



FIGURE 11. Asta Cadell (Deborra-Lee Furness, left) with rape victim Lizzie Curtis (Simone Buchanan) in Steve Jodrell's *Shame* (1987): road trip as liberatory experience. (frame enlargement)

## CHAPTER TWELVE



### *She-Devils on Wheels: Women, Motorcycles, and Movies*

FRANCES GATEWARD

The close of the nineteenth century was a tumultuous era of invention and innovation, when societies around the globe experienced vast economic, political, and social changes. Among those developments were new modes of transportation and new forms of entertainment: motorcycles and motion pictures. At first glance, one might assume that the two have little in common, but a closer inspection reveals some surprising commonalities. Both are European inventions: the motorcycle introduced by Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach in Germany in 1885, motion pictures only ten years later, by Louis and Auguste Lumière in France. Both were immediately associated with society's "undesirables," the working-class and immigrant communities; and both were protested against on moral grounds. And like the motion picture, the motorcycle was quickly transformed from a mechanical device into what Alt describes as "a cultural commodity," communicating ideologies, dreams, and fantasies (129). In contemporary cultural semiotic terms, motorcycles symbolize the quintessentially masculine: individuality, adventure, virility, and strength. Within such films as *The Wild One* (1954), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Top Gun* (1986), and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), motorcycles have served to represent alienated youth, outsiders, rebellion, and more often than not, wild and reckless freedom. Yet motorcycles can also serve

as vehicles for gender transgression. What was popularly referred to as "biker culture" has evolved into several gender-bending subcultures, simultaneously presenting varied masculinities and femininities, including, as Kenneth Anger so brilliantly demonstrated in his experimental tour de force *Scorpio Rising* (1964), homoerotic, camp images. This chapter examines the increasing trend of women actually riding motorcycles in the movies and the images constructed when women ride motorcycles instead of adorning them as scantily clad seat ornaments.

The most prevalent image of motorcycling culture in the United States is that associated with outlaw motorcycle gangs, groups of tattooed renegades dressed in denim and black leather involved in violent criminal pursuits. Though the American Motorcycle Association claims these gangs make up only 1 percent of ridership, hence the sobriquet *1 percenters*, the perception of motorcyclists as marauding hellions remains over forty years after such groups came to national attention, much of it due to the motion pictures.

The event that brought biker culture to prominence was the 1947 raid on Hollister, California, during the July 4 weekend. Over four thousand bikers were involved, including gangs such as the Booze Fighters and the Galloping Geoses. (The devastation is most often mistakenly attributed to the most notorious biker gang, Hell's Angels.) The mayhem, resulting in over four hundred arrests, numerous injuries, and massive destruction, became the basis of the film that established Marlon Brando as a rebel and associated motorcycles with alienated and disaffected youth, *The Wild One*. The trend toward violent biker films continued to such a degree that it developed into a genre: the biker movie. Films within this grouping, for example *The Wild Angels* (1966), *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (1967), and *Hellriders* (1974), took aspects of the road movie—white male pairings or groups, rejection of conformist and conservative society, the outlaw hero, and, as Corrigan describes, "the displacement of the protagonist's identity onto the mechanized vehicle" (145)—and added not only sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, but extremely excessive violence as well. And, of course, no biker film is complete without the requisite montage sequence celebrating the pure joy of riding, with shots of the motorcyclists barreling down the road and subjective shots of the roadway accompanied by up-tempo or aggressive rock music. Motorcycling's association with counterculture was furthered by the success of Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*.

Despite the fact that women have been riding since the motorcycle's inception, as motocross, road, and drag racers, in stunt shows, as

endurance riders, and as everyday commuters, women in early motorcycle films basically serve to assure the heterosexuality of the men involved in the homosocial group. Costumed in form-fitting and revealing clothing, with leather worn not for protection but for sexual allure, they function within the film narratives very much as they do in the highly ritualized and hierarchical outlaw gangs, as sexual objects for male pleasure. The two primary roles are "sheep," women brought to the gang by a male initiate who seeks membership and then expected to engage in sexual relations with every member of the gang, and "mamas," also sexually available to all members but differing from "sheep" in that they regularly associate with the gang. Though women could rarely be seen operating a motorcycle in the more well known films of the biker genre, it was much more common to see them do so in exploitation films.

#### SEX, GUTS, BLOOD, AND ALL MEN ARE MOTHERS!

The term *exploitation* is used to describe films produced on such low budgets that they are sometimes referred to as "Z" pictures. Aimed at youth cultures, the films work with known Hollywood genres—film noir, melodrama, gangster films, horror, and science fiction—but do so in a campy and tasteless manner, highlighting material that would be considered offensive by mainstream audiences: homosexuality, orgies, recreational drug use, and lots of blood and gore. Though some exploitation films manage to make it into drive-in theaters and traditional exhibition houses, many considered too vulgar make use of alternative distribution methods, taking advantage of expanding technologies. They are easily accessed on cable television or on the home video market, with the films going directly to video.

Because they are considered a "lowbrow" form of entertainment, exploitation films are typically regarded with dismissive disdain by both popular critics and the public, despite their popularity. Yet like another denigrated popular culture form, the soap opera, these films are important, for they speak to a specialized audience, offering pleasure in a form not provided by the mainstream producers of the culture industry. The films, often lifted to cult status and watched in ritual contexts, may be cheap, raw, and "trashy" in terms of high-brow aesthetics, but their content directly challenges the dominant ideologies of sexism, white supremacy, homophobia, and capitalism upon which high-brow aesthetics pose. Such is the case in films such as *The Hellcats* (1967), *Bury Me an Angel* directed

by Barbara Peters (1971), *Rough Riders/Angel's Wild Women* (1972), *Surf Nazis Must Die* (1987), *Chopper Chicks in Zombietown* (1989), and the most infamous film of the genre, *She-Devils on Wheels* (1968), written by Louise Downs and directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis.

*She-Devils on Wheels* concentrates on the activities of the female motorcycle gang the Man-Eaters, whose motto is Sex, Guts, Blood, and All Men Are Mothers! Led by Queen (Betty Connell), the Man-Eaters spend most of their time engaged in "picks," ritualized orgies linked to drag racing. When they return to headquarters, the winner of the night's drag race gets to choose a male partner from among a group of willing participants for the orgy. One member of the club, Karen (Christie Wagner), breaks the bylaws because she continually chooses the same partner, preferring monogamy and an emotional relationship. She is given an ultimatum from the membership—she must either drag her lover, Bill (David Harris), from the back of her motorcycle across the pavement or be dragged herself. Bill doesn't survive the experience. Other plot points include the initiation of Honey-Pot, a teenaged junior member, in a ceremony that includes the recitation of dirty limericks, the dousing of the initiate with motor oil, fondling by the other members, an invitation to the men to "take a taste of honey," terrorizing the town, and competition with a group of men over territory. The film climaxes in a physical confrontation, where the Man-Eaters proceed to kick ass, beating the men with chains and even committing a decapitation. Though it certainly can be codified as a film exhibiting a "trash aesthetic," it is also possible to read the film as one celebrating female relationships, the value of female camaraderie over emotional ties to men, the importance of control over women-defined space, and the existence of female sexual desire and the will to act upon it.

As *She-Devils on Wheels* demonstrates, the emphasis on sexual activity is a significant element in the construction of female motorcyclists in the cinema. This association of motorcycling with sexuality is not surprising, for motorcycle riding is often described as an extremely visceral experience: the sound of the engine, the rush of the wind, exposure to the elements, flirtation with danger, and the thrilling experience of speed. The eroticization of women who ride is further heightened by the prevalent use of leather—primal, sensual, and linked to sadomasochism. Perhaps what makes female motorcyclists so provocative, like the femmes fatales of film noir, is assumption of the male prerogative. No mode of transportation could be described as more phallic, for riding a "crotch rocket" involves control of a great deal of power between the legs.

Because women in our culture are not supposed to possess, let alone act on, sexual desires, films depict women like the Man-Eaters and the Cycle Sluts from *Chopper Chicks in Zombietown* as dangerous and overpowering. Because they transgress the boundaries of proscribed gender behavior, they must be punished in order to restore the patriarchal order. In *She-Devils on Wheels* the women are arrested, an outcome preferable to the violent death suffered by the protagonist of the French/British co-production *Girl on a Motorcycle* (1968).

Directed by Jack Cardiff, *Girl on a Motorcycle* features pop music sensation Marianne Faithfull as Rebecca, the bored wife of a grade school teacher. Contemptuous of her middle-class, suburban housewife lifestyle, she escapes by riding her motorcycle to rendezvous with her lover, Daniel (Alain Delon), a university philosophy professor. Wearing nothing underneath her fur-lined leather, Rebecca is obsessed with sex, flirting with everyone from gas station attendants to border patrolmen. As she rides down the highway, eagerly anticipating a tryst with Daniel, Rebecca becomes sexually aroused. Her orgasmic ecstasy causes her to lose control of her motorcycle, and she is thrown through the windshield of an oncoming vehicle.

### BIKER CHIC

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, shifting attitudes about gender, race, and national identity resulted in, among other things, a resurgence of motorcycling, or more specifically, the motorcycle culture associated with Harley-Davidson, the sole remaining mass producer of motorcycles in the United States. Founded in 1903, the Milwaukee-based manufacturer of heavy-weight cruisers, affectionately referred to as "hogs," lost its hold on domestic sales in the 1960s. Harley-Davidson's decline began in 1961, when champion Mike Hailwood introduced a Honda to the world of road racing. One year later, Japanese motorcycles set over a dozen records in twenty-five professional races, placing first in every one. The domination by the technologically advanced, more economical Japanese-manufactured motorcycles extended to the roads and highways of America when advertising campaigns such as Honda's "You Meet the Nicest People on a Honda" helped shift the image of motorcyclists from the bad-boy gangs associated with Harleys to fun-loving commuters and weekend enthusiasts. The unprecedented popularity of Hondas, Kawasakis,

Suzukis, and Yamahas continued as the sales of automobiles also manufactured in Japan began to overtake those of General Motors. This explosion of interest in Japanese motorcycles occurred during an American economic recession. With the rise of the so-called Asian tigers in manufacturing and export (such as Taiwan and Korea), American society saw increased immigration from Asia due to the removal of discriminatory practices with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965; purchase of high profile real estate, such as Rockefeller Center, by Japanese banks and corporations; and a proliferation of Asian/Asian American-owned businesses. America was gripped by a virulent anti-Asian backlash. As history has shown, it is not uncommon in times of economic strife for Americans to turn to scapegoating (Farrell). As competition increases for what is perceived to be a "smaller piece of the pie," minority groups are commonly targeted as the cause of the shrinkage of economic reward. It has happened repeatedly to blacks, Jews, and peoples of Asian descent.

Threatened by failing stock prices and hostile takeovers, Harley-Davidson took advantage of the anti-Japanese climate by stressing Americanism and national pride in its advertisements. As Walle points out, the company "had rejected the renegade/loyalists, embraced the middle-class mainstream market, and then flip-flopped back to blatantly arousing the passion-filled fanatics," a strategy that resulted in Harley-Davidson breaking the fifty thousand sales mark for the first time in 1979 and achieving a 16 percent sales increase, outselling the combined output of heavyweight motorcycles produced by the two largest Japanese competitors (74).

The renewed popularity of the American-built motorcycles could be seen at bike rallies, such as the annual get-together in Daytona, where the destruction of "riceburners," motorcycles produced by Japanese manufacturers, is celebrated in ritualized bonfires. Harleys came into vogue, as "biker chic" infiltrated the fashion world.

As the hogs became more prevalent on the road, well-known designers, including Donna Karan, Anne Klein, and even Chanel, began to market styles inspired by the look of Harley-identified biker gangs, with an emphasis on leather. Fashion spreads in the leading magazines, *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan*, featured promotional displays of models astride motorcycles, dressed, of course, in variations of the classic motorcycle jacket. It was not unusual to see a supermodel such as Cindy Crawford atop a motorcycle selling cosmetics. Biker chic presented interesting and oppositional codings. The motorcycle leathers communicated strength and power, yet the connotations were undermined by the pairing

of motorcycle jackets with frilly skirts and revealing tops, flawless makeup, and models in sexually suggestive poses of passive availability. The style became so lucrative in the fashion world that in 1989 Harley-Davidson launched a new division, Harley-Davidson MotorClothes. According to John Marchese, in 1992 the division made close to \$49 million, most of it from people who did not even ride motorcycles! Biker chic even affected America's most fashion-conscious female, Barbie. Today, in addition to clothes, one can go shopping for Harley Beanies, stuffed animals dressed in Harley-Davidson attire, Christmas ornaments, motorcycle miniatures and Hallmark/Harley ceramic bear figurines; or eat at the Harley-Davidson Cafés in Manhattan and Las Vegas, and return home to dinnerware, furnishings, and walls adorned with the Harley-Davidson logo.

Photographs of high-profile female celebrities, women with personae of independence and power, Wynnona Judd, Queen Latifah, k.d. lang, and Ann-Margret, were a boon to the campaign. Images of media darling Elizabeth Taylor with "Passion," the purple Harley-Davidson cruiser given to her by Malcom Forbes, inundated television and popular publications. Texas Governor Ann Richards, brought to national attention by her "Where's George" address at the Democratic National Convention, made the cover of the July 1988 issue of *Texas Monthly*. Dressed in a white leather jacket, astride the white Harley-Davidson she bought herself for her sixtieth birthday, Richards, with a stern expression, clearly demonstrated her mastery of the machine. The banner accompanying the image—"WHITE HOT MAMA Ann Richards is Riding High. Can She Be the First Woman President?"—certainly implies that only a woman who is "man" enough to ride a Harley could be considered for the most powerful political position in the world.

The motion picture industry picked up on Harley-Davidson's newfound respectability, and both men and women in the movies were soon using motorcycles as the vehicle of choice, mostly within the action genre. It is interesting to note that as Arnold Schwarzenegger became more visible in national politics, aligning himself publicly with the Republican Party, his screen persona shifted as well, so that when his character in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* appropriates a Harley-Davidson and a black leather biker jacket, he defines himself not as a renegade, but as a thoroughgoing American: dangerous, strong, and, because of biker chic, cool.

It is important to point out that motorcycle riding occurs almost exclusively within action films, historically one of the most male-defined film genres. But increasingly, as demonstrated by the 1970s films of Pam Grier, perhaps America's first female action star, by the *Alien* series

(1979–1997), and by the more recent *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), more contemporary action adventure films are featuring women as protagonists, often with characterizations more efficient, competent, and resourceful than those of male characters. Marchetti points out that “contemporary action adventure tales have allowed women to expand their traditional functions . . . reflecting changing and contradictory feelings about gender roles and women’s equality” (191). Though this is relatively new to Hollywood, it is not new to the action cinema of Hong Kong, which has historically made great use of the tradition of the female warrior common in Chinese folklore and literature.

According to Ho, one of the first martial arts films ever made, *Huangjian nuxia wasade* (*The Heroine of Lone River* [1930]), featured a woman as the protagonist. The legacy established by renown female action stars Cheng Pei Pei of the 1960s and Angela Mao Ying of the 1970s is continued in films with Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Cheung, and Michiko Nishiwaki, women whose characters ride motorcycles often and ride them hard in *Ba hoi hung ying* (*Avenging Quartet* [1992]), *Ging chat goo si III* (*Police Story 3: Supercop* [1992]), *Dong fong sam hop* (*Heroic Trio* [1992]) and its sequel *Yin doi ho hap chuen* (*Executioners* [1993]), *Chat gam gong* (*Wonder 7* [1994]), *Hung faan au* (*Rumble in the Bronx* [1995]), and *Goo waak kui ji kuet chin kong woo* (*Sexy and Dangerous* [1996]).

In the United States, women on motorcycles are much more infrequent, usually used only in times of desperation and then often for comic effect, such as in *Burglar* (1987), where Bernice Rhodenbarr (Whoopi Goldberg), usurps a motorcycle in a chase scene. The first big-budget, studio-backed films to present a female motorcycle-riding protagonist were *Barb Wire* (1996), based on the comic book published by Dark Horse Comics, and Warner Bros.’ *Batman & Robin* (1997).

Directed by David Hogan, *Barb Wire* is a remake of the classic Hollywood film *Casablanca* (1942), taking place in 2017, in a postapocalyptic America devastated by civil war. In this version, what is needed to escape fascist domination is not letters of transport but contact lenses that allow one to pass retinal scan tests. Rather than constructing the protagonist, Barb Wire, as the masculinized, tough heroine in the model set by films such as *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, this film functions as a hybrid of science fiction, action adventure, and soft-core pornography. Former *Baywatcher* and *Tool Time* girl from television’s “Home Improvement” (1991) Pamela Anderson had the starring role, so it is no surprise that the film emphasized sexuality. (Anderson’s most

noted “talents” are not in the thespian tradition.) From the very start, the film makes an erotic spectacle of woman. In the opening scene, Barb Wire is introduced onstage, a performer in a strip club. Wearing a revealing costume designed to highlight her exposed breasts, Wire strikes seductive poses as water is sprayed on her writhing body. The scene is enhanced by backlighting and slow motion, defining her character not as an action hero but as the all-too-common sex object providing visual pleasure for the heterosexual men in the audience—both onscreen and in the theater.

The film does offer some avowals to feminism, but we are never meant to take them seriously. How could we, when breasts are referred to as “guns” and dialogue espousing feminism is delivered by a character dressed in fetishistic clothing (a leather bustier; spandex pants; thigh-length, high-heeled boots; and a dog collar)? If she is a woman of power in the narrative, a dangerous Harley-riding bounty hunter motivated to kill men who call her “Babe”—the first time by throwing a shoe (the heel of the pump is embedded in a man’s forehead)—she is also not above bemoaning the breaking of a fingernail. The glamorized female motorcyclist figure also appeared the following year, her leather replaced by a rubber sheath, in Joel Schumacher’s *Batman & Robin*, which introduced Batgirl (Alicia Silverstone). Yet again, fetishized woman was on display.

### IRON HORSES

What I find most intriguing about the trend of women and motorcycles in the movies is the mobilization of the western genre. Scholars such as Eyerman and Löfgren, and Corrigan have pointed out that the road movie draws heavily from American myth, most distinctly that of the American West, with its emphasis on wide open spaces, outlaw heroes, frontier justice, and hope for new possibilities. These revisionist texts address issues of sexism, sometimes in the form of remakes, such as *The Stranger* (1993), a modernized version of the faux spaghetti western *High Plains Drifter* (1972), but more often by adapting characteristic elements of the genre. The narrative of the Australian film *Shame* (1987), directed by Steve Jodrell, is a good example of the classic western plot as outlined in Wright’s seminal work, *Six Guns and Society* (1975). Many have likened the film to George Stevens’s *Shane* (1953) with Alan Ladd.

*Shame* centers around Asta Cadell (Deborra-Lee Furness), a barrister on holiday traveling about the Australian countryside on a motorcycle. The

road trip is constructed as a liberatory experience, much like that of Rebecca in *Girl on a Motorcycle*. It presents the common element of the road movie that Eyerman and Löfgren describe as "escape from the claustrophobia of petit bourgeois life, from corruption and injustice, and from intolerant 'normality'" (62). This freedom in the idyllic countryside from the pressures of daily life, complete with rolling hills and grazing sheep, is a false one, however, because Asta incurs damage to her motorcycle and must stop in an isolated backwater town to obtain repairs. Here she discovers a society where a group of men privileged by class and gender regularly assault men and rape women without threat of punishment. Within the course of the narrative, Asta persuades the victim of a gang rape, sixteen-year-old Lizzie Curtis (Simone Buchanan), to press charges against her aggressors.

According to Wright, the prototype of all westerns involves the story of the lone stranger (Asta Cadell) who rides into a troubled town (Ginborak, Western Australia) and attempts to clean it up. The hero, unknown to the society, enters a social group (the Curtis family); reveals an exceptional ability (in this case numerous abilities: mechanical inclination—many are surprised she is capable of repairing the motorcycle herself; economic independence from men; the courage to challenge patriarchy, verbally and physically), which results not only in the recognition of the hero as a special and different kind of person but also in the hero's rejection from the society. Here the rejection is by those in power, for after initial reluctance, the women welcome Asta.

The film opens with a long shot of an anonymous rider in full motorcycle gear—boots, helmet, and functional leather—roaring down a country road. It is similar to what Calder has described as the cliché opening of a western: "A lone rider emerging from the landscape is guaranteed to make a certain impact. Hero or villain, [his/her] character is broadly defined even before [he/she] approaches near enough for us to see [his/her] face" (97). By initiating the film in this manner, Jodrell reveals a great deal through the use of one shot.

The riding gear, for example, along with the use of the long shot, conceals the rider's gender, playing on the biased assumptions of the audience and the other characters in the film. The helmet and choice of clothing illustrate the sensibility of the character, expressing concern for protection and safety rather than glamour or allure. And just as the film itself recodes the western genre by placing a woman in the protagonist role, the riding gear works to recode the image of female motorcyclists in motion pictures. The facts that Asta is a skilled rider, demonstrated later when she

takes one of the harassers for a ride, and that she chooses to travel the countryside alone powerfully illustrate her independence. Her autonomy is exemplified further by her choice of vehicle, a Suzuki Katana, a large, fast sport/touring bike that weighs over five hundred pounds.

The significance of the motorcycle is also crucial to the narrative because mobility serves as an important theme in *Shame*. As many historians and cultural critics have stated, the restriction of mobility is a common element of oppression; but here the motorcycle functions as a signifier of freedom. That Asta is the only woman in the film who utilizes vehicles for transportation clearly constructs her as active in a town full of passive victims. The other women are shown only as passengers in vehicles driven by men, or as pedestrians, until the end of the film, where a few take "control of the wheel" after their consciousness has been raised. The need for mobility is of such importance to the protagonist that while her Suzuki sits in disrepair, she rides through the countryside on a borrowed bicycle. She gets a flat tire and accepts a ride from Ross (Bill McClusky), a man whose wife, like Lizzie, has been raped. Traveling now in a four-wheeled vehicle, Asta is reduced to being a "passenger on the road of life" and is placed in a perilous situation.

The four-wheeled vehicles in *Shame*, driven almost exclusively by men, are continually associated with danger and violence. When not carousing in the local eatery or bar, the youths responsible for the rapes and assaults are constantly shown either inside their cars or congregating, much like a wolf pack, around them. It is with the aid of their car that the young men are able to attack Ross, running his truck off the road and beating him until Asta comes to his rescue. In another sequence, the men traumatize Lizzie's grandmother in a tow truck and drag her out of it, throwing her against the side of the vehicle. Asta herself is threatened twice, first by three teenage boys in a car and later by Gary (Phil Dean), who is associated with cars because he is an automobile mechanic. The theme is developed full circle when Lizzie, fighting for her life in the back of a car driven by two of the rapists, falls out the door to her death.

*Shame* is a thoughtful critique of rape culture, castigating not only those who commit rape, but the ineffectiveness of the judicial system and community attitudes about the victims as well.

Another film that makes use of the western genre to critique abuses of power is the independent feature *Bang* (1995), directed by Ash. Set in contemporary Los Angeles, this film is more a combination of Wright's revenge plot: where the hero is a member of society, the villains do harm, and the hero



seeks revenge; and the transitional plot, where the hero is inside the society at the start and outside at the close, and the society is large, firmly established, and stronger than the hero who fights against it. A complex film, *Bang* confronts the daily abuses of white male power in the lives of the disenfranchised.

The narrative focuses on one day in the life of a young aspiring Asian American actress, played by Darling Narita (the character remains nameless in the film). As she heads out to a film audition, she is evicted from her apartment as her landlord tells her of his intention to sell all her possessions. Her shabby surroundings are revealed to us, as she rides a bus to her destination, passing through dilapidated sections of Hollywood toward Beverly Hills. The producer (David Allen Graf), claiming to "want more powerful roles for women, especially minority women," has her read from a script chock full of Orientalism. He tries to assault her sexually, and when she resists, he slaps her and resorts to racial epithets. Adam (Peter Greene), a homeless man whom she befriends in the neighborhood, is upset at her distress and begins to destroy the property of the producer and his neighbors. A white motorcycle patrolman, Officer Rattler (Michael Newland), arrives, arrests the protagonist, and promises her release in exchange for sexual favors. Escaping his grasp, she handcuffs the officer to a tree, steals his uniform and his gun, and embarks on a journey of discovery through the urban blight of Los Angeles. The discomfort she experiences when first attempting to ride the police motorcycle—she has difficulty starting the engine and even drops the bike—and the ill-fitting uniform metaphorically illustrate the incongruity of the character's assumption of oppressive power. Upon seeing the reactions of the community to her authority, she is surprised, shocked, seduced, and eventually repulsed by the power of the law. As she rides through the city, her encounters reveal to her and to us the ease with which the police can resort to physical abuse, the racism of the government's war on drugs, the desperation of the homeless, and the atmosphere of violence that permeates the lives of people daily.

The independently produced features *She-Devils on Wheels*, *The Stranger*, *Shame*, and *Bang* offer film audiences narratives that directly address cultural anxieties about shifting gender relations. Like mainstream action-adventure films and westerns, these films rely on spectacle for entertainment value and remain true to conventional formulas. But some critics deride filmmakers' use of formulas. John Cawelti explains:

Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities from conflicting interests of different groups within culture or ambiguous attitudes towards partic-

ular values and assist the process of assimilating changes of values. Formulas enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden, and to experience in a carefully controlled way, the possibility of stepping across this boundary. (35)

In the case of female biker films, the appropriation of formula allows women to challenge gender roles by reclaiming the popular genre of action adventure. When women are shown using motorcycles, they move even further from the restrictions of the past, taking for their own one of the most masculine icons in our culture.

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