FIGHTING FOR WOMEN EXISTENCE IN POPULAR ESPIONAGE MOVIES *SALT* (2010) AND *ZERO DARK THIRTY* (2012)

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Abstract

American spy movies have been considered one of the most profitable genre in Hollywood. These spy movies frequently create an assumption that this genre is exclusively masculine, as women have been made oblivious and restricted to either supporting roles or non-spy roles. In 2010 and 2012, portrayal of women in spy movies was finally changed after the release of *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, in which women became the leading spy protagonists. Through the post-nationalist American Studies perspective, this study discusses the importance of both movies in reinventing women's identity representation in a masculine genre in response to the evolving American society.

Keywords: American women, hegemony, representation, Hollywood, movies, popular culture

Introduction

The American movie industry, often called and widely known as Hollywood, is one of the most powerful cinematic industries in the world. In the more recent data, from all the movies released in 2012 Hollywood achieved $ 10 billion revenue in North America alone, while grossing more than $ 34,7 billion worldwide (Kay, 2013). In the same year, three Hollywood movies; *Marvel's The Avengers*, *Skyfall*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* reached $ 1 billion mark in the international box office. In 2013 alone, there were three movies that reached $ 400 million domestically in the U.S. box office; *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Frozen* in which the latter two reached the $ 1 billion mark worldwide.

The financial success and continuous power of this industry implies that there has been good relations between the producers and the main target audience. The producers have been able to feed the audience with products that are suitable to their taste. Seen from the movies' financial revenues as previously mentioned, action movies are proven to yield more revenue thus become the most popular genre. Because of profitable reception, the producers are commonly inclined to create similar products to maintain a 'mutual' relationship. In other words, what audience wants is revealed through the existed and existing 'popular' products.

Nachbar and Lause (1992) elaborated the deeper level of coherence from the mutual relationship, that "[producers] will go to

great lengths to mold their products to reflect the audience beliefs and values" (p. 3). This implies that Hollywood movies are in fact "mediums" to see the underlying cultural values within the American society. In terms of popular movies, we can see how most of the released movies have been men-centric. It is visible through the characters, especially the protagonist. Almost all movies listed in the top 100 all-time box office are attributed to masculinity. Take example from these most popular movies; commercially successful *Avatar* (2009), *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, *The Dark Knight* (or *Batman*) series, the *Star Wars* series, *Spider-Man* series, *Transformers* series, *Iron Man* series, and *The Lord of the Rings* series; or the critically acclaimed and award-winning movies *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *The Godfather* trilogy, *Schindler's List* (1993), *Inception* (2011), *Fight Club* (1999), *American History X* (1998), *Casablanca* (1942) and *Forrest Gump* (1994). All of these movies put men as the leading characters, with only a small number of female characters. Some of the women were mostly considered as 'supporting characters', as in most cases, be simply the love interest of the men.

According to data from the movie website Vulture, less than 50% of mainstream movies featured women in the leading role from 1989 to 2013 (Dobbins, 2013). New York Film Academy (NYFA) also had a take in exploring gender equality in film. From the top 500 movies from 2007 to 2012, they discovered that only 30.8% of speaking roles were for women characters, 10.7% movies featured a gender-balanced cast, and 32.5%

of women in the movies were depicted with some nudity or sexual scenes (Zurko, 2013).

Movies with women as the leading characters were usually categorized in the more specified genres such as drama, romance, comedy, etc. These genres are more restricted compared to those which feature male characters. The genre is usually called "women films", and is made based on the women's perspective about the lives of women. Since there is a correlation between the movie and audience, a specified theme and genre of a movie means narrowing the audience demographic as well. This is explained by Abrams and Hogg (1990), who stated that people from particular social communities or identity groups seek out particular "messages" which support their social identity. This statement is also supported by Harwood's (1997) reasoning, that selecting particular choices in media viewing is a form of social identity gratification (Fischoff, Antonio, & Lewis, 1998). Thus, the "women films" are particularly attractive to women because the movies share themes common to women's lives; these female audiences can also easily identify themselves with the characters in the movies.

The stereotyping of women in movies-especially in the "women films" or "women genre"-is still based on the traditional assumption that women have always been in a smaller scope. Particularly, as history claimed, in the domestic area. The roles for women are limitedly related to motherhood, household, daughter, inter-women relations, and being a wife or girlfriend.

One of the most apparent gender biases in Hollywood is the depiction of women in the spy genre. This genre has been considered as exclusively male-centric, because almost all spy movies have male protagonists. It can be seen from the beginning of the spy movie trend, particularly from the 1930s until 1950s when British director Alfred Hitchcock has moved to the U.S. He has directed numerous spy movies such as *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Secret Agent* (1936), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Notorious* (1946), and *North by Northwest* (1950). These classic productions have become the archetypal spy movie narrative, where a male spy with exceptional intelligence and physical strength leads the narrative, along with one or more supporting sidekicks, while the women are present either as his love interest, victim, or a vicious spy. Such apportions of role instruments are still used in the more modern spy movies.

This is why usually only the leading male spy character becomes an icon. Starting in the 1960s, the James Bond franchise became a hype, even until now-from *Dr. No* (1962), *From Russia With Love* (1963), *Moonraker* (1979), *A View To A Kill* (1985), *Golden Eye* (1995) to the most recent *Quantum of Solace* (2008) and *Skyfall* (2012). In the 1990s, new spy characters were introduced and instantly became commercially successful; Ethan Hunt in the *Mission: Impossible* series (1996, 2002, 2006, and 2011), and Jack Ryan series *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *Patriot Games* (1992), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), and *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014). The 2000s was the birth of

the character Jason Bourne in the Bourne series *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) and *The Bourne Legacy* (2012). The trend of franchising the spy movies is a proof that the audience is highly interested in this genre. What makes the spy movies more intriguing than the usual action movies is that, "[p]art of the appeal of the spy genre, everyone agrees, is not only the nonstop action and the high-tech tools, but the derring-do spy heroes are often called upon to demonstrate" (Corbett, 2005). This is proven from the box office revenue from each series, as they each grossed over $ 200 million in the U.S. alone.

The spy genre also shows specifically the political activities of espionage operated by government agents. An action movie could revolve around an ordinary man, but this does not apply to spy movies. The leading character of spy movies is always depicted as a professional, most often a federal agent dealing with international issues. This field of work is commonly attributed to men, with the concept of foreign relations having been reinforced by masculinity as it involves masculine issues (Cohn, 1987); international politics, security, arms races, or nuclear issues. This is the main reason why spy movies have been preconditioned to have a male leading character. The female characters in spy movies, however, are still depicted to be secondary, as supporting characters similar to the previously mentioned character stereotypes.

Compared to other genres, particularly action, there has been a gradual expansion of women in leading roles and at the center of the narrative. *Alien* (1979), *Red Sonja*

(1985), *Blue Steel* (1990), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Barb Wire* (1996), *La Femme Nikita* (1991) are some of the most popular women-led action films of the 1980s and 1990s. These films caused a significant shift in how female characters are portrayed in action films, because the women lead the plot and do not only become the supporting characters of the hero. This trend continued in the 2000s, with female leading action films being franchised by the Hollywood studios. *The Hunger Games* (2012-14), *Resident Evil* (2002, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012), *Charlie's Angels* (2000 and 2002), *Underworld* (2003, 2006, and 2012), *Tomb Raider* (2001 and 2003) and *Kill Bill* (2003 and 2004), all portray women as the lead within the action narrative, and they are equipped with the same capability as the male characters and are out of the domestic sphere. Each of them have to fight to survive, and even to save others. These characters also "retain certain key characteristics that maintain their acceptability as female heroines and reaffirm male characters' masculinity and that of male viewers" (Tung, 2004).

However, starting in summer 2010, spy movies with women as the leading characters began to surface. The first movie, *Salt*, was released in 2010 starring Academy Award winner Angelina Jolie. Jolie portrays a CIA agent Evelyn Salt, who is convicted of being a sleeper Russian agent. This accusation leads to tumultuous events for Salt, in which her husband is kidnapped and the FBI starts to hunt her. The second movie is titled *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), with a female character named Maya who is depicted as the key player in the Osama bin Laden hunt. Portrayed by Golden Globe winner Jessica Chastain, Maya is an exceptional CIA rookie who is assigned to locate bin Laden's whereabouts. Seen from the premises alone, these movies do conform to the universal formula of spy movies in which the leading characters are professionals and the films involve U.S. foreign relations. Having led by female characters, these movies are not particularly toning down the spy movies 'experience' involving action sequences and thrilling sensations; as they live up to it. Although the numbers of female characters are not comparable to that of the male characters in both movies, Salt and Maya are at the center of the narratives. This is what discerns *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* from the other popular spy movies where female characters are subverted. In other words, these characters have broken the gender exclusivity of the spy genre.

Salt and *Zero Dark Thirty* are chosen to be the primary objects of analysis in this research because of the similar substance in constructing women's identity within the narratives. The essential difference of how both spy movies depict women identity as the leading character is interesting to examine, because this genre has been conveyed as restricted to male protagonists since earlier developments and because leading women characters are seemingly limited to the "women movies". Thus, the construction of women's identities in these movies can be viewed as an act of countering the hegemony of patriarchal values.

As the American culture and society have been affected by the ever evolving ideas and movements regarding women's issues, women's representation in popular culture is considered just as important. This is one of the many continuations in women's rights movements, which have expanded in the 21st century. Women's representation in American popular culture has been conceived to be unjust and inadequate in terms of numbers and depiction. Popular culture here is put into attention, because there is a mutual relationship between the society and the industry of popular culture, in which the products are reflecting the cultural values that exist in the society. Moreover, it is the easiest product that people could apprehend as it is made palpable for everyone. If it is not properly representing women, then that is unquestionably how people would perceive the conception of women for certain lengths of time.

Methodology

From the perspective of post-nationalist American Studies, women's issues in American society also becomes one of the issues priorities. Post-nationalist American Studies sees that there is an evident oppression by the dominating society towards minority groups-by race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.-which leads them to social marginalization. This brings out the importance of expanding topics within the new American Studies as a critic to the on-going cultural hegemony by the dominant class through the different perspective of the marginalized. Rowe (2000) explained,

The new American Studies tries to work genuinely as a comparist discipline that will respect the many different social system and cultural affiliations of the Americas. […] this new comparative approach stresses the ways different cultures are transformed by their contact and interaction with each other. […] With very different histories of responding to ethnic and racial minorities, as well as of constructing gendered and sexual hierarchies, these different Americas also help foreground the multilingual and multicultural realities of social life and economic opportunity in any of the Americas. (pp. 24-25)

In this case, the representation of women in Hollywood movies is oppressed by the dominating culture of the masculine. The depiction of women in the most popular movies are limited. They are usually the secondary or supporting characters, often victimized, and only take the lead if it is specifically a "women movie". This stereotype has been gradually debunked as the expansion of women leading roles in action movies has started to flourish; but it is more interesting when they have reached the seemingly restricted spy movies. The researcher sees the release of *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* as a resistance towards the existing and dominating male culture in popular fiction.

This research will be conducted in qualitative methodology as it is mainly a literature study which relies heavily on

library research. Creswell (2009) explained about qualitative research method in the book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*:

> Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. Their interpretations cannot be separated from their own backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings. After a research report is issued, the readers make an interpretation as well as the participants, offering yet other interpretations of the study. (p. 212)

The researcher will interpret the data in a subjective manner using this mode of interpretation under the paradigm of post-nationalist American Studies to analyze and answer the proposed research questions.

This research will rely on two types of data; primary and secondary data. The primary data for this research will be taken from two American spy movies; *Salt* (2010) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). The secondary data is comprised of written materials; which includes books, journals, articles, reports, websites, online articles, or interviews; audiovisual materials especially video interviews which will be obtained from the library and online sources. All data that has been collected will be selected in relevance to the research topic and will be put into catalogues of sub-topics. The main sub-topic catalogues will be divided into; American spy movies, women's identity in American

spy movies, and American society which includes the Hollywood industry. These supporting materials will be used simultaneously to explore deeper understanding of the main research topic.

In accordance with the theoretical framework, the data will be analyzed with the theory of representation to answer the proposed research questions. The main objects of this research, American spy movies *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, will be treated as the medium which communicates sub-texts that can be seen through the post-nationalist American Studies perspective. Images, scenes, and dialogues within these movies act as the main 'language' which will be interpreted. Before entering the main analysis, the historical overview of American spy movies will be explored. Furthermore, the common formula of narratives and depiction of women's roles in American spy movies will also be explained. The data will be taken from books, journals, and articles which discuss the relevant topic.

The main analysis is to interpret the main objects particularly in how and why these movies depict particular women's identity. The found data from both movies will be the first signifier, which will be compared to the woman roles as well as the central male protagonist in the previous spy movies in order to find significant differences or similarities. After the comparison, production analysis will be conducted to reveal the factors which support the depiction of women's identity in these movies. Production analysis views popular culture products through the industry itself, which seeks the ideas and values that have

influenced the producers, public taste and the ongoing trend within society. For production analysis, secondary data will be utilized which is taken from articles and interviews with the people involved in the making of both movie productions (e.g. executive producers, directors, actors, screenwriters, the production studio, etc.). Additionally to see the trend and public taste in society, other secondary data will be utilized and taken from box office revenue and the public reception of the movies. This secondary data will be processed and will act as the signified. The found signified here functions as the second layer of interpretation, which is the main values, ideas, concepts, or reasoning behind the signifier that is derived from the images, dialogues, and scenes found in selected movies. These will be further elaborated in order to reveal sign, the broader concept which justifies the construction of both signifier and signified. Thus, sign will be the main finding of this research.

Discussion
Reinventing Women's Identity in American Spy Movies

Spy movies *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* embody a representation of opposing women's identity. Seen from the surface, the leading women characters Salt and Maya are seemingly defying and negating the common roles of women in spy movies. But after being scrutinized very closely, it can be seen that they also celebrate the stereotypes attributed to women. Both of these opposing side also represent different realities and values.

The reinvention of women's identity was supported by the filmmakers, in which they are aware of the lack of women in the spy genre and that they are women. It is rare for women to be involved in spy movie projects especially in directorial, writing, or starring roles. They mostly work as make-up artists or in the wardrobe section. This is why in the previous spy movies, women's depiction was restricted. They are either innocent, merely a sidekick, love interest, or vicious femme fatale and they are often treated as victims or as sexual objects. In *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, women were actually present to construct the identity of the woman character.

Rejecting Women's Objectification

There is one commonality of women's roles in American spy movies: the women are always depicted to be physically beautiful. This does not only apply to the innocent roles, but to the women from the vicious side as well. Their outfits are mostly revealing, in which they usually show off their shoulders or legs. Even the more tomboy characters are still shown to wear tight t-shirts or tank tops combined with a pair of short pants. Despite the intelligence or strength they already have, their physical beauty is what also helps them the most when they carry out their mission in the narrative.

This could be related to the psychonalaysis concept of *male gaze*, which was written by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. According to Mulvey (1985), women in Hollywood movies are merely the "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (p. 834). The

statement is derived from the function of women in the patriarchal society, in which men take control and define the political structure within the society. This rooted idea has been already unconsciously reflected in the film making process, where the term *male gaze* has been popularized since then. Beauvoir (1949) pointed out about the role of women,

> […] she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absoulte sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (p. xxii)

Referring to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis theory in identifying women as merely "the sign of sexual differences" in the society, Beauvoir further asserts that the society itself is 'male' and that woman "cannot think of herself without man". This resonates to that of patriarchal society in which the men define what women are and are not; and what women should and should not do. In other words, the men construct the culture of women in almost every aspect, in this case including the popular culture. As exhibited in movies, women are merely the 'sweeteners' on the screen, the sexual objects to be looked at. Mulvey (1985) also explained that a movie functions "to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human

perception" (p. 838), thus also reasserting the basic perception in the patriarchal society.

Mulvey offers two treatments towards women that are commonly found in classic mainstream Hollywood productions. The first one is scopophilia, which is related to the pleasure of looking or watching. Influenced by Freud's concept of scopophilia in *Three Essays on Sexuality,* this is where people "take other people as objects". Through this concept, women are transformed to be the satisfying objects by beautifying their physical builds. This treatment is common in the spy movies as most women are always physically beautiful or sexually appealing. The second one is constituted from the ego thus related to narcissism, in which there is a ratability and identification of the objects on screen and the spectators in real life. In the more extreme level, this could be associated with sadism on screen, commonly portrayed with scenes of investigation, punishment, or forgiveness.

Such objectification is nowhere to be found in *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, as Salt and Maya are the leading role. These women spies are the subject of the narratives. They are the ones carrying the story and take control of their destiny by being decisive instead of following the common formula of spy movies where they follow the male characters. In the depiction, Salt and Maya are depicted as being physically strong, intelligent, independent, and decisive. This opposes the previous women's roles in spy movies, in which they are helpless victims or love interests. Instead, they possess the

same characteristics as the male protagonist for exhibiting violence by killing or torturing, being unemotional and cold-hearted. The idea of subverting the women's roles is debunked through these characters.

Although Salt and Maya come close to being depicted as femme fatale, they are not positioned to be the antagonist or villain. They are also not depicted to ooze sexuality as femme fatale by wearing revealing dresses. Instead, they represent modern professional women by mostly wearing office attires. While Salt mostly exhibits her physical strength for her survival in numerous action scenes, Maya makes a fight for her credibility with her fierce personality and intelligence. Unlike femme fatale characters, their actions and decisions are not merely based on personal motives. They put the interest of the international security before their own. They prove their loyalty to the nation. And this is what the protagonist spy should do. These characters carry out the fundamental elements which usually embedded into the good male spy character, the hero, who saves the people and saves the nation. He solves the problems in the narrative, and so do Salt and Maya. They are applauded for being the noble knight and not merely being yielded as the innocent victims or villainess who deserve to be punished.

Women's Identity Construction by Women Filmmakers

The changing gender role represented in *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* is reasonably affected by the changing society as well. Women's representation especially in popular culture, has been recognized as a

social matter from the feminist point of view. According to the book *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture,*

> […] it is here, from popular culture – soaps, sitcoms, the tabloid press, women's magazines, mass-produced fiction, pop music, etc. – that most people in our society get their entertainment and their information. It is here that women (and men) are offered the culture's dominant definitions of themselves. It would therefore seem crucial to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of intervention in popular forms in order to find ways of making feminist meanings a part of our pleasures. (Gamman & Marshment, 1989, p. 2)

By "the culture's dominant definitions of themselves" it is quite easy to assume that the popular culture still adopts the common social culture which is patriarchy. This patriarchal values are what construct the image and identity of women in the popular culture. The construction does not necessarily based on the actuality of women's identity, because of the consideration of women as the Others. Thus, the scarcity of women as subjects in popular culture is one of the main issue in feminism.

The patriarchy dominance can be seen from how American cinema seems to favor the male gaze as previously mentioned in Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic explanation. The main assumption is that only the male spectators can identify themselves to the narrative. This is caused by the underlying values that either subtly or obviously stated

in the narratives, which the male spectators consider 'normal'. Irigaray (1998) argued through the psychoanalytic view that the female subjectivity "has always been theorized within masculine parameters" (p. 549).

Becoming the subject in a movie will affect the whole perspective of the narrative. When it is led by a woman, every sense in the narrative will be according to the subject. Shoos (1992) explained that as woman takes over as the subject, the "female perspective […] may emerge as a function of narrative, character, genre, […] etc., and thay may have an impact on women's reception of these [fictions] texts" (p. 220). The feminists address this problem under the notion of identity politics, in which subjectivity is "historically situated, de-centered, fragmented, and non-unitary in order to compose solidarity movements based on political affinities, which could foster political coalitions for social transformations" (Alvarez, 2008, p. 4). This notion is mostly used by the oppressed identities based on race, religion, or gender. By noting Simone de Beauvoir's "Other"-ness concept of women, this affirms that patriarchal society is what defines the subjectivity of women, which is often construed as the "liege". The representation of women in *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* therefore allow the viewers to see the male dominated genre through the perspective of women, as they claim the role of subject in the narrative.

Different from other spy movies, the women behind the scenes were vocal and held significant position in the productions of *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. Amy Pascal, the co-chairman of Sony Pictures – the studio which brought *Salt* – suggested that the leading character of Salt should be a woman as soon as actor Tom Cruise who was signed to play the titular role left the production. She stated she wanted to make a 'female spy movie', and immediately called Angelina Jolie to offer the role. Jolie accepted the role, and she was reported to be involved during the character construction. Besides reportedly being eager to do action stunts by her own, Jolie also suggested a lot of things regarding the gender change, including the characterization and plot changes by seeing them through a woman's perspective.

Zero Dark Thirty has Kathryn Bigelow who holds a directorial position. Bigelow is personally interested in making war-themed dramas, as she previously succeeded in obtaining The Academy Award for Best Director for her work in *The Hurt Locker*. After the historical event of Osama bin Laden's raid and death, Bigelow intended to make a movie adaptation of it. She and her screenwriter Mark Boal did an investigative research about who was involved during the process of the bin Laden hunt until the execution of the compound raid. After finding out that a female CIA agent had a prominent role in the mission, Bigelow and Boal decided to bring this up as the central subject and main character of the movie. Oscar nominated actress Jessica Chastain was cast to play the agent which was subsequently fictionalized as 'Maya'. Despite the heavy military and political theme of this movie, Bigelow wanted to emphasize more about Maya's struggle as a young woman agent and her process in locating bin Laden. Bigelow also stated that

Maya's tough mentality and intelligence are important to show in the narrative, hence the characterization of an intelligent and independent woman.

The explanations show that in order to properly represent women's identity in movies, actual women's perspectives are required in the process of identity construction. In the other hand, it shows how the American society, particularly Hollywood industry, has evolved and that there is resistance towards the misrepresentation of women in the industry.

Commodifying Traditional Women Stereotypes

The reinvention of women identity in both spy movies, however, is accompanied by contradictory characteristics. Despite the strong, intelligent, independent, and problem solver depiction, typical women's stereotypes are still displayed in both characters of Salt and Maya. There are three female stereotypes identified in both characters.

a. Living up to the Myth of Beauty

First stereotype in the movies is that both Salt and Maya are still depicted as feminine. Their femininity can be seen from their long hair, feminine clothes, and lean slender bodies. Salt is depicted as having long blonde hair, while Maya has long red hair. There are scenes where they wear ladies clothing; for example Salt wears a baby blue suit and skirt to the office. Maya mostly wears dark colors and trousers, but she still wears accessories such as a soft grey shawl

and earrings. The physically strong Salt is not particularly depicted athletic or muscular. Like Maya, she is lean and slender. These three traits are what women are expected to be in society, which means they are still living up to the myth of beauty.

Generally, those are the certain standardized physical appearances of women. Long hair is the common tangible identifier of a woman. In addition to bringing out femininity, women with long hair also represent "softness" which can "pacify the enemy" (Slade, 1987). Women with longer hair represent the value of traditional femininity, which men would see as "soft" or "weak", thus considering them to be less threatening.

Both characters also wear clothes with colors that represent femininity. In the earliest scenes, Salt wore a light grey suit with a skirt. Maya often wore suits and trousers, but still oozed femininity with her choice of soft colors. Upon executing her mission, Salt changed outfits into a more comfortable one (e.g. trousers, jeans) but the pastel coat, soft blue ushanka hat (the Russian fur cap with ear flaps), still represents femininity. During the violent interrogation and torture scenes, Maya is present wearing a long-sleeved yellow shirt, and then a grey blazer and a soft baby blue veil. Their choices of colors are rather neutral, but not particularly 'masculine colors' either.

The appearance of their overall body is lean and slender, the ideal type of 'woman's body' in society. This shows how the most popular women's industries, beauty and

fashion, are still restrictedly showing the beautiful and tall-and-skinny models. These are the figures displayed in billboards, magazines, and advertisements. Physical beauty is considered important to the point that it is common for the society to label people as "physically attractive" or "physically unattractive" (Berscheid & Walster, 1974, p. 181). For women, there is always the need to look beautiful, because it affects how they are treated by people. Such physical standards would not be actually available if society celebrated women's individuality. In most cases, the effort of trying to look beautiful is an objective in order to get attention from the men, thus it is considered "an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves" (Wolf, 1991, p. 12).

Salt and Maya could be strong and highly intelligent but still they are depicted to be physically beautiful. These characters represent the beauty that are accepted by both men and women. The physical embodiment of these characters rely heavily on the actresses who portray them, Angelina Jolie and Jessica Chastain. Besides being acclaimed actresses, both are considered to be 'Hollywood beauty queens'. This term is usually attributed to actresses that are popular not only from their acting talent, but because of their relationships with other industries, particularly fashion, beauty, and the showbiz entertainment industry. Jolie and Chastain have been endorsed as the face of popular fashion brands; Louis Vuitton and Yves Saint Laurent, respectively. They appear not only in movie-related media (e.g. Variety or The Hollywood Reporter), but

also general entertainment media such as fashion magazine Vogue and celebrity magazine People. It is common for them to be featured in the 'Best Dressed' list or 'Most Beautiful' list, which has nothing to do with their acting career.

This type of depiction is also apparent in action movies with female lead characters. For example, the women in *Charlie's Angels* (2000) who were all depicted to be strong and independent but still physically attractive. Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (2012), is a portrayal of a tomboy as she takes care of her family in the absence of her father. She is skilled in hunting and in survival like men. However, she still keeps her long hair, despite the masculine traits.

American popular culture has been permeating this standard of beauty through television, movies, books, and especially women's magazines which circulate within female audiences. Fashion which is considered to be the most feminine industry has been deemed exclusive for the tall and/ or skinny women because these attributes represent the standardized body type. It is rare to see voluptuous or overweight models gracing the advertisement billboard throughout the United States, because the society has been tainted by the idea that lean or skinny means beautiful. This is what American women have been perceiving, and they indulge themselves in this beauty standard. The worst part is that there are prevalent cases of eating disorders occurring among teenage girls because of their obsession with looking skinny like "supermodels in the magazines".

b. Affectionate as the Ideal Feminine Trait

The second stereotype is affectionate personality, shown in several scenes. While the masculine theme is inevitable in common spy movies, as it involves violence, a touch of woman's affection is presented in bringing the heart of a story. Portrayal of an innocent and pure woman who is victimized–and even sometimes terminated– has been prevalent in spy movies, to represent the morals of the protagonist spy. Both Salt and Maya represent this soft side although the narratives revolve around assassination and torture.

In a critical condition, Salt is seen calling her husband on the phone and addressing him with terms of endearment like 'honey' and 'sweetheart'. Under the pursuit of the FBI, Salt also manages to secure her dog to her neighbor. Maya is assigned to seek information from CIA detainees, and is shown to be appalled by the torture methods used by her male peers. She then proceeds in the investigation in her own way, with a proper face-to-face interview. To most detainees, she does not yell nor use physical contact. In fact, she promises to not kill one of them if they want to cooperate. In real life, these are the traits commonly possessed by women. In any circumstances – either normal, critical, or emergency – women are required to be the ones who soothe, nurture, and offer "intimate understanding" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 35). Men are "more expected to judge, to offer advice and expertise, or to "figure out" mechanical problems" (p. 39), and also usually in charge of the 'rough' part. Men are accustomed to doing all the jobs that require strength, as

opposed to the gentleness of women. Affectionate is the opposite of the mentioned roughness, so women are naturally put into the more "wholesome, sweet, and ultimately submissive" position compared to men (Wilkinson, 1984, p. 8). In patriarchal society, they become the 'ideal traits of women', because men are believed to take control in every circumstance.

Seen from the audiences perspective, placing such acts of affection in a violent narrative will evoke sentiments from the viewers toward the female characters. The outlook of having a pure heart and innocence makes the characters sympathetic thus easy to be loved. In the traditional spy movies, the role of innocent women characters – which are often victimized – is to evoke such sympathy from the audience. Any sentimental values in fiction are a "bodily act" which "radically contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, as the feelings in the story are made tangibly present in the flesh of the reader" (Sanchez-Eppler, 1993, p. 100).

In addition to the softness and gentleness of affectionate women, these traits also represent submissiveness that is appealing to men. This kind of characteristic gives more authority to men, as they can exhibit their masculinity without any threat. It also guarantees the men's dominance over women, which is only apparent when it is paired with the feminine (Schippers, 2007, p. 91). In the other hand, this also subverts the feminine because it represents 'compliance' and not individual independence. In romantic relationship, it is

common for men to seek such quality in their partner to complement their imposed roughness culture and also to manage their superior position to the feminine.

c. Being Relationship-Driven

The third stereotype is that woman is relationship-driven. There are scenes of flashbacks involving Salt and her husband during critical scenes, which implies that Salt is thinking about him. She turns to defy her Russian spy organization after they killed her husband, and reminisces about the day of their wedding when she sees his dead body for the last time. The conversation between Maya and Jessica revolves around relationships. Maya states that she does not date, implying that her job prevents her from doing so, although Jessica who has the same profession is married and has children. Maya dedicates a decade of her life to carrying this mission, but then after she finally concludes, she becomes overly emotional after the pilot asks her where to go – simply because she does not have anyone to love and a 'home' for a long time. These scenes imply that the women's 'connectivity to the world' is still primarily focused on relationships. The seemingly dependent nature of women is possibly because,

> women's sense of self is more "connected" to the world than men's. This is supposed to mean that women are more focused on relationships than men, and more nurturing and cooperative; men supposedly define themselves as "separate", avoiding relationship for the sake of independence and tending to be violent and

> competitive. (Forbes, 1997, p. 140)

What's more relevant to the movies, is that even though women have attained promising careers, their lives are not yet complete if they do not have any partners, either a boyfriend or husband. It is because even in today's society, including women, it is still believed that traditional women life goals: marriage, motherhood, and housekeeping are considered the most important and fulfilling (Cullen, 1980, p. 73). This theme and idea is also still prevalent in contemporary American popular culture where women take the lead as the main characters. In television, it is represented by the 1990s HBO series *Sex and the City*, which tells about four career women who are financially independent, but are still searching for the things that they crave the most; love. The leading character, Carrie Bradshaw, is depicted as living her dream as a writer in upstate Manhattan. Her success brings her capability to possess material wealth which most women desire; a nice apartment, privilege to access exclusive places in New York, and the secondary but most sought after needs; clothes, shoes, and bags by famous fashion designers. The main idea of the series, however, is not about how Carrie deals with her professional life, but her quest in 'finding true love'. This is also the same common idea in popular literature especially chick lit. Like *Sex and the City*, this is the literature targeted towards women. It also tells stories mostly about successful modern career women who are looking for a life partner. Sophie Kinsella, one of the most prolific chick lit authors, uses this theme in her books. The leading character is usually

ambitious and a workaholic, often able to obtain success in her career, but she still finds something missing as she does not have a boyfriend or husband.

Importance of Stereotyping in Popular Movie Identity Construction

Embedding stereotypes in to the movies is one of the easiest ways to attract society in order to show the "universal language and culture". In the structuralist and semiotic views, society is likely drawn to products which "speak their language" as well. Thus, the stereotypes in the movies are used to obtain large audiences which eventually can be proven by the box office charts. Finklestein (2007) explained that the mainstream movies mostly visualize stereotyping of certain identities,

> In mainstream film, for example, codes are repeated to the point where they seem natural; blondes are beautiful, the young are guileless and truthful, muscular men are heroic. Slowly these associations are standardized and audiences become complicit in maintaining them. […] Businessmen, intellectuals, the criminal and the mentally deranged have all become recognizable through standardized insignia. A woman in neat, pale clothing represents a mother; a man in a suit, white shirt and knotted tie is a policeman or doctor; a man in a dark shirt and bowtie is suspect. (p. 7)

The universality of the spy movie formula, which is still sustained in the modern productions, could represent the 'language' of the society culture itself. It could represent how the society is rooted in patriarchal systems coming both from the filmmaker and audience. Hence, the traditional values of women are almost always depicted in the movies through the traditional binary opposition.

Generally, the producers of popular culture process and absorb the values of society in their products. They are "aware of receivers' predispositions […] [and are] professional, […] often a member of a 'team' of experts" (Hinds, Motz, & Nelson, 2006, p. 66). If such ideas and values have been rooted in the society, it is coherent if the product of popular culture represents the same thing. There should be compensations in constructing a reinvented female character in a masculine genre. Thus, the depiction of stereotypes about women in the movies acts as the "compliance to patriarchy" in which the women are still "oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men", a concept that is still considered relevant in popular culture (Cornell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848; Cornel, 1987, pp. 184-185). It would be risky to the filmmakers to alter these values in the movies, as they would likely lose viewers. Although movies are fiction, the aspect of probability and relatability are also important factors to draw in the audience.

A distinct comparison can be seen through another spy movie titled *Haywire* which was released in 2011. Similar to *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, the movie has a woman as the leading spy protagonist. Directed by award-winner Steven Soderbergh, the story follows

an operative agent Mallory Kane, who is framed by her own boss and is selected to be a target of killing. Kane is assigned to a false mission in which her working partner tries to kill her. After being blacklisted she has to defeat the director of the place where she works. Unlike *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* whose leading characters possess both stereotypes and countertypes of women, Kane completely embodies the 'masculine woman'. She is physically athletic and well-built, with short black hair, and tomboy outfits. While critics expressed major praise for Kane's characteristics which celebrate the individuality of women and defy the stereotypical characteristics of women, the movie was not considered a commercial success. It only grossed $ 18,942,396 in the U.S., while the budget exceeded $ 20 million even though it received a wide release status, and was played in 2,439 theatres nationally, almost the same number as *Zero Dark Thirty*[1].

The depiction of women in *Haywire* does not seem to favor the beliefs and values accepted by the society. Patriarchal society does not believe that a woman should be masculine and rough; they believe that women represent virtue and gentleness. As previously mentioned, the symbolic representation of virtue and gentleness can be embodied in a slender and delicate physical appearance. Salt and Maya do have this depiction, but not Kane. Salt and Maya evoke sympathy, but not Kane. This further implies that society still accepts the

[1]http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=haywire.htm

stereotyped depiction of Salt and Maya rather than the more individualized portrayal of Kane.

Depictions of stereotypes (and countertypes) in fictional worlds become sets of "valuable indicators of attitudes and feelings which are very real-beliefs and values held quite deeply and sincerely by the audience, not only by the author" (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 240). In this case, figures of strong women are proven to be not well-accepted although they do challenge the traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Mencimer (2001) observed that although action heroines have been appearing, the skepticism will not go away as "women are still only allowed to be violent within certain parameters largely prescribed by what men are willing to tolerate" (p. 18). So when an author or producer creates a certain characterization of a particular gender, for example, it will be based on what the majority of the society (audience) favors.

In this case, audience becomes the major player. As a product of popular culture, the main idea of a movie comes from the society (audience) and that the product will be targeted toward the audience (society). This is the systematic nature of popular culture which will decide whether a product is successful or unsuccessful. In the movie industry, box office and awards shows accolades become the main targets of the filmmaker. In order to obtain these targets, the filmmaker must first and foremost consider the values rooted in the society, and what the audience wants. Since the American society is patriarchal, they tend to favor the patriarchal ideas and concepts.

Conclusion

Obtaining commercial success is the rooted ideology of the filmmaker. In the mainstream movies, the aim of substantial content is subverted below commercial success. What is more important for the studio is the workability. For example, in a book-to-movie adaptation, some parts of the books can be deliberately passed on or modified into something else if they are not workable. 'Workability' here refers to the audience or people's reception. Compared to the previous spy movies, the female identities in these movies have improved because of the involved producers who emphasized the women subjectivity. However at the same time, the characters still depict stereotypes of women. The importance of keeping stereotypes is to please people by fulfilling what they want to see. Compared to another spy movie *Haywire*, in which the woman identity is depicted to be overly masculine, both *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* were massive successes. Haywire did not do well at the box office although it was released in the same number of theatres as *Zero Dark Thirty* and received positive reviews from critics. Apparently, the leading character in *Haywire*, Mallory Kane, as well as the actress who portrayed her, Gina Carano, are not quite what people expect a woman to be. Carano does not have the feminine appearance like Jolie and Chastain, in fact she is a martial artist with a muscular and athletic build.

Relating back to the popular culture mechanism seen from the women's identity construction in *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, it is palpable how the Hollywood filmmakers have already seen the facts, which is change of trends in society. In order to obtain success through their creations, they look at these facts to adapt. This is where they deliberately entangle the "old ideas" with the "new ideas" to go in line with the current values in the society. The main reasoning is to obtain success: to be well-received by society (audience), and further to gain commercial profits.

Thus, the construction of the women's identity in *Salt* and *Zero Dark Thirty* is not based on the role instruments where they become the subject of spy movies based on the perspectives of women. The construction is based on the function of the women's identity, particularly for commercial purposes. The dual nature of the identity is to attract a wider audience; those who defy the traditional women's identity (progressive feminists), and also those who celebrate such traditionalism and even stereotypes (the common people of patriarchal society).

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