Suck my dick: G.I. Jane, Demi Moore and the action heroine

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“Suck my Dick!”

_G.I. Jane_, Demi Moore and the Action Heroine

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

The content of my thesis sits at the tail end of about three decades of feminist criticism that has examined women's place in film texts. During which, theoretical work has been done studying the types of roles given to women, how they are constructed visually and narratively across different genres. This thesis then sets out to examine the action genre and the room it makes for the central female protagonist. How does this genre, largely ignored by critics and academics and inherently masculine and dominated by males, allow for a central female heroine? What room is there for any femininity, and how is the central female protagonist coded to survive the entry into this genre? The principal film example I use here is the film *G.I. Jane* starring Demi Moore.

My analysis is built upon, and informed by feminist film studies and film studies in general. I harness elements of these studies; such as semiology, narrative, genre and star study, and use them as a way into the understanding and the positioning of this film. Specifically, by employing a textual approach that covers the major issues in feminist criticism of the last three decades, a study of the action film genre, the star system of Demi Moore and a narrative and textual analysis of *G.I. Jane*, this dissertation attempts to put this film example, and the depiction of its heroine within the context of an always changing media landscape that finds places—both acceptable and unacceptable for women.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

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Signed.

Date. 26/3/xxxx
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Introduction

Over the past thirty years much theoretical work has developed and been written around feminism, queer theory and women’s issues. These theories and ideas have looked extensively at representations of gender and sexuality. Within media, film and cultural studies a large amount of study has explored and examined representations of women. As this theoretical work has developed and grown many of the real social conditions of women have been changing, giving women greater power, equality and freedom. In conjunction with this social change are the media (and film) representations that have been developing and altering. It is within the context of these media changes of representation that I wish to look at one film, *G.I. Jane* (1997), as a case study for exploring the possible position of women in the late 1990s.

*G.I. Jane* is a film that tests out or explores certain possibilities and boundaries for the female heroine, what she can be, and what she can do. I place this exploration within a number of different contexts. In the first chapter I provide an overview of feminist theories on the media, particularly film, over the last three decades. This sets out to give texture to *G.I. Jane*’s position in the scheme of recent and past feminist writing. I deal with feminist theories from early sociological approaches, to Laura Mulvey’s ideas on female objectification and the male gaze, to more recent feminist positions. This highlights the development of feminist theories towards women in the media (in particular film), what areas they have been allowed to inhabit, and how they have been constructed.
G.I. Jane is part of the action film genre, and in the second section I explore how such a classification positions the central female heroine. In doing this I address the salient features of this genre, tackle its place within genre theory and what action cinema says about masculinity and femininity. Action cinema, with its concentration on the visual, the spectacular and physical bodies, simultaneously allows the female action heroine to work, move and succeed in a traditionally ‘male only’ arena (the genre) whilst imposing limitations on her gender representation – her femininity.

Demi Moore stars as Jordan O’Neil in G.I. Jane (who the media in the film coin ‘G.I. Jane’) – the central female heroine. In the third section I study Demi Moore’s image as ‘star’, and the influence it has on the characterisation of Jordan O’Neil. Moore’s star image is diverse and fluid. However two clear elements emerge which frame her as star – independence and her body. Both these elements have implications on her film work from A Few Good Men (1992) to Striptease (1996) to how Jordan O’Neil is represented in G.I. Jane.

In the final chapter I examine G.I. Jane in depth, using analytical tools from a textual/semiotic approach, and a narrative investigation. G.I. Jane sets out numerous possibilities for this heroine, and poses questions about success and achievement for this woman. Something Demi Moore herself notes when taking on the role of Jordan O’Neil – “I think it’s an interesting challenge for me in terms of stretching what is the role of a woman, [and] what are her boundaries” (Kline, 1996: online). In the current climate of feminism and queer theory, several issues regarding Jordan’s sexuality and gender arise. Jordan’s embodiment of butch-femme, her contradictory competing traditional codings of masculinity and femininity, and her progression to equality with
men in all areas, suggesting a movement beyond gender, are the main issues I tackle here.
Feminist Criticism and Representation of Women

How are women positioned and represented in a traditionally 'masculine' genre like action cinema? What room is there in a film like *G.I. Jane* (1997) for 'woman' and femininity? What can the action heroine be, and what can she do? How is femininity constructed in this genre in the 1990s? These issues of representation are the topic of this thesis. Evolving feminist critical theories have explained issues of representation of women in film. Here I provide a brief theoretical overview of these theories to see how they can inform a study of *G.I. Jane*. It is important to note that just as the social position of women changed and developed over the past 30 years, so has feminist film criticism.

Annette Kuhn defines feminism as,

> "a set of political practices founded in analyses of the social/historical position of women as subordinated, oppressed or exploited either within dominant modes of production (such as capitalism) and/or by the social relations of patriarchy or male domination." (Kuhn, 1982: 4)

This description is succinct, yet broad and extensive. It highlights the enormous dimensions and possible applications onto and into the cultural arena. The various forms of media, including the cinema provide extremely fertile ground for feminist examination and deconstruction. Feminist film criticism developed alongside the women's movement of the 1960s, and the increasing penetration of women into the filmmaking practice.
Its early aims were to understand and show the various ways in which women in the cinema were exploited and oppressed, and how cinema contributed to this oppression. One of the first books on the representation of women in cinema is *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) by Molly Haskell. Haskell deals with the changes over time in the cinema representation of women. This is a comprehensive detailing of the many roles and stereotypes that women had/have been relegated to in mainstream cinema decade by decade.

Her approach to this is an inherently sociological one, studying the representation of women, and the highlighting of the female characters within the narrative, relating them to the actresses that starred in them, and then suggesting whether in fact they serve as positive or negative models for women. Haskell in chronicling the developments and shifts in the representation of women in film, attempts to highlight the connection between the cinematic depictions of women as, in-a-sense, reflective or symptomatic of the changes that women are experiencing in the wider society at the time. Sue Thornham (1997: 17) notes from Haskell’s study, that up until the films of the 1960s women have among other things been presented as ‘mother’, set up as ‘earth Goddess’, and both glorified and feared as different. Haskell believes that the 1960s and early 70s were a period of terribly sexist and ‘misogynistic’ filmmaking, where women are ignored altogether or are stereotyped victims of male violence and/or chauvinist fantasies. Likewise, Haskell notes – when discussing films of the late 1960s – the interesting and ironic relationship between women, and film representations of women when she says, “The closer women come to claiming their rights and achieving independence in real life, the more loudly and stridently films tell us it’s a man’s world” (Haskell, 1974: 363).
This form of ‘image studies’ provided a text that emphasised the patriarchal and male dominated nature of filmmaking. Women are presented as inferior and subordinate, something Haskell names “The Big Lie”, and the Hollywood system seeks to perpetuate this – “the film industry manoeuvred to keep women in their place” (Haskell, 1974: 3). However Haskell believes that this is not so much a conscious effort on behalf of the filmmakers but rather an oblivious venture that is inspired by the reverence of women seen in early filmmaking in the 1920s, and a movement to fear of women in the 1970s, seen as a response to the beginning wave of feminism at this time.

Haskell highlights some exceptions to this area of stringent patriarchy, where some women are independent, autonomous and not reliant on a man. She suggests that these films are progressive even when “at the climax, they [the female protagonist] took second place to the sacred love of a man” (Haskell, 1974: 4), and often returned to the confines of marriage and/or family as a subordinate stereotype (as in the finale of *Mildred Pierce* [1945], see below). She believes that in *June Bride* (1948) for example “we remember Bette Davis not as the blushing bride but as the aggressive reporter” (Haskell, 1974: 3). The progressive nature of the film portraying Bette Davis’ character as aggressive and strong overshadows the regressive elements, that have her returning to the staid secondary role as wife.

Haskell’s approach assumes a clear relationship between cinematic representations and the real world; that the female characters and representations of women in a film were comparable to women in the ‘real world’. Annette Kuhn highlights this,
suggesting that according to Haskell, "cinema tends to be viewed entirely as a neutral means of communicating already-constituted significations" (Kuhn, 1982: 75). This was taken up in 1978 by Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf in their essay, *Positive Images: Screening Women's Films*. They posed the question, what images best serve women? Their essay (and the book which it introduced) was a concerted effort by Artel and Wengraf to highlight options to sex stereotypes. They saw that some areas represented women positively; they showed females as strong, independent and self reliant, as bright and astute, living assertively and performing significant work. They suggested that these sorts of representations were progressive for women, and were useful in combating and weakening the influence of traditional subordinate stereotypes that endorse patriarchy. Artel and Wengraf also saw the need for improvement in the representation of women in other areas including: the representation of: strong women surviving hardship instead of constantly being the victim; sensitive male characters; and women in non-traditional jobs. It is pertinent to note that in G.I. Jane, (which represents an image of woman that is twenty years on from the studies of Artel and Wengraf) the central character Jordan O’Neil is suited very neatly to the above criteria for a ‘progressive’ image. Jordan is intelligent, wily, independent and performs meaningful work. Her character survives immense hardship (dictated by the genre, the narrative and the labelling of her as ‘the hero’), and is in the Navy training to be a Navy SEAL (non-traditional job); she also has a male partner who grows more supportive and sensitive as the film progresses.

Claire Johnson and Pam Cook reject a sociological approach to feminist film criticism in their writings in the 1970s, (*The Place of Woman in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh*, 1974). They believe women in film have little to do with women in the ‘real world’.
Instead, for Johnson and Cook what is needed is a textual and/or semiotic approach—an approach which recognises that narrative film is produced under a patriarchal order, and that sexist ideology is perpetrated and made to seem ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ by these films. A textual (and/or semiotic approach) aims to uncover processes of signification and therefore assist in "uncovering the textual operation of ideology" (Kuhn, 1982: 77). Such an analysis (e.g., Johnson and Cook's analysis of the film The Revolt of Mamie Stover) highlights that women in film are in fact signs that operate to represent the desires and fantasies of men. Women only exist as signs and in relation to men; the role of feminist criticism is to decode and retrieve meaning from the woman as sign in the film text. Sue Thornham captures this idea when she says that films "operate to construct woman as sign in a patriarchal discourse, repressing women's own discourse and rendering absent 'woman as woman'" (Thornham, 1997: 30).

Developing the textual/semiotic approach, E. Ann Kaplan edited Women in Film Noir (1978) and studied the representation of women from a generic perspective. Film noir is often labelled as a genre that allows women to be positioned in the narrative as central and powerful, and thus might challenge the traditional subordinate placement of women in film and the control of patriarchal order. Kaplan (and others like Sylvia Harvey, Claire Johnson and Pam Cook) look back on the film noir movies of the 1940s and 50s from the perspective of the feminist influenced 1970s. They observe women who "are central to the intrigue of the films, and are furthermore usually not placed safely in any of the familiar roles" (Kaplan, 1978:2), but nevertheless who are contained in a specific reactionary social discourse. They relate this to the social and historical context of post World War II, where women who had left the traditional
family home and entered the job market during the war, now were ‘required’ to return, to restore patriarchal order (see discussion on Mildred Pierce below).

Kaplan highlights a common narrative thread regarding women in film noir. She sees the woman’s sexuality as dangerous, but desirable nonetheless and the male character’s success is dependent on whether he can wrest himself away from the woman’s manipulations. Order is returned through the exposing or destruction of the sexual devious woman. Yvonne Tasker notes similar characterisations of the female as predator or devious manipulator; these break the normal staid secondary roles given to women (albeit in reference to more modern films of this nature – the examples Tasker uses are Basic Instinct [1992] and Disclosure [1994]); she suggests “transgressive or ‘bad girl’ roles which offer greater possibilities, may seem more tempting than passive stereotypes” (Tasker, 1998: 6). However the independent women of these films with their excess of female sexuality, which Kaplan notes as being the “‘natural’ consequences of the women’s independence” (Kaplan: 1978: 3), are punished and placed back into the patriarchal discourse often by re-entering the family and/or marriage. This is the case in the denouement of the film Mildred Pierce, when the strong self-reliant heroine walks off at dawn back into the protective (‘patriarchal’) arm of her estranged husband. However, as mentioned above this type of film, even with a regressive ending for the independence of women, portrays women as central, important, industrious and self reliant. This generic approach explores the “interplay of the notion of independent women vis-à-vis patriarchy” (Kaplan, 1978: 3). This relates to my area of study; the action film with a central female protagonist who is independent and powerful.
The generic method is also the basis of Christine Gledhill’s book on women and melodrama *Home is Where the Heart Is* (1987). Melodrama in early film genre criticism was largely ignored, in favour of more distinct and clearly delineated genres (a similar situation to which action cinema find itself in today) such as westerns or gangster films, often directed by established ‘autuers’. Clearly unlike action cinema, melodrama is frequently labelled as a female genre, “distinguished by the large space it opened to female protagonists, the domestic sphere and socially mandated ‘feminine’ concerns” (Gledhill, 1987: 10). The genre clearly marks gender difference, male and female social roles and their social spaces – “the woman’s place is in the home” (Doane: 1987: 285).

Here is a type of film that is lauded by some critics who suggest that whilst the genre places women in traditional roles, such as wife and mother, and situates them in the home, it also positions them importantly and centrally as the driving force in the narrative. This contradiction, seen by Gledhill as “‘woman’ as patriarchal symbol conflicts with the unusual space it offers to female protagonists and women’s concerns” (Gledhill, 1987: 13) can be seen and understood in a progressive manner in two ways. The genre can present and expose the contradictions in the segregation of gender roles, and also can celebrate the elements of femininity and emotion.

Melodrama can revel in the feminine and the domestic, with stories being told about mothers, wives, sisters, grandmothers and brides (in such relatively recent films as *Terms of Endearment* [1983], *Steel Magnolias* [1989] and *How to Make An American Quilt* [1995]). These characters, whilst confined to the home and family, dominate the story and push the narrative along. Secondly the genre can present, work through and therefore expose gender issues, like the contradictions of masculinity and femininity,
mother and fatherhood, domesticity and work and careers. I believe *J.I. Jane* acts as a subversive example of what normally constitutes an action movie, an important powerful female heroine, in the traditional masculine arena. As such, it too exposes contradictions with the traditional segregation of gender roles – and how masculinity and femininity are coded – within the bounds of genre.

An important influence on feminist criticism in the 1970s and still today is Laura Mulvey's well known article *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* (1975) which developed the line of woman acting as a sign. Mulvey introduced psychoanalytic theory to film analysis and came up with several theories regarding spectators, sexual difference, pleasure and the privileging of the masculine. Mulvey saw a clear separation between women and men in film, women and thus femininity always being presented as passive while men and masculinity are shown as active. She argued that men pushed the story forward dictating the action, whilst women remained secondary and relatively inconsequential to the story. Like Johnson and Cook, Mulvey also believed that women signified 'what men weren’t', that is, they do not signify 'woman', rather they act as a symbol for what women represents to men – their fantasies and obsessions. Mulvey is encompassing all of narrative cinema in her article, but these suggestions are of particular consequence when discussing women in action cinema. The genre is laden with examples of the female character/s symbolising what man isn’t. For example a common role for women in action film is the damsel in distress, here, women are again passive, unprepared, powerless, silly, incompetent, unreliable, weak and fragile – all the things the 'active male' hero is definitely not. She exists only in relation to the active, strong male hero to satisfy his mood for power and gratify his sexual desire.
Mulvey describes the appearance of women in film as primarily providing the element of spectacle. She believes that women appear in film as mere exhibition and are coded (through film techniques and mise-en-scene) as a sexual and sensual image. Securing women in terms of a simple display tends to halt the progression of the film and narrative, “to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey, 1990: 33) compared to the male hero who pushes the story forward. This in turn again corroborates the delineation of active and passive along the male/female split. Yvonne Tasker in her writings on action film, likewise believes this is the case but also suggests that in action cinema, the story can be halted and interrupted by the erotic spectacle of the male body which is held up as exhibition and spectacle. My analysis of G.I. Jane suggests that in the main the female protagonist takes on the ‘masculine’ role.

Mulvey also addresses issues relating to spectators, and ‘the look’ male characters and male viewers possess over women in film. She is quite pessimistic regarding women in the audience, arguing that the female viewer is either ignored and excluded from the text/spectator relationship, or forced to watch from a masculine position. The male spectator and the active male protagonist in the film (with whom the male spectator identifies with in a narcissistic manner) hold ‘the look’ or ‘gaze’ over the subordinate women in the film who “are coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1990: 33). Mulvey suggests that these two ‘looks’ by both the male characters and spectators, can be combined in a way that will not seem ‘out of the ordinary’ in the film. That is, the narrative
verisimilitude will stay in tact and the ‘gaze’ will be legitimated; both ‘looks’ will be ‘allowed’.

Whilst Mulvey sees the pleasure derived from males ‘gazing’ at women, the gaze also evokes anxiety, which is raised as the male recognises sexual difference in the form of ‘castration’. From this psychoanalytic base it is possible to see once more that women are set up in relation to men, and are defined as what men are not. To delay this anxiety or fear over castration, Mulvey suggests that one way men accomplish this is to label women as a fetish. Castration is disavowed as a threat by turning the figure of woman into a fetish object – as reassuring rather than dangerous.

In 1981 Mulvey wrote the essay *Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’* where she revised some of her statements, particularly in reference to women’s position as spectator. Mulvey suggested that the use of ‘dualisms’ such as active male/passive female, and subject/object in some ways is a hindrance to change and growth, whereby a rigid ‘either/or’ dichotomy is set up and the terms are dependent on one another for meaning. Mulvey proposed that women could participate in the cinema-spectator process by either identifying with the female object of desire – a masochistic position, or take a somewhat active ‘male’ position by siding with the male hero. This spectator position allowed women a certain progression “assuming a degree of control through transsexual identification” (Erens, 1991: xxi).

Mulvey’s article “has become the most anthologized essay in the field of feminist film theory” (Thornham, 1997: 40) and has huge effects on writers and attitudes to visual
pleasure and spectacle. Authors such as Ros Coward tackle issues of women in the visual media; the way they appear, and the manner in which they are coded and held up to gaze at. In her book *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today* (1984) Coward suggests that the visual media – the actual industries, and the images that are produced and circulated throughout television, photography and indeed film are inherently masculine and are controlled by men. The power that is associated with this 'look' manifests itself in the ability (essentially of men) to scrutinise and judge women. Women in turn are unable to return this assessment and critical look, and Coward sees this as a sign of subordination. Clearly related to the traditional representation of women in film is Coward's statement that "one message is written loud and clear across the female body. *Do not act. Do not desire. Wait for men's attention*" (Coward, 1984: 82). Challenges to this suggestion may be found in the action film genre with a female protagonist – which in itself is an exception to the traditional action movie. In *G.I. Jane* Jordan O'Neil *does* act and *does* desire and *does not* wait for a man's attention. Jordan takes her opportunity and 'jumps in', she wants it and she takes it and eventually succeeds.

It could be argued that written clearly across Madonna's body is 'do act and do desire and *take* men's attention'. Madonna has been extensively written about by feminists, highlighting recent discussions around feminism and the representation of women across all media. Feminist issues that revolve around her show a development, change and growth from positions held by Haskell, Mulvey and Coward, who are representative of a whole body of feminist work that began its growth in the early 1970s. By the mid 1980s social conditions had altered and feminism had won certain changes for women in the real world. The following discussions around women and
media texts form a radical break in a developing feminism. A development which includes a challenge over the sexualisation of female images by the traditional male gaze (see discussion on Madonna below), an increased objectification of men in the media as sexual objects (action cinema holds the male form up for scrutiny), and the infiltration of feminist theories into popular knowledge and culture – feminist agendas are now clearly on the map.

The phenomenon that is Madonna seems to be a pillar by which some writers (such as Beverly Skeggs, Kay Turner and E. Deidre Pribtam) argue that women can wield power and take control of their own sexuality, a different and recent (the 1980s and 90s) view from the ideas put forward by Mulvey in the late 1970s. Madonna seems to be an important crux for a discourse of feminist theory which authors utilise to challenge earlier theories which suggest there is no real place for women in visual media other than to submit to a dominating male influence. This challenging assessment implies that female sexualised representations can be used by women in positive ways for gaining control, rather than the accepted method of masculine domination. Madonna is a very rich ‘text’ for feminist writing, from the very start of her career representing the virgin/whore dichotomy in the Like a Virgin video clip, to the domination of men in Express Yourself to the recent birth of her daughter. Turner notes that “in her first photo shoots and videos... Madonna began exercising a plucky reversal of the age-old dominance of the heterosexual male gaze” (Turner, 1993: 12). Skeggs and Turner see Madonna challenging the traditional patriarchal ownership, (which is held and perpetuated by the ‘look/gaze’) of female sexuality by essentially ‘staring right back’. She takes on the male gaze, setting up a relationship between the viewer and the viewed, we (the viewer) are invited, then drawn into her dominant
gaze — certain, confident, unapologetic. Schulze, White and Brown highlight the significance Madonna’s body plays in the reading of her as a cultural text. The authors suggest Madonna’s body is “an excessive body” (Schulze, White and Brown, 1993: 24) and that it is a site where much of Madonna’s ability to transcend gender boundaries and traditional feminine roles controlled by patriarchy originates. She flaunts, and in-a-sense ‘reclaims’ her body from the regulation of the male gaze.

This tradition of the male gaze over women in film, is challenged in a different manner by Yvonne Tasker. She writes about female action heroines, and gender in action cinema extensively in her book Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema, (1993). Tasker suggests that the male body can be held up in an objectified manner also in the action film genre, in a way that can also include women as an active spectator. The action movie’s verisimilitude is able to remain intact with the combination of the ‘looking’ at the characters (the male hero, and also female characters) by the audience (women can admire the male form) because the flaunting of bodies, the physique and “visual display is elevated to a defining feature of the genre” (Tasker, 1993: 6).

Tasker discusses the character roles that have been traditionally held for women in action movies. Tasker highlights ‘rogue’ examples from the 1970’s and Hong Kong cinema which seem to have a tenuous link to my example of G.I. Jane, in that films like Black Belt Jones (1974) and films starring Cynthia Rothrock had a central female protagonist. But these examples drown in a sea of films which traditionally have women performing in supporting subordinate roles, that exist only in relation to the

Tasker highlights the various traditional roles for women in action cinema; the sidekick she believes is a role that can be read as a 'tomboy' who is trying to emulate the male hero and cannot accept the responsibility of adult womanhood. Another common role is the love interest – and essentially she is present to confirm the male hero’s heterosexuality, particularly if he does have a male partner which is often the case in a ‘buddy’ action film (such as *Lethal Weapon 2* [1989] or *Tango & Cash*).

Similarly the damsel in distress operates only in relation to the male protagonist, in that she reaffirms his masculinity, his power and his strength. She needs to be rescued by the male hero. I believe *G.I. Jane* to be a contradictory example here, and this is where my interest lies. Jordan O’Neil is not a sidekick to any male, she is the central hero. She has a love interest, and he exists only in relation to her. And in the climax to the film she needs to save her ruthless superior, and he is cast as the damsel in distress. This somewhat unique reversal of gender roles is comically noted by her superior as he writhes in pain after being rescued, “I’ll never live this one down.”

A much discussed text within film and feminist circles is *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which challenges traditional film stereotypes and puts two important central ‘active’ female characters on a road trip in search of their individuality and personal freedom. In an interesting article on the film Cathy Griggers points out that both the characters in this film struggle with “their femininity and masculinity – both of which are in constant flux and which flow in direct correlation to what their social environment will allow or will demand” (Griggers, 1993: 139). This is an interesting proposition
and brings up the question of not only how masculine or feminine the character/s is/are but how the characters are affected or even 'read' according to what environment they are in – which in turn are labelled as either masculine or feminine. This is intriguing when looking at an action film like *G.I. Jane* where every setting or environment Jordan appears in is fundamentally masculine – the barracks, the violent training courses, bars, the dark shower room, the jungle and the harsh desert – therefore her masculinity is always at the fore, in direct correlation to her environment as Griggers suggests. Similarly the change can be noted in the character of Samantha Cain/Charley Baltimore who is suffering from amnesia in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996). In the film Samantha Cain is a devoted mother and her primary environment is in the family home. The kitchen being the traditional feminine place for a wife and mother is the beautifully ironic room where her other personality (the extremely masculine violent assassin Charley Baltimore) begins to emerge, Samantha realising she has an affinity with knives. And it is also the place where she mercilessly kills an attacker who invades her home. The development of the character Charley Baltimore occurs out on the road as she drives across country (not unlike the development and transformation of Geena Davis’ other character Thelma), in sleazy motels and in torturous environments – much more masculine territory.

The article written by Cathy Griggers is just one of many written about *Thelma and Louise*. The film, and the debate around the film, is an excellent example of how feminist film criticism is dealt with in the 1990s. It provides a fascinating snapshot of where feminist discussions and concerns are now located. There are numerous approaches and methodologies which can be harnessed, which produce various readings. Film’s polysemic nature assists in the relative inability to rigidly locate a
film in one particular way, and read it in one specific manner. Harvey R. Greenberg notes this in relation to *Thelma and Louise* in his section of the article *The Many Faces of Thelma and Louise,*

"The film has been variously interpreted as feminist manifesto (the heroines are ordinary women, driven to extraordinary ends by male oppression) and as profoundly antifeminist (the heroines are dangerous phallic caricatures of the very macho violence they're supposedly protesting). Some critics have discerned a lesbian subtext (that final soul kiss at the abyss); others interpret this reading as a demeaning negation of feminine friendship that flies in the face of patriarchal authority" (Greenberg, 1991: 20).

Jordan O'Neil, what she is and how she is coded textually, is an interesting case study in the context of the above feminist discussions. From a sociological angle, Jordan would seem to be a somewhat progressive female image. She is the central character whom the film revolves around, she controls and forces the story along. Jordan is strong, intelligent, confident, persevering and independent. Generically Jordan performs and succeeds in a traditionally masculine genre (and environment) bucking the traditional subsidiary places usually available for women in this genre. Jordan and *G.I. Jane* are textual sites of contradictions and juxtapositions over gender roles and identities, and what a woman can achieve. The action genre also has a concentration on bodies and their display, dictating the exhibition of Jordan's figure. In recent 'post-feminist' theories Jordan (like other recent examples of post-feminist texts, ie Madonna) can retain dignity and power and avoid any demeaning male gazes when her body is on display. All these views and applications, developed
over three decades, highlights the diversity of arguments that can be placed on Jordan O’Neil, *G.I. Jane* and what room the film allows for a contemporary female heroine. This contemporary heroine has a large amount of influence placed on her by genre. And as discussed in this section the action genre plays a large part in dictating what goes on in the film, and how Jordan is coded. In the next chapter I attempt to highlight the main features of action cinema relating it to elements of genre theory, and discussing how the genre positions Jordan O’Neil.
Action Movies – An Excessively Masculine Place for a Lady!

In his “Introduction” to his book *Film Genre Reader 2* (Grant, 1995: xv-xx), Barry Keith Grant acknowledges that genre movies, or films with a large commercial aim, whilst comprising the majority of film production and commanding huge audiences – have had little critical attention paid to them, and serious analysis is quite a recent development. There were three isolated writings regarding westerns and gangster films in the late 1940s and early 50s, but only in the 1970s did genre theory begin to be fully considered and discussed in a critical manner. Genre criticism has been used to celebrate and validate popular Hollywood cinema in its investigations of the Western and Gangster films, and has been extended to examine what issues and concerns are at the core of these genre films. These genres in particular pose questions about law and order, and the establishment an American society.

Action films as a part genre movies, are extremely popular but have had little critical recognition to date and serious study is lax, yet this is the genre I wish to explore. It is also a genre which seems primarily interested in male stars and feats of masculinity. Tasker notes that in the 1980s, action cinema only ever dealt (she acknowledges examples in the 1990s that have integrated women importantly into the film) with issues regarding gender identities in a manner that was “inscribed almost exclusively over the tortured figure of the white male body” (Tasker, 1993: 3). Yet I am interested in what happens when a woman takes on the traditional ‘male’ hero role. This chapter explores action cinema as a genre and its context within genre theory, and how this understanding can assist in the reading of *G.I. Jane* (1997) and its female protagonist.
Genre is a method of classification, by which a film will be categorised so as to distinguish it from other films and compare it to similar ones. Edward Buscombe separates the 'elements' that decide the classification of a film into a genre (or in some cases a multiple of genres) into two forms. In *The Idea of Genre in American Cinema* (1970) Buscombe highlights a genre film's 'inner forms' and 'outer forms'. Essentially this is the split between the story and themes of the film, and the film’s visual style. These two forms work together to produce and classify a genre film. For example in ‘the western’ the visual style, or the ‘outer forms’, are elements such as setting, costume, character types and physical objects. Specifically ‘outer forms’ may include deserts and plains, saloons, ranches, gaols, wide-brimmed hats, horse-drawn wagons, Sheriffs, cowboys and Indians, pistols and spurs clinking from heavy boots. These “visual conventions provide a framework within which the story can be told” (Buscombe, 1995: 15).

This story then unfolds thematically as ‘inner forms’. In the western Buscombe suggests stories may be about “opposition between man and nature and about the establishment of civilisation” (Buscombe, 1993: 15-16). Other ‘inner forms’ can include the central themes of law and order, romance, and violence or the threat of violence. These are not exhaustive lists by any means but they do indicate the division between the two elements that define a particular film into its genre. The combination of the themes and story elements and the visual style, props and costumes operate to place the film within the boundaries of a particular genre. These boundaries are porous and films are not necessarily stuck in one genre, in fact many films cross these boundaries and are from multiple genres.
Genres act as an indicator to the audience, on what to expect from a movie. Information regarding the film's content, characters, setting, visual style and narrative is suggested through the classification of the film into a genre. The audience will expect certain things from a western, they will expect the setting to be in the country, and they will expect violent gunfights. This expectation is described by Steve Neale in his article, *Questions of Genre* (1990) as 'verisimilitude'. Neale suggests that there are systems of verisimilitude that hint at what is most likely to occur in a film. That is, there are notions of what is plausible and indeed probable within the framework of a film from a particular genre. These systems of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre, but may overlap. For example the systems of verisimilitude of the western and the science fiction genre will be different. Science fiction films can show and depict virtually anything and it will not detract from the film, the expectation from the audience is that almost anything can happen. However, in a western the rules or verisimilitude must be more grounded, based in more traditional 'real' terms. An interesting film example is the film *Timecop* (1994). The film opens with a horse drawn wagon trudging through the rain, guarded by men carrying old rifles, and dressed in 'traditional' western costumes – and the initial expectation is that this film is a western. They come across two men blocking the road, and they wear different clothes, and large coats. When these men threaten the guards to hand over the valuables they are safeguarding, they are laughed at because they are easily outnumbered. Undeterred, the two robbers produce modern automatic weapons, and without the guards having time to retaliate, proceed to easily gun down the unsuspecting men spraying bullets everywhere. The original system of verisimilitude is smashed when this occurs and we realise that this cannot happen in a western. It is then we learn that these men are time travelling thieves, and the film is actually a
science fiction movie. This knowledge then sets up new order of verisimilitude, and the audience can then settle, and believe what is going on in the film. An interesting recent example of these two genres merging is the recent film *Wild Wild West* (1999), where the western and science fiction genres are crossed to produce an interesting hybrid film.

Repetition is often a derogatory tag placed on genre films and particularly action movies. However, Yvonne Tasker, in her book *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993) suggests that repetition “is at the heart of both the significance and pleasures of narrative.” (Tasker, 1993: 60). This repetition gives way to expectation and in turn to a comfort for the viewer about what he/she is about to see. Familiarity with the conventions of the genre and the ‘forms’ that are mentioned above, allow the viewer to engage with the ‘safe’ well-known characters and themes. This repetition and cognition, does not mean that every film from the same genre is exactly alike, on the contrary difference is needed – we don’t want to see the identical thing again and again. With each new western movie the genre ‘grows’, that is (to use Neale’s term) the ‘generic corpus’ is added upon, and from this corpus some generic “elements are included; others are excluded” (Neale: 1995: 170). Again this is all wrapped up in genre. Whilst the knowledge and expectation found in genre is a comfort and satisfying, a film needs to distance itself from total familiarity of other films in its genre. Original elements will expand the limits of the genre, and for the audience will provide much of the excitement, gratification and enjoyment; different elements of the settings can change, and distinct character quirks are literal examples here. To further this would be to have a female protagonist in a western; such is the case in *The Quick and the Dead* (1995).
In past decades (from the 1920s to 1960s) mainstream Hollywood films were bound relatively strictly to generic conventions, a film was quite easily definable as a western, or a melodrama, or comedy, or a gangster film. Action film, comparatively is quite recent in its development -- with the genre’s entry into mainstream cinema representing "a significant shift in the popular American cinema in the late 1970s and 1980s" (Tasker, 1998: 72). The action genre, it could be argued, is a mesh of interrelated generic elements often borrowed from the more ‘established’ delineated genres mentioned above. Tasker believes that “Hollywood films [action films are relevant here] work to stitch together sometimes seemingly contradictory genres, styles and star images from past and present in a variety of complex ways.” (Tasker, 1993: 54) Whether it be the violence and gun fighting, like the western, or the good guy/ bad guy dichotomy of the gangster film, action cinema is inherently difficult to pin down. However in the following I attempt to give a clearer image of what the genre is about, and where it sits on the landscape of popular genre films.

Action cinema commands ‘box office clout’, they make huge profits and attract massive audiences. Of the ‘top 20’ highest grossing films of all time (using domestic box office figures from U.S.A.) – fourteen of them are part of action cinema (www.movieweb.com, 99: see appendix). The late 1970s saw the beginnings of ‘big budget’ action oriented cinema. “Expensive special effects-driven action and adventure films increasingly dominated domestic and international box office in this period” (Tasker, 1998: 72) with films such as Star Wars (1977), Jaws (1975), Conan the Barbarian (1982), Alien (1979) and Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) being released. The 1980s and early 1990s saw the massive screen presences of Sylvester Stallone
and Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose films were extremely popular. And whilst they have faded in recent times, “continued production of action movies in the 1990s has confounded those critics who felt the genre was dying away at the beginning of the decade” (Tasker, 1998: 72). Action films and their male stars such as Nicolas Cage, Will Smith, Harrison Ford, John Travolta and Bruce Willis are still dominating genre movies and popular cinema today.

**Dr. Blondell**

“Lieutenant why are you doing this?”

**Jordan O’Neil**

“Do you ask the men the same question?”

**Dr. Blondell**

“As a matter of fact, yes, I do ask them.”

**Jordan O’Neil**

“And what do they say?”

**Dr. Blondell**

“‘Cause I get to blow shit up.”

This exchange between two female characters in *G.I. Jane* draws attention to, not only the character of Jordan O’Neil, as someone who wants to be treated exactly like the men undergoing Navy SEAL training, but also highlights in a humorous way a salient feature of the action film genre. Special effects, explosions and gunfights are common place in the genre and ‘blowing shit up’ highlights that the “pleasures of the action cinema are primarily those of spectacle” (Tasker, 1993: 6). To produce this sort spectacle a certain amount of technology needs to be available. Action film has developed over the 1980s and 1990s alongside trends in the film industry. Once the early precedent had been set, with successful action based films, filmmakers
recognised the opportunity to market films with action sequences dominating the film. Tasker notes that recent genres – such as action cinema, “have developed since in relation to the changing demands of the industry, technologies of production, distribution and consumption” (Tasker, 1998: 11). In terms of the development of action cinema – the ability to actually construct, produce and execute these action scenes is of obvious significance. Technology is not only an important element to note in relation to the development of action cinema, but throughout the evolution of cinema in general. From the early large steps taken with the invention of sound, and the introduction of colour, to the leaps taken in filmmaking technology from the 1970s and 80s – such as the staging of massive spectacular stunts and special effects. These more recent technological developments (including breakthroughs in computer animation and computer generated images seen in films like Terminator 2: Judgement Day [1991], Armageddon [1998] and even Toy Story [1995]) take the early trend further having the ability to show excessive spectacular sequences as somewhat ‘believable’. Without the technological development and the ability to stage such huge, monumental feats and excessive performances, the visual display on which the action film relies so heavily, would certainly be detracted from, or not exist at all.

When were these huge action scenes and massive technological breakthroughs first seen in film? As I have hypothesised above, one possible time would have been the release of films by Steven Speilberg and George Lucas, two of the most influential people in not only action film, but in cinema today. Jaws was an ambitious undertaking at the time when animatronics were in their infancy, and George Lucas is frequently charged with changing the cinema landscape for the worse, by critics who
suggest that films like *Star Wars* (and indeed action films) are worthless because of their tendency to concentrate on the visual, and the extraordinary.

Having noted that action cinema is a difficult genre to mark out and classify, the action films of today (such films as *Bad Boys* [1995], *Face/Off* [1997], *Air Force One* [1997], *True Lies* [1994] and *Under Siege* [1992]) are dictated by action. It may seem obvious, but the story is pushed forward by action scenes, not the dialogue and characters, but most often through the setting up of one hectic, excessive action scene after another. I believe there are some salient features and characteristics that can be highlighted, through the adoption of the ideas around ‘inner’ and ‘outer forms’. The action film has somewhat of an imbalance between these two forms, Tasker notes that “in the action cinema visual display is elevated to the defining feature of the genre” (Tasker, 1993: 6). Essentially the genre is all about the visual, the ‘outer forms’ of iconography are most important, whilst the themes or ‘inner forms’ are propelled into the background. These ‘inner forms’ may exist across most of the cinema landscape, with stories involving the hero’s journey, the villain opposition, rites of passage, character conflicts, law and order, violence, betrayal, love and death. Again this is a short list of what could be included in an action movie, elements chosen from the generic corpus. The elements are not an exhaustive list, rather they seem to be a recurring base from which action films borrow. As I have mentioned with every new film will come more differing forms and conventions.

Working in conjunction with the story and themes of the films, are the ‘outer forms’, action cinema’s visual style. It is inherently intrusive, loud, spectacular and exciting. Action scenes push the film forward - the special effects and stunts are spectacular,
there are explosions, and fights. Car chases and the use of weapons are prevalent in the genre. And often the climax or finale combines all these elements of “External spectacle - weaponry, explosions, infernos, crashes, high speed chases, [and] ostentatious luxuries” (Jeffords, 1993: 245). It is useful to note that these elements - both ‘inner forms’ and ‘outer forms’ - are not specifically confined for the use within action films, indeed other genres employ car chases and fights and have rite of passage themes. Specifically, more clearly defined and more critically addressed genres like westerns, science fiction, gangster and war films have made use of the common elements found in action cinema. Conflict, fighting, chases, armed combat and technologies like guns, explosions, gadgets and machines have formed a core in these Hollywood genres, and are a staple in the development of these films since their inception. This ‘sharing’ or free flowing of generic forms does not however mean that they are not considerable or important part of action cinema. The adoption of Buscombe’s ideas on generic forms whilst effective on established traditional genres (eg. westerns), fails to apply strict guidelines onto the action genre. Rather it highlights action cinema’s lack of clear delineated boundaries, and highlights the genre’s imbalance towards ‘outer’ forms – the visual spectacle.

Tasker suggests the spectacle associated with action cinema has a lot to do with bodies, and bodies on display.

“Along with the visual pyrotechnics, the military array of weaponry and hardware, the arch villains and the staggering obstacles the hero must overcome, the overblown budgets, the expansive landscapes against which the drama is acted out, and
the equally expansive soundtracks, is the body of the star as hero, characteristically functioning as spectacle.” (Tasker, 1993: 233)

The strength of characters in the action genre can be seen in the type, shape or size of their body. Schwarzenegger was a bodybuilder, Van Damme is muscle bound also, and certainly Demi Moore’s body is on display in G.I. Jane. She goes through extensive military training working out and participating in physical combat.

The ‘traditional’ image of the female body in action cinema is one of passiveness and ‘to-be-looked-at’ in often a sexualised manner. Laura Mulvey suggests this is indicative of all cinema in her article, Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema. Male bodies are also on occasion displayed in a sexualised manner, but in a key difference – they are represented in an ‘active’ fashion. Examples may include the sexualised image of Nicolas Cage in a tight singlet throughout Con Air (1997), the bare-chested torso’s of Mark Whalberg, Lou Diamond Phillips and Antonio Sabato Jnr in The Big Hit (1998) and the open shirt billowing in slow motion as Will Smith runs down a speeding car in Bad Boys. These examples, particularly The Big Hit which has a sexual erotic energy running through the film, hold the male body up as a ‘sexual object’ but in an ‘active’ way – by putting them in violent and dangerous situations and having them escape and survive or be victorious against the villain. This avoids any passive or submissive overtones which are often associated with women in action cinema. Often female bodies are put on display in a ‘passive’ sexualised manner – such as Christina Applegate wearing skimpy tight clothes as she wanders around her house in The Big Hit. Other examples include Tea Leoni in Bad Boys and Erika Eleniak bursting from a birthday cake topless and in a g-string in Under Siege. In these ‘traditional’ examples, the female characters are passive and secondary to the
male protagonists who are there to protect and rescue the females at any given opportunity. However in an example such as *G.I. Jane* or *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) (and others such as *Alien Resurrection* [1996] and *The Real McLeod* [1993]) the female body is on display - as dictated by the action genre - but it is seen in an 'active' way, training for battle, completing the obstacles, emerging successful, pushing the narrative forward and indeed rescuing the subsidiary male characters.

In addition to the presentation and display of bodies in action cinema, seems to be the importance of this body to be punished. The hero’s body often is beaten, put through pain, attacked, bruised and bleeding. The action hero is often tortured or threatened to be tortured, before they promptly escape in a daring manner. Indeed “suffering - torture, in particular - operates as both a set of narrative hurdles to be overcome, tests that the hero must survive, and as a set of aestheticized images” (Tasker, 1993: 230). Examples of this are present in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *True Lies* and in many Bond films. Indeed torture scenes are present when Jordan O’Neil (Demi Moore) in *G.I. Jane* suffers a torturous beating, and Charley Baltimore (Geena Davis) in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) is tied to a submerged wheel and suffers by almost drowning.

So, a female protagonist in an action film? Immediately a film like *G.I. Jane* or *The Long Kiss Goodnight* puts a kink in the ‘normal’ or ‘traditional’ system of verisimilitude for action cinema. The notion of what is probable (or maybe even appropriate?) in an action film – such as a strong male hero – is already challenged. This does not mean that *G.I. Jane* isn’t an action film, rather *G.I. Jane* pushes at the boundaries of the genre and adds to the generic corpus of action cinema. As I have mentioned above, genre “functions through the play of familiarity and difference
rather than the repeated enactment of any static difference” (Tasker, 1993: 55). *G.I. Jane* can be classified as an action film through its familiarity and difference to other action movies. The fact that the film has a pivotal ‘challenging’ component – the central female protagonist – does not exclude the film from the action genre.

The difference in these films leads to the pushing of the envelope in action cinema, the generic corpus expands and more variety is attached. *G.I. Jane* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* both inherently belong to the action genre so certain educated guesses can be made about the film (through genre as a system of verisimilitude and expectation) -- such as the hero will emerge triumphant. Are there new differing obstacles facing the heroine because of her gender? Are they made explicit? In *G.I. Jane*, her gender and the obstacles she faces because of it, is central to the film. When Jordan O’Neil first decides to undergo the Navy SEAL training, the genre hints to the viewer that she will face huge hurdles, she will be harassed, cajoled and be ostracised. Jordan is set up as an outsider and her “marginality, is crucial to the characterisation of the action hero within Hollywood cinema” (Tasker, 1993: 148). The source of her marginality (in Navy and the genre) – is her gender. The film is about one woman’s explicit trials in being accepted into the Navy SEALs. Ironically as Jordan O’Neil pleads to her superior officers to be treated the same as the men whilst in training, the film doesn’t let her. The actual film (and the media in the film) is making ‘the big deal’ about her gender whilst she tries to ignore it. It seems only when she has almost ‘become’ a man symbolically in key scenes (ie. shaving her head, and screaming out “Suck my dick!”) which are discussed later - that her gender is pushed to the side and she can complete her training, and complete the film, in the typical ‘normal’ manner in which the hero is triumphant.
These ideas around the challenging elements involved when a female is the active protagonist in an action film, exemplifies Neale's ideas on genre as process. *G.I. Jane* is not the first action film to have a female lead, but it does broaden the boundaries of the action genre. The film (and of course others like it) extend the genre to include women importantly, and as more than the limited subordinate 'traditional' roles usually reserved for women in action cinema. This pressures the 'traditional' masculine, patriarchal action genre's limits, and allows the action genre's conventions to be "in play rather than being simply re played" (Neale, 1995: 170).

These challenging elements also must be put in context in regards to the effects and influence that the action genre has over them. Along with the excess and spectacle of action cinema, is the dominance of the male hero. Action cinema stalwarts in the 1980s, Schwarzenegger and Stallone highlighted "sheer physical excess of the muscular stars" (Tasker, 1993: 232) and in turn reiterated excessive masculinity as a characterising element of action cinema. The development and popularity of this male dominated genre and it's extreme versions of masculinity, may be seen in the context of, "and could be read in terms of a backlash against the feminism of the 1970s" (Tasker, 1993: 1). So accordingly women were, and for the majority still are, cast as completely subordinate and secondary (as I note in length in the previous chapter), and have no tangible, substantial input towards pushing the narrative along, and only exist in relation to the central male hero. Tasker notes more recently that action cinema of the 1990s has transformed somewhat and the "continued appearance of female protagonists in the genre is part of, as well as a contributing factor in that reformulation" (Tasker, 1998: 72). But what room does this incredibly masculine and male dominated genre leave for the contemporary action heroine? I would suggest
that immediately a central female protagonist is coded with traditional masculine qualities. In the examples of *G.I. Jane* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, the action heroines are active, intelligent, capable and dominant, and as such they are distanced from traditional women in action film, and a "‘femininity’ which is defined by a passivity and hysteria" (Tasker, 1998: 69). The representation of these heroines, and the way they are read is heavily impacted upon by the excessive masculinity that the action genre is endowed with.

As I have discussed above, there is a tendency of genre films (and action films in particular) to be labelled repetitious and even predictable because of their adherence to generic conventions. This however, can actually work towards producing ideas and issues that are not conventional, ideas that ‘go against the grain’. Jean-Loup Bourget in her article *Social Implications in the Hollywood Genres* (1973) believes that when a text is highly conventional – as is the case with action cinema and other genre movies – there are possibilities for the film to contain a certain displacement and subtle irony, and present oppositional ideas. Subtle is not an adjective usually cited when describing action cinema, but there are some ironic and oppositional concepts and ideas put forward in a film such as *G.I. Jane*. First and foremost is the very presence of a woman dictating the action and being central to the plot in an action movie. *G.I. Jane* as part of the action film genre is essentially grounded in predicability, but if we take on board Bourget’s suggestions, it has the potential to present subversive statements and to be noticed. The central female character in action cinema, in the context of Hollywood, must on some level contain irony and be a somewhat subversive statement. Similar films like *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Copycat* (1995), *Cutthroat Island* (1995) and *The Quick and the Dead* are about and
revolve around the female protagonists. It is here that an oppositional challenging base is set up for the film/s.

Further to this Bourget highlights the ability of films that are often dismissed as escapist or unbelievable (action cinema is an example here), as utilising the ‘far fetched’ nature of the film as “a device for criticizing reality and the present state of society” (Bourget, 1973: 51). Often this is applicable and taken under advisement by the creators of, and the critical writers of, science fiction films. The action film genre is often looked down upon, because of its escapist and unbelievable nature, but can a film like G.I. Jane utilise this and put forward an interesting proposition or critical notion about society? G.I. Jane certainly addresses the themes of women in the military. The action film is being harnessed as an instrument to highlight problematical issues in the present state of society.

The action film genre sets guidelines by which a film must abide by, and lists elements that the film can include (not necessarily all), but this does not mean there is no room for innovation, original concepts and ideas and ‘unpredictableness’. The genre tends to concentrate on the visual, and hinges on the an excessive amount of spectacle. Contributing to this spectacle is the display of bodies that is a staple of action cinema, a defining feature of the genre. The action genre comes from very masculine roots, and developed alongside an ability to stage the huge feats and massive spectacles that we expect from these films. The placement of a female protagonist into this genre allows a woman to be capable, intelligent and independent, something that the genre ‘traditionally’ ignores in its strive to represent excessive masculinity. However, this female often is distanced from femininity and aligned with
masculinity so she can be all these things. Along with genre’s influence on the central female heroine, are the connotations and attachments that the actress brings to the text. I study Demi Moore’s star image in the following chapter, and note how it effects the representation of Jordan O’Neil, the central protagonist.
Demi Moore as Star

Judith Mayne suggests that "the role of the star is the most visible and popular reference point for the pleasures of the cinema." (Mayne, 1993: 123) A famous and successful actress or actor can affect the viewer, and the reception the film gets, from actually coaxing the viewer into the cinema to effecting the way in which the spectator reads the film, and the character they are portraying. The pleasure lies in watching the actor/actress ('star') perform. Richard Dyer has argued that a 'star image' is constituted and developed in a number of ways; through the various films she/he has appeared in, promotional activities, and publicity – primary and secondary circulation. The writings and theories around stars has placed women in a strong place within critical film analysis history. Woman like Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Fonda have been studied in terms of their star status and the representations of gender they put forward with their star image, placing them centre stage and highlighting any similarities or contradictions. Dyer's study of Jane Fonda among other things, noted her highly sexual performances and compared them to other seemingly contradictory elements of her image; like her outspoken views on politics and feminism. This sort of study places women at the centre of debates, writings and criticisms – a somewhat powerful position. As I have noted, in recent times Madonna has been studied extensively, and I wish to analyse Demi Moore as 'star' in this context. Demi Moore as star has numerous significations attached to her. Although Moore's star image may be difficult to capture as she plays a multitude of character types in varying styles of film, nevertheless Moore's independence and her physical body are the two dominant features contributing to her star image.
Moore's film career extends over 17 years, and a summary of her film work is important to the understanding of Moore's star image. In the mid 1980s Moore was part of the decade's early 'bratpack'. Moore and others like Emilio Estevez, Rob Lowe, Ally Sheedy and Judd Nelson were a group of semi-successful actors who made films together, all of a similar ilk. Demi Moore starred in St. Elmo's Fire (1985) and About Last Night... (1986), films that dealt with relationships, careers and love of people in their early 20s. From here Moore had small success with forgettable films like The Seventh Sign (1988) and We're No Angels (1989). In 1990 Ghost was released, it was nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award, and was a huge financial success – this is where Demi Moore's career 'took off'. From here Moore has made numerous films and grown into an influential film producer. It is in this time that Moore can be defined as an 'independent woman'. In most if not all of these films, Moore's characters have been independent and strong. Before G.I. Jane in 1997 Moore starred as the talented stubborn lawyer in A Few Good Men (1992), a predatory self reliant executive in Disclosure (1994), a feisty mother in The Scarlet Letter (1995), the tough and headstrong stripper in Striptease (1996), the tough and resilient mother in The Juror (1996), a successful and talented writer in Now and Then (1995), and other performances in Desconstrucing Harry (1997), Mortal Thoughts (1991), Indecent Proposal (1993) and If These Walls Could Talk (1996). And added to this is her public image of a strong wealthy mother, and powerful movie industry player and producer.

Most, if not all of Demi Moore's films (particularly those made after Ghost) highlight in some way the significant elements of Moore's star image – her body and her independence. After Ghost she gained immense success, and an ability to choose,
shape, and with the establishment of her own production company, *Moving Pictures* in 1993 (partnered with Suzanne Todd), create her own roles and characters. The image of the ‘independent’ woman is one that is considered by many writers as a progressive image of women. This sociological approach to feminist film criticism is taken up by writers such as Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf in their article *Positive Images: Screening Women’s Films* (1978), and they suggest that representations of women that are autonomous and independent are crucial to improving the roles for women in the media. In other writings and articles there is this equation between a good, healthy, progressive image of a woman, and her independence. Elizabeth Cowie talks about the “progressive elements” (Cowie, 1997: 37) of the protagonist Susan in the film *Coma* as being “warm and loving (seen in her weekend away with fellow-surgeon and boyfriend Mark), but also independent and self respecting” (Cowie, 1997: 37). This seems to be a key term when describing women’s representation in film, their independence.

Dyer suggests that stars can be categorised into certain ‘social types’, and in the case of Demi Moore (particularly in *G.I. Jane*) she can be classified as an ‘Independent Woman’. There is a further classification here into what Molly Haskell suggests is the ‘superwoman’, whereby a character like Jordan O’Neil, “adopts male characteristics in order to enjoy male prerogatives, or merely to survive.” (Haskell, cited in Dyer, 1998: 54) This suggestion is important in reference to *G.I. Jane* (and indeed *Disclosure*), where it could be argued that Jordan adopts male characteristics to try and be accepted by her fellow male trainees (such as the symbolic shaving of her hair – seen in the picture over the page – and when she takes a male speaking position of power by yelling “Suck my dick!”), to enjoy a male prerogative – and literally
survive. Survival plays a very big part in her character in the film *G.I. Jane*, (and in others like *The Juror, Mortal Thoughts* and *Disclosure*, where it is her business life that is trying to survive) not only with Jordan’s life in constant in danger from being shot at, beaten and drowned, but also in the climax when she survives and orchestrates the rescue of her superior officer.

Demi Moore as Jordan O’Neil shaving her head — adopting a ‘male prerogative’ to survive.

*Jordan O’Neil strikes a stereotypical butch image – with lesbian overtones.*

Dyer notes that stars from the ‘independent woman’ category “were characterised by sexual ambiguity in their appearance and presentation.” (Dyer, 1998: 58) Dyer uses the physical appearances of actresses such as Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck to highlight this sexual ambiguity. This is a pertinent point to make in regards not only to Demi Moore and the example of *G.I. Jane*, but to all of action cinema that has a
female central protagonist. Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane* appears quite butch, and indeed when she shaves her head this intensifies the relationship to the stereotype of the ‘butch female’. We as the public know that Demi Moore isn’t gay, with her high profile marriage and several children (although her recent break-up with husband Bruce Willis may open up sexuality issues), and also that Jordan O’Neil is not homosexual either. But her appearance in the film can suggest otherwise (note the pictures on the previous page), her shaved head, blood, camouflage paint and dirt all connote ‘maleness’ and in turn a ‘butch lesbian’ overtones. Ironically in the film, Jordan O’Neil is chosen as the test candidate for Navy SEAL training because she doesn’t look like the stereotypical ‘dyke’/lesbian. The manipulative Senator wants an attractive heterosexual woman to be the candidate, as she will be much more media friendly and more easily promoted. These indicators of masculinity are not just limited to Demi Moore or *G.I. Jane*, the pioneer of women in action films, Sigourney Weaver is tall, with broad shoulders, as is Geena Davis; Susan Sarandon has a ‘tough’ face, Linda Hamilton has a formidable muscular toned body, and Jodie Foster has an ‘impish’ sexual ambiguity.

There is a tendency in the mainstream Hollywood filmmaking business for stars to appear in films specifically designed to be ‘vehicles’ for their stardom. That is, films may tend to be produced explicitly for a particular actor/actress “which showcases the specific image of the performer.” (McDonald, 1989: 199) An example here may be the roles that place Robin Williams in a position to show off his comic voices and abilities. Films like *Jack*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, *Toys*, *Hook* and *Father’s Day* continually put Williams in an immature comic role. Some information that I have obtained from several web sites indicates that the scriptwriter of *G.I. Jane*, Danielle Alexandra wrote
the film with Demi Moore in mind, and pitched the idea to her before approaching a film studio. Now this type of information may have to be taken with 'a grain of salt' as these sort of statements may be made simply to give the film a positive image, or help sell the film to the public. However this is significant to acknowledge because the "vehicle might provide a character of the type associated with the star" (Dyer, 1998: 62) And from the many recent roles Demi has performed in, apart from being integral to the plot, they have had numerous character traits in common, including resilience, toughness, success and of course independence.

Star vehicles may tend to have a continuity of visual iconography, much in the same manner as genre has common elements of visual style, mise-en-scene, and narrative structure. In today's Hollywood climate it seems that actors have a wider range of roles that they can fulfil, without the constraints of the major film studio's which in the past used to 'own' a star and would place them in similar films and familiar characters. There are still some recent examples of actors, in particular men, whose body of work has "continuities of iconography" (Dyer, 1998: 62), such as Jim Carrey in his wacky roles, and Clint Eastwood's star image has a heavy relationship to the western genre. However in film sequels there is an obvious re-use of the character, and also the genre and iconographic elements. A major example here is Sigourney Weaver's character Ellen Ripley in the Alien films. It is also interesting to note a final scene in the film The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996) where Geena Davis' character is driving through the country in a large car, with meadows and landscape flying by her. Samantha Caine/Charlie Baltimore is wearing large sunglasses and has her auburn hair tucked inside a scarf that wraps around her head. Now, this scene seems to have been created consciously with Thelma and Louise (1991) in mind. The iconography of
her costume and setting is exactly the same, as is the car and the 'road movie' themes of driving across country. This is a clear but essentially solitary example of an actress mimicking a character she has had in the past. A clear relationship between the iconography of the various films Demi Moore has appeared in, is very difficult. This is related to the wide diversity of film genres and film types she has been in. Moore's filmography extends across romance, action, melodrama, period pieces, film noir, comedy, suspense, animation and drama. The diversity of her many films suggests that Demi Moore's star image is less about a continuity of iconography and more about a coherence to the female character's she plays – independent women.

Along with the films Moore appears in, is the publicity that surrounds her as famous celebrity. Demi Moore is high profile in the extreme, and this continues into the area of publicity, “distinct from promotion [which is addressed below] in that it is not, or does not appear to be, deliberate image making.” (Dyer, 1998: 61) This type of information is regularly available, truthful or not from such publications as ‘women's magazines’ and gossip columns. A recent example involving Jodie Foster, is the constant rumours of her homosexuality, she has given birth to a baby, and the father has never been revealed. Also this type of information can highlight certain “tensions between the star-as-person and her/his image, tensions which at another level become themselves crucial to the image” (Dyer, 1998: 61). In the case of Jodie Foster this may harm or contradict her ability to be believable in a typical romance film with a male co-star. In Demi Moore's case massive amounts of publicity come/came from her marriage to Bruce Willis, her involvement with the Planet Hollywood chain of restaurants (where her co-owners ironically formed the core of 'traditional' action cinema – Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone) and of course
her famous body and its many changes, guises and surgical alterations. The Moore star image seems somewhat congruent with these elements of her publicity – a consument independent strong woman, with a heavy concentration on her physique and body. This is of course only part of the influence publicity has on her star image, and in fact the total influence would vary from person to person (according to the amount of knowledge each person has regarding her public image), and impossible to calculate totally. However because Moore’s star image is so hard to pin down into one constant film role or character, if there are any varying publicity elements, they can be easily added to the Moore star system, and will not clash heavily with any strong established image. An image that is fluid and in flux a lot of the time.

The promotion a star performs, in marketing the films they have appeared in is the most deliberate way in which a star creates and endorses a certain image. To take the example of Demi Moore, there is a neat relationship between many of her promotional activities and the genre I am studying here, action cinema. As I have mentioned the major element of action films, is the body on display. And Demi Moore has had massive amounts of discussion about her and her body, through much of her promotion. “Female stars have to fight to control the inevitable link made between the body of the role and their bodily public image.” (Williams, 1997: 21) This link is made so much more obvious for Demi Moore through the high profile roles she takes, in films like G.I. Jane, Disclosure and the hugely hyped Striptease, and some might say, the even higher profile promotions she participates in, such as the infamous Vanity Fair magazine covers (pictured over the page). At the time the pictures of a naked Moore at the height of her pregnancy was an original and controversial photo shoot. Not only was she pushing the envelope for the exhibition of
the naked female form on a mainstream magazine, but that this body was pregnant broke boundaries and started controversy, offering a strong, sensual, imposing image of woman and femininity. Other high profile promotions included an interview where she taught an aging reporter how to perform a striptease, dropping her clothes to reveal her hard toned body in underwear on The Late Show with David Letterman, and the controversial movie poster for the film Striptease (pictured below).

Demi Moore and her body (pictured here in high profile promotional images) have a large influence on her star image, and the characters she plays in film.
It is through the huge amounts of attention over Demi Moore's body, through her films, promotion and publicity, that she has a similarity to an earlier discussion regarding the attention given to Madonna. I believe, in the feminist climate of the 1990s, Demi Moore can maintain an independence, strength, intelligence and self-reliance even if her body is on display. Issues arise here over such familiar feminist theories as 'the look' and objectification. However (like Madonna) I suggest that Moore 'takes on' the traditional male gaze and looks right back with strength and confidence. When Moore appeared in a female pin-up – for the promotional poster for Striptease (on previous page) – she doesn’t act coy or fragile, rather she seems confident (legs crossed and camera at eye level) as she stares right back at us (the audience). And on the Vanity Fair covers (on previous page) Moore seems to be neither objectified nor demeaned. She isn’t in a traditional female pose with her hips poking out and her chest pushed forward, and the camera doesn’t leer at her cleavage. Both photos are shot at eye level (Moore takes the 'gaze' on, by looking straight back at the viewer in the body paint picture) and Moore whilst on display, is certainly not evoking any powerlessness, feebleness or weakness. Her pregnancy shot may evoke some elements of vulnerability as she covers her breast and supports her round stomach, but this is secondary to the strength and pride Moore illustrates in this photo (she stands tall in profile, her shoulders back and her chin high). Moore’s play on costume in both G.I. Jane and Striptease is interesting to note in regards to challenging the traditional objectifying male gaze. She utilises the traditional male camouflaged fatigues and strips down, in Jordan’s working out scenes, into tight shorts, singlet and combat boots. In Striptease, Moore strips down from a male business suit, to her sexy underwear and boots. Her subversive use of male/masculine
clothing and her confident active movements allow her to challenge traditional theories on the masculine gaze.

This connection between Demi Moore and her public body, and the action film is a viable one. Is the attendance at a film starring Demi Moore influenced by the chance that she may take her clothes off? This was certainly implied in the trailers and promotions for *Striptease*, showing flashes of Demi in revealing costumes and sexy dancing and implying that it was extremely explicit and controversial. The irony was that audiences stayed away in droves and the film was a disaster, and in fact the film was by today’s standards pretty tame and routine. This example is highlighted in a quote by Dyer when he suggests that “promotion of a film may be deliberately untrue to the film itself, in the interests of promoting the star’s image.” (Dyer, 1998: 60)

How does Moore’s star image impact on the construction of character? I suggest this as a way of relating all the information that is gathered by the public (every spectator will not be aware of the entire star image of a specific actor/ress) and indeed the information I raise in the above paragraphs, to the character that Moore plays in a certain film (ie. Jordan O’Neil’s relationship to Demi Moore). This is the method by which elements of a star profile can be related into the character in the film. The audience will have attached meanings and ideas to Demi Moore before they see *G.I. Jane* – not everyone will attach the same ideas, or possibly to the same degree – however “the star’s name and his/her appearance (including the sound of his/her voice and dress styles associated with him/her) all already signify that condensation of attributes and values which is the star’s image.” (Dyer, 1998: 126) Dyer highlights a number different ways in which the star image can be harnessed to construct the
character in the film. Firstly a film may ‘selectively’ chose to highlight parts of the star’s image and hide or neglect other parts.

The costumes Moore wears above, both highlight and simultaneously defer desirable and undesirable qualities (qualities which are different for each of the characters) from the Demi Moore star image.

The Demi Moore star image is engaged by each of her films differently. For example the selective use of Demi’s star image is employed in *A Few Good Men*, the film can “bring out certain features of the star’s image and ignore others.” (Dyer, 1998: 127) An example of how this accomplished is in the use of costume – highlighted in the pictures above. Her character in the film is a driven, tenacious lawyer. The film has Demi dressed in a restrictive uniform (see picture above) and she has a ‘no nonsense bob’ haircut. Even when she is in casual clothes they are conservative and are not revealing, they cover her body totally. This assists in bringing out the strong, outspoken, independent, capable parts of the Demi Moore star image, whilst
simultaneously deferring the highly sexual, controversial elements. The character’s costume avoids the engagement of these ‘undesirable’ elements that would adversely affect or change the character the Demi Moore plays. It is interesting to note the direct contrast that the film Strip-tease has here. It too uses costume, but to play up and bring to the fore the highly sexual, erotic and controversial elements of the star image of Demi Moore (see the picture on the previous page). Her hair is in long dark flowing lochs, and her attire is usually a bra (if that) and a g-string.

These two interesting contrasts indicate towards a point made earlier – the diversity of Demi Moore’s work. She seems to move between film genres, portraying various sorts of women (although I do link them as being representative of an ‘independent women’) having played lawyers, writers, nurses, hair dressers, an artist, a stripper, business executives and a Navy SEAL. It demonstrates Moore’s versatility and her difficulty to stereotype, and the fluid nature of her star image. Because of this flowing, multiform image, Moore’s film roles can rarely (if ever) be labelled what Dyer calls a ‘perfect’ or ‘problematic fit’. These two terms are predicated on the ability of a star who has a relatively stable or consistent star image. Meg Ryan is a relevant example here. Her star image is based on romantic, cute, emotional and at times humorous roles, and a film role like Meg Ryan’s in You’ve Got Mail (1998) could be described as a ‘perfect fit’. A film like this would draw on Ryan’s star image of a nice marriage with Dennis Quaid, and previous films like Sleepless in Seattle (1993) and When Harry Met Sally (1989) to enhance the ‘perfect fit’. In contrast, her appearance in Courage Under Fire (1996) may be classified as ‘problematic’. Ryan is a commanding army helicopter pilot in this action drama film. The movie has to fight
attachments and connotations that may come with Ryan’s romantic ‘cutesy’ star image.

The Navy costume helps ignore the erotic, sexual elements of Moore’s image, whilst the action genre dictates that Moore’s body – that of the hero – is on display.

Where then is *G.I. Jane*? By virtue of Demi Moore’s fluid star image, *G.I. Jane* cannot be classified succinctly into a perfect or problematic fit. Rather the film wishes to draw from Demi Moore’s star profile in two ways that may seem contradictory. The film brings out the independent, intelligent and autonomous parts of Demi’s star profile, to show that Jordan is all of those things. She is wily and smart, and fiercely independent and driven. So the films draws these elements out, when Jordan leads her team successfully and when she makes the correct call on finding the lost soldiers, and taking up the challenge of Navy SEAL training in the first place! Costume, to use the example from above also helps in this to some extent, the restrictive uniform she
The influence Demi Moore and her status as a Hollywood star has on her films, including *G.I. Jane*, should not be underestimated. Her diverse manifold star image is difficult to pin down, with common ground seemingly found in her portrayal of female independence and strength. Her roles and performance can challenge traditional feminist theory of the masculine objectifying look that is placed on women. Moore takes part in the construction of her body, inviting a certain sexualised
gaze, and yet is in control and is confident. Demi Moore and her star image (independence and her high profile body) is an important and significant reference point when looking at female protagonists in action cinema and in particular *G.I. Jane*, where this body on display may be coded as somewhat masculine. I study the way Moore/Jordan's body effects the depiction of this contemporary heroine, along with issues surrounding labels of masculinity and femininity and what the heroine can achieve, in the following chapter.
Does Jordan O’Neil have a dick? Not in the physical sense, but this chapter seeks to examine the interesting and complex character of Jordan O’Neil; how she is represented according to gender throughout the narrative, and through visual and symbolic codes. These elements then affect the message the film gives in relation to gender difference and gender equality. Certain elements of *G.I. Jane* (1997) suggest that equality between genders (in the narrative space of the Navy) is desirable, but in providing this equality (and success) in an all male environment, woman’s feminine identity is diminished, or even assimilated into traditional masculine qualities. Jordan O’Neil is a site of intersecting elements of traditional femininity and masculinity, and contradictions about whether she can be female (her sex – which she undoubtedly is), feminine (this is her signified gender according to the manner in which she is coded) and successful. The way Jordan achieves her success and power, involves a transformation throughout the film – taking on masculine qualities whilst discarding many traditional feminine ones. In doing this the film exposes the hypocrisy and the contradictions the action heroine must abide by to gain that power. Jordan accepts this power in its flawed form and takes advantage, and by the end of the film may be seen to be characterised as in fact beyond any traditional gender definitions. The power and independence that comes with Jordan’s success may be called into question with the changes in her gender role throughout the film – principally seen in her change in appearance, her control of symbolically phallic and masculine props. Even her name may suggest a denial of feminine qualities, in favour of a more powerful ‘masculine’
Another angle or possible reading that can be drawn when this transformation occurs in Jordan, is the location of the character and her body in the realm of butch-femme and/or a lesbian body. I address all these possibilities, and the narrative and visual elements that support them in this chapter.

Jordan O’Neil in *G.I. Jane* is a Navy officer who is chosen to be the first woman allowed to participate in the Navy SEAL training program. The film shows her entry into the barracks and her training and struggles to graduate from the course. The narrative for this film has strong links to this film’s place within the action genre.

Jordan O’Neil strives to become a Navy SEAL, to do this she must undergo an intense training schedule that does not cater for women and that is completely full of men – very masculine territory. Similarly a film like *G.I. Jane* is only one of a small number of action films in a genre dominated by films with male protagonists. The film works through several stages of issues revolving around masculinity and femininity, and equality and difference. I intend to read *G.I. Jane* along two major lines. First I harness a textual analysis of coded signs and signifiers; analysing the way gender is coded in the film. This textual/semiotic approach will study how the codes of filmmaking produce meaning through the female protagonist’s representation of masculinity and femininity. Secondly I analyse *G.I. Jane*’s narrative and supporting characters, in particular examining the narrative closure and resolution. These are not clearly split along strict lines rather elements from both analyses will appear and influence the discussions in both approaches.

Initially the film sets up a strong willed woman who gets the opportunity to further her career by being integrated into the ‘male only’ world of Navy SEAL training.
Jordan participates in the beginning under a premise that suggests that in the Navy there should be equality, but for a woman to succeed she needs different rules— and in these situations she is coded as different, as feminine. *There should be equality but there is a necessary difference.* Later the film changes tack, as Jordan pleads to be treated and examined under the exact same regulations as the male recruits. And it is granted. *With total equality there is no gender difference.* In fact Linda Lopez McAlister suggests that *G.I. Jane*’s “idea of feminism is that women can do exactly the same things that men can do and that there should be no acknowledgment of differences between the sexes.” (McAlister, 1997: on-line) And it is here that the changes in Jordan can be seen as increasingly masculine (her appearance and her relationship to masculine power), consequentially kerbing her femininity, and setting her up as butch-femme. I use this term here to describe Jordan’s persona as a site where traditionally coded characteristics of gender are crossed, mixed and juxtaposed against one another. Cathy Griggers locates the central protagonists of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) as butch-femme in a similar manner. She sees them as interesting sites of gender signification, they “are hybrids, incomplete interminglings, and open contradictions.” (Griggers, 1993: 140) So what the film gives with one hand—a woman succeeding in a sexist masculine environment—it seems to take away with the other—suggesting that equality means that her femininity cannot remain in tact.

Demi Moore starring in an action film is an interesting text for the representation of the body. The action genre and Demi Moore have common ground in the presentation of bodies. Action cinema has a primary feature of bodies on display, and “Moore’s body is central to many of her films” and “is already framed by various controversial images” (Tasker, 1998: 8) In *G.I. Jane* Moore’s/Jordan’s body is indeed central to the
film, and also controversial. The entry of a female into the Navy SEALs is disruptive, unsettling the whole Navy base. The media are in a frenzy about a woman participating in the SEAL training, dubbing Jordan 'G.I. Jane'. Jordan's/Moore's body is also pivotal to the film, it is worked on, punished and helps her succeed through the incredibly strenuous physical tests and painful obstacle courses.

Interestingly whilst her body is important and often exhibited, it is the compatibility of brains and brawn that allows Jordan to succeed. Jordan is constantly represented as a combination of these traditionally masculine elements; her hard body and muscular frame, and her calm, insightful intelligence.

Jordan begins the film in Navy Intelligence, and she is shown to be sharp and adept (and persistent – another important feature to her character is she is to succeed) at her job, when she speaks up against her superior, and makes the correct decision to locate a lost platoon. Jordan is constantly depicted as more intelligent, wily, clever and thoughtful than the other trainees. I believe here that the male trainees seem to be less intelligent because of their coding as 'excessively' masculine – as 'blokey', harsh and sexist. Jordan has the calm capability normally associated with the traditional male hero. Whilst the other males have a silly excessive machismo that codes them as less intelligent and in many cases less successful. During a torturous exercise where the recruits must write an essay after many hours of no sleep, she stays awake the longest, eating and sharing precious food scraps she has saved. And in the climax to the film Jordan leads the rescue of the Master Chief. A clear example of Jordan’s rational intelligence compared to an excessive masculine bravado is seen when ‘O’Neill’s orders are disobeyed by a macho recruit and her unit is captured as a result” (Ashley, 1997: 42) Jordan’s superior reasoning may highlight the extent to which changes have
occurred culturally, so that women can be seen as equal (and in this case, superior) in relation to intelligence and rationality. Whilst Jordan challenges male authority with this character trait, it is represented fairly unproblematically.

Masculinity and femininity within a film text has been split according to ‘traditional’ gender characteristics ingrained in culture. Many types of cinema have addressed issues regarding the oppositions between masculinity and femininity, attempting to find ways of bringing them together and/or highlighting their inherent problems or differences. More recently film (and I include recent action films like *G.I. Jane* here) has explored ways in which women challenge traditional restrictions within feminine values as they take on board (and challenge) masculine qualities and power. Much of my study here is based on these ideas, and within the following discussion on the representation of bodies, it is of particular interest. Action heroines of the ilk of Jordan O’Neil and Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* films upset traditional masculine/feminine binaries along the lines of active and passive, and types of bodies. Jordan’s body is a challenge to conventional feminine labels on body types that suggest the women should be undefined, weak and soft. The ‘unfeminine’ aspects of Jordan’s body may be considered her large size, hard build and bulging muscles. Male action heroes such as John Rambo or The Terminator are seen as excessive. Their bodies are an extreme or exaggerated version of what is supposedly taken as masculine, whilst Jordan and the like, may be labelled simply masculine. The categorising of Jordan (or Ripley, or Sarah Conner from * Terminator 2: Judgement Day* [1991]) as symbolically masculine or masculine looking is predicated on the “logic of a gendered binary in which the terms ‘male’ and ‘masculine’, ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ are locked together” (Tasker, 1993: 132). Tasker coins the term
“masculinity” which can place the physical muscular elements of strength of a male body onto a female one without the connotations of ‘maleness’ and/or ‘masculinity’. This term can essentially disavow any traditional masculine labels put onto Jordan because of her body type. However in the larger context of this film, this may not remain completely viable. The significance of her body and the changes it undergoes, it’s representation within the all male environment, combined with other corroborating elements such as symbolic props, costume and key scenes and language highlight the significance of her pumped up, robust, muscular body in traditionally masculine terms.

A traditional female body, defined and coded by feminine characteristics such as softness or a delicate lack of definition, in turn may be related to a certain weakness and vulnerability. Jordan utilises traits, conventionally masculine ones, that render her body tough and quite impervious. Tasker notes that often the “muscular male body functions as a sort of armour – it is sculpted and worked on – which is repeatedly breached.” (Tasker, 1993: 18) I believe Jordan can be included here. Her muscular body functions as an armour, allowing her to complete her training and absorb punishment. There are specific scenes donated to Jordan preparing and sculpting her body. Throughout the film Jordan’s body is tested through tough obstacles, physical tests and is breached severely in a torturous beating by the Master Chief. This beating is carried out to show the male platoon that a female team member will only weaken the team and make them vulnerable. However the vulnerability is overcome when Jordan symbolically rejects her femininity and is eventually accepted as practically and symbolically male.
The discussion and concern over the female body, or more precisely the muscular built up body of the action heroine highlights the ambiguous gendered identity of the heroine and the "redefinition of the sexed body that is worked out over the muscular female body of the action heroine." (Tasker, 1993: 141) It is here that issues may arise regarding the action heroine, Jordan O'Neil as lesbian. Tasker cites Barbara Creed's (1998: 72) suggestion that all female bodies have the potential (or indeed threat) to be lesbian bodies. In particular Creed notes that a female body which is active and masculinised is more inclined to be associated with a lesbian body. Jordan O'Neil is the embodiment of this, an active, bold, muscular woman who is presented in a masculine manner through various technical codes of filmmaking such as camera angle, framing, lighting and codes of actual content such as setting, props, costume, objects (including Jordan/Moore's body) and colours. Creed also points out that within "homophobic practices, the lesbian body is constructed as monstrous in relation to male fantasies" (Creed cited in Tasker, 1998: 72). This fits neatly with the positioning of Jordan as different or monstrous in relation to the Navy and the other male recruits. The Navy too are set up as sexist and homophobic, the narrative highlighting this when the 'monstrous' Jordan (in relation to the all-male Navy fantasies) is suspended over suspicion that he may be a lesbian.

The film therefore seems to map out a boundary for the participation of women in this very masculine environment (the Navy and on a larger scale – the action film), that includes women reluctantly and encourages masculinity in the subject (ie. Jordan) up to a point. The moment Jordan is perceived as embodying masculine desires towards women she is excluded. Jordan continues to be the site for competing and contradictory masculine and feminine elements and desires. Having said this, the film
also seeks to endorse a woman in this environment, through its support of the hero, and as such she returns and is included once more. Jordan exposes the Senator who set her up, subsequently proving she is not a lesbian, and then she is 'allowed' to return to complete and succeed in her SEAL training. At this point the all-male platoon has accepted her as 'one of the guys' and she is able to continue her quest.

Tasker notes that action cinema in general has an "unequivocal play with gay and lesbian desire and identity [that] has become a defining feature of the genre, though it is handled in diverse ways" (Tasker: 1998: 72). Much has been made of lesbian readings of films like Thelma and Louise, and it is quite difficult to avoid any lesbian overtones in G.I. Jane. The narrative makes a point of bringing the issue up, Jordan and her body is a complex site where masculine and feminine characteristics are juxtaposed and crossed - something Tasker notes when she describes Sarah Conner's (from Terminator 2: Judgement Day) persona as one which "juxtaposes traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics -- she is a butch-femme." (Tasker, 1993: 143) In G.I. Jane I believe Jordan's status as butch-femme increases as the film progresses - as she trains more, she is seen as more and more active, her body is displayed and as her appearance changes. Costume plays a large part here in the steady change or growth of Jordan. The journey of the character and her story unfolding throughout the film is a transformation that is often strongly associated with, "and partly achieved through changes to the heroines appearance - weight loss, new clothes, hairstyle and so on." (Tasker, 1993: 137) Character change is standard in most film narratives, and costume is one way of accomplishing this, occurring across a variety of genres including such films as The Mirror Has Two Faces (1996) with Barbra Striesand, and Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman (1990). Similar costume changes occur in the

In *G.I. Jane* Jordan begins the film restrained but nonetheless coded as feminine. Her costume contains her femininity somewhat – a Navy suit, jacket and tie. However she has fine features, make up and the lighting is mild, soft and mellow. When Jordan tells Royce, her boyfriend of her decision to take part in Navy SEAL training they share a bath. Her femininity is brought to the fore; Jordan relaxes sipping wine, her long wet hair drapes over her shoulders and into the water, with candles providing the soft lighting. She giggles as Royce nibbles on her toes. All these visual indicators signify and connote a traditional femininity, a vulnerability to Jordan, which is interestingly contrasted in the way she speaks – confident and headstrong (masculine). She tells Royce the only reason he is of a higher rank is because he has operational experience and “anyone with tits cannot get on a sub”. When Royce sulks and leaves the bath, she orders him “Get your dick back in here!” Feminine looking she may be, but she exhibits traditional coded ‘masculine’ qualities such as independence and autonomy, an opposition that “reinforces the ambiguous gender identity of the female action hero” (Tasker, 1998: 68). A butch-femme label is beginning to fit, and she begins her journey that will see her adopt more and more traditionally masculine attributes; an integration of signs that represent the juxtapositions and contradictions in this example of a contemporary action heroine.

Once on the Navy barracks Jordan is in baggy fatigues that cover her whole body, no make-up and her hair is tucked away. Many of her feminine qualities are hidden and she is taking on masculine looks. Jordan’s hair, or the lack of it plays a large symbolic
part in the representation of the action heroine. In an excellent and significant scene, Jordan takes a pair of electric clippers to her long dark locks. She stares directly and confidently into the mirror (the scene is filmed at eye level) as she shaves her own head—a self confident, independent act (she doesn’t need the male barber to do it). What we see is “Lt. Jordan O’Neil taking control of her career by taking control of her body” (Williams, 1997: 20). Jordan’s head now echoes images of Ripley in Alien3, and as Tasker notes “the shaven-headed image of Ripley produces her even more as a (butch) lesbian body than before” (Tasker, 1998: 72). It is not only a move by Jordan to remove her impractical lengthy hair but it may be seen as a symbolic change to make her ‘one of the boys.’ The soundtrack is brought up over this scene and Chrissie Hynde sings the line “the bitch is gone” (from the song The Homecoming) as the newly shaved Jordan dashes out the door. Jordan has been pleading to be treated no differently from the male recruits to no avail, but in the scene immediately prior, her wishes are cockily granted by the General of the barracks allowing her a masculine equality.

Jordan’s potential to be a lesbian body is also impacted upon with her relationship with Doctor Blondell, the treating physician on base. The few scenes they share it is possible to read a potential for the lesbian body. When Blondell first examines Jordan, she is suitably restrained but also sympathetic and encouraging. Later they become close, and indeed when they are in scenes together they are physically near and any contact is tender and caring, compared to the male contact she receives which for the most part is rough and violent. Jordan again juxtaposes masculinity and femininity in her social time. She goes to a bar and shares drinks with her all male platoon (a common ‘traditional’ masculine setting and pastime in action films, as noted by
Tasker, 1993: 22), then afterwards goes to the beach to meet Blondell and other women to socialise and relax - a much softer serene 'feminine' setting, given 'the extent to which 'woman' has been equated with nature - within both feminist and other more mainstream discourses" (Tasker, 1993: 142). Interestingly, in these scenes Jordan wears a dress, striking and signifying an interesting and formidable butch-femme image - her built up sculpted (masculine coded) body and crew cut, framed in a colourful bright blue (feminine coded) dress.

Jordan's level of acceptance by the SEAL recruits, and a further 'transformation' that strongly suggests that the adoption of masculinity is paramount to Jordan's acceptance and indeed her success, occurs in a scene shortly after her team is captured in a very real training exercise set up by the Master Chief. The members of Jordan's crew are beaten to test their torture endurance. The action hero is constantly subject to physical violence and Jordan is no exception. She is tied by the hands and beaten viscously, both in the hut where the thrashings take place, and then when she is thrown outside in front of the shocked recruits. "Drawing on codes of chivalry, male violence against women has typically functioned within the Hollywood cinema as a signifier of evil" (Tasker, 1993: 152) During this beating where the Master Chief tries to break her - Jordan remains firm and retains a dignity and a strength. She refuses to tell him anything and orders her crew not to give in either, and then fights back. The violence and vulnerability usually facing the male hero "is easily mapped onto the sexualised violence of rape" (Tasker, 1993: 151), and in G.I. Jane it is threatened by the Master Chief. The threat of rape however is turned around by the film, and placed onto the other male recruits. When the Master Chief asks for some information, whilst threatening rape to Jordan, one of the recruits almost relents, "O'Neil you tell him
something or I will.” The platoon is disgusted at the Master Chief for his actions, they are vulnerable and fragile, as Jordan is being beaten a certain heterosexual concern for this woman arises. As Jordan fights back they support and encourage her, support as much for the underdog as it is for the further burgeoning of her masculinity. When Jordan sinks to her knees and yells, “Suck my dick!” the recruits’ (heterosexual) worries are over, they cheer loudly (as did the audience in the cinema that I viewed the film in), and any threat of rape disappears and the team becomes united and bound – “it completes her transformation to ‘one of the guys.’” (McAlister, 1997: online) From here on in, she just has to prove herself to the Master Chief (something she does in the finale), her crew now accept her – and she represents an equality with no gender difference, one however, which required sacrifices to her femininity.

When Jordan yells, “suck my dick” she not only achieves a combat victory and is accepted (assimilated?) by her male team, but she gains power and control. As Linda Ruth Williams notes somewhat crudely “dick means power, the power to which everyone, more or less unsuccessfully, aspires.” (Williams, 1997: 20) Jordan adopts the (psychoanalytic) power that comes with having a penis, with a simultaneous rejection of her femininity – attempting to prove that she does not weaken the SEAL team. Charley Baltimore charges herself with determination, aggression and a refusal to die in The Long Kiss Goodnight (and a refusal to let the villains win) when she mutters “suck my dick” as she crashes a huge truck through a brick wall. In similar fashion, the recent film Lake Placid (1999) has an elderly Betty White comically defending herself and regaining a position of power against an intimidating Sheriff by saying, “this is where, if I had a dick I’d tell you to suck it.” Jordan grasps the power that comes from speaking from a male position and takes advantage of it, even if this
position polarises her femininity, in favour of a dominating masculinity. With the attainment of equal treatment, comes the championing of the lack of difference between genders. However, this scene exposes and ironically shows that ‘no difference between genders’ in *G.I. Jane* (and in the narrative setting of the Navy) detracts from gender equality, when strength, independence, unity, power and even success and survival has to come with a sacrifice of femininity.

The power that is associated with the phallus can be in turn related to phallic items and props in the action film. It is here that the action heroine has a plethora of options to gain power. This can be seen particularly in *G.I. Jane* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, where the heroines have extremely strong connections to weapons and firearms. “These technologies are also intimately bound up with images of the masculine.” (Tasker, 1993: 139) The action film *Tango & Cash* (1989) comically addresses this association between guns and male phallic power when the two male heroes banter about whose gun is bigger, and the relative size of each other’s penis. In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, the aggressive alter ego Charley Baltimore is drawn out of the amnesia suffering Samantha Caine, in key scenes involving guns. Samantha surprises (and scares) herself when she discovers she can effortlessly assemble a huge rifle without thinking. “Charley is (over)determined by an excess of phallic imagery: from the moment she reaches for the gun hidden in her former mentor’s crotch to her open challenge to ‘suck my dick.’” (Tasker, 1998: 87) Jordan too is a master of phallic weaponry. In *G.I. Jane* the relationship of guns, to phallic power is made all the obvious when Jordan is taught to protect her gun barrel from moisture by rolling a condom over the end. Jordan is more in control of her masculine power than any of her male recruits (maybe because she has to be, to succeed). In a timed exercise she
assembles her rifle faster than anyone else, and she is proud of it. The presence of
guns, and the hero’s ability to use them, is a recurring iconographic element of action
cinema. Because of the relationship to the masculine, the female hero in such a film
(ie. Jordan and Sam/Charley and other examples such as Thelma and Louise) is
unavoidably labelled as such. The action genre inevitably brings these connotations
about, and as a result *G.I. Jane* gives Jordan little room to move here, but Jordan
accepts it and nevertheless exploits it to succeed. The film sets up the decree that to
prevail she must use and prove proficient at the use of masculine phallic power –
represented through the images and props of weapons, specifically firearms.

The association with the masculine, that is seen with Jordan’s (and
Samantha/Charley’s) affinity with guns may also be made with a discussion regarding
her name. Jordan O’Neil’s character is strongly coded for masculinity, but even her
original speaking position – that of her name/title – is an interesting juxtaposition of
traditional masculinity and femininity. One reviewer suggests that she is “a character
with the [a] NBA All-Star name” (Taylor, 1997: on-line). Jordan’s name immediately
codes her differently, non-gender specific so she can ‘swing either way’. That is, the
adoption of masculine characteristics will be able to ‘fit’ more easily. Similarly the
name Charley Baltimore denies any traditional femininity, and even her more
feminine alter ego Samantha Caine is referred to as non-gender specific – Sam.
Hinting at the possibility of masculine traits, that are soon to emerge. The name of the
heroine, Jordan O’Neil, may add weight to the claims that; her status as a
contemporary action heroine is influenced by the adoption of traditional elements of
masculinity.
Working in conjunction with the semiological analysis, several points in the narrative structure are of significance to my study. *G.I. Jane*’s narrative organisation adds weight to my claims around Jordan and her representation of a contemporary heroine that is complex and contradictory with her mix of feminine and masculine codings. The narrative also uses the tentative relationship between Jordan and Blondell to put another obstacle in her path. Photographs emerge of Jordan at the beach party ‘fraternising’ with Blondell. She is of course being set up to fail, and Jordan quits her training, completely demoralised. After the scene of accusation and resignation, a frustrated and angry Jordan viscously belts the large bell which is in the centre of the barracks (which is rung by recruits who choose to quit their training). Metaphorically, the bell may assist in solidifying her stature as butch-femme, an example of a modern heroine that embodies contradictory gender roles, as this prop can too be seen as “especially a symbol of the union of Masculine and Feminine” (Chetwynd, 1998: 292). The bell chimes are also played over the scenes when Jordan works on her body. Her body is shown in all of its muscular glory. We watch her, as her stomach muscles flex as she does vertical sit-ups, and her arms bulge as she does one armed push-ups. Her skin glistens with sweat and she grimaces at the strain. Jordan prepares her body for combat; she challenges Mulvey’s early ideas on women and their constant subordination and passive objectification for the male gaze. Her body may be on display (and sexualised to an extent) but she retains control, power and confidence. Her active body is being trained to ‘take on’ men, whilst not existing solely for an objectifying masculine/male gaze. The bell’s chimes and Jordan’s active powerful body, work together to position her as this contradictory female heroine. A heroine who optimises a union, a juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine, gradually moving beyond gender so she can succeed.
I believe two supporting characters in *G.I. Jane* also reiterate the film's portrayal of a contemporary action heroine who is a coded juxtaposition of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. Senator Lillian Dehaven organises the test case of a woman in the Navy SEAL training program. Throughout the film she is all powerful, humiliating and barking orders at high-ranking male Navy officials. Senator Dehaven is also an interesting site for discussions on gender. She is coded as more feminine than Jordan, principally seen in her use of make-up, and her costume (soft blouses and stylish loose outfits). However there are contradicting signifiers to her character which code her as masculine. She is harsh, gruff, intelligent, dry and tough. Her face is rugged, worn and hard. These more 'masculine' elements of her character and personality say as much about the stereotypical tough 'no morals' world of politics, as they do about Dehaven's rise to the top. A rise that suggests that to succeed in the patriarchal world, the political world, she has also discarded feminine traits in favour of more traditional masculine ones to survive. Her characterisation mirrors the juxtapositioning of masculinity and femininity that is exemplified in Jordan. When she assigns Jordan to the SEAL program she seems to be championing women's rights -- a position the film (in the beginning) invites the audience to reciprocate in our support for Jordan, the heroine Dehaven selects. However when the narrative twist occurs, and it is revealed that Dehaven has used (and abused) the women's equality issue, and has set up Jordan to fail so she can ensure her own re-election, it pulls the rug from beneath any true feminist equality ideals. This revelation positions the film's message less about asserting female equality, and more directly about an individual's journey to success. An individual who is coded as very masculine, in many cases symbolically male and who defers any clear association to her sex by moving beyond
a clear gender role so she can succeed. This narrative turning point and the character of Dehaven seem to corroborate and assist in defining Jordan as a site of competing signs of masculinity and femininity, who is no different to a man.

Master Chief John Urgaylc is a curious site for the juxtapositioning of what is traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine'. His physique is not displayed as much or as closely as Jordan's and as a result he actually seems somewhat smaller or less muscular than the pumped up Jordan. His body is tall, lithe and athletic. In many of his scenes his appearance seems to connote a manner of stereotypical homosexuality, with "his Village People mustache [sic], reflector shades and tight little shorts" (Taylor, 1997: on-line). He is only ever referred to as Master Chief, which has bondage and sadomasochistic overtones, and is surrounded only by men (until now!) - both the Navy SEAL recruits, and his similarly coded underling trainers that he supervises. Master Chief reads poetry in his spare time, and quotes it to his recruits, simultaneously suggesting a certain sensitivity and a scary streak of madness. The relationship between Master Chief and Jordan is never sexual or even flirtatious. Even when he interrupts Jordan in the shower, he doesn't ogle her, in fact she is endowed with much of the power in this scene. Her muscular back and shoulders are on display, and she seems to be physically imposing to the Master Chief. Jordan commands the room, moving around it (wrapping a towel around her waist, evoking a masculine image, compared to a traditional feminine one, with it wrapped around the chest), whilst he stays timidly in the corner shadows. Her strength is added to, when he tells her that she is now the leader of her team. The Master Chief's interesting coding clouds his relationship with Jordan, and indeed her position within the Navy. The Master Chief's gay overtones may suggest that the Navy is a place of closeted
homosexuality, and allowing Jordan in, disrupts this. Or her presence may simply be antagonistic to this straightforwardly 'misogynistic' place. The Master Chief character is another meaningful point where *G.I. Jane* plays with homosexuality and homocroticism, and femininity and masculinity which is, as Tasker mentions, familiar and common place in action films. The uncertainty and difficulty of labelling the Master Chief in a staid gender role can in fact add to the contradictory gender characterisation of Jordan.

The climax and the denouement provide the last reference point to what the film is trying to say about the action heroine. On the very surface we see a woman survive and succeed in a tough and treacherous environment. Jordan, as protagonist in a mainstream Hollywood film, beats the odds, overcomes the obstacles and accomplishes her goal. But what exactly is worked through in the finale is harder to explain. In ending of the *The Long Kiss Goodnight* a balance has occurred in the heroine as can be seen as she drives across country to meet up with her husband and daughter. Samantha/Charley seems to have merged into a somewhat 'new' character, exhibiting a combination of the binaries of masculinity and femininity that Charley and Samantha represented respectively. Her costume is toned down from Charley’s hard, dark, sexy outfits, but not all the way back to Samantha’s long baggy skirts and colourful big jumpers. This heroine has found a middle ground between extremes. However where is Jordan? The climax has Jordan at her most masculine; in bloody combat, dirty, bruised and fighting. Her superior intelligence enables her to realise where the Master Chief is going, set a trap for the enemy and save his life. In the denouement, the successful graduates (of which Jordan is one) receive their Navy SEAL awards. The narrative space and graduation occasion allows Jordan to look
softer and cleaner, with a hint of lipstick. Her shaven head is under a cap, and she
wears the baggy camouflaged costume. The Master Chief acknowledges her sex as he
presents her with the decoration, “Welcome aboard ma’am”, the sole indicator of her
difference. Royce (her heterosexual partner) is nowhere to be seen in this part of the
film whilst Blondell observes the ceremony intently (a cut away shot of Blondell
watching the presentation occurs just before Jordan receives her insignia) possibly
suggesting the butch-femme, and lesbian body has come full circle. The graduates
throw their hats in the air, set in the background to a huge phallic cannon, and as the
symbolic chimes of the bell ring loudly. These elements continue the meaningful
representations of masculinity and the union of masculinity and femininity
respectively.

The Master Chief places his book of poetry in Jordan’s personal locker in the final
scene. Jordan finds the book and they watch each other as the Master Chief (wounded
in the battle) limps away. This injury to his leg and his limping exit can be seen as
somewhat of a psychoanalytic castration. This can symbolically represent Jordan’s
final gain in masculinity, and consequently in his weakness (needing to be rescued
like the proverbial damsel in distress) the Master Chief looses his masculinity, and as
such is labelled as lacking and possibly ‘feminine’. A label that was never too far
away with his dubious sexuality and coding which was never totally or solidly within
traditional masculine coding for men in action cinema. The Master Chief’s gift of
poetry acts (not only as a sign of gratitude for saving his life within the narrative
space) but as a passing on of knowledge. This is Jordan’s final acceptance by the
Master Chief, she is now equal in his eyes -- and in this total equality with men she
has transcended gender, her status as female is irrelevant. This is the new Jordan
O’Neil with no coded redistribution of femininity and a corroborating of masculine coding. This suggests she has emerged at the end of her journey as the embodiment of the butch-femme masculinised heroine. Her success points to the idea that females have the potential to be exactly what men can be, in all spheres (even physical) without any difference. Ironically however for this equality one must surrender the feminine and develop the masculine. The film fades to black, and to remind us what Jordan has done, and indeed become, we hear the General’s comments/warning from early in the film, “You have volunteered for the most intensive military training known to man.”

I have covered numerous elements of G.I. Jane and Jordan O’Neil through the above semiological and narrative analysis. These are important and significant elements that relate to how women and gender are represented and what can be made of them in this film. I have addressed a number of possible readings at various times throughout this chapter, and in the following conclusion I summarise these, highlighting the major elements which they harness to produce the desired reading.
Conclusion

This thesis has examined the film *G.I. Jane* (1997) using a number of different theoretical perspectives. As with all polysemic texts different readings may emerge depending on what position the text is being viewed from, or what particular theoretical method is being used. I argue that *G.I. Jane* can be understood as a text which places a woman into a traditionally male genre – the action film – and within this situation explores gender issues. I argue that it is a complex text which in its representation of women and its questions about gender and equality and femininity can be ‘read’ in a number of different ways.

The first possible reading may suggest that with Jordan’s success comes the proposition that gender equality is possible whilst retaining femininity – therefore maintaining a difference between the sexes. I believe a reading such as this has its major influence in the framework of Demi Moore’s star image. On the one hand Demi Moore’s star image puts forward control and independence as central aspects of her character. These give her entry into traditionally masculine territory, certainly making her equal to men and possible making her the same as men. But at the same time Moore’s image rarely deviates from showing her as heterosexual or as a ‘beautiful’ and sexually attractive woman. It is in this realm of heterosexual erotic attraction that Moore maintains traditional notions of feminine difference – she desires and is desired by men, and this desire is ‘naturally’ founded on difference between the sexes, as shown in the way her body and image are normally constructed. Thus, although in *G.I. Jane* she might at times adopt a butch, asexual image in terms of body, clothing and hair style, her star image as constructed outside *G.I. Jane* may lead viewers to see
her within a wider context of heterosexual difference. Additionally Moore’s adoption of the butch persona could be seen as part of her star image which is able to take on very different types of roles. Here the film is read as a celebration of her acting ability which does not compromise her ‘femininity’ and indeed encourages us to read her performance precisely as performance – she is putting on a role. His first reading position may be seen as a heterosexual position which maintains aspects of traditional femininity alongside independence and equality. This reading however tends to ignore other textual elements which I have raised that place Jordan’s coded femininity or traditional status as ‘woman’ in jeopardy.

A second possible reading calls Moore’s/Jordan’s heterosexuality into question by bringing gay and lesbian connotations to the narrative and visual codes. A lesbian reading I believe is more viable than one which suggests that Jordan and her success highlights gender equality combined with a retention of her ‘femininity’. A lesbian reading can be informed between the narrative relationships Jordan has with Doctor Blondell, the Master Chief and Royce, combined with visual codes that influence the scenes that they share. Strong lesbian possibilities arise the way Jordan interacts with Blondell. These characters are two of the three females in G.I. Jane, and they are comfortable and intimate in the scenes they share. Blondell is never seen treating another (male) recruit, and the narrative actually makes a point of bringing the possibility of a lesbian relationship to the fore, through the smear campaign applied to Jordan. In this reading Jordan’s heterosexual partner Royce acts as a traditional female sidekick – in a traditional action ‘male buddy’ film – reaffirming the hero’s heterosexuality. His presence in the film seems specifically created for this purpose; to contain any inferred homosexual elements they may emerge in a lesbian reading.
such as this. Royce as Jordan’s partner satisfies Senator Dehaven into allowing her to take part in the SEAL training. Dehaven prefers to have a test candidate that is heterosexual. However, significantly Royce does not appear in the denouement of the film, rather it is Blondell who watches proudly as Jordan receives her Navy SEAL insignia. Also contributing to this queer reading may be the lack of any romantic or sexual tension between Jordan and the central male character, the Master Chief. The relationship is strictly professional, echoing elements of a teacher/student relationship. Even in the scene when they converse as Jordan showers, there is no overt sexual tension. Adding to this lesbian reading are the visual codes and traditional signifiers of masculinity that are attached to Jordan’s body. Jordan is shown as active, strong and powerful, and as such her body tends to be coded as masculine. When the female form is masculinised it has a heavy tendency and a high potential to be coded as lesbian. It is this masculinised body of the central female heroine, that is common in the action genre, as is present here in this reading. This reading finds significance in Jordan’s masculine coded body and her narrative relationships with the Master Chief and Blondell. The lesbian reading also implies that women can be equal to men, whilst still retaining difference. Jordan is read as being lesbian, as different to men, not as symbolically male.

The third and fourth possible readings of *G.I. Jane* I consider to be the most prominent. Some of the supporting elements for both these readings are shared and interrelated. This third reading suggests Jordan as hero has moved beyond gender, her sexuality and gender has become irrelevant in her attainment of total equality – there is no difference between men and women. This sort of reading is set up in the very beginning with Jordan having a non-gender specific name. Her name may be read as
inherently masculine (as I suggest below), but for this reading it can suggest her ability to transcend gender boundaries, by avoiding a traditional ‘feminine’ name or a clear masculine one. In doing this she has already began to move away from any traditional gender classification. Combined with this is her costume. In very few scenes is Jordan not wearing some sort of navy uniform which restricts any traditional labelling of gender – from her restrictive Navy Intelligence suit to the baggy camouflaged fatigues of combat – costume rallies to place Jordan ‘away’ from a traditional gendered reading.

The narrative elements involving Senator Dehaven may also be included in Jordan’s positioning as total equal, and exemplifying no difference between sexes. Dehaven initially seems to be championing female rights, but through her eventual betrayal, this championing places Jordan as an individual beyond gender. From this point Jordan is free to prove herself without ‘baggage’ that places her as a ‘woman’. Her struggles (apart from her final need to prove herself to the Master Chief) are now firmly as a non-gender specific individual – gender has been transcended.

A final possible reading of Jordan can see her as adopting traditionally coded elements of masculinity at the expense of coded femininity, so she can succeed in this tough all male environment. Jordan can be seen as a site of these competing and contradicting traditionally masculine and feminine codings – in effect a butch-femme image. This is a reading which suggests there is a difference between the sexes, but for equality Jordan must symbolically adopt coded male characteristics. It is in this way that Jordan’s name/title can be read in a slightly different way to the reading posed above. Instead of reading her name as non-gender specific it may be able to
indicate a beginning point where Jordan has already began to adopt traditionally masculine traits, i.e. this name or title. This sets a base for the coding of her in a traditionally masculine manner — a manner which will ‘fit’ more succinctly with a more ‘masculine’ title/name.

In the beginning of the film Jordan shows a clever rationality, a supreme intelligence not traditionally associated with women in film (particularly action film). She is challenging this intelligence as a traditional label for masculinity, and nevertheless employs it to great success throughout the film. Jordan’s initial acceptance of the offer to train with the Navy SEALs also highlights her traditional masculine traits — autonomy, ambition and independence. Which in turn corroborates her ambiguous gender identity which will develop as the film progresses.

Jordan’s physical appearance also changes throughout the film — skewing towards codes of masculinity. Jordan’s body is hidden beneath a baggy Navy uniform which seeks to contain any feminine connotations. However when Jordan’s body is shown (which it inevitably must as dictated by the action genre) it is displayed in all its hard, pumped up, muscular glory. Her bulging thighs, broad strong shoulders, hard stomach and muscular arms are signifiers of traditional masculine body. These features are also compounded by Jordan shaving her head. An action Jordan takes to increase her acceptance by the male recruits, and an image which adds to the masculine coding of her character and physical appearance.

The Master Chief is an interesting and complicated site for codings on gender and sexuality. As such these codings and his presence tends to set up a murky gender
coded environment, and adds to Jordan’s contradictory gendered characterisation. Jordan takes on a male speaking position, one of power, when she yells at the Master Chief, “suck my dick!” This scene allows her to gain control and the power that comes with a speaking position associated with having a penis – being male. The male recruits accept her after this symbolic revelation, and a final denial and neglect of femininity by Jordan. It is this reading that may be seen as radical but problematic for women. The problem is that for women to achieve equality with men they have to become ‘masculine’ – and thus loose their femininity. Thus feminine qualities are downgraded, and masculine qualities are seen as stronger, more positive.

Jordan’s coded masculinity and attainment of phallic power is also exemplified in her use and ability to handle phallic props. She smokes large cigars and has many options (given to her by the action genre) to use phallic weapons. Jordan excels at the use of her firearms and other traditionally masculine props. She accepts this flawed phallic power that increases her relationship to the masculine and distances her from the feminine, and uses it to her advantage, helping code her as symbolically masculine.

The provision of these four possible readings is determined by contributing elements from the sources I have addressed in this thesis. The representation of women across all media texts is always changing, often in correspondence to numerous changing social and cultural conditions that effect women in the real world. The infiltration of women into the action genre – a traditionally excessive masculine, misogynist and male dominated environment – in important and central ways may highlight the inroads women are making in the larger society. Certainly the majority of action films still place women subsidiary secondary roles, but action films of the 1990s, such as
Terminator 2: Judgement Day (1991), The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996), Copycat (1995), The Quick and the Dead (1995), Cuatrotoit Island (1995) and G.I. Jane push the envelope for important influential female roles in action cinema. G.I. Jane at its simplest shows a powerful independent woman living assertively, achieving success and being the equal of men. What the film appears to lack under textual scrutiny is the retention of femininity by this successful independent female action heroine, instead endorsing traditional masculine qualities that she must symbolically adopt to gain this success.

G.I. Jane brings issues regarding a masculinised heroine and whether she can in fact ‘be feminine’ and succeed in an action movie to the fore. Jordan O’Neil challenges traditional views about the display of the female body and the objectifying male gaze. One which she invites (it is required by the genre and is congruent with her star image) in the audience, showing off her powerful and ‘active’ body. The film G.I. Jane, the action genre and Demi Moore’s star image all work to produce a female action protagonist that is just one sign of where debates about feminism and women in cinema are situated in the late 1990s.
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Appendix

Top 20 All Time Highest Grossing Movies

(http://movieweb.com/movie/alltime.html)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Year Released</th>
<th>Total Gross ($millions)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Titanic</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>601</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Star Wars</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>461</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>418</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>E.T. – The Extraterrestrial</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>400</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Jurassic Park</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>357</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Forrest Gump</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>330</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>The Lion King</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>313</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Return of the Jedi</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>307</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The Empire Strikes Back</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>290</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>Home Alone</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>285</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Jaws</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>260</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>251</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Men in Black</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>250</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>Raiders of the Lost Ark</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>242</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>Twister</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>242</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>Beverly Hills Cop</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>235</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>The Lost World: Jurassic Park</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>229</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Ghostbusters</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>221</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>Mrs. Doubtfire</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>219</td>
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