The Importance of Psychoanalytic Feminism to Post-feminism: *Sucker Punch*

By Chelsea Daggett

Reviews of the 2011 film *Sucker Punch* are uniformly critical, calling it “an exercise in public masturbation for Zack Snyder, who doesn't even havethe decency to strive for the R-rating that would at least allow for the exploitative, gratuitous sex, nudity, and violence” (Berardinelli), observing that “It’s hard to believe that the female leads are being empowered when they’re forced to wear skimpy outfits for their sleazy superiors and clients [and] are only ever portrayed as being in charge within dream sequences that carry all the weight of video-game cut scenes” (Goss). In a rare moment of defiance, the critics rejected this film’s dedication to drawn out action sequences and one hundred percent digitized mise-en-scene. So why was a film that was allegedly meant to be exactly what it was charged as, a mindlessly entertaining action blockbuster, ultimately a flop? In order to answer this question one must only look to the critical fixation on the gender of the characters. Whether it was the female critics who declaimed the misogyny of the many female deaths in the film, including the final lobotomy of the main character, or the male critics who believed that the short skirts only needed to be shorter to justify the film’s shallowness, a strong theme of failed feminine empowerment appeared in these reviews. However, much of the construction of the film is related to the psychoanalytic roots of film criticism.

In the shift to post-feminism several themes from the era of psychoanalytic feminism were left unresolved. Some of these themes, such as Teresa De Lauretis’ focus on creating alternative spectator positions through layered narrative, were dismissed in the shift away from studies of spectator position to those of reception. Other themes, such as Mary Ann Doane’s female masquerade, were developed by later theorists such as De Lauretis only to be lost in the
binary traps set by psychoanalysis. Ultimately, psychoanalytic feminism was too engrained in the male institutions it tried so hard to fight against. As a film, *Sucker Punch* embodies the struggles of the psychoanalytic vein of criticism. As a result, the films weaknesses and strengths are rooted in these unresolved conflicts. These conflicts limit the reception of films that embrace psychoanalytic criticism. The use of psychoanalytic structures in *Sucker Punch*, most importantly layered narrative and female masquerade as a form of potential empowerment for female viewers, is rejected by critics who have assimilated the culturally understood misogynistic qualities of psychoanalytic theory yet failed to understand the nuances of the theory that gives films like *Sucker Punch* its feministic potential. *Sucker Punch* was often criticized as a poor imitation of the film *Inception* in its use of the layered narrative.

While the film *Inception* was a largely male-oriented action feature, *Sucker Punch* uses a layered narrative in order to steep the film in the psychoanalytic imaginary. After the death of her mother, the female protagonist Baby Doll is first assaulted by her step-father then institutionalized. The action of the film occurs largely in Baby Doll’s mind as she attempts to prevent her inevitable lobotomy. She retreats, first into the world of a bordello that mirrors the psychological institution and then further into a world of her own creation that allows her to fight in ways that are impossible in the other two realities. These males dominated realities represent the male institutions of psychoanalysis and sexuality, while the third layer represents fantasy.

De Lauretis uses Freud’s visualization of the subject to denote the three levels of fantasy. Using the analogy of a child beaten by his father, Freud states there are three stages: “the first objective form” (My father beating the child) to the “transitional form [which] remains unconscious” and “the final, voyeuristic form” (I am being beaten by my father) (De Lauretis 255). In *Sucker Punch*, the layers function in a similar way. The first layer is objective because it
is outside of Babydoll’s head. The effects of the final the fantasy/voyeuristic layer cause ripples through the other layers. Each of the fantasy sequences lead to the acquisition of a metaphorical object that has a physical manifestation. This quest gives Baby Doll a sense of purpose or agency her fantasy. For example, the fantasy involving a dragon is a parallel to the acquisition of a lighter in the transitional layer. At the end of the film, the female psychologist reveals that this lighter is used to start a fire in the first layer. The latent and ineffectual quality of these objects at the second level suggests that the bordello is a transitional space that mirrors Freud’s construction of fantasy. De Lauretis suggests that using Freud’s layers of fantasy can create subjectivity for viewers that are not male.

The use of layered construction can place a large amount of emphasis on the relations between seeing and cinematic conventions, as well as the space of enunciation. De Lauretis says this construction foregrounds, “the relations of spectatorship to fantasy, of subjectivity and desire to the imaginary-and in particular to the imaginary of cinema… by locating itself in the ambiguous space between seeing and not seeing, and in the play between conventions of seeing and conventions of cinema… a different position of enunciation… addresses the spectator” (De Lauretis 228). Although De Lauretis was addressing the possibility of a lesbian spectator position, Sucker Punch has subversive potential because it also foregrounds these aspects of the cinematic apparatus. The film foregrounds seeing through Babydoll’s dance. The scene always cuts away from her sexually exploitative dance to show her in the empowering fantasy layer. This cut calls attention to the act of seeing and frustrates the male audience’s desire. The film also foregrounds the conventions of cinema through the settings of the fantasy world. All of the fantasy sequences are typically masculine examples of popular culture, like the dragon fighting scene. This foregrounds the gender difference of Sucker Punch’s heroes. These two choices
indicate the subversive potential of the film. But many viewers saw these choices as problematic for representing women. Using Doane’s theory of the male gaze we can begin to understand this contradictory reaction to *Sucker Punch*.

*Sucker Punch* does not treat its female characters like most films and yet it is considered more offensive to women than most. Doane explains, “What the cinematic institution has in common with Freud’s gesture is the eviction of the female spectator from a discourse purportedly about her… one which, in fact, narrativizes her again and again” (Doane 498). *Sucker Punch* does not place its female characters as the central problem of the plot to be won or saved, instead the women save themselves. Babydoll is attempting to escape becoming an object because her virginity has been sold in the second layer and her brain is to be lobotomized in the first. Some may think that these conflicts still narrativize the women because they occur in relationship to men but the women are also granted agency and critical distance through the gaze.

The subjectivity of *Sucker Punch* is decidedly female and creates the critical distance that Freud claims is absent for female viewers. Doane says that “An essential attribute of that dominant system is the matching of male subjectivity with the agency of the look” (Doane 498). Therefore, by shifting the subjectivity to females, *Sucker Punch* gives them the agency of the look within the narrative. The film announces its female subjectivity in the first scene. Sweet Pea, the girl that Babydoll helps to escape, provides the central voiceover of the film. She says “it’s us who hold the power over the worlds that we create” (*Sucker Punch*). The film announces its female agency using this statement and the female narration; the women are the ones enunciating this experience. Female subjectivity is maintained in the film using point-of-view shots from Babydoll’s perspective. In the introductory scene, Babydoll tries to prevent her angry stepfather from hurting her younger sister after their mother dies. The camera shifts to point-of-
view as Babydoll looks through the keyhole of her room to see what her stepfather is doing. Shortly thereafter, Babydoll enacts her agency by climbing out of her window, finding a gun, and shooting at her stepfather. But she misses and shoots her sister. This accident is the first violent action of many towards women in the film and many interpret these violent actions as anti-women. Yet female subjectivity is written into the film two ways, stylistically through voiceover and point-of-view camera and narratively through the action and agency of Babydoll. The layered construction is another indicator of Babydoll’s subjectivity and this construction provides the distance that female viewers require. Is it still possible that this film is anti-women even though it unquestionably provides a female subjectivity? One argument for the anti-women side is that the women are dressed sexually even in their fantasy sequence.

Doane talks about the ways that hyper-femininity can be a way of escaping the masculine trap of the filmic gaze. She says that for Freud “What is not understandable… is why a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity, on other words, foreground the masquerade” (Doane 502). Indeed, as De Lauretis’ work has helped to show, Sucker Punch works to foreground the mechanics of the female relationship to film. Perhaps it also uses masquerade as a way to foreground the character’s relationships to femininity. For instance, Babydoll’s sexual dance is not only kept from the audience’s gaze but is also explained by the other girls as a type of power. The psychologist, Madame Gorski, defines dancing as powerful, stating, “if you do not dance than you have no purpose… your fight for survival begins now… you have all the weapons you need, now fight” (Sucker Punch). This statement establishes dancing and sexuality as an equivalent weapon for the girls. The fact that sexuality is part of the weapon may be why the girls retain their sexuality in the fantasy layer. Many critics disagreed with this decision by saying that it fetishized these already disenfranchised women.
Yet the film uses three different layers and types of female experience to foreground the fact that women are disenfranchised within society. Ultimately, Doane sees this foregrounding as a partial solution to the problem of female subjectivity.

Doane asserts that although the masquerade foregrounds femininity to create spectator distance, it does not allow the narrative to assimilate the female spectator position. She states, “Films play out scenarios of looking in order to outline the terms of their own understanding. And given the divergence between masculine and feminine scenarios, those terms would seem to be explicitly negotiated as markers of sexual difference” (Doane 507). This statement suggests that feminine narratives are already inscribed with generic differences that make the female spectator position unable to be recuperated as an empowering space. However, *Sucker Punch* ignores the tenets of typical female genres and constructs a fantasy world out of masculine genre positions. These fantasies are not able to save Babydoll, the presumed protagonist. However, these fantasies do save two of the other women in the story. Babydoll helps Sweet Pea escape, stating “this was never my story, it’s yours” (*Sucker Punch*). This revelation is important because throughout the story the girl functions as a double of Babydoll, also losing her younger sister. Babydoll is almost a part of the girl who escapes, meaning it is still her story. The other important female who is empowered in the text is Madame Gorski. Throughout the film, Madame Gorski is routinely denied power by the man, Blue. However, in the end Madame Gorski tells the police that she did not sign off on Babydoll’s lobotomy and has Blue arrested. She ultimately triumphs, making the psychological apparatus maternal. Babydoll becomes a narrative sacrifice that helps these two women escape the subordination of male institutions. The problem with the reviews of this film are that they solidify the Freudian understanding of women without considering the work that De Lauretis and Doane have done to show how this film could
be subversive. This omission shows that psychoanalysis still limits our perspective of female spectatorship.

Because film critics are largely male and often unaware of these feminist criticisms of psychoanalysis, our culture has come to understand the limiting aspects of gender but not the ways in which they can subvert normal viewing. The possibility for female spectatorship is part of the construction of the film. Zack Snyder has even said that although the film tested well with female viewers “this movie – of all the movies I’ve made – has been universally hated by fanboys… It’s like a fanboy indictment,” (Giroux). Despite the fact that the film is a perfect formula for “fanboy” viewers, they did not enjoy the movie, why? The audience for the film was largely female, yet even female reviewers could not accept the film. Perhaps this is because our cultural understanding of these films, especially in the action genre, is through the eyes of a male gaze.

The genre of Sucker Punch is action, which generally subordinates females to the passive role and emphasizes their physical characteristics. Several reviews of the film compare it’s exploitation of female sexuality to the large breasts of Lara Croft that many women find offensive. However, the filmmaker has pointed out that this look and action are generic markers rather than a creative decision. He states, “Someone asked me, why did you dress the girls like that? And I said, I didn’t dress them that way, you did. That’s what pop culture demands, not me… I love that when confronted with the exact formula that they request, [viewers] get all freaked out by it, because they’re like, ‘wait a minute – he’s right. I do like this, and maybe that’s my fault’. ” (Gilchrist). This comment suggests that there is something almost Brechtian about constructing a male genre the same way with females as the leads. His reflexive construction, first calls attention to sexuality through the dance, then cuts away to women
looking sexually appealing while enacting male agency. This editing makes males aware of the demeaning nature of the genre itself. Snyder could have changed the physical appearance of the women to not fit the ideal of the genre, but he may have further limited his audience. His feminization of the action genre is also evident in his choice of music and pop culture references (both staples of the action genre). For instance, all of the songs are about how femininity is equated with insanity and masochism. The song “Sweet Dreams” is all about the abuse that women must endure and the song “White Rabbit” is a reference to Alice in Wonderland, the quintessential book on feminine insanity. The fantasy sequences refer back to the institutions that subordinate women, reminding audiences of women’s low status. Ultimately, recognizing the foregrounding of this genre has led to a dismissal of the film instead of the institutions that the film is targeting.

_Sucker Punch_ is a film that reminds audiences why women cannot have agency within a film. Our culture and the filmic apparatus itself is so conditioned by gender differences that female subjectivity is easily misunderstood. Even though girls enjoyed the film, the critics dismissed it because it seems to reinforce Freudian gender differences in the Post-feminist world. However, by ignoring the work of psychoanalytic critics such as Teresa De Lauretis and Mary Ann Doane, critics compare all films based on the standard of the masculine gaze. Reception studies would define _Sucker Punch_ as a post-feminist nightmare. Yet the film speaks from the position of psychoanalysis by choosing a psychological setting. This setting recalls the positive effects of layered narrative, fantasy, and female masquerade for female spectators. The film even solves the problem of female genre by taking on the action genre. In the end, a synthesis of reception and spectator studies would reveal the constructed quality of our response to genre films that subvert gender norms.
Works Cited


