From ‘figurative males’ to action heroines: further thoughts on active women in the cinema

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Hudson: Hey, Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man?
Vasquez: No Have you?

Aliens (James Cameron, 1986)

This now famous quote neatly captures the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the transgressive character of the action heroine.1 Smarter, tougher and better equipped than both the traditional heroines of the action genre and many of their contemporary male counterparts, action heroines are a new breed of arse-kicking female protagonists in action genre films. Aggressive, heroic and transformative characters such as Ripley from the Alien series, Sarah Connor from Terminator 2: Judgment Day (James Cameron, 1991), Rebecca from Tank Girl (Rachel Talalay, 1995), Morgan Adams from Cutthroat Island (Renny Harlan, 1995), both Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991) all of the Bad Girls (Jonathan Kaplan, 1994) and, more recently, Samantha/Charlie from The Long Kiss Goodnight (Renny Harlan, 1996) transgress both cinematic genre codes and cultural gender codes which position female characters as the passive, immobile and peripheral characters of Hollywood action cinema. Although these powerfully transgressive characters open up interesting questions about the fluidity of gendered identities and changing popular cinematic representations of women, action heroines are often described within feminist film theory as ‘pseudo males’ or as being not ‘really’ women.
This paper argues that one of the reasons why action heroines have been difficult to conceptualize as heroic female characters is the binaristic logic of the theoretical models on which a number of feminist theorists have relied. For example, feminists working within the dominant theoretical model of psychoanalysis have had extremely limited spaces within which to discuss the transformative and transgressive potential of the action heroine. This is because psychoanalytic accounts which theorize sexual difference within the framework of linked binary oppositions (active male/passive female) necessarily position normative female subjectivity as passive or in terms of lack. From this perspective, active and aggressive women in the cinema can only be seen as phallic, unnatural or 'figuratively male'.

However, female action heroes confound binaristic logic in a number of ways, for they access a range of emotions, skills and abilities which have traditionally been defined as either 'masculine' or 'feminine'. As female characters who take up the central spaces in the traditionally 'masculine' genre of action cinema, they derive their power from their ability to think and live creatively, their physical courage and their strategic uses of technology. For these reasons I argue that action heroines cannot easily be contained, or productively explained, within a theoretical model which denies the possibility of female subjectivity as active or full.

Working against the traditional binaristic component of psychoanalysis, I want to suggest that the transgressive and transformative potential of these female characters cannot be appreciated via habitual readings or conventional theoretical modes which claim to know in advance what female bodies are capable of doing or what can be said about them. As a corollary, I will argue that some new mode of understanding has to be developed to take account of the new and changing representations of women in the action cinema. From my perspective, action heroines represent something of a methodological crisis for feminist film theory and its theorizing of active and aggressive female characters, opening up an interesting set of questions regarding the ongoing need to critique and transform the theories we use.

Inevitably in an essay of this scope there will be some generalizations. For this reason I think it important to signal that my aim here is not to belittle other feminist work or dismiss psychoanalytic frameworks, but rather to show how feminist film theory is developed and transformed in a context where previous feminist research plays an integral and indispensable role in the articulation of contemporary feminist concerns. This is simply to acknowledge the fact that if earlier feminists had not appropriated dualistic theories to examine active women in film, then the difficulties inherent in this project would not have come to light. The theoretical framework I am adopting here assumes and responds to...
these difficulties, not as a final 'correct' approach, but as a new
development in the necessarily dynamic field of feminist film theory.

With this agenda in mind, I will first examine the limitations and
consequences of discussing active heroines from within binaristic
frameworks, such as psychoanalysis, which position active female
characters as phallic or 'figuratively male'. Then, using Gilles
Deleuze's notion of becoming, I work outwards from an exploration
of Ripley from the Alien series towards a theoretical position which
allows for action heroines to be conceptualized as transformative,
transgressive and heroic. From this basis, I argue for the need
costantly to reflect upon the usefulness of our theoretical
constructions and practices in order to engage with new characters
and changing contexts. My critique of psychoanalytic models and
exploration of the usefulness of non-binaristic post-psychoanalytic
alternatives is motivated, then, by the need to think differently about
active and aggressive heroines in order to create new ways of
conceptualizing transgressive female characters.

For a number of reasons I have chosen to focus these issues
through the character of Ripley. Ripley is, of course, a highly
transgressive, transformative and controversial character. As,
arguably, the first 'action heroine' of her type, she entered our
cultural imaginary almost twenty years ago and continues to be a
significant cultural icon. Whilst there have been many examples of
active women in action genres (ranging from Emma Peel of The
Avengers to the fashionable heroines of Charlie's Angels) the action
heroine as I analyse her here emerged with Ripley from the Alien
series. Alien is what Thomas Schatz calls a 'new Hollywood
blockbuster'. a complete package with elaborate special effects,
thirty-million dollar budget, expensive pre-release publicity and, most
importantly, huge box-office success. It generated a series of (so far)
three sequels, and Ripley has become one of Hollywood's most
visible action heroines.

Her role as heroic female lead has generated a great deal of
controversy and critical interest ranging from a symposium whose
papers were published in Science Fiction Studies through to a major
psychoanalytical reading in Screen. Ripley has been an important
site over which changing theoretical responses to sexual difference
and film have been mapped. Whilst this paper aims to continue this
project by linking Ripley to a new theoretical framework, the main
reason I choose to focus on her is because of her ability to adapt to
the new and negotiate change. Ripley illustrates the importance of
creative thinking in response to the new signs which occur in her
environment, a willingness to experiment with new modes of being
and the ability to transform herself in the process. She provides a
spectacular example of the kind of dynamic subjectivity which I see
as being crucial for feminist film theory.

The importance of creating a new reading position through which

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3 Thomas Schatz. The new
Hollywood in J Collins H
Radner and A Preacher Collins
eds Film Theory Goes to the
Movies (London Routledge
1993) pp 8-36

4 C Elkins Symposium on Alien
Science Fiction Studies vol 7
no 3 (1980) pp 275-97

5 Barbara Creed. Horror and the
monstrous-feminine an imaginary
abjection Screen vol 26 no 2
(1985) pp 47-67
In this sense the film uses an important narrative convention of the slasher film that is the figure of Ripley as final girl. Like the slasher film, much of the confusion and anxiety generated in Alien comes from the absence of clear central characters. See Clover, Men, Women and Chasms.

To a significant degree, suspense is generated in the film by the lack of knowledge regarding the characters: there is an absolute uncertainty of what particular bodies are capable of. For example, when the outer casing of the alien falls off Kane’s face, Ripley contests Ash’s decision to examine it for science by arguing that ‘it drips acid for blood. Who knows what it is capable of when it is dead?’ Like the characters, the spectator/critic also has to learn how to negotiate a way around the unknown figure of the alien. However, the spectator/critic also has another uncoded figure to negotiate: the figure of Ripley when, more than halfway through the film, she emerges as the hero and the sole surviving member of the crew.

Whilst Hollywood convention leads the audience to assume that it will be Dallas (as both captain and a man) who will ultimately defeat the alien, his death is a dramatic and significant break with the codes of the hero stereotype. Indeed, it is not until the last man (the most obvious choice for hero) is killed that Ripley emerges as the central ‘heroic’ character. We find out what her body is capable of when she not only defends herself from the alien but manages to destroy it.

In stepping into the place of the hero, Ripley becomes a character, in Rebecca Bell-Metereau’s words, ‘so foreign as to be unrecognizable to most popular critics.’ Ripley’s female body challenges and disrupts the tradition of heroes as necessarily male, and undermines any certainty about what she can or will do. As a new sign within the genre she interrupts the ease of an automatic reading of her image and disrupts what Gilles Deleuze calls the ‘sensory-motor logic’ of genre cinema. Despite the unfamiliarity of
this new sign, and the fact that *Alien* and its sequels were clearly doing something different in terms of the female-as-hero, a number of critics have utilized conventional binaristic readings of the film's theme of heroism/transformation and its relation to female subjectivity.

Indeed, to some feminist theorists Ripley is not able to function as *both* female and heroic. In this context she has been read as phallic, and therefore figuratively male, or as eroticized, and therefore regressive rather than transgressive. Various responses to the final scenes of *Alien*—which focus on the battle between Ripley and the monster—highlight the dichotomous logic of these reading positions, generating considerable discussion and controversy over whether Ripley maintains her status as active subject or is recuperated into a more traditional feminine role as sexualized object.

Judith Newton’s unease about Ripley’s transgressive status, for example, reflects the dominant theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and the positioning of women within it. Whilst Newton recognizes *Alien* as a potentially transformative text, this recognition is a precursor to doubt about the value or radical nature of Ripley and, by extension, the film. Newton argues that *Alien* is a:

transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies...which is at once wish-fulfilling or utopian and protectively repressive in its thrust. The most obviously utopian element is its casting of a female character in the role of the individualist hero, a role conventionally played by, and in this case specifically written for, a male.

Newton acknowledges that Ripley is in many ways a ‘fine and thrilling hero’ then, but also argues that she is ultimately ‘robbed her of her radical thrust’. Newton makes this claim because of the film’s conclusion which, she suggests, ‘subtly reinvests Ripley with traditionally feminine qualities’, when she is shown not only ‘irrationally’ risking her life to save the cat but also stripped down to her underwear. The argument that these traditionally ‘feminine’ actions and images rob Ripley of her ‘radical thrust’ suggests an either/or logic which acknowledges neither the transgressive potential nor the desirability of accessing a range of roles, skills and emotions.

Ros Jennings’s psychoanalytically based analysis of *Alien* also identifies an incompatibility or regressive tension between the masculine and feminine traits displayed by Ripley. Describing Ridley Scott’s direction of the final sequence she argues that

Although he chose to make her [Ripley] the hero of the film, he also chose to inscribe her in such a way as to neutralize the significance of her threat in ascending to the male domain of movie hero. By rendering her available to male voyeurism, Scott’s control of filmng in the final scene ensures that in addition to the

10 Ibid p 87
11 Ibid
Far from celebrating Ripley's access to both masculine and feminine qualities, Jennings reads Ripley's 'femininity' as disqualifying her as a hero. Because Ripley is shown to be vulnerable as well as brave she can be only a token hero. However, as Yvonne Tasker has argued, this play of vulnerability and strength is characteristic of the action hero/heroine. Indeed, it is during her final confrontation with the alien that Ripley is most visibly an action heroine for, stripped down to her underwear, she presents audiences with an image of a female character who is both victim and her own rescuer: a character which breaks down the hierarchical division of active-male/passive-female. Whilst shots of Ripley in her bikini briefs certainly eroticize her image, her actions supply a strong counter-narrative. In other words, not only does Ripley put on a space suit before doing battle with the alien, she also single-handedly defeats it.

However, even when theorists focus on what Ripley is doing rather than what she is wearing, the dichotomous logic of the psychoanalytic framework again demands that she is conceptualized in negative terms within the masculine/feminine binary. One such response to the transgressive figure of Ripley has been to argue that she is actually phallicized, or reconstituted as masculine. This argument is utilized by Carol Clover in her analysis of the character of the 'final girl' of the slasher film, of which she uses Ripley as an example. Whilst describing the 'final girl' as intelligent, resourceful and able to save herself without outside assistance – male or otherwise – Clover does not allow these active heroines to be defined as normatively female. Using a Freudian psychoanalytic framework and predominantly concerned with the male spectator's processes of identification with the 'final girl', she argues that castration anxiety is resolved by regendering the heroine as masculine, that is phallicizing her through her use of guns, knives, machetes, chainsaws and so on, to defeat whatever or whoever is threatening her. In summarizing this figurative reading Clover argues:

Figuratively seen, the Final Girl is a male substitute in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in ... to the extent she means 'girl' at all, it is only for purposes of signifying male lack, and even that meaning is nullified in the final scenes ... The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure into it only insofar as they 'read' some aspect of male experience. To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development, as some reviews of Aliens have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking.

Here not only Ripley, but feminist approaches which read her as a positive and transformative female character, are found lacking and
dismissed, and the active heroine, no matter how courageous and desiring, is forced to perform the role of lack which is necessary within this phallocentric framework. In other words, Clover can read Ripley and other ‘final girls’ as paradigmatic of figurative males only because she sees resourcefulness and aggression as ‘masculine’ traits, and guns and technology as compensating for some original lack. It seems to me that this type of reading attempts to impose a rigid and habituated explanation onto a new and alternative figure. This is an example of what Deleuze calls a ‘philosophy of capture’ in which the innovation of a new concept is contained and interpreted in an endless being-made-what-one-is-a priori. The use of phallocentric logic to position resourceful, intelligent and courageous female survivors as ‘figuratively male’ seems to me to be a ‘particularly grotesque’ form of selection and interpretation and one which has severe political consequences for feminist film theory.

The questions that must be asked are: what is at stake in relying on a methodological model which defines normative female subjectivity in terms of lack, stasis and passivity, and active subjectivity as necessarily phallic? What readings of active female characters have these theories made possible and maintained? What readings do these theories close off? Are there ways of reconceptualizing female desire and subjectivity as productive, transformative and active? The writings of Deleuze seem to offer hope for such a theoretical framework. His stated agenda of transforming the field of western philosophy through disengaging the binary logic of Platonism is designed to affirm the positivity of difference and to account for change and changing contexts. Deleuze also offers a pragmatic and productive conception of the body which is very different to the psychoanalytic view, for, as Elizabeth Grosz has observed, in contrast to the psychoanalytic model it is not a matter of what a body is — what organs it has — but what it creates and produces; what it connects with and what it does.

For Deleuze, then, the body lived to its fullest potential is not organized according to the particular organs it has, indeed for him it is a ‘Body without Organs’ consisting instead of a multiplicity of independent parts, what he calls ‘desiring-machines’ — which can connect and reconnect with other machines, elements or objects from multiple frames of reference to produce particular types of ‘assemblages’ — such as the assemblage of women and technology. From a Deleuzian perspective, it makes no sense to read technology, such as a gun, as a fixed referent for the phallus. Rather it can be understood as part of a machinic connection: a woman’s hand forming an assemblage with a gun. This has nothing to do with the attempted compensation for some original ‘lack’ but, rather, it is an activity which produces a new ‘body’. In this model, transformation occurs when repetition is replaced by difference through the dynamic assemblage of diverse elements and forces. Because these
assemblages are not restrained by expectations about ‘appropriate’
behaviours or connections, they can be associated with contesting
notions of gendered identity and fixed subjectivity. Rather than a
state of mere being, then, Deleuze posits a notion of ‘becoming’
which is the process of transformation created when a body
disconnects from its habituated modes of acting and thinking in
favour of a multiple and changing process of experimentation.18

As a critical strategy, Deleuze’s characterization of the body
asserts more than the positive nature of non-hierarchical difference
over negatively binaristic models. The emphasis on fluid boundaries,
dynamic interaction and transformation is also an empowering brand
of corporeality which has important resonances for theorizing the
female body. For, as Grosz has pointed out, if the body can be
reconceptualized as a site of experimentation and transformation, then
this means that the female body is capable of being imagined outside
the notions of ‘passive’, ‘lack’ and ‘other’.19

Deleuze’s notion of bodies as transgressive and transformative
resonates with a number of the characters across the Alien films, for
throughout, the series displays an extremely complex use of
corporeality so that bodies cannot satisfactorily be reduced to
discrete unities or binaristic notions of human or non-human, or
essentialist frameworks of specifically male or female characteristics
or identities. For example, the alien has been coded as both
masculine and feminine. Indeed, Barbara Creed reads it as both
phallic and the ‘toothed vagina’ that she describes in her excellent
analysis of the Monstrous Feminine.20 Elsewhere in her writings
Creed has also referred to Ripley as a hybrid character, that is, both
male/hero and female/victim.21 Like the alien, then, Ripley is a
complex and transgressive both/and figure rather than the
oppositional either/or figure of traditional gender codes.

Conceptualized as a Body without Organs, she no longer moves
within the framework that determines her identity from the
established codes of masculinity/femininity. Indeed, across the four
films the coupling of Ripley’s body with other machines – such as
weapons, computers, the now famous ‘power-loader’ suit and the
body of the alien itself – provides the means of creating a new body
which transgresses the hierarchical divisions and limitations posed by
the gender system.

It is important to understand that although Ripley assumes the ‘so-
called’ masculine privilege of active subjectivity through the process
of becoming an active heroine, she is neither imitating men nor
‘becoming a man’. As an active, heroic and technologically
competent woman she is more similar to action heroes than she is to
traditionally passive heroines, such as Lambert.22 However, this does
not make her ‘figuratively male’. Being composed of the speeds of
action rather than the speeds of passivity, active heroines such as
Ripley are becoming something other than the essentialized concept
of Woman held in a mutually exclusive relation to Man. Furthermore, if action heroines become empowered and even violent through their use of technology, this is not to say that they are somehow no longer ‘really’ women, but that they are intelligent and necessarily aggressive females in the context of their role as the central figures of action genre films.

From this perspective, Ripley can be understood as a network of differences composed of whatever signs have been picked up and reassembled into a new active-heroine machine. This assemblage of the terms ‘action’ and ‘heroine’ alters the nature of both structures and exceeds the limits of the binary and essentializing system of gender identities to become something beyond both. This does not mean that she has moved beyond sexual difference to an androgynous, non-differentiated state, but, rather, to a non-hierarchical state of pure difference. She becomes what Rosi Braidotti calls a ‘post-Woman woman’ through operating in the productive middle space between binaries – such as Man and Woman – and, in the process, she opens up new spaces, roles and actions for women within the genre.

However, simply to view Ripley’s body against a masculine/feminine distinction is to constrain the multiplicity of differences which make up her subjectivity. Indeed, across the series it is Ripley and the alien who are increasingly coded as similar. This similarity is often attached to discourses of sexual difference so that their mutual recognition in their battle for survival (in Alien) becomes a fight between two ‘mothers’ in Aliens (James Cameron, 1986), until in the third film (David Fincher, 1992), they both signify the ‘monstrous feminine’.

A Deleuzian view would refuse this dualistic manner of articulating the similarities between them. Their commonality is not simply at the level of sexual difference or ‘maternal desire and instinct’, but at the level of the actual capacities and speeds of their bodies and the connections they make (a theme which can be read through the fourth Alien film (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), where the hybridization of Ripley’s and the alien’s DNA works to cancel the distinction between them altogether). They are similar throughout the series because of the actions they perform and what they do with their bodies. For example, early in the first film the alien is admired by Ash as a ‘perfect organism’ because it is not rigidly organized but can adapt to its surroundings and has an incredible ability to survive. In many ways Ripley displays those same qualities to outmanoeuvre and defeat the alien. Indeed, as Paula Graham has noted, in the final duel Ripley’s movements resemble the movements of the alien itself.

Ripley does indeed become monstrous, but this can be viewed as a creative process. Brian Massumi uses the metaphor of monstrosity to conceptualize the breakdown of metaphysical oppositions which the process of ‘becoming’ produces. Massumi then reads monstrosity as
a positive term to read the transformation of the human in a
transgressive assemblage of forces which weakens the hierarchical
nature of phallocentrism: in this instance the assemblages of
woman with alien, woman with machines, and woman with action. What defines both Ripley as an action heroine and the alien is their
'monstrous' corporeality: a corporeality which confounds, disrupts
and transgresses binaristic logic and opens a space for difference.

Accompanying this new vision of corporeality is a philosophy of
experimentation which creates new ways of thinking. In the
remainder of this essay, I want to use the figure of Ripley to
illustrate this dynamic mode of subjectivity and thinking by
discussing how the new sign of the alien requires her to think and
act differently in order to survive. In this respect I want to argue that
Ripley can be a useful figuration for feminist theorists; just as
Ripley's response to the new image of the alien requires a break in
her habituated responses and heralds the need to develop a new,
dynamic mode of operation in order to negotiate this change in her
environment, the feminist theorist must also find new ways of
negotiating the figure of the female-as-hero.

Indeed, Ripley illustrates the point that the site of the unknown
can also be the site of a transformational encounter – a potential
moment of change – for she demonstrates that as your context
changes so must your responses. This transformation into female
hero occurs through changes in her thinking which necessarily affect
the way in which she acts. As Deleuze and Guattari argue,
knowledge has corporeal affects: it is immanent and embodied. In
other words, there is no mind/body dualism but rather, thinking
directly impacts on bodily actions. It is interesting to consider then,
that when we are first introduced to Ripley in Alien she is depicted
as a character who follows orders. She constantly quotes from the
manual and is the only character to observe the quarantine rules
when Kane, a fellow crew member, becomes infected by the alien.
When Ripley suggests to Dallas that allowing Ash to keep the alien
is 'hardly standard procedure', Dallas replies 'standard procedure is
to do whatever the company tells you to do. I just run the ship'.

However, unlike Dallas, Ripley knows when to follow orders and
when to think for herself. When confronted with the new and
uncoded figure of the alien, Ripley's decisions are not influenced by
the manual. There is a change in her environment and she can no
longer rely on habituated responses but must pause to develop new
strategies. In other words, her responses are no longer automatic but
require a new mode of thinking which is relevant to the issue at
hand.

This new mode of thinking and acting is most visible through her
independent and creative uses of her environment in order to survive.
For example, a scene in which the Captain, Dallas, is denied
information from the ship's computer is contrasted to the scene later
in the film when Ripley, as the highest ranking surviving officer, defies standard procedure to override manually the computer's defence mechanism and gain access to the secret file on the alien. Success depends on access to information available only through creative manipulation of the company's computer.

Once Ripley realizes that the company covertly sent the Nostromo to pick up the alien for use in its weapons division, and has deemed the crew 'expendable', she enacts a line of flight from the company's grid of control she undergoes a transformation. This transformation into action heroine means, of course, that she makes for herself a Body without Organs, for it requires a more creative, partial and pragmatic relationship between herself and the company. This is not an arbitrary process; on the contrary, as Massumi points out, 'becoming is supremely pragmatic or it fails'. Deleuze describes the cautious and pragmatic steps required for a successful undertaking of this process. He writes:

This is how it should be done: lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. Connect, conjugate, continue: a whole 'diagram' as opposed to still signifying and subjective programs. We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata. . . . You have constructed your own little machine ready when needed to be plugged into other collective machines.

These steps can be effectively mapped over Ripley's movements towards the end of the film. Ripley experiments with the opportunities for self-defence offered by the various resources in the escape pod, and thereby increases her capacity to survive by forming unanticipated linkages with other machines. She 'reassembles' her body by covering and protecting it with a space suit and by using her technological expertise in an extremely inventive manner to thrust the alien through the airlock.

It is not simply that there is a change in Ripley's context, but rather it is her response to it which transforms her from a cog in the company structure and opens the possibility for her subjected body to become something quite different. Massumi articulates this changed relation between bodies-in-becoming and their context when he argues that:
the body-in-becoming does not simply react to a set of constraints. Instead it develops a new sensitivity to them, one subtle enough to convert them to opportunities — and to translate the body into an autonomous zone effectively enveloping infinite degrees of freedom.32

This new sensitivity to her environment bears directly on what Ripley’s body can do, on its passions, speeds and movement. In Deleuzian terms, it bears on her capacity to affect and be affected: ‘to destroy [another] body or be destroyed by it’.33

From my perspective, Ripley offers valuable lessons for feminist theorists in the careful art of creative thinking, experimentation and transformation. Indeed, her ability to develop a new sensitivity to her environment offers a spectacular example of the methodological approach that I see as being extremely useful for feminist film theory. In other words, I see her actions as illustrating the ‘delicate experimentation’ and pragmatism which Deleuze argues are necessary to escape the limitations imposed by dualistic modes of thought.34 The reflexivity she employs in relation to her surroundings is not only creatively important but also necessary for her survival. Indeed, Ripley’s final destination has proved to be as unpredictable as the rest of her character for, despite her death in Alien3, she has, of course, already been resurrected and is set to continue in at least one more installment in the series. This reflects the Deleuzian notion that becoming does not have a destination or final location, rather it is a ceaseless process where one continues to become. What is important is the process of change and the desire for the dynamism of becoming rather than the repetition of simply being.

It seems to me that a reflective engagement with our theoretical practices will enable feminist film theorists to examine the usefulness of at least some of our modes of understanding and to question the basis for their continued investment. From this perspective, feminist film theory will continue to transform itself rather than risk becoming ‘petrified into dogma’.35 The crucial questions which confront feminists who are interested in the changing representations of women in the cinema are: which theories open up new ways of thinking and enhance our becoming, and which theories close off experimentation and confine us to the repetition of being? From this basis I would argue that it is a matter of political urgency that as feminist theorists we reconceptualize the way we think about images of active and aggressive woman. Action heroines, such as Ripley, are transgressive and transformative characters who can be conceived outside the negative terms of gender binaries and can be read as alternative images of female subjectivity. We can claim that these female characters are masculine or ‘figuratively male’, but from my perspective it is much more productive to conceptualize them as transformative, transgressive and alternative women. In this respect I
would argue that just as Ripley must alter her way of thinking and acting if she is successfully to negotiate the figure of the alien, so too the feminist theorist must transform some of her habitual responses on how to read the 'active woman' when confronted with the image of the action heroine. Like Ripley we have to invent a set of strategies or theories that are not only specific to the ongoing changes in our contexts, but which will 'call into being new, alternative ways of constructing the female subject.' This new mode of appreciating heroic female characters such as Ripley might then resonate with the feminist desire for personal and social change, and enable us to transform how we conceptualize and experience female subjectivity in the cinema and other cultural sites.