woman is indicative of this wider trend of representing women and girls as capable, free to choose and therefore responsible for their situation, while the construction of Nick reveals how this configuration of female subjectivity is dependent upon the way men and masculinities are represented in response to the seeming destabilisation of their power since second wave feminism.

This representational response is being noted and analysed in an emerging body of postfeminist scholarship. Representations of men and masculinities legitimise representations of women as free and empowered (Negra and Tasker 8; Dow 116; Carroll 208). Dow undertakes a rereading of her own work on popular 1980s television dramas through an examination of changing representations of men in

three films across the three decades which she argues mark the shift from the feminist to the postfeminist era – *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and the 2004 re-make of *The Stepford Wives*. Dow argues that these films function as the missing link for explaining the way representations of women came to be understood in terms of personal choices. She states that: “This move toward assigning women responsibility for their fate under patriarchy was a necessary precursor for the emergence of postfeminism in the 1980s” (Dow 120). One of the ways in which this responsibility was assigned was through the representation of men:

a crucial factor that facilitates the popular notion of postfeminist choice is the shifting portrayal of men in postfeminist media ... if we begin to think about the depiction of men in 1980s postfeminist popular culture, it becomes clear how crucial they are to promoting the idea that women’s problems are their own responsibility ... What makes this believable? The presence of sensitive, nurturing, postfeminist men. (Dow 121)

Furthermore, in contemporary texts where the men are not necessarily constructed as sensitive or nurturing, such as novels that explore the financial crisis through “male-centred, gender-conscious, and highly self-aware narratives of masculine disempowerment”<sup>18</sup>, the anxieties around white male decline are measured in terms of their capable wives:

In both of these novels, men’s shifting fortunes are charted against the economic, social and reproductive empowerment of women, who are understood to be more capable of withstanding the post-financial crisis than men. Therefore, and despite their representations of male characters that hold middle-class liberal values, each of these novels still measures male disempowerment in relation to the forms of female success celebrated under postfeminism. (Carroll 208)

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<sup>18</sup> Hamilton Carroll focuses on two “male-authored recession-era novels”: *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (Jess Walter, 2009) and *The Ask* (Sam Lipsyte, 2010). Carroll argues that these novels “instantiate one epiphenomenon of the global financial collapse: an explosion of finance-related literary fiction” (204). These two novels focus on the way anxieties around male disempowerment are situated in the context of “fractured domesticity” which suggests that “men are no longer able to rely on the family and the home as sites of security, stability, and recuperation” (Carroll 204).

Whether the “sensitive new age guys” (Dow 122) or the tormented male victims of the GFC (Carroll), these depictions of masculinity support the meanings that are generated around representations of women and girls. The representation of female choices and personal conflicts are dependent upon shifting portrayals of men. The representation of Amy, particularly in the closing scenes of the film, performs similar cultural work in relation to the figure of Nick. Framing Desi by staging a rape (engaging in consensual sex with him and slitting his throat in the process), and then returning to Nick and admitting to the murder, transforms her into the calculating, cold femme fatale. The femme fatale traditionally functioned as a threat to the family, particularly adult masculinity, with her own motivations never clarified (Farrimond 79). Amy’s avowed motivations, however, are clear: she wants to escape the “prison” Desi has constructed for her and return to Nick. Moreover, Nick questions these motivations, calling her out on her pathological behaviour. But more striking is the way Nick is positioned as the clear victim once Amy returns to the home – moving into the spare bedroom, becoming unable to sleep, and, finally, consenting to stay in the marriage. It is the characterisation of Nick – the self-proclaimed “average” guy – as ultimately Amy’s victim that highlights anxieties in relation to female agency. This agency also exacerbates a sense of masculinity in crisis and a subsequent need for the patriarchal recuperation of the “empowered” girl.

### **Gender and Identity**

The initial critique of the patriarchal positioning of women and girls (as represented by Amy) and the way it is recuperated (through the representation of Nick) can be understood through Butler’s theorisation of the heterosexual matrix and the ways masculine/feminine identifications depend for cultural intelligibility on the other gender. The increasing emphasis on young women as exceptional individuals in the workplace, schools, and in popular film, has altered definitions and expectations of masculinity, as men and boys are increasingly positioned as disadvantaged by this emergence of female power. However, this assumption becomes suspect in light of Butler’s assertion that gender precedes the category of identity. Butler argues that gender is an effect of the heterosexual matrix of desire and phallogocentric law. This suggests that when analysing the claim that cinema represents the girl as empowered

it is important to consider that this figure must negotiate the implications of being a female subject in a patriarchal context.

A key problem with the insistence in postfeminist popular culture that gender equality has been achieved, citing as evidence the emergence of exceptional girls, is that this rhetoric erases the way that gender precedes the category of identity. As Butler argues: “It would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (*Gender* 22). Within the broader context of her project in *Gender Trouble* Butler interrogates the feminist project by pointing out that in seeking a stable identity in the term “woman”, feminism will inevitably fail because it thereby becomes reliant on a category based on necessary exclusions, and on coherence through a binary logic of gender with its attendant hierarchy. Considered within this framework, the representations of empowered girlhood analysed in this thesis can be understood as structured by a sex/gender system that implicitly positions them as subordinate to male characters. Those necessary exclusions, factors pertaining to class, race, age, ability or sexuality, and the way they are woven into the gendered identities of the girl/man dynamic, help to further explain the girl’s struggle for power.

In Butler’s terms: “The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality” (*Gender* 30-31). In other words, the gender identifications of masculine/feminine require each other for coherence along the lines of a culturally established heterosexual desire:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and the differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. (Butler, *Gender* 31)

As a process, gender identification – gender as a performatively produced “doing” that is compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence – is the act of differentiating each gender from its other in a way that functions to consolidate gender identifications as masculine/feminine within these terms of heterosexual

desire. These regulatory practices of gender coherence are the effects of the laws that produce them; they are not caused by the sex of the body as male/female:

The tactical production of the discrete and binary categorization of sex conceals the strategic aims of that very apparatus of production by postulating 'sex' as 'a cause' of sexual experience, behavior, and desire. Foucault's genealogical inquiry exposes this ostensible 'cause' as 'an effect,' the production of a given regime of sexuality that seeks to regulate sexual experience by instating the discrete categories of sex as foundational and causal functions within any discursive account of sexuality. (Butler, *Gender* 32)

Thus, when gender is understood as a performative act that constitutes the gender identity that coincides with the sex of the body (male/masculine, female/feminine) and is constituted by the laws that produce it – patriarchy, postfeminism, politics of visibility/victimisation – then gender is an effect of those laws, not a cause. Moreover, how one gender becomes coherent is reliant upon the way its oppositional other becomes coherent, but this does not come about on equal terms for the sexes. This is because the “univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are ... regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (Butler, *Gender* 46). If gender precedes the category of identity, and if that gender is structured within the “power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression”, then intelligibility for the female sex is dependent upon its identification as feminine within a sex/gender system that privileges men. Furthermore, recognition by men is privileged in this system in ways that complicate the possibility of empowerment beyond the terms of heterosexual desirability. If young women are being subjected to a patriarchal resurgence together with the postfeminist push to individuality in relation to neoliberal culture (McRobbie), then the girl's relationship to patriarchal hegemony becomes a significant factor in relation to her claims to power. In this context, then, the representation of the girl as empowered in a film such as *Gone Girl* inevitably becomes subordinate to the imperative to be recognised as a gendered subject, and to be a recognisable gendered subject is to be intelligible within the terms of the heterosexual matrix – which is a system governed by the laws of patriarchy.

The girl's struggle for power is not only imbricated in the way this figure's gendered identity is governed by patriarchy, but also in the way representations of subjectivity intersect with other cultural discourses that potentially limit the possibility for empowerment. Returning to the premise outlined in the introduction of this thesis, that the figure of the girl in popular culture is emblematic of a range of discursive formations converging at this particular historical and cultural moment, then the representation of the girl operates not only through discourses of gender, but also through other culturally available discourses of identity. In Butler's terms, where gender is a "substantive effect" of this convergence of a range of discourses, the representation of the girl's gendered identity can be understood through the way it is produced and compelled along the established lines of gender coherence in the culture in relation to other discourses (Butler, *Gender* 33-34). Contextually and historically specific, gender coherence is formed through its relationship with these wider discursive factors:

If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler, *Gender* 4-5)

It is possible, however, to tease out analytically some of these political and cultural intersections in a single film. *Gone Girl* illustrates the way gendered identities circulate particular cultural meanings that are not primarily or necessarily concerned with gender – class, race, regional origins – but are nonetheless imbricated with them (Butler, *Bodies* 123; 135)<sup>19</sup>. The way that Amy's subversive potential is managed, and her gendered identity rendered intelligible, is tied into the figure's class and regional origins relative to Nick's class and regional origins. There are frequent references to Amy's status as a "New Yorker." She is represented as an upper-class,

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<sup>19</sup> Butler is examining the relationship between racialising norms and gender norms specifically, but underpinning her argument is the assertion that the attributes that form identity categories, i.e. gender, sexuality, race and class, do not exist alongside gender norms, rather they are articulated through one another. Sexual difference is not prior to other modes of identification, instead it is inseparable from other axes of social regulation and power.

“type A”, Harvard-educated New York native; but the coherence of this gendered identity takes on particular meanings because of the relationship it forms with the mid-western, working-class collective represented by Nick. When Amy and Nick first meet in a narrative flashback he introduces himself as a: “corn fed, salt of the earth Missouri” boy, which, at this point in the story, is regarded as charming by Amy. Nick’s point of view on Amy in the present (in his recollections for the police and his sister after Amy disappears), by contrast, is of a woman with “high standards”; a figure who sat “dissatisfied” waiting for him to return home from work and repeatedly called him “fly-over boy<sup>20</sup>.” Amy’s New York mother invokes this New York/mid-West binary when, engaged in the search for clues along the Mississippi in Missouri, she sniffs disdainfully and mutters (where Nick can hear): “God, this place literally smells like faeces.” The gendered identities of Nick and Amy are thus imbricated with their respective class positions, which locates the characters in a broader dynamic that encodes US geography in a power struggle bound up with the current economic crisis. The representation of Nick as Amy’s victim also situates Nick as the victim of the financially privileged upper class in the context of the recession. New Yorkers are depicted as able to weather the crisis (Amy’s trust fund secures both her own and her parents’ livelihoods), while the township of Carthage, Missouri (the film’s main setting) registers the full effects of the economic collapse – the *mise-en-scène* offers images of houses reduced for sale, closed businesses, abandoned shops and homeless people. It is through this intersection of their respective classed identities, financial situations and regional origins that the empowerment/disempowerment dynamic between the pair becomes visible. Throughout the film the audience is reminded that Nick married a woman with money, and this financial situation is linked to his masculinity, as hinted at, for example, by a conversation between the detective and the police officer investigating Amy’s disappearance. The male officer, James Gilpin, remarks that the car, the credit cards, the house lease, and the bar are all in Amy’s name. The female detective, Rhonda Boney, replies: “I don’t know that that’s surprising.” To which Officer Gilpin quips: “Oh, but it is humiliating.” Shadowing the Amy/Nick dynamic then, and rendering them intelligible to the audience as gendered subjects, is this sense that

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<sup>20</sup> “Fly-over” is the derogatory term for the mid-western states of the USA, and implies that these are states you would not stop in unless required. The author of this thesis discovered this nuance upon attending a conference in Columbus, Missouri in 2014, though it is probably an idiom well known to Americans.

Nick has been emasculated by Amy's privileged financial situation. This is one of the ways in which the subversive potential of Amy's capacity to articulate a self-aware analysis of the subject position of "cool girl" is undermined. The gendered identities of Amy and Nick operate through a classed/regionalised binary in ways tightly woven into the specific socio-economic context of post-GFC American culture.

Subversions, therefore, perform a significant cultural function in relation not only to gender, but to context. A figure like Amy, which subverts the post-feminist masquerade in the first half of the text, demonstrates how subversions expand the boundaries of what is culturally intelligible in making space for her critique of male hegemony. However, as demonstrated by the second half of the film and the recuperation of Amy's subversive potential when she returns to Nick, these subversions cannot exist outside of the boundaries of patriarchal law. Butler invokes Foucault in this context:

who, in claiming that sexuality and power are coextensive, implicitly refuses the postulation of a subversive or emancipatory sexuality that could be free of the law ... Hence, the sexuality that emerges within the matrix of power relations is not a simple replication or copy of the law itself, a uniform repetition of a masculinist economy of identity. The productions swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of 'subjects' that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible. (Butler, *Gender* 40)

The figure of the girl as empowered or unruly and as potentially marginal to traditional conceptions of femininity exemplifies the expansion of the boundaries of culturally intelligible gender identities. The girl's power, in this discursive context, coexists with the reality that sexuality is an effect of patriarchal law, so that the subversive potential is reappropriated as just another possibility for a gendered identity within the dominant (heterosexual) culture. The emergence of gendered identities that appear to disrupt this patriarchal system is the effect of this sex/gender system and indeed supports the dominance of this gender regime through their marginalisation. This is in keeping with Butler's reformulation of Gayle Rubin's

reading of the sex/gender system – the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied (Rubin 159) – as a system that is fully within the culture in so far as the gendered identities available in this system are effects of the laws that produce them. But gendered identities that are marginalised by the sex/gender system under patriarchy are in fact necessary for its coherence and indeed available if a subject is willing to forfeit a certain amount of power by embodying that identity. As Butler puts it:

What remains ‘unthinkable’ and ‘unsayable’ within the terms of an existing cultural form is not necessarily what is excluded from the matrix of intelligibility within that form; on the contrary, it is the marginalized, not the excluded, the cultural possibility that calls for dread or, minimally the loss of sanctions. Not to have social recognition as an effective heterosexual is to lose one possible social identity and perhaps to gain one that is radically less sanctioned. The ‘unthinkable’ is thus fully within culture, but fully excluded from *dominant* culture. (italics in orig. Butler, *Gender* 105)

Thus it is useful to think of patriarchy as a sex/gender system that privileges men and compulsory heterosexuality and for women to be (ideally) culturally intelligible is to be recognised by men. Patriarchy is therefore an economy of power and privilege that attributes meaning to subjects through a gendered identity so that the donning of the post-feminist masquerade – even the resistance against it – is the donning of a social identity that will provide the gendered subject with a socially sanctioned identity within the dominant culture. Acts of subversion in this context do not present an opportunity for emancipation from patriarchal law; these acts instead function to expand the boundaries of what is thinkable from within patriarchy (Butler, *Gender* 40).

The characterisations of Amy and Nick, as potentially subversive to a patriarchal sex/gender system – Amy as the heroine critical of postfeminist gender identifications and Nick as the “average” guy – show how subversions can expand the boundaries of cultural intelligibility, but also demonstrate that such subversions do not move beyond the terms of intelligibility within the heterosexual matrix. In particular, the text illuminates the way subversions of traditional gender

identification are accommodated by the culture, and the way these are inseparable from each character's classed identity. The representations of Amy and Nick demonstrate how the management of Amy's subversive potential is intertwined with the socio-economic identities of these characters. Consider, for example, the way that Nick's gendered identity is constructed through Amy's speech to him near the end of the film (the following is Amy's response after Nick has slammed her against the wall and called her a "fucking cunt" once it becomes clear to him that leaving her will be impossible):

I'm the cunt you married. The only time you liked yourself was when you were trying to be someone this cunt might like. I'm not a quitter ... I've killed for you. Who else can say that? You think you'd be happy with a nice mid-western girl? No way baby, I'm it.

As suggested so far, Amy's explicit critique of the post-feminist masquerade, the "cool girl" persona, has the potential to subvert the recuperative function the phallic girl performs for patriarchy. But this is not all Amy is: as the above illustrates, she is also traited as the competitive and ruthless individual required by neoliberal culture and reminiscent of the (masculine) entrepreneur. Here, though, the object of competition is not financial success, it is a husband and marriage. In another instance earlier in the film Amy describes the way Nick changed in response to her "cool girl" persona, with her voiceover suggesting that she refashioned his masculinity in service of her competitiveness:

But I made him smarter, sharper. I inspired him to rise to my level. I *forged* the man of my dreams. We were happy pretending to be other people. We were the happiest couple we knew. And what's the point of being together if you're not the happiest?

This ties the sexual economy into the socio-economic context. The gendered identity of Nick becomes the object through which Amy conducts her "business" of social power. This could call Nick's masculinity into question, but because the audience is positioned to reject Amy it works instead to recentralise the politics and interests represented by him. It has the dual effect of repositioning masculinity as central, as well as foregrounding the importance of gender, its relationship to the socio-economic context, for cultural intelligibility.

The relationship of gender to heterosexuality holds the structure of the narrative together from beginning to end. Nick's perspective is privileged and thus the narrative becomes his, rather than Amy's. This is illustrated by Nick's voiceover pondering who his wife is: "The primal questions of any marriage: What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other?" and the repetition of the questions with the added phrase – "What *will* we do?" – in the closing scene. The camera's point of view is Nick's in these opening and closing scenes, as he gazes down at the back of Amy's head and then her face as she turns to look up at him. This produces a narrative that is preoccupied with gender as the predominant locus for cultural identification as well as a narrative that, in a significant deviation from the novel, begins and ends with Nick's point of view. In the novel Nick opens the narrative with the aforementioned remark, while Amy concludes it: "I don't have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I've earned that" (Flynn 810 of 832). Interestingly, in the screen adaptation Amy has not "earned" the final word, and hence privileged position of the subject that speaks within discourse. This change foregrounds the interests represented by Nick. It is possible, though, that the tone of Amy's "earned" speaks more to her sense of entitlement than to her sense of being in a position of cultural priority; a nuance that may not have translated to the screen. In any case, gender is the predominant category through which Amy is positioned as a culturally intelligible subject. In a decisive example in the film, Nick knows what Amy will want to hear in order to reel her back in and allow him to escape the murder charge and by extension all of the other charges she has levelled against him for undermining her sense of personhood. In a televised interview he turns to the camera and tells Amy: "Amy I love you. You're the best person I've ever known ... And if you come back, I promise I will spend every day making it up to you. I will be the man I promised you I'd be. I love you. Come home." The audience is aware Nick is lying, but that Amy believes him undermines the critique of postfeminist gender identifications she has articulated earlier in the film. Her need to be recognisable within the terms of the heterosexual matrix – to be loved by Nick – further limits the subversive potential of this critical analysis. It is also further evidence of the ties between the socio-economic and sexual economy. The "love" Amy requires is quite specific: she needs to hear, and she needs the wider media audience watching the interview to know, that she is the "best."

## **Patriarchy: The Postfeminist in the Homosocial Triangle**

The subversive potential of the girl, as exemplified by Amy, is thus recuperated, in part at least, because patriarchy as a sex/gender system is reliant upon the female as the figure through which male domination is secured. The undermining of the girl's power is imbricated in the function she performs for patriarchy. Rubin stresses that the sex/gender system and patriarchy are not equivalent terms because the former refers to the "set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be" (165) and "sex/gender systems are not ahistorical emanations of the human mind; they are products of historical human activity" (204); whereas patriarchy "is a specific form of male dominance" (168). The specific forms of that male dominance considered in this thesis are based around symbolic (informal) and formal patriarchies<sup>21</sup>. A symbolic or informal patriarchal structure is:

A social structure or community within which power is dispersed among the male subjects ... [it is] a discursive formation by means of which sex, sexuality, and gender become intelligible and legible within a particular economy of power ... a particular kind of economy that ranges across multiple, interrelated institutional systems to whose organization we give the name 'society.' The power inherent in those systems not only governs the activities and practices of the individual system itself but may also be harnessed in the service of giving meaning to sex difference, and hence also to gender and sexuality. (Buchbinder, *Studying* 67)

Patriarchy is the "relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (Hartmann qtd. in Sedgwick 3). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that heterosexuality is a necessary component for the maintenance of any patriarchy (4). In order for power to be dispersed amongst male subjects that power is conducted by dominating the other – women of any class, the

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<sup>21</sup> Formal patriarchies will be considered in more detail in Chapter Three through the construction of the family dynamic in films with little girl avengers. These dynamics operate as symbolic patriarchies, however at the same time they arguably evince nostalgia for the more formal patriarchal (patrilineal) structure.

lower classes and “slaves” (Sedgwick 4). Patriarchy structurally requires heterosexuality because it is through the bodies of women that this continuum of power predominantly operates – power between heterosexual males is conducted through the sexual economy in ways that support wider social and political positions of power<sup>22</sup>. In such a context, the representation of Amy illustrates that it is not only the function this figure performs for a patriarchal economy that is significant. As will be explained, while Amy ultimately does function as a conduit for bonds between men that operate hierarchically and ultimately support patriarchy, the sexual economy is also constructed in the text as inseparable from other forms of power.

*Gone Girl* registers the way the sex/gender system operates in relation to the social, economic and political context and encapsulates the reassertion of patriarchal dominance through representations of powerful females. It seems paradoxical that the terms of the girl’s power are the very same terms through which this figure is disempowered; however the film provides a tangible illustration of how this occurs. The representation of Amy and Nick in relation to the economic context of the film provides evidence of the way the sex/gender system becomes the vehicle through which positions of power are renegotiated. In terms of Amy, as already alluded to, her “empowerment” is demonised so as to render monstrous the individual required by late-capitalist corporate culture, but does so in ways tied specifically to her sex. Nick, by contrast, is victimised. He is feminised because he is emasculated by Amy, but this allows him to occupy a position of crisis and thus maintain cultural priority (Robinson 27). Sedgwick argues that the boundaries drawn between the sexual and the non-sexual, while variable, are not arbitrary, and in fact “the placement of the boundaries in a particular society affects not merely the definitions of those terms themselves – sexual/nonsexual, masculine/feminine – but also the apportionment of forms of power that are not obviously sexual” (22). Those forms of power that are not obviously sexual are the “means of production and the reproduction of goods, persons, and meanings” (22). What Sedgwick makes clear, in the broader context of her argument, is that rivalry between men, which occurs through the “exchange of

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<sup>22</sup> Sedgwick argues that these power relations between men are conducted through a form of “male homosocial desire”, but desire in this sense is not a particular affective state or emotion, rather it is used in the same way psychoanalysis uses the term libido: “the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (2).

women”, is conducted through the sexual economy in order for the male figures to occupy wider positions of power in the culture.

The graphic schema of Sedgwick’s analysis is the triangle, derived from the way Rene Girard “traced a calculus of power between two active members of an erotic triangle” (21). Sedgwick builds on Girard’s work and argues that the bonds of rivalry link the two rivals for a (generally female) beloved in this triangle, and are as powerful as or equivalent to, the desire for the object of this rivalry. In *Gone Girl* the triangle between Desi-Amy-Nick demonstrates two significant points in relation to this schema: the first is that a female character can occupy a position of rival, and the second, that the plot nonetheless returns her to the homosocial bonds by the narrative conclusion. Sedgwick’s analysis of the cultural work performed by feminising the male character in this schema is useful here because a similar process of feminisation is identifiable in the film. This feminisation allows the male character to appear disempowered while simultaneously reassuming a position of centrality via similar terms of feminisation, though here it is understood as victimisation. The key difference is that because the female character occupies a position of rival, thereby appearing to hold power, her masculinity becomes the pivotal term around which he can renegotiate his position of power as victimised (feminised) subject. Sedgwick articulates the relationship between the sexual economy and the way this economy facilitates and disperses power into broader social and political relationships, thereby allowing male subjects to maintain power.

This power is articulated in a contemporary text like *Gone Girl* by placing the female character Amy (however temporarily) into the position of rival in the Girardian triangle. Thus the analysis that follows is certainly influenced by Sedgwick’s work. However, this thesis has adapted the model somewhat to examine how the sexual economy operates when the presumed empowerment of the female subject since women’s liberation is taken into account. Accounting for the girl’s power requires an examination of male characters. Sedgwick demonstrates how the representation of the relationships between men supports homosocial bonds and, in particular, how the feminisation of a male character functions toward his remasculinisation through a

reading of Harry Horner in William Wycherly's Restoration comedy *The Country Wife* (1675)<sup>23</sup>:

Because of his ability to submit to, gain momentum from, and thus expropriate the irrepressible and divisive power of gender representation, Horner constructs for himself an intelligible two-phase narrative of feminization followed by (rather than contradicted by) masculine recuperation. (Sedgwick 60)

Because Horner is constructed as aware of the rules of the game – the broader play of male power within a patriarchal economy conducted through the bodies of women – he is able to use the mask of male androgyny in order to manipulate women's asymmetrical, marginal, subsumed and objectified status in order to position himself as the superior figure within the broader, and more important, power play between men. This example foregrounds, firstly, how the mask of male androgyny is only one part of Horner's narrative trajectory and one that is useful in so far as it allows him to conceal his agenda (to cuckold other men through relationships with their women); and secondly, to illustrate how male bonds between men do not indicate the presence of homosexuality, but rather male heterosexual desire functions as a form that consolidates partnerships with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females (Sedgwick 38). Horner consolidates his position of power through cuckolding another (lesser) male.

Of course, the representation of Nick is not as explicit as the example of Horner; but the point is that the representation of Nick as emasculated by Amy in the text does not damage his remasculinisation, in fact it works to recentralise his masculinity. Moreover, there is a subtle suggestion in the film that the triangular relationship with Amy occurs between Desi and Nick, where Nick represents the white, "Middle American" male – the figure of normativity – negatively impacted by the GFC (Robinson 14-15); while Desi represents the corporate, upper-class figure unaffected by the recession. Desi's attempt to cuckold Nick, and then Nick's disinterest in Amy once she returns to him, further centralises the interests represented by Nick in ways that reinforce "the idea that new masculinities and empowered femininities both

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<sup>23</sup> In *The Country Wife*, the character of Harry Horner perpetuates a rumour that he is suffering from a venereal disease that has left him impotent. This allows him access to women of society in circumstances not normally permitted to men of his status and thus to cuckold other men in the play.

collude to nudge out traditional forms of manhood” (Leonard 36). The representation of Amy, considered from within Sedgwick’s schema, is noteworthy because she is, like Horner, the figure that is aware of the “rules of the game.” In the case of Amy, however, it is not the broader power play between men through the bodies of women of which she is solely aware, rather she is also concerned with using the way the sexual economy governs the performance of femininity in order to secure Nick.

As already elucidated, Amy creates the personas “cool girl” and the traditionally feminine wife in order first, to obtain the object of her desire, Nick, and second, to exact revenge on him. Unlike Horner, she does not win. Nick eventually learns and participates in the “rules of the game”, producing this feminised gendered identity in terms of his empowered wife. For example, when preparing for a television interview on Amy’s disappearance, his sister Go tells him: “Don’t be afraid to play up the doofus husband thing, Nick. I was an idiot. I’m a fuck-up. Everything I do is wrong”, to which Nick replies: “I know. What men are supposed to do in general.” This presents a significant shift in the construction of Nick’s awareness of the way the new sexual economy operates. Up until this point, he has been the hapless victim to Amy’s manipulative control: the gendered identity she self-reflexively produced in order to obtain the object of her desire, as well as the media personality she cultivated before disappearing, implicating Nick as her murderer, doubly encoded Nick as her victim. Nick, by contrast, in the first half of the film, is unaware of how the media operates, oblivious to the paradigm of the guilty husband and the ways it could so readily be applied to him. Go attempts to warn Nick of this possibility, telling him before he goes on camera to appeal for help on Amy’s disappearance, to “be careful”, don’t “bottle it up ... you’ll seem angry” and “don’t go on the charm offensive ... you’ll seem glib.” Of course Nick’s lack of awareness prevails and he does appear charming, smiling next to the picture of his missing wife, and is condemned by the media. However, this lack of awareness, this innocence, works to Nick’s advantage because of the way the film, in the second half, demonises Amy’s ability to manipulate the media through her repositioning as the femme fatale. In fact, Nick’s inability to do the same, without significantly changing his “authentic” character, is retrospectively interpreted as endearing. When he does transform in order to reel Amy back in the audience is positioned to sympathise with his motives.

A closer examination of the Desi-Nick-Amy triangle helps to further explain how it is that Amy loses the position of centrality and cultural privilege to Nick.

This triangle appears to be between Nick-Amy-Desi, where the two male characters are configured as rivals for the female character. In this instance, the rivalry would be between Nick and Desi and thus the object of desire is Amy: she functions as a conduit for their broader rivalry over economic and social privilege in the context of the GFC. This is certainly a possible reading and as suggested above it works to support the working-class masculinity represented by Nick. But this rivalry is more a product of Amy's fantasy than it is an actual desire on the part of Nick (though Desi seems to believe the rivalry exists; reinforcing the undermining of the upper-class, effeminate masculinity he represents). The key rivalry here is really between Amy and Nick. This locates their power struggle outside of Sedgwick's schema somewhat, because the object of rivalry is a contestation over what constitutes a desirable heterosexual relationship between a male and female subject, rather than male-male. This deviation is significant however, because it gives expression to the idea that female empowerment exists. Because the female character occupies the position of subject in the sexual economy she gives the appearance of being a viable rival. But in fact this positioning of the female character is a means to give expression to, and thus lend credibility to, the assumption that adult women pose a threat to men since second wave feminism.

Within this battle over what constitutes a desirable heterosexual relationship, Nick desires a child and a "normal" romantic relationship. In short, the traditional domestic refuge of the nuclear family. Amy, on the other hand, desires the appearance of this familial success to the outside world, and in the context of the film's narrative, the media especially. The libidinal energy operating between the couple is hatred. These two positions, and the function of Desi in this context, are best exemplified by the "little box of hate." The disclosure of this box, a collection of reminders of the way Amy has undermined Nick throughout their marriage, occurs mid-way through the film, in the scene immediately prior to the revelation that Amy is alive and just after the strategic bombshell of her (false) pregnancy has been exploded by her "friend" Noelle. Nick is explaining to Go that he wanted kids, but Amy did not, and thus the pregnancy must be a lie. Go yells that no-one will believe him now, given his media-generated guilty persona, and so he shows her the box he

has kept as evidence. In it are several items that bring together the way the sexual economy operates in relation to elements of power that are not obviously sexual: the notice from the fertility clinic to destroy Nick's sperm because it has not been used by Amy; a letter from Desi to Amy, upon which Nick remarks: "Yeah it was the fucking rich guy who would do anything for her and just kept hanging over my head, it was disgusting"; a clue from the previous year's wedding anniversary "treasure hunt" that Nick could not solve, "When your poor Amy has a cold..."; and the couple's prenuptial agreement, which is to protect Amy's assets from Nick.

The "little box of hate" weaves Nick's gendered identity into the fabric of class and represents a sexual economy where Amy has the power (the masculinity) in the triangle. She controls his sperm; she has the "other" suitor with money in the background; she reminds her husband that he is ill-equipped to care for a "sick" wife; and she has the money and property that needs to be protected. The "little box of hate" implies that Nick's emasculation at the hands of Amy has come about through the relationship between his masculinity and her position of financial and intellectual privilege. She has the power to "destroy" his sperm (literally emasculate him); she is aware of how the sexual economy operates and plays the potential rivals against each other for her benefit; and she uses her financial power to remind Nick that she owns their privileged lifestyle. Rather than allowing Amy to occupy a position of cultural priority, this "empowerment" is instead indicative of how an ideology of postfeminism operates in the culture. Amy's superior intelligence and financial security position her as the female subject benefitting from the gains of feminism and then renders this "feminist" figure monstrous. The transformation of Amy into the femme fatale suggests that female power operates at the expense of the "average guy's" masculinity. The framing and murder of Desi adds to the threat this heroine presents to masculinity. Desi is not a sympathetic character, but his murder reinforces the cultural work of the text as a whole: all men are potential victims of the intelligent, empowered heroine. The inability for a female character to operate as viable rival in the triangle is solidified by the genuine pregnancy at the end of the film and the sexing of the child as a son. This places Amy firmly back into the position of conduit for relations between men. Nick stays with Amy for his son, forfeiting his own desire to escape the monstrous, feminist subject and create for himself a "normal" heterosexual family. In effect he accepts his own emasculation as

the price of securing homosocial bonds. In the end Nick will have his son and the patriarchal function Amy performs will be completed; but the feminisation of Nick performs a significant function nonetheless.

### **Gendering Crisis**

The feminisation of working culture and the masculinisation of female subjects in the West should, arguably, destabilise the power of patriarchal hegemony because it undermines the traditional meanings implicit in the sex/gender system as masculine/feminine, male/female and the assumption that these are natural binaries. However, the opposite seems to be true: the feminisation of the male subject and then the expelling of that feminine element through a process of remasculinisation works to reinforce the way patriarchal culture operates, while the masculine girl, in donning the masquerade, comes close to revealing what this constructed gender identity obscures. The underlying cultural anxiety provoked by the masculine identifications of girls and women, what the masquerade conceals, is not simply rage, as Riviere suggests, it is that the positioning of the female sex within the terms of heterosexual desire obscures the potential feminisation of men implicit in that original taboo on homosexuality. It is this potential feminisation of the male subject (via a homosexual attachment) that renders unsettling the female subject's claim to masculinity. Butler gestures to this fear in her analysis of Freud:

Clearly, Freud means to suggest that the boy must choose not only between the two object choices, but the two sexual dispositions, masculine and feminine. That the boy usually chooses the heterosexual would, then, be the result, not of the fear of castration by the father, but of the fear of castration – that is, the fear of ‘feminization’ associated within heterosexual cultures with male homosexuality. In effect, it is not primarily lust for the mother that must be punished and sublimated, but the homosexual cathexis that must be subordinated to a culturally sanctioned heterosexuality. (Butler, *Gender* 80)

The feminisation of working culture and the emasculation of men in recessionary culture could pose a threat to the stability of the heterosexual matrix through this association with homosexual desire. And yet as Robinson has shown, a certain

amount of feminisation – implicit in the victim position – recentralises the politics and interests of white masculinity. In fact, the representation of Nick indicates that male claims to power and privilege can be consolidated through this feminisation. The fear of feminisation becomes a productive space in which white male subjectivity can consolidate a position of cultural priority. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the rage of the female character in films like *Gone Girl* evinces cultural anxieties around placing the emphasis elsewhere, namely the problems inherent in an active female desire.

How it is that the feminisation of men does not carry the same negative inflections or implications as feminising women seems to lie in the difficulty of wresting the male subject from the position of the unmarked noted in Chapter One. However, this feminisation of male characters, as a productive gesture that works to recentralise the interests these figures represent, is more complex than understanding these figures as connected to normativity alone suggests. As the analysis of Desi in this chapter, and of other subordinate male characters in later chapters will show, feminisation is not equivalent to a position of cultural priority for all male characters at all times. Rather, it is the relationship between the male character (whose interests are prioritised by the preferred reading of the text) and the way this figure becomes intelligible in terms of other discursive factors that help to explain this position of priority.

In this chapter the focus has primarily been on the way Amy's victimisation of Nick generates a subject position that is culturally appealing within a cultural milieu captivated by a specific form of victim politics. This position weaves Nick's gendered identity into the relationship it forms with the economic crisis, his position as the white working-class, mid-Western, charming "mother's" boy who overcame his father's misogyny to become the modern "feminist" male subject. The positioning of Nick as Amy's feminised victim illustrates Tania Modleski's insistence that "we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it" (7). Financially and sexually emasculated, outwitted and outplayed by Amy's superior intellect and potentially facing death row, Nick is reduced to a position of emotional and economic vulnerability traditionally occupied by women. However, as the analyses thus far have demonstrated, mid-way through the text he incorporates Amy's power,

defeating her on the same terms she set for him – manipulation of the media. Significantly, the audience is positioned to sympathise with his manipulative control.

This favourable positioning of Nick is embedded within the wider discourse of a masculinity in crisis. In perpetuating the idea that masculinity is in crisis – and masculinity has been perceived as “in crisis” in different ways since the Enlightenment<sup>24</sup> – the politics and interests central to masculinity are perpetually recentralised:

in announcing the dilemma of the silent majority, these discourses actually *produced* and *enacted* that crisis in dramatic narrative terms. Because of this it becomes increasingly clear that, far from resolving that crisis, analyses of the silent majority instead worked to recenter white men as subjects-in-crisis, in a culture that was proving itself to be ever more interested in such subjects. The announcements of crisis thus actually function to ward off a ‘cure’ since it is through dwelling on crisis that the threats to the normativity of white masculinity get managed. (italics in orig. Robinson 27)

Such articulation in discursive terms – a performance of embattled masculinity that constitutes the recentralising of masculinity and is constituted by this performance of victimisation – makes it evident that the crisis is a productive space that enacts male subjectivity in ways that focus on the politics and concerns associated with that group. This is the crossing that Sedgwick outlines. The subject position of the male changes by the narrative conclusion in a way that seems illogical, but in fact if this is considered via Robinson’s formulation – male victimisers slip almost imperceptibly into the position of male victims – and narrative trajectories analysed for how and when this occurs then it becomes possible to recognise the sexual politics at work in these texts and the relationship they form with the context within which the film is set as well as produced and consumed.

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<sup>24</sup> The current “crisis” in masculinity stems from the relationship of the concept of masculinity with modernity. One of the core principles of modernity is that all human beings are “essentially equal” and yet the sexual contract remains patriarchal, thereby supporting the dominance of maleness (MacInnes 11; see as well Carole Pateman on the contradictions for women implicit within the social/sexual contract emerging from the Enlightenment). It is this contradiction that “supports male dominance while creating the conditions that subvert the ‘natural’ basis for that dominance” (Forth 237). According to Christopher Forth this situation came to fruition with the liberationist movements of the 1960s.

*Gone Girl* illustrates how cultural anxieties around white masculinity are imbricated with contextual anxieties around a crisis in capitalism specifically, and the function of crisis for the privileging of the interests of the dominant group more broadly. The economic catastrophe works in the background of the text in ways that legitimise the recentralising of the politics and interests of white masculinity. The GFC and the subsequent recession are woven into the narrative as the motivating factors for “testing the marriage” (Amy’s voice-over): “Take one marriage. Add one recession. Subtract two jobs.” Amy and Nick move from New York to Missouri because Nick’s mother gets sick, but being unemployed in New York is also a motivating factor. And while this “crisis” is never explicitly shown to damage the material elements of their lifestyle in any way, it is there in the background in ways that, as already suggested, have a negative impact on Nick’s masculinity. Furthermore, the presence of financial destitution in the *mise-en-scène* signifies larger cultural issues at work than Amy’s perceived mistreatment. For example, the abandoned “Megamall” – now a haven for junkies – and several other downtown buildings have “Closed” or “For Sale” signs; the “homeless problem” in Amy and Nick’s otherwise idyllic suburb with presumably abandoned houses being squatted in, as indicated by the sweeping shot of police arresting people looking downtrodden on the lawns of houses in Amy and Nick’s neighbourhood. Cumulatively, these images of the recession create a sense of destitution from the fallout of the GFC and in particular, the way it has affected the “heartland of America”, the mid-west. Amy’s dismissal of these problems, her emphasis on her own predicament, positions the issues pertaining to gender that she represents as trivial and self-indulgent.

The impression of “crises” in the culture therefore functions productively by restaging which subject’s interests should be prioritised, generating the perception that discussions over who is deemed to be a gendered subject are not a priority in times of crisis. The articulation of cultural events as crises allows for the politics of marginalised groups, such as the call for gender equality, to be reframed as a political issue reserved for times of stability. A film such as *Gone Girl* registers this cultural trend; an analysis of the characters’ gendered identities reveals the gender politics that are dismissed as superfluous (the critique of the new sexual contract) and those that are articulated (the struggling white, working-class male figure emblematic of recessionary culture). The way that crises work in the culture – the “so-called crisis

in masculinity” (Buchbinder, *Studying* 6); the “Global Financial Crisis”; and the “War on Terror” for example – operate effectively in so far as the “announcements of crisis ... actually function to ward off a ‘cure’ since it is through dwelling on crisis that the threats to the normativity of white masculinity get managed” (Robinson 27). In this way events such as the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre<sup>25</sup> and the anxieties they provoked become an opportunity to “scare people back into conventional sex/gender arrangements” (Halberstam, *Gaga* 45). The aftermath of the GFC is rearticulated in recessionary culture in similar ways, as Negra and Tasker note, to the cinematic action heroine’s empowerment now being underwritten “or more precisely contextualized by a perception that equality is a luxury that can no longer be afforded” (4). The subversive potential represented by Amy’s unmasking of the new sexual contract is likewise weakened by its contextualisation in a post-GFC setting.

What thoroughly undoes Amy’s critique, however, is the representation of Go, Nick’s twin sister. Go authenticates the “cool girl” persona; she represents another point of gendered intelligibility for Nick’s masculinity in ways that confirm his vulnerabilities; and she is positioned as a rival with Amy for Nick’s affection in the second erotic triangle in operation in the text. Go is also the character most closely aligned with the form of masculine girlhood to be analysed in the next two chapters, the little girl avengers and Juno. Go is the “cool girl.” This representation undermines Amy’s critique of the subject position because she legitimises the “cool girl” persona by performing it in an authentic way. Go adopts the habits of masculinity of the phallic girl outlined by McRobbie, such as drinking hard liquor at 10am and making crude jokes. For example, when Nick is despairing over the annual treasure hunt for his fifth wedding anniversary he tells Go, over shared bourbon at the bar they co-manage: “There’s no good gift for wood [the element for the five year wedding anniversary]” and Go responds: “I know! Go home. Fuck her brains out. Slap her with your penis. There’s some wood for you bitch!” Go’s masculinity provides another point for the cultural intelligibility of Nick’s feminised identity. As

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<sup>25</sup> The beginning of the twenty-first century has been significantly marked in the Western world by the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11 2001 (9/11) and the ensuing “War on Terror”. Many of the cultural anxieties proliferating post-9/11 were displaced into popular culture. The predominant narrative circulating post-9/11 focused on a desire to return to the traditional family and placed the blame (however bizarrely) with the progressive movements from the liberationist era, such as feminism (see Faludi; Nilges; McGuire and Buchbinder; Negra “Structural Integrity”).

Nick's twin she functions as the stoic, sensible point of stability to his comparative vulnerabilities. This dynamic between the siblings is enacted throughout the text, but is perhaps best exemplified by their final conversation when Nick informs Go that he is staying with Amy for the baby: "Go, you're my voice of reason. I *need* you with me on this" and she replies: "Of course I'm with you. I was with you before you were even born." The references by the media in the film to Nick and Go's close relationship as "twincest" are treated with derision within the diegesis, however this disdain is not without its ironies, given that Nick's relationship to Amy as an empowered adult female is what is truly unsettling in the broader context within which the film is produced and consumed.

Go is permitted her masculinity because of the familial bond she shares with Nick and the way this eliminates the problem of an active sexual female desire. Nevertheless, Nick's decision to stay with Amy for his son is what ultimately privileges the homosocial bonds between men in the text, rather than his connection with Go. But that the second erotic triangle, between Amy and Go and Nick, is present throughout allows Go to assume the position of privileged female subject relative to the male subject position represented by Nick. Dow has argued in her reading of the film *Fatal Attraction*, and its relationship to the emergence of a discourse of postfeminism, that "if patriarchy, as Gayle Rubin (1975/1984) has persuasively argued, is about the 'traffic in women' then postfeminism is about the traffic in men" (127). Dow states that what was often missed in earlier analyses of *Fatal Attraction* was that the representation of Dan was not of a hero, rather he functioned as the prize to be won between the two female rivals, Alex (the femme fatale) and Beth (the traditional, passive wife) (126). Similarly, Nick is the postfeminist prize "won" by Go. And even though Go loses Nick to his son, a point that "breaks her heart", she is nevertheless the crucial counterpoint for Nick's gendered identity in ways that undermine Amy and privilege the "cool girl" position Go authenticates. Moreover, it is this authentic performance of masculinity and placement within the family dynamic as Nick's sister that allows her to win the "postfeminist man" (Dow 126).

As the next chapter will argue, like the little girl avengers, representations of masculine girls shore up the idea that girls can be as "cool" as boys, seamlessly obscuring the cultural work that allow these girls their masculine identification.

Gendered identity operates in relation to its other/s in film in ways that can be read through a triangular dynamic. And it is the cultural work the various characters perform in this dynamic that permit the girl her masculinity: the presence of “other” girls, whose independence is pathologised in relation to the socio-economic context (Amy); the representation of vulnerable and feminised men (Nick); and a representation of independent girlhood that masquerades as gender equality but does not take into account the “thin tightrope” this girl walks in order to avoid punishment (Go) (McRobbie 83-84). The construction of the “cool girl” within a family dynamic that privileges her relationship as an equal with a male character permits this figure a masculine identity unfettered by the problems of sexualisation that afflict the “cool girl”/phallic girl. This reconfiguration of gendered identities and its construction within the family will be developed in more detail in the next chapter in relation to representations of empowered “daughters.” As will be demonstrated, a girl represented as powerful does not necessarily mean that she actually has power.

### Chapter Three

#### Little Girl Avengers: Patriarchal Daughters in Post-Feminist Families

“All you need for a film is a girl and a gun.”

Jean-Luc Godard, quoting D.W. Griffith in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*.

The previous chapter established that the recentralising of the interests represented by traditional, working-class masculinity was reliant upon the presence of the pathologically empowered girl. It was the non-sexualised, family bond with the sister, the authentic “cool girl”, however, that further undermined this female claim to power and reinforced the sympathetic positioning of the male character. This chapter expands on the way the girl’s power is dependent upon her relationship to male kin through a closer examination of the family dynamics that underpin these representations of gender. It explores the dominance of the traditional family model in films that represent the girl as seemingly empowered by analysing the way the Oedipal model, as an historical, ideological and cultural discourse, is “used by patriarchal texts to confine women to limited representations” (Kaplan 15-16; 13). Through a close reading of the privileging of the young girl/adult man pairing and the absent/present mother figures in *Kick-Ass* (2010), *True Grit* (2010) and *Hanna* (2011) this chapter argues that these representations create an opportunity to renegotiate the traditional patriarchal family, with little girl avengers producing a female subject in line with changing expectations under neoliberalism and the presence/absence of mother figures signifying the threat presented by adult women since second wave feminism. But it is the foregrounding of the little girl and her paternal figure that instantiates the re-emergence of a key anxiety for patriarchal authority. As this chapter demonstrates, the appeal of aligning with patriarchy under the terms of the new sexual contract outlined in the previous chapter lies with a much older history of representation that, since at least the mid-eighteenth century, registers a reinvigoration of patriarchal authority through these more benevolent representations of father figures and provides a means for the girl to claim power through this alignment with patriarchy.

The little girl as a hyper-masculine “child-woman” has appeared in a number of films emerging in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Luc Besson’s<sup>26</sup> *Leon: The Professional* (1994), which features eleven-year old Mathilda seeking the help of assassin Leon, initiated a trend for representing young girls seeking vengeance under the guiding hand of a paternal figure<sup>27</sup>, for example Hit-Girl in *Kick-Ass*, Hanna in *Hanna* and Mattie in the 2010 remake and second adaptation of Charles Portis’s 1968 novel, *True Grit* (the first screen adaptation was in 1969). Encompassing the binaries of masculine/feminine, mother-wife/daughter, and child/adult and avoiding a number of the problems that emerge for the adult female superhero and the sexualised girl, the little girl as an assassin, warrior, and enforcer of justice and vengeance presents a number of contradictions for traditional gender identifications. She has agency in her quest, and yet within the wider socio-cultural network she seems to function as an instrument of patriarchy. This figure represents a tension between an empowered gender identity and what will be considered here as a “patriarchal daughter.” Furthermore, this figure successfully manages the problems that trouble representations of adult women/sexualised girls – namely the developing sexuality of the more mature girl and the consequent eroticisation of her power. This figure of the little girl assassin avoids the strictures of narratives that render women that kill “mothers, monsters or whores”, denying each of these figures agency as the perpetrators of violence because their motivations are interpreted as maternal “instincts”, individual pathologies or romantic, sexualised feelings for men (Sjoberg and Gentry). Yet because of the inevitability of this figure’s sexual maturation, the cultural function this girl performs in terms of empowering the female sex is arguably limited.

These representations of the little girl avengers share a number of character traits and plot points. Hit-Girl, Mindy Macready, is an eleven-year-old “superhero” fighting alongside her father, Big Daddy, Damien Macready, to avenge her mother’s

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<sup>26</sup> Luc Besson employs a similar narrative trajectory in his earlier film, *La Femme Nikita* (1990). Even though the assassin Nikita is an adult woman there is the sense that she is childlike and must “learn” to be a “woman.” She is also supported and managed in this by a paternal figure (her operative).

<sup>27</sup> It is significant that this relationship between an older male/paternal figure and a young girl in a quest for revenge is a personal mission rather than a political one when considering where this happens in reverse: i.e. a powerful female/maternal figure and a young boy. For example, in the Hollywood film *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) the mission is explicitly political – saving the world from a future apocalypse. Moreover, the son, John Connor, is lacking, and the mother, Sarah Connor is tough, disciplined and traditionally paternal in her parenting, unlike the sensitive male figures represented in relation to the girl assassins analysed in this chapter.

premature death in *Kick-Ass*. Hit-Girl is a supporting character in the coming of age narrative of *Kick-Ass*, Dave Lizewski, and yet her fighting prowess, precocious one liners and solid partnership with her father form the most dynamic representation of empowerment and camaraderie in the text. In the film *Hanna*, sixteen-year-old Hanna is a genetically engineered assassin and, like Hit-Girl, this figure represents the toughest and most skilled fighter in the narrative. Raised since infancy in isolation by her “father”, ex-CIA operative Erik Heller, Hanna has been trained for one mission: to kill Marissa Wiegler and avenge her mother’s murder. Also on a revenge mission is fourteen-year-old Mattie Ross in Joel and Ethan Coen’s adaptation of *True Grit*. Based on the novel of the same name, this remake of Henry Hathaway’s 1969 film reimagines a more feminised version of the tomboy. Mattie seeks to avenge her murdered father and bring the murderer, Tom Chaney, to justice, and Mattie’s proficiency in navigating the man’s world of the Frontier and untamed Indian Territory is presented as a by-product of her father’s legacy. However, it is her relationship with the “fearless, one-eyed U.S. marshal who never knew a dry day in his life”, Rooster Cogburn, which represents the development of an unlikely girl/adult male partnership that ultimately delivers vengeance.

This particular representation of the girl, then, appears in a diverse range of genres, from the Western (*True Grit*) to generic hybrids, such as a comedy-action-superhero film (*Kick-Ass*) and the thriller fairy-tale (*Hanna*). Genre differences aside, there are several features central to the construction of each of these girl figures that suggest they are a popular and emergent cinematic trope. Each figure is marked by their unapologetic violence, their incorruptibility, their independence and sense of responsibility, their unambiguous morality, their excessiveness and their motivation to act on behalf of the other. The nature of that other is a key question. Mattie, Hanna and Hit-Girl all arguably act on behalf of the father for an absent mother, either in order to enact revenge for the death of the mother (Hanna and Hit-Girl) or the death of the father (Mattie). However, the configuration of each of these figures as tough, independent and responsible suggests a tension between their function in service of a paternal figure – as a patriarchal daughter – and their enacting of female agency.

By placing the emphasis on the girl as a *little* girl avenger in this chapter the intention is not to doubly infantilise these figures – as both girl and childlike subject – but rather to suggest that these representations are produced self-reflexively against

hegemonic assumptions regarding “little girls.” As Walkerdine establishes at the outset of *Daddy’s Girl*, the little girl presents for the culture the subject that is the “most” innocent and vulnerable, the figure in need of protection from the dangers of the outside world (1-2). It is these traits, particularly in relation to middle-class girls, that produce and regulate the subjectivity of little girls through their representation in popular culture. The little girl avengers analysed in this chapter arguably present a knowing challenge to these dominant assumptions regarding girlhood and as such undermine the conventions of innocence and vulnerability normally attributed to the little girl narrative. The striking nature of the “little girl avenger” becomes intelligible (and exceptional) when read in conjunction with what is commonly expected of “little girls.” However, as the analysis will show, the presence of the father and the family dynamic operating at large in the films partially recuperates this critical potential.

### **Historicising the Father-Daughter Pair**

Placing the emphasis on the little girl as her father’s daughter in popular representation has a history that predates cinema. In the eighteenth century the emerging focus on the father-daughter pair in popular literature registered larger anxieties that related to the destabilisation of the family, in particular, the role paternal power was to take in the context of broader changes to kinship structures (Zwinger 13-14; Perry 79; Kowalski-Wallace 21). The “obsession” with fathers and daughters in the eighteenth century, a significant shift from the Restoration drama’s investment in fathers and sons, was evidence for the threat presented to patriarchy and the subsequent attempts to restabilise both paternal authority as well as manage concerns around female agency in an age where what constituted the “family” was changing because of wider economic and philosophical shifts (Perry 77; 5). This emphasis on the father-daughter continued into the nineteenth century but in the Victorian era the concept of “femininity” – as part of a self-consciously constructed theory of “natural” differences between males and females – was developed, perpetuating and enforcing submissiveness in women through its manifestation as an ideological position, “the cult of domesticity” and the “Angel in the House” (Gorham 5; Bradley 202).

A closer look at the ideologies at work through these figures since the eighteenth century demonstrates that while they engender different aspects of class, sexuality, morality and age depending on the period in which they emerge, they nonetheless remain the same in so far as where there is a culturally recurrent foregrounding of the father-daughter pair there are also cultural anxieties over patriarchal authority. Most notably, these representations register attempts to restabilise the paternal figure at the same time as they work through issues of female agency from within a patriarchal discourse. In her study of “literary daughters” in eighteenth-century England Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace argues that the writing of Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth, as “daddies’ girls”, prove useful as case studies in “patriarchal complicity” (12). Against assumptions of empowerment via a “masculine literary discourse”, Kowaleski-Wallace brings to the forefront questions of what it means “to argue that women have been ‘empowered’ from within patriarchal discourses” (12; ix); a trend that extends to the presence of not only women writers as literary daughters, but also the growing number of novels that represented father-daughter dramas as central (Perry 77). The emergence of the focus on fathers and daughters functioned as an attempt to reinforce paternal power by reimagining his “brute physicality” as “tenderness” in the literature of eighteenth-century England (Perry 77-78). The analysis of the films in the latter part of this chapter demonstrate that the most enduring feature since the eighteenth century is the rearticulation of the necessity for patriarchy by representing paternal figures in a more benevolent guise (Perry 78; Kowaleski-Wallace x). The reasons for this become apparent through an examination of the changes to patriarchal hegemony from within the family as it adjusts to a new social order (based on Enlightenment principles) as well as responds to the concomitant shifts in the economy in the industrial age.

Modifications to representations of the family in the eighteenth century, including the increasing appeal of the father-daughter as an idealised form for perpetuating a heterosexual ideology (Perry 78; Zwinger 9; Kowaleski-Wallace 21), reflect transformations to the family model in this period. The change from early capitalist societies, which were agrarian in form, to the industrialised capitalist societies that form the basis of the modern capitalist societies known today, were also the basis for a shift in kinship structures: the emphasis on the biological family within which one was born gave way to an emphasis on marriage and the family one creates (Perry 5;

Bradley 191). Historians date the emergence of the “Industrial Revolution” from the late eighteenth century, but the change to a “mechanized, factory-based industrial economy” was not completed until the mid-nineteenth century in England (Bradley 191). In terms of the family, and especially representing the family in popular literature, this becomes a “story about how capitalism affected the family structure that existed in England at the time of the Restoration” (Perry 5). In terms of these representations, the cultural anxieties regarding changes to the economy manifested most intensely in the period 1748-1818 with the “master narrative” of the fiction emerging in this period predominantly concerned with “a reconsideration of the basis of membership in a family” (Perry 7). At the heart of these revisions to the family was the beginning of the separation of the private/public spheres, which finds its fullest expression as an ideological position in the nineteenth century (Gorham 4-5; Bradley 201-203). But what the proliferation of novels from the mid-eighteenth century demonstrates is a preoccupation with, and the cultural residues from, consanguineal kin formations – family relations based on blood, including paternal responsibility for the daughter (Perry 9). As the family moved to an emphasis on the conjugal model – the nuclear family – this period registered acute uncertainties about belonging to the family, and of particular importance was the loss of power of the father over his daughter as well as the power the daughter once had as the bearer of her father’s name (Perry 79; 89). In Ruth Perry’s analysis women lost power in this shift to emphasising the nuclear family because:

As a member of a patrilineal family or tribe, her [the daughter’s] power derives from her father’s backing. In other words, a daughter’s connection to her father enhances her power insofar as she is his representative or the representative of his family. (Perry 89)

It is impossible to say definitively that conditions were “better” for women in the pre-industrial age, when it was “normal and desirable for women to be earners and contributors to the household income” (Bradley 202). But it can be argued, via contemporary analyses of the popular literature emerging at around the middle of the eighteenth century, that significant cultural anxieties regarding what constitutes the family and what form patriarchy was to take under the pressure of these changes were articulated through representations of the father-daughter relationship (Perry; Kowalski-Wallace; Zwinger). The notion of paternal rights and female agency were

central anxieties played out in the novels of this period, dramas that continued to be popular well into the nineteenth century.

Putting this in discursive terms it is worth citing Foucault when he states: “By placing the advent of the age of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression, one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism: it becomes an integral part of the bourgeois order” (*History of Sexuality* 5). What Foucault makes clear here is that the changes to the family did not simply appear in the eighteenth century, rather as capitalism spread as the dominant economic model so too began the emergence of changes to the family which extended to those “two long centuries” of repression from which, as he demonstrates, Western society has yet to be liberated. In other words, changes to the family occurred simultaneously with dramatic changes to the economic model. The relationship between capitalism and the family, in which Western culture remains invested, began in the seventeenth century, and in terms of female empowerment, it becomes an issue in relation to the father and the dominance of paternal law in the mid-eighteenth century, as adduced by the studies on popular literature from this period (Perry; Zwinger; Kowaleski-Wallace).

Part of why this emphasis on the father-daughter came about relates to changes in the structure of patriarchy during the Enlightenment and the philosophical insistence on a new social order based not on “paternal power” but on “political power”. This shift was a break from a “natural” classic patriarchy – founded on religion, “Adam” and the monarchs – to a civil society based on a social contract amongst its people. However, this resulted less in an abandoning of the “classic patriarchalism” than in a modification of men’s domination of women, one that was arguably more repressive. For in order to maintain power in the hands of men while abandoning a model of the state based on the family, the shift was to a model based on brotherhood:

The contract theorists necessarily modified this view of male (pro)creative power when they ceased to see the state as a family, though perhaps not with the consequences one might have expected. In their view, men were no longer perpetuating the social order through their sexual relations with women, but, rather, were producing it without the help of women at all. Seeking to wrest power from the single father/king and vest it in all men, the

contract theorists created a model of civil society based not in paternal but in fraternal authority: not fatherhood but brotherhood provides the conceptual frame for Locke's civil society ... a social vision that is even more masculinist than the one it replaced. Women are no longer needed even as vessels in the birthing of this new state order, and are important only as vessels of birthing in the domestic order, where Locke's vision of the father and mother as equal partners is severely undercut by his assertion of a husband's 'Conjugal Power' over his wife. (Heiland 10)

Thus, the "long eighteenth century (1660-1880)" which comprised a "shift in the organization of family structures, as men were drawn into the workplace, women were increasingly confined to the home, and gender roles were insistently codified even as they were insistently resisted" (Heiland 3), also involved the necessity to rearticulate the terms of patriarchal power. It is here that the literary studies note the transformation of the representation of the father from a brutal, physical figure to a tender and benevolent figure in the eighteenth century (Perry 78; Kowalski-Wallace 17). The Lockean paradigm included an influential directive on how to manage changes to the family, specifically, that the father be more interested in the education of his children (Kowalski-Wallace 17). The subject matter in this instance was of less importance than the stance, which revitalised patriarchal control and "constituted a preservation of patriarchal prerogative, albeit in a more benevolent guise" (Kowalski-Wallace 21). Thus the power of the Lockean father was based in the fact that this figure made it doubly impossible for the girl's rebellion because: "Eternally vigilant, with an eye to every potential danger that besets the female sex, the Lockean father anticipates his daughter's every step and serves her truly where others would falsely seduce her" (Kowalski-Wallace 21).

This transformation to a more benevolent patriarchal figure – which endures in the films analysed in this chapter – anticipates an interesting double bind for the girl's empowerment. On the one hand, by aligning herself to a benevolent patriarchal figure the girl is able to sidestep the worst effects of patriarchy (Kowalski-Wallace x), but on the other, this degree of complicity means that the girl is inevitably operating from within a patriarchal discourse in terms of whatever power or agency she may have. In terms of the girl's relationship to her father in the films to be analysed here a similar caution must be exercised when suggesting that these

representations of power indicate actual empowerment, because the presence of the father complicates her agency from the outset. Furthermore, these films also suggest a similar nostalgia for the period when blood relations between kin were dominant; even where the father is symbolically the father figure (*True Grit*) because he is nonetheless occupying a position of paternal power.

The trading of patriarchal authorities in this period from “father patriarchy to husband patriarchy” (Perry 86) and the concomitant changes to the economic order that sparked this shift – the movement from a status society to a class society and the capitalist transformations of family relationships – resulted in a loss of power for the girl in terms of the power she was once afforded through the relationship with her father (albeit still from within patriarchy). Considering this history of changes within kinship ties, where the shift from patrilineal families to nuclear families was registered in a proliferation of emotionally charged novels centralising the father-daughter pair as they both struggled with this break, the re-emergence of this pairing over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century and its reconfiguration now as the little girl assassin/father figure trope, it can be argued that these films instantiate a similar nostalgia for patrilineal patriarchies at the same time as they adjust and open their form to allow for the individuation of the girl figure in terms of a neoliberal subjectivity. It is important to keep in mind, of course “individuation” – as Perry, Kowalski-Wallace and Lynda Marie Zwinger make clear through their various interpretations of the Oedipal model and their retrospective applications of it to eighteenth-century literature – requires the privileging of the father figure. And yet when this pair is represented and resonates in the culture this pairing seems to suggest that the agency of the young female presents a credible threat to patriarchy, or that paternal authority presents a beneficial alliance for the girl’s autonomy and independence. Thus the cultural work they do in terms of patriarchy is complex: the girl’s complicity affords her a degree of power from within a patriarchal hierarchy at the same time as the “myth of the benevolent patriarch” allows for a renegotiation of paternal power for the male figure as well (Kowaleski-Wallace 12).

The studies examining the concept of the “patriarchal daughter” as a popular figure emerging since at least the mid-eighteenth century vary in focus – from the socialisation of girls to the literary figure of the girl – but each demonstrates how the girl functioned in eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century culture as an idealised

form of femininity in place of the contradictory and complex figure of the mother (Marantz Cohen qtd. in Perry 78; Gorham 6-7; Zwinger 4; Walkerdine 89). In the eighteenth century the convention of the absent mother registered the broader disappearance of maternal power and the suppression of maternal inheritance in the context of wider reconsiderations of the basis of membership within the family (Perry 7). In place of the mother the representation of the father-daughter became the perfect expression of heterosexuality (Perry 78; Zwinger 5). In the context of middle-class Victorian ideology it was the girl's implicit asexuality, relative to her mother's active (procreative) sexuality, which allowed her to unproblematically embody the spiritual qualities of the Angel in the House (Gorham 7). The construction and idealisation of the girl as gentle, loving, self-sacrificing and innocent depended upon her positioning in relationship to others, and pertinent for a patriarchal ideology was her relationship to her father: as the "good daughter" she embodied either the unsullied refuge of the private sphere or the pinnacle of emotional and practical support in times of difficulty (Gorham 37-41). The feminine ideal of Victorian ideology perpetuated a model of femininity as dependent on men, submissive, preferring the confines of the home, innocent, pure, gentle and self-sacrificing; she was to have no ambitious strivings and be free from anger and hostility; more emotional than man, she was also capable of self-renunciation (Gorham 4-5). However, the focus on wives and mothers as the ideal for femininity posed a number of contradictions. The subject position interpellated by this ideology was that of a woman, performing the complex duties of wifedom and motherhood, but a woman forever childlike expected to procreate and yet appear asexual (Gorham 7). The figure of the girl provided a solution:

These contradictions could be resolved by focusing on the femininity of the daughter rather than on the adult woman ... Unlike an adult woman, a girl could be perceived as a wholly unambiguous model of feminine dependence, childlike simplicity and sexual purity. (Gorham 7)

This idealisation of femininity found its fullest expression through the girl's role as the "father's daughter" because the "image of the ideal girl was expressed frequently through the medium of the father-daughter relationship" (Gorham 38; 44). This configuration of the girl persists in contemporary representations through figures such as the little girl avengers in popular cinema.

Although representations such as Hit-Girl, Mattie, and Hanna are not the feminine ideal of the nineteenth century, indeed these figures are in many ways the opposite – strong rather than gentle, angry as well as hostile, and less emotional than their male counterparts – the construction of these girls in relation to a paternal figure and the contradictions this subsequently resolves through the elimination of the mother remain in evidence. Furthermore, these girls do exhibit “feminine dependence, childlike simplicity and sexual purity” (Gorham 7). But this is not a straightforward parallel. The girl is dependent on this father figure and yet it is not a feminine dependence of physical weakness and submissiveness, rather it is a partnership or an understanding, much like the cultural function of the “good daughter” which circulated in popular literature from the nineteenth century. As Deborah Gorham writes: “In novels and moral tales, the good daughter in such a situation [financial loss experienced by the family] provided moral and emotional support to her father as well as genuine practical assistance” (39-40). Moreover her “goodness” oftentimes revealed the “crime” that precipitated the financial destitution and thus restored her father to his former (elevated) position. On the surface the little girl avengers appear different from the idealised daughters circulating in Victorian culture; however the presence of the father in the narrative transforms those masculine traits so that they perform similar cultural work for a patriarchal ideology in the current context.

This history of the father-daughter pairing is imbricated with the ideological foundations of heterosexual desire that were emerging in the eighteenth century to support a patriarchal construct of gender relations. Zwinger argues that the “daughter of sentiment” or the “sentimental daughter” was a popular trope which began with *Clarissa Harlowe* (*Clarissa Harlowe* 1748<sup>28</sup>), continued to enjoy popularity in the nineteenth century British and American novel, and persisted into the twentieth century through figures such as O in *Story of O* (1954) (4). The sentimental daughter is characterised as “a dutiful acolyte to her father, with a loving heart, an innocent mind, and a positive lust for self-abnegation” (Zwinger 5). This history of the fictional daughter and her relationship with the father and femininity provides a cultural context for the cultural function of the figure of the girl in recent cinema. As Zwinger argues:

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<sup>28</sup> *Clarissa Harlowe, or, The History of a Young Lady* is the story of a young woman considered an exemplary figure of femininity by her peers – virtuous, moral and beautiful – and her tragic downfall and death after she is manipulated and raped by her love interest, Richard Lovelace.

The fictional daughter and her father are in fact, two of the most compelling and problematic figures in the history of heterosexuality and its attendant/engendering stories. While most Western fictional versions of the feminine are split into explicit or implicit polarities (mirroring the perceived threat that is sexual difference) – goddess/demon, virgin/whore, saint/sinner, hearth angel/fallen woman, nurturing/devouring mother – when she is daughter, as defined by the significant presence of her father in the text, she is not split. If she is to retain her value for him, her father must leave her whole, which means that he is unable to take advantage of this most common, perhaps effective, technique of managing the fear and anxiety provoked by sexual difference. (Zwinger 4)

Zwinger argues that the figure of the girl is bound and tamed not through the construction of polarities, but rather through narrative choices that construct this figure as the “daughter of sentiment” outlined above (4). In Zwinger’s analysis, she suggests “representation of woman as desiring daughter and of the father as innocent of any but culturally sanctioned designs upon her – ground the system of cultural constructs and prescriptions that we have learned to think of as heterosexual desire” (5). Indeed, the figures under consideration here are left “whole” and as such retain their value for the father figure in the text. The construction of these figures as independent, aggressive and predominantly non-sexual beings, and any suggestion that this signifies agency for the girl is undermined by the presence of the father figure in the text when this is considered in relation to the historical function of the father-daughter pair. As the textual analyses of the films will demonstrate, those traits of independence, aggression and asexuality fulfil the father’s desires in so far as his daughter reflects his privileged position as preferred parental figure because he successfully prepares the girl for late-capitalist<sup>29</sup> culture. This pairing reproduces a heterosexual dynamic: he is free from anything but culturally sanctioned paternal (patriarchal) designs on her and she becomes an instrument not only for this

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<sup>29</sup> The term is Jameson’s and in the context of this thesis it is applied in relation to McRobbie’s theorisation of the undoing of the feminist movement. As a periodising concept, in Jameson’s words, “every position on postmodernism in culture ... is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (italics in orig. 3). In this context the increasing visibility of the girl – as a successful avenger and as her father’s daughter – is reappropriated by a capitalist narrative that signifies her empowerment as the result of the success of a particular kind of patriarchal capitalism. Feminism, which actually fought for women’s rights, is rearticulated in “pain-free” capitalist terms through the contemporary belief that: “Capitalism has produced the need for, and the possibility of, women’s liberation” (McRobbie 45).

patriarchal ideology but also a daughter figure that fits with the newly emergent economic expectations placed on the female subject within a neoliberal context.

The figure of the girl in the nineteenth century evolved in the twentieth into a representation of a much younger, self-assured and stoic figure. The little girl as a tough, controlled and stable subject fits between several binaries: in between child/adult but not necessarily adolescent, and in between wife-mother/daughter, seemingly occupying both. As such, on the one hand this figure represents an enjoyable aberration, a delightful mix of violence and innocence, intended to shock and entertain. In this sense little girl avengers resonate with the hyperreal, as figures that have lost contact with the thing they signify; this spectacle of girlhood casually erases the urgent socio-economic conditions experienced by many female subjects (Woods 27). On the other hand, the contradictions and overlapping meanings this girl draws from her liminal position frustrate the traditional meaning ascribed to childhood. As Valerie Walkerdine explains:

This figure is precisely the one which presents the threat to the discourse of the innocent and rational child: the child who is not a child, and whom, in the case of the little girl, we may understand to be sexually precocious as well as full of street-savvy. This is the model of a little girl who becomes a popular heroine, a girl heroine of the populace, the masses. The figure that she cuts is deeply resistant to the normative model of the child. Her popularity is not surprising on one level, but if she is so deeply subversive a figure, how is she to have survived as an icon? (Walkerdine 84)

Walkerdine is discussing the character of Little Orphan Annie in the comic series, a figure similar to contemporary little girl avengers, “a little gamine, quite evidently in the so-called age of innocence, wise as an old owl” (Smith qtd. in Walkerdine 84). Another similarity this figure presents with the little girl avengers is the representation of Annie’s relationship with “Daddy Warbucks” and its configuration: “the partnership which survives best is father and daughter” where the “mother figures have been banished as nasty and cruel” (Walkerdine 89). Walkerdine’s question therefore remains relevant for the current argument: how and why has this figure persisted and flourished as an icon? In her analysis of Annie, Walkerdine is “struck by the use of a child, who is not childish as the antithesis of a superhero” (86)

and she argues that the persistence of this icon can be explained by the cultural appeal of this figure in relation to wider contextual factors:

the struggles of the underdog presented as the struggles of a child so that they cannot get entangled with omnipotent superhero masculine fantasies. A child, especially a female child, can be the carrier, not of innocence, but of the knocks and struggles of everyday proletarian life. (Walkerdine 86)

Annie and Daddy Warbucks perpetuated the ideal subject required for a discourse of neo-liberalism: they represented the self-made individual, a figure battling and using street smarts to succeed. Moreover, they did so as a father-daughter team which, like earlier depictions of the father-daughter dynamic, eliminated the problem of having to deal with the complexities and contradictions of adult women because of the imposed ideology of femininity (Walkerdine 87). Running from 1924 to 1968, the comic strip appealed to audiences through the Depression, the Second World War, the 1950s and most of the 1960s, and this “is itself a testament to the survival and prospering of the sentiment that they represent” (Walkerdine 89). That sentiment endures with the little girl avenger and has become a popular trope in Western cinema over the last two decades<sup>30</sup>.

### **Oedipal Dramas: A Patriarchal Renegotiation of the Family Post-Feminism**

Taken together, then, the representations of little girl avengers and their father figures in *Kick-Ass*, *Hanna* and *True Grit* register broader cultural anxieties in relation to patriarchal dominance. In particular, these films speak to paternal fears over whether the traditional patriarchal family is needed since second wave feminism. A close analysis of the girl/man relationship in these texts demonstrates the way patriarchal ideology renegotiates its position of cultural centrality in response to this destabilisation. By revitalising heterosexual gender identifications, especially where this reconfiguration of the family allows for changes to the girl vis-à-vis faux feminism, the girl/man dynamic represents an assertion that patriarchy is,

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<sup>30</sup> *Hanna* and *Kick-Ass* both made upwards of US 10 million dollars in profit in US theatres alone, while *True Grit* made a profit of US 133 million dollars in the US and earned Hailee Steinfeld an Oscar nomination in 2011 for Best Supporting Actress (*Box Office Mojo*). Furthermore, in the 1990s, *Leon: The Professional* grossed 45 million dollars worldwide on a 16 million dollar budget (“Léon”).

in fact, necessary. As suggested thus far, the reworking of the patriarchal daughter in contemporary cinema is identifiable as a trope because of shared character traits that can be considered masculine – stoicism, independence, aggressiveness, single-mindedness and lack of emotion – traits which, on the surface at least, appear different from the sentimental and dutiful daughter that emerged in modernity. However, the suggestion that the figure of the girl is an evolution of that representation of girlhood is based largely on her placement within the same family dynamic, the patriarchal family, where the father was idealised through his relationship to his daughter and the girl idealised as the feminine signifier par excellence in place of the mother. As the analysis of these figures will demonstrate, while those idealised feminine traits have been transformed into more masculine attributes, the cultural function of this daughter figure for the paternal character remains largely unchanged. The little girl avenger in contemporary cinema signifies the persistence and reworking of the dutiful daughter and works in a similar way for a patriarchal ideology in the current context.

This dynamic is usefully read through the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of the family. In this context the Freudian model is viewed as a Western cultural model that has very precise historical and economic determinants. Produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this model reads desire in the patriarchal terms still dominant in this period, offering itself as a descriptive and universal interpretation of heterosexual desire (with its developmental narrative of gender as a binary allocation of active/passive for masculine/feminine). Contemporary depictions of the traditional family continue to be governed by this interpretation of the family. The difference, this masculinisation of the girl, can be read as the effect of contextual changes, specifically feminism and neoliberalism. But what remains the same – the restriction on the girl's agency and her function for the father as patriarchal subject – provides evidence of the persistence of this construction of the family. Freud acknowledged that his model was a product of the culture, gesturing to this in his lecture on "Femininity": "But we must beware in this [women's preference for passive behaviour] of underestimating the influence of social customs, which similarly force women into passive situations" (415). Even though he and others extrapolated and universalised psychoanalytic applications, it is nonetheless a model of the family which emerged in a particular historical juncture. As several feminist

interpretations of the psychoanalytic model have already made clear (Chodorow; Silverman; Butler; Kaplan), reading the female subject as subordinate to the male subject in the Freudian model is a culturally determined interpretation of gender identification. For example, writing in 1928 and reflecting on women writers from the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Virginia Woolf re-examined the history of women in literature in *A Room of One's Own* and captured the pervasiveness of not only men's insistent opposition to women's emancipation, but also the degree to which women were inevitably complicit in this cultural arrangement of gender relations because of the economic and domestic structure of their society. The legacy of Freud's analysis is therefore productive when his model is understood as a description of patriarchal gender relations that are as much a product of the culture from which they came as well as a model that helped to re-produce that structure as the dominant model of the family.

The Oedipal drama perpetuates a patriarchal ideology, and bringing this framework to an analysis of the familial relationships represented in contemporary cinema demonstrates how this ideology is still at work even when it appears to complicate the model through a bestowal of phallic privilege not by father on son, but rather by father on daughter. Freud's model is particularly useful when considering the idea of a "patriarchal daughter." The threat presented by an active female desire, which contributed to the evolution of the Freudian Oedipal model in his era, remains in evidence in these films: the mother is treated in similar ways because of persistent cultural anxieties around adult female sexuality, though now this emerges in the context of the gains and then steady erosion of adult female power since second wave feminism. Nevertheless, manifesting and maintaining the dominance of the heterosexual model has long been the domain of the father-daughter pair:

Our strongest taboo, we say, the one upon which civilization is founded, is the incest prohibition directed at the son's desire for the mother ... But the daughter, who is in theory equally covered by the taboo against incest, who is supposed to ensure a smoothly flowing system of exchange among men – the daughter figures in stories of an altogether different kind. If the spectre of father-daughter incest, as a literal rendering of desire, is the cornerstone of anything, it is not civilization so much as heterosexual desire. (Zwinger 9)

The analyses of the films in this chapter through the Freudian framework in relation to the current postfeminist context (understood in this instance as an explicitly anti-feminist mode of female subjectivity) suggest that the father-daughter dynamic remains as a cornerstone for perpetuating heterosexual gender identifications in service of the girl's future-directed womanhood and thus, patriarchal subjectivity.

According to the Freudian model, the power and privilege of a masculine identity is maintained in the hands of male subjects because sexual difference revolves around conducting an exchange of power between father and son. In considering the little girl avengers as figures that complicate this model through their positioning as patriarchal daughters, of particular interest is the moment of the division of the sexes, located at the Oedipal juncture. In the Freudian model two processes differentiate the girl from the boy at this moment. Firstly, whereas the male subject is encouraged to continue to invest his libidinal desires in the mother (the first love object), the girl is expected to replace one parent with the other in her psychic register, i.e. break from the mother and desire the father. The second process leads to her feeling that she is already castrated and that this is to be read as deficiency or "lack" (Silverman 141-142). If this Oedipal juncture is "ideally" resolved the male subject will come to identify himself with the culturally sanctioned position of power and superiority, with phallic privilege. For the female subject this perceived biological inferiority translates into "symbolic exclusion or lack – her isolation, that is, from those cultural privileges which define the male subject as potent and sufficient" (Silverman 142). This model is complicated by the patriarchal daughter: the mother is absent and the father invests her with phallic privilege, not his son.

The fact that the mother is absent and the father is the dominant parent of the girl in these little girl avenger films presents a family dynamic that raises a number of significant deviations or potential problems at the Oedipal juncture. In the Freudian model the girl will turn to the father once she has conceded that she is lacking. Once she realises that she does not want to internalise the deficiencies she sees in the mother, the figure she perceives as the cause of her own deficiencies, she turns toward her father. However, what happens when the mother is absent? If the "female subject is obliged to renounce her first object choice, to effect a quite violent break with the source of her earliest pleasure" (Silverman 141), her mother, but that source is the father; and if he has raised her as entitled to the privileges of the phallus,

bestowed from him, then what type of gendered subject is being formed? And what are the wider cultural meanings inherent in these figures, indeed, in this dynamic? What is at stake in the Freudian model is, in part at least, anti-feminism: “Freud indicates that the female subject’s felt lack ‘ideally’ results in anti-feminism. The rejection begins with the mother, who is not only perceived as deficient herself, but as the cause of her daughter’s deficiency” (Silverman 142). But in fact these texts reassert this antifeminist sentiment through the construction of mothers as either absent or present.

The absent mother is idealised as the traditional feminine and the lost object for the girl, but that this idealisation is based on absence is in itself problematic. On the one hand, the mothers that are present in the texts are constructed in ways that speak to cultural anxieties around empowered adult women in contemporary culture. Moreover, the phallic privilege bestowed from father to daughter is evidence of constructing a female subject prepared for the demands of neoliberal capitalism, not necessarily the privileges of masculinity as commensurate with maleness per se. This is arguably further evidence of that complicated link between the concept of man, not as a gendered identity but as a signifier for personhood. Returning to the assertion made in Chapter One, these films emerge in a context in which significant political and legal rights for female subjects have been won, but remains influenced by the synonymous nature of the terms “man” and “subject” in Western philosophical and historical thought. As Silverman puts it:

the term ‘man’ is gender-specific, although it purports to include all humanity. Its double application permits the phallogentricity of our philosophical heritage to go unquestioned, creating the illusion that any case which is made for man automatically includes woman. In fact, however, the definition of man we inherit from the Renaissance does not apply to woman. The same philosophical tradition – Christian, Platonic, humanist – which associates man with reason and transcendence associates woman with irrationality and the Fall. (Silverman 131)

Thus while it may appear that the girl is constructed as unproblematically masculine in these films, and even socially sanctioned in this position because of the support of a sympathetic father figure, her sex as female remains imbricated with this history of

the subject. The textual analysis of these films suggests instead that the idealisation of the girl in relation to her father works to create an independent capitalist subject, and where she would turn to him for a baby, a symbolic displacement of the phallus, as theorised by Freud (409), this becomes a delayed desire because of changing economic conditions and postfeminist ideologies that inscribe motherhood as ideal, but only after the girl has produced an economically viable subjectivity. The absence of the mother and the subsequent presence of a masculinised girl could be “explained away” as the result of the lack of a maternal presence. However, Halberstam is critical of the notion that “tomboyism” in her analysis of the film *Paper Moon* (1973) is “the result of the lack of a dominant maternal presence that can easily be corrected within a firm family structure [as] the absent mother is often given as a trite explanation of tomboyism, an explanation, moreover, that sidesteps the whole issue of cross-gender identification and the pain of girlhood” (191). Not only does this reading sidestep the problems associated with imposed femininity at the adolescent phase of girlhood, it also ignores the cultural significance of absenting the mother. As the textual analysis of *Hanna* illustrates, representations of mothers as absent allows for traditional femininity to be reimagined as some mythic object that has been lost because of feminism. Furthermore, it is this loss of the traditional feminine ideal that motivates the girl to act, which, in effect, positions the girl as acting on behalf of a textual patriarchal representation, in this case, the traditionally feminine mother: pure, self-sacrificing and dependent, a patriarchal construct of motherhood.

### **Stoic Daughters, Wounded Fathers and Inadequate Sons**

This particular representation of the family is idealised by the absence of the mother and the inclusion of the father-daughter pairing, which signifies a re-emergence of the patriarchal family, but which now encodes this family with a cultural desire for the girl to meet the demands of neoliberal individualism as well. Defined especially by their relationship to paternal figures, Mattie, Hanna and Hit-Girl all seem to share the characteristics of being a “father’s daughter”, pledging allegiance to their father’s cause. Each narrative plays with the absence of the mother in different ways. Hit-Girl is avenging the death of a mother she never knew, a mother idealised by her absence. Hanna is similarly avenging the murder of a mother she never knew; however the

film depicts three mother figures, all of whom are competing for Hanna's affection. Mattie's mother is absent because she cannot navigate her way through a man's world and so the task falls to Mattie in her father's absence. Cumulatively, these figures represent that cliché of cinema identified in Chapter One: the active heroine identifies with her father and thus her activity arguably does very little in the way of disrupting a patriarchal ideology (Tasker, *Working Girls* 102).

The masculine identification of the girl is therefore permitted and idealised, but only because it is constructed from within, and operates on behalf of, the patriarchal family. Like Go in relation to Nick, the little girl avenger is protected from the problems of sexualisation not only because of her relative youth, but also because of her relationships with male kin. This constructs her as "safe" for confirming the masculinity of men within a context now anxious over active female desire because she is implicitly non-sexualised through the emphasis on her familial relationships. Like the dutiful daughter and the daughter of sentiment, these familial girls are similarly moral, self-sacrificing, dutiful and innocent. Their masculine qualities of strength, violence and a lack of emotion suggest a reworking of this earlier figure to fit with newly emergent economic demands. As a familial subject this girl does not risk denying the father's sexual desire and therefore safeguards his masculinity from rejection while simultaneously protecting her own subjectivity from being split into the "whore" side of the sexual dichotomy. And perhaps of most significance: she is at no point directly critical of patriarchy.

The actions of Hit-Girl, Mattie and Hanna are legitimised through the bestowing of phallic privilege by a paternal figure, usually, but not always, the biological father, signifying these figures as patriarchal daughters in the sense outlined above. This bestowal of phallic privilege is not limited to gifts that represent the phallus in the form of weapons and "armour" – Hit-Girl is armed with weapons her father has given her throughout the film; Mattie carries her father's gun and wears his coat; and Hanna uses her father's weapons until his training allows her to commandeer her own – it is also in the faith these father figures have in the girl to carry out their missions of revenge and/or assume the paternal role in his absence. These girls are trained for this purpose, rather than raised as children. This training is exemplified by the pop quiz Big Daddy gives Hit-Girl on her birthday, questions on weapons and kung-fu films which she answers without hesitation; by Mattie's reputation as

“Mattie the book-keeper” and the ease with which she assumes the role of avenging her father’s murder in keeping with the film’s opening proverb, “the wicked flee when none pursueth”; and by the motto Erik raises Hanna to live by, “adapt or die”, and his proclamation that “you must always be ready, even in your sleep.” Not only does this representation of the girl symbolise the idealised and necessarily ruthless subject of late-capitalism<sup>31</sup>, this training regime also allows a relationship to develop between the father-daughter that sees the girl shift between being the father’s protégé and the father’s comrade.

The relationships between Hit-Girl and Big Daddy, Mattie and Rooster, and Hanna and Erik allow the figure of the girl to be both dependent on and equal to the father figure. She is at once his little girl, in that she defers to him for approval, instruction and discipline, and his partner, an equal she fights beside and complements. For example, in one scene from *Kick-Ass*, Hit-Girl ventures ahead of her father to take down a group of armed drug-dealers and save Dave. The scene is memorable because of the one liner Hit-Girl utters upon smashing her way through a window and sizing up her adult male opponents: “Okay you cunts, let’s see what you can do.” Following this, Hit-Girl assassinates seven armed drug-dealers and one of their girlfriends in a spectacle of bloodshed, while “Banana Splits” by The Dickies playfully blares over the action. The scene demonstrates the excessiveness that accompanies the characterisation of Hit-Girl, a figure of spectacular violence and astonishing maturity that challenges expectations of girlhood and innocence. However, it is the small interaction Hit-Girl has with Big Daddy after this massacre that idealises the father-daughter dynamic and reinscribes politics of heterosexuality. Once Hit-Girl has killed everyone in the room she turns to take care of Kick-Ass; but in the background the dealer’s doorman lurches toward her before being killed by a bullet between the eyes. The camera angle switches to a window looking in at Hit-Girl. This scene is framed by binoculars and the viewer becomes aware that the shot is taken from Big Daddy’s point of view from a building across the street as he softly chides her over the radio:

Big Daddy: Now Hit-Girl, we always keep our backs where?

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<sup>31</sup> There is wider contextual evidence that the empowered girl is represented as necessarily tough, see for example *Girlfight* (2000), where her training motto is, “When you’re not training, someone else is training – to kick your ass.”

Hit-Girl: To the wall, Daddy I know. It won't happen again ... Nice shot by the way.

Big Daddy: Thank you.

This interaction, while nurturing her comradeship with the father, tempers the masculinisation of Hit-Girl manifested prior to this through her exceptional fighting skills, and reminds the viewer that she is a girl and specifically her father's daughter. In the wider context of the film, scenes such as this construct her father as both her companion and her superior.

In a scene which does similar cultural work in *Hanna*, the film opens with Hanna absorbed in gutting and cleaning a deer she has just hunted. Erik suddenly appears and presses a gun to her head, "You're dead right now, I've killed you." In response Hanna attacks him, a fight ensues, which she loses, after which he gruffly tells her: "drag the deer back yourself." Yet as she trudges through the snow with the deer carcass, the camera cuts to a shot that privileges Erik in the foreground, watching Hanna from the shadows, both concern and pride evident in his expression. In *True Grit*, the days Mattie and Rooster spend riding through the Frontier are interspersed with his ongoing (drunken) monologue detailing his wives and the failures of his marriages; evidence of his preference for, and comfort with, the non-adult female figure, the lesser "threat" to his masculinity. Nevertheless in the end, when Mattie needs him to be ruthless in order to save her life from a fatal snake bite, he is. Overriding her desire to save her horse, Blackie, Rooster exhausts the horse to the point of death in order to save Mattie. These representations remasculinise the male figure within a cultural context where adult females are no longer dependent on men, but while these girls can certainly fight their own (physical) battles, they are repositioned, at various moments, as dependents. This configuration of the father-daughter relationship illustrates Cranny-Francis's assertion that this particular representation of femininity constructs these girls "textually as patriarchal subjects" through their positioning in relation to a "sympathetic" masculine subject, that "interesting mixture of paternalism and sentimentality which is stereotypically patriarchal" (118-119). Moreover, while the figure of the girl performs masculinity par excellence, the father figures exhibit a sensitivity and a vulnerability which the girls lack, suggesting that through this relationship, and in particular the construction

of a sympathetic masculine subject, the texts function to reinvigorate a version of paternalism that now allows the female subject to assume the more masculine traits required of the neoliberal individual at the same time as she endures as the guarantor of his patriarchal status.

Differences between the 1969 and 2010 film versions of Portis's novel demonstrate how the contemporary little girl avenger and her paternal figure have changed relative to contextual shifts. Hathaway's 1969 film is more closely aligned with a Victorian paradigm of the father-daughter pairing, structuring the plot around the father-daughter relationship. The film opens with a scene at the Ross family homestead and includes Mattie's biological father before he embarks on the fated trip with Chaney. The conversation he has with Mattie draws on the conventions of the Victorian dutiful daughter, Mattie asks her father: "You want my advice, Papa?" and he sincerely replies: "I always do." The Coen brothers' film retains Mattie's first person narration from Portis's novel and links this closely to the point of view of the film. In this twenty-first century version the biological father has already died by the beginning of the film. The conclusion is different in significant ways as well. Hathaway's version closes with Mattie and Rooster together as they finalise their business relationship and then discuss their futures in relation to each other. Mattie pays Rooster an additional \$200 for saving her life, Rooster accompanies her home where she gives Rooster her father's gun and shows him her father's grave. She also indicates the plot in the grave she has reserved for Rooster at her property, informing him: "I want you to rest beside me, Rooster." This scene literally renders Rooster the replacement of the father figure, while the line, "I want you to rest beside me, Rooster" invokes the heterosexual dynamic between the pair. In the Coen version, after Rooster saves Mattie's life – in a scene that is much more prolonged and agonising for Rooster than in the 1969 version – he disappears. He does not collect the \$50 bonus Mattie leaves for him, he is buried in a confederate cemetery from which Mattie has him removed and placed in her family plot after twenty-five years without contact. Mattie does not marry or have children in any version, but this remake emphasises her spinster status through the final vision of the adult Mattie as a short-tempered older woman, although she has fond memories of Rooster as a friend with whom she had an extraordinary experience. Rather than producing a patriarchal ideology between the pair through a clear manifestation of the Victorian ideal, as the

Hathaway version does, Mattie and Rooster in the Coens' version represents a carefully non-sexualised heterosexual dynamic that takes into account the perceived threat to masculinity and presumed empowerment of women since feminism and then manages this destabilisation through the reworking of these characters.

Mattie is moral and has faith in the law, a position constructed in significant contrast to Rooster's immoral and often illegal behaviour. Mattie represents a kind of naivety in this, however, which is made more pronounced by the fact that it is Rooster's ways that ultimately deliver justice – Mattie does not take Chaney in to be hanged, she is forced to shoot him. This version of Mattie is constructed in the context of postfeminism and as such she is emblematic of the publicly visible and capable girl of this era. And yet the terms of her competence, her faith in the law and her moral code, are undermined because while the Rooster of 2010 represents a more adolescent and feckless figure than the John Wayne version in 1969, he nonetheless shows that transgressing the law and operating outside the boundaries of morality leads to success. Furthermore, it is his ruthlessness, in the end, that saves Mattie's life. But it is arguably the presence of Mattie that allows for Rooster to be simultaneously vulnerable and boyish; she redeems this immoral, law-breaking, alcoholic figure into a paternal role. Moreover, the steady erosion of Mattie's moral code over the course of the narrative is indicative of postfeminist subjectivity because this characterisation allows her an individual identity at the same time as her power as an individual is compromised through repositioning her morality as "girly" naivety.

Taken together, these representations of the girl-man dynamic are indicative of an idealised version of sexual difference for twenty-first-century audiences. By recentralising male interests through a configuration of vulnerability the films produce the sense that masculinity is threatened, but that they do so in relation to a neoliberal, depoliticised depiction of female independence is suggestive of the way patriarchal ideologies are reworked through representations of young girls and paternal men. This analysis will now turn to the male character's apparent inadequacies in order to argue that the representation of this figure as a victim, suffering or sacrificing, becomes the new basis upon which assumptions underpinning patriarchal ideology are now generated, but in ways that structurally require the presence of this masculine girl.

For the father figures, pain as well as death constructs these men as suffering and sacrificing for the girl. These representations of the father are evidence for Robinson's argument that: "white masculinity can most fully and convincingly represent itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body" (20). In *Kick-Ass* Big Daddy is tortured before being murdered, in *True Grit* Mattie's biological father is robbed and then murdered, and Erik, Hanna's father, is beaten and murdered. Big Daddy and Erik die in the place of the girl. These male figures are marked (wounded), and recentralised. Because these films construct the father figures as knowledgeable and aware of the larger mission, while the girl is to varying degrees (Hit-Girl and Hanna explicitly, Mattie perhaps less so) unaware of the larger political stakes of their respective missions, white masculinity is made central and in control. Big Daddy is fighting the larger battle of police corruption in relation to the Mafia in New York, but Hit-Girl only understands that she is avenging her mother's murder. Erik is rebelling against the CIA's decision to terminate the test subjects of a research project, but Hanna understands only that she must kill one woman to avenge her mother's murder. And Rooster is the outsider cynically aware of, and skirting the edges of, the laws he is bound to uphold, but Mattie is single-minded in her desire to avenge her father's murder. These paternal figures are constructed in similar ways to the male characters Robinson identifies, as "white men taking up the position of rebel or resistance fighter, fighting the power of the status quo" (7). The wounding of these figures together with the way they represent a larger political mission personalises the collective crisis of masculinity (as white men individually wounded) at the same time as erasing social and political causes and effects (Robinson 7-8). The role that each of these male characters occupies as part of the institutions that they are resisting – Big Daddy was a police officer, Erik was in the CIA, and Rooster is a Marshall – is downplayed relative to their status as victims of these institutions. This exemplifies the contradictions and confusions that abound when white masculinity is represented as victimised through personalised and embodied wounding, because at the same time as they are wounded they remain figures inseparable from the institutional power they claim to be victimised by. In these films this is manifested in the way the wider plot centres on social and political resistance by the father, which, in turn, reinforces the social and political interests represented by his embodied white masculinity. The presence of the girl in this context functions to remasculinise these figures in service of a patriarchal ideology.

The sacrifice (death in the case of Big Daddy and Erik) is for the girl, thereby remasculinising him as a paternal figure and reinforcing the necessity of the patriarchal family and the father figure. But this sacrifice for the girl erases the underlying institutional battle he is also waging, effectively obscuring the social and political forces within which he still counts as subject.

These father figures, however, are marked not only by this physical wounding, but by being represented as emotional and vulnerable, while the girl is not. The girl who lacks emotion but manifests an excess of masculinity and the male who is traited as feminised through his vulnerability together represent a sense of wholeness, forming a new kind of complementary unity. This wholeness recentralises a heterosexual dynamic, by reversing it – the erotic potential with which the tomboy was once associated is completely absent (these girls are explicitly non-sexualised in relation to the paternal figures). This unproblematically masculinises the girl, while the weaknesses of the male character privilege his claim to cultural priority because of his victimised (feminine) status. The white father figure is susceptible to harm in relation to a girl who is impervious to similar threats that would sway her from her mission. The attendant patriarchal ideology is reinstated because the girl is positioned as ultimately dependent on the father figure, thereby completing this reimagining of a softer version of paternalism. This dynamic solves the potential problems disrupting the Oedipal juncture outlined earlier: the girl still needs the father figure, but she does not desire him, therefore sidestepping the issue of an active female sexual desire while simultaneously allowing her to need the father nonetheless. And the paternal figure is not threatened because the girl is not sexualised; she is therefore unable to reject him in terms of his desire. As the analyses of absent/present mothers will illustrate, these figures fulfil that function in ways that reinforce anti-feminist sentiments.

The family dynamic idealised by these films – masculine girl, feminised father, and absent mother – is also encoded as working-class. Significantly, this construction of the working class is underpinned by traditional conceptions of manhood similar to those discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Nick in *Gone Girl*. Because of the setting of the films it is *Kick-Ass* that registers this most acutely (*Hanna* and *True Grit* are set in international and historical contexts respectively and their relationship

to class is thus more ambivalent<sup>32</sup>). In *Kick-Ass* similar impulses to those noted in *Gone Girl* are identifiable because of the relationship between class and space and the respective gendered identities that are encoded in each. This pertains to the family dynamics set up in the film. The Freudian model was based on white, European, bourgeois perspectives and naturalised that configuration of the family as normative (Sedgwick 67-68). In *Kick-Ass*, as in *Gone Girl*, there is a privileging of the working-class family, but this does not disrupt the patriarchal ideology of the Freudian model.

Such a shift – valorising the nuclear family and rehabilitating traditional conceptions of masculinity – is indicative of a broader trend in post-9/11 cinema (Nilges 31; Negra “Structural Integrity” 62), a shift that becomes increasingly preoccupied with class in the mass media emerging post-GFC (Cornelson 182; Banet-Weiser 89-91). The representation of Big Daddy and Hit-Girl in comparison to their enemies – Frank D’Amico and his son Red Mist – suggests that this configuration of the little girl avenger and her tough but gentle father works to recentralise the interests of white, working-class masculinity within the post-GFC context. In the comic book version of *Kick-Ass* (upon which the film is based), Frank D’Amico is John Genovese; the surname of one of the most powerful crime families in New York<sup>33</sup>. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Genovese family expanded their wealth by taking advantage of the subprime mortgage crisis in the US. In the film Frank, who is emblematic here of the “faceless bankers” responsible for the GFC, is ruthless and immoral, and his son, Red Mist, is (relative to Hit-Girl) inadequate. As Frank tells Hit-Girl (after he has severely beaten her): “God I wish I had a son like you.” Similar to the Nick/Desi juxtaposition in *Gone Girl*, *Kick-Ass* constructs masculinity in ways that are being revitalised in recessionary culture but have historical precedents in American nationalist and masculinist discourses, where “this rugged, authentic

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<sup>32</sup> The relationship to class is more explicit in the 1969 version of *True Grit*. Mattie invokes her status as a “property owner” and uses this to express outrage at being mistreated by outlaws. In the 2010 version Mattie is constructed in similar ways, as a property owner with a lawyer and figure that readily identifies the outlaws and rodeo workers as “trash”, however the emphasis is more on morality than class. Her single-minded determination to get justice because it is her legal and moral obligation suggests the contemporary version is more invested in the faith this figure places in wider institutional power (the law) to uphold morality than it is in recognising that a middle-class position implicitly grants this girl morality. Though her faith in legality and morality is ultimately undermined, as she must concede that Rooster’s law-breaking ultimately delivers vengeance, it is nonetheless evident that she is constructed as an individual with values rather than a classed subject representative of collective values.

<sup>33</sup> See: *The Real Godfathers: The Genovese Family*.

working man is often juxtaposed with effete, feminized, anxiety ridden businessman” (Banet-Weiser 89). Not only do Big Daddy and Hit-Girl have a more authentic and successful relationship, the setting for the film supports this authenticity by contrasting central New York, where the D’Amicos live, with the outer Borough of Staten Island (depicted as significantly run-down) where Hit-Girl, Big Daddy and Kick-Ass live. This representation of place, which adds the dimension of classed meanings to the families which live in each space, is suggestive of a similar trend identified by Negra in post-9/11 “chick flicks.” According to Negra, post-9/11 the female desire for power was corrected, and the heroine redirected toward traditional gender roles, in a film such as *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003) through the meanings encoded in the New York boroughs. The heroine, Andie, discovers “realness” and authenticity in the working-class Staten Island, as a counterpoint to white-collar Manhattan, symbolically reimagining the working class as morally pure through strategies of place (“Structural Integrity” 60). Given that the audience is positioned to view Hit-Girl as the most successful and desirable representation of gender in the film, the appeal of this subject lies with the authenticity constructed between her and her father, through such narrative devices as setting. Big Daddy’s training, his complete control of Hit-Girl’s knowledge and world view, and his ability to alternate from friend to father, reasserts patriarchal values but frames them, significantly, as working-class values. Moreover, it implies that while the category of girl can be a very desirable gendered subject position, she must be stronger, less emotional, and able to “finish what [her] Daddy started” (Hit-Girl), a necessarily ruthless subject fit to survive late-capitalism, able to take care of herself, in need of nothing from the State. This is arguably the preferred viewer position engendered by the text and it signifies this desired subjectivity as the result of the patriarchal values established in the relationship between Hit-Girl and Big Daddy.

The boy in *Kick-Ass* is constructed, relative to Hit-Girl, as vulnerable, inadequate and in need of protection. Dave evolves into a relatively capable subject by the narrative conclusion, effectively remasculinised because he saves Hit-Girl and completes her father’s mission, but his characterisation throughout the text as a comparatively inadequate masculine subject vis-à-vis Hit-Girl suggests that the remasculinisation of this figure operates in terms of white masculine boyhood in the context of working-class families. The characterisation of Dave signifies an innocent boyhood absolved

of responsibility but diminished in comparison to a thriving girl figure. The dominant understanding on adolescence and gender propounded since G. Stanley Hall's influential work *Adolescence* (1904) has positioned the girl in an uneasy struggle to be emancipated from the category of childhood, while the boy is confidently preparing for adulthood. As Carol Dyhouse notes: "Hall significantly argued that women never really outgrew their adolescence – psychologically and emotionally they could best be understood as having had their growth arrested in the adolescent phase" (118). In order to thwart women's claims on independence, the circulation of a "psychology of patriarchy" propounded by figures such as Hall split the sexes and reinforced the gender binary in ways that support Rubin's claim that gender identification is "far from being an expression of natural difference, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities" (180):

For the boy, it was a time of ambition, growth and challenge. For the girl, it was a time of instability; a dangerous phase when she needed special protection from society. During adolescence, boys grew towards self-knowledge. Girls, on the other hand, could never really attain self-knowledge. (Dyhouse 122)

This perception of the girl has been challenged since the 1980s, with feminist academics asserting that as a path toward adulthood female adolescence is shaped by historical, social, political and cultural determinants (Brown "The Sad, the Mad and the Bad" 108). Of course in the 1990s there was a re-emergence of this discourse on girlhood as a dangerous phase with the "Reviving Ophelia" movement and the understanding of "girlhood as crisis" (Brown "The Sad" 111; Marshall 119; Gonick 1-2; Aapola et al. 41); however in terms of the representation of little girl avengers in the early twenty-first century these figures appear to disrupt late nineteenth-century assumptions that the girl was in need of protection and arrested in the childhood phase. But the inclusion of the father-daughter dynamic undermines this appearance of agency. As the textual analysis of *Kick-Ass* illustrates, the boy (Dave) continues on the path to self-knowledge, whereas the girl (Hit-Girl) is arguably limited in this because she remains invested in the function she performs for others, i.e. remasculinising certain male characters.

Furthermore, Dyhouse questions these assumptions about girlhood as a passage of perpetual childhood in her study of Victorian and Edwardian English socialisation. Her study finds quite the contrary, working-class girls “far from being condemned to ‘permanent adolescence’... never experienced anything resembling an adolescence at all” (119). At the turn of the twentieth century as soon as working-class girls were competent they were expected to work, taking on household duties and behaving as “little mothers” administering to the needs of others (Dyhouse 119). It would appear boys, especially middle-class boys in the late nineteenth century who had access to a higher education, were arguably enjoying an extended period of childhood as “young adults.”

In a film such as *Kick-Ass* similar assumptions regarding class, girlhood, boyhood and adolescence are at work. On the one hand Hit-Girl’s innocence, in so far as she lacks knowledge and is dependent on her father, situates her in the position of a child. But on the other, the fact that she works and is a competent, indeed an exceptional, assassin, foregrounds the competencies of working-class girls and celebrates them. In terms of the broader postfeminist ideology operating in the text interpellating female subjects into positions of economic capability occurs at the same time as cultural anxieties related to her capabilities feed directly into the perception of crisis in masculinity. Dave is positioned as the unskilled and innocent boy, permitted his indulgence in comic books, his high-school romance and his leisure time with boyhood friends. In other words, he is permitted an extended period of childhood. This representation of Dave forms an interesting dynamic with Hit-Girl and Big Daddy and when these three are taken together, as a family unit, they are suggestive of an idealisation of the patriarchal and heterosexual nuclear family in relation to class. Zwinger has argued, in her examination of novels from the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth, that the “daughter of sentiment is, in short, enlisted by stories that narrate the son’s defeat” (8). This “defeat” occurs because of the privileging of the paternal figure in his daughter’s affections relative to the younger male/s in the texts that represent the son. In a film such as *Kick-Ass*, however, “defeat”, in the context of post-liberationist discourses so enamoured with the victim function, no longer carries such unsettling connotations. The innocence and inadequacies of Dave, relative to Hit-Girl, absolve him from producing the economically able subjectivity of Hit-Girl because his lack of power is juxtaposed

with her empowerment. When Dave is considered as symbolically occupying the position of “son” in the Big Daddy and Hit-Girl family dynamic, with his characterisation including the same working-class outer-borough origins, then this family becomes paradigmatic of the idealised, patriarchal family of the post-GFC, post-9/11 context: the sympathetic, sentimentalised and wounded paternal figure; the capable postfeminist and asexual girl; and the innocent, but justifiably disillusioned boy. All that remains is to “explain away” the mother.

### **Absent/Present Mothers**

Representations of authoritative and yet (necessarily) wounded father figures, in conjunction with absent/present mothers, re-legitimise the paternal signifier within a context troubled by the failure of the Father function<sup>34</sup>. The family dynamic set up in these texts arguably resolves dual contemporary cultural anxieties, in particular, the suggestion that the problem of immaturity is *the* problem of modernity (Driscoll 49) and the late-capitalist cultural impulse that the crisis of the paternal superego is founded on a “culture in which the ‘paternal’ concept of duty has been subsumed into the ‘maternal’ imperative to enjoy” (Fisher 71). By looking at the contrasting families, in particular the mother figures and the representation of young girls set up in *Hanna*, it is possible to see how these cultural anxieties can be textually resolved.

Fourteen-year old Hanna is the product of a research project “to make better soldiers.” Genetically engineered to lack emotions but have increased strength, she is trained (rather than raised) in the wilderness of Northern Finland by her “father” (at the narrative conclusion the audience and Hanna learn that Erik is not Hanna’s biological father). Hanna has exceptional foreign language skills, fighting abilities, and encyclopaedic knowledge. In contrast, Sophie, a young girl Hanna meets once she enters the world beyond her father, is constructed through a proficient vocabulary of contemporary colloquialisms, a mastery of fashion and beauty trends, and comprehensive knowledge of popular cultural references. Sexually precocious, Sophie consumes indulgently. She is “worldly”, in the sense that she knows about

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<sup>34</sup> As noted earlier, this thesis reads the Symbolic Order (to which “Father function” belongs) in discursive terms. Thus where it appears in the remainder of this chapter, as a result of following particular theorists, it is interpreted as a destabilisation of the patriarchal sex/gender system in the context of a discourse of the traditional, nuclear family.

sex and popular culture, but the parallel she forms with Hanna presents her knowledge as frivolous. The film disposes of Sophie once she and her family are caught by Hanna's would-be assassins, and the audience is left to presume they were murdered. Hanna, by contrast, triumphs because of her knowledge and skills, and she is the only survivor at the narrative conclusion. In this context, Sophie represents typical girls and Hanna the exceptional girls of cinema outlined in Chapter One.

Furthermore, the representation of Hanna and Sophie draws on the historical precedent of the "good" and "bad" daughter from the Victorian era, illuminating how the binary of typical/exceptional in contemporary cinema is a reconfiguration of a much older paradigm of white girlhood. The concept of the "good daughter" depended upon her opposite in the "bad daughter": "The good daughter was gentle, loving, self-sacrificing and innocent: the bad daughter was vulgar, self-seeking, lazy and sexually impure" (Gorham 37). The ideological function – promoting the preferred ideology of femininity – remains in this doubling. In addition, it is Erik's training that produces a strong sense of duty in Hanna as the exceptional girl and the good daughter – she assassinates Marissa Wiegler as planned, even though by this point in the film she does not want to "hurt anyone anymore." The film suggests that this training regime reinstates a sense of responsibility through paternal control and it is this form of child-rearing that works best, a point which is reinforced by considerations of the representations of the mother.

*Hanna* presents three mother figures. Hanna herself is the nodal point that positions these figures as "mothers" in different ways and to varying degrees. She operates as the point of exchange for articulating a wider social comment on the role and function of the mother in relation to idealising traditional femininity (Johanna), dismissing second-wave femininity (Rachel) and demonising career-oriented contemporary "feminists" (Marissa). These representations of adult women demonstrate how mothers are idealised through absence and problematised through presence. Hanna's own journey, like those of *Hit-Girl* and *Mattie*, is undertaken to seek revenge for a dead parent who is idealised both by their absence and the premature and violent nature of their deaths. However, where *Kick-Ass* and *True Grit* deal with the mother figures reductively – the suicide of *Hit-Girl*'s mother is presented in a short comic format with light overtones, while *Mattie* explains that her mother could "hardly spell cat" and was "hobbled by grief" leaving *Mattie* to assume

responsibility and manage public affairs in her father's absence, as well as avenge his murder – *Hanna* represents a more sustained critique of the absent/present mother.

Hanna's biological mother, Johanna Zadek, is introduced through a photograph of an attractive, free-spirited looking young woman. She was murdered by Marissa Wiegler before the time in which the film is set and is thus constructed as a memory. This is represented throughout the film by flashbacks framed in soft lighting, tape recordings of her speaking with her unborn child, and several photographs which depict her as fun and gentle, as well as a much loved and missed daughter, as the audience discovers when Marissa murders Johanna's mother after a brief conversation. The result is a portrayal of an ideal mother, a figure arguably idealised because of her construction as a memory.

The second mother is Marissa, Hanna's creator. Near the end of the film the audience learns that Erik is not Hanna's biological father; rather he recruited her mother from an abortion clinic and convinced her, along with twenty other women at the clinic, to enlist their unborn children in a program to make better soldiers. Erik's boss, CIA operative Marissa, ordered Hanna's mother's murder in an attempt to murder Hanna – since the experiment had been terminated and the other children already destroyed. However, when Marissa meets Hanna she is both impressed and taken aback by the young assassin, and thus desires to possess Hanna for her own purposes.

The final mother figure is Sophie's mother, Rachel. A hippy in her youth, she is now a free spirit who engages Hanna in serious conversations about beliefs, about her parents, and her lifestyle, and shows genuine interest in Hanna's responses. She is also constructed as educated, getting her "first at Cambridge", with an indication that this qualification was somehow related to women's studies. In a brief conversation with her family and Hanna, Rachel dismisses Sophie's incredulity that her mother does not wear make-up, making reference to the "history of art and anthropology" and the sexualisation of women for male pleasure through the use of lipstick, stating that she does not wear make-up because it is "dishonest." Yet there is a parodic element to this characterisation – this educated older woman is also a washed-up hippy with free love values – which undermines the hospitable warmth of this characterisation. Rachel is evocative of Slavoj Žižek's reading of the character of Jasper in *Children of Men*. Žižek views this film as a "diagnosis of the ideological

despair of late-capitalism”<sup>35</sup>. Part of this “ideological despair” is articulated through the change in the adaptation of the novel to the screen; where the character of Jasper changes from a retired ex-official to a character that is:

here [in the film] to make him into *this*; and everybody who is after '68 generation knows what *this* is ... this old, obscene, impotent, retired hippy person in all its ambiguity. On the one hand, many old lefties have a fond memory of this generation but at the same time there is something infertile and ridiculous about this ... I think the decadence started there in a way.  
(Žižek)

The character of Rachel reproduces this similar sense of the ridiculous, as well as a sense of contradiction, given that the decadence she condemns is represented by her daughter. This characterisation links belief in the tenets of second wave feminism to this “hippy person” and therefore functions to dismiss the politics and interests of both political positions.

This representation of the three mother figures in *Hanna* attests to a fading away of a feminist critique in the postfeminist era. These depictions of motherhood are arguably indicative of cultural anxieties around “the maternal imperative to enjoy” (Fisher 71-72). If the failure of the Father function is predicated on the assumption that the culture has become feminised, then mother figures such as Rachel legitimise a displacement of those anxieties onto the figure of the mother. Furthermore, Rachel is only one of the figures that suggest that this girl is better for being raised by her father. The characterisation of Marissa is certainly the opposite of Rachel; constructed in the image of a fairy-tale witch she is ruthless, childless, focused and successful. She is the villain of the film, inviting little or no sympathy. If Rachel represents a rejection of the tenets of second wave feminism through the way this character collapses liberated femininity with the maternal as an uninhibited access to pleasure, then Marissa concentrates cultural anxieties around women’s freedom and empowerment in the public sphere. The figure of Marissa is reminiscent of Dow’s reading of the remake of the *Stepford Wives* in 2004 and the change from the original that saw the “entire scheme ... engineered by a woman, not a man” (128). Dow contends that the film’s context is “not just post-(post)feminism, it is post-patriarchy.

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<sup>35</sup> “Comments by Slavoj Žižek” (a bonus disc which accompanies the DVD).

Or, to read it another way, patriarchy is female” (128). Marissa is similarly encoded as the female that is the new patriarchy. Erik betrayed Hanna’s trust by raising her as his daughter without telling her that he was not her biological father and that she was the product of a research experiment. But Erik not only redeems himself, sacrificing himself so Hanna can escape, he is also trumped by the true villain, Marissa.

Constructed through intertextual references to “Little Red Riding Hood”, Marissa is explicitly positioned as the “Big Bad Wolf.” The engineer behind the program to make better soldiers, Marissa was also the one who “disposed of” the “research” (the other nineteen toddlers and the attempted murder of the twentieth, Hanna); while visually she is encoded as the “Big Bad Wolf” through images of her aggressively cleaning her teeth in a magnified mirror until they bleed, and in the final scene, when she shoots Hanna in her side after demanding, like the devouring mother: “Don’t walk away from me young lady!” she steps out of the jaws of a wolf (in an abandoned theme park in Berlin). Erik’s part in supporting the research project to make better soldiers (he did, after all, train Hanna in isolation with this single-minded focus and deny her any knowledge or socialisation skills beyond the mission) is disregarded in favour of focusing on Marissa as the empowered and ruthless mastermind. In this postfeminist context Marissa is the oppressive patriarchal force par excellence, the ultimate authority who murders in an effort to preserve the security and secrecy of the CIA. Marissa is not only the monstrous mother, she is also represented as the corrupt element of authority that can be read as patriarchal power, while Erik is, in the end, positioned as a sacrificing paternal figure and another one of her victims.

Hanna’s biological mother, in contrast to Hanna’s sterile creator in Marissa, is idealised by every fragmented moment of screen time in which she is depicted. This idealisation suggests that mothers in late-capitalist culture seem to be most safely represented as a perfect memory. A similar desire to contain the apparent threat presented by women via representational strategies has been noted by Bram Dijkstra as occurring at the turn of the twentieth century. Dijkstra chronicles the way misogyny permeated the art of that period and functioned as “a principle source of the pervasive antifeminist mood of the late nineteenth century” (5-6). These images perpetuated male fantasies of femininity through iconographies of feminine dependence, death and vulnerability. The countless images in *Idols of Perversity* that

idealised women as frail, submissive and victimised figures are reminiscent of the way the biological mother is presented in *Hanna*. Moreover, this imagery is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as Dijkstra notes of the *fin de siècle*, pervasive. Hit-Girl's mother is an ephemeral figure, though through the more ironic and camp sensibility of the comic, but there are also, to name a brief selection, the mother figures in *Wild* (2015), *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013), *White Oleander* (2002), and the *Millennium* trilogy (2009), all similarly constructed through flashbacks in warm lighting or as dying, dead or immortalised as a memory prior to being incarcerated or banished to a care facility. They invoke a similar male fantasy of the late nineteenth century noted by Dijkstra: "representations of beautiful women safely dead remained the late nineteenth-century painter's favorite way of depicting the transcendent spiritual values of passive feminine sacrifice. Once a woman was dead she became a figure of heroic proportions" (50).

At the turn of the millennium, then, there is once again this idealisation of the female figure, the mother in particular, as a passive figure that is at its most beautiful in death and therefore in memory. This reveals nostalgia for the traditional mother figure. And yet taking these three representations into consideration as a whole it is arguably the case that films such as *Hanna* register not only a frustration with dealing with the adult female as mother in late-capitalism, but also that the possibility of adult women becoming emancipated from men, and the subsequent destabilisation of the nuclear family this might cause, is swiftly recuperated through the idealisation of the father as primary caregiver, as well as the girl as the legitimate heir to the phallus.

This re-working of the family is based on the centralisation of the father-daughter, the rejection of the mother (either through presence or absence) and the absence of an adequate son. Consider the superheroes that complement the construction of Hit-Girl – Kick-Ass and Red Mist – and Kick-Ass's lament: "Hit-Girl and Big Daddy, they were the real deal. Me? I was just a stupid dick in a wetsuit." The son is presented as unable to handle phallic privilege, but as already suggested, this does not necessarily disadvantage the position of cultural priority he represents. Little girl avenger narratives register the complex relationship between late-capitalism and the family dynamic. Mark Fisher relates late-capitalism to what he calls

“postmodernity’s permissive hedonism” and locates the central problem of this time as one of unimpeded access to pleasure:

The problem is that late capitalism insists and relies upon the very equation of desire with interests that parenting used to be based on rejecting. In a culture in which the ‘paternal’ concept of duty has been subsumed into the ‘maternal’ imperative to enjoy, it can seem that the parent is *failing* in their duty if they in any way impede their children’s absolute right to enjoyment. (italics in orig. Fisher 71-72)

Fisher’s argument signals a key problem with late-capitalist culture as an intense desire for pleasure which he articulates as maternal. Given that at one point the child knew no boundaries between its pleasure and the mother: “for a time after its birth, the child does not differentiate between itself and the mother ... Its libidinal flow is directed toward the complete assimilation of everything which is experienced as pleasurable” (Silverman 155); then rejection of the mother, such as that exemplified by Rachel in *Hanna*, makes sense. This is because it occurs in a culture which increasingly desires pleasure and yet at the same time the subject demanded of late-capitalism – ruthless, in control, contained (the little girl avengers) – is the antithesis of this pursuit of pleasure. This understanding of the mother as maternal pleasure helps to make sense of why it is that the mother becomes a site of anxiety in representational terms, and thus why the non-sexualised, stoic girl that is her father’s daughter becomes her idealised replacement. Fisher argues for a “Marxist Supernanny” as the solution to this current predicament – a benevolent paternal figure that would presumably give the culture what it needs, rather than what it wants. It is the representation of fathers in relation to their avenging daughters that fulfil that desire in these films. Yet it is the inclusion of the figure of the girl, as the most ideal subject in the text, as the rightful heir to the phallus, and as the female with which the male can have an uncomplicated and unimpeded relationship, which brings with it the attendant reinforcement of the heterosexual dyad. It is this girl that carries the promise of the subject required of late-capitalism as well as resolves the contradictions that remain with the mother.

**Chapter Four**  
**Reproducing Feminism for Paternal Control:**  
**Teen Pregnancy and the Renegotiation of White Male Privilege in *Juno***

“Everyone at school is always grabbing at my belly. I’m like a legend. They call me the Cautionary Whale.”

Juno MacGuff (Ellen Page), *Juno* 2007.

The previous chapter examined the re-emergence of the patriarchal family, as a historical and ideological construct, in films where little girls seek vengeance on behalf of a familial other. In those films the asexuality of the prepubescent girl allowed for a paternal figure to reassume his traditional patriarchal role in a relatively unproblematic way. This chapter will explore how a similar family dynamic is constructed in films when the developing sexuality of the girl becomes a factor. Taking the figure of Juno MacGuff from the 2007 film *Juno* as a point of departure, this chapter argues that the text is emblematic of the pivotal function of the girl’s adolescent phase for both patriarchy and postfeminism. It suggests that in the process of managing cultural anxieties around the sexually autonomous teen a renegotiation of white masculinity occurs through the construction of the three key male characters in relation to Juno’s pregnancy. While the previous chapter established that representations of empowered little girls register cultural anxieties around the perceived destabilisation of patriarchy in relation to feminism, this chapter explores how the renegotiation of masculinity in *Juno* speaks to cultural concerns around the feminisation of men since the 1990s and manages this perceived threat through a similar remasculinisation of the working-class patriarch likewise supported by the emergence of the innocent boy/Man symbolically occupying the position of son.

On first viewing *Juno* certainly seems to be a progressive narrative of female empowerment. A pregnant, teenage tomboy effortlessly giving her baby away to an older woman desperate to be a mother not only disrupts the biological imperative encoded in motherhood, undermining the fetishisation of women’s biology as a natural instinct to mother, it achieves this through a masculinised depiction of

girlhood. But the film also evinces significant anxiety around the gendered politics it destabilises. The way Juno's sexual identity and potential autonomy are redirected back into the patriarchal family belies the threat inherent in this girl's masculine identification. Thus while the film is, on the one hand, a progressive depiction of alternative reproductive pathways, it is also indicative of just how entrenched the power of a heterosexual gender identification is. This image of the pregnant tomboy represents an intensification of the apprehensions regarding the girl's sexuality that led to the disappearance of the tomboy film in the 1980s and indicates the wider cultural desire to ensure the heterosexuality of the more masculine girl continues in the 2000s.

The image of the pregnant teenager represents the point of convergence for a range of cultural anxieties provoked by the sexual autonomy of the girl. In making sex visible, the pregnant adolescent converts private activity into public behaviour and thus illuminates the various discourses that regulate and control the girl's sexual identity (Nathanson 4). At the turn of the millennium popular representations of teen pregnancy, such as *Juno*, as well as the high school girls in MTV's reality show, *16 and Pregnant* (2009-2014), and the high profile teen pregnancies of Bristol Palin and Jamie Lynn Spears and their association with the "Juno-effect"<sup>36</sup>, articulate the possibilities and limitations that surround the young woman's sexual identity in a chain of signification occurring along classed, raced and economic lines. Informed by "centuries old" as well as postfeminist discourses on feminine sexuality, the pregnant teen violates the assumption that childhood is a space of innocence, undermines the privileging of the married heterosexual couple as the socially sanctioned site for reproduction and disrupts the postfeminist teleology of a "well-planned life" that follows a trajectory of education, career, marriage and then motherhood (Nathanson 4; McRobbie 77). The representation of the pregnant teen and the relationship this figure forms with audiences (via the popular debates they generate in the mass media) suggests they contribute to the policing of the sexual identity of the girl in ways that privilege gender norms that are both traditional and

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<sup>36</sup> The "Juno effect" was a term coined by *Time* writer Kathleen Kingsbury in a 2008 article on the pregnancy pact made between seventeen girls at Gloucester High School in Massachusetts. This incident sparked much popular debate over whether films such as *Juno* (2007) and *Knocked Up* (2007), the MTV television series *16 and Pregnant* and the teen pregnancies of Nickelodeon star and Britney Spear's younger sister, Jamie Lynn, as well as daughter of 2008 Republican Vice Presidential nominee, Sarah Palin, Bristol, were making teen pregnancy seem glamorous and appealing and thus inspiring young, unmarried girls to get pregnant.

postfeminist. Moreover, the ideological investment in this figure since the nineteenth century provides evidence that the girl's adolescent phase of sexual identification is pivotal for securing a heterosexual gender hierarchy within a patriarchal economy.

As the visibility of the pregnant teen repeatedly draws the gaze to the body of the young woman, mobilising the anxieties around the sexual autonomy this figure represents more broadly, what is obscured is the more elusive issue of what women's autonomy may mean for men within a culture still governed by patriarchal logic. Indeed, the treatment of the young woman's sexuality in media panics around teen pregnancy, as well as the coverage of reproductive rights in the "War on Women"<sup>37</sup> that marked much of the political debate in the 2012 Presidential election, often employs a paternal tone. For example, in the "War on Women" the Sandra Fluke/Rush Limbaugh incident was emblematic of the cultural panic that stems from the waning of paternal control in relation to the sexual lives of young women. When controversial radio personality Rush Limbaugh called Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke a "slut" and a "prostitute" after she testified before a Democratic congressional panel on students' rights to be covered for access to contraception, the underlying fear was arguably the removal of paternal intervention on women's bodies (Goldman; Berrier and Schroek). Moreover, journalist Kathleen Kingsbury framed her *Time* article on the seventeen pregnant teens at Gloucester High and the "Juno-effect" with a suggestion that the socio-economic position of the father was of more concern than the spate of teen pregnancies:

All it took was a few simple questions before nearly half the expecting students, none older than 16, confessed to making a pact to get pregnant and raise their babies together. *Then the story got worse.* 'We found out one of

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<sup>37</sup> The term "war on women", in its current usage, began to circulate in the mainstream media in 2010. Of course the phrase is not new. Marilyn French argues that "patriarchy began and spread as a war against women" about 5000 years ago (14-16). This shift from a matrilineal society to a patriarchal one was based on male solidarity – the initiation of boys into maleness through the repudiation of the feminine – as well as through the separation of women from their lineage, with men enslaving women to guard their sexuality and thereby assure parentage in order to ensure a male line of descent (16). In its current manifestation and circulation in online media it is used in blogs and online newspapers such as *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and women's interest blogs like *Jezebel*, to describe certain Republican policy efforts to restrict women's rights, especially reproductive rights. Republican opinion, such as that voiced on *Fox* and *The Rush Limbaugh Show* (Berrier, Johnson, and Shepard), rejects the assertion that there is a "war on women." Barbara Finlay's sociological account, *George W Bush and the War on Women*, looks at the Bush administration and the actions and policies that undermined women's rights during his two terms in office; which would suggest the current Republican "war on women" began at the turn of the millennium.

the fathers is a 24-year-old homeless guy', the principal says, shaking his head. (emphasis mine, Kingsbury 8)

The prominent anxiety articulated by such media panics is the young girl's violation of conventional modes of reproduction within the heterosexual framework, as well as the disturbance pregnant teenagers now present for the economic expectations on young women under postfeminism. Given that postfeminism operates on behalf of a resurgent patriarchy, underpinning these moral panic narratives is trepidation over where men fit if women take control of their reproductive lives as well as which men should count as subjects in the sexual lives of girls.

The threat to male privilege triggered by the girl's potential sexual autonomy is concealed, at least in part, because of the way popular narratives around women's procreation articulate issues pertaining to female reproductive rights through the postfeminist rhetoric of choice. As others have noted (Latimer, Maher, Thoma), a spate of popular Hollywood films emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century that take as their focus unwanted pregnancies or non-traditional reproductive pathways (*Juno*, *Baby Mama* (2008), *Knocked Up* (2007), *Waitress* (2007)) draw on a postfeminist sensibility through the way they structure the young woman's pregnancy in terms of personal choices, divorcing these figures from a consideration of wider contextual and political factors through this language of choice (Latimer 222-223; Thoma 411). Pamela Thoma argues that "the term 'choice' fully replaced the language of rights soon after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, first in legal discourse and then in popular feminist and public discourse" (411). By reframing women's rights as consumer rights these films form part of a broader trend in postfeminist consumer cultures, where "assertions of choice masquerade as political subjectivity" (Thoma 412). This rhetorical shift contributes to the broader depoliticisation of feminist politics, the effects of which are particularly pertinent for those that exist outside of the idealised category of white, middle-class femininity. Heather Latimer's comparative analysis of *Juno* and Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>38</sup> highlights how patriarchal law protects itself through the divorcing of language such as "freedom" and "choice" from context. If the language

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<sup>38</sup> Latimer argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* contains the potential for reading a critique into the structural influences on women's reproductive rights; whereas *Juno* is emblematic of the way the language of rights have been subsumed into the language of choice and thus offers evidence of the further distancing of the possibility to critique patriarchy.

of “freedom” and “choice” is used without consideration of the underlying cultural gender ideologies that have an impact on young women’s decisions, then this language can be mobilised in service of “other” interests. When words such as “freedom” lose their social context – in this instance reproductive freedom post-Roe v. Wade – then such rhetoric is just as easily mobilised in service of other interests, such as the rights of a foetus as part of the state’s rights (Latimer 222-223). The pregnant adolescent participates in further distancing patriarchy from accountability through the way these representations are also constructed in terms of choice and personal responsibility.

The independent film *Juno*, directed by Jason Reitman and written by Diablo Cody, is a useful text to analyse in this context because of the way it represents a pregnant teen’s agency in negotiation with three different figures of white masculinity. The narrative of Juno’s pregnancy, from conception to birth, represents the convergence of discourses of girlhood, masculinity and postfeminism. The character of Juno has received critical attention as a remarkable depiction of girlhood because of the way this figure articulates the tension between traditional ideals of femininity with contemporary understandings of the girl as an independent figure:

She [Juno] is a girl who has neither super-powers nor excessive wealth; her strength is located in her decisive agency and use of voice. Juno is a particularly striking character because she does not fit neatly into the bifurcating model of the proverbial good girl/bad girl. (Willis, “Sexual Subjectivity” 243)

Juno certainly represents a renegotiation with traditional ideals around girlhood as a space of moral purity and dependence, though the text does little to disrupt the privileging of the white, middle-class female as ideal feminine subject, as Jessica L. Willis and others have noted (Latimer 219; Clarke 3-4; Projansky 122). Concurring with these studies and building on this work, this chapter examines more closely how the figure of the pregnant teen in the film *Juno* articulates and then manages the cultural anxieties around young women’s sexual autonomy in relation to male subjectivity and changing perceptions of motherhood post-liberation.

The way the film disrupts gendered expectations of girlhood through its depiction of an untroubled pregnant teen could go some way toward explaining the sheer

popularity of *Juno*. Sarah Projansky identified the film, along with three others – *Mean Girls* (2004), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *Precious* (2009) – as one of the “most spectacularized films” on girlhood emerging in the first decade of the twenty-first century (2000 to 2009) (italics in orig. Projansky 96). According to Projansky’s quantitative analyses of the popular media coverage and academic attention received by these films, they can be usefully thought of as “spectacular” because they contributed to “seemingly endless public debate about girls, girl films, and/or girl stars” and in this context registered some of the key anxieties, assumptions, contradictions and tensions that dominate contemporary discussions of girlhood (96). For Projansky, *Juno* is a significant depiction of girlhood because of the way Juno actively makes choices that “rewrite media narratives, both those of typical postfeminist choiceoisie<sup>39</sup> discourse and those in the media coverage of *Juno* that define girls as incapable of choosing choices worth making” (122). *Juno* undermines the “having it all” narrative of “postfeminist choiceoisie”; though, as will be argued, she is perhaps waiting to “have it all” – confirming Driscoll’s assertion that “the daughter is in a state of suspension before use” (125-126). Nevertheless, *Juno* represents a girl capable of navigating an unwanted pregnancy in a mature and upbeat manner and she therefore undermines the moral panic narratives that have accompanied depictions of teen pregnancy since the 1970s (Projansky 119; Nathanson 31). An examination of the narrative as a whole, however, in particular the gender identification of the characters that make up the non-traditional family structure operating at large in the text, make it clear that *Juno*’s agency functions to rewrite a media narrative around teen pregnancy in ways that facilitate the postfeminist gender identification without developing possibilities for female agency much beyond the ultimate goal of motherhood. In contrast, the gender identifications of the male characters are renegotiated through the relationships they form with *Juno* thereby allowing a revised version of patriarchy to occupy a central place by the narrative’s conclusion.

The story of *Juno* begins and ends with *Juno*’s pregnancy. Beginning with a flashback to the “magnificent” sex she initiated with her best friend Paulie Bleeker,

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<sup>39</sup> “Choiceoisie” is a term used by Elspeth Probyn to describe a postfeminist discourse around choice: “the idea that women have an equivalent free choice between a liberated career or a new traditionalist life as wife and mother” (qtd. in Projansky 120). The relationship between “women having it all” and public understandings of feminism are bound up in this idea of choice (Projansky 120-121).

the story follows Juno's pregnancy as she navigates decisions around abortion, adoption and her recognition that she will be an inadequate mother. Throughout the film the angst that typically accompanies accounts of teen pregnancy are deflected through a tone of cheerful normality. When Juno's best friend Leah informs Juno's parents about the adoptive parents she and Juno have selected, Leah quips "We found them in the Penny Saver by the exotic birds' selection." And upon meeting the adoptive parents, Vanessa and Mark Loring, Juno's father Mac introduces himself and Juno: "Hello. Thank you for having me and my irresponsible child over to your home." On the surface, this proactive and humorous depiction disrupts the assumption that the pregnant teen is an aberrant and shameful figure. Nonetheless, the constructions of motherhood and manhood that underpin this tale of teen pregnancy resecure heterosexual gender identifications even as they allow for this delightful, if somewhat satirical, narrative of adolescent pregnancy. The mother is represented as a substitutable figure through the four depictions of motherhood: Juno's absent biological mother, her stepmother Bren, Vanessa the appropriate postfeminist mother, and Juno, a figure that is, in some ways at least, Vanessa's surrogate. Furthermore, Juno performs a pivotal function in the renegotiation of white masculinity through the way the cultural intelligibility of the three male characters – as boyfriend, father, and ambivalent love interest/potential father – are dependent on Juno to confirm or deny their masculine status throughout the text. It is the three males who undergo significant changes within a hierarchy of masculinity that ultimately privileges a nostalgic father figure and boy/Man heterosexual attachment for Juno in the character of Bleeker; and rejects a version of masculinity associated with a softened and infantilised masculinity from the 1990s through the characterisation of Mark. Thus *Juno* works as a subversion of cultural anxieties around the sexually autonomous and empowered young woman, expanding the boundaries of what is permissible for the sexually autonomous girl, but this expansion also facilitates an expansion of the boundaries of permissible masculinity in ways that support the ongoing hegemony of patriarchy.

This subversion is characteristic of narrative strategies that maintain patriarchal hegemony in the current context: the film allows for the agency of the girl but closer examination shows that this subversive figure does not disrupt the homosocial bonds and the exchange of the girl that sustain a patriarchal sex/gender system. Patriarchy

arguably needs an alibi since second wave feminism, while the sex/gender system can be understood in this context, vis-à-vis Butler, as structurally required to expand the boundaries of what is thinkable in connection with wider social, political and economic changes. The progressive pregnant teen thus expands what is thinkable under patriarchy since feminism, with the characterisation of Juno indicative of how the sex/gender system recuperates the girl's claims to power and agency in relation to the threat this represents for the masculinity of boys and men. This is not to dismiss the complexities of Juno as an autonomous and disruptive figure who refuses the victim role normally attributed to the girl in the teen pregnancy narrative. In this sense Juno represents a refreshing take on gender and sexuality and opens up a space to articulate alternative modes of speaking about youth and pregnancy. The film presents a positive sense of change toward gender equality and female autonomy, but at the same time the text also demonstrates how patriarchal recuperation operates.

### **Pivotal for Patriarchy: Adolescent Girlhood**

The reason Juno is unable to move beyond her traditional function within the family perhaps lies with the essential role the adolescent girl performs for a patriarchal sex/gender system. Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism all include discussions of the pivotal function of the girl for securing patriarchy (Driscoll 107). These theoretical positions, particularly Marxist and psychoanalytic, provide evidence of the way the girl in the adolescent phase of sexual development has been discursively produced as a crucial figure for creating and sustaining a patriarchal gender system based on heterosexuality. Driscoll's genealogical critique demonstrates how investment in the girl in the adolescent phase creates later discourses of adulthood femininity: "Women may be continually learning to be women, but feminine adolescence represents a space in which this learning will principally take place" (118). Driscoll's analysis of the category of girlhood in relation to these theoretical positions shows how by limiting the focus on the girl to patriarchal and maternal terms, and thus predominantly viewing the girl as daughter, this figure supports the heterosexual family unit as the dominant framework (107). Indeed Driscoll argues that the "daughter is indeed a necessary foundation for biologically complementary heterosexual families, far more so, I will contend, than the son" (107).

Juno registers the way this stage of transition is crucial for securing an ideology of femininity that supports and maintains a patriarchal economy, as well as the way a contemporary instantiation of adolescent girlhood gives the appearance of allowing for a newly emergent independence. Feminine adolescence is understood as a stage of transition because of the way girlhood and daughterhood are repeatedly constructed in terms of the girl's future role as a woman (Driscoll 108). Thus, while girls have not historically fitted within the dominant model of the Subject – as a progression toward independent personhood – they have nonetheless been integral to the reproduction of the subject position of the mother (Driscoll 108). In this way, the girl performs a highly visible role across diverse cultural and historical contexts as she progresses toward the implied endpoint of motherhood, and in a patriarchal capitalist family unit:

girls may be seen to represent the exchange, flow and movement of property. The transitions of feminine adolescence are material exchanges of one kind of role for another, but the girl herself often seems to be the object rather than agent of these exchanges, a possibility that is frequently referred to the sexual economy of patriarchal marriage structures. (Driscoll 108-109)

The artifice of postfeminism is engendered through Juno because she is represented as an agent as well as an object of exchange. She initiates sex with Bleeker (“I’m really sorry I had sex with you. I know it wasn’t your idea”); decides not to have the abortion (“I couldn’t do it, Leah! ... I was thinking maybe I could give the baby to somebody who actually likes that kind of thing. You know, like a woman with a bum ovary or something. Or some nice lesbos”); and decides to give Vanessa the baby after she learns that Mark is leaving the marriage (“Vanessa – if you’re still in, I’m still in”). These scenes show Juno making active, humorous, even sentimental choices; and yet they are decisions which are largely restricted to a feminine form of power within the sexual economy – sex/virginity; pregnancy; motherhood.

This representation of agency is nonetheless indicative of the complexities some see Juno as representing for traditional understandings of the girl's gendered identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Projansky views the representation of Juno as one instance of a depiction of girlhood that, because of its contentious and alternative nature, facilitates a more complex understanding of girlhood (96). Juno

drives the narrative action through her choices, and while those choices ultimately lead to normative narrative outcomes – motherhood and heterosexual romance – they nonetheless provide an example of a girl as an active agent (Projansky 122). Jessica L. Willis argues that *Juno* registers a broader trend in shifting gender relations in contemporary girlhood, citing it as part:

of newly emerging constructions of girls that fuse particular aspects of traditional ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity.’ This combination in the depiction of Juno produces an androgyny that typifies contemporary girlhood and calls to mind the fluidity of gender. (Willis, “Sexual Subjectivity” 242-243)

Certainly the construction of Juno through traits deemed traditionally masculine represents a rupturing of traditional expectations of femininity. Juno’s adolescence more closely resembles the way the male passage to adulthood has been theorised and understood since the early twentieth century: “Traditional developmental psychology has also constructed adolescence around ideals of masculinity, where independence, risk taking, troublemaking, and autonomy are the markers of successful passage” (Brown, “The Sad” 108). However, given that Juno’s autonomy and independence ultimately work in service of upward mobility<sup>40</sup> – Juno suspends motherhood until she is “ready” (presumably this means economically<sup>41</sup> ready) – her choices support the patriarchal capitalist family unit and recuperate Juno back to the role of daughter within that unit: “Western family within capitalism is definitively patriarchal, and although patriarchy remains historically and culturally specific rather than a static system of facts, it requires a specific range of positions and functions from daughterhood” (Driscoll 109). While Juno envisions a future in music, the film’s narrative trajectory leads relentlessly to the role of the daughter as future mother, as signified by Mac’s words to her in the hospital after she gives the baby

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<sup>40</sup> Upward mobility in sociology refers to the movement of an individual, class or social group to a position of increased status or power. In the context of postfeminism this references the way governments appear to be fulfilling the hopes of earlier generations of feminists, by singling out young women as the highly visible signifiers for success in new global economies, but in fact encourages female activity as a new form of social mobility where the young woman as an individual improves her personal circumstances irrespective of obstacles pertaining to social class, gender and ethnicity (McRobbie 75).

<sup>41</sup> The film constructs this readiness in emotional terms. After Juno turns down the offer for financial compensation, she tells Vanessa: “I’m just not ready to be a Mom.” However, this emphasis on emotion arguably downplays how emotional readiness in the current context is linked to economic and social factors. The lack of financial support for working-class adolescents together with the isolation from wider structural support because of the privileging of the traditional nuclear family contributes to whether or not a young woman may feel emotionally “ready” to be a mother.

away: “Someday, you’ll be back here, honey. On your terms.” The understanding that Juno is an active agent is thus overshadowed by the depiction of her as a daughter and future mother.

This filmic construction of the girl’s adolescent phase is suggestive of the significant cultural work that goes into orienting the girl to a heterosexual identification. Feminist psychoanalytic arguments assert that the Oedipal drama describes a cultural, rather than a “natural” process in terms of producing a female subject for patriarchy (Chodorow; Silverman). In psychoanalytic terms the girl is expected to undergo several changes during sexual maturation:

A girl’s major task is to become oriented to men. In the traditional paradigm, a girl must change her love object from mother to father, her libidinal mode from active to passive, and finally her libidinal organ and erotism from clitoris to vagina. A boy has to make no such parallel changes. (Chodorow, *The Reproduction* 111)

This is not to support the universalising tendency of the psychoanalytic model and indeed Nancy J. Chodorow argues in *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities* that traditionally feminine behaviour “is not biologically determined or even prevalent transhistorically or cross-culturally; it is historically and culturally specific” (45). In this context the traditional psychoanalytic model describes the culturally constructed directives that go into orienting the girl to a heterosexual identification. Feminist interpretations of this model, such as the multiple changes identified by Chodorow above, demonstrate how psychoanalytic “prescriptions” of girlhood are in fact the effects of heterosexual culture. They are not natural or biological processes but are the result of intense cultural mediation on female development. Similarly, the scientific theorisation of puberty belies anxieties around ensuring that the girl’s sexual identification occurs along heterosexual lines through the way this scientific discourse operates as a policing of the girl’s gendered identity. The scientific explanations of puberty developed a technical specification of female development, which led to understandings of the social process of becoming a woman as one in need of surveillance because of the possibility of deviation or failure (Driscoll 127). The representation of the pregnant teen functions as an index of these concerns coalescing around a single figure.

Indeed the representation of a more masculinised pregnant girl is indicative of significant cultural anxieties about the girl developing a heterosexual gender identification in the wake of cultural shifts since the feminist gains of the 1960s and 1970s. The image of the pregnant adolescent represents the consolidation of the “privileged objects” of sexual knowledge and intervention from the early nineteenth century – women, adolescents and the control of fertility (Foucault qtd. in Nathanson 4). Contemporary depictions of teen pregnancy merge these privileged objects of sexual control into a single focus on the young adolescent woman engaged in non-marital sexual activity and problematically reproducing outside of age-appropriate heterosexual marriage (Nathanson 4). The fusing of traditional aspects of femininity and masculinity that Willis views as representing an androgynous, fluid gender identification in the characterisation of Juno is also, arguably, a feminised version of the tomboy (243). Since the 1990s a feminisation of the tomboy has emerged, tying this figure to femininity and heterosexuality in unprecedented ways (Abate 223; Halberstam, *Female*). This feminisation in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first neutralises the threat posed by this figure’s masculinity. The feminised tomboy of this period appears autonomous, but this surface gesture has replaced the mobility and activity associated with this figure in earlier decades (Halberstam, *Female* 5-6; 187-188). “Tomboy chic”, a popular style at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the fashion industry, is emblematic of this shift. In the 1970s and 1980s the tomboy’s subversive potential was located with its ability to expose gender as a construct; however “redefining tomboy identity as a matter of style, rather than substance” as Jamie Skerski argues, neutralises that potential (471).

This shift is characteristic of that broader trend in postfeminism: style stands in for autonomy in much the same way the rhetoric of choice in neoliberal culture stands in for legal rights. Michelle Ann Abate argues that the heterosexualisation and feminisation of the tomboy during the 1990s was shaped by postfeminism, but this “only presented part of the picture” (228). The LGBTQ movement and the increasing presence of masculine and homosexual tomboys in New Queer Cinema resulted in a social and scientific backlash against tomboyism (231). Abate argues that the description of “Gender Identity Disorder” from 1980 to the revised version presented in 1994 in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) “could have been describing the stereotypical tomboy” (231). This scientific blurring between

childhood tomboyism, Gender Identity Disorder and adult lesbianism provoked cultural anxieties that help explain, in part at least, the feminisation of the tomboy in cinema of the 1990s and the new millennium. Juno does embody the sass, strength and agency that typified the tomboy in the 1970s and early 1980s, but that this figure is pregnant intimates that the film is dealing with the threat of an unresolved gender crisis. Halberstam speculates that this crisis is the reason the tomboy movie faded from view in the late 1980s (*Female 193*). If the disappearance of the tomboy was indicative of cultural anxieties around an impending gender crisis then surely the image of the pregnant tomboy represents an intensification of these anxieties or, at the very least, an increasing desire to shore up certainty around the heterosexual identification of the more masculinised adolescent girl.

### **Girlhood and Motherhood in *Juno***

In representing a more masculine pregnant adolescent the film expands the boundaries of cultural intelligibility for the girl's gender identification, but this expansion still exists with reference to the normative frame of girlhood. Juno as a pregnant adolescent does not exhaust the meanings of this figure, not only because this depiction of a pregnant teen defuses the moral panic narratives around adolescent pregnancy through the film's progressive approach, but also because this representation of teen pregnancy articulates a discursively constituted identity that is inseparable from modalities of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality (Butler, *Gender 4-5*). In effect, it is impossible to separate the representation of Juno out from the political and cultural intersections in which it is produced and maintained (Butler, *Gender 4-5*).

In the case of teen pregnancy this figure intersects with the way the category of girlhood "has been shaped by norms about race, class and ability that have prioritized the white, middle-class and non-disabled, and pathologized and/or criminalized the majority outside this category of privilege" (Harris xx). This limited characterisation of girlhood is informed by the scientific and psychological frameworks popularised in the early part of the twentieth century that described the process of female development as a physical and emotional path experienced in a more or less uniform way (Aapola et al. 5). Such a model, which did not factor in differences of race,

class, sexuality, ethnicity and ability, privileged “the controlling image of girlhood” as “that of the dominant social group, that is, white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied” (Aapola et al. 5). In the latter half of the twentieth century interventions from youth studies and feminism have complicated this model by paying attention to the social, cultural, historical and political dimensions that shape the passage through girlhood (Aapola et al. 5). And yet the policing of the pregnant teen, and the cultural concerns the representation of Juno negotiates, remain imbricated with this normative model.

The surveillance of teen pregnancy occurs within the terms of this normative model, and as the representation of Juno crosses the boundaries of permissible femininity and postfemininity this figure reaffirms the dominance of that gender model within a patriarchal and neoliberal economy. Juno, in deciding to have the baby and give it up for adoption, represents the meeting point of the cultural dismay around young motherhood and the postfeminist call to agency. As others have already noted (Latimer 218, Thoma 412), this representation of Juno glosses over the realities experienced by many young mothers or those young women that experience unwanted pregnancy through the privileging of a feminine subjectivity that is connected with affluence; a depiction of young femininity that has the material, emotional and psychological resources of choice available to them. *Juno* ignores the way that reproductive choices are often limited by circumstances (Latimer 218) built on:

nationalist discourse and public policies that prevent, demonize, and punish the reproduction of all those for whom idealized white femininity is impossible, particularly poor women, women of color, and immigrant women, precisely those women whose labour in the feminization of globalization makes possible the affluence of the market ideal. (Thoma 412)

In doing so, this representation of teen pregnancy conceals the structural inequalities that often lead to characterising young mothers as illegitimate subjects and positions them instead as suffering from personal pathologies (Aapola et al. 103; McRobbie 85). The interpretation of Juno as an active agent who “chooses” to give the child up for adoption subverts narratives that pathologise young motherhood, but this does not disrupt the idea that “young motherhood seriously questions the current conception

of a normal life-course” where the young woman is expected to have an education, career, enjoy life and then begin a family because of the way mothers are constructed in the text (Aapola et al. 103). Motherhood is idealised in the film through the way the various mothers fulfil the perception of a normal life course either by delaying active motherhood (Juno) or becoming the substitute mother at the appropriate time (Vanessa and Bren). Moreover, the other decisions Juno makes at the narrative’s conclusion – rejecting Mark, taking on fatherly advice, and returning to Bleeker – confirm a phallogocentric model.

Juno is neither an agent with autonomy outside of discourse, meditating on choices, nor a figure wholly determined by discourse (Butler, *Gender* 195). Rather, Juno exemplifies the way representations of a girl with agency are constituted by and help constitute an idea of agency that is implicated in a chain of signification which, in this text, reproduces the effects of the laws of patriarchy and the economic model of neoliberalism. As Willis notes, Juno may be pregnant but the text is very careful to manage the representation of her as an actively desiring sexual subject (“Sexual Subjectivity” 245). The film highlights conception, rather than sexual desire, engendering Juno’s sexual activity and personal growth with a biological narrative (Willis 245). Watching the film with director Jason Reitman’s audio commentary on the DVD edition of *Juno* is quite telling in this regard. Throughout the commentary Reitman refers to protecting Juno’s “innocence.” For example, in the scene when Juno and Mark are dancing Reitman remarks: “This scene is dangerous ... I don’t want to go over the line here.” The sexual desire on the part of Juno and Mark is certainly ambivalent, but of more interest is what exactly constitutes the line Reitman refers to. Given that at other times in the commentary, for example when Reitman recalls how actor Jason Bateman (Mark) had asked him how to play his interactions with Juno – “am I trying to make a pass on her or not?” – Reitman had replied: “push it to ambiguity”, then the line he is referring to is arguably Juno’s potential as a sexually desiring subject. Innocence, in this context, refers to preserving a sense of ignorance in relation to the girl’s knowledge of active male sexual desire and her ability to respond with a similarly active sexuality. Thus the anxiety provoked by adolescent pregnancy is not so much reproductive capacity as it is sexual autonomy (Nathanson 5). This is because the sexual autonomy of the girl undermines paternal control and so more broadly, a patriarchal sex/gender system. Juno’s reproductive

freedom therefore confirms the postfeminist maternal trajectory, while the potential threat aroused by her sexual autonomy is managed through the way this figure grounds a broader renegotiation of white masculinity.

The film reinstates the pivotal function of the girl for a patriarchal economy while simultaneously facilitating a new family dynamic revised to accommodate the neoliberal economic structure, specifically the way that motherhood is now reduced to the terms of meritocracy, thereby obscuring and ignoring the implications of class. Juno's pregnancy is the framework through which mothers as well as men become culturally intelligible subjects and the course of this reproductive journey, structured around the changing seasons in the film, implies a kind of inevitability to the maternal/feminine narrative. Gender norms and class boundaries are disrupted and then re-established. The possibilities and pathways toward motherhood are expanded beyond the biological in the film, as JaneMaree Maher notes, but these alternatives suggest that the role of the mother is replaceable. As Thoma argues:

Some consider the film a coming-of-age story in which Juno achieves adulthood through her choice not to terminate the pregnancy. The focus, however, is primarily on the search for a maternal replacement, and Juno shops for a better mother who becomes the film's authentic modern feminine subject through the exchange. (Thoma 415)

This transaction occurs between Juno and Vanessa, but the audience is already prepared for the narrative development through the construction of Juno's relationship to her stepmother, Bren, and her absent biological mother. In the opening scenes of the film Juno's voiceover narration informs the audience of her "abandonment" when she was five, by her biological mother who now lives with "her new husband and three replacement kids." This not only emphasises her father as the more loyal parent, again valorising the father as primary caregiver, but also, through Juno's acceptance of Bren as her stepmother, this situation prepares the audience for a substitute mother for Juno's baby. The relationship between Juno and Vanessa, where Juno signifies sexually irresponsible and working-class femininity, and Vanessa the stable, affluent, middle-class femininity, recuperates the threat Juno potentially presents to a postfeminist teleology. The figure of the single young mother is seen as "feckless or else charged with depriving a child of his or her

‘human right’ to a father” (McRobbie 85-86). This figure is understood “to be an abject person with a ‘mismanaged life.’ She is a social category, a certain type of girl whose bodily features and disposition betray a lowly status” (McRobbie 133-134). In *Juno* this anxiety is managed through her decision to give the baby away for adoption. The significance of the adoption is not only that Juno chooses to follow the appropriate trajectory for youth: “Young motherhood seriously questions the current conception of a normal life-course ... Having children is not part of this model of youth” (Aapola et al. 103); it is also in the way the “closed adoption” at the narrative conclusion reseals the class boundaries destabilised by the relationship between Juno and Vanessa. There are intimate moments in this relationship, for example when Juno encourages Vanessa to talk to the foetus in the shopping mall and, after some failed attempts, the baby kicks Vanessa’s hands. The positioning of Vanessa on her knees in this scene, the ecstatic and almost childlike way she gazes up at Juno’s more mature, maternal expression gazing down at her, establishes an intimacy and understanding between these women that reverses the adult/child binary and, in this scene at least, eliminates the class barriers between them. However, that Juno requests a “traditional closed adoption” speaks to more than Juno’s desire to return to childhood innocence; it also works symbolically to provide closure to this intimate relationship and thus functions in a broader sense to cut potential ties between women occurring across class boundaries. The narrative conclusion, where the closed adoption is now complete, is indicative of the new class divides between women in the postfeminist era:

Perhaps it was an easy mistake for feminists to make, to assume that the gains of feminist success in terms of the winning of certain freedoms (to earn your own living, to be entitled to equal pay, etc.) would bring with it for women, an interest in commitment to extending the possibilities for socialist-feminist values. Female individualisation in contrast is a process bringing into being new social divisions through the denigration of poor and disadvantaged women by means of symbolic violence. What emerges is a new regime of more sharply polarised working-class and lower middle-class positions, epitomised through shabby failure or glamorous success. The pre-welfare rough and respectable divide is re-invented for the twenty-first century. (McRobbie 133)

Certainly the humour and the light melodrama in the film allows for “newly created intimacies” where “heterosexual relationships are refigured, accidents and chances create possibilities, and new forms of family are drawn together” as Maher argues (211). However the way these new families are reconfigured by the narrative conclusion privileges a version of femininity that remains imbricated in individualism and in the process cuts ties between women beyond a maternal exchange, thus isolating women in ways that arguably subject them to patriarchal hegemony.

### **Homosocial Bonds in *Juno***

In part this patriarchal logic is recognisable in the film through the way Juno becomes the symbolic token of exchange for a patriarchal economy. In psychoanalytic terms, the function of the girl positions this figure as one that will ground psychic dramas that are not her own (Driscoll 121). Gayle Rubin argues that patriarchy, as a sex/gender system, is organised around the “traffic in women.” Through an examination of the construction of the position of women in psychoanalysis and structural anthropology, which are, “in one sense, the most sophisticated ideologies of sexism around” (200), Rubin notes that Levi-Strauss understands “the essence of kinship structures to lie in an exchange of women between men” (171) where the woman operates as a conduit for these relationships (174). In psychoanalysis, this exchange occurs because the phallus is the symbolic token exchanged between father and son but which the mother/girl cannot possess. Rather, she functions as the terms of the exchange (phallic substitute). Cumulatively, what Rubin’s argument demonstrates is that the transformation of sexuality and gender identity into a sex/gender system is structured around the idea that girls and women operate as tokens of exchange between men. It is thus a patriarchal economy. A reading of the film through this theoretical lens suggests that Juno operates as a point of exchange facilitating a hierarchical exchange of power between the male characters in the film.

The personalising of the political, and in particular the personalising of male narratives into psychological dramas, recentralises the hegemony of white masculinity in this film. An examination of the three male characters and the way

their gendered identities are configured in relation to Juno's pregnancy demonstrates that homosocial bonds are operating in the text and these are conducted through the body of the pregnant teen. As Sedgwick argues, male homosocial desire operates as a relationship of power in a continuum amongst male subjects (2-3). Where that desire between men is understood as an affective or social force – a glue that shapes important relationships between men and where the figure of the woman functions as the pretext and the alibi that diffuses homosexual possibilities – the woman functions as the sign where men meet and develop homosocial bonds under the sign and protection of “natural” heterosexuality (qtd. in Buchbinder, *Studying* 84). In this context Juno's pregnant body is the conduit, the pretext and the alibi, for a renegotiation of white male privilege between the three key male characters in the film. These male characters do not engage overtly with each other<sup>42</sup>; however each represents a personalisation of masculinity imbricated with contextual factors specifically related to a contemporary cultural anxiety around masculinity. It rehabilitates a nostalgic, paternal figure associated with working-class masculinity (Mac); it bestows masculine privilege on boyhood depicted as innocent (Bleeker), which in turn provides an alibi for the continuation of white male privilege while being absolved of responsibility; and it scapegoats a softened middle-class masculinity represented as narcissistic and imbricated with both the 1990s grunge era and the millennial corporate “sell out” (Mark). Cumulatively, this representation of masculinity (by suggesting that patriarchy is not the problem, just individual men) avoids the inference that white male privilege is a product of patriarchal control over the girl. As well, by constructing this narrative around a representation of a girl that seems progressive, heterosexual gender identifications with patriarchal overtones seem desirable. The fact that the male characters respond to Juno's “choices”, by either supporting or failing her in her desire to provide her child with a stable, traditional family upbringing, facilitates a wider renegotiation of white male privilege that supports the maintenance of patriarchy. Juno's gender identification in relation to each of these male characters privileges traditionally feminine meanings –

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<sup>42</sup> As with Chapter Two some liberties are being taken with Sedgwick's schema in this analysis, but as with that analysis of *Gone Girl* these differences are significant. The bonds between the male characters are not represented as explicit rivalries between the male characters, rather, like Amy Juno is a significant motivator for the shifting power dynamics between Mac, Bleeker and Mark. Nonetheless, it is the similar construction of Juno as an agent in these relationships that lends weight to the assumption that she is empowered at the same time as she becomes the reason the power dynamics between the male characters get renegotiated.

daughter, girlfriend, ambivalent love interest. This is not to dismiss the potential that the characterisations of Bleeker, Mac, and even Mark present for troubling the category of masculinity, or to leave unacknowledged the elements of friendship Juno shares with each of these male characters. But it is to suggest that these figures also continue to support the exchange of the girl/daughter in a patriarchal economy and to argue that this is less obvious because the male characters seem to represent a relinquishing of their traditional patriarchal functions. The innocence of Bleeker, the relaxed parenting of Mac and the “coolness” of Mark distance these figures from what is commonly perceived as traditional patriarchal masculinity.

In the early part of the film Mac represents potential anxieties about the failure of the paternal figure to prevent the sexual autonomy of the girl; however this threat to his authority is managed as he assumes the role of protective father once he learns Juno is pregnant and through the way he gives Bleeker permission to be with Juno, symbolically facilitating a patriarchal exchange of the girl. After Juno tells Bren and Mac she is pregnant he asks his wife: “Give it to me straight, Bren. Do you think this is my fault?” implying that Juno’s sexual agency is his responsibility. From this point in the film Juno’s agency is limited, as he informs Juno he will be accompanying her to meet the adoptive parents: “Juno, I want to come with you to meet these adoption people. You’re just a kid. I don’t want you to get ripped off by a couple of baby-starved wingnuts.” And, when Juno comes to him with questions over the longevity of love, he quips: “Are you having boy trouble? Cos I gotta be honest; I don’t much approve of you dating in your condition, ‘cause ... well, that’s kind of messed up.” Though humorous, the implication is clear: Juno is a child and a girl and the narrative registers the disturbance her autonomy presents for the culture but then placates this disruption through paternal intervention. The amusing elements defuse and displace the cultural anxieties around the potential failures of paternal control while simultaneously allowing that paternal control to be reinstated. The characterisation of Mac as the benevolent patriarch comes full circle by the narrative conclusion. Toward the end of the film, Mac has the following dialogue with Juno when she comes to him disillusioned over the possibility for a “happy ever after.” Here Mac reassures her of the stability of the heterosexual dynamic. This scene occurs directly after Mark has informed Juno and Vanessa that he is not ready to be a father and Juno has fled home:

Mac: You're looking a little morose honey. What's eating at you?

Juno: I'm losing my faith in humanity.

Mac: Think you can narrow that down for me?

Juno: I guess I wonder sometimes if people ever stay together for good.

Mac: You mean like couples?

Juno: Yeah, like people in love.

...

Mac: It's not easy, that's for sure. Now, I may not have the best track record in the world, but I have been with your stepmother for ten years now, and I'm proud to say that we're very happy. In my opinion, the best thing you can do is to find someone who loves you for exactly what you are. Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you, the right person will still think that the sun shines out your ass. That's the kind of person that's worth sticking with.

Juno: I sort of already have.

Mac: Of course, your old D-A-D!

Juno leaves shortly after this, goes to Bleeker's house, and informs him that she is in love with him. This dialogue between Juno and Mac and the symbolic exchange of her father for her love interest foreshadows the concluding scene between these three characters. Though subtle, the way Mac grips Bleeker's shoulders supportively after he has left Juno's hospital bed, leaving Bleeker to take his place and get into the hospital bed with Juno (after she has delivered and given away their baby) signifies an exchange between the paternal figure and the boy in a homosocial transaction.

Bleeker, as both son and boy figure relative to the other male characters, represents the emergence of an innocent and endearingly naive masculinity. The presence of the responsible and capable girl emphasises this sense of vulnerability. But as an alternative depiction of masculinity Bleeker is arguably absolved of responsibility and accountability because of this presence of the girl. Furthermore, his boyish

openness disengages him from the position of privilege that this figure always-already assumes by inhabiting the category of the unmarked white male. There is certainly evidence that Bleeker represents the emergence of a masculinity that disrupts traditional ideas of the masculine, producing an alternative that is potentially more radical than what the film offers in terms of femininity (Willis, “Sexual Subjectivity” 251). The presence of a newly configured masculinity is suggestive of the way masculinities are negotiated in relation to other masculinities, where “multiple and even seemingly contradictory paradigms of masculinity co-exist at the same cultural moment, different aspects of the same struggle over what it means to be a man” (Braithwaite 419). But these “seemingly contradictory” figures of masculinity, such as Bleeker’s innocent, acquiescent and nice guy persona, form part of what R.W. Connell refers to as “complicit masculinities – forms that participate in and benefit from patriarchy, yet are not exemplars of dominant and hegemonic masculinity” (qtd. in Braithwaite 420). Bleeker acknowledges his part in the pregnancy: “What do you think we should do?”; he does not ostracise Juno once she is heavily pregnant, his face lighting up whenever he sees her in the school corridors or on the track; and he accepts Juno’s desire to have an abortion and her later decision to put the baby up for adoption. However the fact that Bleeker is protected by Juno’s father from his own parents’ discovery of his impending paternity and that he is acquiescent to Juno’s wishes rather than involved in the decision-making process himself, indicates that this depiction of masculinity as innocent and agreeable is underpinned by an ideology of boyish, heterosexual masculinity that, through a “perpetually innocent niceness” functions as an alibi for the continuation of ruling-class American male privilege (Pfiel qtd. in Kegan Gardiner 17). Moreover, that Juno’s father shifts from viewing Bleeker as the kind of boy not capable of getting a girl pregnant: “Paulie Bleeker? I didn’t know he had it in him”; to agreeing not to tell Bleeker’s parents: “I asked my dad and Bren not to narc us out to your folks, so we should be safe”; to that final shoulder grip at the hospital; suggests that this dynamic enacts a non-sexualised version of the older man/younger boy configuration in the triangle of male homosocial desire (Sedgwick 4). It is Bleeker who will, presumably, assume the adult mantle of paternal figure, an outcome made more pointed by the presence and dismissal of Mark.

The representation of Mark in relation to Mac, as figures representative of adult and paternal masculinity respectively, provides evidence of the way the idealisation of American masculinity has often occurred through juxtaposition. Mac is positioned as blue-collar masculinity and while this characterisation is humorous – when Vanessa asks him “haven’t you ever felt like you were born to do something?” Mac quips seriously, “Yes. Heating and air-conditioning” – it is nonetheless constructed in relation to his successful remasculinisation as a stable paternal figure, as a loyal husband and an approachable parent for both his daughters. By contrast, Mark is representative of the white, middle-class corporate subject. Unlike his filmic brothers in texts such as *Fight Club*, *American Beauty* and *Falling Down*, cinematic depictions of white collar masculinity that mourn “the imminent collapse of the corporate man, over-civilized and emasculated by allied obligations to work and women”, Mark represents a less sympathetic point of view on this subject position (Ashcraft and Flores 2). His juxtaposition with Mac presents a similar dynamic to that evident in the depiction of Big Daddy and Frank D’Amico, where the construction of the “rugged, authentic working man” alongside the “effete, feminized, anxiety-ridden businessman” performs a moral cultural function in the context of American masculinity, “where the businessman is cast as an individual driven by money and personal gain, in contrast to the working man, motivated by a Protestant work ethic and authenticity” (Banet-Weiser 89). Juno presents the pivotal point around which this juxtaposition comes to fruition: Mark fails Juno as future father of her unborn child, where Mac succeeds as her paternal guide in her potentially dangerous adolescent phase.

For most of the film, Mark is configured as the potential “cool dad” for Juno’s child, the ambivalent love interest and the figure that broadens Juno’s music and movie knowledge. However, when Mark informs Juno that he is leaving Vanessa, she cannot accept his selfishness, telling him: “But you’re old”, and then stressing his failings as potential patriarch: “You were supposed to take care of this [gesturing to her pregnant body] ... I wanted everything to be perfect. Not shitty and broken like everyone else’s family.” This feminisation of Mark operates quite differently from that of Mac and Bleeker. The latter exhibit a degree of feminisation: acquiescent, innocent, and endearingly oblivious to Juno’s activities, which allows their interests to be recentralised because Juno confirms the masculinity of these figures through

the way she is constructed as a heterosexual subject accepting of their respective positioning as father and boyfriend. Mark's feminisation, by contrast, functions as a regression to youthful indulgence the female characters are quick to point out is inappropriate to his age. Vanessa tells him: "You're trying to do something that's never going to happen. And you know what? Your shirt is stupid [nods toward his band shirt]. Grow up. If I have to wait for you to become Kurt Cobain, I'm never going to be a mother." Next to Mac and Bleeker, Mark appears to be relinquishing his responsibilities in favour of pursuing a lifestyle that the narrative positions as indulgent.

Mark represents the cultural anxieties that emerged in 1990s popular culture around an apparent loss of essential masculinity. Exemplified in Bly's work and popularity with *Iron John*, the central belief articulated by this men's movement was that men had become "soft" because they were "no longer in touch with the 'deep masculine' within them" (Buchbinder, *Performance* 37). The other side of this anxiety, signified by Mark through that reference to Kurt Cobain, is an embracing of this more feminised masculinity in this period. Cobain was "the first rock musician to present a cock-rock sound with compassion, vulnerability and femininity" and the popularity of this figure was underpinned by the challenge he presented to patriarchal masculinity (Collins 92). In the character of Mark, however, this Cobain-like feminised masculinity is subsumed into cultural fears that relate men from this period back to the apparent threat presented by a "softened" masculinity. This perpetuates the idea that it was here, in the 1990s as a consequence of the women's movement, that an essential masculinity was lost. Mark overturns the socially sanctioned position of the victim as the young, middle-class, white collar figure that has become so popular; indeed he is problematically feminised – he does not engage in the "corporate jungle"; a rock "sell-out" who works from home (the feminine domestic sphere) writing "jingles" for advertisements. But rather than advancing a critique of this subject position as problematically implicated in patriarchal or capitalist masculinity, the representation of Mark alongside Mac and Bleeker isolates this figure as the failing individual male.

Taken together these three figures of masculinity give the impression that patriarchy is not the problem, certain "soft", immature men are. Moreover, the blue-collar status of Mac valorises the symbolic power of the white, working-class man despite the

decline of the industries associated with this group since the 1970s and the fact that the divide between the wealthy and the poor is steadily increasing (Banet-Weiser 89). The character of Mac reinforces the symbolic power of a pre-1970s masculinity, provides further evidence for the nostalgia for a benevolent paternalism and father-daughter relationship idealised in representational culture since the mid-eighteenth century, but brings it up-to-date it for the twenty-first century audience through the inclusion of the innocent boy/Man in *Bleeker* and the progressive teen in *Juno*. The power of homosocial bonds in sustaining a patriarchal gender system comes full circle through the rejection of Mark; thus demonstrating how a gender system that privileges the interests of men is also reliant upon structuring men in a hierarchical fashion, where the securing of masculine privilege requires the scapegoating and eventual expulsion of undesirable masculine subjects.

In *Juno*, masculine positions of power are textually renegotiated through the valorisation of the working-class patriarch, the emasculation of the young businessman and the idealisation of the guileless high school boy. The signification of these identities, and the consequent reimagining of the patriarchal order, is dependent upon the presence of the “Cautionary Whale”, pregnant teen Juno. The next chapter will examine some of the other ways patriarchal ideologies operate through representations of sexually active girls. The sexual promiscuity of adolescent girls in the Australian films to be analysed next performs similar cultural work to Juno, as they too operate as the point of exchange along patriarchal lines of hierarchy and generation.

## Chapter Five

### Abject Girls: The Cultural Currency of the Sexually Promiscuous Girl for a White Male Nation

In *Juno* sexuality was manifested in reproduction rather than desire. *Suburban Mayhem* (2006) and *Somersault* (2004) represent girls of a similar age but with a more active sexuality. Nineteen-year old Kat, in the former, and fifteen-year old Heidi, in the latter, use the sexual desire they elicit from men as a weapon (Kat) or a form of currency (Heidi). The meanings attributable to the girl in each film relate to what her sexual activity signifies for the key male characters and for the other characters in the town or the suburb where each film is set. Those relationships signify her sexuality as manipulative and abject. By constructing the girl's sexuality as problematic, by positioning these girls as unruly figures resisting traditional gender norms, these films arguably legitimise male cultural anxieties and articulate the girl's active sexuality as a useful alibi for the remasculinisation of key male characters by the narrative's end.

Kat in *Suburban Mayhem*, in particular, is the quintessential “bad girl” of popular cinema. Sexually promiscuous, consuming alcohol and drugs to excess, breaking the law, disobeying the rules of public space and perpetuating violence – Kat certainly transgresses the boundaries of appropriate social behaviour. Of more significance, however, is the way the transgressions of this figure are constructed in relation to the sex/gender system. To transgress is to cross a social or aesthetic limit, but in doing so the necessity and value of that limit is reinforced (Botting 7). The characterisation of women and girls in popular media as transgressive figures, as “bad girls”, brings with it the cultural politics of what it means to transgress as a female. Radically, perhaps, some theorists argue that to be female is by definition to be transgressive: representations of “bad girls” instantiate a broader phenomenon of the female sex as an “ontological transgression” (Owen et al. 2). Rather than viewing transgression in the traditional sense, as associated with sin and criminality, “bad girls” are suggestive of the wider interpretation of women's existence itself as one that “constitutes a transgression against nature or divinity or man himself” (Owen et al. 2). For example, at the *fin de siècle* “all a woman had to do to be transgressive was to try and move into the public sphere. In many ways, that is still all a woman has to

do” (Owen et al. 4). In this context, representations of female autonomy make sense in terms of what her independence signifies for male subjectivity – her sexual liberation and freedom of movement threaten and then reaffirm patriarchal conceptions of gendered identity.

The representation of the “bad girl” in contemporary cinema violates not only the traditional limits on female sexuality and behaviour, but also the postfeminist teleology. Sexually rapacious and often violent, cinematic “bitches”, “bad girls” and “femme fatales” perform transgression in ways that may appear to be working differently from the “good girl”, such as the postfeminist tomboy in *Juno*, but in fact operate toward equivalent ends. Similarly individualised, rather than affirming a postfeminist teleology through making the “correct” choices, the “bad girl” reaffirms the postfeminist narrative by flouting it. In crossing this boundary she demonstrates its existence, while her unruliness is signified as an individual pathology.

In *Juno* the absence of the sexual desire of the pregnant tomboy allowed for a renegotiation of masculinity along hierarchical and generational lines because she functioned as the point of exchange underpinned by a postfeminist narrative trajectory. Set in the mid-West American context, that film constructed Juno’s femininity in ways that facilitated the remasculinisation of a sympathetic paternal figure and permitted the emergence of a representation of boyhood as innocent and naive, while dispensing with the younger adult male as the infantilised, corporate “sell-out” unable to meet the expectations of the postfeminist subject. The Australian films *Suburban Mayhem* and *Somersault* focus on girls at a similar stage of sexual development, however in these films it is the younger white male, a figure in his late teens or early twenties, who is remasculinised. Where *Juno* registers a broader trend in American culture in terms of rehabilitating working-class masculinity and problematising white collar masculinity through, in that instance, a masculinised postfeminist heroine; *Suburban Mayhem* and *Somersault* allow for a closer reading of the defensiveness around white masculinity that emerges when that masculine character is read as imbricated with the national identity and where such a defensiveness is constructed in relation to a girl who transgresses the postfeminist ideal.

While discourses of masculinity in crisis in the American context are also imbricated with national identity, the unique positioning of women historically in the Australian context brings with it a slight deviation in terms of the cultural function of the female subject. American nationalist and masculinist discourses in contemporary visual culture are built on a historical mythology of American manhood; centred on rugged individualism, stoicism and persistence, this figure shaped the symbolic construction of the male blue collar worker as the quintessential American man (Banet-Weiser 89). Moreover, maintaining “masculinity as the symbolic heart of American national identity involves, not surprisingly, the devaluation of women” (Banet-Weiser 90). The crisis in the American economy at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the “Great Recession” currently pervading the American self-image because of its inseparability from the development of capitalism (Boyle and Mrozowski xi-xii), is registered most acutely in terms of this rugged, self-made man emblematic of the working class: as the “symbolic heart of hegemonic masculinity for decades, if not centuries” such crises “in masculinity cause anxiety not only for individuals but also about the future of a nation” (Banet-Weiser 90-91).

This centring of masculinity in American culture is also constructed in relation to the traditional family. For example, following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US these events were largely interpreted as an attack on the family, where the penetration of the homeland was figuratively understood as a penetration of the domestic space of the nation. The trope of the family, in this context, became “both a metaphor for and a metonym of the nation” (McGuire and Buchbinder 300). These effects on the cultural imaginary of America formed the central thesis of Susan Faludi’s book on the aftermath of 9/11 and her assertion therein that the dominant narratives circulating post-crisis shored up a fantasy based on “the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls” in order to perpetuate a “national fantasy in which we are deeply invested, our elaborately constructed myth of invincibility” (14). This myth of invincibility stems from the Puritan history in American culture; conflicts with the Indigenous peoples of North America were constructed around images of virile, white men guarding the frontier and successfully protecting frightened, domesticated women at the hearth (Faludi 145). This image of the white woman and the family in need of protection from “violent natives” would

emerge in Australian culture after 1840 and with it the conception of a national identity encoded with a similar gendered ideology. But prior to this, unlike the American Puritan idealisation of the family and the role of the male subject in this context, the first fifty years of Australia as a white colony included the understanding that its women were whores, not wives. Thus isolating the Australian national identity and its relationship to masculinity in this chapter the aim is not intended to suggest that it is radically different from other gendered ideologies in the West, but rather to argue that the Australian context works as a useful microcosm of a broader trend in Western cultures at the beginning of the twenty-first century uniquely positioned because of this history.

Australia is an apposite case study in this context. Its smaller size and more limited media mean it functions as an intense microcosm of the Western gender ideologies circulating in this period. The Colonial history in Australia, with its entrenched mythology of a convict past, positions the Madonna/whore dichotomy in ways that literalise the whore in this gendered history. From 1788 until the 1840s the white women of Australia were categorised as “whores”; the convict women (of whom approximately one-fifth were actually prostitutes), as well as the women and girls born in the penal colony in this period, were positioned and treated as objects of sexual gratification (Summers 313-314; 322). Furthermore, the formation of the nation in 1901 concentrated explicitly on the image of the white man (Hogan 65). This manifestation of sexual difference along sexualised lines, the first women of the nation as whores rather than the wives and mothers of other free settler colonies, provides an interesting context for reading the sexualisation of the girl in contemporary cinema.

In narrowing the focus to the Australian context the aim of this chapter is to, somewhat paradoxically, establish that there is a broader trend across a range of films emerging in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century that registers cultural anxieties in relation to the sexual autonomy of the girl. Thus far the emphasis has primarily been on American films, but these representations of girls with autonomy may be symptomatic of the perceived threat to white masculinity evident elsewhere. In this chapter, Australian cinema is the case study and in the next chapter Swedish cinema. These films represent a larger trend in gendered politics in Western culture, where Western culture is understood as:

a range of local contexts as far apart geographically as Australasia, Europe and North America, but which can all be conceptualized as late modern Western Societies ... [These societies] are in many ways very different, but they also have some very influential similarities, namely a democratic political system, a market economy and a history of civil movements, including the women's movement. At the moment all of these societies are characterized by an intense process of restructuration and individualization; fundamental changes are happening in the structure of the labour-market, education, as well as the family and many other spheres of life. (Aapola et al. 4)

In expanding the discussion beyond American cinema the aim is to establish how popular cinema may be registering a broader power struggle between young women's claims to autonomy and the implications of this for the masculinity of men in Western culture.

Evidence that these cultural anxieties around female empowerment are not bound by geographical distance can be found in the treatment of female politicians in both America and Australia in the early part of the twenty-first century. The political careers of Hilary Clinton in the US and Julia Gillard in Australia circulate in the mass media in ways that renegotiate broader ideologies of gender, with both of these women repeatedly characterised in the media by misogynistic rhetoric. However the way Clinton is predominantly framed as anti-feminist and monstrous in the mass media (Ritchie; Falk) differs slightly from the framing of Gillard through more sexualised language and images. It is this nuance, while still evidence of the same defensiveness around masculinity stemming from the presence of empowered and exceptional women, which suggests that in the Australian context this fear of women is somewhat more focused on sexuality, whereas the demonisation of Clinton seems to derive more from her position relative to the traditional family. As an empowered woman Clinton resists reading through the model of the family, and the attempts to dehumanise her function as evidence of anxieties that relate to biological understandings of the female sex. The aversion to Clinton articulated online and in the popular media during her bid for the presidency in the Democratic primary campaign of 2007-2008 related to the way she destabilised traditional conceptions of gender and thus provoked anxieties around the fluidity of gender (Ritchie 103). The

images that shadowed Clinton were constructed with reference to the monstrous and the cyborg, thereby signifying her power as unnatural and dangerous (Ritchie 114). Gillard, by contrast, was predominantly reduced to bodily interpretations, insistently returning her to a sexualised status. Beyond the “witch” and “bitch” rhetoric, Gillard was sexualised within social media as a “slut” and constructed in relation to “rooting”; she was positioned in terms of menstruation, “we need to bleed her out” was a comment made by a Labour colleague in the Kevin Rudd faction during the leadership spill, as well as in terms of her sexuality, with then opposition leader Tony Abbott demanding that Gillard “make an honest woman of herself” during the debate on the carbon tax (Summers). Both the American and Australian contexts problematically position female politicians in terms of gender, but in Australia this is arguably done in more abjecting<sup>43</sup>, sexualised terms. This abjected sexuality and the relationship it forms with cultural fears over the stability of male subjectivity is also evident in the films analysed in this chapter. The manifestation of this abject sexualisation of female subjects in Australian culture arguably illuminates what is occurring in cinema of other Western cultures.

In late 2012 the concept of misogyny received substantial attention in the Australian popular media. On the ninth of October, then Prime Minister, Gillard delivered a scathing speech to the opposition leader, Tony Abbott, citing the Liberal leader’s hypocrisy, sexism and double standards as evidence of misogyny<sup>44</sup>. The specific instance of hatred of women and girls to which Gillard’s speech referred was Abbott’s sexist assumption that males and females are fundamentally different and that inequality is therefore the effect of this natural order. But Gillard’s speech was also a response to the sexist political and media attacks on her character alluded to above since she had become Prime Minister in June 2010. In her “Human Rights and Social Justice Lecture” at the University of Newcastle in 2012, Anne Summers had

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<sup>43</sup> Abjection, or the abject, is a key theoretical term used in this chapter. Abjection refers to that which is analogous to the unclean and which the subject casts out in order to reaffirm a sense of stability. The term is Julia Kristeva’s and in her usage it is a psychoanalytic and thus universally applicable concept. In the context of this thesis, however, Judith Butler’s interpretation of the concept – as a process of demarcating culturally constructed boundaries of inner and outer – will be used in order to show how abjection works to redraw boundaries in relation to the specific cultural, historical and economic contexts in which it operates. In this instance, it is the context of Australian films in relation to heterosexual culture.

<sup>44</sup> See “Transcript of Julia Gillard’s speech” in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 10, 2012. Online at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/transcript-of-julia-gillards-speech-20121009-27c36.html>

argued that Gillard had been “attacked, vilified or demeaned in ways that ... [were] specifically related to her sex (or, if you like, her gender)” from the time she took office in what constituted a “deliberate sabotaging of the prime minister by political enemies.” In summation, Summers proposed that the vitriol and hatred levelled at Gillard occurred in part because the Australian electorate had never experienced a leader who was not a married man with children. That Gillard’s personal situation did not fit within the norms of the traditional nuclear family, as well as the fact that she was a female leader in what is the “boy’s club” of modern democratic politics, certainly goes some way towards explaining her treatment. Contemporary Western democracies arguably continue in the tradition of classical Greece as “boy’s clubs”; as Sedgwick notes, tying the continuum of “men loving men” with “men promoting the interests of men”, there is “no perceived discontinuity between the male bonds at the Continental Baths and the male bonds at Bohemian Grove or in the board room or Senate cloakroom” (4). In the context of Sedgwick’s argument, this continuum demonstrates that patriarchy might not structurally require homophobia, but it does require heterosexuality and the attendant role and function of women (4). More broadly, then, the way that Gillard’s political colleagues and the popular media, both within and outside her own party, sought to abject this female leader evinces a particular kind of defensiveness around white masculinity in the context of the increasing empowerment and exceptionalism of women.

This example from the Australian media and political arena foregrounds the way that the Australian national identity, a part of which is negotiated and disseminated in cinema (Hogan 63), is implicated with a gendered politics built on a perception of white masculinity as metonymic of the nation’s character. R.W. Connell asserts: “It is now a familiar observation that notions of Australian identity have been almost entirely constructed around images of men” (9). The centrality of (white) men in Australian culture has been the foundation of the national culture since the *fin de siècle*:

When Australia achieved Federation in 1901, the masthead of the *Bulletin* famously proclaimed ‘Australia for the White Man.’ Arguably, since the earliest days of white colonisation, images of Australianness have been dominated by the figure of the white Anglo-Celtic male. (Hogan 65)

The hegemony of white masculinity in Australia has inevitably required certain positions from women and girls. In Joane Nagel's exploration of the historical and modern connections between manhood and nationhood, she notes that women do have a role to play in the masculinist project of the making of states but the roles ascribed to men and women are dictated by men, with women assuming supporting roles that reflect masculinist notions of femininity (243). In terms of Australian cinema, this position is reflected in the way women have been primarily constructed as either on the periphery (Hogan 66) or as the figures that signify what is at stake in a racialised and gendered landscape: "a cultural and racial logic of whiteness as definitive of the 'Australian'" (Williams 265). Both Jackie Hogan and Marise Williams cite the function of women in two popular Australian films from the past decade, *Australia* (2008) and *The Proposition* (2005), that, through their use of traditional gender roles, position the male characters as motivators to the story, while the female characters provide the justification for paternal and patriotic behaviour (Hogan 66; Williams 7). For this reason, a woman with power, whether representational or actual power<sup>45</sup>, presents a significant disruption not only to the stability of masculine gender identity but also to the dominant perception of the Australian national identity.

In the previous chapter it was established that the potential empowerment of the sexually mature girl in a post-sexual liberation discourse was successfully contained by the emergence of a postfeminist maternal narrative. In this chapter the construction of the girl's sexuality as promiscuous is examined for the way it too threatens male dominance, but here her active sexual desire is interpreted as legitimising cultural anxieties around the necessity for patriarchal law in relation to national identity. Contemporary Australian culture and its representational regimes are, as already suggested, an apposite case study in this context because the dichotomy of Madonna/whore is overt. In her 1975 work *Damned Whores and God's Police*, a book that revisited the role of women in Australian society and history through a feminist lens, Anne Summers argued that the colonial history of Australia cast women into one of two roles: "whores", quite explicitly prior to 1840, and then "God's Police" during the 1840s and 1850s when the bourgeois family circulated as

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<sup>45</sup> The sexualisation of a woman with power is aptly summed up by Gillard in her memoir, *My Story*: "Even if you are the single most powerful person in your country, if you are a woman, the images that are shadowed around you are of sex and rape" (106).

the most appropriate family model for structuring the society of the new nation (67). The imposition of the bourgeois family model onto Australian society changed the view circulating prior to 1840, that women were predominantly objects of sexual gratification, splitting the roles of women in ways similar to the Victorian idealisation of “The Angel of the Hearth.” Women became the designated “police” for the “restlessness and rebelliousness” in men and these figures were grounded ideologically in the family as moral leaders in ways that “acquired an almost evangelical cast” (Summers 67). White Australian masculinity has historically depended upon its counterweight in passive femininity, as well as the abjection of female subjects deemed as morally deviant. The Australian “scrubber”: “those rough-as-guts, oversexed, wild types of women ... [a] (peculiarly Australian) fusion of battler-trollop-mole-slut-bogan” that has “made a significant impact in film” (Waddell 183) is perhaps the cinematic descendent of this colonial history.

Through the process of her abjection the cinematic “scrubber” performs a pivotal role in securing patriarchal masculinity. The textual terms of her abjection can be adduced to explain the defensiveness around white masculinity that relate to the Australian context. *Suburban Mayhem*, directed by Paul Goldman, is analysed in this chapter for the way in which the characterisation of Katrina (Kat) Skinner is paradigmatic of the crucial function of the sexually promiscuous white girl for maintaining a masculine national character. This representation of the Australian femme fatale – with its overtones of the bogan, the slut and the scrubber – is analysed through the understanding of abjection as delimiting and defining patriarchal boundaries around female sexuality and it is argued that the abjection of this figure is representative of the cultural currency of the white, lower-class, hypersexual girl in resecuring a masculine national identity through this process. Cate Shortland’s *Somersault*<sup>46</sup> is bracketed with *Suburban Mayhem* in this chapter because the characterisation of this sexually promiscuous girl, Heidi, provides further evidence that the abjection of these figures is a response to an increasing defensiveness around white masculinity in Australian culture since the 1990s. As the

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<sup>46</sup> *Somersault* was an unchallenged winner at the 2004 AFI awards, winning a prize in every category. There was speculation, however, that this “clean sweep” was evidence of “malaise in the Australian film industry” more broadly (Hawker). *Suburban Mayhem* also led its year for most nominations in 2006. Nominated in twelve categories, it won three including Best Lead Actress for Emily Barclay (George; “Suburban Mayhem (2006): Awards”). Problems with the Australian film industry aside, the celebration of these representations of girlhood by the industry suggests they resonated with the culture in significant ways.

analysis of crisis in white masculinity at the conclusion of this chapter will show, this presents a deviation from the perception of crisis for American masculinity because in that context such rhetoric began circulating in the 1960s.

Set in the fictional working-class suburb of “Golden Grove”, *Suburban Mayhem* follows the story of nineteen-year old single mother, Kat. Partially told in mockumentary format, this drama/comedy/thriller is motivated by Kat’s reactions to the jailing of her beloved brother, Danny, and her quest to appeal his conviction. Danny is jailed after defending Kat’s “honour” during a robbery. When the service station clerk identifies Danny as a “local” and states: “Your sister’s a slut” and then throws condoms at him with the quip: “Take some of these for your sister”, Danny beheads him with a samurai sword. The shocking nature of the crime and the allure of Kat as the skimpily dressed, outspoken “hoon”, feared by neighbours and elusive to police, brings a documentary crew to Golden Grove and the backstory of this femme fatale unfolds. Abandoned by her mother, indulged by her father, Kat is involved sexually with a man “for every letter of the alphabet”, changes cars “like you and I change our undies” and has “never worked a day in her life.” Her sexuality is framed as her ultimate weapon and once she realises that Danny’s conviction will not be overturned she decides she needs money to hire a better lawyer. In order to achieve this, Kat uses her sexual prowess to convince Danny’s mentally disabled best friend, Kenny, to murder her father so she can sell the family home. Her meek boyfriend, Rusty, who acquiesces to Kat’s demands throughout and is the primary carer of her baby (significantly, not his baby), takes offence at Kat enlisting another man and murders Kat’s father himself. Danny is appalled at this turn of events, and this reaction elicits the only moment of genuine despair from Kat, as Danny walks out on her as she sobs during their final prison visit. But Kat regroups, and by the narrative conclusion she is living in an idyllic beachside home with her daughter, Bailey, and (now-fiancé) Rusty, after Kenny takes the blame for the murder. Detective Andretti’s final remark for the documentary crew sums up the way this femme fatale escapes the punishment normally dealt this figure: “Ironically, it appears Katrina’s untouchable.”

*Somersault*, celebrated by the Australian Film Industry in 2004, is in many ways the realist underside of *Suburban Mayhem*. Where *Suburban Mayhem* is a generic hybrid, drawing on elements of the comedy, mockumentary and drama, and set to a

fast paced soundtrack that has echoes of the riot grrrl movement; *Somersault* is an independent film that registers some of the key features typical of this genre at the turn of the millennium. Produced outside of major studios, independent films often emphasise the abuse and anger of their disadvantaged, lower-class female heroines; and as more intimate portrayals of personal relationships, they articulate the underside of neoliberal culture (Ortner 177; 188). Accented throughout by a chilling *mise-en-scène* that evokes a sense of haunting, *Somersault* is infused with the darker implications of neoliberal culture for the sexually promiscuous girl. This sense of haunting is produced by both the setting of the film, Jindabyne, a tourist town built after the sinking of the previous town in the nearby lake, and by the way Heidi is represented as a kind of spectre. She is fragile and transient and reminiscent of the girls in the critically acclaimed Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). And yet there is something quietly discomfiting about Heidi because she also brings connotations of the “scrubber.” Unlike Kat, a figure linked with the *femme fatale* and thus less dependent on men, Heidi embodies a key characteristic of the scrubber: a vulnerable young woman who is “unruly and highly-sexed” and is “unable to survive without clinging to ‘the phallus’ (literally and symbolically) for physical and emotional sustenance” (Waddell 183-184).

Where Kat’s story is of a fearless young woman rampaging her way through suburbia and wielding her sexuality as a weapon, Heidi’s narrative centres on the way she uses her sexuality as currency with men; but it is a use born of desperation, rather than a clear goal. Heidi’s journey in *Somersault* begins when she is caught by her mother kissing her mother’s boyfriend. This leads the fifteen year old to flee her lower-class suburban home in Canberra and head “up the mountain” to Jindabyne to try and get work in the ski resorts on the promise of a man with whom she has presumably had sexual relations. However, when this man dismisses her, Heidi, homeless and without money, sleeps with a male tourist to get a bed for the night. Soon she meets Joe, the middle-class son of local ranchers. Following their night together at a local motel, Heidi gets a job at the BP station and the motherly proprietor of the motel, Irene, allows Heidi to stay on at a lower rate. Heidi continues to see Joe, an “Aussie battler” figure dealing with anxieties around his sexuality, his parents and his friends. Heidi and Joe embark on an intimate sexual relationship, but one that is overshadowed by Heidi being read as “rough trade” and a “slag” by Joe’s

friend and by the other inhabitants of Jindabyne, with this positioning signified by the way she is repeatedly slighted or addressed with knowing glances. A drama-fuelled break-up ensues when Joe leaves Heidi after he is unable to deal with the implications of her lower-class, hypersexual status. Heidi reacts by getting drunk and stoned, and bringing two tourists back to her motel room before passing out when these men begin to sexually assault her. When Joe returns, he violently evicts them but then abandons Heidi. Heidi is subsequently convinced by Irene to call her mother and return home.

The unease generated by the representation of Heidi is bound up in this figure's sexuality and more significantly, the sense that this sexuality is out of place and unclean, something to be used and discarded. Theoretically, this cluster of words is associated with the concept of abjection. Moreover, unlike Kat, Heidi appears to have little control over the way she needs to use her sexuality as a currency and the way that sexuality is made culturally intelligible by other characters, male and female, who read her as a certain "type of girl." As such, this figure, while arguably not "empowered" beyond being "sexually liberated", presents a useful point of comparison with the representation of Kat because of the affiliation of *Somersault* with contemporary independent films ("indies"). Paradigmatic of this genre, the film represents a more intimate and sustained representation of the way patriarchy, class, race and poverty impact on young women's lives in a neoliberal context. The way Heidi's sexuality is policed by middle-class Jindabyne is metonymic of the way the dominant ideology of white, heterosexual, middle-class Australian culture positions certain girlhoods as Other by marking their whiteness as "white trash" and encoding this classed and raced identity with the sexuality of the "slut." The representation of Kat performs a similar role, but in Heidi the audience is left with the pared back depiction of this ideological function because of the generic strategies of the indie. Emphasising the female point of view in a context where the feminist project is understood as unfinished, indie films present the neoliberal world from a female perspective as disturbing, dark and violent; by centralising the experiences of underprivileged women and girls these films reveal the way these figures must deal with the continuing implications of sexism and patriarchy (Ortner 174; 189). The abjection of Heidi, in this context, allows for a clearer picture of the abjection of Kat

to emerge; both of these processes can be read as the result of corresponding trends that work to secure patriarchal masculinity.

Thus, Kat and Heidi are interpreted in this chapter as resecuring Australian masculinity through their abjection in each film. As proposed at the beginning of this chapter, this is not unique to Australian cinema; abjection of unruly heroines is evident in a range of filmic texts. Films from this same period from other Western countries exemplify a comparable process of abjection to the construction of Heidi, for example *Fish Tank* (2009, UK) and *Thirteen* (2003, US). The abjection of fifteen-year old Mia in the former and thirteen-year old Tracy in the latter registers cultural anxieties specific to the setting of each film: Mia represents anxieties in relation to white, underprivileged girlhood in tenement housing in Britain and Tracy the relationship between lower-class girlhood, consumer capitalism and developing girlhood sexuality in twenty-first century LA. Furthermore, the monstrous sexuality of Kat, her abjection throughout the film and the linking of her erotic potential with violence, signifies a continuation of the tradition of the teenage femme fatale that emerged in American cinema in the early 1990s with Ivy in *Poison Ivy* (1992) and Amy in *The Amy Fisher Story* (1993). Isolating Kat and Heidi, relative to their contextualisation in the Australian culture, provides a framework through which similar processes of abjecting the girl in terms of male anxieties and contextual factors can be understood to be operating in other films. In both *Fish Tank* and *Thirteen* the abjection of each girl is constructed in relation to the mother's boyfriend in ways analogous to the abjection of Heidi, albeit with key differences; but what they share is the signification of the permeability of the single-mother household and the anxieties this produces in relation to the sexually active adolescent girl. Moreover, Kat resembles Ivy and Amy in so far as her active sexual appetite provokes a considerable threat to the traditional family and adult masculinity in particular.

### **Abjection**

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection has been interpreted by Judith Butler as a process that demarcates culturally constructed boundaries. This interpretation allows for the boundaries Kristeva understands as universal to be reinterpreted as psychic processes

that are cultural constructions with contextual and historical specifications. In Kristeva's terms, abjection is the ritualistic process of confronting that which is deemed abject in the culture – waste, filth, the corpse – and then expelling the abject element. Central to this psychoanalytic theory is the idea that the subject is able to reaffirm its stability as a subject through the process of casting out that which is analogous to the unclean, but: "It is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). In patriarchal culture this disturbance is understood as the maternal authority, the "chora", while stability is found in paternal law, the Symbolic, and the entrance into language. Abjection is based in a pre-linguistic fear of being subsumed by the mother and Kristeva argues that the function of religious rituals "is to ward off the subject's fear of his own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (64). This theory outlines a psychic process through which the feminine is expelled in order that a stable subjectivity understood as masculine can be sustained.

Butler's application of the concept of abjection brings this psychoanalytic theory back into the realm of the cultural and helps to explain, in part at least, how the exclusion of Kat and Heidi and the repulsion they elicit works toward forwarding the politics and interests of white masculinity in relation to the Australian context. Abjection is here understood as a process that, through the acts of expulsion and repulsion, consolidates "culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation" (Butler, *Gender* 182). Using the work of Iris Young, Butler employs Kristeva's theory to make sense of the cultural formation of identities where those identities are based on exclusions:

Young's appropriation of Kristeva shows how the operation of repulsion can consolidate 'identities' founded on the instituting of the 'Other' or a set of Others through exclusion and domination. What constitutes through division the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of the subject is a border or boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. (Butler, *Gender* 182)

Part of that division includes the demarcation of gendered identities based on investing the bodies of the sexes with different meanings. When this understanding is

applied to an analysis of film it can be seen as a process of social regulation and control that is reliant upon a construction of female subjectivity embodied in ways that are tied to race and class. The abjection of the sexually promiscuous girl in *Suburban Mayhem* and *Somersault* rests on this form of embodiment: she is racialised as white in conjunction with a classing of this figure as lower-class (even where, as in the case of Kat, she is not necessarily positioned economically as lower-class; she is nonetheless linked with this classed identity because of her sexuality).

The differential embodiment of male and female sexuality and desire occurs in puberty. The changes that happen to the female body at this phase of sexual development, with the visible emergence of signifiers of womanhood, the “so-called” secondary sexual characteristics – breasts, hips, pubic hair, and onset of menstruation – are interpreted culturally as abject and passive (Grosz 203-204). For the girl, sexual maturation is understood as a regression to an infantile state, in that she is now encoded with a body that is no longer under her control – bleeding – as well as in the stage of coming womanhood, where this is signified as reproductive function (Grosz 204-205). For the boy, on the other hand, puberty is constructed as the beginning of a mature, active sexuality, where this activity is not simply understood in terms of reproductive capacities but also linked with pleasure (Grosz 204-205). This phase of sexual maturation for the girl is sometimes understood as a relatively identical experience for all girls, regardless of class, race and history (Grosz 207). But it is these identity categories, in connection with this phase of sexual development, that further determine which girls are positioned as abject.

Consequently, the abjection of the girl is not only related to the processes associated with sexual maturation; abjection is also based on the girl’s status as lower-class in relation to the cultural interpretation of her “whiteness.” This is more pronounced when the archaic connotations of the “slut” and “scrubber” are applied to the representations: “This family of words [drab, slut, slommack, slammerkin, traipse, malkin, trollop, draggletail (Greer qtd. in Attwood)] make clear the connections often made in language between sex, women, service, class, dirt and pollution” (Attwood 234). This understanding of the “slut” intersects with and complicates McRobbie’s theorisation of the new sexual contract. In McRobbie’s argument the new sexual contract operates in similar ways to patriarchy in a postfeminist era, policing the girl’s sexuality through the disciplining regimes of the fashion-beauty complex

(“post-feminist masquerade”) and through the performance of an active masculine sexual desire at the same time as the girl is required to remain sexually desirable to men (“phallic girl”). Sociologists employing McRobbie’s thesis find that girls negotiate with the hyper-sexual and hyper-feminine positions offered by the new sexual contract – favouring a sporty, androgynous appearance or emphasising academic success over conventional attractiveness – but this negotiation is done through differentiation from other girls, rather than through criticising male subjects or disrupting patriarchy (Renold and Ringrose; Jackson and Lyon; Charles; Lind and Irwin). Girls negotiate their positioning as hyper-feminine subjects by distinguishing themselves from other girls, in particular, reading the hyper-feminine girl as hyper-sexualised, lower-classed and racialised as white (Charles 64; Jackson and Lyons 241; Renold and Ringrose 324). This policing of other girls does not subvert patriarchy, rather it works to bring the intelligibility of girlhood sexuality back into a discourse of the body where other girls are coded as abject – white, lower-class, hyper-sexual “sluts.” Bringing these insights to bear on an analysis of film narratives, the abjection of the girl through such rhetoric as the “slut” (Kat) and the “slag” (Heidi) can be understood as a race and class based phenomenon that operates in relation to other girls in service of patriarchal hegemony.

Thus, as an image of abjection, the female body, especially one at the onset of sexual maturation, when it becomes encoded with those elements of the abject “as a body which bleeds, which leaks, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions” (Grosz 203-204), works as well as an indicator of class and race. As already suggested, this coding of the female body as abject is relatable to the rhetoric of the “slut”:

The history of the word ‘slut’ demonstrates a number of things; that historically women have often been seen in terms of their sexual relations to men, and often as a source of pollution; that the term is not only an indicator of gender but of class; and that it is used by and between women, as well as by men of women ... In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the word is most commonly used as a means of branding and exclusion, most notably of younger women and girls by their peers. (Attwood 235)

Both Heidi and Kat are deemed “sluts” within the diegetic world of the films and as such they bring these historical connotations of class with them: “As the history of the term shows, ‘slut’ carries particular class significance. It is the lowly, dirty, sleazy quality of the slut that marks her out, a quality that suggests that overt sexuality in woman is precisely not ‘classy’” (Attwood 238-239). Heidi is policed by the other girls in the film; for instance, a knowing snicker and crude comment from the female tourists Joe and Stuart associate with in Jindabyne mark Heidi as the abject figure against which class boundaries are redrawn. This is further emphasised when the father of her work colleague, Bianca, makes very clear the implications of the looks and the innuendo when he informs Heidi that she cannot associate with his daughter anymore because there are “two different types of girls.” As the “other” type of girl, Heidi is representative of the abject element in so far as she signifies the feminine sexuality that threatens to cross the border and the rules of the patriarchal order. Always-already abject figures because of their sexually mature/maturing bodies, Heidi and Kat are further abjected because they are raced and classed as hyper-sexual through their treatment by other girls in the films where they both signify “white trash.” The term “white trash” is both “classist slur” and “racial epithet”, marking out some whites as “a dysgenic race” who are “incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid” (Wray and Newitz qtd. in Attwood 239). Furthermore, the term “slut” is usually applied to white girls (White qtd. in Attwood 239). As abject figures, they represent the crossing of a border that is not only the fear of the feminine in patriarchal culture, it is also a threat bound up in discourses of race and class in relation to white, Australian culture.

### **Abjection in *Somersault* and *Suburban Mayhem***

As abject figures Kat and Heidi both represent this fear of the feminine, albeit in different ways. Heidi’s actions, from the decision to enter a town she has no place in, to the small gesture of picking lint off a man’s shirt in a shop and making him uncomfortable, as well as the drawn out segments set to ethereal music and shot in blurred lighting that show Heidi making her way through a room clearly marked “STAFF ONLY”, and with her constant touching: this tactile figure is constructed in ways that frequently elicit the discomfort associated with the abject. Heidi represents

abjection at the level of that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and it is this configuration of Heidi at the heart of the narrative that functions to “disturb” the identity of her love interest, Joe (Kristeva 4). As will be discussed in the final section on Australian masculinity, Heidi is a figure that works, through the process of abjection, to invite Joe to his own potential annihilation: “On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (Kristeva 2). Heidi represents abjection for Joe in the sense that she safeguards his subjectivity against and in relation to his culture where her function throughout the narrative is to rehabilitate his masculinity (his subjectivity) through this encounter with the abject.

Kat, on the other hand, represents the anxiety around the instability of the original taboo on incest that supports the homosocial bonds between men and thus patriarchal culture. The original taboo emphasises the boy desiring the mother and thus represents a restriction on an active male desire. In Kat this is inverted. She is the figure actively desiring, or at the very least flirting with the boundary of sexually desiring, the male subjects in her family. Kat is traisted in ways that signify the dangers of incest through the suggestion of an incestuous relationship with her brother Danny. Kat is shrouded in insinuations of this aberrant desire: she has her brother’s name tattooed on her back and there is speculation over whether he is the father of her daughter. Moreover, in several scenes with her father the affection shared between the two borders on the uncomfortable, a touch held too long or a manipulative kiss (orchestrated by Kat). This representation of femininity is suggestive of the way George Bataille “has linked the production of the abject to *the weakness of that prohibition*” (where that prohibition is the taboo on incest with the mother) (italics in orig. qtd. in Kristeva 64). Kat not only signifies the weakness of the prohibition, she inverts it: traditionally prohibited as passive object, Kat is instead the active subject inviting male familial desire. This exacerbates cultural anxieties that relate to resisting the “demoniacal potential of the feminine” (Kristeva 64-65). The way that Kat is represented as an unquantifiable threat to the men of Golden Grove (she even controls the men she sleeps with) gestures to intensifying anxieties since the sexual liberation of women after second wave feminism and indulges these anxieties through a hyperbolic representation of a girl abusing her newly emergent sexual and socio-economic power. Kat, as a sexually active girl with a voracious

sexual appetite configured as promiscuous, as “slutty”, represents the legitimisation of this abjection in order to support the broader oppression and degradation of women. The representation of Kat provides evidence of the weakness not only of the original taboo, but also of the weakness of what that taboo stands for: the idea that masculinity is a gender outside of the feminine and one that requires repeated rituals (monsterring/othering the feminine) in order to reaffirm this (paternal law).

The abjection of Kat and Heidi in these films is indicative of how this cultural process creates a boundary in order to maintain the social regulation and control of female sexuality (Butler, *Gender* 182). Both characters are excluded because of their sexuality and its articulation as promiscuous. Kat is a “slut”; a point blatantly made by the store clerk and then of course as the reason for her brother’s downfall after he defended her “honour”. Heidi too is referred to in terms that link her identity with her sexuality; the following dialogue between Heidi and Joe is a more subtle example of how this exclusion operates. In this scene Heidi and Joe meet formally for the first time, although Joe had been watching Heidi in the bar the night before when she left with a male tourist. Here they are discussing Jindabyne, his hometown:

Heidi: It’s nice here.

Joe: Nah, it’s alright. It’s just full of fucking tourists.

Heidi: Like me?

Joe: Nah, not like you.

The conversation seems ambiguous, and yet the viewer knows what Joe’s comment, delivered with a smirk and sidelong glance, means. The lower-class status of Heidi, her presence as a fifteen year old with no money and no home in a tourist town where she sleeps with men so she has a bed for the night is intelligible in cultural terms because she is the Other against which the white middle-class men and other girls define themselves. In Kristeva’s terms, Heidi represents the permeability of the inner/outer worlds of subjectivity based on an original fear of the maternal as a figure that permeates the subject’s psychic boundaries. In Butler’s discussion of the abject:

Regardless of the compelling metaphors of the spatial distinctions of inner and outer, they remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of

fantasies, feared and desired. 'Inner' and 'outer' make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability, this coherence, is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. Hence, 'inner' and 'outer' constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. (Butler, *Gender* 182)

That mediating boundary, in terms of the representation of Kat and Heidi, is a patriarchal definition of feminine sexuality that requires the sexually promiscuous girl for its coherence in order to justify the subjugation of the feminine more broadly and thus to consolidate the hegemony of masculinity. In the Australian context, as will be elaborated in the final section, this has arguably intensified since the decade of the 1990s and the growing perception of crisis in masculinity since that period.

This "crisis" is registered in the films through the representation of key male characters in more feminine terms. In *Somersault*, Joe is characterised as sensitive. Several scenes are dedicated to the expression of his inner angst: he attempts to kiss a male friend of the family and fights with his oldest friend over his desire for Heidi. In *Suburban Mayhem*, Kat's father, John Skinner, is a weakened paternal figure unable to handle his "sexually liberated" daughter. Characterisations such as Joe and John articulate the fear associated with the feminisation of men in Australian culture. But they also show how the recentralising of masculine interests is reliant upon the presence of an abject girl. The culturally defined mediating boundary is demarcated through the actions of this girl. Her actions, constructed as abject as she crosses this border, reaffirm and justify the cultural order as patriarchal through the threat she presents to it. Kat, through her transgressions, represents the justification for paternal intervention and in the process re-legitimises the need for a paternal order in a context anxious over its necessity: the boundary she transgresses is paternal law. Moreover, Kat is constructed as the reason for the problems men experience; her brother is in jail because she is positioned as problematically engaging in casual sex. Danny's defence of Kat's "honour" seems to be the central joke of the film: within the diegesis she *is* a "slut." However, Danny, "traditionalist as he is revealed to be" (Stratton 20), is a figure redeemed by the narrative conclusion because he is the only one who successfully holds Kat accountable for her actions, rendering Kat the perpetual victimiser. Heidi, by contrast, represents the abjection that functions to

rehabilitate masculinity. She becomes the necessary presence from which Joe and the Jindabyne community distance themselves in order to reaffirm a cultural boundary that is not only patriarchal but also raced as unblemished whiteness and classed as the hegemonic middle.

The reaffirmation of the cultural boundary of paternal law through the process of abjection operates ideologically in *Suburban Mayhem* through the construction of Kat as a quintessentially Australian femme fatale. Barbara Creed's application of the theory of abjection as "an extremely useful hypothesis for an investigation into the representation of women in the horror film" also works with *Suburban Mayhem* because while it does not seem to be generically affiliated with horror it represents a similar process of abjection (72). Creed, applying the theory of abjection as a description of the origins of patriarchal culture, shows how the process of abjection in horror films operates as "a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears" (86-87). Creed views the "central ideological project of the popular horror film" as a process of purification, where a descent into the abject (which is symbolically feminine, chiefly maternal), functions as a "modern defilement rite" that allows maternal authority and paternal law to be separated (71-72). Bruno D. Starrs interprets the figure of Kat as an example of Creed's "monstrous feminine" and calls for the film to be considered in the horror genre (2). However, Starrs's interpretation of Kat as the monstrous feminine can be taken further than categorising the film as a horror, particularly when considering that Kat, as a figure blending qualities from several tropes – scrubber, monstrous feminine and femme fatale – is typically Australian. Kat's calculated act of patricide generically affiliates her with the tradition of the femme fatale, but unlike the glamorous and beautiful figures of American cinema, such as Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (1992), Kat is slightly overweight, uneducated, sexually rapacious, and has a penchant for foul-language, more "bogan" than urban sophisticate (Starrs 3). According to Tom O'Regan, "ugliness and ordinariness" are key features of Australian cinema (243-245). Through excessive performances of the mundane and the banal, the figure of the "Ugly Australian" – intolerant, racist, sexist and boorish – dramatises and emphasises the worst parts of the culture and presents these as representative of it (O'Regan 249-250). In Starrs's analysis, this focus on the ordinary renders the exploits of these characters as more truthful (3). This "ordinariness", when rethought

in gendered terms, is perhaps less “truthful” and rather more evidence of the function of the abject girl as perpetuating a patriarchal and class based abjection of a certain type of Australian girl, the “scrubber”:

As precarious margin squatters they [scrubbers] are welcome pollutants in a culture hostile to female unruliness *and* potent reminders of that culture’s penchant for quietening dissenting voices ... As a figure tied to notions of our land, our need to domesticate, our blokkiness and our (seemingly permanent) ties with Britain’s antiquated class system, she embodies the a-temporal gender frictions of this country. A country that while producing strident female voices also subversively works to silence them. Women who are poor, sexual, loud, excessive, wild, dissatisfied with their domestic cages; women who take up too much space physically and emotionally; women who *have* to assert their wants; potentially threatening women – are *usually* dealt a handicap. They are *usually* lumped together as *scrubbers*. They arouse pity because they ultimately cannot function without men. To misogynist audiences they’re heaven-sent instruments of propaganda... (italics in orig. Waddell 194)

Kat represents an instance of the monstrous feminine whose cultural function is illuminated through the relationship she forms with the scrubber. Kat is perhaps less illustrative of Australian cinema as a kind of celebration of the banal and rather more evidence of policing the dangerous potential inherent in all Australian girls to white masculine hegemony.

The function Kat performs for patriarchy in this context of Australian cinema is made explicit because of her positioning within a particular family dynamic – softened paternal figure and absent mother. The interpretation of Kat as the monstrous feminine helps to explain the role of the paternal figure in this dynamic. Recalling that abjection involves an encounter with that which is analogous to the unclean and this encounter is determined by a culturally mediated boundary; in Creed’s terms: “Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (67). Kat threatens the stability of the paternal order through her loud, excessive and murderous

impulses. And these transgressions are more pronounced because of the presence of the softened paternal figure. Her father indulges her and fails to discipline her and yet he also largely escapes blame for her criminal activities; the inclusion of the drug-addicted mother who abandoned the family absolves John. Moreover, this insinuates a matrilineal line to the monstrosity, as Auntie Dianne's final remark on Katrina and her mother for the documentary crew makes clear: "You just can't get clean water from a dirty tank."

This representation of the family dynamic in the film, the monstrous mother and the victimised father, operates to separate out the maternal authority from the paternal law. Furthermore, when the connotations of the scrubber are applied to this representation alongside the function of the monstrous feminine as a figure that brings "about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" then it becomes clear that the threat Kat represents is embedded in the colonial history that designated women as either whores or moral police (Summers). In this context Auntie Dianne represents the moral side of this equation, the "God's Police"; while the "mothers" in the text represent the "Damned Whores." In fact, there is an almost parodic element to the way this dichotomy is presented. The presumably childless Auntie Dianne is the voice of moral reason. However she also represents a "bad-taste aesthetic" in Australian cinema which is part of a broader "Gothic aesthetic in Australian cinema." Identifiable by the presence of "problematic families and relationships, a certain sadness or sense of loss, profound irony and a 'crude and energetic fight by the underdog'" (Mortimer qtd. in Gottschall 295), these films employ a satirical tone and are considered tasteless because they "refuse to take themselves too seriously" (Quinn qtd. in Gottschall 295).

When the documentary crew point out that Danny is, in fact, a murderer (after Dianne sympathises with him), she replies: "Yes, but that doesn't make him a *bad* person." Moreover, the way Kat repeatedly invokes her status as a mother, when asked about Kenny's conviction: "As a mother I've gotta worry about who's out there", this is Kat simply playing up to what she knows she needs to say. These parodic elements, however, also work self-reflexively to highlight the Australian history on womanhood and could work as a humorous critique of those simplistic designations. Nevertheless, the abjection of these mother figures as tied to the body – Kat's sexuality and skimpy clothing and her mother's addiction and its equation with

excess<sup>47</sup> – arguably undermines the critique. Thus, on one level the film is parodic of cultural assumptions regarding white, Australian female subjectivity and these comedic elements invite audiences to be critical of this positioning of the girl’s sexuality as abject. However, beneath this humorous approach the film ultimately does abject Kat in ways that are represented as justifiable. This is because the sexual identity of the “slut” with its raced, classed and polluting elements is so entrenched it is difficult for this figure to transgress without simultaneously reaffirming the boundary it transgresses.

As a scrubber, Kat embodies an Australian version of the phallic girl and her sexual and intoxicated excesses function as “licensed transgressions” of patriarchy. According to McRobbie, licensed transgressions form a circular relationship with the hegemony of masculinity because by performing this gender identity the girl perpetuates the dominance of masculinity but this operates from within the terms of patriarchy. These transgressions are licensed because these figures restabilise gender hierarchies through the way they accept masculine hegemony by conforming to the terms of male desire, and they are understood as transgressions because the girl’s capabilities are articulated in masculine terms, i.e. sexual activity, drinking, thereby transgressing traditional conceptions of femininity (84). The liminal quality of this licensed transgression – she occupies both the privileges of masculinity at the same time as she transgresses traditional femininity in service of a postfeminist version of “empowerment” – places this figure within the same cultural terrain as the cinematic trope of the teenage femme fatale. Occupying the space between patriarchal objectification and sexual empowerment, the femme fatale signifies a similar licensed transgression: transgressing the boundary of passive feminine sexual desire by performing conventional sexiness and appearing sexually available (Farrimond 79), she restabilises the patriarchal sex/gender system by performing that sexuality in terms of male desire.

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<sup>47</sup> Karen Kopelson makes the argument in “Radical Indulgence: Excess, Addiction, and Female Desire” that women’s excesses, in the form of drinking and taking drugs, are objectionable because they represent a transgression of the normative in gendered behaviour: “Rather the drunk/drugged, ‘addicted’ female body, because it is equated with a confusing sexual excess at once inviting and repellent, and because it enacts male prerogatives of occupying – or, might we say, spilling into – public space in forceful ways, disturbs several normative ideals of what is befitting gendered, sexual conduct for a woman. The drunken/drugged woman’s way of living and being in the world, intentional or not, read as radical or repulsive, becomes an embodied refusal of gendered specific enforcements around inebriated and other ‘indecorous’ acts” (10).

The teenage femme fatale in contemporary American cinema, unlike her older and earlier cinematic counterparts:

has evolved since the mid-to late-1990s into an increasingly complicated figure, whose own desires and motivations are not only acknowledged but also foregrounded. Rather than being punished at the end of the films, then, the new teenage femme fatale is celebrated for her ability to escape justice. (Farrimond 79)

That Kat gets her beachside home and avoids prison for her part in her father's murder supports the idea that "the femme fatale's sexual conquests are advanced as evidence of her agency and independence" (Farrimond 79). Jon Stratton proposes that "murderous Katrina" is a "role model for the citizens of the new Australian neoliberal state" (30), arguing that the narrative acceptance of Kat's revenge functions as a validation of the possessive individualism which has become a hallmark of neoliberal culture in Australia (19). But while neoliberalism has been touted as a de-gendered phenomenon – under the rubric of EEO (equal employment opportunity) it is an individualising principle – it has nonetheless indirectly degraded the "position of the majority of women, at the same time as it celebrates the entry of a minority of women into the officially de-gendered heaven of professional success" (Connell, *Masculinities* 255). In terms of the representation of Kat, like the American depictions analysed by Farrimond, this figure presents the "strange social currency in a world where the postfeminist rhetoric of sexual empowerment is in permanent competition with the sexual double standards that continue to prevail" (87). Kat is a figure whose transgressions may work to forward the neoliberal individual as the new cultural dominant in Australian culture, but these transgressions also work to reaffirm the existence of paternal law. Kat does get away with murder; however, the audience is positioned to concur with Danny's dismissal of her and to feel outraged by her act of patricide. The way that the figure of Kat is raced and classed, indeed the way that Kat represents a distinctly Australian version of the femme fatale justifies the abjection of this figure. The intersection of the discourses of class and race with this figure's sexuality undermines the potential for empowerment via sexual autonomy. Furthermore, reading Kat's power in terms of possessive individualism – as a self-interested consumer – ignores the implications of her sex as female within patriarchal culture and its connection to the aforementioned categories of class and

race. It is the latter that re-legitimises the necessity for paternal law. The redemption of Danny, in this context, allows for the politics and interests of young, white masculinity to be reasserted when he reveals his morality through his disgust at Kat for murdering their father, and as such distances himself from a specifically female form of the possessive individual.

### **Australian Masculinity**

As suggested in the opening of this chapter, Australian national identity has overwhelmingly been constituted by white men as the active figures in, as well as the commentators on, what constitutes that identity (Bode 2). The figure of the “Aussie battler” is one such image. A term “predominantly used to describe men – particularly working-class men, sporting ‘heroes’ and farmers” (Bode 3), this archetype of Australian masculinity is underlined and informed by “the disdain for women, Indigenous peoples and the environment” (Bode 7). David Coad has complicated the legend of “hypermasculinity” attributed to Australian masculinity, suggesting there is “gender trouble” “Down Under”, citing the “handful of queer oddballs” that disrupt the tenacity of a long-held fantasy of “heterosexual hypermasculinity” (11-13). Nevertheless, Coad’s “queer reading of the ‘real bloke’ Oz fantasy” interrogates how this “sex/gender fantasy” is based on the enduring images of the hypermasculine archetypes (14). Comprised of historical figures like the “virile diggers”, “larrikins” and “the Australian bushman” and more recently “rugby players” and “surfers”, the Australian national identity has long been imagined as “a haven for hefty heterosexual macho men surrounded by their mates” (Coad 13).

This image, as Connell, Bode, and Coad all make clear, is based on the exclusion of women, the Indigenous population of Australia and non-Anglo-Celtic ethnic Others. This does not mean, however, that these groups do not have a role to play in supporting the fantasy. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, women perform a pivotal function for the making of modern nations as a masculinist project, where “women are relegated to minor, often symbolic, roles in nationalist movements and conflicts, either as icons of nationhood, to be elevated and defended, or as the booty or spoils of war, to be denigrated and disgraced” (Enloe qtd. Nagel 244). This

translates into the Australian context where the “myths of origins for (white) Australia are reliant on the bush or outback, tamed by (white) men and the eradication of an Indigenous Other ... [the] protection of white women from an immigrant, ethnic Other is part of the discourse of this white ‘Aussie’ manhood” (Williams 5). The dominance of the image of the virile, hypermasculine Australian man has been challenged by cultural shifts such as feminism, the LGBT movement, Indigenous rights, immigration and changing economic conditions, all of which disrupt the hegemony of white masculinity in Australian culture. However, certain representations of white masculinity can be read as negotiating with these changes in ways that recentralise their interests while also subsuming the interests of others into this newly emerging narrative.

This negotiation of white masculinity is comparable to a similar response in American culture, albeit with significant temporal differences. Prevalent in America since the 1960s, it is only since the 1990s that white men in Australia have been consistently presented and understood as suffering a similar crisis of masculinity (Bode 5). As further evidence of the globalisation and homogenisation of contemporary masculinities (Connell qtd. in Bode 5), the increasing priority of “American discourses of masculinity and nationhood” in Australia and the West more broadly, is one explanation for this shift, but, according to Bode, this argument is too simplistic (5). Instead, she argues, this “leaching of the discourse of masculinity crisis into Australia ... is enabled by a change”:

a receptivity in Australia to a new model of white male hegemony. Many recent debates have made the Aussie battler’s relationship with the land more difficult to sustain. Native title has been (nominally) awarded and refugees are seen as invading Australian shores. Environmental debates have likewise disrupted the myth of white men’s rights over the land. Potentially, the acceptance and support given by Australia’s government to the idea that the West is engaged in a war against terror also creates a fertile ground for the idea that white men are in crisis. (Bode 5)

As the representations of men change in response to contextual factors, so too must depictions of women and girls adjust in order to support the emergent perceptions of

white masculinity. Bode recognises these variations in the masculinities of the battler and man in crisis:

This man in crisis differs from the traditional icon of the Aussie battler in a fundamental way. In the battler's life of hardship and struggle, only one thing is never in doubt – his masculinity; indeed the more he struggles, the more his masculinity is affirmed. In contrast, the man in crisis is feminised by the challenges he faces, a feminisation that is particularly evident in illustrations of bodily harm. (Bode 3-4)

This feminisation of the male characters in *Suburban Mayhem* and *Somersault* reinvigorates the perception of masculinity as a site of struggle. The representations of Heidi and Kat support this response through the course of their abjection in relation to key male characters in the texts. John, Kat's father, is stabbed repeatedly by Rusty, but of more significance is his characterisation as sensitive and effeminate, a striking contrast to the hard-edges and compulsive manipulations of Kat. John has a soft voice, a gentle manner and a quiet naivety about him in the way he repeatedly attempts to "discipline" Kat. Joe is a similarly sensitive figure, but, like Kat's brother, Danny, he also exhibits moments of the hypermasculinity reminiscent of the Aussie battler trope. Stoic, working the land, and dismissive of Heidi when he chooses to be: "I'm fucking that girl from the servo" he tells Stuart, significantly not "dating" and with no reference to her name; this quip is emblematic of that "disdain for women" outlined by Bode as an underlying feature of the Aussie battler. But this inclusion of hypermasculinity does not disrupt the feminisation of this character; rather it works alongside it as further evidence of the emergent defensiveness around white masculinity. Anna M. Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling argue that:

hypermasculinity differs from Connell's (1987, 1995) identification of 'hegemonic masculinity.' The latter refers to a tradition of masculinity, whereas hypermasculinity reflects a reactionary stance. It arises when agents of hegemonic masculinity feel threatened or undermined, thereby needing to inflate, exaggerate, or otherwise distort their traditional masculinity. (Agathangelou and Ling 519)

This dual presentation of masculinity – the feminised masculine figure and the hypermasculine reactionary figure – contributes to the understanding that there is an

emergent defensiveness around white masculinity since the 1990s in Australian culture. This version of white masculinity takes into account the wounded figure from the American discourse while simultaneously accounting for the “Aussie bloke” figure that is distinctly Australian through moments of hypermasculinity. Abjecting the sexualised girl supports this positioning of white masculinity. These figures of girlhood provide evidence of the ongoing role of women for maintaining a masculine/national identity that is evident in Australian culture historically (Colonial) and more recently (best exemplified by the Cronulla race riots in 2005<sup>48</sup>).

Foregrounding the girl as a disruptive figure allows these representations of masculinity to blend into the background of the narrative. The necessity for paternal law is reaffirmed by the presence of supporting male characters who, in terms of the sex/gender system, ultimately work to “police” that law. For example, Danny assumes this mantle of patriarchal authority after the softened paternal figure in John is murdered. This represents a shift along generational and hierarchical lines, from father to son, where the softened paternal figure is emblematic of a pro-welfare stance in Australian culture and is thus eliminated in favour of the traditional masculine subject; Danny is a hardened neoliberal figure that makes Kat accountable for her actions by withdrawing his affections. It is the anxieties provoked by the girl’s rampant sexuality (and the inextricable relationship between her sexuality and her act of patricide in the film) that consolidate the necessity for this intervention. Moreover, the masculinity of the younger, white male figures (Joe and Danny) is rehabilitated through the process of abjecting the figure of the girl<sup>49</sup> – Danny may be

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<sup>48</sup> The 2005 Cronulla race riots in Sydney began when a group of volunteer lifesavers were assaulted by men of “Middle Eastern appearance” and escalated a week later in a racially motivated riot involving approximately 5000 people (the escalation was linked to the Sydney gang rapes in 2000). In terms of the cultural function of these riots, according to Marise Williams: “Rhetoric concerning the protection of ‘white Australian women’ has circulated in public discourse, media reporting and political comment on the Cronulla Beach Riots of 11 December 2005 . . . . [As well as the] 2000 Sydney gang rapes by Muslim men and the 2006 Ramadan sermon of the Islamic cleric Sheikh Taj el-Din Al Hilaly. The discursive arrangements of this public dialogue and activity among men continue to frame the protection of white Australian women as a neo-colonial patriotic duty and paternal obligation” (12). For Bode, the images of white men that circulated around these riots crystallised a discourse of men-in-crisis in Australia: “The image that became definitive of the Cronulla race riots – of the young white man, draped in an Australian flag with the slogan, ‘We grew here, you flew here,’ painted on his body (Hudson) – signifies a particularly blatant symbol of this juxtaposition of whiteness, masculinity, self-proclaimed suffering and nationalism” (5-6).

<sup>49</sup> Kenny is an interesting figure in this context because he too is abjected in the film as a mentally disabled male subject. Because of his disability he produces a boyish innocence that is unsettling for notions of a hypermasculine Australian character. Kenny functions, therefore, as evidence of the way patriarchy operates as an economy of power not only between men and women but also in a hierarchical relationship between men (Buchbinder, *Studying* 68-69). In this sense Kenny’s abjection

a murderer, but he is redeemed through his punishment of Kat; while Joe, as will be elaborated, represents a clear rehabilitation of the Aussie battler through this figure's relationship with a discourse of masculinity in crisis and its structural support in the abjection of the scrubber.

*Somersault* is exemplary in this regard: it foregrounds a female figure who is threatening because of her status as out of place while never really advancing this figure's potential storyline beyond an escape-from and then return-to the mother. Meanwhile, this figure facilitates a bildungsroman for the man-in-crisis in Joe. What precisely is threatening about Heidi (and is even more pronounced in Kat) is that she transgresses the "normative ideals of what is befitting gendered sexual conduct for a woman" (Kopelson 10). In acting as though she were "free", occupying male public space in a bar when she is (female and) underage, engaging in sex without the endgame of reproduction and without being in a heterosexually sanctioned romantic relationship this figure threatens the "rules surrounding femininity" and the future-directed role assigned to women: "If historically we have needed male bodies that are industrious and productive, we have needed female bodies that are diligently reproductive" (Kopelson 8; 17). In relation to the masculinity of male characters, however, her transgressions of traditional femininity provide an opportunity to rehabilitate her aggrieved love interest. In not respecting the borders, positions and rules of the culture Heidi is able to disturb the identity of Joe and thus facilitate a coming of age for his character in ways that are tied specifically to his gendered identity as masculine in a chain of signification with his status as white and middle-class (Kristeva 4). Joe's status as the middle-class son of successful, local ranchers positions him as a descendent of the "Aussie battler", a point which may explain part of his general dissatisfaction. Because where the "battler" was characterised as a white man who has "few natural advantages, works doggedly and with little reward, who struggles hard for a livelihood, and who displays enormous courage in doing so", Joe is not characterised in this way (Lawson qtd. Bode 2). Rather, his discontent

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works to further consolidate the hegemony of the hypermasculinity exhibited by Danny. This certainly complicates the suggestion that the girl is the figure that is "pivotal" to this consolidation of a masculine national identity. However it is not only Kenny's disability that renders him abject, it is also the way he is used by Kat – she seduces, manipulates and frames him – which adds to his abjection in the text. In usurping another source of female power (Danny's caretaker and sister) Kat's use of Kenny furthers the threat she presents to paternal authority and subsequent need for intervention. Kenny might be her willing victim and an abject figure, but he also functions as another point around which she conducts her power, thereby inviting further justification for her abjection.

arguably originates from his position as the passive beneficiary of the struggles of his forefathers. This in effect internalises the traits of the Aussie battler in Joe, his struggles are interiorised and emotionalised, which in turn allows Joe to be remasculinised through the masculinising of his emotions. As Robinson explains, wounded masculinity risks metaphorical femininity, but this is managed by making an emotional release look violent (131-132). Heidi enables this for Joe when she passes out and is almost sexually assaulted by two male tourists and Joe comes to her aid, angrily and violently evicting the pair before speeding out of the parking lot and leaving a naked Heidi in his wake. In the current context white middle-class male subjects, like Joe, are increasingly distanced from the opportunity to exhibit their masculinity through physical labour or through overcoming positions of economic disadvantage, and thus emotionalised violence in relation to a girl becomes an opportunity to reaffirm their manliness.

As suggested earlier, Heidi functions primarily as a figure that, through her status as abject, invites Joe into the position in which his subjectivity is threatened, but in the process allows him to cast out that which threatens the stability of that masculine identity. Where the abject and abjection are the “primers of my culture”, Heidi represents the abject border; the “primer” of Joe’s culture (Kristeva 2). Through Butler’s interpretation, Heidi can be read as the culturally constructed mediating boundary between a masculine identity that must now temporarily occupy a feminised position. In order for this masculine subject to reseal its boundaries, it must be destabilised by the abject element (Heidi), in essence, emasculated – as Barthes puts it: “A man is not feminised because he is inverted but because he is in love” (qtd. in Sedgwick 28). It is this feminisation, the way Heidi facilitates the point for its transformation into a masculine character, which allows for the rehabilitation of the white male subject, Joe. Heidi repeatedly crosses boundaries with Joe: she is forward when he is reluctant to have sex with her; after they sleep together she calls him incessantly, leading his mother to tell him: “Can you ask that girl not to call here at this hour?”; she “embarrasses” him once they are seen together by his friends because she is “rough trade”; and she infuses their break-up with dramatic visibility by running after him naked in the motel parking lot. That he is drawn to this figure he seems to want to simultaneously abject is captured succinctly in the following

dialogue. Joe is telling his mother's friend, Richard, about Heidi and why he cannot seem to stay away:

Joe: You know when you were a kid; did your Mum ever used to spray perfume in the air and sort of walk through it?

Richard: Yeah, I think she did.

Joe: Yeah, well, she's like that.

Richard: Like perfume?

Joe: No ... You see, when you leave you can still smell her on your skin ... [exhales loudly] ... fuck.

In permeating Joe's boundaries as a figure of abjection Heidi provides the opportunity for Joe to reconsolidate his masculinity along culturally mediated lines. This mediation between inner and outer – which includes the assumption of a fixed, internal gendered identity – could bring the status of a gendered identity into suspect territory (Butler, *Gender* 182-183). However, because of the way ideology can be read to operate in narrative – as a closed space that articulates an ideological position by the conclusion because the subject at the beginning of the narrative is different from the subject at the end – the changes Joe undertakes because of his confrontation with the abject element in Heidi allows for the cultural boundary (patriarchy) to be reaffirmed.

In the absence of traditionally masculine pursuits, women and girls perform a pivotal function for men to reaffirm their masculinity. This destabilisation of masculinity is understood through the following discourses circulating around the man in crisis in an Australian context: "Two themes dominate such discussions: men no longer have access to, or are unable to fulfil, a masculine role; and men are emotionally disconnected from one another" (Bode 3). Joe inherits his position, he does not work for it; he fights with his oldest friend, Stuart, a figure that repeatedly polices his interactions with Heidi, and attempts to kiss his mother's gay friend, Richard, following which Richard tells him: "I don't think you know what you want." But because the film foregrounds his relationship with Heidi, and thus privileges an encounter with a fear of the feminine, it obscures historically and culturally

entrenched problems with Australian masculinity. Instead, the film forwards an ideology that legitimises the abjection of Heidi along classed and raced lines while Joe, in the end, finds some peace from this relationship and presumably returns to working the land. Meanwhile, Heidi returns to the mother and a home life that is framed as failing because of the mother's single status: the nuclear family is corrupted and the female-led, sole parent household is represented as a space easily permeated by men.

Reading the sexual promiscuity of Heidi and Kat in the context of Australian masculinity suggests that the transgressive potential of these figures as contravening traditional and postfeminist tenets of female sexuality, their ultimate abjection, functions as an opportunity to remasculinise male characters and reinstate the necessity for paternal law. While the argument made in this chapter is in some ways fairly obvious – abjection of sexualised females is as culturally entrenched as blaming Eve in the garden – it is nonetheless worth restating when similar rhetoric underpins the subjugation of a woman in the highest office in Australian political culture. Moreover, as the next chapter will demonstrate, the difficulty in resisting the patriarchal meanings that construct the gendered identity of the female sex remains in evidence even in films self-reflexively engaged in criticising misogyny.

## Chapter Six

### *The Girl Who Performed Masculinity:*

#### **A Patriarchal Renegotiation of Gender and Power in the *Millennium* Trilogy**

Boo: We're gonna go full-on *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* on this guy.

Pennsatucky: What's us gettin' tattoos gonna teach him?

Boo: [laughs] No, see, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, it's Swedish. It means we're gonna rape him back.

“Don't Make Me Come Back There.” *Orange Is the New Black* 2015.

Lisbeth Salander, the female protagonist of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy – *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2006) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest* (2007) – is a recognisable trope of female revenge against abusive men. The appeal of Lisbeth as a vengeful heroine increased when the novels were adapted to films in Sweden in 2009 (Niels Arden Oplev; Daniel Alfredson) and the first book translated and adapted for the screen in the United States in 2011 (David Fincher). *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in its original title in Swedish, *Män som hatar kvinnor*, literally “Men Who Hate Women”, prepares audiences for a progressive depiction of female subjectivity actively resisting the constraints of patriarchy. Lisbeth's construction in relation to key male characters certainly appears to subvert patriarchal gender identifications. Unlike the girls analysed thus far, she is not married; she is not her father's daughter, indeed she is his nemesis; she is a bisexually active tomboy with multiple partners; she appears uninterested in reproducing; and, unlike Kat and Heidi, she takes her pleasure from sexual encounters. Sex is not a form of currency or manipulation for Lisbeth, it is a fulfilment of desire. And yet even with these non-traditional feminine signifiers present, this chapter will argue, she performs a pivotal function for repositioning a patriarchal hierarchy between the male characters over the course of the three films.

Lisbeth's struggle, in contrast to the function she performs for male characters, is constructed in relation to first-wave feminism, namely the right to be legally

recognised as an adult<sup>50</sup>. Having been declared legally incompetent as a child, at the age of twenty-four and at the time of the film's setting she remains under the care of a legal guardian. Lisbeth fights, in the end, for the status of personhood by law. This conflict between Lisbeth and the State might suggest that even with almost a century of change for women in terms of gender equality, old battles are yet to be won. Winning the right to the vote, as women in Sweden did in 1921, does not necessarily liberate the female subject from her cultural function as confirming the masculinity of men, nor does it undo the traditional link between male subjectivity and the theoretical, philosophical and historical understanding of the individual as coterminous with maleness. The presence of key male characters, in particular the sentimentalised, sympathetic and politically gender aware Mikael Blomkvist, means that the films also include another significant power struggle.

Mikael's confrontations occur in the visible public domain and his fight on behalf of Lisbeth is also in some ways a fight *through* the figure of Lisbeth in order to ultimately rearrange a patriarchal hierarchy along generational lines. In contrast to Lisbeth's more private contest to be recognised as an independent adult, Mikael's encounters play out in some of the most powerful and visible institutions of the modern West – in the political, media and financial arenas of contemporary capitalist culture. Lisbeth functions as the highly visible point of exchange within this broader conflict between men, while her own struggle, over what she signifies as an individual, is focused around a more masculinised version of the postfeminist subject. Decontextualised from a feminist collective politics, Lisbeth's power is constructed in relation to an individualism that is a neoliberal construct. She is a capable and independent heroine perpetuating a postfeminist ideology of female personhood, as Anna Westerståhl Stenport and Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm argue: "The Salander character is part of what scholars are calling the postfeminist paradigm by which popular culture driven by capitalism and prevailing patriarchal norms draws on the individual woman as a figure to set society right" (170).

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<sup>50</sup> Sweden was incredibly progressive in this regard. Unmarried women were officially declared by parliament as of "legal majority" via royal dispensation in 1810, making Sweden the first country worldwide to legally, albeit informally, recognise women as adults ("Women's Rights Timeline 1800"). It invites the question, and this chapter will explore it, of how "progressive" it is for a heroine to be constructed with the primary aim of achieving "adulthood" by law when contextually this was initiated two centuries prior to the setting of the narrative.

As a prominent depiction of the empowered girl, Lisbeth Salander has become another visual signifier around which debates over girlhood, gender identity and female claims to power have played out in the second decade of the new millennium in Western culture. Academic attention has varied from viewing Lisbeth as a signifier for individuality increasingly distanced from feminist politics to interpreting this figure as a site for a complex renegotiation of gendered identities. As further evidence of “pedestrian” discussions of feminism, Lisbeth represents a “popular-culture convention of individuality” (Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm 158). The narrative slippage between her victimisation and redemption, and the way this cuts across the traditional gender boundaries ascribed to the victim and the hero function in narrative, have led some to argue that Lisbeth lays bare “the tenuous links assumed in our patriarchal culture between notions of power and powerlessness, masculinity and femininity” (Brown, “Torture, Rape, Action Heroines” 47). Lisbeth’s acclaim and the gender debates this figure has inspired make her a productive figure through which to conclude a thesis on the contested nature of the girl’s power in contemporary cinemas of girlhood.

The *Millennium* series has certainly been popular in all of its incarnations<sup>51</sup>, however this chapter will take as its focus the Swedish adaptation to the screen<sup>52</sup> because of the way this version downplays Lisbeth’s heterosexual attachment to her friend and co-investigator Mikael. This change in the narrative should, presumably, diminish some of the power of the heterosexual matrix in creating Lisbeth as a culturally intelligible subject, and, perhaps, offer resistance to this position. However, this does not mean the power of patriarchy is eliminated. In fact, even with this romantically disinterested, but nonetheless sexualised depiction of Lisbeth, together with an arguably softened version of Mikael (relative to Daniel Craig in the American adaptation), the films still register the power the heterosexual matrix has in governing wider relationships between the sexes. In downplaying the possibility that Lisbeth is emotionally invested in Mikael romantically, as is the case in the

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<sup>51</sup> In the US the Swedish adaptations of the films have been enormously lucrative: “Combined, the Millennium Trilogy should end up grossing upwards of \$25 million in North America. “Dragon Tattoo” is among the 25 highest grossing foreign language films ever in the United States, while both “Fire” and “Nest” should easily end up in the top 40” (Knegt). Furthermore, the novels, as of 2009, had “sold nearly thirteen million copies worldwide” and been translated into thirty-five languages (Santikos qtd. in Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm 157). Fincher’s American adaptation grossed over \$100 million in the US and earned five academy award nominations in 2011, including Rooney Mara for Best Actress (*Box Office Mojo*).

<sup>52</sup> The first film was directed by Niels Arden Oplev, the second and third by Daniel Alfredson.

American film and in the books, the friendship between the two is foregrounded in a way that represents these two characters as equals. Furthermore, the Swedish films privilege the autonomy of the female character in ways that make her appear less invested in men for cultural intelligibility. Lisbeth not only resists a romantic attachment to Mikael (as well as to Miriam Wu, her other sexual partner in the texts), she is distinctly abrupt in this refusal. Indeed, the representation of Lisbeth's sexuality and romantic attachments is ambiguous. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that this figure remains imbricated with bonds of masculinity and thus her function as a conduit for this broader renegotiation of patriarchal power continues in a similar vein to the girls analysed in previous chapters, even while presenting a challenge to traditional gender norms.

The *Millennium* trilogy is a crime drama/thriller anchored by the central relationship between Mikael and Lisbeth as they investigate two different cases. The first, the main storyline of the first film, is a professional appointment, while the second revolves around the false conviction of Lisbeth herself for triple homicide. At first these crimes seem unrelated, but in fact the first film, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, foregrounds the way the use of women has been built into the patriarchal system through an investigation that reveals a father/son homosocial bond enacted through the abuse of women. The following two films reveal that Lisbeth herself has been subjected to this positioning since she was twelve. The first film begins when Mikael, an investigative journalist who is an idealist in relation to his profession, loses a libel case against billionaire financier Hans-Erik Wennerström once his sources for the case against Wennerström, already published in his widely respected magazine, *Millennium*, disappear. Before he begins his three month prison sentence he is invited by Henrik Vanger, patriarch of the wealthy Vanger family, to investigate the mysterious disappearance and presumed murder of his beloved granddaughter, Harriet Vanger, forty years earlier. Mikael is unaware that Lisbeth, an exceptionally talented hacker/investigator, had already been hired by Henrik's assistant to do a background check on Mikael. Lisbeth soon does become known to Mikael when she continues to hack his computer, solving part of the current mystery around Harriet and "deliberately" informing Mikael of her knowledge by sending him an easily traceable email with the current material deciphered and the accompanying note: "Read it and weep Kalle Blomkvist." Mikael enlists her help

and they solve the case, in the process discovering that behind Harriet's disappearance was a father/son pair involved in raping, torturing and murdering women for over four decades. The killer, Henrik's grandson and Harriet's brother, Martin, categorises and dismisses the victims: "Those kind of women disappear all the time. Nobody misses them. Whores, immigrants..."

The crime investigation throughout *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is juxtaposed with scenes from Lisbeth's personal life. Declared legally incompetent following her institutionalisation as a child, Lisbeth is appointed a new guardian at the beginning of the film after her previous guardian suffers a stroke. The new guardian, Nils Bjurman, is revealed to be a corrupt sexual deviant in their first meeting, demanding sex in exchange for giving Lisbeth her own money. The second time this occurs, Lisbeth is tied down, raped and beaten by Bjurman for two hours, an incident she records. Later dropping in on an unsuspecting Bjurman, Lisbeth stuns, ties up, anally rapes him with a dildo, makes him watch the video evidence and then tattoos: "I'm a sadist pig and a rapist" on his chest. She then informs him that from now on he is to file model reports and allow her full access to her money without further contact. In some of the final scenes of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* the mystery of Lisbeth deepens when, after saving Mikael from Martin's torture chamber, she pursues the beaten and dazed Martin on motorbike, causing him to lose control of his vehicle and, while he struggles to free himself, she watches him burn to death; this scene transitions to an image of a little girl setting fire to another man and also watching him burn.

The second and third films, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*, expand on this mystery and focus exclusively on Lisbeth's subjection to similar abuse by a "rogue faction" of Sweden's Secret Service. The first film is a microcosm of the way the hatred and subjugation of women is built into patriarchy through the narrative focus on a single, wealthy family. The second and third films expand this narrative thread by linking it to some of the most powerful institutions in Western democracies – members of this "rogue faction" are found in the government, psychiatry and the police – and then personalises the female perspective by making it Lisbeth's story. Framed for three murders she did not commit, Lisbeth goes into hiding and conducts her own investigation into the false murder accusations. Meanwhile, Mikael, never doubting her innocence, investigates

the case and discovers a cover-up that involves Lisbeth's father, Alexander Zalachenko (Zala), a Soviet spy who defected and informed on the Soviets in Sweden during the Cold War. It is revealed that he is the man Lisbeth set on fire at the age of twelve after his final visit to sexually assault and beat her mother, leaving her permanently disabled. The subsequent institutionalisation of Lisbeth, her ongoing status as legally incompetent and her framing for triple murder are all revealed to be the work of "The Section", the name assigned to the rogue faction of the Secret Service, a group initially created to protect the identity of Zala which continues to operate in Sweden unbeknown to the government and police. In proving Lisbeth's innocence Mikael uncovers the corrupt elements of a patriarchal culture. The Section's acts of exploitation are highlighted by a narrative that is otherwise populated by men who frequently come to the aid of the guarded, but highly intelligent, Lisbeth. The third film begins after Lisbeth has been shot three times by her father and buried in a shallow grave by her half-brother, Ronald Niedermann, and sees Lisbeth recovering in hospital and now dependent on the men around her. Her Doctor, Anders Jonasson, keeps the authorities away while she recovers, her hacker friend, Plague, uncovers evidence against the corrupt psychiatrist, Dr Peter Teleborian, and Mikael, who orchestrates and manages the entire investigation which includes an edition of *Millennium* dedicated to telling the story of the, until now, silenced Lisbeth. In the end, Lisbeth's story is national news and the full account of a girl abused by the system which had protected the identity of her father from the time she was twelve years old is exposed.

The films deal with several themes that provide further evidence for the argument being made in this thesis. The proposition throughout this dissertation has been that often the presence of an empowered female figure functions in relation to a broader negotiation of gender that, in part at least, supports the renegotiation of white male power. A close examination of the construction of Lisbeth's gendered identity in relation to male characters suggests this empowered girl represents another example of this trend. *Millennium* constructs the renegotiation of white male power in an exemplary fashion through the way the films isolate a "rogue" faction of corruption in a Western, democratic patriarchy, thereby illuminating the way the institutionalisation of misogyny operates. The story of Lisbeth's childhood, and the staging of a trial that is primarily concerned with her struggle to become legally

competent, articulates pervasive cultural anxieties in relation to how girls have been historically infantilised and pathologised when they attempt to claim status as adults (where adulthood is understood as the province of masculinity/maleness). The anxieties that relate to infantilising and pathologising adult women are staged explicitly in the films, which suggests that the narrative is self-reflexively engaged in critiquing the way the culture continues to position adult women regardless of cultural changes since feminism. Narrative space is undeniably opened up to articulate the persistent fear of women's status as adult subjects. However, in emphasising Lisbeth's struggle for independent personhood by law when it is considered in relation to the shifting power dynamics that occur for male characters it becomes evident that male figures remain the dominant players while the heroine is subjected to a kind of stasis. The question posed by Lee and Roberts (94; 231) upon concluding their respective analyses of the cinematic "angry girl" of the 1990s remains applicable to Lisbeth: where does she go and what can she really do by the narrative's end? Male characters remain synonymous with the institutions that serve their interests and their status is elevated or demoted relative to a power they implicitly have by virtue of being white, male and of a certain class and education.

In addition to the above, as another instantiation of the argument made in this thesis, the narrative of *Millennium* pivots around the way the use of the female sex is built into the structure of patriarchal cultures. Underpinning Mikael's and Lisbeth's personalised narrative trajectories, the films include sub-plots about the systemic murder and rape of girls and young women by Martin and his father as well as the sex-traffic rings that form part of The Section's income. The construction of these women and girls as relatively peripheral to the business conducted between men literalises the way the female sex has operated as the point of exchange and as the conduit for relationships between male subjects (Rubin; Sedgwick). Of course the films position the audience to be critical of this treatment of women and girls, but this chapter seeks to address the question of how far removed Lisbeth is from a similar function in relation to the more sympathetic male characters and thus the broader patriarchal logic operating in the narrative. Finally, in largely eliminating the heterosexual romance narrative between Mikael and Lisbeth, privileging their friendship instead, the films demonstrate an expansion of the potential subject positions available for culturally intelligible relationships between the sexes.

Nevertheless, it seems this expansion of available gender identifications operates more on behalf of the white male politics and interests represented by Mikael, while Lisbeth's characterisation provides further evidence of the problems associated with postfeminist individualism because this figure is ultimately isolated and thus arguably ineffectual in terms of challenging the phallogocentrism that underpins the narrative.

Cumulatively, these themes are suggestive of a central question that continues to trouble gender relations at the beginning of the twenty-first century: what happens to men if girls can, and do, grow up? Moreover, how is the masculinity of men confirmed if girls perform masculinity better than the boys, but patriarchy requires men to be masculine subjects nonetheless? This chapter offers two responses to these questions. Firstly, the trilogy deals with potential anxieties around female autonomy and independence by constructing the character of Lisbeth as both the masculine heroine and the victimised girl, in effect gendering and "marking" this figure on behalf of a white postfeminist ideology. Additionally, by explaining away her empowerment as well as the consequence of childhood trauma through exceptionalism, her marking as a wounded, victimised and infantilised subject operates in the service of rehabilitating the masculinity of certain male subjects rather than centralising the politics and interests she might represent. Secondly, the films function to accommodate the criticism of patriarchy and masculinity by locating the problems with a particular "rogue" faction while otherwise populating the films with personalised and progressive depictions of male characters. The films offer evidence of the way a discourse of masculinity in crisis renegotiates male power and privilege without relinquishing that claim to power and privilege – and this is achieved by masculinising, infantilising and then celebrating the girl.

### **Gender-Equality?: Contextualising Empowerment, Masculinity and Revenge**

As the opening reference to *Orange Is the New Black* demonstrated, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* has become a cultural cliché for "Swedish" revenge fantasies; Lisbeth Salander is now a recognisable metonym for narratives of female empowerment based on revenge against abusive male characters. This is perhaps unsurprising given the context within which the texts were produced and set; Sweden

is understood to be a progressive Western nation in terms of gender relations. According to the “The Global Gender Gap Report 2014” conducted by the *World Economic Forum* and based on data collected over a nine year period from 142 countries, Sweden ranked fourth overall in closing the gap on gender-based inequality. The “Global Gender Gap Index” was created through a survey on the economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment for women and girls in each country. It measures these gender-based gaps in terms of access to resources and opportunities, rather than actual levels of availability, therefore producing the index independent of a country’s economic development (*The Global Gender Gap Report 2014* 3-4). For example, Australia, a “developed” nation, ranks twenty-fourth overall, and Rwanda, a “developing” nation, seventh.

Nevertheless, this discourse of gender-equality for women in Sweden, like other Western nations, now operates on behalf of a neoliberal model of economic development. Despite Sweden’s position as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, there is a tension in this nation between the gender-neutral legislations and the prevalence of the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism (Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm 164). Since the late 1990s, “Sweden has become a poster-child for an international, neoliberal, globalization rhetoric, including the promotion of deregulated international capital markets, a retrenchment of welfare benefits, and partly privatized state retirement accounts” (Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm 164-165). In their analysis of Larsson’s first novel, Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm argue that the text critiques the now defunct welfare state in Sweden and that the novel is suggesting that the ideology of gender equality that supported this model needs to be supplanted by “other models that emphasizes [sic] a conception of women as individuals and not part of a collective” (167). Lisbeth performs a pivotal function in support of this depoliticisation of feminism. Interpreted by Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm as distrustful of the welfare state and its judicial policies in terms of addressing crimes committed by men against women – Lisbeth privately handles her abuse at the hands of Bjurman – they argue that she “represents a thorough endorsement of the deconstruction of the welfare state and an embrace of the neoliberal financial and economic deregulation ... [Salander] decouples gender politics from the state in what appears to be a

conservative turn to liberal beliefs in the exemplary and executive power of the individual” (170-171). Moving beyond the Swedish context, and considering Lisbeth as a signifier for female individualism in the global neoliberal capitalist societies of the West more broadly, the figure is representative of this increasing distance from a collective feminist politics but one that simultaneously registers why individuality for the girl remains so problematic when the power of patriarchy endures.

Like Juno, Lisbeth represents empowered girlhood largely as a product of her exceptional abilities as an individual. But the humanness of their power, that it lies in making “choices” and seems “realistic”, makes them seem empowered as female subjects in similar ways to Jeffrey A. Brown’s assessment of Lisbeth as an action heroine. For him, Lisbeth is a heroine in so far as what she signifies seems both desirable and attainable:

Salander may be understood as an action heroine – she is certainly tough, smart, active, and self-reliant – but her depiction in both film and print is far more realistic than is normal for action heroines. She does not have crazy kung-fu skills or superpowers (though she is unsurpassed in computer hacking), she is not a master of swordplay or archery, and she is not conventionally beautiful with a Hollywood-perfect body ... Both the character of Salander and the narrative of *Dragon Tattoo* are grounded in realism rather than the fantasy world of unquestionable empowerment offered in action films. (Brown, “Torture, Rape, Action Heroines” 53)

In spite of this grounding in realism Lisbeth is still a depoliticised version of female empowerment in ways similar to the action heroine. The spectacle of Lisbeth’s masculinity, the excessive way she is encoded with masculine signifiers – unemotional, supremely intelligent, satiating her desires with sex – challenges traditional conceptions of the relationship between sex and gender, but the “empowerment” this articulates for female subjects is questionable.

The absence of the hyper-femininity normally used to construct action heroines, the fact that Lisbeth “is not conventionally beautiful” and therefore not anxiously framed with markers that remind viewers that this is an empowered female but a female nonetheless, places Lisbeth within the historical terrain of female masculinity in cinema. Lisbeth is arguably a descendent of the cinematic butch:

The masculine woman prowls the film set as an emblem of social upheaval and as a marker of sexual disorder. She wears the wrong clothes, expresses aberrant desires, and is very often associated with clear markers of a distinctly phallic power. She may carry a gun, smoke a cigar, wear leather, ride a motorbike; she may swagger, strut, boast, flirt with younger and more obviously feminine women. (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 186)

Lisbeth is constructed with clear markers of phallic power: she smokes, wears leather, rides a stolen motorbike in the second film and has a sexual relationship with a more obviously feminine woman, Miriam. Butchness in the “positive” view of the history of lesbian cinema signified the possibility for representing sexual variance in an otherwise repressive Hollywood cinema (Halberstam, *Female* 186). However, the appropriation of a masculine identity by female subjects has provoked significant cultural anxieties relating to the sexuality of the girl since the 1980s. In particular, this identification posed a threat to the dominance of heterosexuality and the requisite gender identities that support it. These anxieties culminate in the 1990s with the disappearance of the tomboy film (tomboys being another trope alongside the butch figure in the cinematic history of female masculinity) and, in its place, the popularity of representations that depict masculine girls being punished.

The case of Brandon/Teena, a transgender person that identified as a man, and the representation of his story in the popular 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, captures the attitudes toward girlhood masculinity circulating at the end of the twentieth century. Relative to the depiction of Lisbeth, Brandon/Teena is a much more extreme and literalised case of a masculine identification and subsequent punishment; in this instance, he identifies as male and is murdered for it. Nevertheless, this literal rendering of masculine agency and the punishment of this figure illuminates the gender politics also troubled by the figure of Lisbeth. Brandon/Teena depicts a young female identifying as male as he “passes” as a boy in Falls City, Nebraska in 1993. This representation illustrates the lack of restrictions on the girl with a masculine identity as well as the potential for violence that threatens the girl who chooses to pass as male. Transgender identification reveals the instability of gendered identities as fixed to either masculine/feminine, problematising the supposedly natural relationship between sex and gender. Thus, passing as male is metonymic of a much larger cultural anxiety that relates to the instability of the heterosexual sex/gender

system. The spectre of violence that accompanies these anxieties is actualised when Brandon/Teena is discovered to be a girl and then rejected by her new friends, raped by two of the young men in this group, and finally murdered<sup>53</sup>. The following summary of this character, taken from Linda Dittmar's analysis of the film, is quoted in full because it is a poignant description of the way the representation of Brandon/Teena embodies the freedoms associated with masculinity in ways similar to the cinematic butch and the characterisation of Lisbeth, especially when that masculinity is highlighted by its performance through a female body:

Most important to our purposes is the disproportionate shame and loss of agency many girls experience in the process of becoming adult women, in contrast to boys for whom claiming an adult body and sex are common modes of empowerment ... Seen in these terms, Teena's embrace of masculinity is compelling, be it a 'choice' or a 'true nature.' Being a man, not simply masquerading as one, lets Brandon disavow the injuries of femalehood and gives him a tremendous sense of agency. He can display physical prowess, take up space in a crowded room, drink and scuffle with men, romance women, initiate sex with women ... Being a man lets him articulate a fuller, more assertive and dynamic self than would be possible for him as a woman. (Dittmar 152)

Lisbeth is not "passing" as male, but the characteristics that trait her as masculine permit her greater freedom within the narrative than if she were to identify more closely with femininity. The rape and murder of Brandon/Teena, and prior to this the way the film is haunted by the possibility of his discovery as female, is indicative of the similar cultural anxieties provoked by the girls' ambiguous sexuality in the tomboy film and the masculine woman in butch cinema. The atmosphere in *Boys Don't Cry* arguably resonates with the reason the tomboy films disappeared a decade earlier. In Halberstam's estimation, the tomboy film "faded from view by the end of the 1980s partly owing to the implicit link between tomboys and lesbians" (188). These films unsettled dominant narratives around the positioning of girls as future-

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<sup>53</sup> The film was based on the triple homicide of three young people in Falls City, rural Nebraska on December 31, 1993 and was predominantly influenced by the documentary film, *Boys Don't Cry: The Brandon Teena Story*, released in 1998. Halberstam argues that the "tragic facts" of the case have been recreated into a remarkable archive that turned these events into a broader narrative that split US class and geography in terms of queer identity, suggesting that: "his [Brandon's] story symbolizes an urban fantasy of homophobic violence as essentially midwestern" (*In a Queer Time and Place* 25).

directed heterosexual subjects. The sexuality of the adolescent girl and the young woman perform a significant function for patriarchy: her identification as a heterosexual subject confirms the masculinity of men within the heterosexual matrix of desire. Moreover, the fascination with punishing figures that challenge this, as exemplified in both *Boys Don't Cry* and the *Millennium* trilogy, seems to speak to cultural anxieties over what the masculine girl threatens for the nuclear family, and, more pertinently, for male subjectivity.

Historical representations of female masculinity in cinema and the changes to these figures since the 1970s provide evidence of Halberstam's assertion that female masculinity presents a greater threat to social and familial stability than male femininity. The diluting of this figure's potential since the 1980s suggests the pivotal function of the girl in securing the terms of heterosexual desire in support of this social and familial stability (Halberstam, *Female* 6). Contemporary versions of this figure, such as Lisbeth, form a progression with these earlier figures in so far as she represents freedom through the performance of a masculine identity; but that she is also punished (beaten and raped) suggests that the interesting, exciting and sexy elements that characterised the 1970s/80s tomboys, as well as the masculine woman prowling the film set as an emblem of social upheaval in the history of cinematic butches, are being tempered by contemporary concerns that relate to heterosexuality. These cultural anxieties are managed, at least in part, by contextualising the girl's masculine identification.

Lisbeth's butch potential to signify possibilities for female masculinity and lesbian sexuality is undermined by the personalising of her narrative. Her story is contextualised, her female masculinity largely "explained away." Lisbeth becomes a violent and vengeful twelve-year old girl in response to the abuses her father commits; her act of revenge is on behalf of her mother. Furthermore, her rape and torture of Bjurman as an adult is also an act of revenge; she inflicts the same abuse on him as he did her. Thus even while her masculinity is more clearly signified with images of phallic power than the other girls analysed in this thesis, it is also explicitly rationalised as revenge.

This contextualisation constructs Lisbeth in ways similar to girl-hero tropes of "angry women" and "rape-revenge" emerging in the 1970s. According to Carol

Clover the women's movement produced significant changes in popular culture and one of its main contributions was registered in the horror genre through the image of the angry woman (17). This character is depicted as angry in so many ways she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator (Clover 17). In Clover's analysis the female protagonists of the 1970s combined the positions of suffering victim and avenging hero (17). The construction of Lisbeth, her position on the abuse she has been subjected to, does not necessarily suggest that this character views herself as a victim. In this sense, she resembles the female characters in *Hard Candy* (2005) and *Monster* (2010). Fourteen-year old Hayley Stark in the former and real-life serial killer Aileen Wuornos (thirty-three) in the latter are motivated by anger, rather than victimisation; their transformation from victims to perpetrators is not based on victimhood but on rage (Purse 195). Lisbeth, too, is arguably motivated by anger; however, given that gender identity is, as this thesis has thus far argued, produced in relation to the other, the positioning of the male characters in relation to Lisbeth's victimisation is crucial in terms of understanding her as a victim.

The rape of Lisbeth is a significant moment in the narrative in terms of positioning Lisbeth as a victim in the eyes of key male characters and the renegotiation of masculine power this allows for. Narrative focus on this event emphasises not only Lisbeth's act of revenge but also Mikael's – he arranges for the recording Lisbeth made of the rape to be publicly revealed at her trial. Lisbeth's anger, its association with a feminist political response, is broadened into a male response as rescuer as well. Though this representation of rape is similar to Clover's interpretation of rape-revenge in 1970s cinema in relation to feminism, the representation of male characters as assisting with the rape-revenge means that their interests too are now privileged. The cultural implications of the rape-revenge in the context of the 1970s were linked with contextual shifts in feminism and its relationship to patriarchy:

As if in deference to the feminist discussion of rape in the last two decades, rape is virtually always seen not just as an individual act but as a social and political act as well. Ironically, then, the fantasy of female revenge, which may serve less than savory purposes for the male viewer, brings with it, is indeed predicated on, detailed and sometime trenchant analyses of quotidian patriarchy. (Clover 144)

Quotidian patriarchy remains in the *Millennium* trilogy because the rape of Lisbeth functions as the point around which hierarchies between male characters are visibly renegotiated at the narrative conclusion. The video recording of the rape and its revelation at Lisbeth's trial is the evidence that seals the fate of Teleborian, and once this recording is publicly shown the scenes depicting other members of The Section being arrested begin. Similar to the "double-axis revenge plot" that Clover outlines, where a film such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) stages the revenge of the woman on her rapists as a signification of a broader revenge of the city on the country, in the *Millennium* trilogy the meaning of that double-axis shifts: here it is a masculinity/masculinity battle that is anchored by an emphasis on embodying the white female character through the representation of rape.

In *Millennium*, unlike the rape-revenge texts from the 1970s and 1980s identified by Clover, Lisbeth represents a marking of white femininity that is arguably linked to a discourse of postfeminism, not feminism. Lisbeth's masculinity represents a credible threat to the masculinity of men; however in staging the rape of this figure the texts represent the embodying a particular configuration of white femininity while simultaneously downplaying this figure's butch potential relative to what that "butchness" means in a postfeminist context. Lisbeth's masculinity operates on behalf of an individualism that is distinctly neoliberal. Her masculinity is arguably less in service of radically destabilising traditional conceptions of gender, on behalf of, for example, active lesbian desire and the possibilities of occupying more space as a masculine figure. Rather it functions to support the idea that she is an individual who has assumed a masculine identity as a defensive response. The rape of Lisbeth, as well as childhood abuse which may allude to sexual molestation, in this context therefore works not only as partial explanation for her manlier traiting – violent, aggressive and abrupt – but also as an opportunity to reposition her as a victim in the eyes of the male characters so that they have an opportunity for remasculinisation and more importantly, an opportunity to transform their feminisation into masculinity through redeeming the empowered heroine.

The complexities of the construction of Lisbeth as a masculine figure are evident in the way she is also signified as childlike, while her intellectual superiority as a hacker borders on configuring her adult independence, her masculinity, as pathological. This twenty four year old, androgynous "five foot and eighty-eight

pound” “girl” is introduced in the film as an exceptional investigator, but an unusual person. She is unusual in the sense that she does not engage with others; she is abrupt, secretive and “guarded” but she is also the “best” – unsurpassed as a hacker and investigator with a photographic memory, she uses her intelligence and emotional distance to solve criminal cases, a point emphasised by the contrast she forms with the older and more experienced Mikael. She is androgynous, unfeminine and encompasses the butch aesthetic outlined above as well as a bisexual sexuality. Her appearance is sometimes punk; appearing at her trial in leather, chains, Mohawk, heavy make-up and platform boots she draws a gasp from the media and other interested parties present at her first highly visible moment. Her steady diet of junk food and cigarettes contributes to her characterisation as a hacker as well as associating this figure more closely with masculinity, specifically the adolescent boy or the bachelor living outside of the traditional, domestic space. Living invisibly online, she occupies the degendered space of the hacker, though this too is often associated with a particular kind of masculinity.

However, this butch, androgynous, punk and exceptional figure is also constructed as vulnerable. The way the plot develops around the emerging evidence of her childhood experience as shadowed by the threat, and then actualisation, of sexual violence undermines the masculine and self-sufficient qualities of Lisbeth. The audience is not only reminded of her traumas as a child because the narrative of the second two films provide a detailed background of her abusive childhood, but also through frequent reminders of her physical stature, as the Prosecutor remarks after meeting her: “I was surprised that she was so tiny, like a little girl.” This link between childhood, femininity and vulnerability is invoked again with the repeated images of her tied down to a bed and being sexually assaulted – as an adult by her guardian and rapist, Bjurman, and as a child by the psychiatrist, Dr Teleborian (for 381 days under his “care” at the psychiatric institution). The threat of violence, physical and sexual, for women and girls is a theme that runs throughout the films. Lisbeth is subjected to an unprovoked attack at the train station from a group of young men in the first film; in the second film two bikies hired to find her attempt to beat her and tell her she looks like she could use a “good fuck”, while throughout the third film the men from The Section view her as a liability to be eliminated. Over the course of the three films Lisbeth is characterised as both exceptional and vulnerable:

capable, autonomous and ultimately free, she is also infantilised, abused and incarcerated. This tension at the heart of the characterisation of Lisbeth is symptomatic of the broader tension in the films over the status of patriarchy and masculinity when girls can and do grow up.

But this tension is resolved through the way the construction of Lisbeth operates on behalf of a discourse of postfeminism. The fact that Lisbeth is exceptional supports a postfeminist ideology that generates the hegemony of patriarchy: Lisbeth's capabilities function as proof that the feminist project has worked – she is able to use her skills and intellect to become economically independent. Underpinning this representation of female empowerment, Lisbeth's exceptionalism becomes an excuse not to pursue a feminist politics further and in its place there is arguably narrative space available to renegotiate the positions of men. Her act of revenge does work as a highly visible and personal critique of the positioning of women and girls, while her investigation uncovers the wider network of men responsible. And yet the absence in the films of an explicit critique of patriarchal culture, the structural disadvantages that place women into positions to be “used” by patriarchy, indicates that the empowered heroine's resistance functions from within and thus on behalf of this sex/gender system. Lisbeth participates in the patriarchal and capitalist economies in order to gain power: she takes her share of Wennerström's money after she reveals his corruption and absolves Mikael in the first film, thus achieving economic independence, while her part in investigating The Section does not radically change the power structures that implicitly subjugate women, just the figures that occupy them.

### **Renegotiating Victimhood: The Power and Pleasure of the Gaze**

As noted at the outset of this thesis, the cinematic text, as a site of negotiation over gendered ideologies, is, as has been well established, more complex than Laura Mulvey's theorisation of the gaze, which rendered the female spectator and women in film into relatively passive roles (Hollinger 11-12). Nevertheless, the way Mulvey's position has been taken up and reworked by others (Doane; Gledhill) and understood as a process of negotiation allows for an understanding of the way that the filmic text becomes a site of struggle over gender:

Language and cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace definitions and identities. In this respect, the figure of woman, the look of the camera, the gestures and signs of human interaction, are not given over once and for all to a particular ideology – unconscious or otherwise. They are cultural signs and therefore sites of struggle; struggle between male and female voices, between class voices, ethnic voices, and so on. (Gledhill 117)

While Lisbeth's point of view is significant, taken together with the way masculinity has become the object of feminist studies, and the ways in which this destabilises the subject/object, male gaze/female body dynamic articulated by Mulvey by reversing it, then masculinity too becomes an object to be gazed at since the advancement of feminist politics in the late twentieth century (Kegan Gardiner 9). Because of the way certain male characters' points of view are privileged in the narrative, where the viewer is invited to gaze with these male characters at Lisbeth, then the construction of Lisbeth becomes a site of struggle over the status of female subjectivity in relation to this renegotiation of the male subject's power. The term "gaze" in the following analysis is not employed in the way Mulvey uses the term, but rather in terms of how the point of view of the "progressive" characters, male and female, invites viewers to negotiate with the gendered politics represented. As the following textual analyses of both these positions – Lisbeth's gaze and the positive male gazes at Lisbeth – demonstrate, the films construct this renegotiation of gendered identities but they do so in service of a postfeminist ideology and a newly emergent masculinity for men, a masculinity that remains imbricated with the power of patriarchal authority.

It is the pleasure of Lisbeth's gaze combined with the way some male characters gaze at her that demonstrates the way this figure functions, in part at least, to renegotiate a patriarchal hierarchy. Arguably some of the most pleasurable moments in the films occur when the audience is positioned to gaze, as Lisbeth does, at the suffering of certain male characters. For example, after successfully chasing down Martin, the villain from the first film, Lisbeth watches him struggle to get free of the burning wreck of his car before standing back and watching him burn as his car explodes in flames. In the aftermath, Mikael and Lisbeth have the following conversation about the incident:

Mikael: His father taught him to kill when he was sixteen ... that would make anyone sick in the brain...

Lisbeth: Don't make him into a fucking victim. He nearly killed you. He was a killer and a rapist and he enjoyed it. He had the same chances as everyone else. You choose who you want to be. He wasn't a victim. He was an evil motherfucker who hated women.

Mikael: How did he die?

Lisbeth: He burned to death.

Mikael: Could you have saved him?

Lisbeth: Yes.

Mikael: But you let him burn.

Lisbeth: Yes.

This dialogue and the image of Lisbeth watching Martin burn while he begs for help is configured as a moment of triumph for Lisbeth and for the women Martin raped and killed. It is a sense of triumph repeated when Lisbeth rapes and tattoos Bjurman, when she sets her father on fire as a twelve-year old girl, and even when she smiles a little after Dr Teleborian is exposed to be a liar and co-conspirator with The Section at her trial and is arrested for possessing thousands of images of child pornography. The audience is invited to gaze with Lisbeth at these men and to take similar pleasure in their pain. Lisbeth's gaze positions viewers in terms of the ideologies operating through the representations of men and it is through her gaze, in particular, that certain elements of patriarchy are positioned as problematic.

Lisbeth's gaze is juxtaposed with the way progressive male characters gaze at Lisbeth and as a result, the infantilisation of Lisbeth, indeed the emphasis on her status as a girl, works to privilege a softened and personalised depiction of masculinity. Throughout the films there are juxtapositions of evil patriarchs with more benevolent paternal figures. From the very beginning of the first film the audience is invited to make this distinction. For example, the first scene of the sexually deviant Bjurman abusing his status as guardian over Lisbeth segues into a

scene of the grieving patriarch of the Vanger family, a man that has dedicated forty years to the “ghost” of his beloved grand-daughter. The renegotiation of white masculinity within a patriarchal hierarchy playing out over the figure of the girl is setup from the outset. This is supported by the more personal interactions between Lisbeth and certain men: Plague, Dr Anders Jonasson, and of course, Mikael. The opening of the third film captures this dynamic of the infantilised girl and her protective man succinctly. The scene opens with a weary Mikael typing on his home computer, writing the following for the next issue of *Millennium*:

Her name is Lisbeth Salander. She is 27 years old. This issue of *Millennium* describes how several authorities conspired against Lisbeth Salander to protect a pathological killer...

The voiceover narration continues, but the scene fades from the close-up image of the name “Lisbeth Salander” on Mikael’s computer screen to an image of Lisbeth in a hospital bed. She is unconscious, her head is bandaged and the audience is aware she is recovering from surgery after being gunned down by her father. This shot then zooms out further and reveals Mikael hunched over a sleeping Lisbeth, a concerned look on his face, his hand holding hers as he murmurs softly to her. This scene shifts to an image of her father in his own hospital bed, after surviving Lisbeth’s second attempt to murder him, and then the voiceover narration by Mikael continues:

... this issue is dedicated to providing justice for Lisbeth Salander.

In this scene the audience is positioned to gaze at Lisbeth from Mikael’s point of view and to see her as the victim not only of this attack, but also as the victim of her father and the “rogue faction” of patriarchy enlisted to protect Zala since Lisbeth was a girl. This gaze at Lisbeth continues with the way her doctor, Jonasson, protects and supports her without her asking. He does not let the police interrogate her; he refuses to allow Dr Teleborian to see her, even disagreeing with his assessment that she is a “sociopath”, arguing that she is “guarded” but not pathological. He arranges pizza for her when she is disgusted with the hospital food and he conspires with Mikael to get her recording device to her so she can write her autobiography for the special issue of *Millennium* dedicated to clearing her name. Moreover, he, like Mikael, is configured as a soft and gentle masculine figure: a father of young children, as signified by the children’s paintings on his office wall and the child’s bike-seat on his bike, he earns

Lisbeth's trust. She willingly shows him her tattoo when he asks (significantly, one of the few direct requests she complies with throughout the course of the trilogy). Plague also assists Lisbeth, hacking Teleborian's computer when she cannot because she is in prison, and even Milton, her boss at Milton Security, eventually comes to be on Lisbeth's side. All of these male characters share a supportive gaze with Lisbeth at her trial, while Dr Jonasson shares a smile and in return a respectful nod from Lisbeth as she leaves the hospital for prison. Collectively, these men share a gaze at Lisbeth that is part-protective and part-fond and could certainly be read as moments of challenging those other paternal gazes that have seen Lisbeth incarcerated and deemed mentally incompetent in service of protecting a corrupt paternal figure. However, because their gazes also infantilise Lisbeth and because each of them represents a sense of visibility and an institutional power that she does not, this nurturance also functions as a point of negotiation between factions of masculinity where Lisbeth becomes the point of exchange.

The wounding of Mikael, in particular, recentralises the politics and interests of white masculinity in similar ways to the other male characters discussed earlier in this thesis. Mikael is, from early in the first film, traited as sensitive, victimised and feminised. He is physically wounded. Strung up and tortured by Martin at the end of the first film, the threat of sexual assault looms until Lisbeth saves him.

Traditionally: "The primary function of male torture at the narrative level is to demonstrate the exceptional strength, nobility, and endurance of the protagonist" (Brown 48). However, because Lisbeth saves Mikael his masculinity must be redeemed by other means. Mikael's feminisation operates in relation to Lisbeth's masculinity in so far as she is able to rehabilitate this figure. This works in the larger moments in the film – Lisbeth solves the corruption case that led to Mikael's initial downfall and thus allows him to be reinstated into a position of not only public respect, but also visible vindication. And, aside from the rescue scene when he is being tortured by Martin, there are smaller moments where Lisbeth's hardness, her paternal tone, pushes Mikael to re-take control of his life. For example, when the pair hires a vehicle to investigate the murdered women in the first film, Mikael is reluctant to drive. The following dialogue ensues:

Lisbeth: What are you waiting for?

Mikael: You want to drive?

Lisbeth: Why?

Mikael: I haven't driven since my divorce.

Lisbeth: Then it's about time.

Here Lisbeth is the postfeminist figure setting “society right” by insisting Mikael reclaim his independence (Westerståhl Stenport and Ovesdotter Alm 170). Mikael is doubly encoded as the feminised victim: “castrated” by a woman presumably older than Lisbeth (a point further emphasised by the fact that he is sleeping with a married woman, his colleague, Erika Berger), his “victimisation” at the hands of adult women is compounded by his broader castration in the narrative by the false conviction. In both instances it is Lisbeth who functions to rehabilitate Mikael’s masculinity – declaring it to be time that he drove and discovering evidence against Wennerström and overturning the false conviction. Multiple scenes in the first film establish Lisbeth as stereotypically masculine and Mikael as feminine. After they have sex (initiated by Lisbeth) she leaves abruptly to his bewildered: “Are you leaving?” and she replies as she strolls out of his room naked, “Good night.” When Mikael is grazed by a bullet, Lisbeth puts him in the bath and washes him as he shakes; this potentially encodes Lisbeth in a more maternal role, but even if that is the case the boyish, victim-like status of Mikael in the same scene remains. And, following this attempted murder Lisbeth does not even contemplate giving up on the case when Mikael asks her if she would like to. Mikael’s femininity is intelligible in terms of Lisbeth’s masculinity. Moreover, Mikael is, in the climactic scene of the first film, explicitly positioned as the victim, while Lisbeth is the hero that rescues him. However, when Lisbeth too is ultimately feminised through her victimisation, perhaps more accurately infantilised, this does not work to the same ends as the feminisation of Mikael does. The marking of Lisbeth as victim does not afford her similar claim to the position of power and privilege attributed to the masculine signifier. Victimisation for a male figure becomes an opportunity for remasculinisation, while victimisation of the female figure becomes an opportunity for male characters to confirm their masculinity by assuming a traditionally paternal role.

Because of these broader power dynamics at play in the text, Lisbeth's authentic disenfranchisement (as a genuine victim of patriarchy) becomes secondary to the renegotiation of masculinity that is resolved by the narrative conclusion: the members of The Section are arrested, Mikael is restored to his position as the ethical ideal of the media profession and Lisbeth returns to a position of invisibility within the diegetic world of the texts. The figure of Mikael appropriates a specific form of identity politics, namely the white feminist politics from the second half of the twentieth century, and uses this to occupy a position of cultural centrality. Feminist works that identified the problem of patriarchy as the "traffic in women" (Rubin) and the recognition by others that the historical positioning of women as infantilised problematise their claims to adulthood (de Beauvoir; Johnson) are articulated or made visible through the construction of Mikael within the institution of the media. This is further emphasised because Mikael is also "wounded" by the same perpetrators as Lisbeth; that is, Martin and The Section (when they attempt to set him up and destroy his reputation). Meanwhile Lisbeth's wounding may suggest a similar marking of the white female body, occupying the position of the victim-hero identified by Clover, but this marking of Lisbeth works toward individualising this figure and distancing her from a claim to collective politics. This is evident in the way the two figures are constructed in relation to visibility/invisibility, public/private through the way Mikael uses institutionally sanctioned investigative techniques while Lisbeth borders on the criminal through her use of hacker techniques.

Throughout the films the male figures are constructed in relation to the power of institutions. Mikael of course, with the media, but other male characters, too, speak for Lisbeth from within the power of their institutional discourses. For example, Dr Jonasson, invoking the power of the medical institution, refuses to let the police see Lisbeth: "The police have been here, but due to your condition I won't let them in. I'm sure they'll be back, but for now, I won't let them in." Dr Jonasson is not only an effective gatekeeper between competing institutions, but also within his own. When Dr Teleborian attempts to intimidate him, informing him in a piqued tone: "I had hoped to skip formalities, considering we're both fellow doctors"; Dr Jonasson interrupts and over-rules him: "And as a doctor, you ought to know my word is law here. Regardless of any court order." Scenes such as this demonstrate the sanctioned power of institutional authority and how certain white men are positioned to speak

for Lisbeth, in the process affirming their masculine status through the relationship they form with institutional power as well as, through their relationship with Lisbeth in these moments, a paternal authority that can adequately protect her. But in speaking for Lisbeth they function to renegotiate the lines of patriarchy, in the process emphasising the power of the institution they speak on behalf of, while also further silencing Lisbeth by suggesting that a girl needs someone to speak for her.

When Lisbeth does finally speak in public discourse it is in the context of her trial, her battle for personhood. After refusing to speak to the Prosecutor, the police, her own lawyer (a heavily pregnant, Annika Giannini, Mikael's sister) and Dr Teleborian, she abruptly speaks at her trial, cutting across the Prosecutor to point out that she has yet to hear a question. This moment carries with it the weight of all of the prior occasions in the films at which Lisbeth has successfully and capably avenged, defended and protected herself: from her rape-revenge on Bjurman, to out-maneuvring the two bikies, to attacking her father. Nevertheless, it is difficult to separate out these moments of individual triumph from what they signify as personal revenge and thus privatised, isolated moments of empowerment. The triumph of Lisbeth is in line with the postfeminist narrative of empowerment, which, as argued throughout this thesis, is an individual form of power that does not have any real repercussions for the structural inequalities that limit the female sex, whereas Mikael and the other men in the text have the power of the institutions behind them, even when they are personally wounded and individually targeted. As such the texts are suggestive of a new configuration of patriarchy: depraved masculinities are eliminated; softened and ethical masculinities now occupy the position of cultural centrality; and young white women have their position renegotiated, but this is in the form of individualised, indeed isolated, empowerment.

**Conclusion:**  
**Silencing Feminism, Speaking Difference**

An Internet meme circulating on social media since around 2010 captures a central tenet of the argument made in this thesis succinctly and humorously. It is a photograph of a little girl; she is positioned in the foreground of the shot with her face turned slightly, her eyes looking directly at the camera. She has a smug smile, while in front of her, blurred into the background of the photograph, is a house blazing with fire. Fire-trucks and people are gathered near the house in an obvious attempt to put it out. The picture is captioned in the top of the frame, “I’ll be a post-feminist” and just below her smirk, “In a post-patriarchy.” The implication is clear: the little girl started the fire. As this thesis has shown, in this selection of films at least, these girls are not constructed in a “post-patriarchy” in spite of the number of “fires” they start through their rage, sexual exploits or acts of violence and revenge.

The figures of girlhood analysed in this thesis demonstrate that constructing a female character with signifiers of power – agency, choice, aggression, sexual activity or intelligence – does not necessarily liberate these girls from the patriarchal meanings this sex/gender system also attributes to young women. The gendered identities of the girl characters, predominantly masculine, struggle to eclipse the culturally entrenched assumptions about their bodies, sexed female. By analysing the construction of the central characters’ gendered identities, and showing how the meaning of that gender is dependent upon its relationship to the other, this thesis has argued that such characters register an intensification of notions of sexual difference in ways imbricated with socio-economic changes in the culture. The dyad of the empowered girl and the sensitive man registers changes in the sex/gender system brought about by the increasing emphasis on the individual, the personal and the psychological in late-capitalist culture in ways that encourage the female subject to be independent and the male subject to recognise his newly emergent status as victimised. Taken together these representations reinforce the broader argument now being made in postfeminist scholarship: Western culture is in the midst of a patriarchal resurgence. In this thesis this proposition has been examined further by taking a closer look at what representations of maleness signify in relation to the girl’s power in support of this renegotiation of patriarchy. The girls in these films are

now doubly encoded as the new stars of late-capitalism – their success or failure measured against this idealised form of femininity – while they continue to function as a structural support for the coherence of a patriarchal sex/gender system. Underpinning this, the male characters remain linked with understandings of maleness as the historically verifiable, embodied and unmarked signifier for personhood as well as the figures constructed as most affected by socio-economic changes.

The construction of Amy in relation to Nick in *Gone Girl* saw Amy's characterisation transform in ways that worked to support the transformation of Nick from victimiser to victim. The representation of Amy began as a self-aware critique of patriarchal femininity – both in its traditional form and its more recent incarnation as the phallic girl – in relation to her courtship and marriage to Nick; while at the same time Nick appeared the victimiser of Amy, suspected of her “murder” as well as the unfaithful and disinterested husband. But in a move that legitimised male anxieties, Amy morphed into the femme fatale and Nick her victim by the narrative conclusion. This narrative shift and character mutation, this thesis argues, occurred because gender precedes the category of identity and gender is usefully understood as a patriarchal concept. Nick's disempowerment needed Amy's power so that the marginalisation of the white male in the film was not the result of the global recession; it was instead the fault of the educated, liberated and entitled woman.

In contrast, while still based on a heterosexual gender identification, the narratives of little girl avengers in *Kick-Ass*, *Hanna* and *True Grit* centred on “father”/ “daughter” relationships seemingly based on gender equality. Themes such as friendship, camaraderie and a shared goal structured these paternal/girl representations. However, a closer examination of the transformation of the characters' gendered identities over the course of the films revealed that this perception of equality was supported by the silencing or obscuring of other factors. Absent-present mothers haunted these films as the problematic figures of adult female sexuality and the way they were dismissed, demonised or disposed of allowed for the heterosexual dyad to be restabilised through the presence of the exceptional, asexual girl and her supportive, sentimentalised, paternal companion. Again, as with Amy and Nick, the gendered identities of the characters altered over the course of the narrative in ways

that here allow for a re-feminisation of the girl – a moment of weakness – and a re-masculinisation of male characters – a moment of protection.

The film *Juno* certainly looked, upon first viewing, like a refreshing challenge to cultural assumptions about adolescent sexuality, teen pregnancy and American girlhood. Traited as a tomboy and exhibiting agency and humour in the face of judgement by parents and peers, Juno successfully navigates her pregnancy and the adoption of her baby in a narrative that re-imagines the available reproductive pathways for women. However, as this chapter argued, ideologies of patriarchy and postfeminism operate in this text through the representation of the pregnant teen. As a pregnant tomboy this figure indicated cultural anxieties over the masculinisation of girls, with her pregnant body functioning to remind viewers that this boyish girl is still a body, still feminised. Moreover, the narrative of the film is largely held together by the relationships Juno has with male characters. In stripping the analysis of these figures back from their potential as alternatively imagined masculinities, it was shown that there is a renegotiation of positions of male power operating in this text, where the pregnant girl functions as the point of exchange. And finally, it was demonstrated that depicting mothers as replaceable figures supported a postfeminist life trajectory: education, career and then motherhood. Heterosexual gender identifications operate in novel ways in the film, but they nonetheless privilege the girl's need for recognition within the terms of the heterosexual matrix – as daughter, girlfriend and love interest – and as such, her broader function within patriarchy, as part of the traffic in women, remains. In ignoring the reasons why Juno cannot keep the baby – bound up in late-capitalist discourses of class, the anti-welfare stance in American capitalism, and the lack of social support for young mothers – a feminist awareness is absent in the film and in its place there is, arguably, narrative space to dramatise a patriarchal exchange.

The analyses of *Suburban Mayhem* and *Somersault* provided evidence of cultural anxieties that relate to the girls' knowing engagement with the heterosexual matrix of desire through the way Kat and Heidi use their sexual activity with men as a weapon or a form of currency. By constructing the active sexual desire of the girl as a potent power male anxieties were legitimised. This fear provided the opportunity to re-establish paternal law and justify the abjection of the sexually liberated girl in service of resecuring a masculine identity. The stakes of this masculine character, this

chapter argued, were caught up with the stabilisation of a national identity based, in part at least, on misogyny. The cultural work these films do in relation to white masculinity makes sense in terms of the circular relationship they form with Australian culture: Joe represents the wounded “Aussie battler”, where the threat posed to his masculinity relates to wider changes in Australian culture such as Indigenous Land Rights, immigration and women’s rights, threats re-imagined in the film as the threat posed by the white, lower-class and sexually promiscuous girl, Heidi. Kat, on the other hand, a clear trope of the femme fatale, represents cultural anxieties that relate to perceived failings of an older guard of paternalism in Australian culture. The murder of her father and Kat’s part in it is indicative of a cultural purging in this context. John, representative of a pro-welfare stance in a neoliberal culture that is in the process of undoing such social policies, and Kat, symbolic of much older fears of the monstrous feminine, together functioned as a reconfiguration of the wider cultural order where the softened paternal figure is eliminated and the unemployed, sexually rapacious girl demonised. However, it is the positioning of Kat’s brother, Danny, which functions as a subtle reworking of a traditional, authoritative masculinity. That Kat is culturally intelligible as a “slut” and a “monster” to the people of Golden Grove is fairly obvious, and the cultural work it does straightforward; it indulges anxieties that relate the girl’s empowerment to a misuse of sexual and socio-economic autonomy. But that she also becomes a monster to Danny by the narrative conclusion suggests a subtler condemnation of the sexually liberated girl in terms of a younger, more traditional and self-assured masculinity. Here too, as with *Juno*, masculine positions of power are renegotiated along hierarchical and generational lines. Where *Juno* provides evidence of nostalgia for an older version of paternalism and celebrated innocent boyhood, while dismissing the hip-mid-thirties-corporate-sell-out, *Suburban Mayhem* disposes of a softened, older paternalism and remasculinises the young, Australian male as the new vanguard of paternal authority.

The analysis of the *Millennium* trilogy was the exception that worked to prove the rule in this thesis. The sensational nature of Lisbeth’s vengeance, the driving force of the story as an indictment of “men who hate women”, and the privileging of a friendship between Lisbeth and Mikael in the Swedish adaptation cumulatively suggested that in these films the representation of the girl’s power should, surely, be

liberated from patriarchal meanings. However, as demonstrated, in these texts as well there was evidence of a renegotiation of white masculinity operating through the representation of the empowered girl. The final scene of these films is germane to the broader argument made in this thesis. Mikael visits Lisbeth at her apartment after all other plot points in the films have been resolved and between them they mumble through their gratitude and their good-byes. In a girl and a man represented as being predominantly friends, this lack of words communicates what is silenced more broadly in a culture that emphasises sexual difference at the expense of what is similar between the sexes. It is suggestive of what is not said in the other films analysed and what, there too perhaps, cannot be said.

All of the films contain these moments of semi-silence rupturing into violent outbursts or screams or mumbled utterances on the part of the girls in otherwise cohesive narratives of paternal reprimands, male suffering and postfeminist life choices. For example, Hit-Girl readying her fists on the first day of school when the older boys demand her lunch money, Heidi screaming and drenching the service station with water, and Juno's murmured moment of uncertainty, "I don't know what kind of girl I am, Dad." If the arguments cited in this dissertation remain in evidence at the beginning of the twenty-first century – gender precedes the category of identity and gendered identity is structured within the terms of the heterosexual matrix; patriarchy is in the process of a resurgence marked by a re-emphasising of sexual difference and the repudiation of feminism; and these understandings of gender contribute to the way the culture makes sense of itself through, in part at least, the movies – then what does all this mean in relation to the inability to speak sameness between male and female characters? This question and the argument made over the course of this thesis suggest that there is much to be learned from what cannot be said and what is not said between girls and men in cinema. Moreover, this silence operates as the cost of sexual difference, and at the expense of what could have been if only male and female subjects still had the words, now a mere memory of a whisper, in a post-feminist world.

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