Molly Haskell, assessing the place of women in Hollywood in the mid-1970s, concluded her study *From Reverence to Rape* in the pessimistic tone set by the book’s title:

> Whether in the European or the American film, whether seen as sociological artefact or artistic creation, women, by the logistics of film production and the laws of Western society, generally emerge as the projections of male values. Whether as the product of one *auteur* or of the system . . . women are the vehicle of men’s fantasies, the ‘anima’ of the collective male unconscious, and the scapegoat of men’s fears.¹

Although this is not the place for a full survey of the shifting position of women – as actors and representations – in Hollywood film, some stocktaking is necessary, and the different ways in which critics (especially feminist critics) have recorded that history is crucial. In the same way, the discussion of early modern drama in this study concentrates almost exclusively on the tragic genre, so the parallel analysis of cinema will be largely restricted to violent film, a wide-ranging categorisation that has to incorporate the diverse genres of action, adventure and horror. Since the subject matter of this section will include a number of films where fear, fantasy and gender intersect (mirroring the preoccupations of the early modern tragedies discussed above), the work of Mulvey, Haskell and Kuhn is particularly relevant to the discussion that follows.

The writings of feminist film critics of the 1970s, whether in the psychoanalytically-inflected work of Laura Mulvey, the structuralist study by Claire Johnston, or the more materialist Marxism of Annette Kuhn, brought to light the ubiquity of Hollywood misogyny. Although
the specifically psychoanalytic perspectives are less crucial to my own methodology, Mulvey’s ideas of the active/passive binary, male anxiety, and fetishisation are crucial: they are elements that, as I have argued in the preceding chapter, are foundational to early modern revenge tragedy. In her essay ‘Defacing the Feminine in Renaissance Tragedy’, Sara Eaton attempts to implement Mulvey’s ideas directly, suggesting that ‘in the plays [of the period] most widely read, anthologised, staged and subsequently taught, women, acted by boys, are fetishized and represent constructs of desire’. There might be suspicions about Mulvey’s totalising approach – what allowance is made for resistance on the part of the female spectator? What about a feminist-inflected male gaze, or the non-heterosexual gaze? – but it remains nevertheless a vital critical paradigm. The emergence of the female action hero/-ine in the 1990s has complicated the debate still further, but despite these wider cultural shifts the misogyny identified by the feminists of the 1970s persists in many contemporary representations of women in Hollywood today. While taking into account historical differences and the different media (with the crucial absence, in the theatre, of the camera to direct the spectator’s gaze), there are a number of cross-currents between contemporary violent film and early modern tragedy that allow consolidation and expansion of the tentative connections Eaton has suggested.

In the early years of the new millennium, we are undoubtedly in an era of much greater and more widespread female emancipation – in many ways, Straw Dogs is, like the plays I have discussed, of another era. However, a report by Amnesty International, published in 2004 and spearheading a campaign to stop violence against women, unveiled often deeply shocking statistics that warn us of the dangers of complacency: one in three women worldwide has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime; domestic violence remains the major cause of death or disability for women aged 16–44; in the USA, women accounted for 85 per cent of victims of domestic violence in 1999; and in the UK one incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute. In the year 2000, the UN Population Fund estimated that there are 5,000 so-called ‘honour killings’ each year – instances of a woman being killed for her actual or perceived immoral behaviour, often involving marriage to a partner deemed unsuitable (often for religious reasons) by her family. Amnesty argues that gender-based violence is neither ‘natural’ nor ‘inevitable’ but is rather ‘an expression of historically and culturally specific values and standards’, based on historically unequal power relations and cultural ideology.