THE RISE OF THE SUPER SIDECHICKS: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF GIRLS IN SUPERHERO FILMS

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Stephen Charbonneau, School of Communication and Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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The superhero film genre has recently witnessed a reinvention of the girl sidekick. Instead of falling back on the perpetuated and well-known stereotypes of female heroines, recent offerings have allowed for several strong and innovative female characters to emerge. This close textual analysis of specific feminist examples from the films, Kick-Ass (2010), Scott Pilgrim vs. The World (2010), and X-Men: First Class (2012), examines young heroines as having feminist tendencies in a postfeminist moment. This analysis employs aspects of film theory, feminist theory, and also focuses on adaptation as a potentially powerful and problematic tenant of the films. Through this thesis, I contend that while none of these characters are positioned or marketed as specifically feminist, their collective resistance to hegemonic ideals underscores a movement towards articulating the failings of postfeminism in contemporary girlhood.
DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my family and especially to my sister, Bella, my favorite writer and feminist.
THE RISE OF THE SUPER SIDECHICK: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF GIRLS IN SUPERHERO FILMS

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ vi

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1

Methodology ............................................................................................................................................... 7

Finding the Girl in Film ................................................................................................................................. 11

The Genre ...................................................................................................................................................... 14

Possibilities .................................................................................................................................................... 22

The Chapters .................................................................................................................................................. 25

Hit-Girl’s Surrender to Postfeminism ........................................................................................................... 29

Vigilantism as Marker of Masculinity ........................................................................................................... 31

In the Name of the Father .............................................................................................................................. 34

Gender Performativity ..................................................................................................................................... 39

Everything Back in its Place .......................................................................................................................... 43

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................... 45

Knives Chau: Rethinking Girl Consumption ................................................................................................. 47

Scott Pilgrim is Dating a High Schooler ........................................................................................................ 49

Rivals ............................................................................................................................................................... 56

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................... 61

Mystique: The Performativity of Gender and the Fluidity of Identity ............................................................. 64
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Hit-Girl’s first appearance in Millar’s graphic novel, <em>Kick-Ass</em> (2010)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Mindy and Damon’s first appearance in the film, <em>Kick-Ass</em> (2010)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Mindy McCready dressed in pink</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Hit-Girl and Big Daddy’s backstory</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Damon McCready in his home office</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Masking Hit-Girl</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Knives Chau and Scott Pilgrim as the perfect ninja team. <em>Scott Pilgrim vs. The World</em> (2010)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Panel of Knives between Scott’s short period of contemplation</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Knives choosing an identity</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Raven observing Charles in mid-flirtation. <em>X-Men: First Class</em> (2012)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Raven in her true form</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. INTRODUCTION

Far from being easily defined as either sidekicks or love interests, recent girl super heroes in film and comics resist quick categorization. Daughters of post-feminism, they are regarded suspiciously by feminists for all the things they could be and of the ways in which they fall short. From one perspective they are seen as products of a society informed by the waves of feminism and from another they are seen as betrayers, deniers, and, perhaps most damning, as oblivious enemies to feminist progress. The superhero film is in a recent cycle of resurgence and along with the capes, quirky names, and grand gestures, re-enters the girl superhero, responsible for and representative of more than her male counterpart purely because of her gender, on movie screens in every theater.

In her article “Mass Magazine Cover Girls”, Sarah Projansky writes that the girl obsession of the 1990’s identified the “girl in trouble” and carved the way for the potential of the girl-hero. Capitalized upon in every sense, in every facet of the media, girl power’s by products are often seen by adamant feminists as concessions, forgetful of the actual feminist movement, and complicit in undermining feminist gains. In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, both The Disney Channel and Cartoon Network capitalized on their young female followings with their respective girl power icons (i.e. Kim Possible (2002), Lizzie Maguire (2001), The Powerpuff Girls (1998), and Hi Hi Puffy Ami Yumi (2004)). These characters responded to the “girl in trouble” obsession of the 1990’s with optimistic, empowered, attractive and
well-accessorized offerings, furthering the myth that to be a part of the girl movement, one must have it all and look like she deserves it. In examining the recent explosion of super-hero films and their links to “girl-power,” I hope to answer the following research questions: Twenty years after the explosion of girl-obsessed media, what has the girl-hero evolved into in mainstream film? Is she (still) more foe than friend to feminist ideals? What (feminist) power might she have even while she is defined by and within the patriarchal discourse that seemingly categorizes popular cinema? While a universal definition of girl power is hard to pin down, the celebrated words from the 1990’s feminist punk movement, Riot Grrrl provides a productive starting point. The *Riot Grrrl Manifesto* by the band Bikini Kill was originally published as a zine and clearly outlines why resisting hegemonic ideals is foundational to a new incarnation of feminism. While the manifesto explicitly underscores the importance of female involvement (and take over) of creative production, it also addresses the stark binaries at work in popular culture: “-We are angry that society tells us that Girl=Dumb, Girl=Bad, Girl=Weak”. Interwoven with third wave feminism, this treatise on girl power emerges from a female perspective that acknowledges and incorporates aspects of the feminist movement that came before it. First wave feminists of the early 1900’s demanded more opportunities for women. The subsequent second wave feminists prioritized gender equality, and the 1970’s welcomed such feminist advances as Roe v. Wade (1973) and the publicity from the Women’s Strike for Equality (1970). The third wave more completely encompasses different bodies and socio-economic realities. Girl power is informed of these intersections and is a direct response to social and political responses to feminist advances. It began as a furthering of the feminist discourse, but its marketability was in
some ways its undoing. The acknowledgment of the inherent positioning (and irrelevant status) of girls became foundational for several female icons from the 1990’s ranging from the Spice Girls and their appropriation of the term girl power to Lara Croft and her unequivocal presentation of her sexuality. Most of these female figures acknowledge specific subversion of gender expectations—girls=weak becomes girls=strong in most instances. However, many responses to girl power ignore the other tenants of the Riot Grrrl manifesto. These tenants prove to be more problematic than a simple reversal of dichotomies. The manifesto offers these reasons for championing girl power:

BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.

Or:

BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards. (1)

The girl power message that was appropriated by the entertainment industries in the 90’s was clearly distorted from the vision of Riot Grrrl and reduced to a palatable catch phrase, one that signified a girl’s ability to keep up the with boys and still be a desirable and attainable object, submissive to the desires of the patriarchal collective. Instead of empowerment, girl power reflected more unrealistic expectations. Riot Grrrl’s own dismissal of “making profits or being cool” sounds like the words of a cool girl without any money problems, and an incarnation of her became the it girl of the 90’s, a second wave feminist’s nightmare. This new, desirable, and falsely empowered girl took the advances of feminism for granted and thought there was no longer a need to
acknowledge that collective struggle or resistance was necessary. The positive aspects of girl power failed to become appropriated into our culture while the offshoots that thrived (consumerism and competition) were at odds with the original aims. Failing to acknowledge that aspects of the patriarchy could and must be used as a resistant tactic was not addressed. The girl power icons of the 1990’s don’t recognize that they are situated in a fixed patriarchal paradigm, and exist believing instead that their beauty and sexuality are products of their own subjective experiences, unshaped by male desire.

I’d like to suggest that the characters of Hit-Girl (Kick-Ass), Knives Chau (Scott Pilgrim vs. The World), and Mystique (X-Men: First Class) destabilize the patriarchal status quo that governs what passes as a permissible cinematic female body. All adapted from the world of graphic novels and comics to the film medium, these particular representations of girls privilege the acknowledged positive attributes of “girl power” (bravery, heroism, and strength) but also reveal rather problematic and obvious tensions that exist in their relationships and their own places in their respective worlds. All three characters are less interested in dealing with the large issues that plague their male counterparts. Good/evil and right/wrong aren’t the dichotomies at play within their specific storylines. Instead, each character deals both internally and externally with the places to which their girl-ness relegates them instead of issues that affect the larger population. Hit-Girl as a direct manufactured product of her father, is less interested in finding evildoers than practicing lethal games that might make her dad proud. Knives Chau is defined by her relationship with Scott Pilgrim, outwardly manifesting obsession with him and abandoning her sense of self, powerful only in response to Scott’s need for her. Mystique, a young incarnation of a well known femme fatale in the X-Men
universe and imagined in the 1970’s, is influenced directly by the men she admires, two superhero godfathers who see her as either diseased or perfection. In many ways, these secondary characters are more humanized than their leading male counterparts and are allowed to exist in a gray area. Instead of underlining the myth that having “girl-power” means having and maintaining it all, these characters are instead isolated and, while not fully acknowledged as equal, are depicted as conscious of their positioning in a postfeminist context. While I am reluctant to label these heroines and their stories as post-post-feminist, I do think that these contemporary female characters are unique to the superhero genre because they embody elements of traditional superhero narratives while articulating tensions between gender, violence, and viewers in new ways.

Inevitably, when we view Hit-Girl, Knives Chau, Mystique, or any girl superhero for that matter, we view the character as a part of a feminist dialogue. Audiences rarely question male superheroes, accepting that there is something inherently male about bravery in the face of danger but when the girl dons the cape, she is both familiar and strange; she is familiar as an archetype and othered because of gender. In Western cultures, romanticizing masculine agency is an intrinsic part of how we interact with fiction. We are socialized to believe that men’s stories are important; we are made to understand that men are allowed to be complicated and flawed and still be categorized as heroic. Audiences do not usually extend this same empathy to female characters unless they take on a masculine role. Before examining these most recent evolutions of the girl-hero in film, it’s essential to identify where they might fit in not only within a post-feminist discourse but also what space they settle into as far as film theory goes.
Postfeminism, much like this set of heroines, is slippery. The term indicates that we are past the necessity of feminism but it also connotes a disappointment in the lack of acknowledgment and implementations of gains from the movement. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note in their introduction of *Interrogating Postfeminism* that postfeminism emerged as a buzz word in the 1990’s as media outlets began to recognize women as both subjects and consumers (8). Tasker and Negra define postfeminism as “—inherently contradictory, characterized by a double discourse that works to construct feminism as a phenomenon of the past, traces of which can be found (and even valued) in the present; postfeminism suggests that it is the very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture (8).” In the same way the idea of a post-racial society suggests that race is no longer of importance, postfeminist ideology assumes that women can and must do it all. This assumption goes beyond just insisting that women must be complete by traditional standards, it also implies that a woman who doesn’t have it all is flawed. The paradigm has changed—traditionally, a woman attained success by becoming a wife and mother. The contemporary (complete) female experience insists that a woman seek out a certain amount of autonomy which is usually expressed through successful financial ventures and casual sex. While this updated version of a woman who has it all is broadened from its original, she will still ultimately find that financial and physical well being is not enough and that a love interest is necessary to prove her worth.

The definitions of postfeminism are varied and not wholly agreed upon, but for this analysis, the postfeminist moment is perceived to be one in which the need for distinctions and allowances are unnecessary. From this view, the postfeminist world is a
place where females exist in a completely equal environment as their male counterparts and any struggles attached to their sex are immaterial. The tensions teased out in this analysis underscore the fallacy of this idealized moment and the characters studied represent feminist negotiations in conspicuously male dominated universes. The irrefutable success of feminism is questionable, especially when inundated with clear examples of everyday inequality. While there are certainly a multitude of inconsistencies that the postfeminist moment offers, this study focuses on the specific cinematic presence of a new kind of girl superhero, one that embodies many of the same characteristics of popular masculine heroes while painfully still restrained by their femininity. Their self-awareness differentiates them from other sidekicks or secondary characters, as they demand the audience’s attention, and their stories and evolutions overshadow their male counterparts. They are the Super Sidechicks.

Methodology

Throughout this paper I am only looking at three specific instances of girlhood on the big screen. The particular characters and their constructs may therefore be problematic as representations of girlhood: each is a part of a fantasy narrative, each is a direct adaptation of her graphic novel counterpart, and each belongs to an adaptation that is situated in and captive to mainstream cinema. It is through the medium (and all that entails) that these characters are allowed fleeting moments to realize power as subjects aware of their post-feminist positioning before quickly being contained and funneled into more recognizable and (stereo)typical roles. The girl as both subject and object has been a focus for many theorists. In her foundational feminist text, *The Second
Sex, Simone de Beauvoir highlighted girlhood as an important and impressionable period of a female’s life. Masculine possibilities and interests that are earlier allowed are discouraged during girlhood in order to shape feminine identity (267-370). While masculine behavior becomes coded as tomboyish at this time and ultimately, repressed, there is another aspect that de Beauvoir identifies:

This is the characteristic trait of the girl and gives the key to most of her behavior; she does not accept the destiny nature and society assign to her; and yet she does not actively repudiate it: she is too divided internally to enter into combat with the world. (365)

Girlhood, then, is a time of lenience before socialization takes over. Interesting that de Beauvoir uses the image of a girl engaging in combat with her surrounding as an inherent example of defiance against traditional views of what a girl ought to be. The duality of girlhood is especially relevant in terms of the superhero narratives in which duality is foundational to the genre’s framework.

The timing of these films is another revealing aspect of their postfeminist consciousness. The 1990’s are highlighted by psychologists for recasting young female subjects from a more disturbing angle and books like Reviving Ophelia, Fast Girls, and Queen Bees identified average girls as supposed beneficiaries of feminism. Instead of instantly empowered females, the teenagers were depicted as ultimately hurt, untouched by the advances of feminism, seemingly at more of a loss because of readily available opportunities. This image of the ‘90’s girl was disheartening, problematic, and troublesome. Sarah Projansky’s study of popular magazine covers upholds the argument—she separates the covers into two distinct categories. The first depicts the girls as:
What Anita Harris calls, in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-first Century*, “at-risk” or “can-do” (47). Either they are endangered by the world around them (including the proliferation of choices in part provided by feminism and postfeminism) and their personal choices within this context or they are able to take control of this new and rapidly changing environment and eschew unhealthy desires and impulses in order to become idealized citizen subjects. (48)

Projansky writes that the response to the oppositional assumptions of girls was the proliferation of “girl-power” narratives in response to the “girl in trouble” motif. In *Between Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia*, Marnina Gonick continues this thread of questioning and ultimately concludes that the two opposing views of girlhood are unsatisfying and allow only for contradictions that limit the possibilities of young femaleness. It is interesting to note that when examining the girl in trouble narratives, feminism isn’t necessarily presented as an answer to an average girl’s problems.

Angela McRobbie observes in *Postfeminism and Popular Culture* that feminism is an outdated concept to girls, a word not to be associated with:

*Why is feminism so hated? Why do young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist? To count as a girl today appears to require this kind of ritualistic denunciation, which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicized and generationalized and thus easily rendered out of date.* (32)

A quick rundown of current celebrities that deny being feminists include musicians Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Niki Minaj and actress Gwyneth Paltrow. This A-list sampling demonstrates McRobbie’s compelling point: it’s *still* not cool to be a feminist, nor is it necessary to be a feminist anymore.

There seems to a trend, however, that is encouraging a more universal acknowledgement of the performativity of gender. Judith Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir’s revelation that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” in
Butler clarifies de Beauvoir’s statement by explaining the distinctions between a sexed body and a gendered body, insisting that sex does not define or limit genders (112). She further argues that gender is performed and that drag and cross-dressing are examples that underline the artifice of gender through parody:

> Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization.

(138)

These parodies represent “three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (137). If gender is performative as Butler argues and cross-dressing calls attention to the instability (and the conscious recreation) of the so-called “original,” “girl-heroes” also reflect the signifiers of gender identity and gender performance. Butler theorizes that sex is regulated through societal norms and bodies cannot exist in their pure (perhaps sexless) state because the ordered world of language immediately projects sexual identity. These particular Super Sidechicks don’t question their anatomical (and perhaps fictive) sex, but they do call attention to performativity in a way that works within and against the accepted constraints of patriarchal discourse. The superhero genre hinges not only on masks and capes, but also the idea of fluid identities. Does this extend to fluid genders? The artifice of the constructed super-identities of the girls calls attention to the constructions of the originals but also highlights what a girl must do to gain the distinction of superhero.

Super Sidechicks specifically can work to represent this negotiation by depicting and embodying traditionally male-appointed fantasies and posing girls in
situations where they are literally entering into confrontation with “the world” that de Beauvoir references. At the same time, the circumscribed hero is a filmic ideal that demands performativity of accepted masculine traits. Without this appropriation and recreation, girls could not be considered heroic, and yet the Super Sidechicks highlight the possibility that if masculinity can be performed at will, their femininity might well be a construct as well?

Finding the Girl in Film

There is a clear distinction between discussion of the female image in film and its feminist reading. It seems strange that the two should be so juxtaposed, as if the first almost attests to being purely aesthetic and the second politically charged. It is undeniable that the female image always has the potential to be both.

In Christian Metz’s discussion of the spectator in The Imaginary Signifier, he suggests that the film spectator is always able to recognize two parallel realities. The spectator is able to realize that film is artifice, but at the same time, she/he is able to designate the cinematic experience as real. This allowance of dual realities, Metz writes, is maintained because of the trauma that has already happened to us and reaches far back into our childhood.

In the face of this unveiling of a lack (we are already close to the cinematic signifier), the child…will have to double up its belief (another cinematic characteristic) and from then on forever hold two contradictory opinions…In other words, it will, perhaps, definitely, retain its former belief beneath the new ones, but it will also hold to its new perceptual observation while disavowing it on another level. Thus establishing the lasting matrix, the affective prototype of all the splittings of disbelief. (68)
Though Metz writes specifically later about identification with characters, to him it is a secondary identification. The first and most important identification that we possess during the cinematic experience is that with the apparatus that captures the images we see.

This connection with the perspective of the camera becomes problematic when Laura Mulvey’s explanation of its gaze is taken into account: Laura Mulvey identified the gaze (the subjective perspective of the camera) that is employed in mainstream cinema as inherently male. The subject—the one who matters—is behind the camera and through his eyes we see the chosen object—the one who only matters because we choose to look at it. The object is defined by our gaze and our perspective as a spectator is, as Mulvey asserts, predominantly masculine. The object is lingered over, fetishized aesthetically, and seemingly reduced.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote ‘to-be-looked-as-ness’. (63)

If, as a spectator, we are bound to the gaze of the camera and if the gaze is masculine, how can we ever navigate away from a traditionally gendered narrative?

I think there are several beginnings that we might make by revisiting second wave feminism. In Gyn/Ecology, Mary Daly writes of the dangers that the patriarchal mythmakers pose to women (44). Daly outlines The 8 Deadly Sins of the Father as Processions, Possession, Aggression, Obsession, Assimilation, Elimination, and Fragmentation. As any fan girl knows too well, obsession and assimilation are
cornerstones of comic book personas (both male and female), on the movie screen as well as in the pulps. Daly’s warnings against the myth-makers that perpetuate male fantasies through stories are well founded. Certainly the specific characters from this study can be seen to embody the symptoms of these sins, but is there a way of moving beyond Daly’s definitions without chalking their flaws up to the patriarchal norm with a post-feminist shrug? Daly writes about using stories and myths productively, “It is necessary to break their codes in order to use them as viewers; that is, we must see their lie in order to see their truth” (47). This is an aspect of reading that is lost in the seemingly post-feminist moment. This study will be utilizing close textual analyses of three films to identify and explain the codes at work.

One of the “codes” of film theory is Freudian psychoanalysis but I would like to resist Daly’s judgment of code. I mean only to highlight that psychoanalysis is a cornerstone of recognized (and reputable) film theory. With that being said, it is undeniable that psychoanalysis hinges on a very clear delineation of self and other, man and woman, often leaving female-ness as non-entity. Viewing a film through the lens of psychoanalysis will offer a compelling reading but there are only so many ratios, so many paths that are available. Analysis cannot help but settle on incompleteness and a yearning for masculine completeness that is forever out of reach. Ann Kaplan writes in *Women and Film*:

> Psychoanalytical discourse may indeed have oppressed women, in the sense of bringing us to accept a positioning that is inherently antithetical to being a subject and autonomy; but if that is the case, we need to know exactly ‘how’ psychoanalysis has functioned to repress what we could potentially become…First, is the gaze “necessarily” male?...
Using psychoanalysis to deconstruct Hollywood films enables us to see clearly the patriarchal myths through which we have been positioned as Other (enigma, mystery), and as eternal and unchanging. (25)

Kaplan isn’t the only theorist to question Mulvey’s assertion of a masculine gaze. Mandy Merck’s, “Mulvey’s Manifesto” in Camera Obscura in 2007 also revisits Mulvey’s article and is a bit suspicious of its arguments. Merck systematically explains how Mulvey’s work reads like a manifesto, a call to action—and also underlines the stark binary at its core. We continuously call back to Mulvey’s work and in some ways her definition glosses over what is inherently wrong in film. We can easily account for any female image by labeling it as a product of the masculine gaze and therefore un-reliably anti-feminist. I would like to suggest that the gaze is pliant and changeable. The gaze has the possibility to change and to evolve. It seems unproductive to resist that the gaze has been coded male, to ignore the crux of film theory, and it is also impossible to insist that the gaze has no bias. Instead, perhaps we can allow that as the bearers of the gaze change, as different perspectives are illuminated, the gaze itself becomes layered with new meanings. This overlapping of realities and this allowance (and even invitation) for both dual and conflicting visions becomes a key element in reworking the codes. Working through a film using psychoanalysis as a guide is not enough. The problem of genre and specific character types are swift reminders that it is futile to go further without admitting to the constraints of the genre.

The Genre

The superhero genre is essentially a hybrid. Depending on the character, time of production, and headlining stars, a superhero film can be categorized as either Science
Fiction, Fantasy, or as a Thriller while always retaining its obvious Action status. The more recent offerings to the genre also reflect that they have been informed by the medium from which they originated: comic books and graphic novels. Mila Boncgo details the history and evolution of the superhero comic in *Reading Comics* and points out several recurring themes of the genre: “a) aberrant or mysterious origins, b) lost parents, c) god-man traits, d) a costumed, secret identity, e) difficulties with personal and emotional relationships, f) great concern for justice, and g) use of superpower in politics” (102). Boncgo later writes about the change in superhero comic books and specifically cites fan pressures as acting as catalysts for the changes in story content, characters, and in some cases, form (126-127). Bradford White writes in Comic Book Nation that while girls have often been identified as comic book readers, titles marketed to girls from the 1950’s-1970’s were either Romance Comics or Teen Humor series like *Archie* (128). Romance Comics, White asserts, mirrored hegemonic ideals of femininity offering a “central premise that women were incomplete without man” (128). More girl friendly characters such as Wonder Woman and Supergirl offered female incarnations of superheroes but their stories, White writes, were silly in comparison to their male counterparts (185). These female characters are not feminist failures, but they do exist without calling direct attention to the patriarchal structure they are a part of. Being a superheroine does not guarantee liberation or even acknowledgment of female experiences or struggles. These adaptations of newer works are, to some extent, influenced by the market and what it demands. If girl characters are changing on the page, then it is because the readership is asking for the change. Martin Baker quoted Judith O’Connell’s dissertation in his 1989 book *Comics, Ideology, Power and the*
Critics: “Girls are the readers in schools, but they do not read comics. Why? I am forced to believe that it is because comics seem to set out either deliberately to exclude them or to exploit them” (93). What happens if the narrative chooses to do something else entirely?

As adaptations take along elements of their form with them, the look and feel of the films and stories begin to change and they become self-reflexive, not only calling back to their medium but also calling attention to the constructs of the film itself. It is important to note that this medium that was once so entrenched in masculine storytelling and focus on privileging the male gaze is changing.

Why does this traditionally playful and pleasurable genre have the position to take a new stance on what it means to be a modern girl? I think the privileging of this specific genre comes directly from the way its counterpart is faring in academia. Comic books (and their descendants) are easily acceptable as allegorical and metaphorical, and are painless to consume. This combination of pleasure and narrative is able to connect abstract ideas and has made the medium fertile for some interesting connections (for example, Ben Saunders examines Wonder Woman as a nexus of feminism and theology in a chapter of his book *Do The Gods Wear Capes?* and Alan Moore takes on feminist issues with pornography with his…pornography). It seems logical that female representations in adaptations of comics and graphic novels are also viewed expectantly.

Betty Kaklamanidou wonders in “The Mythos of Patriarchy in the X-Men Films” if “one of the last male-centered fictional spaces—the superhero film—(is) finally accepting what the three feminist waves have been striving for a century?...Is the
superhero film a new step in gender articulation?” Kaklamanidou ultimately finds that while the heroines of the X-Men film trilogy are powerful and formidable characters, they are ultimately bound by traditional patriarchal views and mores, as explained by the powerful boundaries of myth explained by Levi-Strauss and Barthes (67). Even more interesting is her direct critique of Mystique’s character in the first three X-Men films (*First Class* is a prequel, set in the 70’s, thirty years before the earlier films, and allows Mystique a potential lacking in these subsequent portrayals).

In “Vivacious Vixens and Scintillating Super Hotties,” Richard Gray also acknowledges the ways in which superheroines are stripped of their promise, citing Sue Storm’s depiction in the film *Fantastic Four*, “Her deference in the filmic version once again underscores the recurrent theme that superheroine power (be it superhero abilities or authority), for whatever reason, seems to be diminished in their cinematic representations” (89). The commentaries of both Gray and Kaklamanidou in *The 21st Century Superhero* offer compelling readings of superheroines and point out some serious flaws of the filmic representations.

This thesis is not mean to contradict their very lucid points. In fact it is because superhero films have depicted superheroines in such an oppressive way that the examples chosen for this study stand out (and though Mystique is one of the characters used as an example for Kaklamanidou’s point of hegemonic gender constructs, there are ways that the Mystique of *X-Men: First Class* deviates from her representation in the first few films). Both authors analyze films that are constructed in a traditional narrative fashion and in some ways the films are chained to the constructs of the superhero film genre. I would like to add another dimension to questioning films in this genre by
asking several questions: how do the films call attention to friction with other incarnations of the work? In what ways are the films referential to their originals? In the case of Mystique, how does the last film released (and perhaps the “first in the series”) contradict and call into question her constructed identity? Adaptations of comics and graphic novels differ from the recent resurgence of fairy tales hitting the theatres. The stories told in comic books are not ingrained in the common psyche. Bruno Bettelheim writes in *The Uses of Enchantment* that there is even a difference in the attraction of fairy tales and that of myths. Fairy tales, he writes, can happen to anyone. The titles of the stories are meant to be ambiguous in order to insinuate that these miraculous events can happen to any of us. Myth, however, is meant to be read as a unique experience for a very specific, extraordinary individual. Superhero narratives seem to be a hybrid of these genres. In the superhero narrative, the characters with powers are very much extraordinary and also set apart by their otherness. There is a brooding and self-aware aspect to the superheroes that captures our attention. This questioning space leaves room to ponder larger questions of our existence. What does it mean for female superheroes to interrogate themselves in this space and in front of the camera? Their radical positioning allows them to highlight gender performativity more than their male counterparts. There have been several failures (both commercially and critically) of superheroines attempting to brood, resulting in little more than caricatures of perceived femininity (Jennifer Garner’s Elektra and Halle Berry’s Catwoman come to mind), but there is a reason their representations seem false. While script and production might both be examined, the blatant sexualization of the characters renders almost any action or self-reflection secondary. These films took few hints from their comic origins. The
legions of comic book followers consume sexualized bodies as much as anyone else and enjoy it—but they are also incredibly invested in characters and their backstories. It becomes difficult to view Elektra as a conflicted and complicated assassin because the movie is hindered by its allotted time and pushes us through the narrative only allowing Elektra to be viewed as an undeniable hero. We do not have an identical relationship with Batman, for instance. For one thing, we have been inundated for years with films, television series, as well as comic books centered on the Dark Knight. We know who Batman is, whether he is Nolan’s or Burton’s. Elektra is sacrificial to the superhero film gods, her film version was taken from Daredevil (a similarly ignored film starring Garner’s husband, Ben Affleck) and while her comic version has a dual nature, that aspect of her is never seen in the film version. What do we lose by not acknowledging these back-stories and what is gained by films that do?

There is something ingenious to staying true to the medium of the graphic novel in cinematic adaptations. The X-Men films acknowledge continuity as well as dual and conflicting narratives. Stand alone films, Kick-Ass and Scott Pilgrim are hardly as widely read or recognized as stories from the X-Men universe. The films are informed directly by the medium both in the ways that they are constructed and in their fidelity to the representations of female characters.

It seems problematic and ageist perhaps to circle back to this conception of girlhood but if Hit-Girl and Knives can be included in the superhero genre, they surely stand apart by being androgynous. Their “safety” from sexualization might be explained by their roles as sidekicks. Tasker writes in Working Girls:
Like both “working girls” or “bad girls”, the image of the ‘tomboy’ captures a sense of immaturity—of both freedom from the responsibilities of adult life and a sense of incomplete development. A mapping of transgression that can be contained, the tomboy signals a composite of experience and innocence—of capabilities and energies together with sexual naïveté. Or rather she is a sexually ambiguous figure. Her ambiguous state allows the tomboy to accompany the hero on his travels, even to drive the bus. She is a kind of cross-dresser, discreetly, rather than excessively muscular in her proletarian male guise. And as Barbara Creed suggests, the image may exceed the narrative that seeks to contain it. (85)

While these characters can be easily defined within Tasker’s terms, there are a few other things at work in these narratives that the feminist readings of the characters must take into account. The first of these is age as the three characters represent the girl at three stages of adolescence. Hit-Girl is the youngest at eleven and in many ways the most free from patriarchal expectations. Knives is seventeen and is the most vulnerable, and while Mystique is never given an age (and in the comic universe we know that she is just about ageless), she is portrayed as a young, university-aged woman. Young females are posed to be doubly consumed through film, first for their gender and next for their youth.

It is hardly unusual to find girls in film that are interesting and appealing, but the ages of the characters are important because of what they connote. Eleven, seventeen, and college-aged are important ages to a person’s development, and, specifically, they are traditionally thought of as volatile moments in a girl’s life, not only because of biological and societal rites of passage, but also because of the consumption they imply. Accumulating and assimilating into capitalist society is never so imperative than at these points and while Hit-Girl and Mystique are seemingly immune to the onslaught of
consumption, Knives is a prime candidate for consumption and all three are subject to the fetishizing of their youth. Rob Latham writes in *Consuming Youth*:

Youth fetishism refers at once to (1) “the compulsive character of the young”—that is, the specific consumerist practices of young people, their tendency both to set and follow fashion; (2) sensualized images of youth that serve to provoke consumer appetite; and (3) a pervasive ideology of youthfulness, which “subjects the whole world of useful things, in which people articulate their needs in the language of commercial products, to an incessant aesthetic revolution”.

The characters in these films are subject to a constant need to accumulate and shift identities. If post-feminism is articulated by consumerism, then refusal can be read as a direct acknowledgement and resistance.

Aesthetic references to the comic books also cause resistant readings of these girls to be considered (specifically, the visual cues that reference distorted point of views, gutters, and panels). In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explains that the concept of gutters (the space between the panels) is essential to the form. In his chapter entitled “Blood in the Gutters”, he explains that the gutters represent action and time that is unseen (much like off screen space for cinema) and though the gutters are not directly meant to give closure to each panel (or scene), the reader reads them as such, allowing for the narrative to flow in an organized manner. Comics, then, allow the audience to visually arrange and re-arrange the narrative. It is impossible to do this when watching a film in the theatre (it becomes a reality when watching DVD’s in a living room) but even the reference is enough to pull us out of the narrative and to make us perhaps reflect on the film as a construct. Each shot of a film can be equated to a panel or even a splash page of a comic, but for McCloud time *is* space on the comic page—while the film medium condenses time, at least in most main stream films, comic
book pacing adds an urgency to the image—a present-ness to the narrative that, again, seems to make the film reflective. Superhero adaptations that do not reference their original medium lose a certain nuance that is both a distinguishing and indisputable marker of its origin as well as a visual reminder that the work is a part of larger, referential fictional universe. These comic universes are a part of a medium that is in constant flux and reflects ongoing discourses of gender representations in episodic forms. Jacqueline Danziger-Russell writes in *Girls and Their Comics*:

Comics’ ability to give voice to the voice-less with its boundary-breaking style makes the medium an ideal messenger to bear the stories of females and the struggle for equality. Comics, web comics, and graphic novels are exceptionally capable of representing the female experience because the nature of the medium. Their hybrid form opens up dialogic possibilities for textual and visual storytelling and the interaction of the two, making comics unique in their transmission of different narrative streams. (220)

**Possibilities**

After intersecting gender and age, it is imperative to go back to Kaplan who advocates for beginning with psychoanalytical readings of the film texts. After all, this is the direct manifestation of the acknowledged “code.” There are ways that these characters subvert traditions. This is a genre that caused fans to coin the term “Women in Refrigerators” as reference to the continuous brutal harm to female bodies for the sole purpose of energizing a male hero. In these particular narratives, the female bodies in question are enacting violence and embodying power.

Violence on female bodies is commonplace, but there is something subversive about young females acting instead of being acted upon. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener insist in *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*:
Skin has a life of its own... Skin is mutable: it can peel off, blister, grow callused and shed itself. It is alive but also dies all the time, existing in an accelerated cycle of death and renewal, without us being aware of it... Skin is an envelope and thus endless and seamless, but skin also evokes the cut, the incision and the mark, the scar, and the gash. Skin is also gender-determined in culture: soft for women, taut for men, light for women, dark for men. Acne scars can be seen as masculine, because male skin is seen as a carapace or armor, while women’s skin is more of a surface... Female skin is the canvas on which endless dramas of hiding and revealing, or self-exposure and modesty, or presentation and shame, or veiled allure and absolute vulnerability are played out and staged. (111-112)

These films depict young female forms doing the unexpected, aesthetically presented as something unfamiliar, and also, they reconfigure femaleness to defy objectification.

Slavoj Žižek writes in The Interpassive Subject that the object asserts a power over the subject: “The object which gives body to the surplus-enjoyment fascinates the subject, it reduces him to a passive gaze impotently gaping at the object.” The assertion that a masculine gaze/subject is left impotent and rather powerless when engaged by the object opens up another facet of resistance. Action movies and superhero fare is traditionally meant to be easily consumed as entertainment and with enjoyment. If the power of the gaze is relinquished by the act of looking and being transfixed, the images of these particular female superheroes work to upset the status quo in two important ways: the first is their status as representations of young females with physical powers; and the second is their location in mainstream films that are meant to entertain. Powerful girls reducing the spectator to a mere “gaping” viewer might allow for the contemplation of a power shift, especially if the images are ones that call into question traditionally accepted norms.

Mary Ann Doane writes in Film and the Masquerade about spectatorial desire in response to the female image:
The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman’s beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging—framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed 3-dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and control. (132)

The space that the masculine is destined to control undergoes a power shift when the female bodies are embodying control. But in modern films is the presence of female violence even surprising, let alone revolutionary? In Lisa Coulthard’s piece “Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence”, the violent acts by the female assassins in Quentin Tarantino’s film, Kill Bill, are ultimately found to be flawed from a feminist perspective. The narrative, Coulthard contends, is dependent on the idea of female domesticity, ranging from redemptive revenge to “maternal wholeness” as depicted in The Bride’s main storyline. She writes, “The female violence that precedes this narrative closure is thus framed as an aberration…—these figures become markers of the violation of nature and natural order wreaked by a violent woman” (165).

Coulthand’s conclusion in 2007 was that the modern female action hero was a failure—one that promised a “revolutionary change while disavowing any actual engagement with violence and its relation to feminism” (173). Our modern female superheroes are also subject to this negotiation and are not always able to deliver on their promise to further a feminist agenda within 90-120 minutes of playing time. However, images of female bodies executing violence are still bold, and to many viewers, shocking.

Though also readily explained and reasoned away, the violence portrayed in the films defies traditional acts by teenage girls in cinema. Frantz Fanon’s contention that
violence is the only way of communication with colonizers (or Daly’s myth-makers) recognizes physical force as liberating. Fanon’s reasons for violence seem to fit in with restoring some of the power that Daly sees as being spirited away: 1. To liberate the native; consciousness; 2. As a natural response to the violence perpetrated by the settler; 3. To physically bring down the colonial/social/political economic system; 4. To build solidarity in the fight for freedom. Violence as a mode of rebellion is intertwined within these particular narratives and is, in many instances, the way that the characters articulate their agencies.

The Chapters

In chapter one, I argue that Hit-Girl of *Kick-Ass* is a potentially resistant representation of a female superhero. Her youth, a controversial aspect to the films’ reception, was jarring to viewers when combined with the violence she enacts as well as with her offensive language. Hit-Girl, undisputedly the most violent of the three characters, seems to be an interesting continuation and deviation of Coulthand’s study of female revenge/redemption narratives. Depicted as a construction of her father, she is representative of gender performativity. Her story, revealed through editing that reflects comic book form, calls attention to the importance of her indoctrination and its physical and psychological effects.

In chapter two, I argue that Knives Chau of *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is presented as a female subject that becomes self-aware of her postfeminist positioning. Throughout the narrative, Knives constantly defines herself in relation to Scott and the other girls she views as competition. Altering her hair, clothes, and music preference is
natural to Knives as she represents an impressionable and self-conscious image of
girlhood. Her character transitions from Scott’s groupie to a female with agency and
choice. This transition is depicted through scenes that are directly referential to the
comic book medium, calling attention to a transgressive space.

In chapter three, I argue that though X-Men: First Class is the most traditional
narrative of the three films, Mystique can be read as the most self-aware of the three
heroines. The film is a prequel to a trilogy that reduces Mystique to the status of a pawn
of Magneto, the films’ villain. Throughout the trilogy, her ability to shape shift and take
on identities is exploited by Magneto, and she is ultimately discarded when she
“breaks.” This newest re-imagining of Mystique poses modern feminist concerns
against the backdrop of the 1970’s while she vacillates between an attachment to the
young Professor Xavier who suggests that she cure her mutation and a sympathetic
Magneto who urges her to embrace her otherness. Both male characters have mental
powers that are physically undetectable while Mystique’s mutant status is readily
discernible. Her decision to resist contemporary ideals of beauty and normalcy does
reflect girl-power rhetoric to some degree, but she also recognizes that acceptance of
her self and body will put her in direct opposition with society. She is the most
distinctly performative of the three and, within the acceptable confines of the film, the
most resistant to and dismissive of the male gaze.

In conclusion, these specific instances of girlhood can be interpreted as
reflecting current anxieties of postfeminism while offering non-traditional and complex
depictions of the Super Sidechick. The chapters progress towards the most self-aware
depiction of postfeminism. All three characters articulate the failures of postfeminism as
well as the performativity of gender within the super hero genre. They are all depicted as androgynous and therefore safe from sexual advances. While Hit-Girl is the most controversial of the three characters because of her youth, she also fits into a rather traditional space, one that is defined by male values and characteristics. Her unflinching use of violence separates her for most of the film, but even that, like The Bride’s actions before her in *Kill Bill*, is eventually explained away by a revenge/redemption narrative. Though Knives Chau may seemingly be a quintessential teenage drama queen on par with other notable makeover junkies (i.e. Ty from *Clueless* or Laney Boggs from *She’s All That*) she undergoes a more complex transformation than the star of the film, Scott Pilgrim. She also realizes that the tireless endeavor of changing her looks and tastes based on hegemonic ideals is unrealistic and, unlike most attractive and funny teenage female characters, is left with an ambiguous ending that does not include a love interest. This version of Mystique seems, curiously, self-aware of contemporary feminist discourse. She is othered as both a mutant and a female, and has the ability to “correct” either identity (whether through her shifting ability or a medicinal cure). With the ability to shift into any and all forms, Mystique best represents performativity and the artifice of gender. Though she resists becoming normalized, her completed story-arc within the *X-Men* Trilogy depicts the consequences of her choice, and more importantly, the blatant disbelief and disgust when her identity is discerned as she shifts between identities. Although older than the other examples, Mystique’s true form and age both consistently signify her as undesirable. These safe and desexualized representations attempt to detail the failings of postfeminism through violence, post-
continuity, and self-reflexive narratives while still adhering to conventional attitudes on gender.
II. STILL JUST A GIRL: HIT-GIRL’S SURRENDER TO POSTFEMINISM

The figure of Mindy McCready/Hit-Girl in the film *Kick-Ass* (2010) is seemingly an uneasy addition to the long list of sassy girl-sidekicks that pervade the superhero film genre. As a ‘tweener, she is just young enough to resist hyper-sexualization and is therefore allowed to have a nonthreatening relationship with the protagonist of *Kick-Ass*, Dave. She also upsets the traditional stereotypes that govern her role by being shockingly violent, funny, and foul-mouthed. This negotiation is acknowledged in interviews from the writers of both the original comic book and the film. Jane Goldman, a writer for the film, is quoted in an interview from the website *Film School Rejects* as saying, “We just really wanted Hit-Girl to be a character who, in a sense, simply happens to be an 11-year-old girl, in the same way that Ripley in *Alien* could have been a guy but the part happened to be played by Sigourney Weaver.”

Goldman’s sentiments reflect the potential Hit-Girl has to resist gendering. This statement seems to reflect that the character is meant to upset and even reconsider gender binaries. Goldman goes on in the same answer, however, to further explain Hit-Girl’s motivations:

She [Hit-Girl] is genuinely dangerous, she's genuinely mad. It's not her fault: she's been raised in this environment where she doesn't know anything different. She's unwittingly part of a folie a deux.

This explanation reduces Hit-Girls’ agency to an extension of someone else’s desires. It quickly strips away the idea that Hit-Girl just happened “to be an 11-year old girl”
and instead implies that anything that she does, bad or good, is outside of her own
control. Mark Millar, the writer of the original graphic novel, gave a similar answer when
asked why Hit-Girl was such a stand out character by a blog featured on The
Independent:

I think people like revenge movies. People like revenge stories but they get
objectionable when Charles Bronson’s cutting someone’s testicles off or
something like that. But whenever it’s a 10-year-old girl doing it, it’s […]
impossible to get upset by it. So even if you saw Hit-Girl in the first one crushing
people inside car crushers it still felt quite bright and fun. I think you juxtapose
the horror with the cuteness and then it’s somehow alright.

Millar’s creation is a box-office success, not only does Hit-Girl rejoin Kick-Ass in the
graphic novel sequel (after hanging up her vigilante cape at the end of the first collection)
but Millar also created a spin-off volume focusing solely on her exploits. In this
particular interview, Millar may have been citing the age of his break-out character, but
“cuteness” is a direct reference to her gender as well, and a negation of her actions
because they come from a little girl. She allows for a different type of revenge film, one
that champions a nonthreatening antihero. There is also a liberating aspect of traditionally
repressed female emotions and Hit-Girl is able to realize her need for vengeance as an
atypical vigilante.

This meta-text that innocently answers questions surrounding her agency was a
response to Hit-Girl’s jarring cinematic presence. The construction of this presence
underscores questions of gender, performativity, and patriarchal socialization. While
these rather provocative fissures are sealed by the end of the narrative, they are worth
examining as symptomatic of postfeminist discourse. Hit-Girl is an example of an
innovative and strong female character in a genre dominated by complex male
protagonists. Her unexpected and conspicuous violence penetrates an otherwise impermeably masculine space. While her character is contained by the ending of the film, its intense images of the female body as violent and unafraid retain some feminist power.

Vigilantism as Marker of Masculinity

Though there are places that the graphic novel and film depart from each other, Matthew Vaughn’s 2010 film *Kick-Ass* follows Mark Millar’s original work relatively closely: The narrative follows a fanboy turned vigilante taking to the streets to dole out justice. He finds that dressing up in a costume does not automatically make him a superhero, however. After getting beaten and humiliated, Dave/Kick-Ass meets real life vigilantes, Big Daddy and Hit-Girl who are working through their own vendetta against the D’Amico crime organization. Dave is an underdog, immersed in comic books and pretending to be gay in order to get closer to his long time crush. He is also insecure enough to become friends with one of the bad guys, Red Mist (a fellow pretender) and is ultimately the reason why Big Daddy is killed. Together, Kick-Ass and Hit-Girl get their revenge on the criminals and their endings are both positively resolved.

In most superhero narratives, vigilantism is the ultimate response to an unjust world and seemingly the marker of power and masculinity. Ineffectual in his own life, Dave desires to assert himself anonymously as a hero. He imagines a scuba suit will turn him into one of the urban gods from his comic books. As he practices his moves in front of his bedroom mirror, it is apparent that the narrative is hyper aware of the performativity and artifice of masculinity. If the parody calls attention to the conscious construction of the original, as Judith Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble*, then Dave’s futile
first attempts at crime fighting underscore gender constructions present in superhero narratives.

Hit-Girl is a stark contrast to Kick-Ass. Dave admittedly has no real reason to act as an avenger for the city, but Hit-Girl has a backstory worthy of a complex vigilante. In “From Victim to Vigilante: Gender, Violence, and Revenge in The Brave One (2007) and Hard Candy (2005)”, Rebecca Stringer examines the vigilante characters of Erica Bain and Haley Stark and ultimately finds that the violence they enact upon the male attackers in their respective films are positive and feminist. This is an unusual claim to make about a mainstream film to make because, as Stringer writes:

Patriarchal gender norms render the capacity for violence as properly masculine, creating for women what Connell has called a ‘cultural disarmament,’ or a social context in which men’s capacity for violence is normalized, while women are typically marked as vulnerable to violence. (269)

If a signifier of masculinity is the ability to act and a signifier of femininity is to be acted upon, then any female vigilante stands to push the parameters of traditional gender norms. Hit-Girl then successfully embodies masculine traits. Unlike in the graphic novel, the first time we encounter Hit-Girl on screen, she is simply Mindy McCready, standing in an abandoned lot opposite her father. The space is reminiscent of a dilapidated arena as it is presented to us through a high angle shot; this vantage point allows viewers to make their own speculations concerning the relationship and danger between the two figures. A long shot reveals Mindy and Damon McCready standing in profile and the camera moves from behind Damon and finds Mindy in a medium shot. Their banter reveals the aim of Damon’s lesson. He insists that Mindy should not be afraid of physical harm to her body. He instills confidence in her physical abilities and resilience that is unusual in most
father/daughter depictions on screen. Damon pulls out a gun and shoots Mindy, the force knocking her off her feet. At first, the audience is presented only with the image of a violent man shooting a little girl who is dressed adorably in pink. As Mindy’s hands fumble with her pink puffer jacket and fingers the bulletproof vest just beneath it and rises to her feet, the audience realizes that she is not a typical little girl. This scene directly contrasts the previous, which depicts Dave’s playful romp in front of his mirror in his brand new superhero outfit. This exercise between Mindy and Damon is depicted in a flashback sequence in the graphic novel long after readers have first encountered Hit-Girl coldly killing a drug dealer.

Fig. 1. Hit-Girl’s first stoic appearance in Kick-Ass the graphic novel (2010).

Fig. 2 Mindy and Damon McCready’s first appearance in Kick-Ass (film; 2010).

Fig. 3. Mindy McCready dressed in pink. Kick-Ass (2010)
Reordering the sequence of storytelling allows the audience to identify Hit-Girl with the slight girl on screen, dressed in pink and alone with only her father for guidance. Instead of first viewing the cold blooded killer capable of slicing through rooms full of criminals, the audience sees all the signifiers of a little girl but learns throughout the film that she has little in common with other representations of ‘tweens in film. The image accesses and reflects what traditionally defines a girl child so that her unexpected actions clash with this first, innocent image of her. This imbalance is resolved through proximity to her father (both physically in the first shot and displayed psychologically through the narrative). Millar’s choice to thrust Hit-Girl into view even before readers see Big Daddy allows her some autonomy, at least for a short period of time, and distances her from more common ideals of femininity. While the graphic novel depicts Hit-Girl as embodying masculine traits immediately, the film positions the viewer to question whether the real illusion is the little girl in the pink hat or the vigilante slicing through criminals.

In The Name of the Father

Both Dave and Mindy have been immersed in the modern fairy tales of comic books. Dave’s reason to become a vigilante is that he is directly inspired by Spider-Man and Batman, but Mindy has been brought up to believe that the stories are real and that she has a place among her heroes. Bruno Bettelheim writes in *The Uses of Enchantment* that there is even a difference in the attraction of fairy tales and that of myths:

Although the same exemplary figures and situations are found in both and equally miraculous events occur in both, there is a crucial difference in the way these are communicated. Put simply, the dominant feeling a myth conveys is: this is
absolutely unique; it could not happen to an ordinary mortal like you or me. The reason is not so much that what takes place is miraculous, but that it is described as such. By contrast, although the events which occur in fairy tales are always presented as ordinary, something that could happen to you or me or the person next door when out on a walk in the woods. (37)

The rather random configuration of *Kick-Ass* is based on Dave’s belief in the fairy tale, the idea that anyone can choose to be brave—especially a quiet, unassuming male (i.e. Peter Parker or Clark Kent). Hit-Girl’s construction, however, is something else entirely.

The presence of comic books in the diegesis presents a self-reflexivity on the genre itself. This self-awareness speaks to everyday viewers and allows them to more closely identify with the onscreen characters. Mindy McCready is hardly the typical fangirl. She might wait excitedly for the next Marvel title, but her relationship with comics is far different from Dave’s. Dave consistently insists that he knows that the stories aren’t real while Mindy has been assimilated into a comic book life since her birth. Unlike Erica Bane or Haley Stark who decide to embark on their vengeance alone and are prompted by targeted violence, Mindy’s vigilantism and violence is ignited and cultivated by her father. Mary Daly’s warnings of patriarchal myths are clearly represented in the indoctrination of Mindy. She is groomed systematically for the life of a superhero, and her own story is captured for their canon in almost religious styling.

Damon and Mindy’s backstories unfold through the use of the comic book medium, flipping through Damon’s retelling, an incredulous old partner and friend is disturbed by the seemingly romanticized version of the tragedies surrounding their family. Mindy has moved past a loose identification with a universal fairy tale and become the star of her own myth, a myth dictated by her father. The audience is quite aware that Mindy has been socialized to perform traditionally masculine behaviors and her identity is shaped
entirely by her father’s influence and their comic book bible. Her skill is unquestionable but her agency is uncertain.

Damon McCready is interested in recreating Batman, or rather, himself as Batman and Mindy as a Batman without the real experience of sadness or loss. This is an innovative premise of indoctrination for a girl, far from the actual gut wrenching torture that creates a heroine, it is rather playful and make believe. Daly denies any positive attributes of playing myths out in such a way:

To participate in ‘reality’ is to repeat mythical models, to reactualize them continuously. The myth-makers do not admit that these paradigmatic models stage ‘reality’ and program the audience to be performers of ‘vain and illusory activity.’ Breaking out of the circles of vain and illusory processions requires exactly the initiative which patriarchal myth stifles. (45)

An ex-police man and a widower, Damon McCready’s vendetta against the D’Amico crime organization begins with the death of his wife and the birth of Mindy

Fig. 4. Hit-Girl and Big Daddy’s backstory. Kick-Ass (2010)
(representative of yet another procession via Daly). In the film, Mindy’s pregnant mother attempts suicide when Damon is framed by D’Amico and imprisoned. Doctors save Mindy before her mother dies and a family friend raises her until Damon is released. Gail Simone, writer for several comic series, created the website Women In Refrigerators (1999) listing numerous females killed off in comics in order to motivate their male avengers. The reduction of the female presence as pretense to actualize male heroes is prevalent in action films as well (examples of killing off saintly mothers and wives are present in family fare such as Star Wars: Attack of the Clones (2002) as well as more adult offerings like The Godfather (1972)). Damon uses his wife’s death to fuel Hit-Girl’s training and desire for revenge. Damon McCready has made everything over into a game tailored after his favorite comic books. Their lives are a mixture of reality and fantasy, as expressed through aesthetics of Damon’s office. On one wall renderings of the D’Amico crime organization are hung instead of photographs. Real firearms sit on the connecting wall. Mindy’s life is reflected in this juxtaposition of the threat of the real and its representation. Damon creates her not in his image, but rather in the image of admired comic book heroes. She is skilled, quick, and impervious to fear, but Hit-Girl’s moral code is ambiguous and hinges solely on what her father tells her is right and wrong.
Mindy’s own transformation is quite different than other female heroes from the genre. Perhaps it might be considered deceptive, but systematic physical or psychological damage is not a part of her evolution. Her father does not teach her to be afraid in order to strip away her identity. Instead he views her as complete (albeit male) from the start. She is unafraid of physical pain because she has the confidence and training to fight back. The female body as fragile, as an appendage that might be scarred and bruised is not a part of her indoctrination. Mindy’s self-awareness might present a step forward as far as female action heroes go, but the power that she possesses is defined as positive because of its connotation of and connection to masculinity.
Gender Performativity

The construction of Hit-Girl’s character raises questions about gender performativity but it also almost uniformly resists the possibility of Hit-Girl as a truly provocative feminist character. As mentioned previously, Millar himself dismissed Hit-Girl’s actions purely based on her status as a little girl. While she acts in accordance with her father, Mindy is usually an extension of the patriarchal agenda. However, she seems to deviate from this path in a pivotal scene in which she single handedly rescues both her father and Dave. The scene offers multiple perspectives while the two men are tied up: the first is from a fixed camera, documenting and transmitting the torture of the two vigilantes on the net in the diegesis, the second focuses on Dave and his misery, and the third offers Hit-Girl’s point of view through night goggles. This perspective is favored and the audience takes Hit-Girl’s point of view as she shoots her way through a crowd of mobsters. This scene opens on a voyeuristic spectacle. Kick-Ass and Big Daddy are bound to chairs and being tortured for a captivated online audience. Their enforced
passivity poses an opening to reverse gender roles. As the hired goons stand as the backdrop for the killings, one expert shot through the head of the lead thug marks the end of the theatrical torturing. The screen abruptly turns to black until we take up Hit-Girl’s perspective through her night vision goggles. Similar to a violent video game, our perspective is that of a first person shooter. Only through flashes of gunfire and the steady blinking of a strobe light is the scene illuminated and vignettes of the carnage are revealed, more like fragmented panels in a comic book than a traditional film montage. The moments of darkness are meant to imply Hit-Girl’s movement through the warehouse space but they also work to connect the audience with this sidekick turned leading hero. Intersecting the action with black blank spaces is similar to the placement of gutters in comic books and is important to tie *Kick-Ass* back to its origins: a graphic novel that allows for a transgressive space where perspective and identity can shift several times throughout a vignette and that has the potential be read in an oppositional way. In “The Gutters as Third Space”, Stephanie Crawley writes:

> The comics gutters also can be seen as a visual metaphor for Homi K. Bhabha’s conception of hybridity as a “Third Space” outside of the boundaries of cultures or identities. For Bhabha, the dominant conception of cultures and identities is that they are self-contained, framed objects, much like the individual panels of a comic… Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity poses a challenge to this notion of identities and cultures being fixed, bounded, static objects, by emphasizing the spaces between these boxes, where identities can be negotiated freely. Similarly, in comics, much of the work of reading happens in the gutters, the spaces between panels, where readers must use their own minds to construct the story.

These lapses used within the film function the same way, allowing a space between images that encourages a self-awareness in the audience. The lapses consistently remind the audience that they share a young girl’s gaze.
Here, time and space are represented as being one and the same, and the effect incites urgency. When Hit-Girl is finally revealed in a full-length body shot, her image is paired with grand and almost redemptive music—a leitmotif befitting a hero. The movement between seeing through her perspective to viewing Hit-Girl from a distance in slow motion solidifies audience identification with her as the primary hero. Nothing about this scene is cute or innocuous. Hit-Girl’s victory arrives too late to save her father and her only other ally, Dave, is useless. She stands between them as she delivers the final shot to the strobe light, Damon has been exposed to a fatal fire and Dave is terrified, weeping. Hit-Girl is instilled with a righteous anger and, at this moment in the film, she is the only protagonist that matters. From this point on, the film ceases to be about Dave’s attempt to become a super hero and refocuses on Hit-Girl who is the actual hero that propels action forward. Laura Mulvey’s theory of fetishistic scopophilia might serve as a productive framework in which to view this reversal. If the female appearance in cinema can be categorized as either voyeuristic, offering the satisfaction of possessing the feminine (through the audience’s identification with masculine protagonists), or as fetishistic scopophilia, which Mulvey defines as a building up of the “physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying itself” favoring the gaze, then Hit-Girl’s deviation is something unusual not only to the genre, but to mainstream films. Her character can be explained away as satisfyingly voyeuristic and representative of patriarchal control over a young female body, but in this section of the film, she resists fetishistic scopophilia. Here, she is not an object that stops action, but a subject in action. While Dave’s story clearly continues, Hit-Girl is the catalyst for action and the hero of the narrative. She mirrors the more positive feminist vigilantes Rebecca Stringer cites in
her study. Does this mean that we are meant to identify with a girl sidekick and more importantly, that we are pushed to favor a primary identification with her over the leading male character? In the scene that follows Damon Macready’s death, the clear distinctions between Hit-Girl and Kick-Ass are drawn. While Hit-Girl decides to avenge her father, Dave, near tears, stares in a bathroom mirror, horrified by the blood and cuts on his face. It is apparent that Hit-Girl is not really the alter ego of Mindy McCready but that the costumed vigilante is her true identity and also apparent is the realization that Dave will never truly embody the heroic Kick-Ass he imagines. This scene attempts a reversal of patriarchal hegemonic ideals, but they ultimately return by the end of the film. Mindy’s momentary separation from a male’s protection elevates her to full-blown hero status, but she is unable to sustain the masculine traits of which audiences approve. However, the warehouse scene provides a powerful image of what an unapologetic girl hero might look like and overshadows the actions of her male counterparts. Though she might be viewed as an acceptable hero because she, in essence, can play with the boys, it is problematic to view her actions as definitively masculine. Hit-Girl’s actions put her on par with the men of the action genre but do not automatically code her as male. The violence she enacts might be read in a different way, and instead of Hit-Girl taking on the phallus to become empowered, her actions could be read as ressaltly female and feminist. Fanon’s language of violence (The Wretched of the Earth) is invoked by the violence that Hit-Girl executes. She is speaking the language of the colonizer, the only language that Fanon insists will be understood and speaks it well. While her actions may not be explicitly feminist by contemporary standards, they should not be negated by her gender and youth; instead they should be rendered more powerful because of those aspects. This sequence is
not about Hit-Girl becoming male in order to save the day. By using violence (the symbolic language of the patriarchy), she equips herself to adequately fight the patriarchy and functions as a fully realized embodiment of unapologetic girl power.

Everything Back In Its Place

In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo analyzes Judith Butler’s very convincing argument of gender performativity from *Gender Trouble* and also seeks to stretch the reach of Butler’s theory of parody. Bordo writes, “But subversion of cultural assumptions (despite the claims of some deconstructionists) is not something that happens in a text or to a text. It is an event that takes place (or doesn’t) in the reading of the text” (292). The reading of the text then is the final message that is left after screen lights come back up and audiences leave a theatre. How might the text of *Kick-Ass* ultimately be read?

Though it is Hit-Girl that kills dozens of bodyguards, Kick-Ass eventually comes to her rescue. Mob boss Frank D’Amico stands over her body. She is laid out on his slab-like desk as he punches her in the face. This common silhouette of male on female violence is uncomfortable, positioning the female body in a distinctly vulnerable position. Through this brutal one-sided beating, Frank admits that he wishes he had a son just like her, as the scene cuts to the image of his own son dressed as Red Mist and laid out from his rather pathetic showing with Kick-Ass. Still, Dave saves the day. He uses a bazooka to blow Frank D’Amico away and cradles Hit-Girl in his arms before flying away with his jet pack. The inconsistencies of this ending feel false—not because we cannot suspend disbelief or that we need a more realistic ending, but because it is hard to make sense of Hit-Girl, able to dispatch room after room of hired goons, held powerless by yet
another father figure. The underlying subtext is that Frank D’Amico has replaced the patriarchal figure in her life and she is, still, under the control of a myth-spinning father. 

In his discussion of film noir, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, and his work, *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek writes about the existence of the two fathers in Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. For Žižek, the father functions are defined as the “ego-ideal and ferocious superego” (133). Both of these figures appear in Hit-Girl’s life and she is captive to both. Žižek further discusses the flaws with the Freudian concept of the order of fathers in *Metastases of Enjoyment*. There, he writes that in Freudian discourse the primordial father (the “obscene” Master of Enjoyment) is dispatched first and is replaced by the Oedipal Father (Father as Law or Nature) but he insists that reality and history invert this order and it is the Father as Law that is brought down first to allow for the Primordial Father to take his place. *Kick-Ass* follows Žižek’s model and it is the symbolic father (Damon) that is killed in order for the obscene, pleasure-driven father (Frank) to take his place and the control over Hit-Girl. With the death of both fathers, Red-Mist is positioned then to become the third father (dissected from the “bad father”) who stands to be the most evil (note the character’s alter ego name change to The Mother Fucker, another Oedipal signifier). All of these implicit reenactments of psychoanalytical expression positions Hit-Girl as an object that can be controlled, wounded, and hunted. This leaves little room for Kick-Ass to be anything more than a narrator, but this reading is opposed by his heroic turn at the film’s conclusion. The glaring negative patriarchal order is ignored in favor of a happier ending that allows for a positive masculine figure to gloss over the problematic patriarchal structure.
Hit-Girl’s resilience and extraordinary skill is proven scene after scene throughout the film. When Kick-Ass, the bumbling and frightened makeshift hero saves the day, it displaces much of Hit-Girl’s agency. This traditional turn downplays her unique character and reduces her to a sidekick and, worse, a girl unable to save herself.

Conclusion

Within a postfeminist context, Hit-Girl can be viewed as embodying progress and a promise of a wildly violent and adept hero (who just happens to be a girl). The potential of the character isn’t quite realized and fails to break away from the traditionally accepted action genre. Her apparent weakness, whether explicitly underlined or not, is the father figure. Her only chance at survival is the designated and agreed upon male hero, regardless of his actual aptitude. The narrative also implies that no matter how much stronger, smarter, and better a girl hero might be, she is still ultimately unable to control her own fate. This failure at the end of the film taints Hit-Girl’s actions throughout the narrative and instead of the lasting impression of a strong, young, female hero, the final images of Hit-Girl in costume depict her in a fetal position in the arms of the traditional male hero. This is a departure from Millar’s original graphic novel. In Millar’s version, Hit-Girl does end up in Dave’s arms, but just after she has killed all their enemies (with his minimal involvement) and is finally able to mourn her father. Though Millar’s work continues to wrap up Dave’s story, the reader is left with the impression that Hit-Girl is the real thing: a comic book urban legend made flesh, while Dave, like the rest of us, could only ever pretend. Kick-Ass is a mainstream film and in being such, it upholds dominant ideologies and refuses to leave a truly feminist statement as a final image. A
truly postfeminist ending would not have settled back into a traditional Hollywood ending, instead Hit-Girl would be the irreproachable hero based purely on her prowess. Because the postfeminist moment is so contradictory, she is denied this distinction because she is a girl. The film resists the possibility of acknowledging Hit-Girl as a complete superhero and positions her instead into a more contained and knowable space and underscores that though she may be a remarkably different type of character, she is still just a little girl.
III. KNIVES CHAU: RETHINKING GIRL CONSUMPTION

2010’s Scott Pilgrim vs. The World reflects the popular merging of styles in film and through post-continuity editing, the film is directly referential to comic books and video games—transgressive spaces that allow for readers and players to move through narratives in non-linear routes. Eric Freedman writes in his discussion of the race controversy surrounding the Resident Evil video games, “Resident Racist”:

Studies of interactive media emphasize that consumers do not simply read images, they occupy and play through (or with) them; and the narrative space is often conflicted, the contextual elements and plot details never fully sewn up. Game narratives are often purposefully messy, and the discussions about images and stories are an important aspect of framing any consideration of the representational practices of particular media economies. What these discussions often revel is the degree to which people feel personally empowered in their everyday lives. (3)

While the choices to compress time and use particular stylistic effects make the film more visually unique among other offerings, they also help to underscore the more non-traditional character possibilities as well as the connections between gameplay and empowerment. Knives Chau is the first of Scott Pilgrim’s love interests we encounter and, based on the rules of the romantic comedy genre, she should be the girl with whom we identify and the one that ultimately ends up with the guy. Knives is the designated “good girl” but her character ultimately undergoes the most profound transformation and by the end of the film, acknowledges her identity as self-created in response to Scott’s preferences. Her constant updating and changing of her physical appearance
reflects a grasp at girl power in the postfeminist moment. She believes she can have it all if she just tries harder, wants it more, and becomes more desirable. This false choice is advertised in magazines, music, and most films that feature teenage girls. Knives, however, does not get the guy in the end, and more interestingly, no longer wants him. Ramona Flowers, her rival, can be read as the more dangerous, risky choice of the two. But for all her sex appeal, she is the more traditional female figure, moving from one monogamous relationship to the next, and finally finding contentment in Scott. Though the film’s conclusion fits neatly beside other films of the genre, Knives’ character development reveals certain negative aspects of the girl power movement.

Through the use of camp and comic book and video game references, Knives offers a momentary critique of the definition of postfeminist girlhood. Similar to Hit-Girl, she is shaped by masculine perspective, but her seemingly permanent inferiority to Scott is revaluated and allows her to break away from this view and reconstitute herself as a separate force that remains outside of male desires. This conflict and friction between her character and the genre of the hybrid action/romantic comedy is off-putting in some ways. While Hit-Girl’s violent tendencies are meant to shock us, Knives’ unabashed affection is meant to make us uncomfortable in more familiar way. For the majority of the film we view her with Scott’s eyes. She is the perfect sidekick, safe, easily impressed and dismissed. While Hit-Girl’s motivation is concretely based in her father’s obsessions, Knives’ actions are driven by the unattainable need to be the perfect consumer. This is the underlying artifice of this perspective of girl power. Fashionable consumption promises success and happiness and completeness, but as Knives becomes painfully
aware, it is an empty promise. Excessive accumulation of music, clothes, or hair dyes does not aid in her pursuit of Scott. Unlike other makeover stories that close with heroines who grasp their happily ever-afters in life changing new outfits (Cinderella (1950), The Princess Diaries (2001), Miss Congeniality (2000), or Pretty Woman (1990)), Knives does not really attain any of her original goals. She’s never quite cool enough to fit in or disenfranchised enough to stop caring about it. Her constant consumption draws attention not only to her positioning as a female consumer, but also underscores the idea of the female as object: a commodity that is easily bartered for and possessed. Through her character’s evolution, she emerges as neither the commodity of love interest nor the possession of sidekick but instead as the voluntary outsider who has lost faith in consumption as remedy. Ambiguity surrounds both Knives and Hit-Girl and serves to promote a more probing and permeable perspective of girlhood.

Scott Pilgrim is Dating a High Schooler

Knives Chau is the topic of conversation as the film begins, when Scott Pilgrim tells band members about his 17-year-old Chinese girlfriend. He awaits his older (and Caucasian) friends’ inevitable and critical response. While the male band members ultimately approve of Knives after her expected childish awe over their music, Kim, the band’s drummer, remains skeptical. Scott grows more embarrassed when his sister, Stacey, and his roommate Wallace find out about the relationship and defends his choice by trivializing his romance with Knives as a response to the heartbreak he had suffered with his previous girlfriend. The couple’s activities are limited to playing video games, wandering through CD stores and The Goodwill Store, and riding the bus. Scott
obviously enjoys the way Knives admires him but he does not view Knives as a real girlfriend and treats her like an annoyance for most of the film. His dismissal of Knives is easy once he meets Ramona Flowers, who encapsulates more desirable feminine qualities and is indicative of how society views and invalidates the actions and desires of teenage girls.

Throughout the first section of the film, the audience views Knives solely from Scott’s perspective. When Scott first introduces Knives to his friends, she stands just outside their door on the outskirts of the in-crowd. Once she self-consciously promises to “be good” she is allowed in and is turned instantaneously into a Sex-Bob-bomb groupie. The close ups frame her face looking straight ahead. We see the change in her expression as her almost overwhelming admiration for the band registers clearly on her face. Through this framing we are told that everything we need to know about Knives is on the surface, that nothing will be withheld as a surprise. Knives is arguably the most transparent member of the group. Without a word of dialogue from Knives throughout the band’s performance, her face alone shows us her newfound fascination with music, as well as her gratitude to the Sex Bob-bombs for helping her find it. As if the character is in on this conclusion, Knives turns to changing her persona when she feels Scott pulling away, focusing on the superficial things that she can change: what Scott and the audience are able to see.

In cinema, teenage girls typically represent postmodern subjects as incessant consumers more so than their male counterparts. They are intersections of consumption and desire that both define and imply both. In *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Frederic Jameson questions the aesthetic of postmodern society and asserts that the
position of contemporary art has shifted and that the appropriation of the arts into our commodities and advertising lessens the subversive power they might have once possessed. As many teenage films focus on some incarnation of a makeover (examples abound from *Grease* (1978) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985) to *Mean Girls* (2004) and *Ghost World* (2001)), the playful altering of identities, the trying on of different skins emerges visually as a necessary rite of passage. It is fitting, then, that the backdrops for many of these films are stores, concerts, and arcades—places that offer a myriad of identities to try on and take off. Music is a determining factor and influence on Knives throughout the film. Not only is she Scott’s biggest fan, but she literally passes out when she hears him play. This connection between music and consumption is apparent in the transformation of Knives. She and Scott frequent a music store where they sift through CD’s and a Goodwill store where they shop for clothes, recreating the aesthetic suggestive of the music scene of which they both want to be a part. Their presence in such places of power for youth, where even a high schooler like Knives holds the power (even if only to consume) is vital to their relationship. We never see the couple together in situations that don’t reflect some overarching sense of consumerism. Although their companionship seems awkward in any space, we cannot help but notice that these spaces in particular connect the otherwise incompatible pair. Their moves (and perhaps, briefly, their characters) are perfectly synched as they engage in a multiplayer round of a ninja-themed video game reminiscent of Dance Dance Revolution. Scott may not be a perfect fit for Knives, but he does fit perfectly into the culture Knives desires. While Knives’ interest in Scott comes across as genuine, it is his status as a fixed part of the culture machine that she is most drawn to. In *Consuming Youth*, Rob Latham underscores the
place that malls play in the teenage world, a space “where teens, otherwise a subject population, move and act with the confidence of adults” (66) and discusses the relevance of these spaces in adolescent media. Though the Toronto that is represented through the film can hardly be equated to a mall, it is still, in some ways, an artificial environment where hipsters are the norm and everyone is in a band. The space is presented as both urban and suburban at once. Scott and Wallace’s apartment is set into a bland building, literally a door in a wall. It is claustrophobic and minimalistic, with one bed, one bathroom, and one old television to share between them. This lifestyle is juxtaposed with an expansive suburbia when Scott points out the house where he grew up, a large two-story building just across the street from his current apartment. As the characters move from spaces defined by washed out color to high contrast settings (performance and fight venues to starkly white snow covered streets) they are in effect mapping a mediated Toronto, one that serves as a necessary element that implies certain idyllic qualities of both trendy youth and a capitalist society. This intersection of perspectives can only take place in the Toronto presented, where the indie-musician and the small town schoolgirl are both the norm. Knives, like Scott, belongs to a more contained lifestyle and attempts to cross over into the trendy scene. Jameson’s observation that subversive outlets have been commodified into mass culture is implied in this environment. The once subversive perception of the indie music scene is commodified and sold is referenced several times throughout the film, first with Natalie’s transformation into Envy Adams and later with Gideon’s evil music empire. The way in for Knives is to buy what they are selling. Outside of this community, as most teenage girls have learned by age seventeen, she must look like she fits in if she wants to have a shot at belonging.
These previous scenes establish Knives as an outsider to the music scene. Even in the retail space of the CD store she is a clueless consumer and influenced by Scott’s superior taste in music. She shops for articles of clothing at the Goodwill Store without ever buying anything. In these scenes, the camera pans across the spaces, seamlessly transitioning from the Goodwill to the CD store to the arcade. There is no break between these places, just as there is no break in the cycle of consumption in which Knives and Scott are caught. The arcade, however, is a space in which she moves comfortably and like an expert. Latham defines the arcade as the “emblem and central site of youth consumption” (21), but the arcade he is examining no longer really exists the way it once did even a decade ago as a space of community. Several young adult novels from the 90’s are set in the arcade precisely because of the possibilities of the space as a new kind of public sphere, one that meshes consumption of games as well as identities with public discourse. Like the mall, the arcade is a quintessential space that connotes a certain aspect of adolescence, one that resists the real in favor of the potential for fluid identities. As Knives and Scott play through Ninja Ninja Revolution, it is not only their perfect timing and seamless team work that stands out, it is the nostalgia associated with the arcade and the significance of the gamers that used to interact within the space. When asked about the uses of 80’s and 90’s video games within the film in an interview for Wired magazine, director Edgar Wright answered Michael Cera’s question:

We had to get his (Shigeru Miyamoto—Mario creator) permission to use this piece of music from The Legend of Zelda for that dream sequence. So when I was writing to Nintendo to get permission, I was saying, “This music is like nursery rhymes to a generation.” I remember seeing you get all misty-eyed any time Super Mario Bros. 3 was mentioned...Those Nintendo games are classics—and people still play them, which is a testament to them being pieces of art. You’re so much younger than me,
but Mario is a touchstone for both of us. And in this film we can do visuals that may seem pretty unconventional by Hollywood standards, and yet it doesn’t faze people at all because everyone knows what an extra life is.

The film speaks to those members of the audience that understand the references to a video game culture that has rapidly changed in the last decade. Though the entire film is immersed in the aesthetic of 16 bit games and it seems authentic that Scott Pilgrim at twenty-two is still an avid gamer and still a regular at the local arcade, Knives’ familiarity with this space that is predominantly associated with young white males is effective. Knives is representative of the changing demographic. Video games, like comics, have secured their place in academia as more than entertainment or novelties of pop culture and as the corollaries between the games and society are explored in scholarly ways, the audience too has become broader. Knives, like Hit-Girl, appropriates the masculine (here, video games rather than comic books) just as effectively if not better than the title male hero. Just as adolescent novels, films, and music serve as texts that might suggest ways adolescents might become a part of societal machine, the connection between nostalgia and gaming also implies a connection between the negotiation of growing up and the introduction of video games.

Games, in general, teach their players about identification to others and the environment in which they meet through the navigation of the abstract. In his book *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga outlines the significance of play as a cultural phenomenal integral to the evolution of civilization and socialization. Video games specifically are constructed as spaces that involve aspects of our society’s institutions, and they teach players how to solve problems to navigate those spaces successfully. Scott’s movement
through the different levels of exes expresses this concept as he gains life skills that will ultimately be assets in a real relationship. Instead of a systematic depiction of working through the obstacles put forth by society, the film offers a camp take on gaining self-respect. Camp, as defined by Sontag, “is a certain mode of aestheticism,” a mode that privileges the stylized. For Sontag, camp relies exclusively on innocence and extravagance while the development of character is unimportant, even detrimental to a work’s camp potential. The highly stylized aesthetics of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* and the “over-the-top-ness” (Sontag) are both markers of its uses of camp that serve to highlight Knives as trapped by postfeminist consumer culture in a way in which audiences can easily and even playfully identify. Knives’ trajectory through the game is less obvious than Scott’s. She can successfully pair with her male partner in Ninja Ninja Revolution, a game whose success seems to hinge on two player synchronicity and is represented by a heterosexual pairing on the screen, but she is unable to stretch this practice to her real life. Throughout the film, the game is used to articulate the status of their relationship as each time they complete a game they are asked if they would like to continue. From the onset, it is Knives who is responsible to keep the game going with an endless supply of quarters but it is later Scott who is unable to break up the partnership when prompted. The avatar that represents Knives is covered by her ninja apparel but she is clearly tall, white, and blonde. These physical choices foreshadow the fluctuating identities that Knives will later adopt.
Fig. 7: Knives Chau and Scott Pilgrim as the perfect ninja team. *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010)

**Rivals**

When Knives notices Scott gazing at Ramona, she swiftly changes from the easy-going, video game teammate to a jealous and insecure stalker-girl. She quickly rights herself with the common knowledge that all she has to do is change. Yvonne Tasker writes in “Enchanted by Postfeminism” that “Choice is a central term within postfeminist cinema, although there are clear and relatively conventional (that is, limited) choices to be made by female characters in contemporary Hollywood cinema” (75). By becoming what she believes Scott wants, she can win him back and assert her agency. Her first move is to cut her hair short—and while on Ramona it might look edgy and nonchalant, the haircut makes Knives look even younger than she is. Her school-girl barrettes call attention to how out of place she appears in the hip Toronto music scene. After Knives cuts her hair and declares her love, Scott breaks up with her in the CD store. The background fades to black behind her and the scene continues, referencing comic book
panels that sequentially and purposefully separate our views of Knives from Scott’s perspective, allowing her autonomy from Scott’s perception of her and enabling the audience to share both perspectives. As Scott becomes less bothered by hurting her, she is still against the black backdrop. His apathy juxtaposed with progressive close ups of her heartbroken face marks a secondary identification with Knives that follows her into her life outside of her proximity to Scott.

![Fig. 8: Panel of Knives between Scott’s short period of contemplation.](image)

After her break up with Scott, Knives stands in front of hundreds of boxes of hair dye and ponders her choice while it is clearly obvious that there isn’t one. The women on the boxes are identical; the only difference is their hair color. The fantasy of transformation privileges western standards of beauty, as does the film. Her Chinese background is brought up several times through dialogue for humor or to underscore the inappropriateness of her relationship with Scott, but it is remarkable that Knives isn’t considered desirable within the narrative. Both Ramona and Envy (Scott’s most recent ex-girlfriend) are traditionally beautiful, and though Ramona dyes her hair every other
week, she, like the women on the dye boxes, meets the hegemonic ideals of beauty. Because *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is so visually unique, issues of race are seemingly non-issues, but Asian identity is referenced (not only through Knives’ character but also through Ramona’s first evil ex, Matthew Patel, who performs a Bollywood-like number in his fight). Knives is a typical teenager but it is Scott that is hung up on her race, asking if they are going to eat Chinese food at her house and if she is even allowed to date outside of her race. Aspects that hardly mattered before he met Ramona are examined when he has the chance to be with a traditionally attractive Caucasian female. For Knives, in a postfeminist and apparently postracist society, she does not even acknowledge her difference. She chooses instead to blame Ramona for stealing her boyfriend and relies on her own girl power to get him back while ignoring that regardless of which hair color she buys, she will never look like the woman on the dye packaging, or like Ramona.

![Fig. 9: Knives choosing an identity.](image-url)
This false consciousness plays out as Knives throws a tantrum in her bedroom with her girlfriend and attacks Ramona’s physical appearance, calling her “old” at 25 and “fat.” The tirade is meant to be over the top, dramatic, and bordering on ridiculous, calling attention to the competition that girl power innately encourages. After dying her hair, Knives looks in the mirror satisfied and tells her reflection that she will get Scott back, raising her fist in the process.

While Knives does try to enact change in her identity, the artifice and failure are uncomfortable to watch. Rather than asserting herself and becoming more desirable, she fails miserably. Her random relationship with Young Neil hardly makes Scott jealous and her agency is completely stripped from her as Todd (another of Ramona’s evil exes) knocks her new blue highlights out of her hair. Her choices are inconsequential, and though less violent than Hit-Girl’s, still reduced to just the “silly actions of a girl.” While the film is not overtly calling the audience to recognize the intersectionality represented by Knives as a female minority in a predominantly white environment, there are subtle invitations for the audience to consider the impact of Knives’ race on her interactions with Scott.

The dichotomy of Ramona and Knives seems to mirror the split between girls in trouble and girl power that Sarah Projansky wrote about. Ramona is flawed, running away from her past, and controlled by evil exes that refuse to release her. Knives is naïve but believes that she can get what she wants if she is willing to change and aggressively pursue her desires. Ramona is the beautiful mess that connotes desire but the film resists over-sexualizing Knives, as if even the audience should feel that an attraction would be inappropriate. Ramona’s exes attest to the fact that she has had multiple relationships and
is hard to get over. Knives tells Scott that she has never had a boyfriend before or even a kiss. At first glance, the two characters are stereotypes brought to life, each a side of the same projected figure of femininity.

In *The Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray writes that women are mere products that are “used and exchanged by men” (84). She goes on to explain women’s roles as commodities:

A woman “enters into” these exchanges only as the object of a transaction, unless she agrees to renounce the specificity of her sex, whose “identity” is imposed on her according to models that remain foreign to her…The “feminine” is never to be identified except by and for the masculine…(85)

We are meant to identify Ramona Flowers as the more free of Scott’s two choices because of her ability to instill desire and yet she is only ever defined in relation to her exes. She is a commodity that transfers hands several times and one that Scott has to fight to possess. Irigaray argues that there is a position of power that this oppression offers as it allows “women today to elaborate a ‘critique of the political economy,’ inasmuch as they are in a position external to the laws of exchange, even though they are included in them as ‘commodities.’” Viewed against Irigaray’s framework, Knives is able to propose a critique on this commodity trading as she remains outside of this negotiation. Her critique is ultimately removing herself from the equation and as a choice.

Disappointed in the reaction to her physical transformations, Knives final makeover is into a super-hero of sorts, a girl hero that fights back against alleged mean girls and evil Bosses. After first challenging Ramona for “stealing” her boyfriend, Knives learns that Scott cheated on her and that Ramona had no hand in hurting her. She joins
Scott to defeat Gideon, the final evil ex, in battle. Knives’ realization that she has been lied to does not stop her from standing up for Scott, and by extension, Ramona. The victory is Scott’s alone, but Knives’ help is crucial to his success and his progression to the Nega-Scott level in which he battles himself. Scott Pilgrim is the title character so it follows that Knives is merely a commodity that is used within a convenient time frame, but there is something else potentially subversive at work. Knives has undergone the same tests as Scott. She did not battle seven evil exes, but she engages the one person she believes has hurt her and when realizing that she is wrong, still helps Scott although he can offer her nothing. When the fighting is finished, she shares a final moment with Scott, encouraging him to go after Ramona while she is left alone. The progression of her character from an innocent teenage nightmare to a formidable fighter and genuine friend is complex when compared to Ramona’s, whose own storyline ends with her relationship with Scott, defined primarily as a commodity acquired by the male hero.

Conclusion

There is nothing overtly feminist about Knives Chau’s character and certainly the majority of the film underscores her vulnerability not only to consumer culture but also to the patriarchal system at work around her. Her definition of femininity relies on traditional hegemonic views of desire and her youth allows her to explore and inhabit new identities at will. However, Knives fails to assimilate into the role of a desirable love interest. After adapting her appearance, interests, and ultimately, her personality to better fit Scott’s perception of desire, Knives still falls short of Ramona’s seemingly effortless appeal. This is no real departure from what other teenage girls in film face, but there is a
distinct fissure that her character progression addresses. What can a subject do when she realizes that she’s a subject? Knives is caught in a cycle of dissatisfying consumption, consumption that promises acceptance but does not deliver. The realization that the “incessant change(s)” (Latham) to her appearance and identity are meaningless pushes Knives to become empowered. While her constant status as a consumer and object for consumption may seem to indicate submissive qualities, these identities allow her to more realistically discover and grow into her own girl power. Knives does not resist the patriarchy or attempt to act outside of it. Instead, she allows traditional hegemonic ideals shape her development both physically and mentally. Only by beginning within and acknowledging the restrictions placed upon her can she reach her full (and feminist) potential. While Knives’s pursuit of feminism is less perfect than the exclusive outlines from Riot Grrrl and its subsequently empowered females of the 90’s, it is also more realistic. Knives is a flawed role model but she works with what she is given. Unlike many other female characters considered to represent “girl power,” Knives lives in a universe that is (with the exception of costumed evil exes and convenient extra lives) not entirely different from reality. She cannot act entirely independent from the patriarchy, simply because such escape is impossible. Instead, Knives provides a role model that, however imperfect by feminist definitions, displays real ways to find empowerment in a society that does not wish to grant it to her. Ultimately refusing Scott, Knives begins her feminist journey by rejecting Scott (the catalyst for her development) as a boyfriend, and possibly rejecting the patriarchy along with him. However, her dismissal of Scott is not angry or final, but friendly. Although Knives has chosen not to directly adapt to male desires any longer, she does not deny that the patriarchy (personified by Scott) will
continue to have an impact on her. Knives’ evolution directly addresses questions of identity. Ramona’s victory in the proverbial battle for Scott’s affection is won because the struggle takes place against a flawed postfeminist background. Ramona as a worthy possession is never questioned because of her traditionally attractive feminine qualities while Knives remains unpossessed but exhibits qualities when she’s standing up for Scott that should be admired and desired. While they are secondary to the film’s main plot and left unanswered, aspects of Knives’ journey uncover the fictitious nature of postfeminist dialogue and offer ways in which a young female might navigate within it.
The *X-Men* franchise stretches across almost all modern entertainment mediums: comic books, video games, television shows, and films. Unlike many other popular comic series, *X-Men* does not just work as a metaphor for social issues. The comics directly acknowledge and respond to contemporary issues of race, gender, and sexuality (though historically they have not always been able to overtly articulate these issues, the last twenty years have offered storylines that acknowledge current debates surrounding sexuality and gender). Bradford Wright discusses Marvel’s acknowledgement of current issues in the 1960’s in Comic Book Nation and writes: “Marvel managed to strike an antiestablishment pose without appearing political. For instance, Marvel’s comic books at this time rarely mention the civil rights movement, yet Marvel was the first publisher to integrate African Americans into comics” (219). Similarly, while the women characters of X-Men are not called feminists, feminist tendencies are certainly present in many of the characters. The *X-Men Trilogy* [comprised of *X-Men* (2000), *X2* (2003), and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006)], is presented as traditional and distanced from its more innovative original. While *X-Men* has a vast canon of villains to draw from, Raven/Mystique, created in 1978, is a staple of the series, inspiring hundreds of appearances across mediums and alternate story arcs that explore her position as a complex female character. Raven/Mystique is a fascinating female villain in the paper
immortal, and consistently linked with a female partner who is finally accepted as the
great love of her life in the X-Men canon. As Betty Kaklamanidou points out in *The 21st Century Superhero*, Mystique’s portrayal in the X-Men film trilogy reduces her to Magneto’s henchman and situates her only value in her mutant ability to shape shift. However in the newest X-Men film, *X-Men: First Class* (2012), a prequel to the trilogy, Raven/Mystique is rendered differently and portrayed as more resistant to the overt patriarchal power in the prior films. This new Raven/Mystique is hyper aware of her conditional acceptance in society as represented through the males in her life and, within the confines of a mainstream film machine, ultimately raises questions about the fluidity of gender and identity. There are different aspects throughout the film that deal directly with feminist and postfeminist positioning. The first is Mystique’s body as a blank canvas questioning the performativity of gender. Her choices can also be read as representative of feminist tensions. Ultimately her control over her body can be read as a resistant and oppositional female positioning. These choices are problematic and similar to the choices that both Hit Girl and Knives Chau face as they are presented within a false construct. Raven/Mystique’s decisions are innately linked to patriarchal discourse and expectations, however the Raven/Mystique of *X-Men: First Class* and the comic books retains the ability to function outside of this imposed binary and represents a female who can quite literally be anything and anyone while choosing to resist the ideals of hegemonic beauty. While Hit-Girl presents the female body as violent and Knives Chau explores the commodification of the body, Mystique’s body emerges as potentially fluid, the merging of uncomfortable imaginings of femininity. The film is set in the late 60’s and corresponds to the emergence of Second Wave Feminism. Within the diegesis,
Raven/Mystique moves beyond merely posing the question of gender performance, and instead offers an answer. While the film allows only a glimpse into a destabilized gender identity as a part of the story line, her character reflects possibilities that prior film incarnations do not.

**Mystique as Body**

Scholarly work and fan response to the film version of Mystique is divided. In Rebecca Housel’s chapter in *Superheroes and Philosophy*, “Myth, Morality and the Women of the X-Men”, Mystique’s character from the X-Men Trilogy is described as an anti-hero whose “perverse perspective” leads to a “distorted sense of justice” reflected by evil and wicked actions. This characterization paints a picture of an unpredictable vigilante, one whose own moral code and aims are the stand out indicators of her person. Betty Kaklamanidou’s examination of Mystique in “The Mythos of the Patriarchy in the X-men films” points out Mystique’s flaws even while underscoring the intrigue surrounding the character. She finds ultimately that the result of Mystique’s storyline marks her as merely a tool of the patriarchy, able to be used and discarded at will when she sacrifices her powers to save Magneto at the end of the trilogy:

> Mystique is reduced to a useful weapon: a tool that broke and can be discarded with little remorse whatsoever. In addition, there is no mention of her help and/or abilities, just the superficial statement that she was beautiful. (70)

Like many conflicted female superheroes who are categorized as villains (for example, Catwoman and Talia Ali from Batman) Mystique also holds a distorted view of justice. *First Class* attempts to get at the origins of Mystique’s skewed perspective but resists
passing judgment on it. Though audiences might know that the trilogy ultimately depicts Mystique as evil, this specific portrayal offers a more sympathetic view of her reasoning.

This portrayal of Raven/Mystique even destabilizes the physical attractiveness of the character. Housel directly acknowledges the use of pin-up type beauty in the filmic versions of comic book heroines. Richard J. Gray’s piece, “Vivacious Vixens and Scintillating Super Heroes” examines “hotness” as a common factor among super heroes and theorizes that physical attractiveness helps to negate the possibly uncomfortable vision of a strong woman on screen. Gray’s academic take on these characters is mirrored by fans that position the women of X-Men at the top of hottest, sexiest, or most beautiful lists of comic book women (both on the page and in film). These studies focus centrally on Mystique’s function as a villain, or a femme fatale. Between this negotiation of appeasing the male gaze and acknowledging Mystique’s agency, the authors do not focus centrally on the character’s physical body as a manifestation of her otherness. In Vivian Sobchack’s study, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, she discusses the problematic body of the other in Science Fiction films and her observation is relevant in relation to Mystique:

> While we may react with varying degrees of detached wonder to invading Martians or Metalunan Mutants who are distinctly seen as “other” than ourselves, our responses to those aliens clothed in our own familiar skins is something else entirely. We expect unnatural behavior from something seen as unnatural, alien behavior from something alien. (120-121)

Sobchack locates some of the power of science fiction in its capacity to alienate the familiar. In the case of Mystique, her body is not only alien, unnatural even compared to other mutants, but also alienates the feminine form from being knowable and easily discerned. While several scenes show her so obviously naked female body, few
characters notice or comment on her nudity. Her nakedness, when referenced negatively, becomes representative of her uncontained femininity. Likewise, while her genes are thought to be a viable cure for physical mutation, they are proven to be so strong that they enhance the undesired mutated cells instead of attacking them. Though these instances serve only as subplots, they suggest the inherent strength and adaptability of femaleness.

Female skin is usually fetishized in the cinema and is presented as soft, even, and unscarred (Elsasser and Haigen.). While Raven/Mystique’s blue complexion is the first indication of otherness, the texture of her skin is most instrumentally in resisting femininity. The ridges and scales that cover her breasts and forehead are not traditional invitations to be touched. Her character might represent the most foundational of patriarchal myths (Daly): she is both reptile and female combined, able to deceive. The balance that Gray insists must be present for a non-threatening female villain is inherent in this dichotomy of a desirable female body covered with undesirable textures. This might call into question what is fetishized when we view women’s bodies on the screen: are breasts enough to connote sexiness or is skin the ultimate manifestation of desire?

A young Charles Xavier encounters Raven/Mystique for the first time in his kitchen. She is in the guise of his mother but Charles’ quickly discerns her true form with his telepathy. The girl that remains after the illusion disappears is young and her true body is blue and scaly. The next image of Raven/Mystique that we encounter is that of a college-aged female whose chosen form is traditionally beautiful, blonde and light-eyed. The relationship between the two has evolved into a platonic friendship, though it is implied that Raven/Mystique wants it to be more. Though Charles admires her mutant ability to shape shift, he believes that she should be cured in order to assimilate into
society. Her scaled body makes Charles uncomfortable; he even shields his eyes from her nakedness. The physical anatomy and the markers of sex are not what connotes desirability. It is the guise of the female gender, a signifier of something that does not have the autonomy to inspire attraction without it, that serves as an invitation for male desire. As Christian Metz suggests in *The Imaginary Signifier*, cinema calls attention to the artifice of our cultural signs and symbols, at times rendering them transparent in their fictitiousness. Instead of viewing Mystique as evolved into a mutant, we might also view her body as a sort of deconstruction of femininity, endowed with the markings of sex but not necessarily of gender. Raven/Mystique does not have to make the choice of which sex her true body is, but she does have to decide whether or not she will appropriate acceptable feminine characteristics and “pass” as normal in her daily life (reminding us of de Beauvoir’s theory of *becoming* a woman).

When meeting a young co-ed that Charles is attempting to pick up by pointing out the chromosomes controlling the girl’s different colored eyes, Raven/Mystique wills one of her own eyes to change color, trying on the characteristic and infuriating Charles. Later, staring in the mirror as her true self, Raven/Mystique wonders over the acceptable mutations and the unacceptable, referencing the acceptable parameters of femininity and desire. These questions are also raised in the performance choices of Jennifer Lawrence, the actress who plays young Mystique. Jennifer Lawrence’s portrayal of Mystique is obviously quite different than that of Rebecca Romign’s older, more lethal Mystique in the film trilogy, and the difference in the actresses’ body types might be reflective of the changing conceptions of this super villain. Romign’s Mystique is taller, leaner, and prone to strike poses that mirror models on runways and magazine covers. Lawrence’s
character seems more aware of female artifice and positioning. The majority of shots from the earlier films depicted Romign’s Mystique with her head tilted, chin lifted and back arched. Lawrence’s Mystique is framed facing the camera head on without this positioning. If Lawrence is consistently named at the top of lists of beautiful actresses, why then is there a shift in the way the two are shot? Perhaps it speaks to the less narrow view of beauty that has emerged within the last decade. We are meant to fetishize the older Mystique but this new portrayal of her does not adhere to traditional body positioning. Instead of signifying femininity and desire by her stance, the younger Mystique is less prone to imitate the pin-up positioning. Here, Mulvey’s theory of the masculine male gaze is questioned. If, as Mulvey theorizes, women’s bodies are meant to be consumer in either a voyeuristic or fetishistic way, where does First Class’s Mystique fall? The obvious pleasure of looking at her is lost by the majority of the male protagonists and comparatively to the response to Romign’s characterization, it is also lost by the audience. Lawrence’s blocking is more natural and the proportions of her body more realistic with average girls. With this more direct Mystique, her “looked-at-ness” (Mulvey) is not as apparent and the implied invitation to male desire is absent.

There are other ways that the physicality of Mystique might be explored. Both Linda Williams and Steven Shaviro suggest new ways to analyze and encounter the body on screen. Regarding the female body, Williams groups film theorists such as Metz, Baudry, and Mulvey as assuming “that the desire for these visual pleasures is already inscribed in the object” (44) but her argument resists this, not completely displacing foundational tenets of film theory, but suggesting that the cinematic apparatus can work to create something quite different:
In this case the cinematic magnification and projection of human bodies would not simply restage the original scenario of castration (and the male “solutions” or escapes of fetishization and voyeurism) at the sight of female difference. Rather, it would produce a new kind of body, which viewers experience through this optical machine. The new, larger-than-life, projected film body is ideally visible; although on display for the viewer, it goes about its business as if unaware of being watched. The little scenarios providing opportunities for movement produce, in the case of the woman’s body, a first step in the direction of narratives that will facilitate seeing her previously hidden further truths. (45)

This “new body” is captured by what Williams describes as not only a technological apparatus, but also a social one. As she describes the historical framework from which female bodies came into focus on the screen, she writes that women were not involved in the positioning and direction of female bodies, that there was little “truth” to the movements of the models and actresses. Her argument is that we automatically assume that the objects denote desire and this assumption is not necessarily final. Though all film images are mediated, the choices made by either Lawrence or director, Matthew Vaughn, seem to display a more truthful depiction of the character (for example, the scene in which Raven/Mystique brushes her teeth in front of the mirror, the camera resists framing her in a glamorous way).

Also inherent in Mystique’s depiction is the unity of mind and body. Her guises are controlled completely by her psyche. In Theory out of Bounds, Shaviro writes that the
body has a long history of being appraised as an obstacle to thought, something to be overcome or contained. He argues that cinema breaks through this assumption. Shaviro devotes a chapter to the work of David Cronenberg and focuses on the bodies displayed in Cronenberg’s films. He writes:

Bodily affectation are not psychoanalytical symptoms to be deciphered; they actually are, in their own right, movements of passion...The flesh is less rigidly determined, more fluid and open to metamorphosis, than we generally like to think. (128.9)

A family friendly action film is a clear departure from Cronenberg’s visions, and still the body of Mystique suggests a similar transgression (albeit much less violently). Her actual transformations are soft, feathered, but the body is still being remade. Donna Harraway champions a similar movement in *A Cyborg Manifesto* when she likens cyborgs to salamanders in that reconstitution and not rebirth is the catalyst to achieve genderless society. While Mystique’s body doesn’t make a visceral or offending cinematic statement the way that the body genres that both Williams and Shaviro discuss, it is literally and figuratively an unstable intersection of gender and performativity. It simultaneously acknowledges that thought directly influences the body and reinforces that in Mystique’s case, consciousness affects gender more than anatomy.

**Symptoms and Cures**

Raven/Mystique’s powers allow her to shift into any form (male or female), taking on any identity, physical appearance, or voice at will. There is an inherent repulsion that she inspires in Charles that she must pretend at normalcy. While this film lays the foundation for the evolution of Professor X, with his empathetic and encouraging
views on mutants, he seems opposed to Raven/Mystique and embarrassed whenever she chooses her original form over an attractive human form. By his reaction to her body, he seems to continuously pose the question, “If you could be anyone, look like anyone, why in the world would you choose to be you?” Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (Gender Trouble) is key in the evolution of Mystique throughout the film. As a female supporting character, she ought to be categorized as a sidekick, relevant only in the way she relates to the males that take top billing, but there are moments that the narrative privileges her perspective.

Thematically, all of the X-Men films deal in some way with the concept of curing mutations and otherness with either war, captivity, assimilation, or a medical antidote. This wariness of the majority is concentrated not so much against the actual abilities of the mutants, though they are obviously problematic to the population, but with the unsettling realization that there are mutants who can hide in plain sight. Mystique is a peerless example of this tension because her ability allows her to pass as human, blend in, and this is what is truly forbidden.

In Enjoy Your Symptom! Žižek revisits Lacan’s statement that woman is a symptom of man and uses examples from film noir to suggest a reversal of this assertion. Instead of woman disappearing as the hero “breaks her spell upon him” (155), Žižek positions the statement backwards:

If the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself loses the ground under its feet, disintegrates…In other words, man literally ex-sists: his entire being lies “out there,” in woman. Woman, on the other hand, does not exist, she insists, which is why she does not come to be through man only…Woman is therefore no longer conceived as fundamentally “passive” in contrast to male activity: the act as such, in its most fundamental dimension, is “feminine.” (156)
*X-Men: The First Class* is classified as an origin story so it is essential that there be a sense of the characters rounding out to who they will ultimately become. Mystique’s character functions as a femme fatale in the trilogy—becoming the “fall” of anyone who is taken in by her false identities. Žižek’s discussion is compelling in that it positions action as inherently feminine and questions how we might view the female on screen. Zizek discusses using masks to create identities, insisting that “the only authenticity at our disposal is that of impersonation” (34). Women are subject to imposed patriarchal fantasies and the masks they wear reflect this. Without them, the feminine is void of such boundaries. For Žižek, acts that interrupt or deviate from male expectations disturb the symbolic order of patriarchy (an order that is organized with language), the acts are feminine because they are outside of the ordered, masculine realm. Mystique fits into this claim in two ways: first, she is without a symbolic “mask” and without the disguise of normalcy, she is distanced from male desire. Even her status as a superhero does not dictate that she don a cape or mask. While her counterparts are defined by helmets or superhero suits, she is most lethal when she is without the trappings of signification. Second, Mystique’s choice not to fulfill the male fantasies offered to her (Hank’s and Charles’ desire that she remain a blonde, Caucasian girl or Eric’s desire that she act as a god) interrupts the symbolic order. Instead of the power of the femme fatale being neutered by the men’s choices to stop short of desire fulfillment (as Žižek asserts, male heroes must purify their desires of the female in order to thwart her power), Mystique ceases male desire and asserts her own agency. In effect, she gives up the familiar life she once shared with Charles as well as the burgeoning romance she might have with Beast to begin again. Though she leaves with Magneto, she does so on her own terms and does
not necessarily share his viewpoint entirely. Her alignment with his mission is left ambiguous. It is an act of freedom and one that could fall under Žižek’s label of a “symbolic suicide.” The symbolic death of Raven (the young girl that Charles adopts as friend and pet) can be viewed in Žižek’s terms as “an act of “losing all,” of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the “zero point,” from that point of absolute freedom” (43). While Žižek does not necessarily define the masculine and feminine in terms of physical embodiment, his statements provide an opening for this argument on Mystique’s agency. In a traditional read of the film, her anxieties become representative of masculine perspectives but by embracing Žižek’s outlook, her decisions and actions can potentially be defined as empowered as well as feminist.

Mystique’s potentially resistant possibilities are mostly overshadowed by the evolving relationship between Charles and Eric. Eric Berlatsky writes that the film “revolves around a love triangle that positions Raven/Mystique between Professor X and Magneto, serving as the ‘object’ that helps define the relationship that is clearly the most important in the film, the homosocial competition/friendship between the two men” (“Between Supermen”). The connection between Charles and Eric is obvious from their first encounter in the film. Charles dives into the sea and embraces Eric, saving him from chasing his nemesis and also saving him from death. They progress into a deep friendship, an equal pairing. Fans of the films as well as the comics are well aware of the underlying tensions as expressed through fan fiction and art. In *First Class*, Mystique’s interaction with the men seems superficial, light, and unimportant when compared to their chess games and philosophical musings. The two men make each other better and there is pleasure in watching Eric, whom the audience knows to be a super villain in
waiting, and Charles find an easy friendship against a war-ready back drop. Instead of viewing Mystique as the object that the two channel their own desires through, we might separate Mystique out of their equation as an outlier, a non-choice for either man. The apparent excuses of age difference and proximity fall away as false reasons and she emerges as undesirable for both. Like *Scott Pilgrim’s Knives Chau*, she is somehow dispossessed of feminine desirability. Heterosexual norms are underscored by moments in the film: Eric shares a chaste kiss with Raven, Charles kisses FBI agent Moira MacTaggert, and Raven is given an ineffectual love interest, and yet none of these possibilities offer any believable pairings.

Hank McCoy, Raven/Mystique’s only real viable love interest, is never really a persuasive option for her. He represents the part of Raven/Mystique that wants to be normal and accepted. His creation of a “cure” to their mutant appearance is brought about by insecurity and the desire to blend in. Mystique is a complex character, comic theorists have pointed out how calculated and logical (though questionable) her choices are. The film, situated in a genre that usually positions female love interests only to define masculine heroes, presents Hank as valid only in relation to Raven. His one strong and empowering moment is brought on by the injection of her genes that imposes her own desires upon his physical body, resulting in his transformation into Beast. Not only is her physical body deceiving but her genes are also potent. The message that surfaces is that her will and wants are important and separate from any of the men that she encounters.
Otherness

It is imperative to recognize that neither of the leading men (Charles nor Eric) represents the majority of mutants who are identified as outsiders. The film’s finale posits Charles, who desires a peaceable existence with humans for the good of all, on the good side and Eric, who desires dominion over humans for the good of all mutants, on the evil side. They represent two extreme positions that are easily defined. Raven/Mystique resists this spectrum, instead mediating her individual choices based solely on what’s best for her, with little regard for the larger picture. This differentiation is important, because Mystique is representative of a mutant who struggles with the necessity of passing in human society. Instead of disappearing at their rejections of her (i.e. Charles’ reaction to her nakedness or Eric’s disapproval over her human form), the men are the ones that cease to exist in that they are only extensions of her: the true “act” that is visual, visceral, and eye-drawing (Žižek). The two opponents flatten out, situated on either end of a clear division. While Mystique chooses not to assimilate and ultimately leaves with Eric turned Magneto, she is not choosing one man over another but instead choosing what is in her own best interest. She is outside their patriarchal control and her vantage point allows her to critique these two strong staples of the diegesis. Instead of Charles or Eric bestowing approval and desire onto her, it seems that within the film, the only gaze and choice that matters is hers.

The Canon

Perhaps Mystique’s positioning as a feminist in a postfeminist context has something to do with the referential and highly complex narrative from which her
character originates. Unlike Knives and Hit-Girl, Mystique’s origins in the comic canon are mysterious, complicated, and varied. The fact that Mystique has a complex origin gives her more depth as a feminist character because her back-story does not rely on a more significant male figure. She does not begin as someone’s girlfriend or daughter. While she is paired romantically with several mutants and humans, her longest and most important relationship is with Irene/Destiny, a fellow mutant and woman. Followers of the comics know that Mystique is acknowledged as one of very few bisexual characters in the Marvel universe. Several story arcs emphasize fluidity of gender and sexuality. Many of the stories that writers wanted to tell about the couple and the child they raise together, posing such implications were impermissible at the time. However, the fact that Mystique’s gender is changeable is in constant focus within the canon.

**Conclusion**

Though Mystique can be read as a traditionally powerless female character, there are possibilities of deviation afforded to her within the diegesis of *X-Men: The First Class*. Aesthetically, she resists the connotations associated with previous cinematic incarnations. Inspiring desire is less important when she’s in her true form. The implications of her physicality bleed over into her relationships with her male counterparts and while hints of different pairings are given, none are fleshed out. Instead, the film allows for Raven/Mystique to distance herself from her given options. This refusal to commit the character into an expected heterosexual relationship may just reflect writers’ desires to keep potential romances in sequels open, but it also offers the possibility of an oppositional reading. It allows viewers to question the permeability of
Raven/Mystique’s gender and identity. Her character is without a great cause to fight for and believe in, her story is purely individual and follows her evolution from a lost child, to an insecure young woman, and finally to an accepting outsider. While Charles and Eric’s trajectories are well set up to become evenly matched opponents each fighting for the greater good, Raven/Mystique’s future is left ambiguous: she joins Eric’s team but seems not to harbor any animosity for Charles or the mutants that stay behind. She merely does not want to have to hide.

Compared with the other heroines detailed in this paper, Raven/Mystique uniquely answers many of the inconsistencies posed by the previous characters, Hit-Girl and Knives Chau. Mystique lacks Hit-Girl’s blatant tendencies for violence but her image still calls attention to the fluid female body, a body that has the anatomy of a woman, but is not treated as such. Both seem to call into question performativity and intent. Similarly to Knives, Raven/Mystique is not paired off at the end of film though the promise of a relationship is indicated. Instead of an ellipsis for the character, she follows her own convictions and makes a specific choice. Her choices as well as her body mark her character as a feminist in an unintentionally feminist story. Mystique consistently feels the pressures and inadequacies of being female in a male dominated world, highlighting the impossibility of a real postfeminist existence. However, her character does not succumb to the desires of the patriarchy but pushes against them and makes her own resistant decisions.
V. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have examined three examples of progressively feminist representations of girl superheroes, Hit-Girl, Knives Chau, and Mystique. Though from different origins and situated in varied fictional universes, each denotes certain qualities specific to the Super Sidechick. This new categorization of girl superhero reflects postfeminist tensions. To have a presence in this narrow grouping, a secondary girl character must either 1. Exhibit violent tendencies that surpass her male counterparts (acting); 2. Realize the limitations of the girl power movement through self awareness (thinking); or 3. Embody the adaptability that modern feminism requires (becoming).

Hit-Girl’s youth and gender differentiate her from other complex heroes. Her familiarity with violence juxtaposes the seemingly nonthreatening nonentity with skilled and deadly action. This pairing offers not only the possibility of what a Super Sidechick is capable of and her actions are unique, yet the film ends with her containment and demotion to an average girl. Knives Chau realizes through the narrative of *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* that her constant makeovers, both physical and internal, are not able to grant her fulfillment. She becomes self-aware of her own status as both a consumer and a commodity. Though the perfect consumer for most of the film, she realizes that her desires to consume are fueled by the greater desire to become the perfect object for Scott to consume. Mystique, able to take on any persona and appearance, ultimately chooses her true identity over her myriad of options. The true
identity that emerges and that she chooses to protect is problematic when viewed against feminist theories that assert that reality is performative. Mystique’s choices seem to reflect a modern feminism that comprehends the performativity of gender but does not abhor or deny the socialized constructs of a sexed body. This study has shown each of these characters is indicative of a different role emerging in the superhero genre—a role that privileges female perspective and questions masculine views of what defines the feminine.

This paper used the approach of close textual analysis to examine and interpret young female superheroes as responses to postfeminism. Further analysis of girl superheroes might focus on audience reception to the newer cinematic offerings in the genre. The demographic of comic book readers as well as the audience of the action film genre is changing, and cinema, as a business, is responding to this shift. Further analysis would benefit from incorporating audience reception studies. Qualitative research on the reactions that young females have to like characters would provide a greater insight into how more feminist-friendly superheroes affect adolescent girls.

Studies in adaptation could also offer perspective into the choices made when translating feminist characters from page to screen. Although I offer a basic comparison between Kick-Ass the graphic novel and the film, I believe much can be gained by a more in-depth analysis of form. Researching authors and interviewing key sources could also provide a glimpse into the intent behind the creation and adaptations of the characters. Also, these films are not sealed and closed; they are contextual in that they belong to broad universes. A more in-depth look at the canon of the narratives would present differing visions to the development of feminist tendencies in each character.
This new movement of the Super Sidechick not only reflects the growing demographic of the genre, it is also reflective of a changing understanding of what a feminist looks and acts like. It might not be trendy to be named as feminist, but these socially acceptable feminist characters in unfeminist films offer a way to appropriate positive feminist attributes without labels. Because Fantasy and Science Fiction are well known for crafting metaphors referencing social philosophies and movements of the time, it is unsurprising that this new, more subtle, feminist character has emerged in response to the disappointments of postfeminism. Existing wholly outside of patriarchal discourse (a tenant implied by girl power) is unrealistic for even postmodern subjects. By understanding and working within the confines of the patriarchal realm, Super Sidechicks are able to assert an individualistic feminism that responds directly to the issues they face. The girl power movement continues to fail participants because having and maintaining everything is unrealistic; however, the flawed yet more realistic Super Sidechick, as reflected in these specific characters, provide a more attainable response for modern girls to adopt.
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With Elastigirl taking centre stage, the new Pixar film’s feminist cape is streaming proudly. But the wider animation industry needs to catch up. She happens to have grey hair, as do an unusual number of the women in the film and they are far from hobbling grannies. Cast your mind back to action movies where there are gatherings of influential people in a glamorous location, say at a mayoral opening or a party on a yacht. I found it quietly groundbreaking: it offered hope that a generation of young girls would be able to envisage a complex working future, albeit with less dramatic moral challenges than those faced by Helen Parr. But while it might pass the Bechdel test, Incredibles 2 doesn’t pass on all counts.