

Postmillennial Cinema and the Avenging *Fatale* in *Sin City*, *Hard Candy* and *Descent*

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Introduction

This article explores how the *femme fatale* of postmillennial film differs from earlier incarnations of the figure, how she fits within the dynamics of postfeminist culture, and reveals why these representations are significant for feminist film and cultural studies. It does so through an analysis of Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's 2005 *neo-noir* fantasy *Sin City*, David Slade's 2005 thriller *Hard Candy* and Talia Lugacy's 2007 film *Descent* (not to be confused with the 2005 female-centered horror film *The Descent*). Drawing upon Lisa Coulthard's essay "Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Violence," in which she argues that *Sin City* plays out problematic pleasures, regressions and recidivisms of postfeminist culture (2007: 173), I suggest that the way women are represented in these three cinematic texts is markedly different from the archetypal *fatale* construct. Most significantly there is a move away from a desire for wealth and power, towards an increased centrality of the rape-revenge narrative as a catalyst for female violence. *Sin City* also stands out in that the *fatale* figures lack the inherent trait of falseness and duplicity typically associated with the character. Further, postfeminist discourse is played out differently in these films compared to the way it is articulated in earlier 1990s thrillers, suggesting a shift in the way castration anxieties are expressed through the postmillennial *femme fatale* that has thus far been overlooked. I also contend that in the case of *Hard Candy* and *Descent*, female depictions do not fit neatly with the kind of postfeminism that predominates in mainstream media culture. *Descent* rejects "assimilationist modes of female representation" which generally prevail in popular female-centered texts (Projansky, 2001: 73; McRobbie, 2009: 41). Alternatively, the film focuses on the experiences of a woman marginalized by race and class. In *Hard Candy*, there are distinct overtones of "grrrl postfeminism," which is also closely affiliated with third wave feminism and the revalidation of female power (Holmlund, 2005: 116). As such these films trouble modes of representation that have come to be associated with postfeminism.

Postfeminism is a widely applied and contradictory term (Negra, 2009: 2), however the kind of postfeminist discourse that has come to prevail in popular culture is one marked by contradiction in that it celebrates many of the gains of earlier feminist activism while simultaneously undermining

them. In this sense, for many theorists dominant postfeminism is a kind of "faux feminism" (McRobbie, 2009: 1), because despite articulating a view that gender equality has been achieved, it nevertheless instils an entire set of regressive ideologies emphasizing that feminism is a thing of the past and as such is no longer needed (McRobbie, 2009: 12; Tasker and Negra, 2007: 1). This perceived stabilization of gender roles effectively renders latent anxieties about the position of women in society redundant. Theoretically this problematizes a symptomatic reading of the *fatale* figure that is argued to operate in popular culture as an expression of male paranoia about the shifting roles of women in Western society over the last century (Copjec, 1993: xii; Doane, 1991: 2-3). Therefore, a re-evaluation of the ideologies reproduced through the construct is called for.

The deadly woman of classical Hollywood cinema through to 1990s thrillers has been extensively examined, especially from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective. However, aside from Coulthard's reference to the position of female characters in *Sin City*, the postmillennial incarnations of the *fatale* figure have received very little mention in the context of critical debates about postfeminism. Instead, to date, the vast majority of postmillennial cinematic texts explored by feminist scholars fall generically into the category of "chick flicks," partly because this style of narrative clearly demonstrates many of the discourses circulating within postfeminist culture (commonly cited examples include the 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the television series *Sex and the City* [1998-2004], and the subsequent 2008 and 2010 feature films of the same name). However, this article reveals that the way women are depicted in cinema varies according to different narrative styles and genres, and that alternative gender representations co-exist within mainstream postfeminist media culture, indicating the need to analyze and explain films that do not fit the mold of the "chick flick" narrative.

Setting the Scene

In order to understand how the figure of the *femme fatale* has developed, it is necessary to firstly provide an overview of her previous incarnations. The fabled deadly woman has appeared under many guises throughout history, dating back to Pandora – the first woman of ancient Greek mythology – and the biblical character Jezebel. With the beginning of motion pictures, the figure was quick to emerge in the form of the "vamp," taking centre stage in silent movies such as Frank Powell's *A Fool There Was* (1915) and Fred Niblo's *The Temptress* (1926). Drawing her name from the vampire of the horror tradition, the vamp was a beautiful seductress who targeted successful men, draining them of their wealth and dignity (as opposed to their blood), before leaving them distraught and destitute. It is here that the *femme fatale* finds her origins. Like her

predecessors, she is a dangerous creature who seduces and destroys men in order to satisfy her own narcissistic desires. As Jane Mills contends: "Outside is charm, glamor, beauty. But this exteriority is mere artifice – manufactured [...]. It conceals the interior, the dark hidden recesses of female sexuality" (2001: 165-166).

Because of the external/internal dichotomy between beauty and iniquity that defines the *femme fatale* she is commonly explained in terms of latent male anxiety. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, feminist scholars have determined the figure to be a manifestation of repressed infantile fears relating to the realization that women lack a penis, and the dread of castration this image invokes. These castration anxieties, which find expression through the *femme fatale*, are argued to have been triggered by the destabilization of traditional gender roles in Western society. In 1940s US cinematic representations, the character is considered to be representative of fears about changing gender dynamics bought about by first-wave feminism and the increased presence of women in the public sphere, particularly during World War II, which saw them occupy traditionally male jobs. As Joan Copjec argues, the *femme fatale* functions as an expression of "mounting paranoia regarding the working woman's place in society" (1993: xii). This is reflected in the characterization of these women. They are ambitious, determined and not content to take the back seat. Driving them is a compelling desire for wealth, independence, freedom or fame; things they will kill to get if necessary.

Later incarnations of the *fatale* figure that became prominent in the 1980s and 1990s are also considered to be a product of repressed anxiety, functioning as a paranoid response to cultural shifts initiated by second-wave feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s that saw women's rights such as equal opportunity, divorce and abortion become enshrined in law and increasingly taken for granted. However, as Jacinda Read (2000: 157) argues, these more contemporary *fatale* figures are not simply continuations of the earlier construct. Instead the films in which they appear evoke nostalgia by playing with fragments of the past, subjecting classic narratives to parody and ironic quotation in a postmodern style. In some texts such as *L.A. Confidential* (1997), nostalgia is expressed through aesthetic style. In other films, the deadly woman has transformed into a sexually aggressive, power-hungry psychopath who uses sex as a weapon (literally at times) and a strategy, as well as an erotic spectacle (Williams, 2005: 97-103). Women such as this invoke Barbara Creed's category of "the castrating female psychotic" (1993: 123) because of their extreme violence and enormous appetite for power, money and sex. The thrillers *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Body of Evidence* (1993) are well-known examples of films that feature this type of figure.

As with a number of such 1980s and 1990s thrillers, postmillennial films of this style often adopt various narrative and stylistic features from other cinematic periods and genres. For example, Brian de Palma's *The Black Dahlia* (2006) is set in 1947; its female figures are directly reminiscent of that era. In *Brick* (2005), the *femme fatale* is inspired by the classic construct of the figure, but the setting is a contemporary California high school. And the film *Obsessed* (2009) plays out an archetypal 1990s narrative where a deranged office temp sets out to destroy the fragile nuclear family of her male work colleague. However, despite (sometimes) rehashing earlier themes and tropes, other distinctly different incarnations of the *fatale* figure can also be identified. This suggests not only a shift in the way gender anxieties are expressed, but also a change in the types of postfeminist ideologies articulated through the character since the 1990s. This article will consider these changes with reference to the *Sin City*, *Hard Candy* and *Descent*.

Postfeminism and the 1990s *Femme Fatale*

Around the same time that this resurgence in the popularity of the *fatale* character in cinema occurred, postfeminism also emerged as a "sensibility" [1] within popular culture (Gill, 2007: 254). The term postfeminism dates back to the mid-1980s, but it was in the 1990s that it exploded as a "cultural phenomenon and journalistic buzzword" (Genz, 2009: 82). Although there are many forms of postfeminism (as feminist scholars such as Rosalind Gill, Sarah Projansky and Chris Holmlund, among others, have argued), the kind of postfeminism that prevails in popular culture is one that works to undo or undermine the gains of earlier feminist movements (McRobbie, 2009:11). Susan Faludi is well known for describing this form of postfeminism as a "backlash" against feminism (1999: 13); however, the majority of feminist scholars argue that postfeminism is more complex than simply a counter-reaction to feminism. Instead, postfeminist discourse manifests as a series of contradictions and tensions, where the gains of earlier feminist movements are both taken for granted and undermined; the prevailing message being that feminism has been achieved, that it is a spent force, and as such is no longer needed (McRobbie, 2009:12; Taylor, 2012: 13).

The contradictions and tensions central to postfeminist discourse are played out in a variety of ways in popular culture, including in Hollywood film. In relation to 1980s and 1990s thrillers featuring *femmes fatales*, a number of dominating themes emerged. These included the renewed centrality of the nuclear family (Pidduck, 1995: 67), where the deadly woman is positioned as a dangerous outsider who threatens to destroy its invariably fragile structure (usually by seducing the husband or father). *Poison Ivy* (1992) and *Body of Evidence* are only two of the many examples of this form of narrative. At other times the deadly woman is a

highly intelligent, successful career woman. As Tasker (1998: 134) contends, it is increasingly common to find the 1990s *fatale* in a business suit (as in *The Last Seduction* [1994], and *Basic Instinct*, for example). However, according to Read (2000: 175), although these powerful corporate women generally get what they want, they are typically isolated, bitter or unbalanced, suggesting that feminism's claims that women can have it all has only made them miserable. For Faludi, films such as these (inspired by the explosive 1987 thriller *Fatal Attraction*), are the product of a new form of traditionalism that works to paint the career woman in a distinctly negative light, instead holding the devoted "good" wife and mother up as a desirable model of female achievement (Faludi, 1999: 113).

Postfeminist contradictions are also played out through the excessive eroticization of the *fatale* of this period. In one sense the figure functions as an expression of recently established rights for sexual autonomy, yet by presenting female sexual assertiveness as a weapon and aligning it with mental imbalance, the concerns of second wave feminism about the sexualization and objectification of women are undermined. As Gill (2007: 258) argues, women are encouraged to internalize the heterosexual male gaze by actively choosing to portray themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberal interests to do so. However, McRobbie contends that far from being empowering, self-objectification ultimately undercuts equality, instead ensuring gender restabilization by repudiating feminism (2009: 18). Therefore, by presenting the *fatale* figure in a comprehensively sexualised manner her potency is effectively destabilized, mollifying latent fears about feminism in the process.

A New Kind of Tart (With a Heart)

Sin City is based on a combination of graphic novels written and illustrated by Frank Miller. It is a place where most of the authority figures are corrupt, turning a blind eye to vile serial killers with a penchant for human flesh or torturing children; allowing them to run rampant because of their connections to the "right" people. The *femme fatales* of *Sin City* are gun-toting, action-heroine-style prostitutes. They have a fragile truce with the police, who allow them to control a section of the city called "Old Town" in return for a share of the profits and free entertainment at parties. Although they are potentially lethal, these *fatale* figures stand out in that they lack the essential trait of dishonesty that has traditionally formed the basic construct of the deadly woman. Uncharacteristically, they are not intent on underhandedly stripping men of their wealth and dignity; rather, they are more closely aligned to sex worker Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) in the 1971 thriller *Klute*, who has a very business-like attitude towards the men with whom she has relations. As Dwight (Clive Owen), an on-and-off lover of one of the prostitutes,

explains: "If you've got the cash and play by the rules they'll make all your dreams come true." It is only if you cross them that "you're a corpse." Not only are they straightforward in their dealings with men, for some, the women are true heroines. In Marv's (Mickey Rourke) opinion, Goldie (Jamie King) is an "angel of mercy" as well as a friend and more when he needed one, showing him kindness that he had never experienced before. For Dwight (Clive Owen), Gail (Rosario Dawson) is his warrior woman and his Valkyrie. And although Miho (Devon Aoki) is a lethal ninja killer, she has a compassionate side, rescuing Dwight from certain death as he drowns in a tar pit. As he thankfully gushes: "Miho, you're an angel, a saint, you're mother Teresa, you're Elvis, you're God."

Much of the frankness surrounding the women in *Sin City* relates to the way the commodification of sex is presented. The *fatale* figure as prostitute is a motif that has been present since 1940s US cinema. Fritz Lang's 1945 classic *Scarlet Street* is a notable example, although in such films the *fatale*'s occupation in seedy industries such as sex work serves to further cement the character as highly untrustworthy and criminal. This image of the prostitute is often at odds with other sex-worker representations in a broader range of cinematic styles and genres. As Tasker (1998: 93) argues, whilst the *femme fatale* and prostitute are both stereotypes that articulate gender identities in relation to constructions of independence, self-reliance, and sexuality, the prostitute is often depicted as selling her sexuality in a straightforward "down-to-earth" manner and is repeatedly invoked to signify a position of relative "honesty," as a "tart with a heart" (*Ibid.*).

This is played out in *Klute*, where the sex worker is presented as an independent, sexually autonomous, liberated woman. As such, the film articulates themes central to second-wave feminism at the time, particularly considering that Jane Fonda is associated with second-wave activism in the 1970s (Gledhill, 1998: 103). Whilst Bree is not a *femme fatale* per se, Gledhill argues that, in *Klute*, the myth of the woman as sexual instigator and predator is undermined. Whereas the *fatale* figure is a stereotype designating the mysterious and unknowable power of women, the prostitute in *Klute* represents a more defined sexual role, "shorn of the *fatale* stereotypes fatality" (*Ibid.*). The men who solicit Bree's services know what they are getting, so there is no duplicity involved. Similarly, Bree is shown negotiating terms and prices with her clients in a straightforward, candid manner. Her only interest is to provide them with what they have paid for. Whilst the 1990s saw a reversion back to 1940s US representation of the duplicitous *fatale* prostitute, particularly in films such as *Bound* (1996), the dynamics presented in *Klute* are replicated in *Sin City*. Although they make a living from sex, the *fatale* figures are not predatory instigators, and crucially, they are straightforward and honest about what they do. Similarly, many other

postmillennial films featuring prostitution also debunk the myth of woman as a sexual predator. But unlike in the fantasy world of *Sin City*, the profession is often depicted in a realistic and sometimes brutal manner, as in *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002), *London to Brighton* (2006) and *Candy* (2006), for example.

However, while the women of "Old Town" lack the inherent deceptiveness often linked to classical Hollywood *fatale* incarnations, *Sin City* is also a place where *all* the women are whores (Bould, 2005: 110), as well as being literally reduced to bits of meat by cannibal Kevin (Elijah Wood). According to Diane Negra (2009: 86-87), contemporary postfeminist discourse is marked by a new respectability (and even at times idealization) of women who are employed in the sex industry: "What is certainly clear is that the female sex worker is becoming one of popular culture's most regular archetypes of paid labour" (Negra, 2009: 100). Negra draws on the "teen romance" *The Girl Next Door* (2004), where an honors student falls in love with his glamorous porn-star neighbour, as one of many examples. By depicting the heroine in the role of sex-industry worker, the threat of the urban career woman is defused. Therefore, representations such as this undercut and repudiate feminism, ensuring the restabilization of gender order (Negra, 2009: 87; McRobbie, 2009: 18). As Coulthard argues, by situating women in *Sin City* as prostitutes, gender clarity is restored (2007: 169). This sits in contrast to *fatale* representations in 1990s thrillers, where gender equality is undermined (and male anxiety alleviated) by positioning the career woman as a greedy, isolated psychopath.

The Rape-Revenge Narrative and an Intensification of Castration Anxiety

Despite postfeminism's claims that anxieties about feminism are a thing of the past, there is a distinct shift in the postmillennial thriller towards an increased centrality of rape-revenge as a primary motive for female violence towards men. This is evident in *Sin City*, *Hard Candy* and *Descent*, with the latter two films focusing entirely on the theme. The rape-revenge style of narrative was particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s, articulating second-wave feminist responses to rape, as well as functioning as an attempt to make sense of the changing position of women in society and the gathering woman's movement (Read, 2000: 39). Well-known examples include *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *Lipstick* (1976), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). Rape-revenge narratives are typically presented from the woman's point of view and see the heroine seek retribution because either she or her friend has been raped and/or murdered by a single male or group of males (Creed, 1993: 123-128). According to Read (2000: 156), the structure and motifs of the rape-revenge narrative began making their way into some thrillers in the

1990s. But rather than playing out in a straightforward manner, they were instead recycled in a way that undermined feminist responses to rape. Drawing on the example of *The Last Seduction* (a contemporary, updated version of the 1944 classic *Double Indemnity*), Read argues that *femme fatale* Bridget (Linda Fiorentino) utilizes a discourse of victim feminism in order to get what she wants (*Ibid.*). The character is shown using a rape scenario to frame her lover for rape and the killing of her husband (neither of which he has committed), enabling her to get away with both murder and the cash. In doing so, the film mocks the stereotype of woman as a victim (Read, 2000: 160-164). Creed (1993: 124) argues that other 1990s thrillers (such as *Basic Instinct*) debunk the conventions of the rape-revenge narrative by showing it as motiveless, implying that women always have a desire for revenge, which can express itself at any time.

However, in postmillennial representations of rape-revenge, there is a reversion back to the more archetypal narrative structure of the 1960s and 1970s, where avenging women regain control and power by destroying the men who legitimately threaten it. Here the women can certainly be deadly, but only in retaliation against those who terrorize them (unlike the traditional *fatale* figure, who is deadly to any man who gets caught in her sticky web of deceit). In *Sin City*, the women only become lethal when their autonomy is challenged. Their truce with the police leaves them free to keep the pimps and the mob out (and the beatings, drugs and rapes that accompany these men). But when the mob discover that the women have inadvertently killed a trouble making undercover police officer, they quickly move in and attempt to reclaim control over the territory. Desperate to avoid returning to the old days of violent male domination, the women declare war on the gangsters, slaughtering every one of them and regaining power in the process.

Both *Hard Candy* and *Descent* represent contemporary enactments of the classic 1970s rape-revenge narrative. In *Hard Candy*, protagonist Hayley Stark (Ellen Page) uses the forum of an internet chat room in order to lure 32-year-old paedophile Jeff Kohlver (Patrick Wilson). Adopting the identity of fourteen-year-old "Thonggrrrl14" she flirts with Jeff on-line, teasing him with the possibility of sex. Her true intention is to seek revenge for his involvement in the abduction, murder (and presumed rape) of fellow teenager Donna Mauer. Positioning herself as prey, Hayley agrees to meet Jeff at a café before climbing into his car and going to his Hollywood Hills home. Here Hayley transforms from potential victim into predator, enacting retribution on Jeff that cumulates with him hanging himself. In *Descent*, college student Maya (Rosario Dawson) is brutally raped by football jock Jared (Chad Faust) after he seduces her with roses, expensive restaurants and wine. Following the assault, Maya becomes deeply introverted and depressed, submerging herself in a surreal world

of nightclubs, alcohol and drugs. Here she meets a charismatic man called Adrian (Marcus Patrick) who shows her how to dominate men. Some months later she encounters Jared again and decides to seek revenge. Accepting his sleazy suggestion that they should get together, she invites him to her home where she orchestrates her plan of vengeance.

A central component of the classic rape-revenge narrative is the often explicit and brutal castration of the male offender. In *Sin City*, *Hard Candy* and *Descent*, themes of castration that typically exist symbolically in conjunction with the *fatale* figure are brought to the forefront in an intensified or explicit manner. *Sin City* speaks back to Freudian film theory through themes associated with BDSM fantasy role and the excessive fetishization of its female characters that are costumed in a plethora of black leather, latex, fishnet, G-strings and spiked heels. According to Freudian theory, fetishization is a way of resolving tension created by repressed castration anxieties, functioning to displace the source of fear onto an alternative object: "The horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of a substitute – a fetish object" (Freud, 2001: 147-148). The types of garments worn by the women in *Sin City* are common fetish items, as are objects such as guns and knives, which also form an embellished part of the *fatale*'s iconography in the film. Miho's armory consists of a range of razor sharp machetes, swords and throwing knives. Other women prefer a varied assortment of large automatic machine guns. There are also much more direct references to castration, with Miho severing the hand and head of Jackie Boy (Benicio del Toro), Shelly (Brittany Murphy) threatening to cut the "pecker" off one thug, and Hartigan (Bruce Willis) shooting the genitalia off child rapist Rourke Junior (Nick Stahl).

The narrative structure of *Descent* shares many parallels with *I Spit on Your Grave*. In the latter film, Jennifer (played by Camille Keaton) lures one of the men who raped her back to her home. She convinces him to take a bath with her where she begins to masturbate him before severing his genitals just as he reaches the point of orgasm. In Freudian terms, Jennifer enacts fears of castration by literally turning her victim into a "bearer of the bleeding wound," as Laura Mulvey (1989: 14) famously describes the symbolic position of women. This theme is also enacted in *The Last House on the Left*, where the parent of a murdered rape victim literally transforms into the *vagina dentata* – a symbolic expression of the orally sadistic mother (Creed, 1993: 109) after she tears the penis of one of the perpetrators with her bare teeth. In *Descent*, a similar scenario is played out, except that during the de-masculinization process the rapist comes to occupy the symbolic position of a woman through a reverse-rape scenario. After inviting Jared to her apartment, Maya convinces him that she would like to engage in sexual role play. Although slightly apprehensive, Jared allows Maya to shackle him to the bed with his arms

above his head and his legs splayed. Once Jared is completely restrained, Maya gags him and vents her fury verbally before violently shoving a large phallic-shaped object repeatedly into his rectum. Her friend Adrian then appears and proceeds to brutally rape Jared. During this process, Jared's anus is referred to as "cunt," and he is called "fairy cake" and "she" (instead of "he").

Themes of castration are played out more explicitly in *Hard Candy*. In an intense and lengthy scene, Jeff is bound to a table and subjected to what at the time appears to be a castration procedure. Donned in surgical attire and armed with a scalpel, Hayley numbs Jeff's genitals with ice before (seemingly) removing one testicle, and then the other; excitedly declaring the operation a success at the end, and recommending Jeff join a eunuch support group. She even goes so far as to set up a video camera and television monitor so that he can watch the "procedure" should he choose, and to present him with two bloodied testicles at the completion of the task. It is not until Jeff breaks loose from his bindings that he realizes Hayley has been psychologically torturing him and that his organs in fact remain intact.

Although the relaxation of censorship regulations is undoubtedly a factor in the increased graphic content of these films, an intensification of castration anxieties sits in opposition to popular postfeminist rhetoric, which promotes the ideology that the challenges, demands and upheavals generated by earlier feminist activism are a thing of the past because equality has been achieved (McRobbie, 2009:12). However, whilst *Sin City* diffuses male paranoia by situating its castrating warrior women as whores, fears about gender power are not ameliorated in the same way in *Hard Candy* and *Descent*, as the next section will further explore.

Alternative Female Representations

In *Hard Candy*, the threat of castration is made all the more pronounced by the fact that it is enacted by a young teenager (or at least by a girl who claims to be only fourteen). The construction of girls as powerful, self-determined figures has become increasingly popular in dominant postfeminist culture. Anita Harris describes these figures as "can-do" girls. Drawing on action figures such as Lara Croft, Tank Girl, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Harris argues that "can-do" girls are presented as independent, successful, self-inventing and able to have it all. However, they are also highly stylized, with lots of makeup and revealing clothing. As such they invite the female body to be infantilized, sexually objectified, and commodified (Harris, 2004: 19-21). Mike O'Day describes these figures as "action babes," because they "function simultaneously as the action subject of the narrative and the erotic visual spectacle" (O'Day, 2004: 203). These representations imply that feminist power is predicated

on female attractiveness and desirability. By presenting the action heroine this way, her potency is effectively undercut (Levine, 2007:180; McRobbie, 2009: 18). Examples of similarly eroticized *filles fatales* can be found in thrillers including *Poison Ivy*, *The Crush* (1993), and *Wild Things* (1998).

However, *Hard Candy* stands out in that unlike most films featuring “can-do” action girls, this film does not undermine the threat of female power by offering its heroine as a highly sexualized spectacle designed for the heterosexual male gaze. Whilst Jeff may find Hayley desirable, she does not fit with conventional expectations of female attractiveness as they prevail in popular culture. Instead, Hayley is distinctly tomboyish. She has short hair and no make-up, and is costumed in jeans, a T-shirt, sneakers and a hoodie. The character’s pseudonym “Thonggrrrl14” (along with her self-effecting determination to strike back at crimes against girls and women) also aligns her with the form of postfeminism described by Holmlund as “grrrl postfeminism.” According to Holmlund (2005: 116), “grrrl postfeminism” is more closely affiliated with third-wave feminism than the kind of postfeminism that dominates popular culture (particularly in “chick flick”-style films) in that it generates a discourse that is eager to carry on first- and second-wave feminist struggles such as gender equality and sexual autonomy by engaging with political and institutional critique. It also revalidates female culture and the strength of femininity without diffusing it. *Hard Candy* enforces respect for female power through Jeff’s eventual willingness to see the error of his ways and kill himself. Therefore, the film offers an alternative representation of girls compared to that which predominates in postfeminist popular culture.

Descent also does not fit neatly with popular postfeminist discourse, particularly in relation to the way the film deals with issues related to racial (as well as cultural) difference. One of the main criticisms of first- and second-wave feminist activism is the tendency of these movements to focus on women as a collective whole, which assumes that the experiences, concerns and problems they faced were all the same, ignoring the issues of women marginalized by race, class and sexuality (Brooks, 1997: 34). This became a central concern for third-wave feminism, which prides itself on the rejection of essentialist discourse and the avoidance of universal claims about the experiences of women (Sanders, 2004: 51). However, the majority of postfeminist texts make no distinction among various social and cultural positions or experiences of women. Instead, there is a marginalization (or even elimination) of these differences in favor of a shared universal similarity (Projansky, 2001: 73). As a result, female figures in popular culture tend to fit with what Projansky describes as an “assimilationist mode of representation” (2001: 74). Here all women are presented through a white, middle-class, heterosexual lens, which is held up as normal and privileged as a marker

for all women's supposed success (Projansky, *Ibid.*; Taylor, 2012: 20). According to McRobbie, female representation of this kind are motivated by "nostalgia for whiteness" (2009: 41), where anti-racism is undermined through increasingly Anglo-centered depictions and political critique is labeled outdated: "dominant female-whiteness becomes an invisible means of rolling back on anti-racism" (*Ibid.*). This is particularly prominent in "chick flicks" and other female-focused films.

Projansky argues that this type of rhetoric also extends to depictions of rape in film, which is also often used to reinforce "the general white, middle-class, heterosexual focus of postfeminism" (2001: 94). However, *Descent* depicts themes of racial and class difference from the perspective of a woman who is marginalized by these two things. At the college Maya attends, she stands out as an anomaly in an almost exclusively white, middle-class environment. Whilst she does have one close friend, other students are shown as treating her with a degree of disdain. Already recovering from a relationship breakup, she is somewhat cautious but flattered when the confident, pushy Jared (who is Anglo and evidently from a privileged background) makes advances towards her. Jared seems preoccupied with Maya's ethnicity, although at first he is very complementary about her appearance. However, during the rape scene, this descends to derogatory levels when he describes her as a "fucking savage," "baboon cunt" and "nigger," among other things. This violent experience further isolates Maya, who retreats into Adrian's (who is of mixed-race heritage) world. Whilst the film goes on to invert black/white, male/female power dynamics in a relatively superficial way, it nonetheless actively rejects assimilationist modes of representation common to postfeminist popular culture.

Further, it is not uncommon for the postmillennial *femme fatale* to be of non-Anglo descent. Like *Descent*, *Sin City* presents mixed-race (Gail) and Asian (Miho) *fatales* as central characters (there are also other prostitutes of various ethnicities). In both *Kill Bill Vol. I* (2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. II* (2004), deadly women include the African-American Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox) and the Japanese-Chinese-American O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu). The films *Perfect Stranger* (2007), *Death Proof* (2007) and *Colombiana* (2011) also feature deadly female protagonists of mixed-race heritage. This raises the possibility that rather than soothing anxiety about racial equality by writing out ethnic difference (as is often the case in many "chick flicks"), these fears are expressed in action and thriller narratives by situating women of Asian, African-American and other ethnicities as deadly.

Conclusion

Postfeminism, as it manifests in popular culture, shies away from political engagement and direct critique of patriarchal power structures. Instead, whilst it positively draws on and celebrates many aspects of feminist achievement, it also works simultaneously to undo and undermine them (McRobbie, 2009: 12; Taylor, 2012: 13). These dynamics are particularly evident in “chick flick”-style narratives that have formed the central focus for feminist scholars to date. However, female representations in *Hard Candy* and *Descent* do not conform to this model of postfeminism. Although *Hard Candy* articulates postfeminist rhetoric through Hayley’s youthfulness, the film does not attempt to undercut the power of its female protagonist by presenting her as a highly stylized, sexualized “action babe.” Instead, she is directly aligned with what Holmlund describes as “grrrl postfeminism,” which is closely affiliated with third-wave feminism and the ideologies it embraces. *Descent* refuses modes of racial and class assimilation, which tend to dominate many “chick flick” and other female-centered narratives. Conversely, the film is played out entirely from the perspective of a woman who is marginalized by her race and class. Therefore, female representations in these two films reveal that postfeminist discourse does not necessarily operate in the same way across all cinematic styles and genres.

Although *Sin City* also celebrates racial diversity, in other ways it functions very much as an expression of dominant postfeminist discourse. However, despite this, the film does reveal several distinct shifts in the way postfeminist ideologies are articulated. In the 1990s, feminism was undermined by presenting the *fatale* figure as a mentally imbalanced sexual predator, a destroyer of the nuclear family or a corporate psychopath. Instead, in *Sin City* postfeminist discourse works to defuse the threat of women in the public sphere by positioning them as whores and attaching a new respectability, honesty and heroism to an occupation that is non-threatening to patriarchal power structures. This suggests that postfeminism is not static, but rather that it works to re-establish male hegemony through a variety of rhetorics that shift over time.

By depicting the women in *Sin City* as heroines and honest “tarts with hearts,” the trait of dishonesty that forms the core of the archetypal *fatale* figure is disrupted. Deadly women in the film, as well as in *Hard Candy* and *Descent*, also stand out significantly in relation to typical incarnations of the *femme fatale*, in that they are not motivated by greed or by an insatiable desire for wealth and power. Instead, in the spirit of the 1970s rape-revenge film, retribution and the reassertion of autonomy become the sole motivation for female violence, which is exacting and brutal, bringing castration anxieties to the forefront of the narrative in an explicit manner. This, coupled with the fact that the threat of female

power is not diffused in *Hard Candy* and *Descent*, enforces the fact that gender anxieties continue to exist, despite postfeminism's claim that feminism, and its accompanying disruptions, are a thing of the past. Importantly, despite the prevalence of certain forms of postfeminist rhetoric in mainstream media, examination of the three films reveals the presence of different strands of postfeminist discourse circulating in contemporary popular culture, strands that provide space for new modes of representation and self-representation to emerge.

Notes

[1] For Gill, one way to address the many different meanings attached to postfeminism is to conceptualize it as a "sensibility" rather than a period after second-wave feminism or (simply) a backlash against feminism, as some other feminist thinkers have done (2007: 247-54).

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