

Bad Bitch, White Witch

A Study of the Crossover Star Personas of Supermodel-Actors

Devon Aoki and Abbey Lee

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Abstract

While it is very common for supermodels to make the occasional foray into cinematic performance, and some of them manage to turn these forays into full-time careers in acting, it is very rare that supermodel-actors are afforded any academic attention. This thesis seeks to change this through a case study of two supermodel-actors: Devon Aoki and Abbey Lee. Using a methodology that combines extratextual contextualization with close analysis of image and film materials, and grounded in a perspective that centers the body, it analyzes Aoki and Lee's careers as they cross over from one form of stardom to another. The focus of the analysis lies in the way that the bodily capital which is the basis of their modelling work also informs their acting personas as they are shaped through their on-screen work, publicity and reception. Furthermore, the thesis applies the concept of niche stardom, adapted from Diane Negra, to illustrate how Aoki and Lee inhabit a stardom which is specific to certain audiences with specific values and tastes. The analysis finds that there is a significant overlap between Aoki and Lee's modelling and acting personas, and that this overlap is channeled through the representations of their bodies which, are the sites of heterogeneous discourses of gender, sexuality and race.

Keywords

Supermodel-actors, Stardom, Celebrity, Star personas, Devon Aoki, Abbey Lee, Action film, Horror film, Bodily capital, Whiteness, Asian stereotypes, Modelling, Supermodels, Fashion models

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Introduction

On June 23rd 2016, in anticipation of the wide theatrical release of Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn's then latest film *The Neon Demon* (2016), *Vogue* ran an article titled "The 10 Best Model Moments in Film," ranking "movies that are either about models or that star famous models in acting roles that became touchstones."¹ This list includes such classic films as *Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) and *Celebrity* (Woody Allen, 1998). However, while Rita Hayworth, Isabella Rossellini and Charlize Theron, to name a few, all started out in modelling, none of these stars had been famous as models when they had their big breaks as actors – and thus they could make this transition without being affected by biases about models' acting skills or preexisting ideas about their on-screen presence. It seems not coincidental that famous German supermodel and socialite Veruschka, in contrast to those actors who simply "used to model," has primarily appeared in small roles and cameos, never being considered a "real" actor.² Not many supermodels manage to cultivate lasting or substantial acting careers, even though it seems for some almost a rite of passage to make the attempt to cross over from fashion to film.

Models are primarily treated as commodities in the fashion industry, necessitating that they learn to discipline and manipulate their bodies to be marketable.³ Thus, when famous supermodels transition to acting, certain connotations of what it means to be a model are imposed upon the aspiring actor. Tumblr user tom-i-butler's post "The Best and Worst Models Turned Actors" illustrates this point quite clearly with its opening line: "Nowadays, being really, really ridiculously good looking just isn't enough for supermodels, they want to be multi-hyphenate model-singer-actor-fragrance-peddlers too."⁴ The blogger's rather harsh words indicate a certain disdain towards the ambitions of people commonly regarded as beautiful-but-empty bodies.

¹ John Powers, "The 10 Best Model Moments in Film," *Vogue* Online, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://www.vogue.com/article/best-model-moments-in-film>.

² Ulf Poschardt, "Grazie im Schatten Einer Tragödie," *Welt*, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://www.welt.de/geschichte/article182070718/Leonore-von-Haefen-gestorben-Grazie-im-Schatten-einer-Tragoedie.html>.

³ Joanne Entwistle and Don Slater, "Models as Brands: Critical Thinking about Bodies and Images," in *Fashioning Models: Image Text and Industry*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (London/New York, NY: Berg, 2012), 15-18.

⁴ @tom-i-butler, "The Best and Worst Models Turned Actors," Tumblr, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://tom-i-butler.tumblr.com/post/126670705766/the-best-and-worst-models-turned-actors>.

When supermodels cross over, they are very often cast in genre cinema, and this thesis focuses on the genres of horror and action (I elaborate on genre below). Some examples of this tendency are Milla Jovovich, Amber Valletta, Alek Wek, Tao Okamoto and Rila Fukushima and it is reminiscent of the consistent casting in action cinema of former athletes and bodybuilders like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Dave Bautista, whose filmographies largely rely on their specialized physiques. Female characters in horror and action often embody characteristics that are required of models, such as thinness, androgyny, or alien-esque features that work to enhance monstrosity.⁵ Simultaneously, supermodel bodies complicate certain established gender dynamics within these genres; typically long-limbed and flat-chested, supermodels may bring a look and a type of sexuality that departs from the typical female body found in the typical contemporary action heroine who is defined by visible physical fitness and hypersexual femininity.⁶

In this thesis I focus on two supermodel-actors – Devon Aoki and Abbey Lee – in relation to the relationship between model bodies and star personas. Aoki started out as a petite mixed race Asian-American model in the 1990s, when very few Asian models had prospering careers on the international market. Her “face of a goddess” and naturally slim figure combined with an attitude of genuine cool made her “one of the most recognisable alternative faces of the 90s,” and an “It Girl in all its glory.”⁷ This It Girl-status has translated into Aoki’s film career.⁸ Her filmography consists of primarily action movies, including several 2000s films and franchises with cult followings, such as *2 Fast 2 Furious* (John Singleton, 2003), *D.E.B.S.* (Angela Robinson, 2004) and *DOA (Dead or Alive)* (Corey Yuen, 2006). Her roles are usually

⁵ Jeffrey A. Brown, “Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books,” in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke/New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47-74; Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (Jefferson, NC/London: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2007).

⁶ Marc O’Day, “Beauty in Motion: Gender, Spectacle and Action Babe Cinema,” in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 201-218.

⁷ Sonia Blair, “In Celebration of Her Birthday, We Look Back at the ‘It’ Girl Style of Devon Aoki,” *Russh* Online, accessed 15 March, 2023, <https://www.russh.com/devon-aoki-style/>; Dominic Cadogan, “Cult Model Devon Aoki’s Most Memorable Moments,” *Dazed Digital*, accessed 15 March, 2023, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/37334/1/cult-model-devon-aokis-most-memorable-moments-jeremy-scott-moschino>.

⁸ The term It Girl is hard to define as it is such a commonly used term in colloquial discussions about fame and media. I embrace this uncertain, floating quality of the It Girl, in a similar spirit to Raven Smith, who writes “The truth is that Its are more than the sum of their parts. They are pure zeitgeist, charisma incarnate, hard to describe linguistically, the same way the word ‘love’ doesn’t come close to all the sublime, silly, big, and little feels associated with it. Roughly speaking, when it comes to It girls, men want her, women want to be her, gays want to meme her.” Raven Smith, “What Is It About an It Girl?,” *Vogue* Online, accessed 7 June, 2023, <https://www.vogue.com/article/what-is-it-about-an-it-girl>.

defined by a quality which may be most succinctly defined as “badass.” However, Aoki’s persona has also been defined by her Japanese heritage and her work has often relied on her ability to transform into a more distinctly Japanese version of herself. This blend of edgy cool girl-factor and racialization points to a tension within the racist conception of Asian women in a Western context as always existing in a binary of submissive devotion and sexually loaded aggression.⁹ Aoki’s star persona plays with the latter, such as in *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005), in which she plays a sometimes sadistic assassin – while the girlishness of her features is often highlighted by makeup artists and costume designers to hint at the former.

Unlike Aoki, who is immediately recognizable as Othered in the eyes of Western hegemonic ideology due to her non-white body, Lee is a tall, pale (bleach) blonde with strikingly blue eyes and a hyper-thin frame. Her alien-esque features are, in the fashion industry, venerated for their freakishness. Lee’s whiteness is one which calls attention to itself, where the “*idealized* whiteness” which, as Sean Redmond argues, Hollywood stars have historically had the ideological function of embodying, does not.¹⁰ Her whiteness is *extreme* to the point where it almost appears as exterior to the ideal, and it has strongly connected her persona to mythological creatures such as the witch, the mermaid/siren and even angels and deities. This seemingly intrinsic otherworldly or supernatural quality, in combination with Lee’s rail-thin, long-limbed, 181cm tall body, position her in a specific niche in the film industry. She has played a bloodthirsty aging model in *The Neon Demon*, a white supremacist witch in *Lovecraft Country* (Misha Green, 2020), a mythological ancient Egyptian assassin with a snake tongue in *Gods of Egypt* (Alex Proyas, 2016), a trophy wife whose gruesome death has her body contorted into something almost inhuman in *Old* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2021) – and these are only some examples from her growing filmography. There are outliers, but majority of her acting credits to date are roles in which her extreme whiteness and supermodel persona are intrinsic to her characters – somehow always either connecting her to the very materiality of the earth or to the supernatural or celestial realms, indicating that she is something other than merely human.

⁹ See for example Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles, CA/London: University of California Press, 1993); Xin Peng, “Anna May Wong and Sessue Hayakawa: Racial Performance, Ornamentation, and Yellow Voices in Daughter of the Dragon (1931),” *Camera Obscura* 37, no. 2 (2022): 1-29, DOI: 10.1215/02705346-9786986.

¹⁰ Sean Redmond, “The Whiteness of Stars: Looking at Kate Winslet’s Unruly White Body,” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 263.

Research Aims

This thesis aims to create an understanding of how supermodels' acting personas can be impacted by their modelling work and bodily capital through two case studies. Furthermore, it aims to illustrate how this hybrid stardom, with such strong emphasis on the body, relates to the gender politics of the film performances of Devon Aoki and Abbey Lee, particularly as their careers are located predominantly in the action, horror and science fiction. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic of this thesis, my theoretical framework draws on star studies (focusing on genre film and gender) and fashion studies (for different perspectives on modelling as both a material and symbolic/ideological practice). The methodology combines different approaches to textual and intertextual analysis with a focus on the physical body, its agency and place in ideological meaning-making. The thesis will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- How do Aoki and Lee's crossover acting personas reflect the bodily capital and personas of their modelling careers, and how does this connect them to the concept of niche stardom?
- How do their personas connect Aoki and Lee to discourses of gender, race and sexuality?
- How do the representations of Aoki and Lee's model bodies present across a variety of media interact with the gender politics of the action and horror genres?

Previous Research

To the best of my knowledge, no research has been done on Aoki or Lee either as models or actors. In a study of Milla Jovovich's career in *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, Rikke Schubart illustrates how the consensus on models-turned-actors often is that they, like any actor whose persona is "based on their physical appearance," are subpar actors and instead function simply as empty body-objects for the pleasure of the viewer's gaze.¹¹ She further argues that the androgynous quality and unnatural appearance of Jovovich's hyper-thin supermodel body is the basis for a star persona which relies on its deviation from common constructions of desirable femininity, and that this informs both her performances and their reception.¹² Schubart's study is the only academic work on supermodel-actors that I have been able to find in the research for this thesis, and I hope to contribute to more scholarship in this area.

¹¹ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 270-289.

¹² Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 286-289.

This thesis departs from the field of star studies. In cinema, media and cultural studies, the crafted persona of the on-screen star has been regarded as a vessel for contemporary social and cultural values, as a pawn or even commodity within a capitalist industry aimed at selling, precisely, commodities. The star persona has been studied from various perspectives, often focusing on such culturally important aspects as race, sexuality and gender. Already in the 1950s, Edgar Morin described the tense but symbiotic relationship between the star's off- and on-screen lives as essential to the development of a star.¹³ Some two decades later, Richard Dyer would identify how the real-life person and their characters are inextricably linked, and that they are both inherent to the construction of the star image.¹⁴ The field is indebted to the seminal work of Dyer's *Stars*, which provided a comprehensive theory of the polysemy of stardom, and later *Heavenly Bodies*, which examines stardom from the perspectives of gender, fandom and marginalization.¹⁵ As Martin Shingler notes in *Star Studies: A Critical Guide*, Dyer's framework incorporates into the study of stars "work on gender and film, synthesising and advancing existing claims," while considering sociopolitical contexts and ideological concerns.¹⁶ His work has also been the foundation upon which many other scholars have built their research on stars from a variety of different perspectives, by providing theory and methodology which has been adapted and reconsidered near-infinitely.

Christine Geraghty conceptualizes stars as being able to inhabit different primary roles in their stardom, enabling the conceptualization of different kinds of on-screen talent under the "star-umbrella."¹⁷ She argues that a star may belong to either the category of the "celebrity," the "professional" or the "performer" – a division which indicates that the extent to which the star image relies on the personal lifestyle of the star versus their work differs depending on the individual star.¹⁸ Similarly, Joshua Gamson in *Claims to Fame* and Barry King in "Articulating Stardom" both make similar arguments about the importance for stars of negotiating the balance between their association with their work versus the "extra-filmic."¹⁹ This notion of maintaining the balance is vital to take into account as it can often, as I will illustrate, impact the career of a star hugely. Furthermore, Diane Negra, in "Niche Stardom," attempts to develop a framework

¹³ Edgar Morin, *The Stars* (New York, NY/London: Evergreen Profile Books, 1961 (originally published in French in 1957)); Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

¹⁴ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 1-16.

¹⁵ Dyer, *Stars*; Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*.

¹⁶ Martin Shingler, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 14.

¹⁷ Christine Geraghty, "Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance," in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 98-110.

¹⁸ Geraghty, "Examining Stardom," 98-11.

¹⁹ Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 79-107; Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 174.

for understanding those stars who are not globally recognizable brands that can carry a whole studio movie, but who nevertheless hold a stardom which may be largely constricted to certain niche audiences.²⁰ These are often audiences priding themselves on their elite or oppositional tastes and values, and niche stars' personas tend to reflect those, which can sometimes be limiting for their careers.²¹

This thesis is interested in the intersection of bodies, gender and race in the genres of action and horror. Much academic attention has been paid to the physical body as a tool of the acting trade, as a target of objectification and as a site for the construction of both gender and race in these genres. Regarding action, some notable works like *Impossible Bodies* by Chris Holmlund, *Action Chicks* edited by Sherrie A. Inness and *Contemporary Action Cinema* by Lisa Purse all deal with the "body-focused nature" of the genre, its muscled excess and athletic excellence.²² *Action Chicks* as well as Schubart's *Super Bitches* and Marc O'Day's "Beauty in Motion" focus on specifically femininity and the female body in the genre, particularly paying attention to the way that the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of postfeminism and liberal feminism which embraced "empowered" femininity and sexuality, leading to a marked shift toward a highly feminine and sexualized female action hero.²³ Yvonne Tasker has also shown a recurrent interest in the bodies of women in action cinema, largely focusing on the muscled bodies of the 1980s and 1990s as represented in actors like Demi Moore and Brigitte Nielsen, the intersection of race and gender channeled through actors like Whoopi Goldberg and "the ambiguous gender identity of the female action hero [...] points to the instability of a gendered system."²⁴ While the focus of scholarship on action cinema is often on white bodies, this in itself is a way of highlighting the racial issues of the genre; its inhabitants are usually white, and it tends to venerate white masculinity and sexualized white femininity, and whenever non-white bodies are involved there must be a negotiation of their proximity to whiteness.²⁵

²⁰ Diane Negra, "'Queen of the Indies': Parker Posey's Niche Stardom and the Taste Cultures of Independent Film," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London/New York, NY Routledge, 2005), 61-76.

²¹ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 70-73.

²² Chris Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 2002); Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (New York, NY/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 40.

²³ Innes, *Action Chicks*; Schubart, *Super Bitches*; O'Day, "Beauty in Motion."

²⁴ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1993) 14-34; Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London/ New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 69.

²⁵ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 9-23. 136-139.

This is not, of course, true of *all* iterations of the genre. Hong Kong action cinema, for example, and blaxploitation cinema are both examples of niches within the genre that for different reasons center

Tasker has also studied the crossover bodies of actors who used to be athletes and bodybuilders such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Chuck Norris, and the impact that their bodily capital and material bodies have on the way they embody the “muscular action hero” that has been a staple in Hollywood action cinema since the 1980s.²⁶ Model-actors, who work under similar conditions – including the common denial of their possible acting skills – should be treated with the same scholarly regard, because like the muscles of the bodybuilder, the thinness of the supermodel is an embodiment of ideological notions about gender and race.

Horror’s relationship to Otherness, that which deviates from the socially acceptable, has been the subject of much scholarship. Robin Wood is one of the foremost voices on horror and difference, his “Return of the Repressed” and “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” perhaps being the most famous of his writings, exploring through a synthesis of psychoanalytic and Marxist frameworks how “ideology is transmitted and perpetuated,” and difference repressed, through bourgeois heteropatriarchal values.²⁷ *The Dread of Difference* edited by Barry Keith Grant is an anthology comprised of a number of perspectives on the way the genre deals with gender and gendered bodies, which often entails the positioning of women and their bodies as violated victims or threatening monsters – yet sometimes both at once.²⁸ Barbara Creed’s concept of ‘the monstrous-feminine,’ relating to how the female body is mirrored in the monsters of horror, Carol Clover’s ‘final girl’ figure who becomes a site of complicated cross-gender identification, and Linda Williams’ theorization of the affinity between woman and monster through the gaze in “When the Woman Looks,” are theories I will return to when discussing the contradictory ways women function in horror.²⁹ While many authors have departed from psychoanalysis for their theorization of the horror film, authors such as Steven Prince and Bridget Cherry in her monograph *Horror*, elaborate culturally contextual, socially

Southeast-Asian and Black bodies respectively. However, the films of Aoki and Lee, the subjects of this study, are situated in Western and almost exclusively commercial contexts.

²⁶ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 1. 74.

²⁷ Robin Wood, “Return of the Repressed,” in *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 57-62; Robin Wood, “Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 73.

²⁸ Barry Keith Grant, ed., *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).

²⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1993); Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015 (1992)); Linda Williams, “When the Woman Look,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 15-34.

situated theorizations of horror instead.³⁰ This perspective acknowledges horror's preoccupations with Otherness, while more readily acknowledging the multiplicity of Othered identities, and I approach the genre similarly.

The study of supermodels in the cinema is also an interdisciplinary study of the intersection between film and fashion. Much scholarly work has been done on costuming and fashion in the cinema, notably in works like Stella Bruzzi's *Undressing Cinema and Fashion, Film and the 1960* edited by Eugenia Paulicelli, Drake Stutesman and Louise Wallenberg.³¹ In 2019, journal *Film, Fashion & Consumption* even hosted a special issue on the intersection between fashion and film studies edited by Elizabeth Castaldo Lundén and Chiara Faggella, which features a number of articles regarding these subjects.³²

The link between costume design, fashion, and specific star personas is addressed in studies of specific stars, and *Fashioning Film Stars* edited by Rachel Moseley is a collection of studies centering that relationship, including for example chapters on Marlene Dietrich's hats and their significance for her traversing the line between the masculine and the feminine, and the construction of Audrey Hepburn as the ultimate "woman's star" through her transformational wardrobes in Cinderella narratives.³³ This research tends to highlight the interplay between dress/fashion, the body and the construction of (racialized) gender, and that perspective is something I aim to focus on in my analysis of Aoki and Lee as well. However, this research is largely focused on how primarily older Hollywood stars have become fashion icons through their cinematic images, the assumption being that their personal style out of the movies should match their on-screen personas. Yet some more recent research, notably by Rebecca L. Epstein on Sharon Stone's stardom and Pamela Church Gibson in *Fashion and Celebrity Culture*, focuses on the way stars in recent decades have become increasingly reliant on publicity opportunities like red carpets to establish themselves as forces of fashion and diversify their stardom.³⁴ While these different perspectives on the interplay between film and fashion are all important to my understanding of Aoki and Lee's crossover personas which

³⁰ Stephen Prince, "Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*: Toward a Social Theory of Horror," in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick/New Jersey/London: Rutgers University Press, 2004); 118-130; Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).167-185.

³¹ Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1997); Eugenia Paulicelli, Drake Stutesmand and Louise Wallenberg, eds., *Film, Fashion & the 1960s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017).

³² Elizabeth Castaldo Lundén and Chiara Faggella, "Editorial Foreword," *Fashion, Film & Consumption* 8, no. 1 (2019): 3-8, https://doi.org/10.1386/ffc.8.1.3_2.

³³ Rachel Moseley, ed. *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005).

³⁴ Rebecca L. Epstein, "Sharon Stone in a Gap Turtleneck," in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 206-218; Pamela Church Gibson, *Fashion, and Celebrity Culture* (London: Berg, 2012), 53-68, DOI: 10.5040/9781472572424

inherently combine fashion and the cinema, I further understand the two as embodying certain qualities stemming from their supermodel identities which inform the way their bodies are dressed on screen. For these crossover stars whose stardom stems from their fashioned bodies, the connection to fashion can be a hindrance to diversification rather than a tool, as I will illustrate in my analyses of Aoki and Lee.

Thesis Outline

In order to answer my research questions, the following chapter of this thesis will be a review of my theoretical framework, divided by the main categories of star studies, perspectives on modelling, as well as genre theory with a focus on gender and the body. Following this is a chapter explaining my methodological approach as well as a detailing of the materials which will be used for analysis and possible limitations of the study. The materials include mainly films, both written and video interviews, as well as other publicity materials related to the subjects' modelling and film careers. In the next chapter, I start my analysis with a discussion on the creation of models, on supermodels as stars with star bodies, and on the transition of supermodels from modelling to acting, in which I will argue that models' cinematic careers are very often built in a way which is body-centric, relating to the discourse of models as embodiments of idealized beauty and bodily perfection and thus subpar actors. Following this are two chapters, each focusing on the case studies of Aoki and Lee respectively, starting with analysis of their respective modelling careers, before moving on to their careers in Hollywood, particularly noting continuities and ruptures between their careers in the different industries, and the way that Aoki and Lee's respective bodies become centered in their personas. I will argue that each model's look is integrated into her actor persona to some extent, but that due to certain factors, inherently tied into the issues of race, Lee has managed to diversify her career in ways Aoki has not.

Theoretical Framework

Stardom and Niche Stardom

Star studies is the academic study of stardom, of celebrity, of fame – whatever you prefer to call it. I draw much of the theoretical framework for this thesis upon Dyer’s basic framework, which combines “sociological” and “semiotic” perspectives, wherein the former considers the star a “social phenomenon” in a particular industrial context and the latter instead conceptualizes the star as a sign within the semiotics of film texts.³⁵ According to Dyer the star should be considered a “structured polysemy” of meanings that are present in complex ways in the star both on- and off-screen – meaning that one can “read” a star’s “image” (I use the term *persona* in this thesis) as an intertextual sign.³⁶ Crucial to Dyer’s perspective on stardom is his constant emphasis that stars are important because of the inherent ideological implications of the star sign/image, and his assertion that “since what they [texts] are is ideology [...] it follows that textual analysis is properly ideological analysis.”³⁷

The concept of ideology is of course itself polysemic and can be interpreted in a range of ways, but for the purposes of this thesis I will be following Dyer’s understanding of it as “the set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world.”³⁸ Dyer’s view of ideology could be understood as intersectional in a contemporary context; he argues that in addition to the “dominant ideology” of any given society, there can be any number of intersecting and conflicting ideologies – and also contradictions “*within* each of those ideologies” – which are produced by different groups in that society.³⁹ This is an aspect of the ideological analysis of Aoki and Lee that I put particular emphasis on; at many points, different aspects of their personas will seem contradictory, but that is an inevitable result of the position of stars and celebrities in popular culture – which in itself is a constant clashing of discourses and ideological positions.

Returning to Geraghty’s different star types, the star as professional is primarily associated with those genres within which set conventions and tropes are especially integral to the storytelling, and wherein certain modes of physical performance are particularly important. Geraghty’s prime examples are actions stars like Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger and

³⁵ Dyer, *Stars*, 1.

³⁶ Dyer, *Stars*, 3.

³⁷ Dyer, *Stars*, 3.

³⁸ Dyer, *Stars*, 2.

³⁹ Dyer, *Stars*, 2. Italics in original.

Sylvester Stallone as well as comedians like Eddie Murphy, Jim Carrey and Steve Martin, and she further argues that it is difficult for women to embody this form of stardom because of the association between women and “the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity.”⁴⁰ However, it is impossible for any star not to have a degree of the “celebrity” aspect attached to their persona; even Harrison Ford is covered by gossip websites. Thus, one needs to consider that a star persona can never be completely stable across an entire career, and any star considered through the perspective of the star as professional must also be considered in the extratextual dimension – and this is part of the inherent polysemy of celebrity.⁴¹

Furthermore, while many factors may impact the shaping of a star persona, celebrities are still “active thinking subjects” with the ability to impact the way they are perceived to some extent.⁴² However, asserting their agency comes with certain consequences particularly for female stars. This theme of self-making is present in Barry King’s discussion on the embodiment of the star persona, in which he argues that contemporary, post-studio system stars are forced to become adaptable and “elastic,” constantly managing their own popularity and publicity.⁴³ This may be considered a benefit for supermodels, whose professional skills are honed in an industry in which adaptability and the ability to physically transform are arguably more integral to the professional skillset.

My study does not concern itself with traditional stars who are universally recognizable faces. As Martin Shingler notes, celebrity culture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries necessitates that “virtually all studies of contemporary stardom need to reckon with the wider context of celebrity and with the operations and uses of the media in general.”⁴⁴ Because of the fragmentation of public discourse that comes with the development of near-infinite news outlets, social media, and other media platforms made possible largely by the proliferation of the internet, the Star with a capital S is not what it used to be. Thus, the study of individuals with less “star power” is exactly the direction the field of star studies needs to be moving in. There are still, of course, top-earning actors who are more prominent than others, but in this diverse social media landscape, the term ‘star’ becomes far more elusive and hard to define.

⁴⁰ Geraghty, “Re-examining Stardom,” 101f. 106.

⁴¹ Geraghty, “Re-examining Stardom,” 107.

⁴² Rebecca Williams, “From *Beyond Control* to In Control: Investigating Drew Barrymore’s Feminist Agency/Authorship,” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 112f.

⁴³ Barry King, “Embodying the Elastic Self: The Parametrics of Contemporary Stardom,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (London: Arnold, 2003), 52.

⁴⁴ Shingler, *Star Studies*, 54.

What I am interested in is what the transition from one mode of fame to another does to the star's persona, and how it is impacted by their "look" as it would be called in fashion. If in the past star vehicles were films produced from screenplays specifically targeted at showcasing individual stars' personas, then it makes sense that models – or former athletes – are also cast in films where their body control will be showcased.⁴⁵ Dyer also recognizes a continuity in aspects such as appearance/styling, tropes and genres across stars' careers as central to the crafting of their star personas – something which I argue becomes even more crucial for performers who enter the film industry with the disadvantage that their bodies are assumed to be all they can contribute.⁴⁶

Diane Negra, in relation to the development of American independent cinema culture, suggests the concept of "niche stars" to understand how stardom can operate outside of the mainstream in contemporary culture. She argues that performers like Steve Buscemi, John Leguizamo and Parker Posey, "while perhaps not fully meeting the criteria for stardom in the conventional sense, nevertheless generate personae that operate as legible, functional trademarks."⁴⁷ Their position in cinema is largely confined to the indie audience and operates "beyond the level of character and bit-part acting but below the level of [conventional] stardom."⁴⁸ Negra focuses on stars of the elusive 'indie' film culture, and while both Aoki and Lee have worked across both indie and mainstream film, they deviate somewhat from this indie-focused conception. However, their appeal to "upper-end publications," and also from a cultured fashion audience resulting from their privileged status as the top of the fashion industry, maintain elusive and elevated images in ways which are similar but slightly different to the ways Negra discusses the "seemingly comprehensive" personas with "very little elaboration of [...] private life" of niche stars.⁴⁹ Thus, I find that the idea of niche stardom is effective for understanding the way that supermodel-actor personas operate across two separate cultural spheres. Their level of stardom within fashion does not directly translate to equal stardom within cinema, but it *does* come with specific trademarks and a dedicated niche audience.

⁴⁵ Dyer, *Stars*, 62.

⁴⁶ Dyer, *Stars*, 62.

⁴⁷ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 61.

⁴⁸ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 64.

⁴⁹ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 62. 64.

The Body and Gender in Action and Horror

The genres of action and horror are hard to clearly define, and often overlap. For the purposes of this thesis, Steve Neale's definition of the "action-adventure" as a hybrid genre which showcases a number of characteristics, including "a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts" well encompasses my understanding of action as a genre.⁵⁰ Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze as theorized in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has been a foundational concept for an untold number of works in cinema studies, and is also central to much work on the gender politics of genre cinema. Understandably so, because the fundamental understanding that the female body is constantly under threat of objectification on the screen must inform any attempt to understand the presence of supermodels in an action film.⁵¹ It is commonly understood that the female action star is always defined by her body, where it is positioned on the scale from sexualized femininity to masculinized spectacle and, usually, what pleasures can be derived from that body by audiences (these pleasures may be heterogeneous and depend on the spectator).⁵² As Tasker illustrates, male action stars are also defined by their "male bodies on display."⁵³ Yet because of the white patriarchal hegemony of Western civilization, the "visual pleasures focused on the display of the male body" have generally been perceived as revolving around the definition and negotiation of masculine identities.⁵⁴

As Judith Butler illustrates, the normalcy of heteropatriarchal hegemony is upheld through the definition of the man as subject and the woman as object, whereas deviance from this model becomes a threat to the very gender binary.⁵⁵ Therefore, although it is of course possible for the male body to be an object of desire in the action film, the emphasis tends to lie – at least in mainstream productions – on the simultaneous desirability and physical fitness of the female body. Academic discourses have questioned whether action cinema can reflect women's identities at all; can they be an "object of sexual pleasure" and "an active subject" at once?⁵⁶ My analysis, primarily when concerned with Aoki, is interested in these aspects of the

⁵⁰ Steve Neale, "Action-Adventure as Hollywood Genre," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 71.

⁵¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 6-18.

⁵² Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 11-16.

⁵³ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 2.

⁵⁴ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 2. 114-116.

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (London, New York, NY: Routledge, 2006 (1990)), xxx.

⁵⁶ Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik, "Introduction: Babes, Bitches, Dominatrixes and Teen Witches," in *Femme Fatalities: Representations of Strong Women in the Media*, eds. Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2004), 9.

genre's relationship to body and gender, while also factoring in how her half-Japanese ethnicity affects these structures as certain racist stereotypes play into her on-screen presence.

Horror, meanwhile, is equally heterogeneous and difficult to define. Cherry writes of the heterogeneity of horror films:

Some are set in the past, many in the present, one or two in the future. Several contain impossible supernatural monsters, others merely all-too-human killers, a small number improbable – yet physically possible – extra-terrestrial creatures, the odd exception may not – or may after all (hesitation being the key) – even contain a monster. A fair number are extremely violent and/or gory, others rely on a creepy atmosphere. Some show the horror in explicit, close-up detail, a few show very, very little or merely hint at a horrible sight before cutting away. Many tell a story from the point of view of the victims, others from that of the monster. Some are about revenge, several feature the struggle to survive, a few embrace death. It is not simply that there is a range of conventions that offers some degree of variation on a coherent, formulaic theme (as there are with other genres such as westerns or action films), but that this genre is marked by a sheer diversity of conventions, plots and styles.⁵⁷

Like Cherry, I prefer to embrace horror's heterogeneity and hybridity, especially since, as she notes, "genres are never fixed," and the labeling of a film as one particular genre is often done for marketability more than anything else.⁵⁸ Some of the films I designate as horror might simply be thrillers to someone else, others might be strictly science fiction to some while I deem them science fiction-horror. Along Cherry's lines I consider horror "an umbrella term encompassing several different sub-categories of horror film, all united by their capacity to horrify."⁵⁹

Horror has an intimate relationship with bodily difference and the Othering and objectification of certain bodies, and the genre often centers on the spectacular/monstrous body. As Linda Williams notes, the transgressive space of horror cinema can be a place for the objectification versus the opportunity to return the gaze for women to be negotiated, where woman can be both victim and monster.⁶⁰ Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine addresses "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject." Abjection, as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva, refers to that which "disturbs identity, system, order," and Creed uses this concept to understand the horror film as a world full of "images of abjection" which create reactions of fear and disgust.⁶¹ The monstrous in horror derives, according to Creed, from historical understandings of abjection, including such themes as "sexual

⁵⁷ Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London / New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 2.

⁵⁸ Cherry, *Horror*, 2.

⁵⁹ Cherry, *Horror*, 4.

⁶⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 6-18; Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 15-34.

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, quoted in Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 8; Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 10.

immorality and perversion; corporeal alternation; decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest.”⁶²

While I find the psychoanalytic framework – in which cisgender women’s anatomy and bodily functions related to sexuality and the maternal are positioned as the source of abjection in the monstrous-feminine due to an inherent betrayal of its connection to nature – to be reductive and on the edge of biological essentialism, the concept is still thoroughly productive as a discursive concept.⁶³ Like any other marginalized bodies, women’s bodies are designated as abject when they threaten the dominant sociocultural forces and/or discourses, or destabilize binaries and fixed categories – Jeffrey Jerome Cohen identifies these kinds of transgressions as central to the fictional monster, in a theory he derives from Michel Foucault’s understanding of social control.⁶⁴ Similarly, I regard the monstrous-feminine as a monster whose abjection derives from the transgression of ideological boundaries, recalling Butler’s conception of the unstable gender binary again.⁶⁵ I apply the concept of the monstrous-feminine to my analysis of Lee quite liberally. Even in some films that do not necessarily qualify as horror, such as *Fury Road*, I argue that she still embodies a monstrosity which unsettles and brings attention to those ideological tensions that are expressed through her body. As Cohen argues, “the most monstrous part of difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual,” and Lee’s distinctly *white* monstrosity is related to anxieties about whiteness in terms of beauty, femininity and, most of all, the issue of race.⁶⁶

Modelling and Bodily Capital

As Joanne Entwistle and Don Slater note, fundamentally models are workers “employed to produce images, and these images are encountered by people in various texts.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, they argue that there has been a tendency in scholarship to focus on either the model as physical “labouring body” on the one hand, and the model as a representational body on the other.⁶⁸

⁶² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 9.

⁶³ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 10-15.

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *The Monster Theory Reader* ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 37. 40-48.

⁶⁵ Creed does understand the monstrous-feminine also in terms of ideology, arguing that the horror film takes the place of religion in purifying the abject through “a confrontation with [it] in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human.” My issue lies in the psychoanalytic understanding of where these abjection anxieties stem from, particularly as psychoanalytic theory relies on an inherent cisgendered “normal.”

Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14.

⁶⁶ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 41.

⁶⁷ Entwistle and Slater, “Models as Brands,” 15.

⁶⁸ Entwistle and Slater, “Models as Brands,” 16.

Similarly, Patrícia Soley-Beltran argues that “models [...] have increasingly become physical embodiments of ideal identities” whose reality as workers is obscured.⁶⁹ Entwistle and Slater propose instead that we need to regard the model body as a synthesis of the representational and real body, because the two “are not usefully distinguishable.”⁷⁰

According to Ashley Mears, the fashion industry requires models to treat their body as a constant site of work, “processing and packaging” it into a look.⁷¹ She defines the look as “a fixed set of physical attributes,” which adds up to “a special type of human capital” – specifically “bodily capital,” a concept she adapts from Loïc Wacquant.⁷² In the case of boxers, Wacquant’s original example, that capital consists of “the raw materials of flesh, fist, and physical force,” while for the model the raw material is their physical appearance, including thinness, height and a photogenic bone structure.⁷³ Mears emphasizes that the look is not about beauty necessarily, but rather about something which is distinct, photogenic and attention-grabbing which perhaps could be described as “an ‘essence.’”⁷⁴

Following Wacquant, Mears details how models perform “body work” to manipulate, enhance and maintain their bodies at an ideal physique, which will enable them to “convert their bodily capital into sellable looks.”⁷⁵ However, real bodies cannot possibly maintain a static state. Bodily capital must be constantly renewed, and models must obscure the imperfect instability of their bodies to maintain it. Soley-Beltran notes that “[t]he promise of success through body transformation and style [...] via models’ chameleon-like character” has become a common feature of “the discourse of economic and social improvement of young women,” creating the myth of the model as controlling their own careers.⁷⁶ This serves individualist discourses well, but in reality models must accept the apparent “arbitrariness of their career successes or failures,” while doing what they can to control their careers through their bodily capital.⁷⁷

Furthermore, Mears details how gender performance and racialization are inherently connected to the field of modelling, and how the industry to some extent conceives of these

⁶⁹ Patrícia Soley-Beltran, “Performing Dreams: A Counter-History of Models as Glamour’sn Embodiment,” in *Fashioning Models. Image, Text and Industry*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (London/ New York, NY: Berg, 2012), 97.

⁷⁰ Entwistle and Slater, “Models as Brands,” 16.

⁷¹ Ashley Mears, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 33f. 93.

⁷² Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 6.

⁷³ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 88.

⁷⁴ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 6.

⁷⁵ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 88.

⁷⁶ Soley-Beltran, “Performing Dreams,” 108.

⁷⁷ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 88.

factors differently from certain other industries.⁷⁸ She argues that modelling scouts, casting directors and designers seek and revere strangeness or alienness – in fact, generally gender performance and bodies that appear to deviate from hegemonic prescriptions of beauty and gender work as important currency in the fashion industry.⁷⁹ I argue that this is a crucial aspect to consider when analyzing supermodel-actors as hybrid stars; due to the difference in attitudes toward beauty and deviance from the norm in the fashion industry versus the film industry, the supermodel body often (not always) looks different from the ideal female movie star's, and this carries ideological connotations that can be explored or exploited on the screen. This will be further explored in a chapter below focused on models and stardom.

⁷⁸ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 173-207.

⁷⁹ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 38.

Methodology

Reading Embodied Star Personas

Devising a methodology for a project like this – which is attempting to combine two different academic disciplines which have historically quite divergent theoretical and methodological traditions despite their commonalities – is quite the challenge. Fundamentally I will combine the cultural contextualization and sociological focus on the star/model as a laboring body found in Dyer as well as Entwistle and Slater within two specific industrial contexts, with close analysis of the modelling and acting work of Aoki and Lee.⁸⁰

I will first discuss models in relation to star theory, and the situation of supermodel-actors generally; how are they usually perceived in the public discourse(s)? What patterns exist when it comes to models with a certain established bodily and cultural capital being integrated into a different cultural industry in which their existing stardom, experience and skills will inevitably be reevaluated in a new hierarchy? This theoretically oriented chapter grounds my case studies in a wider context. I have chosen to use two case studies because being able to compare two cases of adjacent but slightly different temporal contexts and of different backgrounds is beneficial for understanding what their crossover personas have in common, but also how issues like race and ethnicity impact their bodily capital and subsequently their respective personas. Furthermore, having a small number of case studies as opposed to trying to conduct more of a comprehensive survey lets each case be studied in more extensive depth and nuance.

Each of my case studies will be conducted in two parts. First, I explore the modelling career, look and star persona within fashion of the person in question, using illustrative examples of their photographic work as well as interviews and articles, to understand what already-established discourses are infused into their acting personas. I then move on to analysis of each subject's film career and acting persona as complex intertextual webs of heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory discourses, focusing on their physical and representative bodies and the bodily capital they transfer from one system to the next. Analyzing the representations of their bodies in films, and the discourses presented in interviews, reviews and other publicity materials, my analysis aims to show illustrate both the continuities and ruptures in each actor's persona as their bodily capital is adapted for cinematic purposes.

⁸⁰ Dyer, *Stars*, 20-28; Entwistle and Slater, "Models as Brands," 15-22.

The classic Dyerian methodology essentially conceives of the Star as a sign and a text before anything else. In *Stars*, Dyer discusses stars in the context of performance, referencing Umberto Eco's assertion that a drunk man on a stage is no longer his own person but a "sign" of a drunk person by virtue of being in a performance space.⁸¹ As Dyer reads performance signs, his focus is always on these signs as expressions of cinematic signification rather than as performative actions of embodied individuals; although the body is discussed in terms of what actors actually *do* to enact performance signs, their bodies are only deemed important as sites of signification.⁸²

My aim with this thesis is to always keep the body in focus. As Vivian Sobchack writes in *The Address of the Eye*, "[t]he lived-body projects and performs its perceptual perspective and situation and bears meaning into the world as the expression of that situation" – and thus, according to her, all semiotic interpretation must start from a consideration of the body as the origin and an essential part of all language, expression and signification.⁸³ Sobchack focuses on developing a way of conceptualizing the film viewing experience grounded in existential phenomenology by understanding the spectator as an embodied subject/object, or in her own words "to describe and account for the origin and locus of cinematic signification and significance in the experience of vision as an embodied and meaningful existential activity."⁸⁴ Although my work is focused primarily on the person in front of the camera and represented on the screen – the Star – I will use some of Sobchack's perspectives to develop a more bodily oriented methodology and avoid abstracting the body into a mere theoretical figure. This also underscores the importance of agency; in considering Aoki and Lee as embodied subjects, this also means that their embodied agency must be afforded significant consideration.

Similarly, Annette Kuhn discusses the female body as a physical entity present in the cinema as well as in the audience rather than only figuring "in the production of both meaning and pleasure" as a representation.⁸⁵ The model-actors I am discussing in this thesis are, like any other women, first and foremost individuals in physical bodies. Like the female bodybuilders of *Pumping Iron II* that Kuhn investigates, their bodies are also a constant site of work, and of the reproduction of certain gendered discourses; models.⁸⁶ Like female body builders, models

⁸¹ Dyer, *Stars*, 133.

⁸² Dyer, *Stars*, 132-150.

⁸³ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ/London: Princeton University Press, 1992), 41.

⁸⁴ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, xvii.

⁸⁵ Annette Kuhn, "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York, NY/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997), 199.

⁸⁶ Kuhn, "The Body and Cinema," 199-201.

embody femininity which may at times be considered freakish and at others ideal, and their job is to transform their bodies into objects of consumption. Furthermore, Soley-Beltran discusses models' bodies in "Modelling Femininity." Her theoretical framework regards the body as "an artefact" created through performative repetition and reinforcement of ideologically charged and "collectively defined identity norms" in the vein of Butler's ideas of gender performance, but also extending beyond gender to aspects of identity such as race and class.⁸⁷ Here, I also want to recall Entwistle and Slater's assertion that the physical and the representational body cannot be distinguished from one another.⁸⁸ Following this logic then, I argue that situating the body as the key to connecting the individual with the social and the "hegemonic definitions of identity" means understanding that while the physical body can be understood as a representational sign in some contexts, one must always regard that physical body as concrete and real, never abstracting it into the merely symbolic.⁸⁹

Materials

The primary materials used for the analyses in this thesis mainly belong to three different categories: films, modelling materials and publicity/press materials. For the analysis of Aoki and Lee's model looks, I have gone through all photographic and video materials available of their editorial, campaign, and runway work on various blogs, fashion publication websites and on Youtube and other video hosting sites, to collect as wide a range of materials as possible and to get an overview of the development of their respective looks. While I will not discuss every editorial, cover and runway appearance in detail they all form the basis of my analysis, whereas the examples I will examine more closely function as illustrative examples of a larger whole. Furthermore, Models.com has provided additional information for the modelling aspect of my analysis.

Moving on to the film careers of Aoki and Lee, a major part of the materials consists simply of the film and television work in their respective filmographies. Their full bodies of work will be considered in the analysis, and as with the modelling work all films and shows Aoki and Lee have worked on are important to the analysis of their personas – to properly assess trends of continuation as well as ruptures in those personas this is crucial so as not to miss out

⁸⁷ Patrícia Soley-Beltran, "Modelling Femininity," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 11, no. 3 (2004): 310.

⁸⁸ Entwistle and Slater, "Models as Brands," 16.

⁸⁹ Soley-Beltran, "Modelling Femininity," 310.

on important details in the overarching whole – although some performances will naturally be given more attention than others.

Finally, the publicity and press materials, including primarily interviews and reviews, have been sourced from a wide variety of publications and websites, and come primarily in written form – however I will be referencing some materials in video form as well. Many of the materials are interviews with Aoki or Lee. There are also film reviews, as well as runway backstage coverage, film production behind the scenes coverage, and other similar content. I have tried to collect as much relevant material as possible to form the basis of my understanding of how Aoki and Lee’s careers have been covered in the press, particularly focusing on things published after their transition into acting to keep my emphasis on the hybridity of their stardom and the way their bodies are highlighted in film-oriented publications. Some user-reviews from the cinema-social media app Letterboxd are also included in my analysis of specifically Aoki’s persona, which is so dependent on her online cult status whereas Lee’s is largely concentrated to her on-screen presence. Of course, one can never be entirely exhaustive when gathering materials for such case studies, especially considering the amount of material which could possibly be available online, but I have endeavored to be as exhaustive as possible.

Limitations and Considerations

The primary focus of this thesis is on two different case studies. This alone is of course a limitation, since I am attempting to conduct research in a field that is near-unstudied. As previously mentioned I have not been able to find any other study which seriously considers the crossover-aspects of supermodel-actors’ stardom and personas than Schubart’s chapter on Jovovich, and while I can illustrate how I read the discourses of Aoki and Lee’s supermodel personas as influencing their acting personas and on-screen work, it is impossible to draw any wider conclusions about this group of crossover stars, although I discuss general trends found in the acting work and reception of supermodel-actors in the next chapter. This study does not have the scope, nor the aspirations, to be as comprehensive as a work like Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies*. Instead, I am attempting to illustrate that this research can generate valuable insights into how a particular group of actors with specific bodily specializations – including the way their bodies *look* – function as ‘stars’ in ways that might be different than the average on-screen talent, and which align with Negra’s concept of nicheness particularly in terms of their embodiment of discourses which might be limiting to the reach of their careers in film. Rather than reaching definite conclusions about supermodel-actors as a group, I am reaching

conclusions about the subjects of my study which illustrate how they are similar and where they diverge, while also opening up for further research of other individuals in this group of crossover stars.

Furthermore, especially as this study focuses on the physical bodies of Aoki and Lee, even as they become the subject of articulated discourses, it is impossible for my case studies to cover every single example in their careers which may impact the subjects' personas because that would take up much more space than this thesis affords me. Therefore, aspects which may reinforce or contradict my readings of Aoki and Lee may be left out of my analysis. However, the polysemic nature of star personas means that it is impossible to encapsulate every single meaning attached to a star in any one study, no matter its scope. While I have attempted to include as many different aspects of their personas as I can in my analysis, it is possible for someone to find other aspects of Aoki and Lee's personas which I do not address in this thesis, and while this is a limitation, it is not a *problem*.

Lastly, I would like to address the fact that this thesis includes the study of one individual – Aoki – who is racialized through her mixed Japanese and white heritage whereas the author is white. To avoid overstepping any lines, I have taken great care not to make any assumptions about Aoki regarding for example her relationship to her ethnic background, and only address these issues through her own words on those matters. The analysis is also not focused on Aoki's perception of herself or her place in for example Japanese culture, which are subjects I do not find I have authority to speak on. Rather, I am exclusively interested in the way that Aoki, in her racialized body, has acquired a specific persona which is influenced by discourses about her in spaces which are defined by Western hegemony and the racial hierarchies and racist systems included in that system. All of Aoki's films were made and financed in a Western context (including *DOA* which was directed by a Hong Kong native but written by three Westerners, at least one of whom is white, with financing from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada and Japan) and thus inscribe her into the ideological frameworks and gender politics of Western action cinema.

Contextualizing Supermodel-Actors

Models vs. Supermodels: Agency and Glamour

Chris Holmlund writes of the bodies of film stars that “on an obvious level, the film bodies we watch are and always have been ‘impossible’: they are, quite simply, not real, but made up of images and sounds and constructed through narratives.”⁹⁰ This is of course also true of models, whose impossible bodies are simultaneously shaped *into* narratives as well as *through* them. However, as Mears argues, models have very rarely been allowed to express themselves through anything other than their physical bodies – their voices even being dubbed away in many commercials, often due to non-native English accents – and in the business of commodification of models it is not uncommon for other professionals to refer to them simply as “bodies.”⁹¹ Thus, since models are often only seen on the runway, in photographs and in commercials, the average model has historically had very little space and opportunity to expand their narrative beyond the odd behind the scenes interview on platforms like FashionTV; their bodily presence is the expression of their entire persona. In some ways, this focus on the body and the beauty of models aligns them with notions of glamour that differ from other kinds of celebrity.

Soley-Beltran’s argues that the objectification of models is “related to the production of glamour” and the perpetuation of societal beauty standards through the generation of envy and desire.⁹² Glamour is intrinsic to stardom in both fashion and the cinema.⁹³ From Mears’ perspective, it is defined by “artifice and deception,” creating a fantasy image of desirability to entice consumers, obscuring the labor behind commodities.⁹⁴ Similarly, in *Star Studies* Shingler refers to primarily Stephen Gundle for his definition of glamour and relates the concept to consumption, much like Mears does. In *Glamour: A History*, Gundle develops his argument, however, claiming that glamour is the creation of an almost magical veneer, referring to “the mysterious and magical arts of glamorous transformation, which may be used to stimulate consumption, but which is also “a weapon and a protective coating, a screen on which an exterior personality can be built,” allowing for the rejection of natural beauty in favor of

⁹⁰ Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies*, 3.

⁹¹ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 89.

⁹² Soley-Beltran, “Performing Dreams,” 113.

⁹³ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 5; Shingler, *Star Studies*, 68-69.

⁹⁴ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 25.

desirable artifice, and also the obscuring of the private self.⁹⁵ This perspective, aligning glamour with marketing, consumption and mass appeal, is one shared by a number of scholars.⁹⁶

On the other hand, some conceptualize glamour in a more esoteric way. In “A Note on Glamour,” Elizabeth Wilson argues that it historically carries much darker connotations than those of “airbrushed perfection,” with a history related to witchcraft (note that the word glamour can be synonymous with the word spell) and the supernatural.⁹⁷ Glamour is thus in Wilson’s account mystical in nature, and at the same time also a symptom of the reign of individualism that emerged out of industrialization; it is a performance of gender, beauty and a desired persona rather than simply a squire of consumption, and a “a displaced search for perfection” akin to religious self-castigation.⁹⁸

Wilson further argues that the antithesis of glamour is celebrity, because “celebrity is all about touch; glamour is untouchable.”⁹⁹ Dyer identifies this same issue when discussing the importance of publicity for the star image, quoting a mid-20th century lament that “[t]he stars are losing their glamour,” due to the amount of access and insight granted to the public into their lives in tabloid and TV culture.¹⁰⁰ Through this argument, we can understand Wilson’s assertion that “[t]he celebrity is desperate for our attention” and “[t]hat is why she can never be glamorous.”¹⁰¹ An integral part of modelling is to act as “intermediaries,” creating a demand for commodities “through the selection, styling and dissemination of images populated by models.”¹⁰² While Wissinger argues that the spectacle of the model’s body and lifestyle contributes to this, I contend that the model’s image typically retains some of the elitism and mystery of Wilsonian glamour through the restricted access to their “real-life” personas.¹⁰³

Caroline Evans argues that the model’s “spectacular appearance” is a crucial part of creating the runway as a “space of artifice” on which plays out gender performances as heightened and as complex as those required of the “principles of dandyism.”¹⁰⁴ With this argument, Evans indirectly parallels Wilson, whose concept of glamour is an expression of

⁹⁵ Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford/New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

⁹⁶ See for example Sarah Elsie Baker, “A Glamorous Feminism by Design?,” *Cultural Studies* 31, no. 1 (2017): 47-69, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1167928>; Soley-Beltran, “Performing Dreams”; Nigel Thrift, “The Material Practices of Glamour,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 1, no. 1 (2008): 9-23.

⁹⁷ Wilson, “A Note on Glamour,” 95.

⁹⁸ Wilson, “A Note on Glamour,” 96-99.

⁹⁹ Wilson, “A Note on Glamour,” 100f. 105.

¹⁰⁰ Hollis Alpert, quoted in Dyer, *Stars*, 61.

¹⁰¹ Dyer, *Stars*, 61; Wilson, “A Note on Glamour,” 105-106.

¹⁰² Wissinger, “Modelling Consumption,” 158.

¹⁰³ Wissinger, “Modelling Consumption,” 157.

¹⁰⁴ Caroline Evans, “The Enchanted Spectacle,” *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 3 (2015): 273, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.2752/136270401778960865>.

spectacular embodiment which parallels the mystical, and just like the dandy, the model has the possibility to stay untouchable.¹⁰⁵ Thus, models retain some of the opaque glamour Wilson champions, but their personas are often entirely reduced to their bodily capital. I do not find the two versions of glamour to be mutually exclusive; the untouchable spectacle of Wilsonian glamour appears as just a different version of commodification which depends on a sense of mystery.

As we have seen, the areas of fashion and cinema are intimately connected in a number of ways.¹⁰⁶ The intensification of celebrity culture since the 1990s has become a cause for concern for professional models as their professional expertise has gradually become substitutable for celebrity.¹⁰⁷ According to Mears, all manner of stars now constitute competition for jobs that would once have gone to models; magazine covers, brand campaigns and sometimes even runway spots are now given to non-models.¹⁰⁸ Thus, models are not only commodified out of their voices and defined by their bodies, they are also in a line of work which is highly volatile wherein their popularity may easily plummet from one day to another, leaving them stranded in debt. It is also, of course, a profession in which youth has been and still is (with few exceptions) of utmost importance – making it a transitory career.

The models given most agency, and whose bodily capital is by far the most valuable are the supermodels. There is no consensus on who the first supermodel was (Janice Dickinson, Gia Carangi, Beverly Johnson, Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton are some of the more popular candidates), but the supermodel as we know her today – because she is certainly gendered – appeared in the late 1980s. At the time, some models (Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell and Tatjana Patitz to name a few) emerged as the stars of their industry, breaking into the mainstream of celebrity. In the 1990s, models like Kate Moss, Claudia Schiffer, Shalom Harlow and Amber Valletta continued this trend of supermodels as celebrities, often featured in tabloids, interviewed by journalists, hired to give music videos star power and even given their own TV shows as in the case of MTV's *House of Style* (1989-2000) which was featured a number of these household names, Cindy Crawford being the original host.

¹⁰⁵ Dyer, *Stars*, 61.

¹⁰⁶ See for example Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 30-39; Epstein, "Sharon Stone in a Gap Turtleneck," 206-218; Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*; Moseley, ed., *Fashioning Film Stars*.

¹⁰⁷ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 36.

¹⁰⁸ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 36.

The establishment of supermodels as stars outside of the fashion industry also opened career opportunities outside of modelling for the lucky few who made it to that level of fame. Thus, supermodels acquired star personas. Rebecca Williams, while recognizing the need for stars to “market themselves as a malleable, versatile commodity,” and the fact that they are subject to many constraints by the nature of the industry, she argues that they can also exercise some agency by actively participating in the shaping of their personas.¹⁰⁹ This is in contrast to working fashion models who can really only affect their career through their bodily capital, working toward a narrow range of idealized body shapes, and market themselves through primarily modelling cards that represent their bodies in snapshots. In the realm of mainstream stardom individuals can exercise considerably more agency than is afforded regular fashion models, while still being restricted by industry demands, management influence and public opinion.

Supermodels: The Body Is the Star

Supermodel fame still relies heavily on disciplined bodily capital. Mary C. Beltrán discusses the way that, in her crossover stardom as a racialized Latina actor in Hollywood, Jennifer Lopez’s stardom has been constructed largely around her body – and specifically her butt, which still is rumored to be insured for millions of dollars despite many refutations.¹¹⁰ Models’ appearances are often similarly obsessed over, their thinness and facial features becoming a site of contentious discourses both as individuals but more importantly as a group. If Lopez, particularly in her early career, has been defined by her status as Other due to her Latina ethnicity, models are similarly defined by the Otherness of their unattainable bodies.¹¹¹ For example, as Soley-Beltran notes, the homogeneity of fashion models’ bodies became a necessity in the 1960s for purely practical reasons; the emergence of ready-to-wear fashion meant fashion shows used sample garments in standardized sizes which the models then had to be able to fit into, in stark contrast to the made to measure garments of haute couture.¹¹² Over

¹⁰⁹ Williams, “From *Beyond Control* to In Control,” 119.

¹¹⁰ Mary C. Beltrán, “The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle: Media Constructions of Stardom and Jennifer Lopez’s ‘Cross-over Butt,’” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 275-286.

¹¹¹ I invoke Otherness in reference to models even though they are often idealized and seen as aspirational in terms of their body control and gender performance. This is firstly only the case in reference to a select group of models whose bodily capital translates into desirability in the mainstream, whereas many models, as I discuss further below, and particularly in relation to Abbey Lee, have bodies which don’t fit easily into culturally dominant conceptions of beauty and desirability. Secondly, I find it useful to understand Otherness simply as something which defines a group as different, whether seen as positive or negative by the hegemonic ideology.

¹¹² Soley-Beltran, “Modelling Femininity,” 312.

time, however, the thinness of that sample size body has become recognized as generally unhealthy, and models have often been regarded as either victims or perpetrators in a perceived ideological war on body diversity.¹¹³ It is telling that photographer Corinne Day has argued that the “heroin chic” svelte body, popularized in the 1990s with Kate Moss as its most emblematic face, “epitomized the ‘honesty’, naturalness, cleanliness, ingenuousness” of the 1990s.¹¹⁴ These words are loaded with the ideological implication that to be thin is to embody “pure” beauty, and that the ideal thinness is also tied to whiteness, as I will discuss further below.

On the other hand, modelling is an industry with an ambivalent relationship to beauty standards and hegemonic beauty versus the ‘strange,’ and appearances not traditionally considered beautiful in the mainstream. While having a body type that fits the mold of sample sizes has long been a modelling requirement which has only started to truly be questioned in the last decade, having a face that deviates from the cookie cutter is considered a virtue giving a model the edge they need to stand out in the market of (editorial) looks.¹¹⁵ As Mears puts it, editorial models are “typically described as having an unusual or [...] ‘edgy’ look.”¹¹⁶ Edgy is an ephemeral and elusive term which is best defined as “*not* commercially pretty” and “departs from conventional norms of attractiveness.”¹¹⁷ Using Bourdieu’s terms, Mears argues that the editorial sphere is “the economic world reversed” and also “the *beauty world reversed*,” wherein a look can be built from features that might get someone bullied in school.¹¹⁸ This often means that in modelling, ethnic features which don’t fit a hegemonic European standard of beauty are commodified to highlight a model’s “edge” – something which is of course complicated because to bookers and other fashion gatekeepers, the top models “are freaks. [...] Not as people, but physically, they are freakish.”¹¹⁹

Amy Adele Hasinoff illustrates how *America’s Next Top Model* (UPN/The CW/VH1, 2003-2018), functioning essentially as a microcosm of the fashion industry, posits “non-whiteness” as “inherently attractive and interesting” – often hypersexualized and in many cases also hyper-marketable.¹²⁰ Furthermore, Hasinoff argues that “ambiguous” racialization (mixed race and brown models whose ethnicity is hard to pinpoint visually) is particularly

¹¹³ Soley-Beltran, “Modelling Femininity.”

¹¹⁴ Soley Beltran, “Modelling Femininity,” 315.

¹¹⁵ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 42.

¹¹⁷ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 42. Italics in original.

¹¹⁸ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 43. Italics in original.

¹¹⁹ New York stylist Clive, quoted in Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 42.

¹²⁰ Amy Adele Hasinoff, “Fashioning Race for the Free Market on America’s Next Top Model,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 3 (August 2008): 334, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802192012>.

commodifiable to industry insiders, because of its supposed versatility (whether a Latina model *should* be hired to “pass for” black or Asian or not).¹²¹ Mears also notes this tendency, referring to the industry phrasing “ethnicity light.”¹²² Another point described by Hasinoff is the way that “African-ness” is seen as particularly marketable because of the “exotic” Otherness of African as opposed to African-American black models.¹²³ The popularity of African models after the Alek Wek and Liya Kebede blueprint points to increasing diversity in the industry, and so does the ever-growing visibility of East Asian models since the late 2000s, but it is undeniable that this same industry treats non-whiteness as a commodity to sell to new markets, to exotify and fetishize, and to exclude when these bodies are not deemed profitable. Even non-white supermodels like Naomi Campbell, Alek Wek and Liu Wen are constantly defined by their racialized bodies and turned into activists or signposts in the struggle for increased diversity.¹²⁴

Certainly, there are many white models (many more, in fact, than models of color because whiteness maintains its hegemony in this seemingly ‘reversed’ beauty economy) whose non-Anglo or otherwise non-normative looks are commodified for editorial, and this further speaks to the extreme attention and ambiguous relation to race and ethnicity in the fashion industry. For example, in the late 2000s and early 2010s a wave of Eastern European models became extremely popular for their perceived ethnic looks which, while pale and recognizably white, tended to deviate from the Anglocentric standard of beauty. Their faces often featured “china doll mouth[s] (*sic*),” wide jaws or cheekbones, characteristic noses and “Slavic eyes,” and generally features that would be deemed bold or even masculine on the one hand, or delicate and fairylike on the other.¹²⁵ Models like Magdalena Frackowiak, Jac Jagaciak, Snejana Onopka, Ruslana Korshunova, Kasia Struss, Tanya Dzhahileva and Vlada Roslyakova dominated the runways for years, following the initial “Russian dolls” of the early 2000s, including Natalia Vodianova, Natasha Poly, and Sasha Pivovarova.¹²⁶ As Emily Nussbaum noted in a 2007 *New York Magazine* piece about the extreme thinness of runway models, many of the girls of the late 2000s were coming “from the poorest regions of Eastern Europe” and

¹²¹ Hasinoff, “Fashioning Race,” 335f.

¹²² Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 199.

¹²³ Hasinoff, “Fashioning Race,” 334.

¹²⁴ See for example Harper’s Bazaar Online, “The 25 Top Supermodels that Dominated Fashion in the ‘90s,” accessed 4 April, 2023, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/models/g32754339/90s-supermodels/>; Marina Liao, “15 Supermodels of the ‘00s Who Changed the Face of Fashion,” Marie Claire Online, accessed 4 April, 2023, <https://www.marieclaire.com/fashion/g27044850/supermodels-of-2000s/>.

¹²⁵ Evgenia Peretz, “Slavs of Fashion: The New Beauties,” *Variety*, April 2005, accessed 1 May, 2023, <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/2005/4/slavs-of-fashion-the-new-beauties>.

¹²⁶ *L’Officiel Singapore* Online, “Model World: The Supermodels of the 00s,” accessed 4 April, 2023, <https://www.lofficielsingapore.com/fashion/model-world-the-personalities-of-the-2000s>.

were “brought up in the postcommunist years on an extremely bad diet.”¹²⁷ This made the region attractive for modelling scouts to pick up desperate young teens – who often had yet to go through the transformations of puberty – and give them new lives in New York, London, Paris and Milan while helping support their families.¹²⁸ Similar situations certainly occur all the time when agencies sign models from other disenfranchised backgrounds, and even more so when they are models of color. These examples illustrate how Western hegemony is deployed by fashion industry gatekeepers and tastemakers exploit the bodies of those that same hegemonic order deems Others, while also venerating those bodies as edgy. This is most evident when considering non-white models and white models whose appearances appear as non-Western, but the objective of editorial fashion is to seek out strangeness, even in the Western white models who make up the bulk of editorial models.

Supermodels (and generally the top models in the field) have one foot in the editorial world and another in the commercial world. Mears’ conception of the difference between editorial and commercial modelling is that commercial modelling sells merchandise directly to consumers, whereas editorial modelling conveys the symbolic capital of specific brand identities, selling fantasies, narratives and ideas to mainly industry insiders.¹²⁹ However, to be on top of the industry – and even more so to cross into mainstream celebrity – one needs to be able to use one’s bodily capital to appeal to the entire spectrum of demographics. Mears notes that many high fashion clients find any “[c]urves and their accompanying suggestions of female sexual desire and availability are polluting images for high-end brands and high-end femininities.”¹³⁰ This is not true of all high-end or editorial clients, however; what would a Versace campaign, a Dolce & Gabbana runway show or an issue of any expensive fashion magazine be without any reference to sexuality or the highlighting of the sex appeal of models’ bodies? Likewise, how could the Victoria’s Secret runway show have become the star-creating media event it was for 23 years straight without showcasing sexualized bodies and approachable femininities that “relate to the consumer” while being populated by some of the most prolific editorial models in the business?¹³¹ Supermodels, then, typically need to have an approachable, desirable or relatable look to appeal to the public, while maintaining the unattainable body and editorial edge needed to book high-end clients.

¹²⁷ Emily Nussbaum, “The Incredible Shrinking Model,” *New York Magazine* Online, accessed 4 April, 2023, <https://nymag.com/fashion/07/spring/28149/>.

¹²⁸ Nussbaum, “The Incredible Shrinking Model.”

¹²⁹ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 188f.

¹³⁰ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 189f.

¹³¹ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 179.

With their bodily capital so central to their profession and thus their public image, both in the press and among the public there is an emphasis on the bodies of supermodels whenever they cross into the mainstream. Consider for example nicknames like “The Body,” which has been associated with multiple supermodels including Elle Macpherson, Heidi Klum and Gisele Bündchen, or the shock people expressed at seeing 1990s star Linda Evangelista’s body transformed after botched CoolSculpting, when that same body once made her famous for allegedly not getting out of bed for less than 10,000 dollars a day.¹³² Inhabiting the most unattainable and idealized bodies in the public imagination, supermodels trying to diversify their careers and branch out from fashion are often met with doubts; there exists in the public discourse a general idea that their bodies are all they have to offer until they prove otherwise, as we shall see below.

Crossing Over

As discussed above, when a model becomes a supermodel and attains mainstream fame it enables them to further their careers in a wide range of areas. One industry many models try to break into is the film industry – specifically as actors. Many actors at every level of the industry used to model before they became actors; Charlize Theron, Jennifer Lawrence, Cameron Diaz, Robert Pattinson, Channing Tatum and Eddie Redmayne are only some of the names one could mention here. However, other than perhaps some fashion industry professionals and very dedicated fans, the general public would likely never know about these former modelling careers without popular culture writers publishing listicles about actors who used to model before they got into acting. Their personas are therefore not impacted by their modelling careers, since they are only treated as fun trivia and not an integral part of how these stars are portrayed in the media. They may still, of course, be defined to some degree by their physical body, their beauty or perceived lack thereof, in the public discourse; beauty and desirability have always been important currencies in celebrity culture and a potential source of both praise and criticism, particularly when it comes to female and racialized stars.¹³³ Yet this still tends to

¹³² Kiri Blakeley, “The World’s Top-Earning Models,” *Forbes* Online, accessed 1 June, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/consent/ketch/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/2007/07/19/models-media-bundchen-biz-media-cz_kb_0716topmodels.html; Georgia Aspinall, “The Devastation Linda Evangelista Feels Isn’t Shallow,” *Grazia* UK Online, accessed 1 June, 2023, <https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/in-the-news/linda-evangelista-pah-coolsculpting-photos-feels-deformed/>.

¹³³ See for example Dyer, *Stars*; Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*; Patrick Keating, “Artifice and Atmosphere: The Visual Culture of Hollywood Glamour Photograph, 1930-1935,” *Film History: An International Journal* 29, no. 3 (2017): 105-135, DOI: 10.2979/filmhistory.29.3.05; Mary Ann Doane, “The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 23-33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208909361285>.

differ from the way that supermodels who attempt to branch out into acting – however successful they end up being in their pursuit – are perceived, due to their preexisting personas as famous bodies.

A *Rolling Stone* article from 2014 is titled “Hollywood Posers.”¹³⁴ The title already belies a lack of respect for models trying their hand at acting, the term posers indicating a perception of models as vapid and fake, a stereotype with a strong hold in the culture, in addition to the association with posing for the camera. It becomes clear as one reads this article that in many cases, the supermodels mentioned – Claudia Schiffer, Tyra Banks, Cindy Crawford, Elle Macpherson and Gisele Bündchen for example – only make one or a few movies, often confined to small parts in ensemble casts and cameos, before retreating from the film industry in favor of other pursuits.¹³⁵ This is hardly surprising, considering the bias against supermodel actors from multiple directions, including audiences, critics and the media.

Schubart illustrates the bias against Milla Jovovich (a rare success story in the transition from supermodel to movie star) through the instance of critics dismissing her performance as Joan of Arc in *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (Luc Besson, 1999). Casting a model in the lead was perceived to automatically mean that she would not possess the complexity and talent they deemed necessary for such a role.¹³⁶ Furthermore, Schubart notes how some critics even implied that Jovovich’s *only* value lay in being “a great *Vanity Fair* photo spread,” implying that a model should be a body seen but not heard from.¹³⁷ Similarly, Kenny Herzog in the above mentioned *Rolling Stone* article finds it necessary to comment upon Bündchen’s “slinky Brazilian figure and sea-blue eyes,” Kate Upton’s “hourglass figure” and Jovovich’s “Ukrainian beauty” (the latter directly in connection to a Richard Avedon photoshoot she did at eleven years old) while the photographs chosen to represent many of the individuals mentioned feature them in bikinis, deep cleavages or entirely topless.¹³⁸ Little attention, if any, is paid to the actual performances – leaving one with the impression that Herzog deems them to be of far lesser importance than for example Jovovich’s 15-year-old body in *Return to the Blue Lagoon* (William Graham, 1991).

Coming from a slightly different perspective, in an article which reads as far more sympathetic to supermodel-actors, Daniel Rodgers writes for *Dazed* about “9 Times

¹³⁴ Kenny Herzog, “Hollywood Posers: 20 Supermodels Who Tried Acting,” *Rolling Stone* Online, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-lists/hollywood-posers-20-supermodels-who-tried-acting-11681/lauren-hutton-paper-lion-1968-103937/>.

¹³⁵ Herzog, “Hollywood Posers.”

¹³⁶ Schubart *Super Bitches*, 270.

¹³⁷ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 270.

¹³⁸ Herzog, “Hollywood Posers.”

Supermodels Hit the Silver Screen.”¹³⁹ Rodgers states that supermodels are more than their physical body. “Beauty alone is boring. You’ve got to embody enigma, charm, and personability,” he writes, adding that just “being drop dead gorgeous” is “[d]ull.”¹⁴⁰ Likewise, Naomi Pike at British *Vogue* writes that the jump from modelling to acting is a career pivot which makes sense, since models “often feel compelled to take their efforts to embody a character to the next level” – indicating that she considers the agency of models in their career choices, as well as the professional skills necessary to embody the concepts of high fashion work.¹⁴¹ However, while both articles emphasize embodiment – as in the way models exist in and use their bodies with agency – it seems that commenting upon the supermodels’ bodies as physical manifestations of the myth of the supremacy of physical beauty is inescapable even to well-intentioned journalists. To Rodgers, supermodels do still have to be “drop dead gorgeous” even if that is not their only virtue, and Pike notes that the glasses worn by Bündchen in *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) “did nothing to disguise her supermodel features” – the implication being that to be taken seriously as an actor she might have needed to do more to obscure her bodily capital.¹⁴²

This indicates something about why the action and horror genres are so common for supermodel-actors to make their careers within. Geraghty, Schubart and Tasker all illustrate how certain aspects of a star’s persona – in Schubart and Tasker’s cases particularly their physical bodies – lend themselves particularly well to certain genres.¹⁴³ In the case of this crossover group, they are so defined by their bodies that being “taken seriously,” as in the case of bodybuilder-actors in Tasker’s account, is extremely difficult, because the preoccupation with body work that the physiques of both groups display presents as narcissistic and almost as a *substitute* for talent.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, as discussed above, the body (whether as spectacular, frightening, abject, desirable) is typically central to performance in the genres of action and horror, making them possibly much more welcoming than genres focused on, for example, naturalistic performances.

¹³⁹ Daniel Rodgers, “9 Times Supermodels Hit the Silver Screen,” *Dazed Digital*, accessed 10 April, 2023, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/52349/1/supermodel-movie-cameos-gisele-bundchen-cindy-crawford-devon-aoki>.

¹⁴⁰ Rodgers, “9 Times.”

¹⁴¹ Naomi Pike, “19 Model-To-Actor Transitions That Probably Deserve a Sequel,” British *Vogue* Online, accessed 9 May, 2023, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/miss-vogue/gallery/models-turned-actors>.

¹⁴² Pike, “19 Model-To-Actor Transitions”; Rodgers, “9 Times.”

¹⁴³ Geraghty, “Re-Examining Stardom,” 101; Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 5-23. 298-306; Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*.

¹⁴⁴ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 75.

Those supermodels who do manage to turn their guest appearances in Hollywood into lasting acting careers continuously have to navigate the tension between the opportunities afforded them by their bodily capital, and the ways in which it can also hinder their further careers in acting. I depart in my case studies from the idea that the star is “paradoxical” and “composed of elements [...] of contradictory tendencies” which generates an “*incoherent* image,” and this position in itself, when applied to fashion models, is an uncommon one.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵John Ellis, “Stars as Cinematic Phenomenon,” in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 90. Italics in original.

Devon Aoki: Being a Y2K It Girl

Devon Aoki is perhaps most well known for her appearance in *2 Fast 2 Furious*, in which she played a smart-mouthed street racer with her head in the game and a preference for all things pink. While the film is considered one of the weaker sequels to *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001), the image of Aoki's Suki has staying power, and one can easily find many video edits of her on TikTok. Across her film career, Aoki has appeared in nine feature films, and what her roles all have in common is a reliance on her model body – although shorter than most models, she is lean, athletic looking and has a striking yet idiosyncratic beauty – as the central component of her performance. While she has not acted since 2009 – she was cast in The CW's *Arrow* (2012-2020) in 2014 to play Katana, but dropped out for unclear reasons – her performances, or at least her *presence*, in films like *2 Fast*, *DOA*, *D.E.B.S.* and *Sin City* retain a cult following, primarily among young girls and women.

In this chapter, I will trace Aoki's career from modelling and her instant status as an It Girl, and through her acting career, focusing on the way that her model physique and exotified mixed-race beauty, as well as the sense of “coolness” she is inherently tied to, all contribute to the formation of a niche star persona which unfortunately has proven to center the extra-filmic and the visual above her actual performances.

Y2Kool Girl

Aoki is what social media users in 2023 may refer to as a “nepo baby” – someone who achieved fame through her familial connections to the industry. Although she, by her own account, was scouted randomly by *Interview* magazine at a concert in 1995 at the age of 13, and agreed to a photoshoot for the magazine in exchange for being introduced to The Ramones, it was her family's connections which really got Aoki into the industry.¹⁴⁶ These connections and her family's wealth undeniably contributed to the fact that she could achieve success so young, becoming one of the biggest new stars by age sixteen, as an Asian-American woman whose height is a good two to three inches below the long-standing industry minimum. However, the fact that Aoki, and those writing about her, have favored emphasizing the mythos of her punk-rock scouting, fits seamlessly into her niche star persona, as will become clear in this analysis.

¹⁴⁶ Devon Aoki, quoted in *The Independent Online*, “Devon Aoki: Face Value,” accessed 15 March, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/devon-aoki-face-value-1093630.html>.

For over twenty years, Aoki has been a Y2K icon (in the colloquial sense), legendary for her über low-rise pants and carefree attitude.¹⁴⁷ Even when her film career is discussed, it is her look that is typically remembered, in online discussions as well as writeups in prestigious style and lifestyle publications, rather than her performances. For example, her part as Suki in *2 Fast* is featured in a piece about Aoki's "Wildest Y2K Style Moments" for Highsnobiety, and an article for *Dazed* celebrating her return to the Jeremy Scott runway in 2017 through her "most memorable moments" includes her performances in *2 Fast*, *D.E.B.S.* and *DOA* in the form of snapshots wherein she *looks* very iconic, but the accompanying captions say very little of her performance as an actor. I will examine the discourse surrounding Aoki as an actor below, but here it is sufficient to note that her image has often superseded her actual acting skill in the minds of critics and audiences alike. This Y2K "cool girl" aspect of her modelling career is what has primarily been channelled in her acting career and shaped her star persona, while much of her more moody and soft modelling work – which includes some famous imagery such as an otherworldly portrait by Nick Knight in Alexander McQueen for *Visionaire* magazine – has not been reflected in casting directors' choices for her in the same way.

When Jeremy Scott celebrated the 20th anniversary of his eponymous label, Aoki opened the show, as one of many industry icons walking the runway. "When I was looking at the 20 years, I couldn't imagine anybody opening the show but Devon," claimed Scott of this choice, and this remark can only be understood in the context of their longstanding friendship and collaboration, which are also integral to Aoki's persona.¹⁴⁸ Aoki became Scott's friend and muse when he cast her to walk in his third runway show, and she has made exceptions to her retirement from the industry for his shows and campaigns on several occasions. It is, as far as I have been able to tell, impossible to find photos of Aoki on the runway of her first Jeremy Scott show. However, a photo from an editorial featuring Scott's designs from that very collection on his teen muse highlights how Aoki would become somewhat of a patron saint of Y2K style, through her association with Scott and other designers such as Betsey Johnson, Baby Phat, Anna Sui and Versace. (Fig. 1) To understand this association between Aoki's star persona and Y2K style, I will need to briefly outline what I mean when I speak of Y2K.

¹⁴⁷ I employ the terms "iconic" and "icon" in this thesis in a colloquial sense – as a term for those people/concepts/artefacts/moments etc. that are considered worthy of veneration and/or are representative of a certain era or movement for example. It becomes almost impossible to avoid using these terms in this nonspecific way, since these are the terms writers and users use when referring to particularly Aoki in online spaces. When I use these terms, I am not referring to their more specific usage in semiotics.

¹⁴⁸ Jeremy Scott, quoted in Emily Manning, "Jeremy Scott Celebrates 20 Years of Creative Independence," *i-D Online*, accessed 16 March, 2023, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/evvyja/jeremy-scott-celebrates-20-years-of-creative-independence>.

The term Y2K refers to the Y2K bug, a computer-related issue which was expected to cause massive issues globally ahead of the year 2000. Encapsulating the years between 1997 and circa 2005, Y2K style is characterized by such fashion attributes as butterfly clips, low-rise wide-leg jeans, sweater dresses, heavy hip belts, glittery or metallic crop tops, micro mini skirts, platform shoes and velour tracksuits.¹⁴⁹ The style is also, notably, associated with an incredibly strict and thin ideal of female beauty, and a number of celebrities who embodied this form of femininity and whose fame is inextricably tied to the fashion and lifestyles of the era – from Paris Hilton to the Olsen twins, Christina Aguilera and a young Beyoncé.

Aoki's status as a Y2K icon would not be so long lasting as to still be referred to as a "Y2K style star" or a "Y2K dream babe" if not for her ability to transfer her runway stardom into a celebrity persona, which ultimately translated into the expression of her persona on screen.¹⁵⁰ As Shingler notes, stardom in a contemporary context is dependent on, and intrinsically linked to, celebrity culture and the many media in which it proliferates.¹⁵¹ Aoki's cult stardom is very much defined by the longevity of her Y2K Cool girl (or Y2Kool Girl for short) image, which is propagated on social media, where she is revered mainly by girls and women in their teens and twenties – something which seems to stem not from her films or characters, but rather from Aoki's embodiment on the screen as well as on the runway or in paparazzi photos. Her on-screen appearances often seem to translate as representations of Aoki's real-life self in fictional settings, privileging her celebrity over her performance. In the case of a star like Aoki, the way she is dressed on screen must be considered an essential signifying attribute of her persona as well as an extension of her body on screen, because her bodily capital as an already established fashion It Girl is fundamental to her on-screen roles.

To further exemplify this Cool Girl look as established in Aoki's fashion work, we need look no further than her Moschino S/S 2001 campaign in which she portrayed two sets of "twins." (Fig. 2) In the first photograph, one of the Devons sports a longline pleated skirt, white

¹⁴⁹ Sarah Bochicchio, "2003 Unbearable: Y2K Fashion is More Problematic than You Remember," *Art & Object*, accessed 21 March, 2023, <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/2003-unbearable-y2k-fashion-more-problematic-you-remember>; Samantha Sutton, "These Celebrity Y2K Outfits Weirdly Look Like They're From 2023," *InStyle* Online, accessed 21 March, 2023, <https://www.instyle.com/y2k-fashion-7096515>.

¹⁵⁰ Maria Bobila, "Devon Aoki's Best 2000s Fashion Moments," *Nylon* Online, accessed 21 March, 2023, <https://www.nylon.com/fashion/devon-aoki-fashion-style-outfits-2000s>; Alexandra Pauly, "Camera Obscura: Devon Aoki's Wildest Y2K Style Moments," *Highsnobiety*, accessed 21 March, 2023, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/devon-aoki-y2k-style/>; Emma Elizabeth Davidson, "Y2K Dream Babe Devon Aoki is the New Face of Acne Studios," *Dazed Digital*, accessed 21 March, 2023, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/58435/1/y2k-dream-babe-devon-aoki-is-the-new-face-of-acne-studios-tumblr>.

¹⁵¹ Shingler, *Star Studies*, 54f.

shirt and striped tie in schoolgirl fashion, her hair in two braids with ribbons at the ends and simple makeup accentuated by heavy pink blush – also recalling the flushed cheeks of schoolgirls. The other Devon in this photo is wearing a printed pink micro-mini skirt over clashing leopard print tights, accentuated by studded belts and a studded pink choker, along with a black top and two Y2K staples: the metallic jacket and the tiny purse (not quite a baguette bag, but adjacent). Her eyeshadow matches the bright pink of the other Devon's blush, and she is also wearing drawn on freckles, a sharp liner and metallic brown lipstick, her hair eclectically styled in two pigtails with pink and black bits in the otherwise ginger hair. The two also wear contrasting facial expressions; schoolgirl Devon is sporting a small wry smile while her twin's expression is one of punkish defiance.

The other photo is far more sexually loaded. The first Devon here is wearing a tiny white halter-neck bikini with heart appliqués on both bra cups and on the front of the bikini bottoms, to one of her thighs is strapped a knife in a holster. Her hair and skin are wet while she wears what looks like diving goggles on her head, while her makeup is very minimal, seemingly only a light coat of mascara on her lashes. The look is strongly reminiscent of *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2001) – a film which will be addressed again below. Next to this deadly spring break-babe version of Aoki is our final Devon. She wears a bodysuit printed with references to punk subculture in black on white, along with a studded belt embellished by many chains, as well as a wide black choker to accompany her dark goth-adjacent makeup featuring black lips and black eyeshadow to accompany her long, straightened, bleached hair. Both Devons sport defiant facial expressions, although the body language of the bikini-clad Devon is obviously seductive and hearkening back to a certain type of “beach babe” movie scenes; Ursula Andress in *Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962) and Bo Derek in *10* (Blake Edwards, 1979) come to mind. The uninterested nature of her gaze along with the knife attached to her thigh, however, indicate a warning – *I might be dangerous* – and disinterest in simply being a passive body to be gazed at, a central issue of her acting career (which would launch two years after this campaign) as well as a connection to the general shift in the portrayal of women in action films taking place in cinema the early 2000s.¹⁵²

Moseley argues that when it comes to stars, their dress and fashion must often be seen as multiple things at once – that it can function “simultaneously as boundary and margin,” setting the star apart and defining their unique “identity” (persona) while also connecting them

¹⁵² See for example Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 270-317; O'Day, “Beauty in Motion,” 201-218.

to an audience that relates to that very fashioned identity.¹⁵³ Moseley writes specifically about cinematic stars and the interplay between their on- and off-screen embodiment. However, recalling what Geraghty identifies in stars and celebrities as a “relationship between the public sphere of performance and the private sphere of personal lives,” I argue that this concept is equally applicable to Aoki as a supermodel as it is to her as an actor.¹⁵⁴ Although Aoki’s cool girl image would be perpetuated in her acting career, it was certainly founded in the interplay between her modelling work and her off-duty persona – as is evident when considering the many instances wherein her personal style rather than her runway or photographic work is highlighted by press and fans alike. In the case of the Moschino campaign, not only the bikini-wearing Devon but all four Devons seem to be echoed in her film work, while the performative defiance and punky “I don’t give a fuck” attitude she exudes in the campaign are also a hallmark of her on-screen performances.

“Ethnic” Bodily Capital

In these early interviews and profiles of Aoki, there is also another tendency which emerges in the way reporters regard her. She was, in her first few years of modelling, first and foremost a middle- and high school student. This is mentioned in *The Independent*, *CNN*, *Vogue Australia*, and British *Vogue*, and it is not just a throwaway line; multiple writers dedicate quite a lot of space in their articles to her top grades and the fact that she is a diligent student who “intends to go to college.”¹⁵⁵ This may seem innocent enough, but when so much emphasis is put on a successful model’s academic record, and that model is also recognizably half Asian, it comes with ideological implications. Although the idea of the model minority is never explicitly evoked, and Aoki often gets asked about her thoughts on the visibility of Asian models in the industry, this fascination with her fantastic grades and dedication to her schooling perpetuates the “problem of representing ‘Asia’ and ‘Asians’ as monolithic” in majority White countries.¹⁵⁶ This tendency appears as a strategy to prove Aoki’s merits and to avoid the association with more negative stereotypes about Asians – while also disproving ideas of models as vapid and unintelligent. This is, however, only one aspect of the multiple ways that Aoki’s Asian-ness has

¹⁵³ Moseley, “Introduction,” in *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), 6f.

¹⁵⁴ Geraghty, “Re-examining Stardom,” 99.

¹⁵⁵ *The Independent*, “Devon Aoki: Face Value”; *CNN*, “Devon Aoki Hits the Books”; British *Vogue*, “How I’d Wear It: Devon Aoki,” September, 2000; *Vogue Australia*, “Faces of the Future,” August, 1999.

¹⁵⁶ Jessica Walton and Mandy Truong, “A Review of the Model Minority Myth: Understanding the Social, Educational and Health Impacts,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 3 (2023): 392, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1080/01419870.2022.2121170>.

been highlighted, and instrumental in the building of her specific bodily capital and supermodel persona – and subsequently her ethnicity and “exotic” beauty have also been integral to several of the film roles she later embodied.

In Aoki’s early modelling career, her Otherness is constantly emphasized in the press – whether that be regarding her short stature, which certainly was out of the ordinary for a fashion model in the 1990s and 2000s (and still, to a lesser degree, is) – or her ethnic background. In a *Washington Post*-article about the possible renewal of the heroin chic look, Aoki is described as “a diminutive new muse” whose “height and her child-like look” (the latter defined by the roundness of her cheeks and her freckles) are cited as setting her apart from other models.¹⁵⁷ In *The New York Times* meanwhile, her “versatile look,” immediately connected to her half-Japanese and half-European mixed ethnicity, is credited with allowing her to become the “muse for both Lagerfeld and that wild young upstart Jeremy Scott” – two designers working at opposite ends of the high fashion industry with regards to brand identities.¹⁵⁸ As discussed above, mixed race models often become revered in fashion because they represent an exotified Otherness which is at the same time more adjacent to whiteness than other models of color, making them more marketable in the eyes of fashion professionals.¹⁵⁹ Non-white stars in any field have to orient themselves around whiteness and define themselves against it because as Redmond argues, the idealized embodiment associated with stardom is directly associated with whiteness, the two becoming synonymous, through star imagery.¹⁶⁰ This is heightened in the case of Aoki whose celebrity status as a supermodel derives directly from her physical body, which has a certain proximity to whiteness thanks to her freckles and light hair while also being considered exotic due to her recognizably East Asian facial features. Her skin tone is just tan enough that white women may find it desirable, and her look combines typically European and East Asian beauty so well that she can be constructed not an “idealized white star,” but at least a star whose non-whiteness is unthreatening and delicate enough that she may be positioned as “idealized exotic” in a Western context, while also being able to appeal to the Japanese market, where she was immediately cast in ads and commercials.¹⁶¹

In some of Aoki’s photographic work, her Asian-ness becomes the central focus. Rarely, however, is it her Japanese ethnicity which is highlighted – rather she is often cast in editorials

¹⁵⁷ Monica Drake, “Waifs and Whatnot,” *The Washington Post* March 1, 1999.

¹⁵⁸ Amy Spindler, “There Is Nothing like a Brain, Especially When It Belongs to the Model of the Moment,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1999.

¹⁵⁹ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 199.

¹⁶⁰ Redmond, “The Whiteness of Stars,” 264.

¹⁶¹ Redmond, “The Whiteness of Stars,” 265.

where she gets to represent a vague exotified “Asian-ness” divorced from any ethnic specificity or referring to Asian ethnicities that are not her own. In these cases, her racialized body serves as a mere signifier of Orientalist narratives about Asian cultures. An example of this is in *Vogue France* September 1999 issue wherein she portrays ethnic (as in non-assimilated) Asian-ness in the editorial “Couture du Monde,” which features models in traditional dress from various cultures. (Fig. 3) In *Oyster Magazine*’s August/September 2000 issue however, the images themselves hardly evoke any ethnic specificity – Aoki poses in front of a white studio wall in various designers’ garments – yet her non-whiteness takes center stage when one notes that the editorial is entitled “Broken English.” The choice of title is of course particularly questionable when considering that Aoki’s entire childhood and adolescence were spent in America and England; there is no reason she would speak with anything close to “broken English,” unless one made assumptions based on her appearance. In *Vogue Italia* March 2003, she is styled like a geisha for a beauty shoot about hair – for once being associated specifically with her Japanese heritage. However, in Western contexts the geisha is often a highly fetishized and racist image of the subservient Japanese woman, and the fetishization is heightened by the way that the photograph highlights the roundness of her face; she appears almost as a Lolita-geisha, a child in eroticized costume.¹⁶² This infantilization of Aoki related to her Asian-ness plays into her acting persona in multiple ways, as I will discuss below, particularly through the multiple characters she plays that are daughters or younger sisters – which perpetuates stereotypes of Asian women as possibly deadly but also pawns in someone else’s game.

The reduction of Aoki (and her experience is of course not unique) to commodified Asian-ness in these cases speaks to how her strong bodily capital also has the capacity to make people overlook her material body and embodied agency in favor of ideological representational signification. Aoki seems to have been keenly aware of the way her racialized body could be both blessing and curse since the beginning of her career, and has attempted at times to distance herself from being the designated Asian girl. One interviewer states that “Devon’s celebrated ‘oddness’ has not always worked in her favour,” and further quotes Aoki herself on the matter: “People always want to make me look like a freak. [...] I’m a combination of a lot of different things.”¹⁶³ Maybe it’s just easier to make me look weird than another model who is specifically Caucasian.”¹⁶⁴ Articles on the racial diversification of the modelling industry in the late 1990s

¹⁶² Jennifer Lin LeMesurier, “Race as Supplement: Surfaces and Crevices of the Asian Feminine Body,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 108, no. 3 (2022): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2022.2088841>.

¹⁶³ *The Independent UK*, “Devon Aoki: Face Value.”

¹⁶⁴ *The Independent*, “Devon Aoki: Face Value,” including quotes from Aoki.

feature her as one of the faces illustrating that “you don’t have to have white skin to look like a goddess.” However, Aoki rarely addresses the way her mixed race makes her different unless directly asked – rather she prefers to elaborate on how she finds herself as part of the process of diversification for other reasons.¹⁶⁵ These reasons are often related to her short stature and a general sense of difference she seems to perceive between herself and “the status quo of what a model should be” – a conclusion which certainly has some merit, as evidenced by the way she is continuously represented in interviews and articles.¹⁶⁶ Of course, the connections of her family to the fashion industry played a significant role in Aoki’s meteoric rise to the top of the industry, and they were instrumental in allowing her to enter it in the first place, considering the multiple ways in which she deviates from modelling standards.

Rather than rejecting her Japanese heritage, defining her identity on her own terms primarily as a New York native and California girl has been a marker of Aoki’s attempt at maintaining her agency in a career built on the commodification of the self. As we shall see in the following sections dealing with Aoki’s film career, she has repeatedly embraced playing characters whose recognizability as Japanese, or at least East Asian, is integral to their representation on screen. Philippa Gates describes the difference in classic Hollywood cinema between “Asian” and “Asian-American” characters while discussing Asian-American “action heroes” of this era such as Anna May Wong, Keye Luke and James Shigeta.¹⁶⁷ She argues that although Wong and Philip Ahn “dismantled Oriental stereotypes” in *Daughter of Shanghai* (Robert Florey, 1937) and others have also done so since, the “‘otherness’ [of Asian-Americans] was most desirable when assimilated”¹⁶⁸ Aoki’s career in modelling, but perhaps even more so in film, will come to show that this sentiment still seems to ring true, assimilation and Orientalist stereotypes being major points around which her star persona is constructed – and these are integral to understanding her bodily capital. To finish this section, I would like to illustrate the convergence of Aoki’s Y2K Cool Girl status with the importance of her ethnicity and race through one of her most iconic photographs.

Captured by iconic fashion photographer Nick Knight in collaboration with Alexander McQueen for an issue of *Visionaire* magazine edited by Comme des Garçons’ Rei Kawakubo

¹⁶⁵ Jessica Brinton, “Different Faces, Different Races,” *Harper’s Bazaar* Australia, 1999.

¹⁶⁶ CNN, “Devon Aoki Hits the Books and the Runways,” 2 September, 1999.

¹⁶⁷ Philippa Gates, “The Assimilated Asian American as American Action Hero: Anna May Wong, Keye Luke and James Shigeta in the Classical Hollywood Detective Film,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 19-40.

¹⁶⁸ Hye Seung Chung, *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 10; Gates, “The Assimilated Asian American as American Action Hero,” 20.

in 1997, this image features Aoki staring straight into the camera, a characteristic sulky expression on her face. (Fig. 4) She wears a deep red lipstick, painted to exaggerate the small size and naturally pouty shape of her mouth, which along with the pink blush on her cheeks and otherwise lack of noticeable makeup alludes to the pervasive image of the geisha. Her hair also appears to be styled into a minimalist version of the hairstyle commonly worn by geishas. Furthermore, she wears a pink silk dress embroidered with flowers and featuring an unusual high and wide collar which appears as an exaggerated version of the collar of a Chinese cheongsam. The safety pin and open gash arranged in an X-shape on her forehead also evokes Western ideas of Japan, because out of the gash bloom cherry blossoms. Finally, one of her eyes has no iris or pupil, instead having been digitally turned a light blue shade drawing parallels to both crystal balls and the futuristic AI machinery and cyborgs of science fiction imagery. The photograph is bathed in a bluish light, the colors muted and extremely cool toned, Aoki's skin appearing almost grey or green – a palette closely tied to the Y2K era's preoccupation with high-tech futuristic aesthetics.

This image combines Aoki's Y2K appeal with her Japanese-ness in an expression of techno-Orientalism. Typically conceptualized as “a representational device that assigns technological and thus inhuman characteristics to the peoples and locations of the so-called Orient,” techno-Orientalism has been illustrated by a number of scholars to be intimately tied to representations of Asian – most typically East-Asian, and Japanese or Chinese especially – people in moving image media and literature, but it also has a long history within fashion, going back to Paul Poiret's designs in the 1910s.¹⁶⁹ This photograph of Aoki has been exhibited, posted and reposted in art galleries and on the internet numerous times, and might very well be the most commonly known photograph of Aoki's modelling career. That it be an expression of techno-Orientalism represented through Aoki's Japanese-American body that has become emblematic of her image seems hardly a surprise in the ideological context of Western hegemony's eroticized stereotypes about Asian women.

¹⁶⁹ Minh-Ha T. Pham, “Paul Poiret's Magical Techno-Orientalist Fashions (1911): Race, Clothing, and Virtuality in the Machine Age,” *Configurations* 21, no. 1 (Winter, 2013): 7, doi:10.1353/con.2013.0003. See also David S. Roh, Betsy Huang and Greta A. Niu, eds. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (New Brunswick/New Jersey/London: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Alexa Alice Joubin, “Screening Anti-Asian Racism: Gendered and Racialized Discourses in Film and Television,” *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 19, no. 1 (March 2022): 167-180.

Doll-Like and Dangerous

Aoki first made the transition from attending other people's movie careers as a fashion It Girl to acting in films herself in *Death of a Dynasty* (Damon Dash, 2003). *Dynasty* is a mockumentary-style film about Roc-A-Fella Records, the hip-hop record label founded by Jay-Z, Damon "Dame" Dash and Kareem Burke in 1994, and the "beef between Dash and Z over a disconcertingly teenage looking party chick called Picasso."¹⁷⁰ The film was directed by Dash and Aoki plays Picasso. For some reason. – one may speculate that it has some relation to the 3.6-star rating the film has on IMDb – *Dynasty* is never cited as Aoki's acting debut by journalists despite being released at Tribeca Film Festival before the film commonly referred to as her debut, *2 Fast*. However, *Dynasty* only ended up getting a theatrical release outside of festival two years later, in 2005.

Aoki's role in the film appears as a direct extension of her supermodel persona, and the film overtly capitalizes on her It Girl-status at the time. Her character is little more than a human trophy used to trigger the film's (deceptive) plot. In her introductory scene, Picasso shows up at a club with P. Diddy (played by Kevin Hart) who addresses Dame (Capone Lee), telling him "Yo, I got somebody I want you to meet."¹⁷¹ As Aoki/Picasso steps in to fill the frame, in medium closeup to mimic Dame's perspective, the shot turns into slow motion to emphasize the impact of her beauty – or perhaps rather desirability – for the audience. Idyllic, dreamlike music and bird sounds accompany this shot as well as she next one, which captures Dame's reaction as he scans her body, appraising it. The film's narrator, Dave Katz (Ebon Moss-Bachrach) comments on the scene: "Now, Dame was never really fazed by beautiful women. But that night, he met Picasso." The two become instantly coupled, Picasso claiming Dame as "her man" in that very first scene. As is revealed at the end of the film, the entire feud between Dame and Jay-Z which arises when the latter starts hitting on Picasso, was faked by the two supposed adversaries as a PR stunt. This implies that Aoki was chosen precisely because of her desirability; people would believe that long-term friends and partners might feud over her.

Most of Aoki's scenes in *Dynasty* are defined by her wardrobe – which is revealing, emphasizing her thin frame and toned stomach, and minutely on trend for the early 2000s – and the lack of actual personality exhibited by Picasso leaves one with the feeling that she is less a character than an excuse to feature one of the most famous models at the time in a half-dressed state. Picasso's most standout scene in the film is even set at a streetwear runway fashion show,

¹⁷⁰ IMDb, accessed 18 April, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361498/?ref_=nm_flmg_t_14_act.

¹⁷¹ I refer to the fictionalized character of Damon Dash in the film as Dame, to distinguish the character from the real person and director of the film.

at which her appearance on the catwalk leads Dame to lose all interest in his date for the show and instead engage in a lusty fantasy involving himself and Picasso alone on that same catwalk. (Fig. 5) Here, once again the desirability of Aoki's model physique is front and center, but she is not asked by the narrative to do more than be, precisely, a model.

This fashion show scene also showcases aspects of Aoki's star persona that would become integral to the rest of her acting career: the scene culminates in Picasso leading the army of models in firing off guns into the ceiling. Throughout this action, Aoki's face stays in its neutral state. She looks tough, ready to actually shoot someone if needed. This scene almost reads like a part of a demo reel for Aoki, whose subsequent filmography is oriented toward the construction of her as a female action hero – although one whose acting skills are rarely called upon outside her ability to be physically present on screen. At first glance, this seems like an ideal career path for Aoki to have pursued; she was certainly “young and beautiful,” the first step in becoming a “female hero in a man's world” according to Schubart, and she seemed unbothered by the ambivalence about possible objectification of scantily dressed women in action movies that has long been located at the heart of discourses about gendered bodies in action cinema.¹⁷² However, as will become clear, she has not managed to quite reach the status of “hero,” as she has stayed within ensemble casts where she kicks ass, so to speak, next to other, more dominant, female characters – a fact which cannot be extricated from her position as a supermodel-turned-actor as well as a woman of visibly East Asian descent.

Through *Dynasty*, Aoki is resolutely positioned within the group of stars-as-celebrities, as Geraghty would have it.¹⁷³ She argues that “in the celebrity mode the films are relatively unimportant and a star can continue to command attention as a celebrity despite failures at the box office.”¹⁷⁴ *Dynasty* received mainly mediocre-to-bad reviews, both at its Tribeca premiere and its theatrical release – a recurring pattern in Aoki's filmography – and those critics who acknowledge her presence in the film nearly all emphasize her look and her ability to be convincingly desirable while finding her actual performance and acting talent to be lacking. *Entertainment Weekly's* Lisa Schwarzbaum gave the film an unusual positive review and stated of Aoki that she “conjures all skinny, blank-faced pretty rapper molls everywhere,” while

¹⁷² See for example Schubart, *Super Bitches*; Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik, eds., *Femme Fatalities: Representations of Strong Women in the Media* (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2004); Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Films* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Chris Holmlund, “Wham! Bam” Pam!: Pam Grier as Hot Action Babe and Cool Action Mama,” in *Screening Genders*, eds. Krin Gabbard and William Luhr (New Brunswick/New Jersey/London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 61-77; Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*.

¹⁷³ Geraghty, “Rethinking Stardom,” 100f.

¹⁷⁴ Geraghty, “Rethinking Stardom,” 101.

Richard Harrington for the *Washington Post* called her a “vaporous actress-model” and her character “a piece of work of art or something like that.”¹⁷⁵ Frank Scheck identifies Picasso for *The Hollywood Reporter* as “a beautiful model” despite her never actually being identified as such in the film; one runway show does not necessarily a model by profession make, but in combination with Aoki’s celebrity persona it might.¹⁷⁶ Like in the case of Milla Jovovich as illustrated by Schubart, there is a general resistance by critics to treat Aoki as an actor rather than a model who just happens to appear in a film for “eye candy” reasons.¹⁷⁷

Aoki’s acting career has been located almost entirely within the action genre, and in this section I approach Devon Aoki’s star persona as one which has been shaped by her recurrent performances in films of that genre. I will be focusing on how her bodily capital is centered in her films and through extra-filmic discourses in both gendered and racialized ways, and how she has attempted to assert agency in her persona.

Sherrie A. Inness notes how the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a trend of films featuring “tough women” who can, and here Inness quotes Lorraine Ali on Chinese action star Zhang Ziyi in a *Newsweek* piece, slay “several men twice her size while drinking a cup of tea.”¹⁷⁸ The films in which Aoki has acted, excluding *Dynasty* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Undead* (Jordan Gallard, 2009), are straight-forward action films, and her characters certainly display aspirational “toughness” which may inspire female audiences to dream of kicking bad guy ass. Most of Aoki’s action roles overtly capitalize on one of the two aspects of her bodily capital which are discussed above. Her characters are typically either tough yet desirable and stylish walking Y2K clothing hangers (*2 Fast, D.E.B.S.*), or they are eroticized stereotypes of Japanese women (*Sin City*, *DOA*, *War* (Philip G. Atwell, 2007)) – or perhaps the word “girls” would be more fitting for how they are portrayed in the films and perceived by other characters.¹⁷⁹ At times they are both, and one factor which seems to connect all these characters

¹⁷⁵ Lisa Schwarzbaum, “Death of a Dynasty,” *Entertainment Weekly* Online, accessed April 19, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20050424061304/http://www.ew.com/ew/article/review/movie/0,6115,1051976_1_0_,00.html; Richard Harrington, “‘Death of a Dynasty’: Rapper’s Delight,” *The Washington Post* Online, accessed 19 April 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171130191419/http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/04/28/AR2005042800942.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Frank Scheck, “Death of a Dynasty,” *The Hollywood Reporter* Online, accessed 19 April, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20050804082312/http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/reviews/review_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1909330.

¹⁷⁷ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 270f.

¹⁷⁸ Lorraine Ali, quoted in Sherrie A. Inness, “Introduction: ‘Boxing Gloves and Bustiers’: New Images of Tough Women,” in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York, NY/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1.

¹⁷⁹ *War* is also called *Rogue Assassin* in some markets. It was renamed from just *Rogue* to avoid confusion with another film of the same name.

is the tension between Aoki's doll-like beauty, her desirability and her deadliness. In fact, even as Picasso firing a gun into the air at a fashion show in *Dynasty*, and as Anna who is turned into a vampire and threatens the life of her ex-boyfriend protagonist Julian (Jake Hoffmann) in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, her body signifies eroticized danger, which is simultaneously disarmed by her girlish femininity.

Schubart identifies the female hero as “a contested site, a paradoxical and ambivalent creature” whose “aggressiveness is [...] delivered by a body more artificial and ‘constructed’ than ever before.”¹⁸⁰ Aoki's body as it appears on the screen is thin and athletic, but in comparison to many contemporary female action stars it appears decidedly softer and less constructed; she does not have rock-hard abs and no noticeable bicep definition.¹⁸¹ If female action heroes are typically “forced to choose between two positions [...] gendered respectively as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’” then Aoki's body has tended rather to place her within the realm of the “high trash” category, designating films emerging out of the new millennium whose explicit exploitation and “hyper-ironic tongue-in-cheek approach” centers “*fun*, [the female] *body*, and the question of *empowerment and identification*.”¹⁸²

Aoki's supermodel body, due to the transformation and body work inherent to modelling, appears to have made her, in the eyes of casting directors, suitable for the position of an “action babe” of the new millennium – who were not only required to be beautiful, erotically charged objects of desire, but also able to rigorously learn to do their own stunts and be physically impressive.¹⁸³ Aoki had to learn to drive a car in a few days for *2 Fast*, to perform martial arts at a professional level for *DOA* and carry genuine firearms with trained confidence for *Mutant Chronicles* (Simon Hunter, 2008) – all while constantly switching between the roles of the exotic-but-assimilated Asian-American and the representation of stereotypical Japanese-ness.¹⁸⁴

It also becomes evident that Aoki's star persona is ambivalent regarding gendered appeal. While her highly sexualized characters seem tailored to the gaze of male audiences, many of Aoki's films are extremely popular with particularly female and LGBT audiences, tied to her It Girl status. Male critics at the time often (though not always) dismissed her performances in favor of commenting on her body, if they acknowledged her at all. However,

¹⁸⁰ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 7

¹⁸¹ O'Day, “Beauty in Motion,” 205.

¹⁸² Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 291. Italics in original.

¹⁸³ O'Day, “Beauty in Motion,” 205-207.

¹⁸⁴ Lyvie Scott, “A Lack of a License Didn't Stop Devon Aoki from Stunt Driving in 2 Fast 2 Furious,” Slash Film, accessed 1 May, 2023, <https://www.slashfilm.com/1188337/a-lack-of-a-license-didnt-stop-devon-aoki-from-stunt-driving-in-2-fast-2-furious/>.

a trend also emerges wherein men on the internet felt compelled to comment on how undesirable Aoki was, in exceedingly misogynistic terms. One review of *DOA* posted on City on Fire, a website dedicated to reviewing Asian and martial arts films, states that “[Corey Yuen] should get a special effects award for making Devon Aoki look doable.”¹⁸⁵ A review on DVDtalk instead calls Aoki “odd looking,” explaining in a footnote below what this means: “Pasty complexion. Mump-cheeked. Toneless body.”¹⁸⁶ It appears that Aoki, was not enough of an action babe for certain subsets of the audience, her body and face too soft to fill the visual criteria of “fitness” expected.¹⁸⁷

In contrast, searching Aoki’s name on Letterboxd generates over 250 user reviews, where some simply state her name, implying that she is the only reason one should need to watch the film in question, while some elaborate further. These reviews indicate how Aoki has over time been positioned as a star “for the girls and gays,” as the expression goes. For example, user ramí asks in a *D.E.B.S.* review “where is devon aoki’s oscar?” while user buku says that the film “has everything youd want from a movie, devon aoki in a mini skirt, devon aoki smoking, devon aoki doing a terrible french accent, lesbians.”¹⁸⁸ While I have no knowledge of how these users identify in terms of gender and sexuality, the vernacular they use is generally one typical of feminine and LGBT popular culture-oriented spaces online, and Aoki’s stardom in these spaces is undeniable. A common sentiment overall from these user reviews is that without Aoki’s name in the cast list, they would not have watched films like *2 Fast, War, Sin City* or *Mutant Chronicles*. User analogmountains directly ties Aoki to the aesthetic value of *2 Fast*, writing: “the aesthetic of the series really peaked in this one. bring back devon aoki, and also devon aoki’s car.”¹⁸⁹ The enduring power of her supermodel presence to draw a specific audience is undeniable, and that audience is often one which is not typically drawn to the action genre.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ JJ Bona, “DOA: Dead or Alive (2006) Review,” City on Fire, accessed 20 April, 2023, <https://cityonfire.com/doa-dead-or-alive-2006/>.

¹⁸⁶ J. Doyle Wallis, “D.O.A. Dead or Alive,” DVDtalk, accessed 20 April, 2023, <https://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/30544/doa-dead-or-alive/>.

¹⁸⁷ O’Day, “Beauty in Motion,” 206.

¹⁸⁸ @ramí, “where is devon aoki’s oscar?,” Letterboxd, accessed 10 May, 2023, <https://letterboxd.com/narcosmicoma/film/debs/>; @buku, “everything youd want from a movie,” Letterboxd, accessed 10 May, 2023, <https://letterboxd.com/bukuling/film/debs/>.

¹⁸⁹ @analogmountains, “the aesthetics of this series really peaked,” Letterboxd, accessed 10 May, 2023, <https://letterboxd.com/analogmountains/film/2-fast-2-furious/>.

¹⁹⁰ For *D.E.B.S.*, it almost certainly is the intended audience, and I return to this at a later point in my analysis. Additionally, as O’Day argues in relation to action babe cinema, this type of elevated B-movie material aims at attracting as wide an audience as possible, meaning that it is designed to appeal to many different types of spectators. Therefore, Aoki’s appeal to her niche audience cannot be considered a lucky coincidence for those involved in making these films, but likely something they would have hoped for when casting her. O’Day, “Beauty in Motion,” 202-205.

In interviews, Aoki expressed that she found her characters compelling in a way one might describe as feminist, although she avoids that phrasing – unsurprising, considering the early aughts’ stigmatization of that word in popular culture. Instead she highlights how, for example, Suki’s pink car in *2 Fast* defies stereotypes of “sissiness” because Suki “can really drive, so this is sort of like a statement, it’s sort of like an in-your-face ‘yeah, I drive a pink car but I can, I can definitely beat your ass if it comes to driving.’”¹⁹¹ The “you” in question here seems to allude to misogynistic men who would mock a pink car and dismiss female drag racers, and Aoki speaks in similar tougher-than-the-boys terms about her role in *Mutant Chronicles* as Corporal Valerie Duval. At a red carpet event when asked about how she felt being one of very few female characters in the post-apocalyptic action-science fiction film, Aoki replies with pride that it was “fun” but also “a challenge” and “exhausting,” particularly because she, as opposed to the rest of the nearly all-male cast, had to carry a real gun instead of a dummy gun for every scene.¹⁹² She has also bragged about her ability to clear a room of bikers with her bag full of weapons while filming *Sin City*, despite her small stature.¹⁹³

Aoki obviously found empowerment in her characters and her own performances and seemed convinced that she has a degree of control over her own image as a tough girl who can kick as much ass as any man – and kick any man’s ass. I would not necessarily disagree with this; when discussing her films, she often comments on how she actively went after roles she wanted to play with a great degree of agency. However, a star’s persona is never created by the individual star entirely on their own. Stars and celebrities are commodities, and managers, casting directors, members of the press and others are all involved in this creation – and so are the audience.¹⁹⁴ The fact also remains that Aoki’s roles primarily position her as a schlocky “High Trash Heroine” or “action babe” in films that make putting “beautiful bodies on display” into their main objective, complicating her great efforts to emphasize empowerment and girl power.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley, “Immaculate Consumption: Negotiating the Sex Symbol in Postfeminist Celebrity Culture,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 269, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.658145>; Devon Aoki, interviewed by Vudu, “2 Fast 2 Furious Behind the Scenes – Pink Car (2003) – Paul Walker Movie HD,” accessed 20 April, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPBX4YIGoxw>.

¹⁹² Devon Aoki, interviewed by CoinOpTV, “Mutant Chronicles – Red Carpet // COIN-OP TV,” accessed 20 April, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5qAMsfRd7g>.

¹⁹³ Devon Aoki, interviewed by Conan O’Brien, “Devon Aoki on Conan 2007,” *Leggy Ladies on VHS*, accessed 24 April, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxJHarbnfS0>.

¹⁹⁴ Turner, “The Economy of Celebrity,” 193.

¹⁹⁵ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 299; O’Day, “Beauty in Motion.”

The Screen Is a Runway

In many ways, what Aoki embodies on the screen is exactly what she was known for on the runway. Zoë Kendall writes for *i-D*, about Aoki's appearance as one of the four crime-fighting teen spies at the center of *D.E.B.S.*, that despite the negative criticism the film received upon its release, "it has arisen as a cult classic in the internet era, in part thanks to its stellar costuming."¹⁹⁶ She continues by detailing how Aoki's character, chain-smoking French girl Dominique, "wears a wool beret and slinky black minidress (accessorized with a baguette bag and massive handgun)" throughout the film, and venerates the iconic image of "the film's signature D.E.B.S. school uniform: plaid micro-miniskirt with matching tie and collegiate sweater."¹⁹⁷ "Does anybody else make a school uniform look that good?" asks Dominic Cadogan for *Dazed*.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Kendall praises Aoki's "hot-pink, corseted chaps" from *2 Fast* which also hold online cult-status, and Cadogan emphasizes how Suki's looks are always matched to her hot-pink car.¹⁹⁹ These examples illustrate how Aoki's most iconic performances are those which blur the borders between her off-screen style icon status and her on-screen image. In discourses about Aoki, the films she appears in are often regarded as a runway, her performances secondary to the way she carries her fashioned body on screen.

As Graeme Turner notes, if you are not one of the performers at the very top of the film industry, your personal brand (persona) as an actor is essential.²⁰⁰ Gamson similarly argues, from perhaps a more pessimistic perspective, that in the late twentieth century "the concept of 'quality'" was "dismissed as irrelevant and old-fashioned" in celebrity culture, and that to increase marketability, one's persona should be independent from one's performances.²⁰¹ Clearly, Aoki's persona as an actor is intimately tied to the image of her as a supermodel with aspirational looks. While this reinforces the idea that supermodels who venture into acting lack value or talent in the craft of acting defined as being able to "be convincing 'in character,'" the centrality of this "extra-filmic discourse" is not only a common pattern in the construction of the star as image and persona but has also likely impacted which roles Aoki had the opportunity to audition for.²⁰²

¹⁹⁶ Zoë Kendall, "7 of Devon Aoki's Most Iconic Outfits," *i-D* Online, accessed 20 April, 2023, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/4ayedp/7-of-devon-aokis-most-iconic-outfits>.

¹⁹⁷ Kendall, "7 of Devon Aoki's Most Iconic Outfits."

¹⁹⁸ Cadogan, "Cult Model Devon Aoki's Most Memorable Moments."

¹⁹⁹ Kendall, "7 of Devon Aoki's Most Iconic Outfits"; Cadogan, "Cult Model Devon Aoki's Most Memorable Moments."

²⁰⁰ Graeme Turner, "The Economy of Celebrity," in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmon and Su Holmes (London: SAGE, 2007), 195.

²⁰¹ Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 46. 84.

²⁰² King, "Articulating Stardom," 174.

Here we must return to Negra's concept of niche stardom. She illustrates how Parker Posey is extremely closely associated with her characters to the point where she can be described as remaining "a *character* in real life," and while this has hindered the diversification of her career, it made her a favorite of 1990s indie filmmakers for whom she became the ultimate downtown New York fashion girl.²⁰³ Aoki's acting persona functions similarly, her characters inextricable from her supermodel body. However, if press coverage of conventional film stars "tends to focus heavily on the authenticity of a private life that grounds fictional performance," this is not the case with regards to Aoki.²⁰⁴ Instead of private life, her public It Girl status and cultural significance to particular audience niches are what grounds her performances.

Featuring a Y2K style icon and supermodel in demand could be used as a strategy to attract a demographic which may not typically be the target audience of films like *2 Fast, DOA* or even *War* as illustrated by the Letterboxd reviews above and the attention paid to her acting career in prestige style publications. At the same time, the image of Aoki in revealing outfits showing off her toned body which is integral to her bodily capital as a model, may still heighten the interest in these films' typical straight and male target audience.²⁰⁵ Thus, the "niche-ness" of Aoki's film stardom results in her characters "becoming models," in the sense that it is the look that matters. The degree to which her supermodel body is centered in the discourse around many of her films is just another example of how her acting work has been shaped by her bodily and cultural capital.²⁰⁶

Aoki's supermodel cachet and bodily capital lend themselves well to *D.E.B.S.*, a satirical take on action movies like *Charlie's Angels* – the film which is Schubart's prime example of the high trash aesthetic.²⁰⁷ Helmed by a black lesbian director, this feature debut aims to twist the hot-girls-kicking-ass trope away from the objectification and torture of women's bodies for the male gaze, as Schubart illustrates is often the role of women in "male genres," while also centering a lesbian love story.²⁰⁸ *D.E.B.S.*' group of spies-in-training are still hot girls who kick ass in fashionable outfits, but the film targets an audience that would be expected to be interested in Aoki's on screen appearances. As opposed to other films in Aoki's filmography, *D.E.B.S.* is targeted toward an indie audience who generally have more of an

²⁰³ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 62f. Italics in original.

²⁰⁴ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 62. 70-73.

²⁰⁵ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 9f.

²⁰⁶ Cadogan, "Cult Model Devon Aoki's Most Memorable Moments"; Blair, "In Celebration."

²⁰⁷ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 290-303.

²⁰⁸ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 11f.

oppositional taste primed to appreciate something like an action genre satire due to its off-mainstream positionality.²⁰⁹ This demographic generally overlaps with demographics interested in high fashion and style icons like Aoki; having an interest in high fashion and the stars of that industry also entails aligning oneself with a “taste culture” that “distinguishes itself [...] against the other of mainstream culture and its audiences,” as Michael Z. Newman would have it.²¹⁰

From SoCal to Japan

Aoki’s racialization has undeniably had an impact on her acting career, and this becomes particularly significant when considering those films that explicitly position her character as Asian/Japanese. Alexa Alice Joubin identifies how the fetishization of Asian women in Western culture has “led to the bifurcated imaginations of Asian women as either virgins or femme fatales.”²¹¹ As I illustrate in this section, these films in which Aoki plays Japanese rather than Japanese-American characters enhance her Asian-ness both visually and through recourse to either “Dragon lady” or “China doll”-stereotypes, continuing the discourse from her modelling career in which her half-Japanese identity is obscured to enable her to embody “full” Asian-ness.

Aoki’s runway-trained stone face and athletic body lend themselves well to the Dragon lady stereotype, and her striking beauty is useful in convincing the audience that she is indeed desirable while being dangerous. On the other hand, as discussed above in relation to Aoki’s modelling career, her face has a natural roundness and small features which easily translates into a doll-like innocence.²¹² Aoki’s ability to transform herself – as fashion models must – and to embody a mood and a single concept, rather than fully formed characters – is essential to these characters who are defined by their deadliness and Japanese-ness.

In *Sin City*, Aoki’s character Miho is a mute assassin, referred to by critic Andrew Sarris as “a kind of samurai prostitute” (she is never actually identified as a sex worker).²¹³ Dwight McCarthy (Clive Owen), one of the film’s many white male characters, uses the nickname “Deadly little Miho” for her, connoting sexual attraction connected to her lethal skills through

²⁰⁹ Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 15.

²¹⁰ Newman, *Indie*, 15.

²¹¹ Joubin, “Screening Anti-Asian Racism,” 175.

²¹² Jeremy Scott, quoted in Ben Reardon, “Jeremy Scott Celebrates 20 Years in Fashion,” *i-D Online*, accessed 21 April, 2023, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/59dzg3/jeremy-scott-celebrates-20-years-in-fashion>.

²¹³ Andrew Sarris, “Welcome to Blood-Soaked Sin City, Frank Miller’s Morbid Fantasia,” *The New York Observer*, accessed 21 April, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071218175256/http://www.observer.com/node/50628>.

an act of infantilization. To him, Miho's adeptness at killing holds less power than her softly feminine appearance – and this aspect hinges entirely on Aoki's specific presence. Miho kills using a variety of Japanese swords and shuriken, and she always retains her stonefaced beauty. Her costume is highly sexualized; she wears a thin robe, which lies at the intersection of traditional Japanese garments like haori or yukata and lingerie, over a red bra with a print that looks vaguely "Oriental," a pair of leggings that hit her calves and some lace-up flats which are reminiscent of Japanese uwabaki footwear. The Orientalism of the character's dress and Aoki's delicate appearance appeals to the common white male fantasy of small and submissive Japanese women, while her lethal nature becomes simply another aspect of her to fetishize.

DOA – directed by prolific Hong Kong director Corey Yuen but a Western production for Western audiences – positions Aoki similarly as an object of desire through Orientalist fantasies. Aoki plays Kasumi, a ninja princess from a Japanese clan whose motive for entering an invite-only martial arts competition is to find her brother who went missing there the year before. Kasumi is stoic and unwaveringly filial – embodying common stereotypes about East Asian (particularly Japanese, Chinese and Korean) women – and she is also skilled at martial arts. *DOA*, like *D.E.B.S.*, owes much of its style and aesthetics to *Charlie's Angels*, even featuring two white women (Tina (Jaime Pressly) and Christy (Holly Valance)) to complete the trio. The film's body politics also mirror those of *Charlie's Angels*. O'Day argues that "action babe heroines" are defined by the display of "beautiful feminine bodies combined with active masculine strength" and that "the gendered body of both the star and the action babe heroine are processed through the twin lenses of eroticisation and active strength."²¹⁴

DOA features many opportunities for the audience to take pleasure in Aoki's, Pressly's and Valance's bodies, framed in self-conscious and humorous ways – for example, when the contestants are body scanned in underwear, the three are shown in split screen, the camera travelling up their bodies in closeup. In one particularly gratuitous scene, a beach volleyball match features plenty of "tits and ass," as it is often colloquially termed – including another full scan of Aoki's body – and there are several scenes where the women are caught in intimate settings by Tina's father who thinks they are engaging in lesbian activities. However, Aoki also uses her body for intense fight scenes, the most standout of which is one in which Kasumi fights a man who appears about three times her size, outsmarting his brute strength with her martial arts skill, and another (which owes everything to Yuen's background in Hong Kong cinema) plays out in a bamboo grove wherein she is framed in full-body shots showcasing her graceful

²¹⁴ Marc O'Day, "Beauty in Motion," 203. 205.

movements and strength. Watching Aoki next to Pressly and Valance however, she obviously has a softer body with less spectacular muscles. While this may be viewed as a simple exception to the action babe formula, I contend that it also plays into the character's aristocratic Japanese identity, tying Aoki's supermodel body, which is thin yet softly feminine, into ideas of Japanese women as soft lotus flowers.

Meanwhile, in *War*, Aoki's character Kira is the daughter of Yakuza boss Shiro Yanagawa. Groomed to inherit her father's position, She is also ruthless and lethal – particularly skilled in throwing sharp objects, but not afraid of pointing a gun or holding a knife to a throat – when dealing with cops, Triad members, or her father's own underlings. Kira is the ultimate Dragon lady and Aoki's supermodel persona is implicated in one of the film's most humorous moments in which the character threatens two Yakuza underlings at knife- and gunpoint and orders them to get her a chef salad with no blue cheese – recalling stereotypes about models' diets.

Aoki's explicitly Japanese characters are defined by their skill at combat or killing as well as by their lack of visible affect. As Miho and Kasumi particularly, Aoki becomes an embodiment of “sexualized spectacle,” and the use of her body for aestheticized violence positions her as the object of a racialized “male sadistic gaze” which is also racialized.²¹⁵ Meanwhile, Kasumi and Kira are united by their filial duties; Kasumi to her older brother and Kira to her father. This, of course, positions Aoki within cultural discourses regarding East Asian women as submissive and pleasant – unless they are deployed to defend the honor of, or avenge, a male family member. The filial revenge theme connects back to characters like Anna May Wong's Ling Moy in *Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931) and reflects a Western understanding of Confucianism also found in films like *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, 1998) and its live-action remake *Mulan* (Niki Caro, 2020) and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003 and 2004). This recurring theme also connects to a wider trend in action cinema wherein female characters are often motivated by or trained by older male characters.

Schubart identifies in contemporary action cinema the “archetype” of “the Daughter,” whose skills stem from her creation by a father (figure); she “is *his* little girl.”²¹⁶ While she must “fight like a man” she must also “act like [...] an *attractive* woman.”²¹⁷ Aoki's own interpretation of Kira is that “[h]er dad raised her to be more of like a Yakuza whore than just

²¹⁵ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 2.

²¹⁶ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 23. 32f. Italics in original.

²¹⁷ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 33. Italics in original.

a nice little girl,” which has made her a “bitch.”²¹⁸ Of Kasumi however, Aoki states that she is “like a delicate little flower princess – well, not so delicate,” who embarks on the D.O.A. adventure to “make things better for herself and her family,” as her missing brother was in line for the throne.²¹⁹ Aoki’s Japanese characters “can physically power their way out of dangerous situations” yet always maintain a level of femininity that is expected of women.²²⁰ When dealing with a half Japanese actor whose entire image relies on her body and beauty, in films intended for an American and international market, the construction of femininity in violent characters becomes even more ideologically loaded. Michelle Yeoh had to have her features softened with makeup to be marketable as “an international beauty” instead of “an Asian action babe” when she appeared in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1997).²²¹ Aoki’s case is somewhat reversed: her Japaneseness is heightened and strongly emphasized in the films in question, because she plays characters who are not supposed to be mixed, and who are also written to fulfil Western conceptions of East Asian/Japanese women.

In *War*, when Kira shows up 24 minutes into the film in a scene at Shiro’s Japanese estate, Aoki’s natural hair color which lies somewhere between a dark blonde and ginger has been altered to a very dark brown. This change appears as an attempt to make her look more Japanese, and less mixed. Surrounded by cherry blossoms and Japanese architecture, the film roots Kira in a Japanese cultural context far from Aoki’s upbringing in New York, California and London. Kira also speaks Japanese, which Aoki had to learn for the film. In an interview she confirms that she did not speak Japanese before accepting the role, stating that “I know I look like I’m straight off the boat from Japan or China or any of those Asian countries. People always ask, ‘What are you, Asian?’”²²²

In *DOA*, Aoki’s appearance has been similarly manipulated to, presumably, make her appear more Japanese and “like a delicate little flower,” as discussed above.²²³ Her skin looks paler than the light tan she typically sports; in comparison to film’s white stars she has the skin of an aristocrat who has rarely needed to see the sun, despite the fact that the character has clearly spent a lot of time training in martial arts. While some questioned the choice of casting

²¹⁸ Devon Aoki, interviewed by Rotten Tomatoes, “‘Rogue’ Set Visit: Devon Aoki Dishes ‘DOA,’ Learning Japanese, and Buff RTers,” accessed 24 April, 2023, <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/rogue-set-visit-devon-aoki-dishes-doa-learning-japanese-and-buff-rters/>.

²¹⁹ Aoki, “‘Rogue’ Set Visit.”

²²⁰ Charlene Tung, “Embodying an Image: Gender, Race, and Sexuality in La Femme Nikita,” in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York, NY/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 97.

²²¹ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 135.

²²² Aoki, “‘Rogue’ Set Visit.”

²²³ Aoki, “‘Rogue’ Set Visit.”

Aoki over “Asian-starlets (*sic*) [...] who have proven that they have the action and acting chops,” Aoki’s specific beauty and model look appears to have been more interesting to the filmmakers than her acting and stunt skills.²²⁴ However, it is worth noting the implications of a half-white actor with a persona based around her bodily capital being cast in these roles which are intended to represent culturally and ethnically Japanese women. Aoki emphasizes that she did a lot of work to, for example, speak Japanese well enough that Japanese people would understand her, and she considers it part of her job “to represent for Asian people.”²²⁵ Yet it is inescapable that her body becomes a site onto which discourses about Asian/Japanese femininity are projected, and amplified due to her specific identity as a Japanese-American iconic model raised in the US and the UK. These films become a continuation of the tendency already illustrated in her modelling career, wherein Aoki is employed to express exotified Japanese beauty and filial piety while being, in her own words “really kind of a California girl.”²²⁶

Serving Face and Striking a Pose

Rebecca L. Epstein illustrates how actor and 1990s style icon Sharon Stone has maintained her stardom regardless of the success or failure of her films through her personal fashion choices being lauded and constantly paid attention to by the tabloid press.²²⁷ Furthermore, as argued by Charles Eckert, the cinema and the fashion industry evolved together across the 20th century in a symbiosis facilitated through tie-ins, film-themed fashion boutiques and the associations of stars with trends and stylishness.²²⁸ In the case of Devon Aoki, fashion, film and stardom are connected in a way similar to that of Stone. In this final section on Aoki, I explore how what opened the door for her in Hollywood – her supermodel persona – has also been detrimental to her acting career, by placing her in a niche which she has not been able to successfully diversify outside of.

Dyer notes that Marilyn Monroe’s star persona became a site for discourses on sexuality – particularly women’s – to be projected, and that a lot of the actual value she brought to her roles was certainly “against the grain of how they are written” and filmed.²²⁹ I argue that Aoki’s persona as it evolved across her film career can be identified in a similar way. While she

²²⁴ Doyle Wallis, “D.O.A.”

²²⁵ Aoki, “‘Rogue’ Set Visit.”

²²⁶ Aoki, “‘Rogue’ Set Visit.”

²²⁷ Epstein, “Sharon Stone in a Gap Turtleneck,” 214f.

²²⁸ Charles Eckert, “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 30-39.

²²⁹ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 19f.

obviously put a lot of work and passion into all of her films, wanting to be taken seriously in a field where supermodels typically are not, she did not have the ability to circumnavigate the fact that the characters she played were consistently crafted and received as “Lycra clad fashion models” who do little more than “provide eye-candy to horny thirteen year old boys with an Asian fetish.”²³⁰ Thus, her acting persona *is* her modelling persona because her film appearances translate as modelling rather than *performing*.

Aoki’s star persona shares much in common with the “type” (as developed by O. E. Klapp and utilized by Dyer) of the “pin-up.”; there is an emphasis on “surface appearance and [...] woman as sexual spectacle and sex object” and she appears as “a model of bodily perfection” whose “[p]hotogenic perfection is enough” to carry her on screen.²³¹ Some critics react positively to her presence in films like *Sin City* and *War* – Toddy Burton for *The Austin Chronicle* remarks that Kira in *War* is “one of the most enjoyable characters,” and Ty Burr at *The Boston Globe* thinks that Aoki “swipes the whole sequence” as Miho in *Sin City*. However, in many cases, she is not mentioned at all in reviews, as if her presence is simply eye candy not worthy of comment as an acting performance.²³² Most critics who *do* mention her make sure to emphasize how she is all face and body, and no acting; notably Maitland McDonagh at *TV Guide* comments that Aoki “can’t act her way out of a pair of La Perlas and isn’t asked to,” about Suki in *2 Fast*.²³³

We may conceptualize Aoki as an example of a “type” of star which is adjacent to the “open, friendly” and “inviting but not seducing” sexuality of the pin-up.²³⁴ However, she is defined by her stand-offish and “girl power”-charged sexuality which may be more appealing to women – whether as an aspirational image of gendered empowerment or through a lesbian lens of attraction – than men in many cases. I would like to tentatively call this type “the hot girl,” and while it is not specific to supermodel actors, it certainly lends itself well to that group of aspiring film stars. The hot girl holds connotations which fit well into the discourses of postfeminism/neoliberal feminism/popular feminism (the three are so closely related that they might as well be interchangeable) championing women’s empowerment through girl power and

²³⁰ Liam Lacey, “2 Fast 2 Furious (2003),” *The Globe and Mail*, June 6, 2003; Ranting Ray’s Film Reviews, “2 Fast 2 Furious Blue-Ray Review,” accessed 25 April, 2023, <http://rantingraysfilmreviews.blogspot.com/2011/04/2-fast-2-furious-blu-ray-review.html>.

²³¹ Dyer, *Stars*, 50; O. E. Klapp quoted in Dyer, *Stars*, 50.

²³² Toddy Burton, “War,” *The Austin Chronicle*, August 31, 2007; Ty Burr, “Stylish and Violent, ‘Sin City’ is Ripped Right from the Comic Book’s Pages,” *The Boston Globe*, April 1, 2005.

²³³ Maitland McDonagh, “Pedal to the Metal,” *TV Guide*, accessed 25 April, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030607070335/http://tvguide.com/movies/database/ShowMovie.asp?MI=44283>.

²³⁴ Thomas B. Hess, quoted in Dyer, *Stars*, 51; O’Day, “Beauty in Motion,” 204f.

“bad bitch” style rhetoric, implying that anything a woman does that makes *her* personally feel powerful, sexy or in charge is feminist.²³⁵ This stereotype also relies heavily on the commodification of the beauty and cultural capital of the actor in question. Eliza Dushku is an example of someone who may fall under the hot girl category, particularly through the enduring popularity of her characters Faith in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003) and Missy in *Bring It On* (Peyton Reed, 2000). Another example is Megan Fox, who might be called the arch-hot girl, as her persona is so closely associated with characters like Jennifer in *Jennifer’s Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009) and Mikaela in *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007) and converges with a similar persona off-screen.

The way Aoki uses her body, inhabiting physical spaces and the screen – as informed by her background in modelling – is fully integrated into her hot girl persona. For example, when Kasumi is hang-gliding through the air and catches her invitation to D.O.A. with a perfect beauty-campaign face, or when Suki sits on the hood of her hot pink car adorned with manga-style drawings – legs wide apart and torso fashionably curved like in a *Vogue* editorial – Aoki’s use of her bodily capital on the screen conveys a certain ideal of femininity venerated in high fashion. The shot from *DOA* is reminiscent of her Lancôme beauty ads, while the latter might easily be from the set of a Dsquared or Jean Paul Gaultier campaign. (Fig. 6 and 7) In *D.E.B.S.*, Dominique lights cigarette after cigarette, appearing as a parody of a model off-duty (except for the guns and various spy gadgets she carries). In an interview about the film, Aoki noted the aesthetic appeal of Dominique’s chain-smoking, describing it as taking one drag “and then for the rest of the scene, you can just sort of stand there looking fashionable.”²³⁶ Constantly, Aoki is called upon to infuse characters with her bodily and cultural capital, and her professional expertise at selling something – a vibe, a style – through looks.

Even in scenes where the D.E.B.S. are out on a mission, Aoki stands out in the group; Dominique’s skirts are shorter, her heels higher and her top cropped – and most importantly, her stance while holding her gun looks suspiciously impractical and *posed*. (Fig. 8) Yet *Sin City*’s might be the clearest example of a film in which Aoki’s body and ability to harness it to communicate silently is central to her character. Using very few facial expressions and, of course, no words, Aoki transforms the scene in which Miho fights and ultimately kills Jackie

²³⁵ See for example Lisa Coulthard, “Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2007), 153-175; Jess Butler, “For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 35-58.

²³⁶ Devon Aoki, interviewed by Michael J. Lee, “Devon Aoki & Angela Robinson,” RadioFree, accessed 1 May, 2023, http://movies.radiofree.com/interviews/debs_devon_aoki_angela_robinson.shtml.

Boy (Benicio Del Toro) into a fashion film. Never once is she not “serving face,” as it might be termed in LGBT spaces. The climax of the scene, in which Miho slashes Jackie Boy’s hair and nearly decapitates him, also finishes with a shot of her perfectly composed and made-up face not even flinching as his blood splashes onto it – the red almost seems to finish off her look. (Fig. 9) This stylized way of acting may appear unnatural and even bad if what one expects from actors is always the naturalistic Method acting which is dominant in the industry.²³⁷ However, the aestheticized performances of Aoki tie back to Negra’s concept of niche stardom, which she argues approximates the “picture personalities” of early commercial cinema, wherein “[e]xtrafilmic discourse insisted on the personality’s real world identity” and that identity in turn “referred readers back to the evidence of the films in a kind of tautological loop.” This, it must be stressed, means that she is giving a niche audience exactly what they want; she is performing her It Girl persona on screen.²³⁸

Past, Present, Future

Despite several cult classic film roles and her star power with certain niche audiences, Aoki never managed to land roles which gave her the opportunity to legitimize herself as a conventionally good actor. Negra argues that Posey, when she did appear in mainstream films, did so typically in cameos which “trademarks a film as having certain qualities expected of it” – namely indie qualities – or “infuse it with a sense of irony and high style.”²³⁹ However these qualities are not always received as warmly in mainstream films as in indie cinema. This, according to Negra, hindered Posey from successful crossover.²⁴⁰ I argue that Aoki’s film career encountered similar issues, being cast in both low and high budget action films to infuse them with fashionability and trendiness as well as lending her extremely famous face and body to the films’ visuals, without giving her roles in which she is allowed to spread her acting wings.

Tasker illustrates the difficulty for certain male action stars to be “taken seriously,” arguing that to understand the bodybuilder-“muscular hero” necessitates the understanding that he “is caught by the camera [...] both posed and in motion at the same time.”²⁴¹ The bodybuilder represents in many ways the ultimate embodiment of masculine performativity by “acting out an excessive caricature of cultural expressions.”²⁴² In the same way, one might argue that Aoki

²³⁷ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 18f.

²³⁸ Richard DeCordova, quoted in Negra, “‘Queen of the Indies,’” 62.

²³⁹ Negra, “‘Queen of the Indies,’” 70.

²⁴⁰ Negra, “‘Queen of the Indies,’” 71f.

²⁴¹ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 75. 77.

²⁴² Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 78.

in her supermodel/Y2K icon-status embodies feminine performativity, and this fact is heightened by the limited scope of her roles. *Mutant Chronicles* appears as an attempt to broaden her performing spectrum. The film still lies within the action/science fiction genre, but its cast included respected performers Ron Perlman and John Malkovich, who might seem to legitimize B-movie material. Aoki's character is markedly less sexualized and far more masculinized than in any of her other films; Valerie Duval is as far from a supermodel as a character could possibly be. Yet the film failed to prove Aoki's versatility in the vein of Demi Moore or – a more recent example – Emily Blunt, when it crashed at the box office and received abysmal reviews, and the film is seldom mentioned when Aoki's film career is discussed.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is another Aoki-foray into the world of indie films, and also another film which might have been a launching pad for Aoki to be taken seriously as an actor. She plays Anna, the reincarnation of Shakespeare's Ophelia, pursued by the real-life vampire Horatio, who has been feuding with the real-life Hamlet for centuries. As Anna, Aoki got to act "on stage" in the play-within-the-film and take on the role of a bitter ex-girlfriend in an ordinary love story – although it ends in vampirism – very far from her usual repertoire. However, the film did not manage to appeal to the indie audience it targeted, despite the involvement of legitimizing forces like John Ventimiglia and Sean Lennon. Aoki's performance was not regarded highly, and critics still only saw her as a model.²⁴³ Despite her best efforts, it seems Aoki could not escape the part of her star persona which carried the label supermodel or the constraints that her racialized appearance would put on her career choices, leaving her with very limited appeal for casting directors and – apparently – the audience.

Aoki has not acted in a film for, at the time of writing, fourteen years, appearing on screen only for two brief appearances in documentaries about her brother, DJ Steve Aoki, and her long-time friend Jeremy Scott. While she has stated that she wants to focus on her family – she raises her four kids with her husband James Bailey, a private equity analyst, and they run a winery in northern California – she has on occasion returned to modelling. While these instances have usually been at the request of Scott, she most recently appears in Acne Studios' Spring/Summer 2023 campaign in which she is goddess-like in frosty pinks and blues – classic Y2K shades. (Fig. 10) Aoki also attended the 2023 Met Gala on the arm of Jeremy Scott, and the comments of her Instagram posts commemorating the event is full of adoring fans begging

²⁴³ See for example Frank Scheck, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Undead – Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed 1 May, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100608225947/http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/film-reviews/rosencrantz-and-guildenstern-are-undead-1004096040.story>.

for her return to the pop culture limelight – and to acting. Likewise, Letterboxd users wish for her very own *2 Fast*-spinoff. Since that casting in *Arrow* which she had to drop, Aoki has not made any more attempts to return to acting. However, it seems that audiences, at least, might be more receptive to her if she did appear on the big screen again in the future, as her It Girl-persona seems more powerful than maybe ever before.

Abbey Lee: The Monstrous White Feminine

Abbey Lee left a meteoric modelling career at the height of her popularity with designers and fans alike to film *Mad Max: Fury Road* in the Namib desert. The post-apocalyptic action-road movie was followed by appearances in four more film (*Ruben Guthrie, Gods of Egypt, The Neon Demon* and *Office Christmas Party* (Josh Gordon and Will Speck, 2016)) within the next year, and Lee made the permanent switch from full-time modelling to full-time acting. At the time of writing, she has acted in fifteen feature films and three TV shows in eleven years (*Fury Road* was filmed in 2012). Her filmography ranges from big budget studio blockbusters like *Gods of Egypt* to holiday comedies like *Office Christmas Party*, with a number of low budget, independent and/or art house horror-thrillers like *Elizabeth Harvest* (Sebastián Gutierrez, 2018), *The Neon Demon* and *Welcome the Stranger* (Justin Kelly, 2018) in between.

In this chapter, I analyze Lee's star persona in generally the same way as I did Aoki's; I first trace her career in modelling spanning from 2007/2008 to around 2013 when she left modelling to focus on her acting career, with a focus on two main themes; the first is the association of Lee with the otherworldly, and the second, which appears almost as a twisting of the former, is the positioning of her as the embodiment transgressive femininity and dark glamour. I then analyze her acting career, focusing on how these themes have been translated and transmuted into her acting persona, in ways that connect it to issues of whiteness, agency, glamour and sexuality. While I do not have the space in this study to address every single role Lee has taken on in the last decade, I identify the common themes and the outliers, and to provide an understanding of the synthesis of her niche star persona.

"Fairies and Elves and White Snow Princesses and Mermaids..."

Lee arrived on the international high fashion scene in 2007 when she came to New York City. "When Abbey Lee stepped onto the scene she instantly created a demand for laid back ultra-chic Australians and quickly became the industry's go to girl for cool," writes Models.com of her arrival in New York.²⁴⁴ She was soon in constant demand, booking prestigious campaigns and doing a debut runway season with such impressive bookings that it earned her spots on both

²⁴⁴ Models.com, "Industry Icons," accessed 10 March, 2023, <https://models.com/rankings/ui/IndustryIcons/2562#2562>.

Style.com and WWD's top runway newcomers lists.²⁴⁵ However, it is Lee's continued ability to hold designers', casting directors' and bookers' interest, her skill at making herself irreplaceable where models typically "are in fact substitutable," which has earned her a spot on Models.com's "Industry Icons" list as one of the modelling industry's biggest stars.²⁴⁶ Lee's popularity with industry professionals is particularly noteworthy considering the fact that during the Fall/Winter 2012 runway season, she suddenly all but vanished from the runways, walking only Alexander Wang and Anna Sui in New York during that season – spawning rumors reported by *The Cut* that she may be moving on to Hollywood.²⁴⁷ Following this season, Lee has mostly stayed away from the fashion industry for several years as she pursued her acting career, although she retains relationships with certain privileged fashion brands.

On *Fashion Gone Rogue*, the earliest editorials one finds of Lee feature her natural brunette hair, which she would later exchange for the various shades of bleach blonde that have become an integral part of her persona. The very first entry is an editorial in *W Magazine*'s January 2009 issue. She is styled in 1960s silhouettes in high contrast photos which highlight her gamine figure, huge round eyes and overall doll-like face. (Fig. 11) Merely a month before this issue of *W* was released another editorial featuring Lee was published in *Vogue Italia*, shot by Mario Sorrenti, with the title "Viva Vacation," in which she poses in a seemingly deserted beach vacation spot in minimal clothing including mostly dainty swimwear and sheer slips (in one photo she is topless). (Fig. 12) The editorial evokes Brigitte Bardot in *And God Created Woman* (Roger Vadim, 1956) – and this film is also the name of another one of her early editorials. The photos in both these editorials are markedly different from the kinds of concepts and looks Lee's modelling career has become defined by, but they are an interesting entry point to her otherworldly image, which connects her to larger discourses of beauty and whiteness – and also establishes her relation to the world of cinema. The doll-like features of her face paired with the porcelain-like quality of her skin in the high contrast lighting and the girly makeup and styling of the *W* editorial instantly transforms Lee into something not-quite-human; a mannequin whose perfect flawlessness is her entire appeal.

In the *Vogue Italia* shoot, on the other hand, the connection to *And God Created Woman* becomes the first instance of something which would very much become part of Lee's brand as a model; she is connected to the earth, the wind, the water, like a primordial being who does

²⁴⁵ Models.com, "Abbey Lee Kershaw," accessed 10 March, 2023, <https://models.com/models/Abbey-Lee-Kershaw>.

²⁴⁶ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 85.

²⁴⁷ Ally Betker, "Where is Abbey Lee Kershaw?," *The Cut*, accessed 11 March, 2023, <https://www.thecut.com/2012/02/where-is-abbey-lee-kershaw.html>.

not have to feel naked in very little or no clothes because it is simply how she was created. Time and time again, Lee's Australian "spirit," associated with the ocean, the untouched nature of the outback and arid deserts, has been centered in her persona, suggesting that she is somehow one with nature in a way which evokes not only the biblical Eve, but a range of mythical creatures.²⁴⁸ The transformative possibilities of her face amplifies this; sometimes she is doll-like perfection, and other times she may instead look like a pixie, when her razor-sharp cheekbones and jawline are emphasized.

Another editorial from Lee's early career highlighting this connection between her and the wild spirit of nature is "Wild At Heart" published in the December 2009 cover of *Dazed & Confused*. The issue also featured an interview with filmmaker Spike Jonze about his latest release *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009), a film adaptation of Maurice Sendak's children's book of the same name. The book's story has a little boy escape his reality into a fantasy world populated by fantastical monsters called the Wild Things, full of deep forest as well as arid desert. The editorial starring Lee (she was also featured on the cover of the issue) evokes both the book and the Jonze film; she wears a crown similar to that worn by Max, the story's protagonist, in some photos, and in others she is styled in big furs and crowned by horns like one of the Wild Things. (Fig. 13) As often is the case, her eyes are wide open in many of the photos, while the stripped-down and disheveled hair and makeup highlight the seemingly supernatural nature of her features, bleached eyebrows enhancing the ability of her eyes to appear as though she is almost seeing through one's soul as one meets her gaze in the photos. In combination with the introductory copy, reading "THE NIGHT ABBEY WORE HER WOLF SUIT AND MADE MISCHIEF! IN THE UNTAMED SPIRIT OF THE AUTUMN/WINTER COLLECTIONS WE TRAVEL TO WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE," the association between Abbey Lee and nature as a wild thing is once again made.

For the Spring/Summer 2011 season of fashion shows, a big change had occurred in Lee's look; her hair was now icy platinum blonde with eyebrows to match. In an interview with FashionTV (FTV), she is asked "what happened" to her hair color.²⁴⁹ In her response, Lee not only reinforces her look as one which is ethereal and otherworldly, she also makes an attempt

²⁴⁸ See for example Felicity Kinsella, "10 Pearls of Wisdom from Supermodel Turned Actress Abbey Lee," *i-D* Online, accessed 15 March, 2023, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/wj589x/10-pearls-of-wisdom-from-supermodel-turned-actress-abbey-lee>; Tim Elliot, "Model Act: The Multi-talented Abbey Lee Kershaw," *The Sydney Morning Herald* Online, accessed 15 March, 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/model-act-the-multitalented-abbey-lee-kershaw-20141022-1162m8.html>; *Oyster Magazine* Online, "Abbey Lee Kershaw x Bill Henson – Oyster #105 Cover Story," accessed 15 March, 2023, <http://www.oystermag.com/2014/08/abbey-lee-kershaw-x-bill-henson-oyster-105-cover-story/>.

²⁴⁹ FashionTV, "Model Talks: Abbey Lee Kershaw – Spring/Summer 2011 – FTV.com," accessed 26 April, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAkklRDXmn0>.

at asserting her agency as a model: “I’ve always been obsessed with the um... um aethereal world of like fairies and elves and white snow princesses and mermaids and I think with my blue eyes and light skin, white hair makes me look more like a fairy,” she says.²⁵⁰ She further explains that the shorter new cut was inspired by Marilyn Monroe, and that she thought short hair would suit the new color better, but also that she wants to show with this new look that she is able to transform herself and her appearance and still look good.²⁵¹ Clearly, Lee was feeling the pressure to “embody the assumed social Zeitgeist” by changing up her look. However, she is resistant to admitting that she is affected by the pressure of body work – and insistent on retaining some agency – as illustrated by her insistence that it is *her* choice and *her* interests in fantasy worlds and creatures which has led to this particular look.²⁵² This is further communicated when she emphasizes that outside of modelling she is also an artist, making abstract art “with also a tinge of that aethereal sort of feel to it.”²⁵³ This statement links the real-life Abbey to her new look, attempting to craft a persona of authenticity.

Beauty as a concept and a commodity has historically been intimately tied to whiteness.²⁵⁴ Lee’s persona as an aethereal, mythical being must therefore always be understood as gendered and racialized in a very specific way, and one which is not only informed by the whiteness of beauty in hegemonic discourses, but also by the way that fairytale characters and mythological creatures fit into discourses of whiteness. For one example, Disney princesses are the definition of beauty for many children, and they are, overwhelmingly, white.²⁵⁵ Snow White, who is particularly closely associated with beauty, is described as having “skin as white as snow” – a fact which reveals some of the ideological implications of Lee’s association with snow princesses.²⁵⁶ The elves of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings*-trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), similarly, are “almost whiter than white” and associated with “ethereal light.”²⁵⁷

²⁵⁰ Abbey Lee, interviewed in “FashionTV, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2011.”

²⁵¹ Lee, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2011.”

²⁵² Patricia Soley-Beltran, “Aesthetic (Dis)Orders: Styling Principles in Fashion Modelling,” *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 2, no. 1 and 2 (2011): 187, DOI: 10.1386/csfb.2.1-2.185_1.

²⁵³ Lee, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2011.”

²⁵⁴ See for example Alice Yeow, “The (In)Visible Whiteness of Beauty,” in *On Whiteness*, eds. Nicky Falkof and Oliver Cashman-Brown (Freeland: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), 111-118; Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997); Mary Thompson, “‘Learn Something from This!’: The Problem of Optional Ethnicity on America’s Next Top Model,” *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 335-352.

²⁵⁵ Dyer, *White*, 71.

²⁵⁶ Dyer, *White*, 71.

²⁵⁷ Lianne McLarty, “Masculinity, Whiteness, and Social Class in The Lord of the Rings,” in *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), 176.

Yet there are different kinds of whiteness – and some are closer to the ideal than others. Some forms of whiteness are too “ethnic” to be fully accepted by Western hegemony, white fat bodies are Othered by the dominant discourse, and some whiteness is simply so white that it draws attention to itself – and whiteness like this also becomes to an extent strange or freakish because it is “too much.” As Dyer identifies in *White*, the hegemony of whiteness depends on “[t]he invisibility of whiteness as a racial position.”²⁵⁸ Dyer too acknowledges that “some white people are whiter than others,” and that the category of white is ever-changing and always defined in opposition to what it is not, rather than being “the most accurate term to describe [white people’s] skin colour.”²⁵⁹ In the interview quoted above, Lee directly addresses her whiteness – presumably unknowingly – when she explains that her new hair makes her more fairy-like in combination with her light eyes and extremely fair complexion. Specifically, she pinpoints her whiteness, enhanced by white hair, as a hyper-whiteness which lies outside what would be considered normal. She also remarks on how she looks “pasty” because she spent all summer in Australia, where it was of course winter, and did not see the sun – making her stand out among all the other models’ tans in a way which is not necessarily desirable.²⁶⁰

Her natural, flowy light brown hair made Lee reminiscent of a wood creature or a mermaid. In contrast, the white-blond shade – which she would stay committed to for the rest of her active modelling career, and which has become engrained in her star persona – transformed her look into something more closely associated with other kinds of fantastical creatures, such as the aforementioned elves of Middle Earth, the evil fairy Maleficent of Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) or the vampire.

This contrast becomes evident when comparing two of Lee’s ad campaigns for Gucci’s Flora fragrances, which she was the face of for several years. In one campaign, from 2011, she is styled in a flowy, flower-printed dress and her makeup is all earth tones, matching her brown hair which is flowing against a light blue sky with a few clouds. This Flora appears as a fairy frolicking in a meadow, soft and feminine and embodying an unthreatening femininity. In the later 2012 ad for Flora The Garden, Lee’s platinum hair is in sharp contrast to the dark night sky. She is illuminated by what might be a spotlight, making her extremely light blue/green eyes extra icy behind a heavy coat of black mascara and her complexion appears significantly paler than in the former. This Flora may still be a fairy, but she seems more like a one who would trap you in her fairy ring than one who would frolic; there is a sense of danger behind

²⁵⁸ Dyer, *White*, 3.

²⁵⁹ Dyer, *White*, 50f.

²⁶⁰ Lee, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2011.”

her beauty because it is so blinding. (Fig. 14) This turn in Lee's look – and subsequently her supermodel persona – from being soft, girlish and spritelike to embodying a more dangerous, bloodthirsty femininity also led to the crystallization of the other part of Lee's image, which is entwined with discourses of dangerous female sexuality and dark glamour.

Glamorous Vamp

One of the most notorious editorials of Lee's career is "Best of the Season," shot by Terry Richardson for *Purple Magazine*, and described by the magazine as "a classic fashion shoot in a studio with supermodels. [...] Simply the beautiful girls we love, who feel free to use their bodies to the best effect."²⁶¹ Terry Richardson has been multiply accused of sexual misconduct and exploitation, something which in the context of the photoshoot in question is imperative to mention.²⁶² The editorial stars Lee alongside several other supermodels of the late 2000s and early 2010s: Eniko Mihalik, Freja Beha and Magdalena Frackowiak. Richardson also figures in several of the photos. The models, all at the time known for being girls who didn't mind taking on jobs including nudity or explicit sexuality, are done up in matching bright red lips with black blown out smokey eyes, their hair curled and teased into huge birds' nests, and dressed mainly in blacks, greys, hot pinks and purples. Their tops are yanked up, fallen down or missing, their topless chests on full display – and in some they are completely nude, save black strappy stilettos. (Fig. 15) This type of "trashy" nudity is frowned upon in the fashion industry as elsewhere, whereas "tasteful" nudity and eroticism in the work of the likes of Herb Ritts and Helmut Newton has been a staple of fashion photography for a long time.

The performative, transgressive sexuality of the editorial – the models pose clothed in sex positions, grab each other's bodies and make out – recalls "late '70s glam rock [and] Studio 54." It also evokes the cinematic figures of the vamp and the femme fatale – figures whose sexuality is threatening to male hegemony in many ways, including their frequent transgression of the bounds of normative heterosexuality.²⁶³ Wilson argues that the "forbidden and the dangerous were always saturated in glamour," and that transgressive expressions of sexuality –

²⁶¹ *Purple Magazine* Online, "Best of The Season," accessed 27 April, 2023, <https://purple.fr/magazine/fw-2009-issue-12/best-of-the-season-11/>.

²⁶² Harriet Sim, "The Disturbing List of Sexual Assault and Harrassment Allegations Against Terry Richardson," *Marie Claire* Australia Online, accessed 17 May, 2023, <https://www.marieclaire.com.au/terry-richardson-every-sexual-harassment-and-assault-allegation>.

²⁶³ See for example Katherine Farrimond, "'Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are': Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film," *Journal of Bisexuality* 12, no. 1 (2012): 138-154, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1080/15299716.2012.645725>; David Trotter, "Come-Hither Looks: The Hollywood Vamp and the Function of Cinema," *Critical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2020): 37-53.

particularly when associated with unattainability or inaccessibility – are therefore closely tied to the notion of glamour – which I will return to shortly.²⁶⁴

Lee's supermodel persona is fully intertwined with the image of the vamp and the femme fatale, whose sexualities are constructed as a means to an end and particularly threatening to the status quo of acceptable femininity.²⁶⁵ If Greta Garbo's claim to glamour was defined by her ability to strike the perfect "mysterious blend of accessibility and distance," creating a star persona of equal parts careful construction and transgressive sexuality, a similar effect can be identified in Lee's consistent openness to sexuality combined with a distancing from publicity during her modelling career.²⁶⁶ This way, she perpetuated her glamorous persona, which could remain largely focused around her work rather than her personal life, upholding a sense of mystery that left people free to speculate about whether she lived up to the sexuality of her editorials. Lee has been openly non-heterosexual since early in her career, and rumours of her sexual relationships with other models that were already circulating in online spaces were certainly stoked by her work. At times, Lee would reinforce the association between her image and transgressive sexuality. Regarding the *Purple* editorial above, which became highly controversial due to its explicit sexuality, nudity and association with Richardson, Lee told *The Times UK* in 2010 that the photographer "puts you in a G-string in a pile of mud because you want to do it. You touch yourself because you want to."²⁶⁷ While she has never commented on this statement again, inadvertently defending the abuse of power of men in the fashion industry is directly contrary to statements she has made later.²⁶⁸ It is impossible to know what her true opinion was at the time, but the statement did become intertwined with her image as a model.

Important to remember in the case of Lee is that she, as opposed to Aoki, used modelling as a ticket out of a financially challenging situation. For Lee, quitting was not an option, no matter the work conditions. Soley-Beltran, following Bourdieu, identifies the grueling work conditions, long hours, body maintenance or weight reduction requirements (Lee herself showcased smaller and smaller measurements across her modelling career) and constant

²⁶⁴ Wilson, "A Note on Glamour," 99f.

²⁶⁵ Farrimond, "Anxiety and Bisexual Activity," 138-154; Trotter, "Come-Hither Looks," 37-53; O'Day, "Beauty in Motion," 202.

²⁶⁶ Rosa et. al., quoted in Wilson, "A Note on Glamour," 100.

²⁶⁷ Abbey Lee, interviewed by *The Times UK*, here quoted by The Cut Online, "Abbey Lee Kershaw Isn't Ashamed of Her Purple Orgy Shoot," accessed 27 April, 2023, https://www.thecut.com/2010/03/abbey_lee_kershaw_isnt_ashamed.html.

²⁶⁸ Abbey Lee, interviewed by Gillian Sagansky, "Abbey Lee on *Neon Demon* and Why Modeling Isn't 'Humane,'" *W Magazine* Online, accessed 20 May, 2023, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/abbey-lee-neon-demon-interview-modeling-industry>.

rejection that models face as “symbolic violence.”²⁶⁹ Throughout her modelling career, Lee constantly attempted to renegotiate this violence imposed on models which strips them of a lot of agency.

Reclamations of agency such as the previously discussed choice to bleach her hair, or expressions of overt sexuality that exceed the limits of tastefulness according to the standards of the gatekeepers of fashion, are acts of resistance. This strategy allowed Lee to participate in the shaping of her own supermodel image into one where her modelling work always stayed the focal point while her actual private life has always been kept out of reach. This, in turn, contributes to the glamour of her image by maintaining the allure of mystery. The success of this strategy, of course, is entirely dependent on the fact that so many designers and other industry professionals loved Lee’s look – the expression of her bodily capital. They would book her for campaigns, shows and editorials despite her rebellious actions; the average model would likely have been heavily penalized by her agency for deciding to get nude without their approval on a shoot.

Gucci, while under the creative direction of Frida Giannini, was one of the brands which truly made Lee’s name in the industry. She was a Gucci exclusive for several of her first fashion weeks, has been the face of a number of Gucci campaigns and, as illustrated above, also of Gucci’s Flora family of fragrances. The brand was at the time closely associated with sexually suggestive or sensual imagery, Giannini’s work being heavily influenced by the controversial hardcore sex appeal of Tom Ford’s time as creative director. However, Giannini’s work, in contrast to Ford’s, over time skewed more toward an androgynous “rock chick” sexiness and a vampy, gothic sensuality than outright “porno chic.” Lee, with her rebellious attitude, rail-thin body and taste for the dangerous and forbidden, was a perfect fit for the brand; her body could easily be employed to signify the carnal hunger and world-weary coolness that the Gucci woman embodied. In the campaigns for the brand’s fall 2011 and fall 2013 campaigns, the alignment of Gucci’s brand of sensuality with Lee’s vampy glamour is particularly evident.

For the 2011 campaign, Gucci chose Mert and Marcus to photograph Abbey Lee alongside fellow supermodel Joan Smalls as well as Sigrid Agren and Emily Baker (and some male models who seem to remain uncredited everywhere) on a colorful neo-noir-inspired set. (Fig. 16) The models lounge on red velvet couches in front of huge projections of their own bodies, dressed in jewel-toned furs, leather and other sensual fabrics, and the ambience of the photograph evokes mythic conceptions of 1970s luxury and opulent elite parties. The photos

²⁶⁹ Soley-Beltran, “Aesthetic (Dis)Orders,” 188f.

employ cinematic and voyeuristic imagery, positioning the models as femme fatales and even alluding to the figure of the vampire (whose non-fanged cousin is of course the vamp) through their blood-red lips and the red of the couches.

As Brigid Cherry notes, cinematic vampires are coded through a spectrum of costuming and aesthetic conventions.²⁷⁰ Similarly, Stella Bruzzi identifies “[a] standardised set of signifiers” which has “evolved for the *femme fatale*” in the cinema, “such as bleached hair, boldly coloured, sexual clothes, heavy make-up and cigarettes” which is also often used to connote lesbian attraction on film in relation to the more natural good girl stereotype (the vamp/vampire are of course also closely associated with lesbian desire).²⁷¹ Similar aesthetic coding can be identified in this Gucci campaign. Although four female models star in the shoot, Lee and Smalls clearly stand out as the main characters. Lee in particular is the focus of most of the softly lit images, and the poses of her body connote a sense of action and determination. In some of the photographs she looks into the camera from beneath heavy lids reminiscent of stars like Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, connoting both seduction and danger. Her ultra-pale skin and hair, too, make her stand out, and it seems almost as if she is being singled out as the apex predator of the campaign – an Elizabeth Báthory-type mythical witch/vampire who has recruited other women to her blood-thirsty mission through her glamorous seduction.

The 2013 campaign differs from the 2011 one in one particularly important way; Lee is the sole star of this womenswear campaign, joined by male top model Adrien Sahores for some eyewear-focused shots. (Fig. 17) This campaign was somewhat of a comeback for Lee, who had been absent from fashion for the better part of a year due to the filming of *Fury Road*. The campaign reinforces her emerging star persona as an icon of vampy sexuality and glamour. Again photographed by Mert and Marcus, Lee poses in front of a dark blue studio backdrop with a black leather chair. The makeup and hair styling result in a look which bears a remarkable similarity to Angelina Jolie’s appearance as the evil fairy in *Maleficent*, which was a hot topic throughout 2012 and 2013 in anticipation of the film’s 2014 release; Lee’s white-blonde hair had been dyed a rich chocolate shade (which appeared black in the photos) and slicked back, leaving her face entirely exposed. In contrast to the black of the hair and the dark backdrop, her pale skin appears an almost luminescent white, and her eyebrows are completely bleached out. Meanwhile, her already extremely prominent cheekbones have been further exaggerated, her

²⁷⁰ Brigid Cherry, “Daughters of Darkness: Vampire Aesthetics and Gothic Beauty,” in *Dracula’s Daughters: The Female Vampire on Film*, eds. Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2014), 223-227.

²⁷¹ Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, 139f. Italics in original.

mouth painted a rich blood red, and her piercing blue eyes are enhanced by glossy dark grey eye makeup.

While the resemblance to Jolie's Maleficent may or may not have been coincidental, it speaks to the influence of the symbiotic relationship between fashion and cinema when it comes to beauty trends, as well as the continuing melding of the different aspects of Lee's model look into a persona which always recalls the supernatural. The original vamp, Theda Bara, is also reflected in the photos. Consider the many photographs of Bara with her dark hair and makeup, lounging on a throne or draped across a divan. Lee's expressions are equally daring and sexually charged as she sits upon her throne, showcasing her best "come-hither looks."²⁷² Fashion Gone Rogue, on the other hand, makes the comparison to a cinematic character equally associated with danger and transgressive sexuality: Rooney Mara's version of Lisbeth Salander from David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011).²⁷³

The campaign's styling by the iconic Edward Enninful fully embraces Giannini's 2013 collection, which was described by Nicole Phelps of *Vogue* as "[t]he forties by way of the seventies" and full of "fetish-y accessories," while Nikki Ogunnaike at *Glamour* called it "dark and sensual."²⁷⁴ Lee's glamorously sensual image is amplified in the shiny leather gloves, restrictive high necks, and reflective snake skin fabrics in deep blacks, greens and burgundies – and it is simultaneously exotified and made more dangerous, as the comparison with Mara and the similarity to Bara illustrate. The timing of this campaign in relation to Lee's impending change in careers – she had just wrapped filming of her acting debut, coming back to fashion as a supermodel-turned-actor – is important to take into consideration. Starring solo in the campaign singles her out as a star of considerable merit, and her bodily transformation into a full-on vamp in these photos creates a sense of glamour which reaches beyond fashion. As it were, this campaign introduces Abbey Lee the actor to the world of fashion, connecting the two sides of her professional self in her persona.

²⁷² Trotter, "Come-Hither Looks."

²⁷³ Joanna Elizabeth, "Abbey Lee Kershaw Makes Her Return with Gucci's Fall 2013 Campaign," Fashion Gone Rogue, accessed 28 April, 2023, <https://www.fashiongonerogue.com/abbey-lee-kershaw-makes-her-return-with-gucci-fall-2013-campaign/>.

²⁷⁴ Nicole Phelps, "Gucci Fall 2013 Ready-to-Wear," *Vogue* Runway, accessed 28 April, 2023, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2013-ready-to-wear/gucci>; Nikki Ogunnaike, "Gucci Fall 2013: Dark and Sexy Is the New Dark and Stormy," *Glamour* Online, accessed 28 April, 2023, <https://www.glamour.com/story/gucci-fall-2013-dark-and-sexy>.

Like an Animal in a Zoo

In a video for FTV filmed during the Spring/Summer 2012 fashion week cycle, Joan Smalls interviews Abbey Lee behind the scenes of the Pucci show. Smalls opens the interview by explaining how when the models are all dressed and lined up for a show and facing all the cameras, she feels like “a little animal in a zoo. Like when you go up to the animal and you start taking pictures of them and they’re just...like this.”²⁷⁵ Here, she illustrates what she means through a blank expression, her eyes staring into nothing. Lee nods slightly in understanding before she responds, in typical stand-offish fashion: “You’re a little prettier than an animal at a zoo, but yeah, I feel like that too.”²⁷⁶ Smalls and Lee agree that the feeling of being a model on a runway, knowing that to most of the people in the crowd would not regard you as more than a clothes hanger and perhaps part of an entertaining spectacle, is a source of extreme feelings of alienation.

The interview that follows is awkward, both models seeming to find the questions issued by FTV to be dull and uninteresting. Smalls asks Lee what she does while hanging out backstage (Lee first sarcastically replies “drink champagne...,” after having a sip of the glass in her hand, before mentioning hanging out with other models), and whether she has “done any pranks” (she has not, and she seems to find the question preposterous).²⁷⁷ Lastly, Smalls asks if she ever gets tired of the flashing lights of the cameras at shows, to which she replies that she does not because she opts to simply ignore them.²⁷⁸ She then adds with a smirk, “although they might be damaging a few brain cells or eye cells or whatever you wanna call it.”²⁷⁹ This exchange seems almost like foreshadowing of the bad reputation Lee would eventually gain in the fashion industry for being difficult to work with, and her eventual distancing of that industry from her own persona through repeated criticism of its exploitative practices.²⁸⁰ To Lee and Smalls, and presumably to many other models, walking the runway is a moment of alienation wherein their body is simultaneously unattainable glamour and grotesque spectacle, and this contradictory position of model bodies is the focus of this section.²⁸¹

²⁷⁵ Joan Smalls in “Model Talks – Abbey Lee Kershaw at Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2012,” FashionTV, accessed 29 April, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxPrMDfFpTw>.

²⁷⁶ Abbey Lee, interviewed by Joan Smalls, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2012.”

²⁷⁷ FTV, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2012.”

²⁷⁸ FTV, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2012.”

²⁷⁹ FTV, “Abbey Lee Kershaw S/S 2012.”

²⁸⁰ Abbey Lee, interviewed by Collider Extras, “Abbey Lee Talks ‘Mad Max: Fury Road,’ ‘The Neon Demon’ and ‘Gods of Egypt,’” accessed 29 April, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VZtcLCgMqI>; Elliott, “Model Act.”

²⁸¹ Soley-Beltran, “Aesthetic (Dis)Orders,” 193.

As Soley-Beltran identifies, models are often seen as holders of “the ‘official degree certificate’ in beauty certifying normative compliance and social acceptability [...] embodying physical perfection and permanent self-confidence.”²⁸² On the other hand, many models working in specifically editorial and the runway circuits have, and pursue, bodies which would be considered freakish, grotesque or at least unhealthy and undesirable by many audiences, as high fashion relies on the elitist in-group redefinition of beauty standards wherein looking like a freak equals extremely high bodily capital.²⁸³ Thus, Lee occupies a complicated position; she simultaneously embodies the ideal and freakish, getting paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single modelling job while being described as looking “like she’s suffering from malnutrition or is doing the ‘cocaine diet,’” or having “the massive eyes and triangular face of a cartoon Martian” by some writers.²⁸⁴

High fashion model bodies, including Lee’s, may connote extreme levels of self-discipline and self-deprivation (maintaining this body would be impossible for most models without these), but I argue that they are also perceived as expressions of the grotesque, as explored by Mary Russo.²⁸⁵ This term is typically associated with “issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess,” transgressive and “low” culture – things which high fashion tends to thematize and project onto the model body.²⁸⁶ Fashion shows, as suggested in Smalls’ analogy to the zoo, may be considered grotesque spectacles in their nature, often deliberately exaggerating that which might be considered freakish in those model bodies on display. In turn, high fashion models often display an excess of visible bones or blue fingers and toes connoting extreme bodily discipline and deprivation – even the continuous descriptions of Lee’s otherworldly appearance reads as an observation of grotesque qualities. While in retouched campaigns her body may connote ideal femininity through the disguising of sharp hipbones or smoothing of visible ribs, on the runway and in real life high fashion model bodies come closer to an aberrant femininity being upheld as ideal in a certain cultural space.

When one’s profession and public persona are so dependent on one’s body being an expression of extremes and a constant site of spectacle, the relationship between oneself and

²⁸² Soley-Beltran, “Modelling Femininity,” 319f.

²⁸³ Mears, *Pricing Beauty*, 149-151, 182-190.

²⁸⁴ What Went Wrong With, “What Went Wrong With... Abbey Lee Kershaw?,” accessed 29 April, 2023, <https://whatwentwrongwith.com/2019/07/26/what-went-wrong-with-abbey-lee-kershaw/>; Elliott, “Model Act.”

²⁸⁵ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

²⁸⁶ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 54.

the body becomes marked by that symbolic violence in an entirely different way. Lee has certainly expressed this sentiment in interviews since leaving modelling, emphasizing how alienating the experience of constantly being the tool for someone else's art could be, and her frustration at the notion that "the less you say, the better a model you are."²⁸⁷ On the other hand, she has also forged a blossoming acting career, far more successful than most supermodel-actors' attempts at acting, wherein her persona relies on the grotesque – or otherworldly or monstrous or aethereal – aspects of her bodily capital.

Schubart argues that Jovovich's persona is marked by her embodiment of "a new version of in-betweenness" in the action genre, marked by her "almost ugly marked features, an androgynous appearance, and a hysterical behavior," her body stripped of the markers of female sexuality and sex-appeal common to female action stars.²⁸⁸ Similar markers of Otherness have become central to at least one side of Lee's emerging cinematic stardom as well. However, in Lee's case it also recalls the monstrous-feminine, by way of Creed. The ideas of the grotesque and the monstrous, the in-between and the instability of both femininity and whiteness are, as I will argue, all represented in Lee's acting persona in ways that present a continuation, but also a breaking with, her modelling career.

"I Ate Her": Between Monster and Final Girl

Owen Gleiberman writes for *Variety* that *The Neon Demon* is "the kind of movie in which models look like mannequins that look like slasher-film corpses, and corpses look like love objects," identifying the film's complicated relationship to both the horror genre and the model body.²⁸⁹ In *The Neon Demon*, Lee's character Sarah is an older model whose big break has yet to happen, and she is feeling the pressure of aging in an industry which equates youth with value and bodies with commodity. The arrival of 16-year-old Jesse (Elle Fanning) on the scene further rattles Sarah. Jesse seems to possess everything she does not; instantly attracting both people and jobs. Jesse's youth must be considered a contributing factor, but more than that, it seems that she possesses a certain immaterial quality that draws people in. Along with fellow model, Gigi (Bella Heathcote) and makeup artist Ruby (Jena Malone), Sarah decides to get revenge, and get ahead, by murdering Jesse, bathing in her blood and consuming her literal body.

²⁸⁷ Lee, "Abbey Lee Talks 'Mad Max: Fury Road.'"

²⁸⁸ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 271.

²⁸⁹ Owen Gleiberman, "Cannes Film Review: 'The Neon Demon,'" *Variety* Online, accessed 2 May, 2023, <https://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/cannes-the-neon-demon-nicolas-winding-refn-elle-fanning-1201778544/>.

The Neon Demon is loosely based on the legend of countess Elizabeth Báthory, sometimes considered the “female Dracula” and mentioned above in relation to Lee’s Gucci fall 2011 campaign, who according to legend bathed in the blood of virgins to absorb their youth and beauty, leading to an entanglement with two important mythic characters: the (female) vampire and the witch, two different representations of the threatening monstrous-feminine.²⁹⁰ Specifically, these images become tied to Sarah/Lee, because she is the only one who in the end walks out alive, into the arid California desert. After consuming Jesse, Sarah immediately books a photoshoot next to Gigi, while the model originally booked gets kicked off the job. Gigi ends up running off set into a bathroom where she vomits up Jesse’s eye before desperately committing suicide in an attempt to rid herself of Jesse’s body inside her, and Sarah calmly picks up the eye from the floor and eats it – her eyes so supernaturally electric light blue in contrast to her burgundy eyeshadow that they seem almost completely dead. (Fig. 18) Yet Sarah has been looking dead in comparison to the other models throughout the film, and particularly in comparison to Jesse – something which becomes particularly obvious in a casting scene for a runway show that both models are attending along with a number of other hopefuls.

In this scene, the girls all sit or stand around in a room while waiting for their turn, wearing only underwear. Sarah stands out in this scene, because Lee is the only actor in the room whose body actually looks like a model’s body during fashion week; she is somewhere between frightening and ethereal, bones jutting against her skin as if they are about to poke through, and she is lit to make her skin and hair look grey and lusterless in comparison to Fanning’s pale but healthy glow as Jesse. When the two stand next to each other in anticipation of their turn to walk for the designer, Lee’s face looks gaunt and haunted while Fanning’s has a youthful fullness, Lee’s sharp clavicles can be traced all the way to the edge of her shoulders while Fanning’s only show through her skin delicately toward the middle of her body. Lee is also significantly taller than the rest, exaggerating her skeletal thinness.

Lee’s body, which in the fashion industry would be considered standard – she might even be told to lose weight by some clients and bookers – is positioned in this film *about* the fashion industry as a sign of her aberration. While Lee’s body cannot be read as entirely androgynous, as Schubart does Jovovich’s, there is something to her description of Jovovich’s ‘in-betweenness’ as being marked by the absence of “large breasts, broad hips, round bottom”

²⁹⁰ Kayleigh Donaldson, “Countess Elizabeth Báthory and the Dark Truth Behind her Killer Legend,” Syfy, accessed 16 May, 2023, <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/countess-elizabeth-bathory-and-the-dark-truth-behind-her-killer-legend>.

which resonates with Lee's supermodel body in *The Neon Demon*.²⁹¹ As in the case of Jovovich, her body is positioned in the film as an "empty" body.²⁹² While Gigi had everything to lose, her flourishing career threatened by Jesse's arrival, Sarah has not achieved success presumably due to her emptiness – signified by the extremeness of Lee's body – in the sense that she lacks the youth and supposed inherent charisma Jesse possesses. The contrast between Sarah and Gigi is pointedly illustrated in a diner scene in which Sarah wants to just order coffees while Gigi, with a glowing smile, turns to the waitress and adds "and a fruit cup." Gigi's body control allows for occasional indulgence, whereas Sarah's keeps her empty.

Thus, Sarah's desperation and emptiness is what demonizes her, but also what saves her, because her body – which we may understand as "not a natural-looking body, but rather a human frame" – can be filled up with Jesse's body and essence, and thrive.²⁹³ She begins to look alive toward the end of the film, after the consumption of Jesse; her eyes become lit from within and glow blue instead of greyish, and her skin and hair appear less dull. Her triumph is visualized through her appearance. When Sarah is asked at the film's final photo shoot whether she has "ever had a girl screw you out of a job" and what she did about it, she replies with no hint of remorse: "I ate her."

However, the contrast between the greyish, ghostlike Sarah and the full-of-life glow of Jesse (natural) and Gigi (artificially created through cosmetic procedures) also belies a preoccupation with whiteness in relation to femininity in the film – in a similar way to how Holmlund argues that *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) holds "a particular obsession" with female whiteness.²⁹⁴ There are no non-white people in *The Neon Demon* aside from one black model in the casting scene described above and Keanu Reeves' pedophilic motel owner (and Reeves is often not considered anything but white in the public imagination). The film portrays a civil war between white women and girls, and the monstrosity in Sarah which makes her able to triumph is signalled through the deviation of Lee's body from idealized white femininity as either extremity or lack. As Williams notes, "the monster's body is perceived as freakish in its possession of too much or too little."²⁹⁵ In Williams' argument, this makes the woman-victim and the monster similar because of their "sexual difference from the normal male," but I argue that it also, as in the case of Sarah, applies to an aberration from normative femininity, outside

²⁹¹ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 271.

²⁹² Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 272.

²⁹³ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 273.

²⁹⁴ Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies*, 83.

²⁹⁵ Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 20.

of the psychoanalytic framework.²⁹⁶ Thus, what made Lee a compelling editorial model also makes her monstrous-feminine, *and* hyper-white.

Andrew O’Hehir writes in a review of the film for Salon: “Whether you think it’s a brilliant feminist commentary or misogynistic softcore porn is entirely up to you.”²⁹⁷ This ambivalence encapsulates the film’s treatment of its characters generally and Sarah in particular. *The Neon Demon* positions Sarah, and in turn Lee, on whose bodily capital the character relies, as somewhere in between the monstrous-feminine and the final girl – that figure who in Carol Clover’s theorization can triumph over the slasher film’s killer because of precisely her lack of femininity.²⁹⁸ Lee’s bodily capital makes Sarah the monster who killed a narcissistic-but-innocent girl for her beauty (reminiscent of Báthory, but also the Evil Queen of the Snow White story), and simultaneously also a victim who survived the horror of an industry that consumes models and then spits them out; both ideas exist in Lee’s performance and in the in-betweenness of her body.

While *The Neon Demon* was overwhelmingly criticized for its misogynistic understanding of both the fashion industry and women’s relationships to beauty and each other, it received mixed reviews. Lee, however, is framed in primarily positive terms whenever her performance is mentioned in reviews; Michael Roffman for Consequence wrote that she “subtly steals every scene she has” and Jessica Kiang for The Playlist calls her “awesome.”²⁹⁹ April Wolfe for *The Village Voice* identifies Lee and Heathcote both as “models in real life” (something which, while technically true, fails to register the nuances of the modelling industry since it is all but impossible to find Heathcote’s pre-acting modelling work online) who “are riveting as caricatures of the worst, most narcissistic humans.”³⁰⁰ *The Neon Demon*, through its controversy and association with Refn, who is regarded as an auteur, positioned Lee within the pantheon of art house cinema – regardless of the film’s lukewarm reception. However, it also

²⁹⁶ Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” 20.

²⁹⁷ Andrew O’Hehir, “Is ‘The Neon Demon’ Gruesome Misogyny or Brilliant Feminist Commentary? Can It Be Both?,” Salon, accessed 2 May, 2023, https://www.salon.com/2016/06/22/is_the_neon_demon_gruesome_misogyny_or_brilliant_feminist_commentary_can_it_be_both/.

²⁹⁸ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 39-41.

²⁹⁹ Michael Roffman, “Film Review: The Neon Demon,” Consequence, accessed 2 May, 2023, <https://consequence.net/2016/06/film-review-the-neon-demon/>; Jessica Kiang, “Cannes Review: Nicolas Winding Refn’s Spectacular, Gross & Delicious ‘The Neon Demon’ with Elle Fanning,” Playlist, accessed 2 May, 2023, <https://theplaylist.net/cannes-review-nicolas-winding-refns-neon-demon-elle-fanning-20160519/>.

³⁰⁰ April Wolfe, “Beautiful Agony: Refn’s ‘Neon Demon’ Is a Stylish Giallo Jolly Until It Tries to Get Real,” *The Village Voice* Online, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/06/21/beautiful-agony-refns-neon-demon-is-a-stylish-giallo-jolly-until-it-tries-to-get-real/>.

arguably cemented her persona as one associated with a certain type of physicality of heightened bodily discipline, always on the edge of the extreme/monstrous, embodying the in-between of beauty and ugliness, the real and the supernatural, sex and death, hegemonic whiteness and aberrant whiteness. My understanding of Lee's crossover star persona must begin with *The Neon Demon* because it includes seemingly every part of that persona.

The Rebellious Abbey Lee

The Neon Demon was the fourth feature film of Lee's to be released, premiering after *Fury Road*, *Ruben Guthrie* (Brendan Cowell, 2015) and *Gods of Egypt*. However, the film is an important turning point in her acting career, as it won her recognition widely as an actor rather than a supermodel on screen. In its demonization of the fashion industry, it further distances Lee from her former career, which connects it to her off-screen criticism of that industry. Lee states in an interview with *The Guardian*, "[y]ou are so disposable as a model, there is no security in it and you don't really believe people actually care about you," while the demands of clients and call times leave models sleep deprived and prone to injuries.³⁰¹ In another interview with *AnOther Magazine*, she calls acting and modelling incomparable, but states that she prefers acting because it does not force her to "just become the mannequin" – instead letting her "communicate and share someone else's experience with my voice *and* my body."³⁰²

This explicit positioning of herself as an opponent of the fashion industry's unethical practices, and the continued assertion of her agency, recalls once again Dyer's discussion on types. While in the case of Aoki we saw how she became associated through her modelling and acting career with chiefly the surface appearance of her body and the connotations of the word supermodel, in Lee we see instead a "rebel" aspect emerge in her persona.³⁰³ The rebel belongs to what Dyer classifies as "alternative or subversive types," characterized by their embodiment of "discontent with or rejection of dominant values" which are "grounded in a normative world-view, but as an alternative to the dominant one."³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Abbey Lee, interviewed by *The Guardian*, "Abbey Lee: 'There Is No Security in Getting Paid for Your Looks,'" accessed 3 May, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/ng-interactive/2015/jul/16/abbey-lee-there-is-no-security-in-getting-paid-for-your-looks>. Italics in original.

³⁰² Abbey Lee, interviewed by Sirin Kale, "Abbey Lee on Acting vs Modelling: 'They Don't Compare,'" *AnOther Magazine* Online, accessed 3 May, 2023, <https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/11647/abbey-lee-kershaw-actress-model-elizabeth-harvest-interview-2019>. Italics in original.

³⁰³ As I have discussed in relation to both actors, racialization is an important aspect to Aoki and Lee's respective personas, and while I will touch on this issue in the conclusion of this thesis, I would like already here to point out that the amount of agency in speaking her mind that Lee is afforded cannot be divorced from her whiteness in contrast to Aoki's Asian-ness.

³⁰⁴ Dyer, *Stars*, 52.

In addition to her criticism of the fashion industry, Lee has been vocal about her feminist views, often highlighting her preference for playing “strong female characters,” “women with balls” and antagonists – while also recognizing that she is not in full control of this persona as it is “not so much what I’m going for; it’s what people see in me.”³⁰⁵ However, as Lee has made clear on multiple occasions, having been a successful model has paid off in purely monetary terms, and long-term financial independence does contribute to her ability to choose her acting projects with critical eyes, because she has no need to take a job just to make money. Despite her acting career at the time of writing only spanning seven years and twenty-two credits including short films, this place of financial privilege has “enabled her to exert greater control” over her persona as shaped through her roles than most up-and-coming actors.³⁰⁶ Additionally, while promoting this idea that she can choose the screenplays she finds compatible with her interests, Lee also reinforces the notion that she is a politically conscious and creatively minded actor.

Lee’s first role in *Fury Road* laid the foundation for this development. The film is a postapocalyptic action rampage in which she plays one of warlord Immortan Joe’s (Hugh Keays-Byrne) wives-cum-breeding-slaves who are fleeing the tyrant with the help of Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) and eventually Max Rockatansky (Tom Hardy). The wives are victims of extreme mental, physical and sexual abuse, but they are not damsels in distress. Throughout the film, they participate in the violence of Furiosa’s fight to get to the mythic “Green Place” where water abounds, the home of the matriarchal clan from which she was stolen as a child. In interviews, Lee and her wife-castmates discuss the impact of the film’s subject matter on them, including the collaboration with *The Vagina Monologues* writer Eve Ensler who was hired to workshop with the actors on the feminist themes, particularly focusing on how the wives’ minds might possibly function after the lifelong trauma of being bred for sex slavery.³⁰⁷ However, in addition to the feminist angle of female liberation, the film attempts to reach toward liberation of all of humankind through its focus on climate change and what would typically be termed ecofeminism.³⁰⁸ Lee’s character, The Dag, is particularly connected to the

³⁰⁵ Abbey Lee, interviewed by HeyUGuys “Abbey Lee & Ryan Corr Interview – Outlaws (1%),” accessed 3 May, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89EyZeYm6_Y; Abbey Lee, interviewed by Jordan Crucchiola, “Abbey Lee: ‘I’m Very Passionate, and I Can Become Very Enraged,’” *Vulture*, accessed 3 May, 2023, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/abbey-lee-elizabeth-harvest-interview.html>.

³⁰⁶ Williams, “From *Beyond Control* to In Control,” 113.

³⁰⁷ Abbey Lee and Rosie Huntington-Whiteley interviewed by ScreenSlam, “Mad Max Fury Road: Rosie Huntington-Whiteley & Abbey Lee Official Movie Interview,” accessed 4 May, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pWSEcQvPU4&t=336s>.

³⁰⁸ The value of *Fury Road*’s politics has of course been debated. My intent here is not to judge whether the film is successfully (eco)feminist but simply to point out that these are the values the filmmaker and others involved in the project aspired to when making the film. For more on the film’s politics, see for

environmentalist themes of the story, as I will return to below. She defined by her strangeness in contrast to the other wives, and she is viciously aggressive toward all men and fiercely protective of her sisters.

Similarly, *Elizabeth Harvest*, a horror-science fiction thriller inspired by the story of Bluebeard, also attempts to address themes of feminism – particularly female autonomy and the fetishization of misogynistic violence and violation of women’s bodies by men. Lee plays the titular character(s) Elizabeth, who is really a series of clones, cyclically awoken, romanced and then murdered by her much older mad scientist husband Henry (Ciarán Hinds) – that is, until the sixth clone manages to liberate herself in a series of events that end with not only the husband, but also his younger cloned self, dead. Throughout the film, Lee as the six Elizabeths goes through a transformation from docile and virginal naivety to world-weary freedom, the film ending on the line “I dreamt I would meet a brilliant man. I would steal his breath away, and he in turn would steal me away from everything ugly into a secret world of our own. But I’m awake now.” This same line opened the film nearly two hours earlier (except for the last sentence), then spoken by Elizabeth. Now, however, they are spoken by Henry’s research assistant Claire (who is also looking for freedom from Henry) as the camera closes in on Elizabeth/Lee’s face as she walks on an empty road, eyes closed and then slowly opening, staring into the camera until she breaks into a small smile before the frame goes black.

Much of *Elizabeth Harvest*’s publicity surrounds the centrality of the female characters in the story. Writer-director Gutierrez drew parallels to Eve and the garden of Eden and repeatedly stated that “there’s all these stories where if the woman gains knowledge, men go crazy,” and that his intention was to explore and question this through the film.³⁰⁹ Critics received Lee’s performance, and *Elizabeth Harvest*’s attempts at feminism, with varying degrees of approval. Some criticize Lee’s performance with reference to her modelling – an echo of criticisms regarding Aoki – while others praise the capability with which she handles the difficult job at hand, embodying multiple versions of the same character through subtle differences.³¹⁰ Lee goes to great lengths to emphasize how much she pushed herself in

example Belinda Du Plooy, “‘Hope Is a Mistake, If You Can’t Fix What’s Broken You Go Insane’: A Reading of Gender, (S)Heroism and Redemption in *Mad Max: Fury Road*,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no. 4 (2019): 414-434, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2018.1491395>; Michelle Yates, “Re-casting Nature as Feminist Space in *Mad Max: Fury Road*,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 353-370.

³⁰⁹ Sebastián Gutierrez, interview on Deadline Hollywood, “Elizabeth Harvest – Deadline Studio at SXSW 2018,” accessed 4 May, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLVsWVhGSgk>.

³¹⁰ Sheila O’Malley, “Elizabeth Harvest,” *Roger Ebert.com*, accessed 16 May, 2023, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/elizabeth-harvest-2018>; Tasha Robinson, “Elizabeth Harvest is a High-Tech, Twist-Packed Take on the Bluebeard Myth,” *The Verge*, accessed 17 May, 2023,

constructing each Elizabeth's personality and the importance of the film's feminist angle in interviews, yet it is undeniable that despite the efforts made to avoid objectifying Elizabeth, the camera certainly lingers on Lee's body in completely gratuitous ways at times, moving up her long bare legs or showing a closeup of her bikini bottoms as she ties their strings. Herein lies the difficulty for Lee to maintain the illusion of control over her persona. While *Elizabeth Harvest* may look empowering on paper, her long-limbed beauty occasionally becomes the contradictory focal point of the gaze.

As discussed in relation to Aoki, there is a general understanding within the study of celebrity that "stars seek to avoid correlating themselves with their most recent characters, to avoid any potential threat to their independent agency."³¹¹ On the other hand, Williams identifies in Drew Barrymore's stardom (another female actor who has, for different reasons, had to work hard to steer her career and persona away from associations with her past), how the star "makes discursive bids for star agency by constructing a narrative of her own 'real-life' which is reflected" in her characters.³¹² This also recalls Negra's example of how real life, as discussed above, can be integrated into a persona which directly collapses the off-screen self into the on-screen self.³¹³ *The Neon Demon*, *Fury Road* and *Elizabeth Harvest* all fit into Lee's preferred image of herself as rebel with an anti-patriarchal cause, similarly connecting her off-screen with her on-screen self.³¹⁴

Some of Lee's other roles also contribute to this inter- and extratextual continuity. Her performance in *Lovecraft Country*, in which she lends her hyper-whiteness to a black creator's representation of white monstrosity, will be explored in greater detail below, but suffice to say here that it certainly qualifies within Lee's political persona. Meanwhile, in *1%* (Stephen McCallum, 2017), she plays Katrina, the girlfriend of Paddo (Ryan Corr), who is second-in-command of a motorcycle club and dies defending his brother against the club president. Katrina is a Lady Macbeth-adjacent character; she stokes Paddo's aggression and desire for power, and in the end, it is she who ends up conquering, through murder, the throne of the club, leaving every other character dead in her wake. In interviews, Lee emphasizes the character's similarities to Lady Macbeth – explaining that she tried to channel the Lady's advice to "look like the flower but be the serpent underneath" – and Corr argues for the female characters'

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/17/17133426/elizabeth-harvest-movie-review-abbey-lee-carla-gugino-sebastian-gutierrez-horror-sxsw-2018>.

³¹¹ Williams, "From *Beyond Control* to In Control," 119.

³¹² Williams, "From *Beyond Control* to In Control," 119.

³¹³ Negra, "'Queen of the Indies,'" 73.

³¹⁴ *1%* is alternately titled *Outlaws*. The title was changed upon release in a number of territories presumably to avoid conflation with another film with a similar title released the same year.

“strength.”³¹⁵ Katrina’s ruthlessness reads as an extreme example how contemporary cinematic discourses often use female violence as a shorthand for feminism, when it may in fact reinforce “regressive or dominant ideological constructions of violence and gender under the guise of liberatory or subversive fantasies of omnipotence,” as Lisa Coulthard argues.³¹⁶ Katrina’s use of violence – through the proxies of others or enacted by her own body – reads as an extension of hyperindividualist discourses of girl power. Furthermore, the fact that her final victim – her equally-scheming female rival Hayley – is a woman of color (played by Simone Kessell, who is of mixed Maori and white descent) is not insignificant in this context. While Lee saw the film as an opportunity to return to the “craft” of acting after doing several Hollywood studio movies, it appears as contradictory to those of her films which are concerned with a more collective and inclusive conceptualization of female empowerment. It does, however, continue to enhance the complex discourses of whiteness that relate to her image.

Otherworldly and Alluring

Lee’s self-identification with her characters inevitably reinforces the image of her as less of a skilled actor than a model who “has that thing that amazing kid actors have, where they are so candid. They don’t have that craft, they just give you the truth,” to quote her *Ruben Guthrie* (a film in which she plays a supermodel) director Brendan Cowell.³¹⁷ While she has the privilege of being discriminatory when choosing her projects, she cannot control which projects are offered to her. Inevitably, her offers are impacted by her bodily capital as expressed in her beauty which teeters on the supernatural, her physical frame which exists in the borderland between the desirable, the androgynous and the freakish, and her mode of gesture which is both neurotic and stand-offish – and therein lies her particular allure.

Certainly, Lee’s rebel image and tendency to choose projects that have overt feminist aspirations or are fairly obscure low-budget indie and art films contributes to a consistent persona. However, Lee’s supermodel body and dark glamour have also contributed to shaping her acting persona. As discussed above, part of Lee’s glamour can be attributed to her deliberate avoidance of celebrity and tabloid press. She seems to have deliberately sought to make her “meaning” as a (niche) star grow out of her professional work rather than “the interdiscursive

³¹⁵ Lee and Ryan Corr, interviewed in “Abbey Lee & Ryan Corr Interview.”

³¹⁶ Coulthard, “Killing Bill,” 158.

³¹⁷ Brendan Cowell, quoted in “Abbey Lee: ‘There Is No Security.’”

knowledge” of Geraghty’s celebrity-stars.³¹⁸ For an ex-supermodel, this is of course impossible to achieve completely, but her efforts are obvious.

As Geraghty notes, it is hard for female actors generally to escape the celebrity category because they “function effectively as spectacle in the press and on television as well as in the cinema.”³¹⁹ Yet the spectacle of Lee’s supermodel body appears to have been integrated into her professional expertise rather than tied to her off-screen self. Apart from premieres or fashion show appearances, publicity on Lee has largely become restricted to interviews with prestigious fashion, style or film publications about her work and craft. She very rarely discusses her private life and uses social media sporadically, nearly always to promote her latest project.

Whenever Lee does discuss personal topics, she often brings up themes which further her association with the supernatural and aethereal, and writeups tend to highlight these aspects both in her personality and her physical presence. Some mention her “almost-supernatural beauty” which enables her “to play otherworldly and alluring characters,” while others call her a “vampish hippy chick” and emphasize her eclectic sense of style.³²⁰ This, of course, echoes her supermodel persona, re-establishing Lee as close to both nature and outer space; she is simultaneously an earth goddess and a space alien. The most explicit example of an interview positioning Lee in this otherworldly space is an *i-D* piece in which she is simply asked to provide “ten bite-sized words of wisdom,” which range from “Always moisturize” to “Those who fear the darkness have no idea what the light can do” and, perhaps the most on-brand example, “Only a vampire can love you forever...”³²¹ These themes are integral to Lee’s performances as well, her body and sheer energy infusing characters with the otherworldly qualities ascribed to her persona, yet in ways that differ from her legacy in fashion.

Lee’s ability to transform from undeniable beauty into grotesqueness and back again, with the help of makeup, lighting or just her body language with ease, contributes to a polysemy which makes her particularly fit for the extreme aesthetics of speculative fiction. Whether it be in the vein of horror, like *The Neon Demon*, *Elizabeth Harvest*, *Lovecraft Country* or *Old*, or in the action milieus of *Fury Road* and *Gods of Egypt*, Lee’s body embodies an androgyny which destabilizes the gendered binaries of victim/monster and damsel/hero, and a freakish whiteness

³¹⁸ Geraghty, “Re-Examining Stardom,” 101.

³¹⁹ Geraghty, “Re-Examining Stardom,” 106.

³²⁰ Crucchiola, “‘I’m Very Passionate’”; Kinsella, “10 Pearls of Wisdom”; Jessica Baker, “For Model Turned Actress Abbey Lee, ‘90s Fashion Will Never Go Out of Style,” *Who What Wear*, accessed 3 May, 2023, <https://www.whowhatwear.co.uk/abbey-lee-interview>.

³²¹ Abbey Lee, interviewed in “10 Pearls of Wisdom.”

which makes itself known and can easily become a sign of monstrosity.³²² On the screen she is usually made freakish rather than aethereal, and her sexiness is made ambiguous as her supermodel body is recontextualized for the cinema. In those cases where Lee's body is positioned as directly belonging "to the pleasure-regime of the male gaze," it usually serves the purpose of collapsing sexiness/beauty into monstrosity; this is the case in *The Neon Demon* (as explored above) *Lovecraft Country*, and *Old*, for example.³²³

In *Lovecraft Country*, a horror/science fiction/drama series set in the 1950s, Lee plays Christina Braithwhite, a white supremacist witch who feels slighted by the constraints of her gender. She becomes a sometime ally to the show's black protagonists Atticus (Jonathan Majors) – her distant relative through a slave pregnancy – and Letitia (Jurnee Smollett). Christina refuses the high glam beauty ideals of the 1950s, mixing aristocratic minimalist femininity with androgyny. Makeup softens Lee's more masculine features and her long platinum hair falls over her shoulders in Veronica Lake-inspired curls, contributing to a "sterile, alienation vibe" according to *Lovecraft Country*'s hair stylist.³²⁴ Thus, Christina's gender expression and cold beauty are directly intertwined with Lee's brand of whiteness. (Fig. 19) Meanwhile, Christina's wardrobe mixes pants and neckties with severe satin dresses. Her androgyny is heightened by Lee's height, and at times she disturbs the gender binaries further by shapeshifting into the hyper-white, hyper-blond William. This leads to her seduction and exploitation of Letitia's sister Ruby (Wunmi Mosaku), whom she supplies with a potion to turn her white – and whiteness is the true monstrosity of the show, the ultimate expression of which is eventually found in Christina as embodied by Lee's hyper-whiteness. In fact, Lee was cast in the role after Elizabeth Debicki dropped out. The two are similar in a number of ways. Both are very tall and pale, with very light and large eyes and severe bone structures, and both are extremely thin. Considering this, the importance of Lee's supermodel body for the role of Christina becomes undeniable.

In the show's last episode Christina sacrifices Atticus in an immortality spell. In this scene, she emerges as the embodiment of angelic, white virginal purity; white hair, white skin, and white wedding dress. (Fig. 20) However, the angelic whiteness is turned monstrous when she slashes Atticus' arms wide open, drinking the blood that gushes from the wounds. Thus, in *Lovecraft Country*, Lee's model body becomes a tool for collapsing the distance between white

³²² Barry Keith Grant, "Introduction," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 1-12.

³²³ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 300.

³²⁴ Brian Badie, quoted in Leah Prinzivalli, "How *Lovecraft Country* Got '50s Beauty So Right," *Allure* Online, accessed 7 May, 2023, <https://www.allure.com/story/lovecraft-country-hair-makeup>.

femininity and monstrosity. Alan Sepinwall at *Rolling Stone* remarks that Christina and William “look like the whitest, blondest people ever put into existence” and that the show argues that “whiteness itself can seem like a superpower when you’re black in a country with so much racism,” while Decider’s Meghan O’Keefe calls Christina “eerily white.”³²⁵

Meanwhile in *Old*, Lee’s character Chrystal is a looks-obsessed trophy wife who wears only revealing outfits and heavy makeup, and she is covered in a tan which serves to highlight her visible bones and flat chest, like a bodybuilder’s tan highlights their muscles. Here, Lee’s body connotes excessive body control, and the fate of Chrystal further associates her persona with the monstrosity inherent in beauty. In her final scene, she has hidden away in a cave to avoid the gazes of the other characters as her face betrays the accelerated aging that the film’s mystical island causes. Obsessed with maintaining her beauty, Chrystal desperately screams “Don’t look at me!” as she throws rocks at the children who walk in on her. As she tries to launch a bigger boulder at them, her arm is broken and twisted into an unnatural position, healing instantly. As she crawls through the cave, her body breaks and re-heals continuously as she writhes in pain, disfiguring her further before she eventually dies. Her aged and dishevelled face – once-flawlessly applied makeup now smudged, adding to the grotesqueness of the image – and her contorted body are given voyeuristic attention by the camera. (Fig. 21) In contemporary discourses, the value of thinness and the price of achieving it are constantly debated in public spaces, in real life and online, and aging is a more controversial topic than perhaps ever before since there are so many ways to avoid its visible effects.

Lee’s body is positioned throughout the film as spectacle (as are all the actors due to *Old*’s rapid-aging central crisis), as Chrystal embodies these discourses about women’s bodies. Yet her brutal death makes that spectacle into a freakish monstrosity, and one which is both a gruesome image of body horror and a joke at the expense of women who try to escape the judgment aging brings with it. Chrystal’s arc thus results in something which looks an awful lot like misogyny – she is “a cruel caricature” meant to embody cultural obsessions and an object for voyeurism.³²⁶ Once again Lee is caught in between contradictory ideological positions. However, although reviews are torn about the film, Lee’s performance was positively

³²⁵ Alan Sepinwall, “‘Lovecraft Country’: A Nightmare on Main Street,” *Rolling Stone* Online, accessed 7 May, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-reviews/lovecraft-country-hbo-review-1038614/>; Meghan O’Keefe, “HBO’s ‘Lovecraft Country’ is a Thrilling Ode to Pulp Fiction,” Decider, accessed 7 May, 2023, <https://decider.com/2020/08/07/lovecraft-country-on-hbo-review/>.

³²⁶ Tim Grierson, “‘Old’: Review,” *Screen Daily*, accessed 8 May, 2023, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/old-review/5161871.article>.

critiqued by some critics, while others note that she struggled because of the lacking material – indicating a hesitant acceptance of Lee as a “real” actor.³²⁷

Schubart identifies in Jovovich’s model body “cool androgyny and enviable body control [...] which could be mistaken for anorexia,” leading her to transcend traditional conceptions of “‘beauty’ and ‘good’ acting,” instead “functioning as a blank page and an empty sign.”³²⁸ Similar effects, but of *emptiness*, can be situated in Lee’s embodied presence; notably in Sarah’s and Chrystal’s obsessions with beauty and body control which turn them monstrous, as discussed above. Blankness can be identified, however, in other characters. The Elizabeths of *Elizabeth Harvest* are borne out of cryotanks into short existences that end in shocking male violence, until finally the pattern is broken through extreme reactions – it is only after this that the final Elizabeth can truly live. Anat of *Gods of Egypt* is simply a tool of Set’s (Gerard Butler) violence, and she is the mirror double of Astarte (Yaya Deng); one albino and one dark-skinned, they ride giant matching snakes into battle and death, existing only to obey orders. Meanwhile, in *The Dark Tower* (Nikolaj Arcel, 2017) Lee is simply a menacing sidekick to the bad guy, her role relying on her menacing physical stature. In *Fury Road*, however, the emptiness of Lee’s body comes to signify the subversion of hypermasculine environmental destruction through her perceived supernatural connection to the earth.

The Dag, is by far the most idiosyncratic of the wives in *Fury Road*, and she is embodied through the abject emptiness of Lee’s model body. The other wives embody the slim ideal of 21st century Hollywood – feminine enough to be obvious objects of male desire. However, The Dag is taller, thinner, paler and more androgynous than the rest and her long white hair constantly obscures her face as she distorts it in hisses and insults toward male characters. (Fig. 22) She consistently displays a neuroticism which is connected to a heightened attunement to her surroundings, and particularly the dying earth, as becomes clear. Her extreme thinness and freakishness position The Dag as an embodied manifestation of the earth that hypermasculine society has depleted – and thus her body rejects male desire. Her complete rejection of anything associated with the world of men is further emphasized through alignment with Furiosa’s matriarchal society; she is instantly connected with the oldest woman in the group – “the Crone” – who teaches her to grow plants from seeds even in the barren desert.

Finding out that The Dag is pregnant is particularly shocking. If The Splendid Angharad, played by Rosie Huntington-Whiteley – a fellow supermodel known for her sexiness

³²⁷ Martin Carr, “Old Review,” We Got This Covered, accessed 16 May, 2023, <https://wegotthiscovered.com/movies/old-review/>; Grierson, “‘Old’: Review.”

³²⁸ Schubart, *Super Bitches*, 286. 288.

on the Victoria's Secret runway, in some ways Lee's opposite – appears as an embodiment of idealized glowing motherhood despite her resistance to the pregnancy, Lee as The Dag seems an arid field in which nothing should be able to grow. Here, Lee's body becomes a site for discourses of whiteness and reproduction; in Western society, white women who fail to further “white reproduction” assume a position of Otherness, and Lee's hyper-whiteness is aberrant because it is too much, and too androgynous.³²⁹ Thus, The Dag becomes a version of Mother Earth who can learn to make vegetation grow again as she is connected to a wider collective, but resists the notion of pregnancy even as the character *is* pregnant, due to the connotations of freakishness and abjection projected by Lee's monstrously feminine body.

Between a Natural and Unnatural

I understand Lee's persona, like Aoki's, from the perspective of niche stardom. However, as mentioned above, Lee's acting career is far more diverse, and has afforded her more space to hone her skills as an actor. Over time, she has involved herself primarily in indie and art house productions, which match her rebellious cultural capital and might be more likely to offer her challenging roles. Naremore argues that the continuity or ruptures of an actor's “*professional role*” as perceived in their characters, is integral to the development of their star persona.³³⁰ Lee's persona, as I have illustrated, relies heavily on her physical body. It also, however, relies to some extent on the image of her as a supermodel – no matter how much she has tried to distance herself from that label. Aside from *The Neon Demon*, she was for example asked to audition for *Fury Road* through her modelling agency with no prior acting experience.³³¹ She was also cast in *Ruben Guthrie* – as Ruben's (Patrick Brammall) supermodel-girlfriend Zoya – based on “the similarities between the character and her own life circumstances” as a model, while Gutierrez emphasized the way that her model body made her able to embody the Elizabeths as “sort of alien-like and yet desireable.”³³² In *Office Christmas Party* she even has a small part as a sex worker hired to pretend to be someone's model girlfriend, and in *Lux Aeterna* (Gaspar Noé, 2019) she simply plays herself as a model trying to break into acting – while also being connected to the supernatural through Noé's witch burning-narrative.

³²⁹ Dyer, *White*, 27.

³³⁰ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 101. Italics in original.

³³¹ Lee, “Abbey Lee Talks ‘Mad Max: Fury Road’”

³³² *The Guardian*, “Abbey Lee: ‘There Is No Security’”; Sebastián Gutierrez, interviewed by Aaron Couch, “‘Elizabeth Harvest’ Director on the Struggle to Get It Made,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/elizabeth-harvest-director-fought-get-it-financed-1135479/amp/>.

Despite these instances of direct correlation between characters and Lee's supermodel status, she has not ended up in the same situation as Aoki. While her model body plays a part, most of her roles do not rely on it entirely, affording her the opportunity to develop her own acting style. In her performances, Lee oscillates between extreme controlled coolness and jittery neuroticism, often appearing stylistic and mannered, but telling a particular "truth," whatever that may be. This seems to attract projects that employ the body-oriented visual storytelling tropes of horror and science fiction. The name Abbey Lee certainly connotes a certain set of heterogeneous meanings which filmmakers employ her to convey, and her persona builds on discourses surrounding beauty, whiteness, the construction of femininity versus androgyny, and female agency. In this sense, she is positioned as an actor who draws upon her modelling experience, rather than simply a model on screen.

When it comes to her whiteness and the issue of beauty, filmmakers often seem ambivalent about how to handle Lee; is she a monster expressing anxieties of white guilt in an era where the culpability of white women in the systems of racism is finally becoming acknowledged (this discourse is at the heart of *Lovecraft Country*), or is she a monster because she threatens male hegemony? Is she perhaps both? Can she embody monstrosity and desirability at the same time? I want to stress that there are no right answers to these questions, and that the polysemic nature of Lee's persona, and the ambivalent nature of her bodily capital, are precisely the point of this study. Her two latest projects, *Florida Man* (Netflix, 2023) and *Waco: The Aftermath* (Showtime, 2023) in which she plays a duplicitous femme fatale-turned-true-love and a neo-Nazi who ends up becoming a government informant respectively, indicate that Lee might be interested in branching out her career in terms of genre. However, these projects also illustrate that her unusual brand of whiteness is still at the center of her persona.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the way that the star personas of the supermodels Devon Aoki and Abbey Lee have been shaped as they crossed over from modelling to careers in acting, departing from the theoretical concept of bodily capital, which I derive from Ashley Mears, and that of niche stardom, which I adapted from Diane Negra. Using Aoki and Lee as my case studies, I focused on the significance of their bodily capital in the shaping of these personas in both their modelling and acting work, both through close analysis of films and editorials but also in publicity and reception. I focused on two main themes for each subject: the fashion It Girl status and exotified ethnicity of Aoki, and the association with otherworldliness and transgressive sexuality (which connects to constructions of gender) in the case of Lee. The ideological intersection of discourses of gender/sexuality/race, as embodied in different ways by the two's personas was at the center of both case studies. In addition to the translation of star meanings from one career to another, I also set out to understand how agency and genre played into the creation of Aoki and Lee's star personas.

In the chapter "Conceptualizing Supermodel-Actors," I discussed how models become supermodels who sometimes become actors. As a profession, modelling requires the maintenance of a very narrow range of body types and constant bodily transformation. Under these conditions, it is inevitable that the modelling profession inhibits the agency of models as individuals in the process of commodifying them. Furthermore, while supermodels are afforded considerably more agency than the average model, their personas are still very much rooted in the physical body of the model. High fashion prefers editorial looks which deviate from the standard of beauty, but models who become supermodels must be able to combine the editorial with the conventionally beautiful to appeal to the wider public, whose tastes are typically not as "elite." This also has ideological implications related to race; while high fashion often praises appearances that lie outside of mainstream beauty ideals, models of color or those with non-Western appearances may be venerated in modelling, but only in exchange for the commodification of their "ethnic" features.

I further argued that due to the ephemeral nature of the modelling profession, supermodels often attempt to diversify their careers in other adjacent industries, including acting. However, supermodel-actors are often unsuccessful in furthering acting careers that go beyond cameos and bit parts, and I argue that this can be attributed partially to the fact that their personas are so intertwined with their physical beauty, which in turn is associated with a lack

of real talent. Those supermodels who do manage to grow their careers are also very often repeatedly cast in roles that capitalize on their bodily capital, in genres like action and horror wherein one supermodel's toned body and long legs can easily lend itself to the 'action babe' stereotype, and another's extreme thinness and alien features may easily translate into a movie monster.

The next chapter, "Devon Aoki: Being a Y2K It Girl," was dedicated to my analysis of Devon Aoki's star persona, which is both intertextual and extra-filmic. Aoki's persona is heavily associated with her It Girl status during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and at the height of her modelling career, it is obvious that her celebrity status directly informed her modelling work – and vice versa. Meanwhile, her Japanese heritage also played a large role in the development of her persona; while she is born and raised in America and Britain with a white mother and Japanese father, her ethnic appeal is enhanced in her modelling work and inherently integrated into her persona.

As Aoki left modelling to pursue acting, the persona that had been created around her as a celebrity supermodel became integrated into her acting persona. She mainly appeared in relatively small roles in action films of both the mainstream and indie kind, and these roles capitalized on her It Girl status and her Japanese-American beauty in various ways through both visual and narrative aspects. Aoki's stardom among certain niche audiences has endured, and several of her films have achieved cult status among these audiences due to her involvement – as evidenced on social media. However, the limits of her persona also appear to have stopped her from being able to move her career outside of roles as hypersexualized hot girls and Japanese stereotypes. Although she continuously attempted to assert her agency by emphasizing the girl power and empowerment of her characters, her agency was obviously limited by the association between her bodily capital as a model and her persona as an actor.

The chapter "Abbey Lee: The Monstrous White Feminine" illustrates clearly how Abbey Lee's acting career has much more range than Aoki's, and how Lee has been acknowledged as an actor, rather than a model on screen, to a much larger extent – although not everyone may be convinced of her talent. Lee's supermodel persona has been defined by a combination of otherworldliness and transgressive sexuality. The former connects to the extreme whiteness she inhabits – simultaneously reinforcing the link between beauty and white/pale/blondeness, and making whiteness strange through the excesses of her whiteness. From early on, Lee made it a part of her persona to retain mysterious glamour and privacy by avoiding press and especially discussions of her private life. This way she, in contrast to Aoki, skirted the trap of overexposure and celebrity, letting her public persona be defined by her work.

This assertion of agency translates into Lee's acting career, and she continuously cultivates a persona associated with on-screen work that is politically conscious and allows her to show her acting craft. It becomes clear, however, when considering *how* she was cast for certain roles and in which roles she is cast, that although she has the financial privilege to be able to wait for scripts she likes to come her way, those offers clearly depend on the *image* of Lee's body. While she has occasionally portrayed "ordinary" women, her otherworldly persona has become associated with (often supernatural) characters that embody complicated discourses regarding issues like female obsessions with beauty and the complicity of white women in racism – and Lee's supermodel body becomes the prism through which they are reflected in the films.

The findings of this thesis illustrate that in the cases of Aoki and Lee, there exists a level of direct continuity – to different degrees for each actor – between their personas as models, the meanings of their specific bodily capital, and their acting careers. This is clear not only in their on-screen work, but also in the way they are talked about (by critics, journalists, and the wider audience) and the way they talk about their own careers. In Aoki's case, the restriction of her on-screen presence to a very narrow type of character seems clearly influenced by the strong association in her model persona with her celebrity icon-status. The Aoki-look *is* Y2K stylishness, and this fact seems impossible to separate from her acting persona. Furthermore, the repeated casting of Aoki in roles where her mixed ethnicity is erased in favor of enhancing her Japaneseness is a direct continuation of the way that her modelling work often plays up her ambiguous Asian-ness through the deployment of racist stereotypes. While movie decision-makers were interested in Aoki's bodily capital for the creation of action babe characters, and the appeal of her supermodel status to niche audiences, these same factors also kept her on-screen persona entirely defined by her body and looks. This contrasts with Lee, who has managed to turn the association of her on-screen presence with her body into just one part of a constantly evolving acting persona. While she booked several of her early roles purely because of her model body and the supposed truth of her experience as a model, she has since harnessed the strange or freakish aspects of her bodily capital into a mode of performance which elevates her to the status of actor while allowing her to distance herself from the hypersexuality of her modelling persona.

However, I would be remiss not to make absolutely clear that Lee's whiteness, which is so central to her persona, also affords her numerous privileges that do not, and never will, apply to Aoki because of her immediately recognizable racialization. One of these privileges is the ability to turn the aberrant aspects of one's body into a career asset so easily. Thus, while

both Aoki and Lee can be concluded to inhabit niche stardom – as evidenced by Aoki’s dedicated cult following and Lee’s penchant for picking low budget and art house films that elevate her within certain elite taste cultures – Lee’s is a stardom which allows for expansion whereas Aoki’s has kept her restricted.

This study of Aoki and Lee’s personas opens up for a plethora of future studies in this nearly unexplored field. Supermodel-actors as a group of crossover stars have the potential to generate as much insight into cultural and cinematic constructions of gender, sexuality and race as other crossover performers such as athletes and bodybuilders have, and this thesis only manages to scratch a tiny part of the beautiful surface. Further studies centering the role of whiteness in the success supermodel-actors might be one possible avenue for future research. As I have illustrated, her whiteness opens doors for Lee even as it calls attention to itself, and Milla Jovovich – who is arguably the currently most successful supermodel-actor in the industry – is similar to Lee in that she is hyper-white and hyper-thin. On the other hand, studies focused specifically on supermodels of color in cinema is another important avenue for research to explore. Furthermore, it would be exciting to see studies on what role supermodels’ bodily capital and personas might play in other genres; I have focused primarily on action and horror and the body politics of those genres in my case studies, and although these genres are extremely common for supermodels to appear in, focusing on genres like romantic comedies would likely generate completely different conclusions about bodily capital, gender, race and sexuality. The possibilities for future research in this field are as endless as our cultural obsession with beauty, and I encourage it all.

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- Arrow* (The CW, 2012-2020)
- Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992)
- Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966)
- Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)
- Bring It On* (Peyton Reed, 2000)
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003)
- Celebrity* (Woody Allen, 1998)
- Charlie’s Angels* (McG, 2001)
- Daughter of Shanghai* (Robert Florey, 1937)
- Daughter of the Dragon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1931)
- D.E.B.S.* (Angela Robinson, 2004)
- Death of a Dynasty* (Damon Dash, 2003)
- DOA (Dead or Alive)* (Corey Yuen, 2006)
- Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962)
- Elizabeth Harvest* (Sebastián Gutierrez, 2018)
- Florida Man* (Netflix, 2023)
- Gods of Egypt* (Alex Proyas, 2016)
- House of Style* (MTV, 1989-2000)

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Kill Bill Vol. 2 (Quentin Tarantino, 2004)
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Lux Aeterna (Gaspar No  , 2019)
Mad Max: Fury Road (George Miller, 2015)
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The Fast and the Furious (Rob Cohen, 2001)
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The Neon Demon (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016)
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Tomorrow Never Dies (Roger Spottiswoode, 1997)
Transformers (Michael Bay, 2007)
Waco: The Aftermath (Showtime, 2023)
War (Philip G. Atwell, 2007)
Welcome the Stranger (Justin Kelly, 2018)

Visual Appendix



Figure 1: Devon Aoki in Jeremy Scott, photographed by Marcus Mam, 1998.



Figure 2: Devon Aoki for Moschino Jeans, 2001, photographed by Nathaniel Goldberg.



Figure 3: Devon Aoki in "Couture du Monde," *Vogue France*, September 1999, photographed by Ruven Afanador.



Figure 4: Devon Aoki in Alexander McQueen, *Visionaire*, photographed by Nick Knight, 1997.



Figure 5: Aoki as Picasso on the runway in *Death of a Dynasty*.



Figure 6: Devon Aoki's 'beauty shot' as Kasumi in *DOA: Dead or Alive*.



Figure 7: Devon Aoki's 'posed' posture as Suki in *2 Fast 2 Furious*.



Figure 8: Devon Aoki with Sara Foster, Meagan Good and Jill Ritchie in *D.E.S.*



Figure 9: Devon Aoki as Miho in *Sin City*, maintaining total composure and perfect makeup even as blood splatters on her face.



Figure 10: Devon Aoki for Acne Studios Spring/Summer 2023, photographed by Carlijn Jacobs.



Figure 11: Abbey Lee in *W Magazine* January 2009



Figure 12: Abbey Lee in "Viva Vacation" for *Vogue Italia* December 2008, photographed by Mario Sorrenti



Figure 13: Abbey Lee in "Wild At Heart" for *Dazed and Confused* December 2009, photographed by Daniel Jackson.



Figure 14: Abbey Lee in ads for Flora by Gucci and Flora by Gucci: The Garden.



Figure 15: Abbey Lee, Freja Beha, Eniko Mihalik and Magdalena Frackowiak in "Best of Season" for *Purple Magazine* F/W 2009, photographed by Terry Richardson.



Figure 16: Abbey Lee and Sigrid Agren in Gucci's Fall/Winter 2011 campaign, photographed by Mert and Marcus.



Figure 17: Abbey Lee in Gucci's Fall/Winter 2013 campaign, photographed by Mert and Marcus.



Figure 18: Abbey Lee as Sarah, eating Jesse's eye, in *The Neon Demon*.



Figure 19: Abbey Lee as the hyper-white Christina in *Lovecraft Country*.



Figure 20: Abbey Lee as Christina in the scene where she sacrifices Atticus, her look combining white femininity with monstrosity.



Figure 21: Abbey Lee as Chrystal in *Old*, after the character has been turned into body horror.



Figure 22: Abbey Lee as The Dag in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, three of the other wives and Furiosa are behind her, whereas The Splendid Angharad is being held at gunpoint.

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