Transcendence through Violence: Women and the Martial Arts Motif in Recent American Fiction and Film

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Recent Hollywood movies such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Kill Bill: Volume One* (2003), and the two *Charlie's Angels* movies (*Charlie's Angels* 2000, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* 2003) have been characterized by the use of martial arts violence in place of earlier uses of guns and shooting as the primary vehicle of screen violence.[1] The "shoot-em-up" has become the "kick-em-up" and notable agents of this violence are women and specifically Asian women. Lucy Liu features in three of the movies named above. In this essay I want to explore the connections between Asian femininity and the spectacle of Oriental violence in these movies and in Chinese American literary texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Kingston's work is foundational both in terms of the subsequent development of Asian American literature and the ethnic women's movement. Kingston's popularity has been explained as a consequence of historical coincidence, which saw the publication of *The Woman Warrior* at a time when the feminist movement was beginning to make a widespread impact on American society. Kingston told American women what they wanted to hear, so this argument goes. But what of the representation of warrior women in a post-feminist age?[2] Violence is stereotypically gendered as "masculine" while femininity is symbolized as passive and pacific. Violent women then cross over into masculine territory, potentially to challenge patriarchal gender boundaries. Lucy Liu, interviewed by Sean Chavel about her role in *Kill Bill, Volume One*, was asked, "What's so sexy about girls fighting?" to which she replied:

> You know what it is? I don't see it as sexy, because it's more that women like to watch women fight because it makes them feel sort of empowered physically and mentally, internally, emotionally they feel kind of jazzed and excited by it. And men like to see it because two women fighting, men see women as a very different entity altogether. So to see that entity doing what men generally do is kind of an exciting thing. I'm not saying that women going out there and playing football is a hot thing, too, but you never know what's going to happen if you sort of turn things on its head, it always makes it more interesting, I think.

However, women adopting "masculine" forms of violence also risk emasculating themselves, rendering themselves "female eunuchs" of a new variety. Are, then, the violent Asian women of recent Hollywood cinema progressive or conservative representations of women's use of violence?

The emphasis upon powerful feminine martial artists in recent fiction and film (especially the latter) has coincided with a cultural moment that is variously described as post-modernist and post-feminist. In both cases, one might legitimately inquire into the significance of the cultural motif of the violent woman as a strategy for women's empowerment. Lisa Jardine argued in *Gynesis* (1985) that the process named by her study represents the displacement of post-modernist anxieties concerning the instability or dissolution of the once-unified subject on to "the feminine." The feminine thereby comes to represent a force akin to Freud's "uncanny" (*unheimlich*): the repressed, the alien; "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud, 1919, 241). In a post-modern age, the dissolution of stable categories of being – among them gender divisions and boundaries – gives rise to the appearance of images of "monstrous" women, which crystallise these anxieties. But this post-modern era is also the period of social, economic and political advances made by the Women's Movement. These same cultural anxieties are given shape (and feminine form) by the patriarchal perception of feminine threat and female aggression. The image of the warrior woman or the militant female can be seen as American patriarchy's attempt both to express and to contain male anxieties about the restructuring of gender roles in the post-feminist age. I want to suggest that contemporary images of the Oriental warrior woman are far from subversive of patriarchal hegemony and in fact work to reassert conventional positioning of feminine sexuality.

Hollywood Oriental

Midway through *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003) there comes a crucial confrontation between the dynamic trio and their nemesis, the "fallen" Angel, Madison Lee (Demi Moore). They meet on one of the terraces of Los Angeles' Griffith Observatory, high above the city, and it is in this quasi-celestial location that Madison Lee's identity is revealed as the mastermind behind the crimes that the Angels have been engaged to solve.[3] Lee mocks what she calls the Angels' "ass-kicking pose" and, as she sneers, she brandishes two outsized pistols, declaring "back then, we used guns." She then shoots them, knocking each in turn off the Observatory parapets so they "fall" presumably to their deaths. The importance of this scene lies not only in its function as a turning point in the storyline. This confrontation underlines the absence of hardware, and specifically guns, in this action movie in favour of martial arts. Kung-fu, kickboxing, or "ass-kicking" as Madison Lee calls it, is the preferred form of violence in this twenty-first century rendering of the 1970s drama series. The "Orientalization" of *Charlie's Angels* in these movies is represented powerfully by the substitution of kicking for shooting but is crystallized perhaps most clearly by the casting of Lucy Liu as an Angel. She becomes the only ethnic minority Angel (the others are played by Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrymore and are distinguished on the grounds of class). This casting of an ethnic Angel breaks the emphatically Caucasian feminine stereotype of the original TV series which featured then-models of feminine perfection: Farrah Fawcett, Jaclyn Smith, Kate Jackson and, later replacing Farrah Fawcett, Cheryl Ladd, women who were to be distinguished from each other primarily according to hair, not skin, colour. Why, one must ask, is an Asian American actress cast alongside Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrymore?

I want to suggest that the inclusion of an Asian Angel has nothing to do with any kind of attempt at multicultural representation and everything to do with the

sexualization of the *Charlie's Angels* story. The explicit sexual dimension of both *Charlie's Angels* movies is expressed in myriad ways: from the sustained sexual innuendo of the dialogue, the inability of Dylan (Drew Barrymore) in both movies to resist the sexual attraction of the villain (in the first movie she explains this by describing her's as "a full service job"), through to the comic subplot of the second movie where the father of Alex (Lucy Liu) is mistakenly led to believe that his daughter is a prostitute who, with her two close colleagues, specializes in group assignments and that Charlie is her pimp. It is this character of Lucy (despite or perhaps because of her unlikely Caucasian father, played by John Cleese) that provides a site for the playing out of a complex interplay between feminine (Oriental) sexuality and feminine (Oriental) violence.

Passive/Aggressive Women

In the case of the character portrayed by Lucy Liu, the militant woman is represented as sexual spectacle. The character of Alex in fact parodies the S&M figure of the Oriental dominatrix, the Dragon Lady. In the first movie she appears at one point clad in skin-tight black leather, wielding a whip, which she cracks periodically to assert her violent authority over a roomful of bureaucratised engineers. In the burlesque scene of the second movie, she again appears with a whip, which this time is used to remove Natalie's (Cameron Diaz) clothes. In both cases, the camera adopts the perspective of the male gaze, appropriating the spectacle of sexualised feminine violence as male entertainment. The masculine co-optation of Alex's aggression in such scenes is reinforced by those scenes that take place in the private domain. Here, apart from Charlie, the agency and her co-Angels, Alex's sexuality is defined by her relationship with Jason (played by Matt LeBlanc, reprising his role as the inept post-adolescent Joey of the TV series *Friends*). In the scenes with Jason, Alex is represented as passively engaged in traditional feminine activities (primarily cooking) and agonizing over her inability to tell him her true profession. As if to emphasise the sexualization of this character, Jason believes that she is a bikini-waxer and admits he finds this idea "a turn-on." Alex works at baking and roasting while practicing potential confessional speeches, though she has talent for neither. Her culinary ambitions and her lack of talent form the basis for numerous incidental jokes, like the blueberry muffins, the "Chinese fighting muffins," which when thrown in mock-battle become embedded in the door. Later in this movie, the trailer in which she is cooking is raked with automatic gunfire but Alex becomes concerned only when a bullet causes her perfect soufflé to deflate. The point of emphasising the conflict between Alex's professional talent as a private detective and warrior woman and her comically desperate attempts art conventional domestic femininity is to underline Alex's passivity in her relationship with Jason. She may represent pure aggressive sexual spectacle in her professional role but her private self is revealed to be passive and unthreatening. Any threat that the aggressive woman may represent is effectively defused by her private willingness to subordinate herself to one man and his appetites.

Much the same kind of scenario is represented in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), specifically in the "White Tigers" section, which ends with the return of the victorious, crusading woman to a life of conventional femininity. She returns to her husband's parents with the promise that she will devote herself to work and the production of more sons. Her story concludes with the hopeful anticipation of legends that would be told of her perfect filiality. But we might

interpret this filiality as perfect obedience and passivity, reasserted in place of the aggression she has demonstrated throughout her military career. In this story, women cannot be assertive both publicly and privately; public achievement must be compensated for with private humility and passivity. The choice between female militancy and female domesticity is a recurring theme in martial arts movies. The gifted female martial artist is plagued with doubts about the effect of her physical prowess and her capacity for "masculine" violence on her ability to attract a husband. Wendy Arons argues, in her essay on women in Hong Kong kung-fu movies, that "even as such films depict women as strong, independent, and capable fighters, they continue to embed such images of women within a context that defines femininity in terms of physical beauty and sexual attractiveness to men, and that draws on traditional misogynistic stereotypes that reduce femininity to a figure of 'fascinating and threatening alterity'" (Arons, in McCaughey & King, 2001, 27).

The character Yu Shu Lien (played by Michelle Yeoh) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* could be described as a female eunuch of this variety. She chooses honour and the discipline of the warrior's code over romance. The opening sequence of the movie reveals the tension of her undeclared passion for Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun Fat). This love must remain unspoken, on both sides, because Shu Lien was once betrothed to Li Mu Bai's dead friend. They must then resist this shared passion and in fact transform this effort into of denial into an aspect of warrior discipline. Shu Lien is seen to make a choice between her feminine desires and her fighting self and her prowess is attributed in part to her choice of asexuality. The feminine threat represented potentially by Shu Lien's martial artistry is then defused by her choice to renounce her feminine sexuality.

Not all women warriors of course represent this reassuring passivity. The authority over men asserted by the militant or violent woman is, in patriarchal terms, an illegitimate authority. The female usurper of male authority is, as a consequence, pathologized and then violently destroyed. The connection between violence and the illegitimate feminine claim to authority is dramatised by the character of Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei), in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Cornered by the hero, Li Mu Bai, Jade Fox is accused of stealing the master's book of secret martial arts teachings. Her access to this restricted knowledge is the result of murder, theft and usurpation. In response to this accusation, Jade Fox replies that she killed him because he had "no respect for women. She had possessed an honest desire to learn the martial arts but the master had only sexual desire for her. She was regarded as good enough to seduce but not good enough to teach. This injustice she avenged by killing him and stealing the book of his teachings. Being illiterate, however, she must entrust the book to her own protégé, Jen (Zhang Ziyi) the governor's daughter who is herself struggling against the arranged marriage that has been made for her father's benefit. The pathological quality of Jade Fox's desire for martial skill is represented through her unhealthy obsession with Jen. Jade Fox is represented as the corrupting force upon the young girl to whom she can teach technique but this is skill devoid of the necessary discipline and ethics that makes a warrior great. Consequently, Jen steals the famous and magical sword, the Green Destiny; because she knows no honour, she is ignorant of the warrior's code. Jade Fox is ignominiously dispatched by Li Mu Bai but for Jen is reserved the ambiguous ending of the movie, to which I will return below.

Feminist Fatales

In *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, the usurping female warrior, Madison Lee, is represented as the *femme fatale*, poisonous to all the men she touches yet irresistible in her domineering sexuality. When Madison Lee first enters the action she is filmed in slow motion, walking out of the sea, clad in a skimpy black bikini (in contrast to Natalie's white counterpart), like a post-modernist parody of Botticelli's Venus. This slow motion walk across the sand carrying her surfboard emphasises her almost masculine musculature but this is a physical strength transformed into an image of sexualised aggression. The nature of her femininity is also placed into question by the flashy red sports car (popular image of male ego-projection) in which she departs with an aggressive squeal of the tyres. It is not only in the role of the sexualised female aggressor that Madison Lee assumes the role of the *femme fatale*. As Elisabeth Bronfen observes, "the classic *femme fatale* has enjoyed such popularity because she is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ruthlessly ambitious, using her seductive charms and her intelligence to free herself …" (Bronfen 2003). Madison Lee wants to liberate herself from the authority of Charlie, to stop "taking orders from a speaker box" and become her own authority. But she does not want to become Charlie. Her ambition is much greater than that. "Why be an Angel when you can be God?" she asks immediately before shooting each of the Angels, in the Observatory scene discussed above. The *femme fatale* is ambitious, independent, ruthless and, above all, dangerously sexual. However, as Bronfen incisively argues, she also embodies a will to death. The *femme fatale* uses her sense of her own personal destiny, which inevitably includes the knowledge of her own death, as the source of her power. Madison Lee tells the disembodied voice of Charlie, with a single tear trickling slowly down her face, "I was never good. I was great" – before shooting the speaker box with her outsized gold pistol and turning to face the conclusion of this destiny that has been her obsession. The significance of that single tear lies precisely in her acknowledgement that the fulfilment of her destiny will also be her death. This is why she refers to herself in the past tense: "I was great." Mortality and triumph are inextricable. Precisely to the degree that Madison Lee, like all *femmes fatales*, exceeds the masculine fantasy of the tameable violent woman she risks her own mortality.

Violence and the Uncanny

If we return to Lisa Jardine's argument that woman represents the uncanny, the frightening irruption of the repressed in everyday life, then we can see how it is that the alien and alienated *femme fatale* in fact represents the irruption of mortality into the comfortable textures of everyday life. Madison Lee, like Jade Fox, makes present an image of femininity that is threatening because it represents that undesired knowledge of death. These characters accept the fact of their own mortality as a consequence of their pursuit of personal destiny. Destiny for these characters involves the dissolution of conventional gender boundaries – Jade Fox wants to possess knowledge that is prohibited to women; Madison Lee wants to become the Boss of all crime bosses. The post-modern, post-feminist anxieties concerning a perceived lack of stable gender and ego boundaries are dramatised by *femmes fatales* such as these. The conjunction of postmodernism, death and Eros is taken up by Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1975):

> Eros in the service of death, all cultural sublimation as a long detour to death, the death drive nourishing repressive violence and presiding over culture like a ferocious super-ego, the forces of life inscribed in the compulsion to repeat; all this is true, but true of our culture. Death undertakes to abolish death and is haunted by its own end. ...] Stage of the immanent repetition of one and the same law, insisting on its own end, caught, totally invested by death as objective finality, and total subversion by the death drive as a deconstructive process – the metaphor of the death drive says all of this simultaneously, for the death drive is at the same time the system and the system's double, its doubling into a radical counter-finality (Baudrillard, 1988, 152).

In Baudrillard's terms, the culture of the hyperreal is motivated by the desire to escape or repress or at least to efface knowledge of death but as a result becomes deeply imbricated in the fact of mortality ("all cultural sublimation as a long detour to death").[4] Eros, "the forces of life," are pressed into the function of death-denial but the consequent reign of arbitrary semiotic signs, alienated from representation, is deathly ("Death undertakes to abolish death and is haunted by its own end"). However, the repression of death is never complete because the death drive is at the same time both the system of the hyperreal and also the repressed that will not remain repressed, which compulsively repeats its own sublimation, which irrupts into and shatters the hyperreal as *das unheimlich*, the uncanny. The spectacular violence of our post-modern screens (movie and TV), perhaps epitomised by the violent terrorist spectacle of 9/11, is the return of the repressed – the fact of death. This is the violence of the symbolic, which Baudrillard describes as "haunting" modern social institutions as "the prospect of their own demise" (Baudrillard, 1975, 120). The metaphor of haunting is reminiscent (probably deliberately so) of Freud's image of the uncanny as a haunting, symbolised by the haunted house. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud observes that: "Many people experience he feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. … Some languages in use today can only render the German expression 'an *unheimlich* house' by 'a *haunted* house'" (Freud, 1919, 241; italics in the original).

It is the violence of the symbolic alone which has the power to break through or subvert the banality of the semiotic codes that constitute post-modern culture. These codes of the hyperreal – like CNN news, banal advertising, movies like *Charlie's Angels* that refer only to other movies – are susceptible only to spectacular violence which instantiates the fact of death in the midst of those codes designed to obscure and deny mortality. In Baudrillard's words, "Only symbolic disorder can break the code" (Baudrillard, 1988, 122). Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Volume 1* demonstrates this breaking of banal semiotic codes through acts of extreme, spectacular violence. The irruption of death into the fabric of everyday life is dramatized in the confrontation between "the bride," (Uma Thurman) code named "Black Mamba," and the second victim of her vengeance, Vernita Green (Vivica Fox). The suburban house in Southern California before which she pulls up in her (misappropriated) car is filmed so that the pastel colours of the building, its spacious lawn strewn with children's toys, is more vivid than in any real American suburb. The house itself is a cliché of American sit-com TV, with cute gables and wide windows painted in contrasting pastel colours. Into this suburban calm bursts the violence of

the bride's revenge. Again the contrast is heightened when Vernita Green's four-year-old daughter returns from school, bringing her mother's knife fight to an abrupt pause. The banal questions asked by the mother ("Did you have a nice day at school, sweetheart?") are posed by a woman caked in her own blood, standing in a room of shattered glass and trampled knick knacks. This sequence culminates in Vernita's attempt to shoot Black Mamba with a gun hidden in a cereal packet. The packet, banal and ordinary as is the packaging of all children's cereals, is emblazoned with the word "Kaboom." We are back in the world of the simulacra where objects in the "real" world imitate fantasy objects of television (like the house itself). But this hyperreality has been shattered, momentarily, by the violent killing of Vernita, by the intrusion of death in this spectacularly violent way.

Baudrillard's theory of the symbolic expression and repression of death through code-violating acts of spectacular violence (note the emphasis on spectacle as constitutive of this violence) can be useful as a strategy by which to insert a feminist agenda into otherwise closed systems of representation, through the reappropriation of representations of violence. This happens through the identification of cultural constructions that equate feminine sexuality with death. Baudrillard's "uncanny" as the irruption of violence as death and Jardine's description of the "uncanny" quality of post-modern feminine sexuality are linked through Freud. Freud's essay on the uncanny constructs a link between the uncanny and woman precisely through the repressed knowledge of death.

In Freud's essay on "The Uncanny," he observes that neurotic men have been observed to experience as uncanny the female genital organs. Freud interprets this experience to be the result of the return of repressed memories of inter-uterine fantasies. He links this to the image of the uncanny as attached not to the image of the house or home but to the haunted house, the home inhabited by death: "The *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. … In this case, too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *Heimlich*, familiar; the prefix 'un' ['un—'] is the token of repression" (Freud, 1919, p. 245; parentheses in the original). The return of repressed memories of death is intimately associated with feminine sexuality. Freud's explanation of the uncanny is primarily interested in the connection between the uncanny and death, not the uncanny and femininity. He observes that many people experience the uncanny in relation to the return of the dead, through spirits or haunting. But death is inseparable from life and knowledge of mortality is inseparable from living. So long as we are living we know that we may die. And so the female – but specifically female sexuality, the female genitals, the locus of new life – is inscribed with death. She always already represents the return of repressed knowledge of death.

Baudrillard's "uncanny" is the irruption of violence as death; but if the agent of that violence is feminine and her message is the inescapable fact of death, which post-modern culture has tried to efface through the hyperreal, then how can the violent woman achieve anything more than the reinscription of the category of woman as "death"? Lisa Jardine's image of post-modern woman as the "uncanny" site for the expression of male anxieties about the breakdown of stable gender boundaries offers greater potential for the redefinition of femininity in a post-feminist (as opposed to post-modern) age. In the breakdown of stable gender boundaries there lies at least the potential to recreate gender in such a way that "woman" is no longer identical to "death."

Death, Mortality and Mastery

In the *Charlie's Angels* movies, as in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the human capacity to fly is represented as a consequence of strict martial arts discipline and training. Only through discipline is it possible to transcend the limitations of the mortal body and fly. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's heroine recalls the Chinese martial arts movies she saw as a child: "on Sundays, from noon to midnight, we went to the movies at the Confucius Church. We saw swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill; they didn't even need a running start" (19). Young Maxine remembers the swordswomen who could defy gravity, who possessed the power to transgress the laws of nature. In the narrative that follows, "White Tigers," she imagines herself as the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. Her training in the arts of war involves primarily learning to control and so transcend bodily, corporeal and natural forces: muscular reflexes, noise, hunger. Eventually, she can control the movements of her irises; she can "point at the sky and make a sword appear, … and control its slashing with my mind" (33). The ability to fly is a measure of her progress: after six years she can leap like the swordswomen of the movies ("I could jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, leaping like a monkey over the hut"[23]) but still she says, "I could not fly like the bird that led me here, except in large, free dreams" (24). However, the white horse that appears magically to carry her into battle bears on its hooves the ideograph "to fly" (35). In so far as she can fly, she describes how, high on the mountain, she runs but does not fall over the cliff edge, "[a] wind buoyed me up over the roots, the rocks, the little hills. We reached the tiger place in no time" (24).

This description is reminiscent of the sequence in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* when Li Mu Bai chases Jen to regain possession of the Green Destiny sword. They fly among the treetops, briefly touching down on each, and travelling very quickly as a result. When the sword falls into the mountain waterfall, Jen does not jump after it rather she flies down the mountain until her flying becomes a dive down to the riverbed. The ability to fly is here represented as the characteristic skill of warriors trained in the Wu Dang method. Jen has learned this method illicitly from Jade Fox and so although she possesses skill, she lacks the warrior's code and martial discipline. Her lack is represented as poison in the scene where the film reaches a climax: Li Mu Bai engages with Jade Fox over possession of Jen. Both wish to be her teacher and guide but both fail. Li Mu Bai kills Jade Fox, avenging his murdered master, but is poisoned by one of her darts. As she dies, Jade Fox tells Li Mu Bai the true meaning of poison: staring at Jen with unwavering eyes, she declares that poison is a young girl with eyes full of deceit. Both Jade Fox and Li Mu Bai are poisoned by their relationship with Jen. In the case of Li Mu Bai, there is a subtle yet powerful sexual dimension to this relation. Jen embraces the warrior's life because she wants to escape the arranged marriage that would sacrifice her to her father's political ambitions. But when Li Mu Bai pursues her after her flight down the mountain she asks him, which does he want, the sword or the girl? He has no answer to this question. He wants her as his pupil, ostensibly, but in his relation with Shu Lien he has been sublimating sexual passion into martial artistry for many years. Jen is seeking a kind of freedom that is not resolved by the role of female warrior eunuch, such as Shu Lien embraces. Jen is seeking a different way to be an assertive, even aggressive, sexual woman.

This quest is clearly revealed in the sequence in Mongolia, after she is taken captive and falls in love with the Mongolian bandit Luo (Chang Chen). This relationship is doomed, however, by the competing claims of civilization and

wilderness: she must return to her family in the city yet he cannot renounce his nomadic ways. She tries to live with him in the desert; he tries to prove himself a worthy, "civilized" match for her. In the ambiguous concluding scenes of the movie, she meets him briefly at a monastery, high atop Wu Dang Mountain. Earlier, Luo has told of the legendary qualities of this mountain: how once a man whose children were ill jumped from the mountain and so brought his wishes true. He did not die, says Luo, but floated away happily knowing that his children were well again. The moral of this story, as Luo tell it, is the importance of a trusting heart. As Luo searches for Jen at the monastery through the morning mist, the camera leaves him peering over the parapets, over the cliff edge, and shifts to the image of Jen flying down the mountain. Her face is serene and confident; she is not falling, she is not frightened. She is flying towards some destiny (not this time the Green Destiny) that only she can see. No longer must she choose between the roles of patriarchal wife and sexless warrior woman but what this alternative feminine destiny, this new definition of femininity, might be is not revealed.

Jen faces her own death and embraces that knowledge. Her ability to fly has granted her the power to transgress the law of gravity as her martial prowess has granted her an alternative to the social law of patriarchal marriage. Whether she achieves transcendence or simply transgression is ambiguous. Kingston's heroine, however, quite clearly achieves transcendence through her discipline and training. On the mountaintop, she faces death through exposure, hunger, wild animals: she describes being "unable to sleep for facing my death – if not death here, then death someday" (25). But after she enters "the dead land" her vision changes. She sees the ancient couple who have trained her but now they are young, now they are angels. In her vision, they transcend time and mortality. It is not only death that the young warrior woman must confront and master; as I argued above, the connection between femininity and death is made through the life-giving properties of feminine fertility. By bringing babies into world where they will die women are dealers of death as well as bringers of life. Initially, Maxine's fantasy life as a woman warrior involves postponing the desire to have children in order to fight and win her martial victories. When she does fall pregnant, her armour transforms her appearance from vulnerable woman to "a powerful, big man" and later to "a fat man," as when the infant rides into battle inside his mother's armour (39). The baby is, significantly, a boy for whom all the full-month ceremonies (denied to girls, as Kingston points out elsewhere in the narrative) are performed. At this point, the woman warrior is certainly a devoted soldier and leader. But we must ask to what extent is she a *woman* warrior? Even through this most feminine of experiences – childbirth – she continues her masculine performance unabated. Except for the time of giving birth she boasts never to have absented herself from battle and, after her baby is sent to with his father to stay with his grandparents, she is transformed once more into a "slim young man" (41). The performance of masculinity is so complete that she effectively remains a man, a male warrior in her violent confrontations with death. Though she is a violent woman, she is much more a perfect filial daughter who, after avenging her family's grievances, returns to a life which is undisturbed by her violent achievements:

> Wearing my black embroidered wedding coat, I knelt at my parents-in-laws feet, as I would have done as a bride. "Now my public duties are finished," I said, "I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons" (45).

The paradigm for femininity remains unchanged by this story of female filiality.

Gender roles and boundaries are unchanged and the conclusion of the story asserts the primacy of feminine passivity over female aggression. This is underlined by the contrast drawn between the filial and obedient warrior woman and a group of women she liberates from the clutches of the evil baron. The narrative suggests that these women become themselves a band of swordswomen, devoted to the liberation of all women. The warrior woman tells how: "[t]hey did not wear men's clothes like me, but rode as women in black and red dresses. They bought up girl babies … When slave girls and daughters-in-law ran away, people say they joined these witch amazons" (45). The difference between "witch amazons" and the "warrior woman" lies in the extent to which the former assert a violent femininity that is not disguised by the naturalising performance of masculinity. The amazons are said to kill boys and men – an unnatural practice in a culture which, according to this narrative, kills only girls and women. These witch amazons embrace the power of death to assert a form of femininity that is unacceptable and unknown, which consciously defines femininity in terms of death and embraces the power to challenge normative gender boundaries with which that endows them. Death permits them to transcend the confinement of patriarchal feminine identities.

Conclusion

As Imelda Whelehan and Esther Sonnet have argued, following Camile Paglia, that

> the "post-feminist" heroine is regarded as transgressive and challenging for depicting a woman "in control." We are encouraged to position gender politics on an account of "control" that rests solely on the view that a certain female style and set of behaviours can operate as ironic and knowing, which can celebrate pre-feminist feminine identity with a playfulness which is both performative and transgressive. There is, of course, a degree of debate about what would constitute a transgressive image, but presumably it must in some way dismantle gender binarism without reviving its essential dynamics (Whelehan & Sonnet, 1997, 42-43).

The Woman Warrior does not dismantle this gender binarism, as I have argued above. Kingston's young protagonist confuses the masculine armour and military successes for victory as a woman. She imagines herself as transgressive because she transgresses the patriarchal taboo against women "passing" for men but she willingly embraces this patriarchal orthodoxy when her brief career as a warrior woman has passed. Kingston's woman warrior is "performative and transgressive" but she performs and transgresses masculine codes, not the codes of femininity. She is mistaken for a man. Only at the moment when she kills the evil baron does she reveal her gender, by exposing her breasts as she displays her parents' grievances which are carved into her back: "When I saw his startled eyes at my breasts, I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head" (44). This revelation of femininity at the moment of death, reinscribes the feminine within the sphere of death. Again, femininity becomes inextricable from death but this is death in the

service of patriarchal filiality, not in the service of female liberation (as is the death-dealing of the "witch amazons").

In *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, Alex represents an Asian woman in control of her destiny but this representation is a pastiche drawing upon the "Dragon Lady" stereotype, which brings together the combined influences of racism and patriarchy. She is in control in so far as she wields a whip; like the other Angels she takes her orders from Charlie and, as I argued above, retreats into domestic passivity in private. The cabaret scene in the first *Charlie's Angels* movie attempts an "ironic and knowing" representation of pre-feminist roles, in this sequence the movie aims to "celebrate pre-feminist feminine identity with a playfulness which is both performative and transgressive." However, this German-style burlesque (which nods towards the Liza Minelli movie *Cabaret*) is more like a strip-show, as the name by which it goes indicates: "Pussycat Dolls." These women are acting out masculine fantasies of the aggressive yet sexually available woman: the dominant and violent woman in Alex's case. The audience should make a distinction between the role we have seen these women play as strong and competent detectives and the image they create as dancing sex objects. However, the point of this sequence is to distract the male audience with the spectacle of female sexuality while stealing keys and a security pass from one of them. In this scene, as in the movie as a whole (and its sequel) feminine sexuality is represented as manipulative; as a substitute for feminine strength. Here, as in *The Woman Warrior*, femininity is placed in the service of patriarchy. The cabaret scene is playful and performative but it is "transgressive" only in so far as the male fantasy played out is coded as "transgressive" within patriarchal culture. The performance serves the interests of, and is possessed by, the male gaze. The essential dynamics of gender binarism remains undisturbed.

In Kingston's writing and in the recent movies discussed above, the martial arts theme functions as spectacle, as a choreography of violence that displays the female body and the Asian female body specifically as strong, aesthetically pleasing yet violent. The motif of flying, which is used in *The Woman Warrior*, the *Charlie's Angels* movies and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, hints at the possibility of transgression through the image of violent women, who transgress the law of the fathers, of patriarchy, literally or physically transgressing the law of gravity. But the possibility of liberation from the confinement of patriarchally defined gender roles is not realized. Kingston's heroine, like the Asian Angel, retreats into domesticity and is unable to reconcile her femininity with her "masculine" capacity for violence. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the ambiguous conclusion hints at an alternative subject position for the warrior woman but the reality is that the audience is left with the image of her body suspended in air, destined perhaps for transcendence of conventional masculine/feminine identities or destined perhaps only for death. The image of the violent female in recent filmic and literary texts can then be seen as American patriarchy's attempt to express and to contain male anxieties about the restructuring of gender roles in the post-feminist age. The objectification of the feminine body in combination with the spectacle of physical power is reassuring to male audiences who possess the privilege of the objectifying gaze. Contemporary images of the Oriental warrior woman then are far from subversive of patriarchal hegemony, working instead to reassert conventional positionings of feminine sexuality.

[1] The action choreography of these movies is, in fact, the work of two brothers: Yuen Wo-ping (*Kill Bill*; also *The Matrix*, an important precursor which uses martial arts but no female Asian warrior figure) and his brother Yuen Cheung-yan (*Charlie's Angels*, *Charlies Angels: Full Throttle*; also the two *Matrix* sequels: *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*). The Yeun brothers are responsible for bringing into the Hollywood mainstream the Hong Kong practice of "wirework" to enable actors to leap and fly during action sequences.

[2] There is a connection between feminism and martial arts going back to Edith Garrud and the Suffragettes. The wife of noted martial artist, William Garrud, Edith, who was also an expert in jujutsu, is reported as having achieved "considerable notoriety both as a suffragette and as a trainer of 'fighting suffragettes,' the bodyguard unit for Mrs Pankhurst. Edith, after breaking with her husband, opened a dojo close to Oxford Circus. This was used as a base for suffragettes to sally forth, break a few windows, rush back and be engaged innocently in jujutsu training when the police arrived." (http://www.budokwai.org/history_vol_i.htm)

[3] The Griffith Observatory is a perceptive choice of location of only because of the commanding aerial context that is established for the confrontation between Angels. The Observatory is a well-known movie location, having functioned as a movie set (Gene Autry's *The Phantom Empire* (1935)) even before it was officially opened as an observatory in 1935. Later film and television roles include *Rebel Without a Cause*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Logan's Run*, *Star Trek Voyager*. In this respect, the Observatory forms a part of the texture of simulacra that characterises this movie and its predecessor. The reality portrayed by the *Charlie's Angels* movies is that of the simulacra; the cinematic images refer to other cinematic images from which conventional understandings of reality are divorced. Below I will argue that the world of simulation, of the hyperreal, is key to an understanding of the representation of femininity and violence in these movies.

[4] Baudrillard defines the "hyperreal" as "the meticulous reproduction of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography." This reproduction of the real refers to no reality beyond or outside itself and the free play of arbitrary signs. "It becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism of the lost object." In the era of the postmodern, the real is defined as that which possesses not the capacity to be reproduced but which is "always already reproduced" (Baudrillard, pp. 145-46. Emphasis in the original). See Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2000) for an excellent explanation of these concepts.

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