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**The Female Action Heroine:**  
Deconstruction of Selene in *Underworld*  
from a (Post)Feminist Perspective

**Author**

Menuka Torres Martínez

**Supervisor**

Elena Oliete Aldea

Faculty of Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the resurgence and the construction of female action heroines in the 21st century. For that matter, I will analyze the main character, Selene, from the *Underworld* saga, which is an excellent example in the representation of postfeminist discourses. Therefore, the essay introduces the feminist waves and its impact on action cinema. Subsequently, an analysis of Selene explores the subversion of gender roles and rejection of the patriarchal vampire society by becoming an agent who moves the story forward, while being portrayed as an objectified and hypersexualized body. The dissertation concludes that female action heroines have undergone an outstanding evolution on the screens in the last decade, as Selene shows, however there is still space for more complex representation of women.

**Keywords:** Female Action Heroine; *Underworld*; Postfeminism; Third-Wave Feminism

## **RESUMEN**

Este ensayo explora el resurgimiento y la construcción de heroínas de acción en el siglo XXI. Para ello, analizaré al personaje principal, Selene, de la saga *Underworld*, que es un excelente ejemplo en la representación de pensamientos postfeministas. Por lo tanto, el ensayo introduce las olas feministas y su impacto en el cine de acción. Posteriormente, mediante el análisis de Selene, el texto explora la subversión de los roles de género y el rechazo de la sociedad patriarcal vampírica al convertirse en un agente que lleva la historia, mientras es retratada con un cuerpo objetificado e hipersexualizado. Finalmente se demuestra que las heroínas de acción han experimentado una notable evolución en las pantallas en la última década, como muestra Selene, aunque aún hay espacio para una representación más compleja de las mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** Heroína de Acción, *Underworld*; Postfeminismo; Feminismo de la Tercera Ola

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The action-fantasy film *Underworld* (2003) became the initial point in the career of directing by Lei Wiseman in the film industry. Despite having a \$22 million budget, the film brought in \$95.7 million globally and launched four more films. Sony Pictures distributed the film *Underworld* in September 2003. Before its release, the film faced controversy when video game publisher White Wolf and writer Nancy A. Collins sued the filmmakers, alleging copyright infringement of their *World of Darkness* series and Collins' short novel, *Love Among Monsters*. Nevertheless, a concept or storyline cannot be protected by copyright; rather, copyright safeguards the idea's expression. The case depended on more than the application of a few original ideas (Ward 1-3).

In spite of its box office success, the film received negative reviews on the part of the critics, criticizing mainly the plot and the plagiarism accusations.<sup>1</sup>

The "Underworld" series centers on Selene (Kate Beckinsale), a vampire Death Dealer determined to put an end to the lycans (werewolves) as a result of a centuries-old conflict. She gets involved with Michael Corvin (Scott Speedman), a human pursued by lycans. Selene learns that Michael is descended from the Corvinus Clan, and that is the reason why lycans want him. Selene alerts the vampire regent Kraven (Shane Brolly), but he ignores her. Selene leaves the vampire society to learn the truth about the battle, keeping Michael safe from lycans and vampires. The rest of the saga focuses on the ongoing war.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the importance of Selene's agency throughout the first film mainly, focusing on her impositions against the patriarchal and hierarchical vampire society, and the film's subversion of gender roles through the lens of feminist theory. However,

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<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Rosenbaum from *Chicago Reader*; Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* and Nick Schager in his vlog *Lessons of Darkness*.

there will be references to the other films of the saga for the analysis of some scenes. This essay starts with a brief contextualization of the importance of social changes and movements (feminist waves) in the early 21st century in Western culture and its impact on cinema, specifically on the increasing representation of main female characters in action films. This is followed by an analysis of Selene as a female action hero in the film *Underworld* saga through the lens of feminist perspectives. The analysis is divided into three sections. The first one explores the depiction of Selene as an active agent rather than a passive one who makes sure that the narrative of the film goes forward through her own decisions and behavior. The second section deals with Selene's rejection of the patriarchal society in the coven. The last section will focus on Selene's hypersexualized body, and how it shifts from a negative connotation to a more positive one, and the effects on the audience. The ultimate goal of the dissertation is to explore the construction of the character of Selene as the protagonist of action films, whether it has meant an evolution or change in the representation of female characters in action films within the contemporary context of postfeminism and Fourth-Wave of feminism.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Feminist Waves and Social Changes in the 21th-Century

From an early age, women continuously had to fight for their rights because of the prejudices based on their gender. They have been relegated to a subordinate position by male hegemony and patriarchal ideologies which subjugated, oppressed, and exploited women's bodies and lives. As a reaction to these treatments, women have raised their voices in a variety of ways to change both men's and women's attitudes and views towards them (Turan 1). Therefore, throughout history, there have been "waves" reflecting the vindications women wanted during their period.

First-Wave Feminism increased women's political visibility. To take one step further of this wave, Second-Wave Feminism emerged in the 1960s, addressing issues like family, workplace inequities, and reproductive rights. Important works included Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1977), highlighting constructed gender roles. However, it mainly focused on white, middle-class women, ignoring the problems experienced by lesbians, working-class women, and women of color (Turan 1-2).

The Riot Grrrl movement and critiques of Second-Wave Feminism propelled Third-Wave Feminism in the 1990s, along with postcolonial feminism (Brown 147-149). This wave prioritized a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, emphasizing individual identities over legal procedures (Turan 2). Enjoying the results of earlier feminist fights, young women in the 1990s and 2000s openly explored gender identities and roles. With the growth of the Internet, new forms of representation and communication were made possible (Malinowska 4). This generation embracing popular culture and emphasizing consumerism, individual choice, sexual

freedom, cultural diversity, personal empowerment, and an ironic sensibility, continued the general fight against misogyny and violence against women.

Regretfully, the Third Wave's passionate and creative feminist agenda was rapidly watered down and appropriated within the sphere of popular culture as a banal Girl Power marketing slogan. The movement's core component, youth, and the Third Wave's reclamation of stereotypically girly pleasures as subversive and liberated led to the idea of postfeminism. The politically conscious and aggressive Riot Grrrl movement was eclipsed by the glamorous and playfully powerful image of Spice Girls and Britney Spears.<sup>2</sup> From the mid-1990s onward, the Girl Power notion was co-opted by the marketing industry to align with the postfeminist fervor for consumerism and the media's acknowledgment of this group as a significant and prosperous group (Brown 147-149). The Third-Wave of the media saw the rise of a diverse range of mainstream and alternative idols, such as Madonna, Riot Grrrl and the Guerrilla Girls. Additionally, it has served as a mediator between "womanism" and the inclusion of racial and LGBT minorities in feminist discourse. The Third-Wave has experienced a shift toward anti-feminism as it has become stronger and women's professional and social freedom has been implemented more quickly. The postfeminist movement whose main criticism was the Second and Third-Wave utopias' apparent insignificance to the real lives of women, was largely responsible for the "new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period, i.e. the 1970s and 1980s" (McRobbie, 2008, 1). Postfeminists expressed the need for a more balanced approach to women's demands and choices by proclaiming that "feminism is dead". This approach should mix conventional female responsibilities with liberal longings, such

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<sup>2</sup> Spice Girls made "Girl Power" their catchphrase.

Britney Spears sang "Hit me baby one more time" while dancing in a skimpy Catholic schoolgirl outfit.

as marriage and children along with professional success. *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Ally McBeal* are some of the most well-known series that highlight this tendency. The protagonists frequently mock fundamental feminist principles and redefine femininity as consumerism, albeit from a position of power (Malinowska 5).

For Turan, digital feminism, which gave rise to this new kind of feminism, is closely associated with social media and internet use. In the twenty-first century, women marginalized in other spheres of society have found a voice on social media thanks to the fourth wave of digital feminist activism. Their primary concerns include the objectification of women in the media, particularly on television, as well as job discrimination, rape, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Other issues include racism, classism, transphobia, and homophobia (3-4). As River (2017) states, it is already being said that the Forth-Wave is a rejection of postfeminist thinking which says that feminism belongs to the past and that even hinders women in the present (16-17). However, in the 2010s, protests against violence against women and children on the Internet and in public spaces throughout the world gave rise to a resurgence of feminism. Online mobilization on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Instagram, and so on, along with the hashtag and blog campaigns that followed (like the #MeToo, #NoMore, and #TimesUp campaigns as well as the Everyday Sexism Project, Feministing, Counting Dead Women Project, #Fem2, #YesAllWomen, #HeForShe, #ToTheGirls, and #EverydaySexism, and more recently, #MeToo, #NoMore, and #TimesUp), refers to as the Fourth-Wave of feminist activism (Malinowska 5).

Especially, the #MeToo movement served as a ticking bomb to expose all the sexual abuse cases of Harvey Weinstein in the Hollywood scenes. Originally, the #MeToo movement was initiated by the African-American Tarana Burke, who used it as a way to empathize with

victims of sexual violence from marginal communities. However, that idea of empathy for the victims of sexual violence was used years later, in 2017, by the American actress Alyssa Milano, who on October 15 tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” which led to the #MeToo movement to start trending (Bertran, 2022). As a result, protests against sexual assault and harassment on social media and the #MeToo movement have grown to become one of the most significant Twitter campaigns. It also showed that sexism can be eradicated and that discrimination against all kinds may be opposed. One may argue that the women's liberation movement's most inclusive manifestation is digital feminism. Given the idea that all types of structural oppression are interrelated, it is strongly related to social justice action. Therefore, the fight to eradicate heterosexism, racism, classism, discrimination against the disabled, and shame on one's body is inextricably linked to the fight against gender discrimination (Turan 4).

## **2.2. Female Leads in Action Films**

It is evident that action cinema was a male-dominated sphere where the traditional male hero showed the “so-called masculine traits such as independence, physical strength, aggression, intelligence, competence, reticence, and cool-headedness” (Knight xiii-xiv). For more than four decades, James Bond, the archetypal action hero from Ian Fleming's books, has served as a model for the contemporary hero. He represents the perfect man—the one with “the gadgets, the sophisticated lifestyle, the cars, the license to kill, and, of course, the women” (Brown 3). As Knight (2010) explains, the masculine hero was a symbol of strength, and his weapons were phallic representations of power. Psychoanalysts commonly use the term “phallic”, which comes from the Greek word for an erect penis, to describe items that either resemble the male penis or, more crucially, symbolize the physical and social authority that has historically been associated

with males. Fertility is not a big problem for an action hero because most male heroes are childless and do not have committed love relationships. The masculine hero functioned best by himself, staying away from anybody (a wife) or any connections (marriage, a fixed residence, societal duties, and responsibilities) that would compel him to live a stationary life or civilize him. His only goal in life is to be active and have freedom. Because of this, he most frequently uses his power to show off his physical and mental prowess and to subdue or overcome opponents—such as villains or nemeses—who would attempt to restrain or bridle him (xiii-xiv). Throughout the history of American cinema, women have played the expected traditional roles in action films, that are, the “romantic interest for the hero” (Tasker 32), and more often than not, “women were typically portrayed as weak, unintelligent, and needing to be rescued (damsel in distress)” (Knight xvi). Moreover, most of the time the death of female characters served as a “passive narrative function”, that is, “the lost object to be avenged” (57). It is impossible to ignore the nickname of the “Bond Girl” given to Ursula Andress after appearing in the film *Dr. No* while walking in a bikini on the beach. Her function as Bond’s erotic accessory highlights her attractiveness and sexuality. Thus, James Bond is idealized as the archetype of the modern hero because he embodies the ideal self of every man (Brown 3).

According to Brown, through the late 1990s and early 2000s, the action woman has, continually, battled to become a blockbuster celebrity (Brown 7-9). Nonetheless, both Tasker and Knight considered that since the turn of the 20th century, female action heroines have developed into the remarkable phenomenon that they are today (Knight xiii; Tasker 39). New roles for women “have begun to sketch out new narrative possibilities for women in the Hollywood action cinema meaning that the “heroine no longer necessarily signifies passivity” (Tasker 40). As explained above, women’s movements brought several changes in terms of societal norms, which

is also reflected in the cinema scenarios. Through the 1970s, Tasker denominates the “independent heroine” in films as “women who are independent of men, who are sexually free, and who, to an extent, determine their own lives”, it is a “respon[se] to feminist demands for less stereotypical roles for women [...]” (40-41). The depiction of women as strong and capable of pulling off action scenes—Knight introduces the term “female toughness”—shows that these characteristics are not only reserved for men. Women can also “punch, kick, and drive fast cars” and look “cool” (vii). Although female action heroines are the most prominent representation of progressive female characters in films, television shows, comic books, and videogames, they are rarely made by women. Male directors and screenwriters continue to predominate, which means that the action heroine continues to be objectified. They are “idealized” and “a fantasy image of women brought to life by a male artist” (Brown, 86).

In the ‘70s and ‘80s, there was a neglectful representation of ethnic minorities, especially women. Cirkic and Maj talk about the “feminist film theory” (7) where they criticize Second-Wave Feminism that focuses only on “the white woman” cinema (9). The perspective on the female subject in “feminist film theory” started to shift dramatically with the emergence of the Third-Wave of feminism. Black and queer feminists were the most vocal groups throughout this wave. The downside part of having black female actresses as an action figure was that they frequently served as “exotic” plot devices, they were made fun of because of the stereotypes and they were still the “Other”. For example, in *Conan the Destroyer* (1984) actress Grace Jones wore a tail for her role as Zula. The significance of the focus on animality in Grace Jones' cinematic performance is intricately connected to the conventional body and sexuality associated with black women and “the fetishistic representation of [these] female power[s]” (Tasker 45-47).

The first female heroines in action films and the most visible ones are considered to be Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* trilogy (1979-1997) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator II* (1991) (Brown 8-9). Considering their stardom through the late 1980s and early 1990s by taking on the “muscular hard-body heroism made famous by such male icons of the genre as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, their success has proven difficult to repeat”, suggests Brown (8-9). Chengting (2013) agrees saying that it was hard for women to be in mainstream Hollywood with their roles as action figures. But over the short course of the years, there was a proliferation of action heroines, particularly, after the figure of Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) in its two series (2001 and 2003). Knight affirms that Lara Croft “changed the face of video game playing. She became a role model for young girls and the star of one of the most popular video games for both males and females” (viii). So, Hollywood studios focused on female leads “pursuing the evil-fighting, world-saving cause once accomplished by male characters”. Some examples of these modern action heroines include Alice, played by Milla Jovovich in the *Resident Evil* saga (2002, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2016), Selene, played by Kate Beckinsale in the *Underworld* series (2003, 2006, 2012, 2016), Uma Thurman’s The Bride from the *Kill Bill* movies (2003 and 2004), Elektra, played by Jennifer Garner in *Elektra* (2005) or her other character Sydney Bristow from the TV series *Alias* (2001-2006) (Chengting 2-3; Brown 8-9). Through the years, these tendencies have been kept by characters like Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) in *The Hunger Games* (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015), Furiosa (Charlize Theron) in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and Dianna (Gal Gadot) in *Wonder Woman 1984* (2017).

In the meantime, the blockbuster formula remains constant: the allure of the female stars’ individual charisma, the promise of an elaborate experience within a world of fantastic special

effects, the constant anticipation of potential sequels and adaptations, and the even more pervasive and profound influence of the ancillary market among fans (e.g. video games like *Resident Evil* and *Tomb Raider*). Together, these elevate female superheroes to a prominent position in the Hollywood industry (Chengting 2-3). The modern action heroines are presented as the dynamic force that advances the story, unravels the mystery, and ultimately brings the condition of disequilibrium to an end. As a result, they are no longer classified as having a supporting function as mothers, sisters, or lovers in relation to male characters. And, when they are in action, they are driven by a moral need to defend the virtuous, protect humanity from any harm, and maintain order in the world. For instance, Lara Croft's main purpose is to stop the evil force from misusing the magical power of the treasures (Magic Triangle and Pandora's Box). In the *Resident Evil* series, Alice is relentlessly trying to uncover Umbrella Corporation's work on viral weapons and provide a remedy for those who have already fallen prey to the virus. Their powers seem to be a "given, a natural-born gift that can be brought into play at any necessary moment" (Chengting 7-8).

Everything discussed above establishes the groundwork for the analysis of Selene as the new prototype of action heroine, in the *Underworld* saga, through the feminist perspective which will be carried out in the following section. Textual analysis will be used to explore the exemplary portrayal of Selene, who breaks through the typical passive femininity shown in action films, rejects the patriarchal rules and shows her sexualized body as progressive agent within the context of postfeminist ideas.

## 6. ANALYSIS

Since the invention of cinema, one of the most recognizable and forward-thinking archetypal figures on screen is the vampire. This indicates that vampires are now widely accepted mythical figures in all countries, and that this archetype has changed over its cinematic incarnations in tandem with societal shifts in cultural norms (Dominguez 2013, 5). The vampire sub-genre has the power to subvert prevailing ideologies and conventional roles in culture through counternarratives that may be seen on film (16). There was a surge in technically advanced action vampire movies that combined aspects of fantasy and science fiction stories. The *Underworld* saga introduces a new female lead named Selene, a hybrid figure with a mix of feminine and masculine strength and traits (41). Therefore, the following sections will critically examine the most compelling attributes in relation to the depiction of Selene in the *Underworld* series as the one who pushes the narrative forward. As analyzed in the previous sections, the modern action heroines, departing from Ellen Ripley (*Alien*, 1979), are very different from the conventional portrayal of women in classical cinema. They are the first to advance the story, unravel the mystery, and ultimately bring the condition of disequilibrium to an end. As a result, they are no longer classified as having a supporting function as mothers, sisters, or lovers in relation to male characters. Secondly, their drive for action is a huge departure from previous portrayals of active women. When they are in action, they are driven by a moral need to defend the virtuous, protect mankind from harm, and maintain order in the world rather than any sinister or self-serving intent like the femme fatale or explosive rage against a past perpetrator like the avenger.

### 3.1. Selene as a Postfeminist Action Heroine

Selene is the main character and the main focalizer of the *Underworld* saga except in *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans*, which focuses on the past battle between vampires and lycans. Throughout the films, Selene can be seen as an active participant who develops the events and the flow of the storyline by making her own choices and actions, she is not just a tool or victim in the supernatural conflict between lycans and vampires. Besides, she is portrayed as a cold and ruthless Death Dealer (a vampire warrior) who is obsessed with eradicating all lycans. So, this portrayal contradicts the traditional image of women being emotional and weak. This section will focus on the depiction of Selene as an active agent by analyzing her characteristics such as her independence, critical thinking skill, and strength, seeking truth and justice.

The ways Selene is portrayed are in the same line with other contemporary action heroines (except the costume she wears), it can be seen through her actions that show independence and autonomy. After knowing that Michael, a human, is the target of lycan attacks, she reports it to Kraven who prohibits her to dig more in the affair. However, she senses that something is wrong, and driven by her personal sense of duty and her doubts about Kraven's authority, Selene makes the decision to take matters into her own hands. The norms of her society, which forbid vampires from meddling in human matters are clearly contradicted by Selene's choice to investigate Michael's persecution. This demonstrates that Selene does not follow orders without question. Another example is the command given by Viktor (Bill Nighy), her adoptive vampire father and an Elder vampire, to kill Michael but Selene decides to save him (Sherwood 2011, 50). Thus, she consistently challenges and defies the expectations and conventions of vampire society. Throughout the whole film, Selene engages in fights against lycans and vampires. She showcases her strength and high level of fighting skills. One of the

most important combat scenes in this film is Selene against Viktor. When Selene discovers that Viktor has been manipulating her memories and betraying her, she challenges him. As Heyerdahl explains in her work, the reason why Viktor must die is because “Viktor is not a ‘true King’, but a ‘deceptive one’”. She makes a connection between Viktor’s sword and the legendary sword Excalibur within the Arthur narrative where it “must be pulled from stone by a true king”. In the scene we can see that the fallen sword is recovered by Selene just to kill Viktor, thus, she becomes the “true hero” who "is able to brand the sword and kill the oppressor" (28). Moreover, this confrontation makes her agency crystal clear by questioning the authority against a powerful opponent —such as an Elder vampire. Her deep and complicated relationship with Viktor will be analyzed in more detail in the following section. Another trait of Selene is that she demonstrates critical thinking by trying to uncover and seeking the truth behind the history and mysteries surrounding the war between lycans and vampires. She does not stay still and remain quiet after knowing that something is wrong and does not feel right.



*Figure 1: Selene cuts with the sword the face of Viktor.*

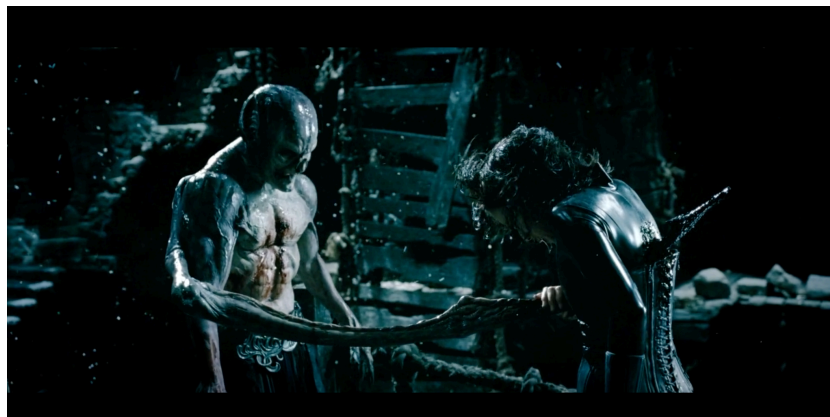
Like her contemporary action heroine companions, Selene fights against evil creatures (lycans) to survive, even if the opponent is gigantic. The big lycan in *Underworld: Awakening* is

portrayed as something grotesque, thus Selene must kill him. She shows no fear despite the difference in size.



*Figures 2 and 3: Selene fighting a giant lycan.*

In *Underworld: Evolution*, Selene confronts Marcus, the first vampire. The scene uses close-ups and slow-motion to show her facial expression when Marcus pierces her body. The music becomes slow too, but as an action heroine she immediately recovers from the shock, breaking the spike and penetrating Marcus' face. The camera is placed from Selene's left side which makes the audience feel like being with her at that moment.



*Figure 4: Marcus piercing with his wing's spike Selene's body.*



*Figure 5: Close-up to Selene's expression.*



*Figure 6: Close-up to Selene piercing Marcus' face.*

### **3.2. Rebellion Against the Traditional System and Values**

As argued before, the evolution of the representation of action heroines in cinema is related to (or reflects and/or reinforces) the cultural ideas of the social context of films and, therefore, of feminist movements. With the emergence of these movements, the portrayal of women in films shifts from being a side character to the main character, who refuses and challenges the

patriarchal norms. In *Underworld*, the vampire society is ruled by traditional systems and norms. The coven is a sphere where Selene belongs to and is faithful to its rules. Nevertheless, Selene, as the main protagonist, in order to achieve her quest of seeking the truth of the beginning of the vampire-lycan war, needs to break-up with the coven and fight against her own family and the system she has been part of. It is interesting to analyze the previous relationship between vampires and lycans. As Sherwood explains, in the film *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* we get to know that lycans were once slaves working for vampires. Looking from a feminist viewpoint, we can see that the vampire represents the dominant, permeating masculine aspect, while the lycan represents the downtrodden, repressed feminine side. However, the figure of the lycan is more ambivalent since it also represents masculinity and the Alpha-male image. Although lycans and vampires both are capable of great violence, it is only among the lycans that we discover oppression and a strong bond with the natural world through the moon. Particularly, nature and the moon cycle have always been associated with the feminine. The character of Selene is also linked with the feminine. The film uses the meaning of names to connect to classical Greek mythology. Therefore, Selene, the daughter of the Titans Hyperion and Theia, is a moon goddess who falls in love with Endymion, a mortal shepherd. Her father forbids such union, and Selene begs Zeus for help. Zeus grants Endymion immortality at the expense of endless sleep, meaning that Selene could only see him in her dreams. In *Underworld*, Selene falls in love with Michael, a mortal who is given immortality thanks to Lucian's intervention, and is hated by her "father" Viktor (Heyerdah 24). Additionally, the fact that William, the first lycan, "had to be entombed because of his bloodthirst that led to uncontrollable reproduction of lycans" by the vampires to regulate lycan reproduction and control the slave population reflect persistent concerns about women, such as their uncontrolled procreation and tendency to suppress their femininity in favor

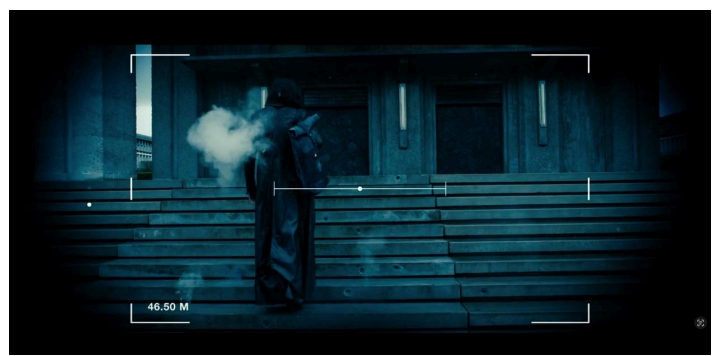
of their masculinity (2011, 44). In this section, it will be discussed Selene's rejection of male dominance, the "feminine behavior" in vampire society, and her process of becoming herself.

In the film *Underworld*, Selene regards Viktor as her real father since he converted her into a vampire after a massacre of her family supposedly by lycans, and consequently she could avenge them. It is not until the third film of the saga that we know the reason for the ongoing war. Lycans were the vampires' slaves and daytime guardians and the war began after the revelation of Sonja, Viktor's biological daughter, violated the vampiric law by mating with Lucian, a lycan and a slave which show a "rejection to the miscegenation" (Sherwood 35). At the beginning of the film we see how devoted Selene is to Viktor treating him as her savior, she illustrates the dutiful and obedient daughter for both Viktor and her biological father (by seeking revenge). But, in order for Selene to be free from the patriarchal life she needs to kill Viktor who turns out to be the real murderer of her family. Furthermore, the decapitation means "[a] hint toward castration and taking the power of the Father" (43-44). She really takes the power from the Father when Alexander, the father of all vampires, gives her his blood in *Underworld: Evolution* and she transforms into a strong hybrid similar to Michael. This act becomes a symbolic transmission of patriarchal power, "a form of synthesis that bequeaths power from a father onto a daughter". It is an illustration of a feminine figure regaining control in order to reinvent herself (Dominguez 41-42). And, it is evident from both movies that this process of metamorphosis does not entail "creating something wholly new, but rather *becoming* a hybrid, taking the old and transforming it into something better and stronger" (Sherwood 43-44). As Sherwood comments:

Selene is no longer simply a dutiful daughter and an enforcer of the patriarchy. By defying traditional values and exposing a false history that underwrote them, and through the mutual recognition that occurs with Michael, she is able to formulate a feminist self

that frees her of the bonds of servitude, but also does not divorce her from her body or her desires. To speak one's desires is to speak one's self, and too long Selene had been possessed by Viktor's desires and not her own. (46)

Having Selene involved with the human Michael expresses a subversion of gender roles regarding the notion of action films. It is Selene who has to save and protect Michael from both Lycans and vampires. It is no longer the woman who needs to be saved. Even though her relationship with Michael becomes a romantic one, this is not the exclusive focus of the narrative in the *Underworld* series. The audience is mostly focused on Selene, despite the fact that one would think that Michael should be the center of attention given his destiny to become a vampire/lycan hybrid and put an end to the conflict between the two species (Sherwood 41). The saga shows several sequences where the audience gets the feeling of playing a videogame using Selene as the avatar. In *Underworld: Awakening*, the scene where Selene tries to enter *Antigen Corporation*, we see her from the POV of binoculars. The audience follows Selene's actions with Detective Sebastian (Michael Ealy).



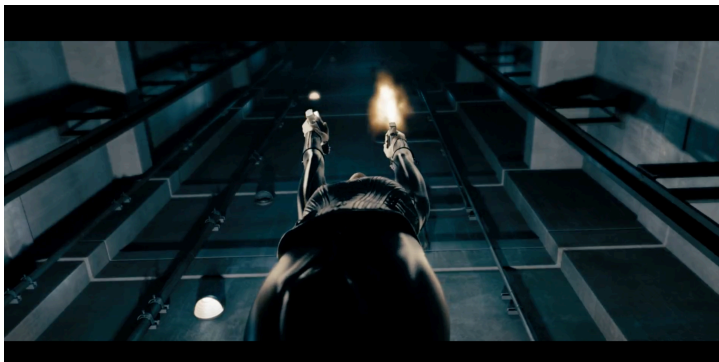
*Figures 7 and 8: Sebastian watching Selene enter Antigen.*

Another scene is when Quint (Kris Holden-Ried) breaks the elevator cables. The camera shows from high and below the POV of Selene shooting the elevator. Right before the elevator

comes down, the camera is at the feet of Selene, this makes the audience more focused on her, and thus identify with her.



*Figures 9 and 10: Selene shooting the elevator.*



*Figures 11 and 12: POV of Selene from the ground.*

Also, Selene's implication with Michael serves as a way to wake her up from her unconscious blindness, making her doubt the history of vampires as the victims. This also leads her to develop into a more complex character since "Michael awakens feelings in Selene, because he shows concern for her [...]" (Sherwood 43) but also it "can be interpreted as an uncomfortably conservative ending for such a strong female character" (46). This means that female action heroines are not portrayed in the same way as male heroes. The action hero is always the subject and the woman the object, as he cannot be constrained with a fixed relationship, he fools around with women. In contrast, when the action heroine becomes the

subject, her love interest does not become the object. Thus, Selene creates a deeper bond with Michael, culminating with her having his child, she worries and protects him at all costs. This idea aligns with postfeminist notions, women seeking successful careers and creating a family. And, the figure of Michael serves to make Selene evolve as a character, making her more human-like.



*Figure 13: Selene and Michael kissing.*

Another interesting character who defies the traditional system is Semira (Laura Pulver), who appears in the last film of the saga, *Underworld: Blood Wars*. She is portrayed as an ambitious woman who gets a place in the Council of the coven. In this film we see the empowerment of women; she uses Varga (Bradley James), a vampire warrior as a sexual object for her pleasure. This relationship can be compared with the first film, where Erika (Sophia Myles) tries to seduce Kraven, and thus gain power and status in the coven. Here, Erika is depicted as a submissive, stupid and young woman who just functions as entertainment for Kraven due to the fact that Selene ignores him. So, she is always following orders from Kraven. This is similar for Vargas, a young man satisfying an older woman who has the power. He is not allowed to think because he is just a tool for Semira. There is a subversion of gender roles in this

relationship. The difference between Erika and Semira is that the latter takes action and makes her way using her intelligence in the male sphere while the first one does not have agency despite having ambitions. However, in the end, Semira's lust for power makes her a threat to the patriarchal society and to the rightful heir, David, so she needs to be eliminated. Also, her power seems just an illusion because when Semira orders Varga to kill David, he does not obey. The villain's assistant rebels against her using the excuse of making the right decision to protect the leader of the Eastern coven, in this case, due to the fact that the one in power is a woman. The portrayal of empowered women in the films is ambivalent since Semira is considered not acceptable. She wants to have equal power as men in the Council but she is considered a threat to the patriarchal and vampire society and for the film audience. The ideology is thus closer to feminist discourse than those of the Fourth-Wave. Meanwhile, Erika is acceptable, she is ambitious but does not take action, thus does not get in the way of the patriarchal society. Therefore, these films are quite ambivalent or contradictory when addressing (post)feminist discourses.

### **3.3. Hypersexualization of the Female Body: Is It a Problem?**

As far as Selene has been analyzed with the notion of postfeminist views in the cinematic area, she stays in the same line with other action heroines for all the reasons mentioned above. Some negative aspects of the representation of Selene throughout the *Underworld* saga are the way she is stylized. Selene is dressed with high boots and a one-piece black leather clothing with a long cape which is tight and highlights her body figure. Many critics point that this costume is a way to sexualize her, just as Mulvey states "[t]raditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the

screen” (2006, 347). For Mulvey, in cinema one way to get pleasure for the male audience is through “scopophilia instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object)”, the male spectator projects its phantasy on the female figure which is considered “to-be-looked-at-ness” (346). It can be said that the male spectator views Selene fetishistically in an effort to minimize the "threat of castration" that women represent (348). The assertion of her power equal to that of men cannot justify her body being displayed sexually because she is reduced to the status of a purely erotic object for pleasure, completely undoing the long-term work of the second wavers to reject male objectification and create a female subjectivity (Chengting 31). Similarly, Ferriss, and Young (2008, 20) argue that the action heroine is “constructed more to appeal to young male audiences than to young women looking for female models of heroism”, therefore, the embodiment of the female characters’ bodies are tied to the conventional images and qualities of femininity. So, even if she exposes “the transgressive acts and characteristics she may show to the audience, she is still subject to the male gaze” (Chengting 30-31). Thus, Selene is seen as a regressive action heroine. However, for Frohreich “the film also rewrites the (white) female body as vampire and as post-feminist ‘girl power’ model” (2013, 39). This section will deal with the image of the hypersexualization of Selene’s body as a progressive female character rather than a regressive one.

In contrast, for other critics Selene’s portrayal in the skin-tight costume means “the power to enjoy her sexual body and being in a controlling position in romantic relationships” (Chengting 32). This discursive construction of women as powerful and seductive is closely related to the postfeminism narrative that is widely disseminated in the media and popular culture of the time. At the same time, Frohreich claims that “Selene refuses to play the role of the stereotypical elite female, she also eventually refuses to assist other vampires in their fight for

racial purity” (39). Furthermore, Selene refuses to wear the dress that Erika chose for her in order to go to the reunion with the Elders vampires. Even though she wears a tight-skin costume, her dislike to wear the dress is considered the rejection of the traditional ideals of women wearing dresses to be considered ‘properly’ feminine, we can see that in the coven all the female vampires wear extravagant dresses while she is the only one who wears a kind of a “military costume”. It is worth mentioning that at least her costume covers all her body, there is no skin-baring sight in the costumes as it can be seen in Alice from *Resident Evil* saga. Also, she is the only female vampire who fights against lycans to protect the coven, other women are always partying and succumbing to their desires. Hence, Selene’s appearance as “hyper-feminine with curvy bodies” and skin-tight clothing, [she] remain[s] stereotypically masculine in behavior” (Gibson 115). The fact that Selene is the “central protagonist in the action narrative, can clearly be seen to constitute the figure in the landscape, the position traditionally occupied by the male hero in classical cinema”. Likewise, “the powerful agency of the leading female provide[s] a strong active womanhood that has never been seen before” (Changting 31). Overall, Selene displays paradoxical qualities, a mixture of feminine and masculine strength. She possesses the same physical strength as her male counterparts and is adept at using highly advanced weapons in addition to having tactical awareness. Regardless of how she shows a sexualized feminine body with her latex clothing, “Selene is conceptualized as a powerful and progressive female agent” (Dominguez 41). McRobbie states that postfeminism stresses personal liberty and choice, showing women to be active participants in their lives (1). One can interpret Selene's decision to dress in a skin-tight outfit as a statement of her independence and self-determination. She makes conscious decisions about her looks, which is consistent with postfeminist ideas that emphasize individual agency and body autonomy. In *Underworld: Blood Wars* her costume and appearance

changes. After her resurrection, maintaining her signature style, Selene switches up her normal black cape for a long white coat with armor-like fur trim. Likewise her hair takes on lighter streaks. All these changes mirror her development to a more mature character throughout the saga. As analyzed before, Selene's choice not to wear a dress aligns with the ideas of a postfeminist woman, who chooses what to wear



*Figures 14 and 15: The change in Selene's outfit.*

## 7. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the construction of Selene as the protagonist of action films, it can be concluded that she supposes a change in the representation of female characters in action films within the contemporary context of postfeminism (first film) and Fourth-Wave of feminism (the entire saga). The first section of this dissertation has dealt with the analysis of Selene as a character who moves forward the story and how she is depicted with the same qualities that of male heroes. The second section examined Selene's rejection of the patriarchal society and making her empowered by her individual choice by killing Viktor. By making the audience immerse with her in the film by role-playing a videogame with the aid of camera placement and binoculars, makes her a well-developed female character in action films. Also, the analysis of Semira and Erika as potential characters reflect just a part of the ideals of postfeminist and the Fourth-Wave conceptions. The last section explored the hypersexualization of Selene's body and her choice not to wear dresses makes her the model of the ideals of postfeminism. She acts according to postfeminist and Third-Wave feminism lines. For future research, it would be interesting to analyze the evolution of other films of the saga in more depth with reference to Fourth-Wave feminism.

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