



"I think women can do anything": Postfeminist Sensibilities and the Male Gaze in *Charlie's Angels* (2019)

Dr. Jono Van Belle*, Jasmine Lietaert**, Prof. Dr. Stijn Joye***

*  Örebro University, Centre for Feminist Social Studies (jono.van-belle@oru.se)

**  Ghent University, Department of Communication and Media (jasminelietaert@hotmail.com)

***  Ghent University, Centre for Cinema and Media Studies (stijn.joye@ugent.be)

Abstract

This article considers Mulvey's male gaze in today's postfeminist media culture in the latest remake of *Charlie's Angels*. Male gaze is analyzed as form, as production ecology, and as narrative. Since the inception of *Charlie's Angels* in the 1970s, the TV and feature film franchise has tried to balance feminist concerns with notions of femininity, in more and less successful ways. Although the 2000 remake of *Charlie's Angels* could be considered as an exemplar of objectifying and sexualizing women, the 2019 film barely presents such instances. Instead, it offers a male gaze directed at a female audience and internalized as a measure of success for its female protagonists and the implied female audience. Through practices of othering, and by placing male characters in morally inferior positions, the female audience is presented with hegemonic conceptions of white, middle-class femininity as an ideal that female viewers can and should aspire to be.

Keywords: *Charlie's Angels*; representation; postfeminism; remake; male gaze, Laura Mulvey.

Introduction

The 2019 remake of *Charlie's Angels* was praised for its innovative ways of dealing with female action heroes (Kemp 2019; July 2019). That some male reviewers found the film "a little too much of a rousingly of-the-moment feministic" (Gleiberman 2019) or found it "staggering to consider the sheer volume of dead bodies the Angels leave in their wake" (Eggert 2019), which, by the way, is on par with any other action movie, only confirms that the action genre finally got the female heroes it deserves. With positive montages of active girls and women, and the film's feminist references, director Elisabeth Banks took a radical break from the overtly sexualized Angels of the past: "These lady spies aren't leading with cleavage or dumbing themselves down to shore up the egos of their clueless boyfriends like the Angels of the past. Rather, they express their femininity and sexuality in ways that give their characters depth and agency rather than

reducing them to objects" (July 2019). It is precisely this agency that lies at the core of the debates surrounding *Charlie's Angels*, and postfeminist¹ representations in general.

Originally, *Charlie's Angels* was a US television crime series that ran between 1976 and 1981. The three main characters are ex-police force members who now work for Charlie Townsend as private detectives. To catch the bad guys, the Angels often went undercover in skimpy outfits. The series has been both praised and criticized for how it balances notions of femininity and sex appeal to feminist concerns like independence. For example, the original Angels were dissatisfied with the structural discrimination in their previous jobs, suggesting that sexism is old-fashioned. However, a male protagonist, Charlie, "rescues" them, fundamentally reproducing gendered and patriarchal relations.

In contrast to the original series, the 2000 remake of *Charlie's Angels* completely ignores feminist politics or institutionalized discrimination. The shift towards more agency and autonomy, or "girl power", is only superficially emancipatory, as once again the female body is put forward as an eroticized object for the other characters and the audience to enjoy, a portrayal that is in line with the then increasingly postfeminist representations of women in popular media (Coon 2005). Additionally, the 2000 remake of *Charlie's Angels* naturalizes sexual objectification as a means for women to be successful.

Although the previous versions of *Charlie's Angels* were always three established spies working for an off-screen male voice called Charlie, the 2019 film offers a contemporary twist. *Charlie's Angels* is now a global network of women saving the world. In the updated version, the character of Bosley has been expanded to a rank, with multiple Bosleys commanding and supporting the Angels worldwide. Engineer Elena, played by Naomi Scott, invents a clean energy source but is mansplained and her accomplishment diminished. When her invention risks falling in the wrong hands, she seeks the help of *Charlie's Angels* and joins them in their effort against her money-hungry boss Brock (Sam Claflin) and the assassin he hired, Hadok (Jonathan Tucker). The Angels trio is formed by the addition of the unexperienced Elena to established Angels Sabina (Kristen Stewart) and Jane (Ella Balinska). The 2019 remake positions itself as a successor to the earlier versions through a photomontage at the start and by casting Jaclyn Smith, one of the original Angels in the 1970s. At the outset, however, the 2019 remake differs substantially because of its overt feminist ambitions and female cast and crew.

¹ We will use the term postfeminism, without hyphen, in line with Banet-Weiser et al. (5). In the age of postfeminism, media represent feminism more often, potentially de-stigmatizing it, but these representations are "safe", hyperfeminine, and depoliticized (Caldeira). Postfeminist discourse dictates that equality between men and women is now fully achieved and that active feminist resistance is therefore no longer necessary (McClearen). While it is claimed women now have full agency, it is at the same time highly individualized and reduced to a sexualized femininity (Banet-Weiser et al. 8).

Where does the 2019-remake of *Charlie's Angels* stand amidst our postfeminist popular culture? How can we evaluate Mulvey's male gaze in the film, given the film's feminist claims, its female director, and the wider era of postfeminist media culture we are currently in?

A revision of the male gaze

Mulvey's seminal premise (1975, 17) is that women are cinematically reduced to passive objects, in contrast to active men, through the three looks (the active look of the male protagonist; the look of the camera that objectifies women's bodies; and the audience, looking through both the eyes of the male protagonist and the camera). An early criticism on Mulvey's concept is the lack of a female gaze or queer gaze. Her pessimistic assumption that female viewers do not hold any form of agency regarding their identification with the characters has been widely criticized (Sturken 2020). Mulvey formulates an answer to this criticism in her "Afterthoughts" and reflects on the women in the audience and how identification is affected when a female character occupies "the centre of the narrative arena", where she finds female protagonists are unable to achieve a sexual identity, torn between passive femininity and regressive masculinity (1999, 122). Another criticism is that Mulvey ignores the complexities of masculinity as well as intersectional identities (Loshitzky, 2003). In that respect, Chia (2013) postulates that the male gaze has been challenged in recent decades by the emergence of the female gaze, in which the female characters are themselves the subject and the agents - no longer the passive objects - in the storyline by fulfilling the role of the looker. Nevertheless, Kaplan (1983) argues that although women can master the objectifying gaze, only the male gaze implies the notions of action and possession.

Additionally, the male gaze functions as a norm for filmmaking. Against the background of important developments in the film industry in terms of gender equality, Mulvey's male gaze is a marker for conceptions of feminism and femininity in contemporary popular culture on three levels: male gaze as form, male gaze as production ecology, and male gaze as narrative. A female director would complicate a straightforwardly patriarchal male gaze, although gendered norms and rules of film production work might not allow for anything else (Mayer, Banks & Caldwell 2009). Recent research on women working in creative positions in the Swedish film confirms this when they find how "women filmmakers experience continuous questioning of their professional competence" (Jansson ea. 2022, 202), which often arises when women directors break with the stereotypical way of portraying women, i.e. when they choose a portrayal not in line with the male

gaze (Jansson 2022). More women in numbers does not always imply more variety in the voices we hear (Kay 2021, 75). Therefore, after addressing the contexts for the series and franchises of *Charlie's Angels*, we will look at *the male gaze as ecology of production*. Does a female cast and/or crew make a difference? Next, we will investigate *the male gaze as form*, where we use the 2000 version as a benchmark. In the last part of our analysis, we look at *the male gaze as narrative*, especially its ideological implications for womanhood and contemporary representations of women.

***Charlie's Angels* in Context**

The tension between feminism and femininity was crucial in the original *Charlie's Angels* series and has continued to be the guiding principle in the representation of the Angels' relationship to the world throughout the remakes. By the 1970s, feminist debates had centered around the question of sexual difference, and to which extent society could radically reform while at the same time allow women "to be women". The *Charlie's Angels* series at the time resolved this issue in favor of femininity. The broader definitions of womanhood and the Angels' independence made the show appealing to a wider, female audience. At the same time, the Angels were traditional sex symbols, addressing male viewers (Inness 2003, 4-5). The characters' hegemonic feminine attractiveness helped them succeed in a male-dominated world. In this sense, the Angels stand for a broader tension symbolized by female characters in the action film genre. By being conventionally attractive, these women conform to gender norms, but by performing the same physical stunts as their muscled and masculine counterparts, they defy definitions of classic femininity (McClearen 2015, 835).

The original series took up other advances of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, such as women in traditionally male jobs (Powers et al. 1992; 1993) or the notion of sisterhood, which built on consciousness-raising groups within the feminist movement at the time (Gough-Yates 2001, 91). The series was conceived in a climate where female characters increasingly pursued positions of authority and discipline that frequently required using violence (Taylor & Setters 2011). Before the 1970s, white female characters in action films were usually presented as frightened victims, while the male hero was more intelligent and assertive, and above all more numerous (Gauntlett 2008). This slowly changes around the 1970s. The Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s are undoubtedly a crucial yet often unacknowledged influence on the conception of the Angels, with its strong African American female action heroes, such as *Cleopatra Jones* in 1973 (played by Tamara Dobson) or *Foxy Brown* in 1974 (played by Pam Grier) (Schubart 2007). Another influence is the emerging feminist film criticism and a more progressive climate in Hollywood (Smelik 2009;

Powers et al. 1992). Topics such as sex and extramarital relationships in films became acceptable, which also led to the rise in film roles with more agency for (white) female characters (Powers 1993).

In the original *Charlie's Angels* series, we find this agency in its heavy reliance on the "single girl" archetype that took shape during the 1960s and 1970s. It was no longer pitiable to be a single, young, independent woman, and this was often paired with a consumerist lifestyle: "[In the series] women could be empowered through immersing themselves in the world of consumerism – commodity consumption allowing for a performance of femininity that could deceive and evade the exercise of dominant patterns of gender relations" (Gough-Yates 2001, 93). In this way, the series can easily be seen as a precursor or at least an early expression of the centrality of consumerism to postfeminism in contemporary popular media. Postfeminism often entails the embracing of consumerism and a focus on aesthetic labor (i.e., making oneself "beautiful" in line with hegemonic femininity, for example, by "pampering" oneself). It is precisely the voluntary self-objectification by women under the guise of emancipation and the road to gender equality that characterize postfeminist representations of women today (Caldeira 2020, 94-5).

In addition, we can consider the series as one of the starting points of today's postfeminism as it attempted to soften the concerns of the feminist movement at the time and to absorb it into mainstream popular culture, as "notions of women's 'independence' [were] being recuperated through a sexual objectification of 'liberated' heroines" (Gough-Yates 2001, 83-4). Indeed, feminism had softened by the time the broadcasting of *Charlie's Angels* ended in 1981.

During the 1980s and 1990s, we see a backlash against the feminist achievements of the 1970s. Feminism was generally portrayed in media as being old-fashioned and redundant: "[T]he tropes of freedom and choice [...] are now inextricably connected with the category of 'young women'" (McRobbie 2020). On-screen, the backlash in feminism expresses itself in an upsurge of female action heroes during the 1980s and 1990s who often possessed qualities that are traditionally attributed to the male hero, such as courage and perseverance (Smelik 2009). A good example here is Pamela Anderson in *Barb Wire* (Edwards 2004). But female action heroes are rare. A comprehensive study of American action films between 1980 and 2016 identified 172 male action heroes and only eight female action heroes (Soberon 2020, 138).

With the third wave of feminism, the 1990s saw a broader sensitivity to issues of equality, not only gender but also race, class, and sexual orientation. Kimberle Crenshaw's work (1991) on intersectionality is fundamental here, where she conceptualizes how gender intersects with other social identities such as race, and how these intersections reveal different challenges than when considering only gender (see also Bilge

2013; Bowleg 2008; Cho ea. 2013; Davis 2008; Hill Collins ea. 2016; McCall 2005). But at the same time as sensitivity for intersectional nuances in gender conceptions develops, the "girl power" phenomenon of the 1990s introduced popular feminism as a form of commodified feminism: "as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 4). The male gaze and the sexualization of women as passive objects are further complicated by an increasing lack of control for male characters (Sherwin 2008).

Despite more strong, independent, and decisive female characters today, women in popular culture continue to be represented as "hypersexualized and self-disciplined female bodies" (Dejmanee 2016, 431), with a near-exclusive focus on sexual attractiveness. The women we see on screen only confirm hegemonic conceptions of femininity (thin, white, middle-class, heterosexual). Therefore, we can conclude, unfortunately, that the concept of male gaze as a means of cinematically objectifying women still stands strong since Mulvey's original conception (Coon 2005; Rodrigues 2012). But what about *Charlie's Angels'* (2019) diverse cast and crew?

Methodology

Our case study focuses on *Charlie's Angels* (2019) but we use the 2000 remake as benchmark. Where the original Angels only dressed revealingly for undercover purposes, the early 2000 Angels are provocatively dressed all the time. The 2000 remake can be considered the epitome of Mulvey's male gaze, where a male (character, camera, and audience) actively looks at passive and objectified female characters. This seems like a good starting point for evaluating the 2019 remake.

For the analysis on the productional level, a comparison was made between the respective crew and cast of both films by drawing upon information retrieved from IMDb.

For the analysis of the male gaze as form, we made a focused sequence analysis. In the sample we only included potentially sexualizing shots, as they are defined in the literature: close-ups on the body, depth of field and how it draws attention to the female character in the frame (Mulvey 1975), camera movements, and finally the use of slow-motion when a female character is shown (Colling 2017; McAllister & DeCarvalho 2014). The images in which female characters cast a glance over the shoulder were also considered (Wright 2017). In the course of the research, other shot sizes (e.g. medium shot), certain camera angles (e.g. low or high angle), and the way of framing also appeared to contribute to an objectified perception of the female characters. For the sake of brevity, we discuss only the most illustrative examples of the selection.

For the male gaze as narrative, we made a qualitative textual analysis of the film as a whole and for a selection of scenes. The selection was made based on statements the female characters make, how they are dressed, whether they behave aggressively or defensively, and how they are approached by male characters.

Male gaze as production ecology: more women, more problems?

Although most Hollywood films are directed, written, and produced by men (Benshoff & Griffin 2004), Smith's comparative studies between 2010 and 2019 suggest that there is a subtle increase in women behind the screen over the course of about ten years (Smith 2010; 2019). The findings indicate that women most often take up the role of producer. A similar observation is found in a report from 2017, which shows that 18% of the production employees of the 250 most successful films were women. This ratio has been almost stable since the 1980s (Lauzen 2018; Miller 2018). When looking at the potential influence of female production members, the consensus is that women in leading roles such as producer or director have a positive effect on the overall number of female production employees. Furthermore, women in these positions tend to depict female characters in more varied ways and therefore contribute to a better and more diverse representation of women, both in terms of quantity and quality (Smelik 2009).

Looking at quantity and the corresponding representation of women on screen, we can indeed see that there are more women in the crew and that the female characters are represented in more varied ways in the 2019 remake than in the 2000 remake of *Charlie's Angels*. There is more than a 100% increase in the number of women in the crew (18% to 42%), and women have more positions of power in the 2019 remake. Where Bosley was previously played by one man, Banks herself plays one of the crucial Bosleys in the 2019 remake. Another intriguing character is Charles Townsend, founder of a crime-fighting organization (Townsend Agency) and principal of the Angels. Although we consistently hear a male voice, the end of the 2019 remake reveals that Charlie is a woman (played by Jaclyn Smith). Since Charlie is the most authoritative figure in the franchise, Banks confirms the idea that female directors involve more women on the film production team and represent female characters in more varied ways (Smelik 2009, Benshoff & Griffin 2004). The following section considers whether the same could be said for how women are shown on-screen.

Male gaze as form: agents to be looked at

Mulvey's male gaze theory argues that an erotic emphasis on women's physical appearances reduces women to cinematic objects purely to be looked at. Moreover, female characters are often portrayed as to suggest that they derive pleasure from their objectification (Mulvey 1975). Camera movements are crucial in bringing about such objectification (Dow 2003). The vertical pan, for example, slowly portrays a woman from her legs to her face, or vice versa, creating a sexualized image of the female body. Similarly, close-ups are often used to draw attention to the body of female characters (McAllister & DeCarvalho 2014). According to Colling, slow motion shots can be objectifying as they give the viewer time to study all the complexities and details. Lastly, Wright refers to a shot where a woman glances over her shoulder as a typically seductive image in the male gaze (Wright 2017). Ironically, in the 2000 version of *Charlie's Angels*, the look over the shoulder is explicitly used as a strategy by the Angels to seduce a male waiter.

Table 1. Cinematographic parameters which contribute to a sexualized representation of the female character

Parameters	Charlie's Angels (2000)	Charlie's Angels (2019)
Shot size		
Extreme close-up	2	0
Close-up	9	5
Medium close-up	5	0
Medium shot	2	3
Medium long shot	5	1
Long shot	3	0
Framing and depth of field		
Low angle	4	1
High angle	1	0
Ground-level shot	1	1
Central framing	9	3
Symmetrical framing	3	1
Focus	4	3
Camera movements		
Horizontal camera movement	1	0

Vertical camera movement	2	5
Tracking shot	3	0
Slow-motion	6	0
Over-the-shoulder shot	4	1
Total	65	24

Taking these cinematographic parameters (camera movements, shot size, framing and depth of field, slow motion, and over-the-shoulder shots) as indicative of *the male gaze as form*, we counted shots and scenes with objectifying undertones in the 2000 version and the 2019 version of *Charlie's Angels*. In the 2019 remake, we identified 14 such objectifying suggestions, as opposed to 32 in the 2000 version. Both film versions confirm the theoretical assumption that close-up shots, and by extension extreme close-up shots, can prompt a sexualized representation of women by framing specific body parts (McAllister & DeCarvalho 2014). The most objectifying close-up in *Charlie's Angels* (2019) is a shot of Sabina removing an ID card from another character's sports bag that simultaneously reveals a close-up of her bum. As she swings the ID back and forth, the curves of Sabina's bum in tight shorts remain visible throughout the shot. Although the shot's primary function is narrative, emphasizing that Sabina managed to obtain the card, it is an overt example of male gaze. This still differs from the 2000 remake, where the close-ups that we identified as objectifying were not motivated by the narrative and rarely to never contributed to the progression of the story. We note a similar non-narrative motivated use of depth of field in the 2000 remake. For example, while Alex (Lucy Liu) explains to her boyfriend Jason (Matt LeBlanc) how a bomb works, we see her in a medium close-up in the foreground of the frame and Jason in the background. Although Alex is closest to the camera, she is out of focus, unlike Jason, who is further in the background but in sharp focus. His gaze is directed at Alex's bosom in the foreground throughout the scene, and as viewers we follow that look. That is, although Alex is not in focus, the emphasis of the shot is nevertheless on her bosom. The 2000 remake further excels in its narratively unmotivated sexualization of female characters using slow motion. Alex can be seen twice in slow motion while taking off her skydive helmet and screen mask, only to shake off her hair and cast a sultry glance into the camera. Displaying this action in slow motion gives the image a sensual connotation, as the viewer's attention is drawn to this action for longer than necessary, allowing more time to study Alex's features, presenting us a classic example of male gaze as form. In the 2019 remake of *Charlie's Angels*, the slow-motion technique is not used to depict female characters for a male gaze.

The 2019 remake of *Charlie's Angels* obviously scores well on representation of women when we look at *the male gaze as form* and compare the film to its predecessor. But the film seems to be a case of "add women and stir" (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2020, 10), where "the project of making experience visible

precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself" (Scott 1991, 778). In other words, the film perpetuates a postfeminism on a narrative-ideological level.

Male gaze as narrative: "I believe that women can do anything"

In the film's opening scene, we see Sabina undercover on a date with smuggler Jonny Smith. The film's first spoken words are that she believes "women can do anything". Jonny replies that "just because they can, does not mean they should." Sabina goes on to argue that it was she who chose to make him notice her, thereby perpetuating agency in their interaction. At the same time, her agency is reduced to "using" her physical attractiveness to get to date Jonny and to eventually trap him for his illegal activities. Although she is on an undercover mission, the only way to succeed is to play out her femininity. Given that she is on an undercover mission, she chooses to objectify herself to his male gaze. This agency is characteristic of postfeminism. In the film, the agency is made redundant when Jonny thereupon replies that to date him "is not your choice, Sabina, that is God's gift to you". This reply implies that Jonny cannot resist Sabina's beauty and is a first illustration of the "weak man" motif woven throughout the film.

In fact, throughout the whole film heterosexual men are depicted as helpless, ignorant, immoral, egomaniacs, and power and money hungry. The only man who is reliable is Saint, who is sensitive, caring, fixes the Angels' clothes, and makes their food. In other words, Saint can be considered as a feminine, non-sexual, and non-heteronormative man. This cinematic trick of making others morally "worse" implies that we tend to see the female characters as morally superior (Vaage 2014). Making the men look dumb results in the portrayal of women as more sophisticated. The fact that none of the antagonists are women further confirms this particular moral binarism.

Through this practice of othering, men are depicted as morally inferior, unlike in the original series and the 2000 remake (Gough-Yates 2001, 83) that were mostly oriented towards men. At this point, the 2019 film mostly addresses a female audience by prompting alliances between women on-screen and women in the audience. Rather than invoking heterosexual desire for men in how the women are portrayed, the film portrays heterosexual and feminine ideals for women to gaze upon. These ideals become clearly visible when we aim our lens at the centrality of sexual seduction so present in this film.

Seduction and the self-objectivation of their bodies are portrayed as female skills and weapons to be used. This is not only clear from the opening sequence where Sabina seduces Jonny but also when the female

Bosley tells Elena she could be dating more if she emphasized more of her cheekbones. First, this scene yet again confirms the idea of heterosexual men as superficial and weak: Elena is an intelligent and successful engineer, yet her dating success depends on her appearance. Second, the beauty ideals presented here are decidedly Western and white femininity ideals. All lead actresses (the Angels and Banks herself) fit within the conventionally of the thin feminine ideal. Despite a diverse casting of the Angels (Naomi Scott is of Indian descent and Ella Balinska has a British/Polish/Caribbean background), these actresses fit neatly into the trend towards more ethnically ambiguous actors as a superficial way to promote diversity on screen. Simultaneously, these actors are confined to a "white ethos", where they pass as white, and with no space for the complexity of their heritage (Beltrán 2005, 56). As such, these "feminine action bodies operate within an ambivalent media space that ultimately sustains white patriarchy" (McClearen 2015, 836). This emphasis on the actresses' whiteness, or at least on the conformity of their bodies to white patriarchal standards, is further confirmed through the othering of non-white women, which we will touch upon shortly. In feminist terms, this gendered heterosexual binarism coupled with sexual seduction to achieve one's goals is a continuation of the battle on gender differences and femininity already present in the original 1970s series. Hegemonic femininity in its contemporary postfeminist definition is further displayed in the film through its portrayal of femininity in interaction with consumerism, age, and others. For example, after Jonny's arrest, Sabina announces that she will take a week off to party on a beach in Thailand, and she urges Jane to try the same. This statement encompasses both her agency and her consumerism as illustration of her freedom in a postfeminist sense, a freedom to conform to patriarchal ideals.

In the film, clothes also support consumerism as a method to achieve hyper-femininity. For example, the women run wearing high heels in multiple scenes. This is nuanced in the scene where Elena gets flat shoes instead of heels for the rest of the mission. Since she is not a real Angel yet, this implies that successful Angels - and by extension successful women - *do* run in heels and do succeed in complying to patriarchal and unrealistic standards of femininity. Furthermore, the characters highly value being able to pick any piece of clothing they want from their "dream wardrobe" at the Berlin base. We find that Sabina takes home these clothes and likes "having them." In contrast, later in the film, Elena criticizes her former boss, Broc, because he is only interested in the investors of his company, and therefore is immoral. Neoliberalism is accepted by the characters as expression of femininity and consumerism but not as an abstract entity ("the investors"). The female characters all seem to be a continuation of the single-girl archetype already manifest in the original television series. Sabina is, once mockingly and once admirably, called Miss Independent. Jane flirts with a guy at the lab and meets him again in the end. But this "single" girl archetype is in the film – just like

in the 1970s – a privilege for the younger women, as the female Bosley claims that she is "40 and single and has a hole the size of a cheese that needs to be filled," as if she is to be pitied for her (self-chosen?) singlehood.

This ageism is not uniformly present. In the end, Elena is trained to be an Angel by a variety of older (yet conventionally attractive and feminine) women, acknowledging their wisdom and value. However, again this is narrowed down to light-skinned, western, and middle-class women only. In a confrontation between Jane and a woman in Istanbul, we learn how Jane was the cause of the woman having to stop helping "unwed mothers." Jane thereupon promises to make up for this and provides her with a van filled with diapers and the pill. The woman is older and is portrayed as having no power or agency in her situation. Because this scene takes place in Istanbul, this is a case of Othering, where the non-West is represented as less developed and in need of help by the morally superior West (Said 2003). It equally reinforces the imperialism that is so intrinsic to the American action film genre (Soberon 2020). That Jane is played by Ella Balinski, who could be considered non-white, is irrelevant here as she is portrayed as ex-MI6 and very British. Therefore, her ability and agency are therefore linked to her western identity and body. Additionally, this scene de facto hides similar women's issues in the western world to which the lead characters belong. Yet another level of othering is present in the Angels' main antagonist, Hodak, who has a foreign background. Through its othering of men and non-western women, the film posits postfeminism as a privilege.

Heteronormativity is nuanced by Sabina's character, who reads as queer. After Jonny's arrest, Sabina expresses her disgust at having to play this feminine role. When she is stealing an entrance card at the gym, she casts a flirting glance at another girl. Sabina's clothes are quite neutral and concealing, except when she is undercover and has to or chooses to wear hyperfeminine and objectifying outfits within that context, for example, of her date with Jonny and during the dance scene at Broc's party in the end. In that sense, the film is truer to the original series in narratively justifying objectification than the 2000 remake. However, despite Sabina's more tomboy appearance and behavior, she still very much conforms to standards of femininity throughout the film. The unfortunate message here is that this is "necessary" for success in the patriarchal world within which they operate. Sabina explicitly addresses this when she claims that being a woman is an advantage in her line of work: either there are low expectations, or you are invisible. From an objectifying perspective, this is a positive return to the original Angels' premise of using their femininity to carry out their job rather than for its own sake like in the 2000 remake. Nonetheless, it really only naturalizes patriarchal structures and asserts that women have no other choice.

Conclusion

The final scene reveals that there were many women present in the room to support the main characters. Thereafter, the film ends with Elena being trained by a number of women, presumably ex-Angels. We are left with a feeling of sisterhood. We, women in the audience, are not alone. Despite its confirmation of femininity and consumerism along classically postfeminist lines, we do find some hope here in the 2019 remake. The individualism that characterizes postfeminism, where each woman is responsible for her own fate in this supposedly gender equal world, is nuanced by the feeling of sisterhood we are left with in the end. The question remains whether this sisterhood addresses all women and thereby implies a liberatory feminism or whether this sisterhood only re-confirms the postfeminist realism at work here. In line with Levine's earlier work on *Charlie's Angels*, we can conclude in any case that the 2019 remake is yet another step in how the franchise negotiates and "remakes discourses of feminism and femininity" (Levine 2008, 375).

Our proposed refinement of Mulvey's male gaze offers a tool to address potentially overlooked complexities in the portrayal of women when studying films as texts. First, when looking at *the male gaze as production ecology*, the increase of women on cast and crew has indeed led to both more women on the team and to a more diverse representation of female characters in power positions, such as Bosley and Charlie. Consequently, when looking at *the male gaze as form*, the 2019 remake is not, or at least to a much lesser degree, used to sexualize women's bodies. Without doubt, more female directors is a necessary step towards more diversity on and off screen. But when looking at the male gaze as narrative, postfeminist ideals stand out, which confirms that women as much as men are bound to male gaze norms of representation (Jansson 2022). This echoes Teresa de Lauretis' concept of gender as a sociocultural product *and* ongoing process (1987, 5).

Curiously, in the case of *Charlie's Angels*, and exactly the reverse from what Mulvey originally described, the film's internalized male gaze affords an alliance for women rather than men. The 2019 film differs from its previous versions in that it is now the women who look (the female protagonists, the female director, and the implied female audience) and who have internalized the male gaze as a measurement for their own

success. There is, however, no space for queer women nor for women who do not wish to comply to western, white, and middle-class feminine ideals. Men and older single women are subtly ridiculed. Moreover, through practices of othering, binary sexual differences and patriarchal ideals of femininity remain hegemonic. Additionally, by presenting men and non-white, non-binary, and non-middle-class women as morally inferior, the film portrays hegemonic femininity and postfeminism as the ideal the female audience should aspire. Based on our analysis of the 2019 remake, we can conclude that the *Charlie's Angels* franchise, including Elisabeth Banks as director and producer of the film, does not question the patriarchal world it operates in. Therefore, *Charlie's Angels* offers us an interesting example of how "the legal, political, social and cultural context of film production constitutes gendered rules and norms that inform film work" (Jansson ea 2020, 208) in both the ecology of production and the narrative offered to us. More women must be accompanied by a diversity in stories, and ultimately, ideals. For *Charlie's Angels*, a narrowly white, western, and heteronormative postfeminism is - for now - offered as our only reality. Yet, to dismiss Bank's effort as insignificant would undermine the franchise's potential to challenge patriarchal norms. Even Angels have their demons, but the last battle has not been fought.

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