



This image as well as the other images in the article were sourced from: <http://www.foxmovies.com/sitemap>

THE HEAT (2013): ARE NARCISSISTIC CHARACTERS IN FILM “FUNNY”?

Douglas Gosse



ABSTRACT

The Heat stars Sandra Bullock as uptight FBI agent Sarah Ashburn, who is paired with a coarse Boston detective, Shannon Mullins, played by Melissa McCarthy, to capture a drug lord. This quintessential odd couple, forced to work together in Boston, display character traits that exemplify narcissism, racism, ablebodism, and sexism (both misandry and misogyny). I pinpoint and destabilize The Heat’s superficial appropriation of feminism via critique of Ashburn and Mullins’ outrageous behaviours and actions. Their narcissism, entailing self-interest, ruthless competition, and scorn of those marginalized—eventually binds the crime fighters together. Stemming from a long line of films that purport to repudiate the patriarchy, The Heat actually reinstates capitalist and hegemonic principles. Under a shallow feminist veneer, The Heat further reflects a North America pop cultural trend of upholding a modern version of professional womanhood that disdains men, while paradoxically elevating women who embrace uncivilized and narcissistic behaviors as heroic sisters.

Keywords: capitalism, narcissism, sexism, misogyny, misandry, racism, ablebodism

INTRODUCTION

Written by Kate Dippold, and directed by Paul Feig, who also directed the sophomoric 40 Year Old Virgin (2005) and Bridesmaids (2011), *The Heat* (2013) stars Sandra Bullock as uptight FBI agent Sarah Ashburn, who is paired with coarse Boston detective Shannon Mullins (Melissa McCarthy), to capture a drug lord, Simon Larkin, and his henchman, Julian Vincent. Since its June 2013 release, *The Heat* has grossed over \$230 million from a \$43 million budget. *The Heat* highlights a modern cinematic penchant for disdaining men but in doing so, reimagines Ashburn and Mullins as prototypical patriarchal males — controlling, violent, obnoxious, and ruthless.

Not surprisingly, the soundtrack, “Sittin’ on a rainbow”, was co-authored by songwriter Gail Delta Collins (1941-2013), who shot and killed her husband Felix Pappalardi on April 17, 1983. Collins was convicted of criminally negligent homicide rather than murder. The judge admonished the jury for their gullibility. Sentenced to four years in prison, Collins served only two. Tethered on its girl-woman power predecessors, from *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *I shot Andy Warhol* (1996) to *Kill Bill: The Whole Bloody Affair* (2011), at least *The Heat* (2013) does not justify killing male characters in response to female oppression. Rather, and just as problematically, Ashburn and Mullins mercilessly humiliate men, women, and each other in the movie. Puig (2013) graciously allots that, “The formulaic male-dominated genre needed some gender diversity. This action comedy pairing Melissa McCarthy with Sandra Bullock is no less predictable, but it’s bawdier and funnier than most of its masculine counterparts.” Bullock and McCarthy had leeway to ad lib from Dippold’s script, and McCarthy dove in. However, *The Heat* exceeds vulgarity to become a carnival of pathological speech and acts.

In her squalid apartment, Mullin keeps a fridge filled with weapons, including a grenade, a combat knife, a Marlin 1894CB rifle, a Smith & Wesson Model 59 pistol, a FN PS90 personal defense weapon, an AK-47 rifle, and a Browning Auto-5 shotgun. Mullins and Ashburn arm themselves and become “the heat”, rogue law enforcers, when both are taken off the case for their reckless behaviour.

James (2012, p. 5) says “assholes” systematically allow themselves to enjoy special advantages out of an entrenched sense of entitlement, and are immunized by their sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people. While Mullins shows loyalty towards her Irish Catholic

community and family, and the dedicated yet isolationist Ashburn hankers for a promotion in the male-dominated FBI, both frequently behave like “jerks” or “assholes.” Indeed, Ashburn and Mullins are noteworthy for their dominance, arrogance, superiority, power seeking, and disregard of others, traits which are also indicative of narcissistic personality disorder (Ronningstam, 2011).

SARAH ASHBURN

Early in the movie Ashburn’s boss, Hale (Demián Bichir), tells her that he’s received “countless complaints of arrogance, and competitiveness...showmanship”, narcissistic traits (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) which Ashburn carries over in her new Boston assignment. When Ashburn arrives at the Boston precinct of Captain Woods (Thomas F. Wilson), she imperiously demands to curtail established custom, and immediately interrogates the prisoner brought in by Mullins, who is absent:

Ashburn: Frankly, it doesn’t matter. I have jurisdiction and every second we stand here is interfering with a federal investigation. So open his cell and be so kind as to show me to an interrogation room.

Ashburn comports herself as “the big wheel”, oblivious to local politics, and autonomous in her investigation, for she looks down on others. They are inferior and seen as a hindrance to her expertise and efficiency.

Ashburn has a sense of grandiosity. She is confident she can best optimize resolving her cases alone. She calls her boss, Hale, to have Mullins suspended or sequestered rather than trying to work with her. Indeed, women in management and organization “often are not friends, do not cooperate and do not support each other” (Mavin & Williams, 2013, p. 178), contrary to popular beliefs that women have a more collegial leadership style and work ethic. Later, a medic chastises Ashburn for performing an unnecessary emergency tracheostomy on a man in a diner, when he simply needed a piece of pancake removed from his mouth. Most revealingly, towards the end of the movie, Ashburn sends Mullin’s brother, Jason (Michael Rapaport), a reformed drug dealer, into the criminal fold as a mole, impervious to Mullin’s concerns for his safety. Jason is shot and ends up in hospital in an induced coma. Ashburn presents herself as an expert in all things, and above

everyone, for “the end justifies the means” to obtain her coveted promotion.

She is a classic narcissist.

It is revealed that she grew up in foster care, to perhaps explain her trouble forming attachments with other people, and to garner sympathy from viewers. The divorced Ashburn’s sole companion, Pumpkin, a cat, actually belongs to a neighbour.

SHANNON MULLINS

Shannon Mullins’ mother, known only as Mrs. Mullins (Jane Curtin), is distant and antagonistic towards her. Mrs. Mullins gives her daughter the finger when driving by her in the street. In *The Heat*, there are multiple allusions to Mullins’ promiscuity and inability to form enduring romantic attachments, also characteristic of narcissism. Attachment theorists believe that the initial bond between caregivers and children plays a pivotal role in determining future adult intimacy, and is linked to narcissistic defense mechanisms, including a tendency towards suspicion of other people, hypersensitivity, a sense of entitlement, and a desire for dominance (Smolewska & Dion, 2005), traits typified by Ashburn and Mullins.

The narcissist’s modus operandi entails lack of respect for authority, disdain for procedure, short cuts, and disregard for other people’s feelings, contributions, or welfare, except when it suits their own purposes. Mullins is unmoved when people indignantly glare, or dare to complain about her outrageous behaviours and rants, which most don’t since she is a bully, and intimidates them. While Ashburn is unmitigatedly arrogant, competitive, and lacking in social skills, in particular, it is Mullins who showcases traits that are racist, ableist, and sexist. With Ashburn sometimes following her lead to a lesser but still problematic degree, Mullins is completely comfortable flouting accepted social conventions, thereby additionally conforming to James’ (2012, pp. 5-7) definition of an “asshole.”

RACISM

Terrell Rojas (actor-comic Spoken Reasons), one of few African American characters in *The Heat*, is stereotypically portrayed as a local pimp, extortionist, and small-time drug dealer, who

has possible ties to kingpin mobster Larkin. Mullin chases him and hits him with her car. She then chases him over a fence and tackles him to the ground. They have the following exchange:

Rojas: Lady, what the hell did you throw at me? *Mullins:* A watermelon. *Rojas:* A watermelon! Oh, hell! Ah, see, I told you, you was a racist!

Mullins then warns him, “Shut up before I feed you watermelon. Get up!” *The Heat* uses watermelon as a racist trope (Black, 2014), a longstanding pop cultural symbol of black people’s perceived uncleanliness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence.

In another scene, Mullins and Ashburn hoist Rojas upside down by his legs over a fire escape, threatening to release him if he does not provide information. They drop him.



With so many cases of racial profiling and brutality towards African Americans à la Rodney King (Rabinowitz, 2015), this violence is disturbing, and indicative of widespread racialized misandry.

Furthermore, Mullins tells Hispanic Bureau Chief Hale, “You’re not my boss, Puss in Boots,” referring to the Spanish-speaking cat played by Antonio Banderas in the 2011 film of the same name.

Minorities are mocked in *The Heat*.

ABLEBODISM

Equally appalling, disability is up for guffaws *The Heat*:

Ashburn: I'm a Federal Agent. I'm a special agent, I work...*Gina* (Jessica Chaffin): Special like retarded? *Ashburn*: Well, we don't use that word, we say, 'special needs'. But I...I have a very high IQ.

Mullins calls a male medic a “fucktard”.

Early in *The Heat*, Ashburn is seen in her apartment, cuddling with Pumpkin (her neighbour's cat, for she has no real friends), watching television. Ashburn flickers through *Foul Play* and *The Matrix Reloaded*, both movies featuring male albino villains terrorizing female characters, foreshadowing that there will be an albino misogynist in *The Heat*. When Mullin and Ashburn meet Special Agent Craig Garrett (Dan Bakkedahl), DEA, Mullins says, “What the hell is that?” to which Ashburn replies, “I don't know.” Mullins tells him, “You look evil as shit” and “Your wife must be a five-pound bag of flour with a hole in it.” She says, “Fuck you, chalk balls” and calls him “Fucking snow cone.” When Ashburn's car gets blown up, Mullins says, “I know when I smell a fucking albino rat!”

A pop cultural trope has arisen in recent years in movies—that of the “evil albino” (Simmons, Falto-Aizpurua, Griffith, & Nouri, 2015). The evil albino has pale skin, platinum blonde hair, and blue or red eyes. In *The Heat*, he is also misogynist. However, albinism is a genetic condition, characterized by a lack of melanin and the absence of pigment in skin, hair, and eyes. In keeping with *Foul Play* (1978), *End of Days* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), *I Am Legend* (2007), and the *Harry Potter* movies, *The Heat* equates albinism with evil but also targets this genetic disorder for ridicule.

SEXISM

Sexist ridicule towards both male and female characters runs rampant throughout *The Heat*. Misogyny is a favourite choice for mirth. For instance, Mullins tells Ashburn, “My fear is that I'm gonna put you in a bikini and you'll still look like a fucking bank teller” adding that the way

Ashburn dresses is a “boner killer.”



Dressed in business attire, Ashburn is often targeted for her so-called “unfeminine” appearance. This comes to a peak when Ashburn visits Mullins’ family, and Mullins’ brothers’ girlfriends. Beth (Jamie Denbo), asks her, “Are you a boy or a girl?” to which one of Mullins’ brothers adds, “From the get go? No operation?” Beth then asks Ashburn, “How you get that close a shave on your face?” Apparently, to be a “real” woman, one must slather on make up, wear skin tight clothes, and sport big hair, like Gina and Beth the girlfriends of Mullin’s brothers, and Tatiana Krumula (Kaitlin Olson), a Bulgarian drug distributor.

Ashburn is analogous to “a woman in drag”, and therefore privy to heterosexist censure by other characters. Ashburn was raised in foster care, while Mullins was raised with her brothers, who she says all turned out “terrible”. Neither has a female friend. Thus, both are portrayed as ersatz males, and this is implied as a feeble excuse for their over the top machismo and lack of “normalcy”.

In another scene, Mullins and Ashburn have this exchange:

Ashburn: I'm gonna say this one more time. Stand down, Officer. *Mullins:* Fuck off, Officer. *Ashburn:* Oh, okay. Guess what? Now you've really done it. I'm going to call my boss. *Mullins:* You do that, tattle-tits! Fuckin' narc!

Likewise, Mullins tries to pawn Ashburn off to a man she dated:

Mullins: Her lady business is like an old dirty attic. Full of broken Christmas lights and like shoes and shit. Why don't you clean THAT out for her? *Ashburn:* Uh, that's a... that's a misrepresentation of my vagina.

At her family house, regarding his girlfriend, Mullins warns her brother, “You tell Gina to shut her mouth before I strangle her on the dinner table!”

If a ‘real’ man were to say such things, it’d be misogynist and unacceptable, but when a mannish woman says them, we’re supposed to laugh?

In North American culture, misandry is often presented as legally and morally acceptable (Nathanson & Young, 2001), which may explain the contempt towards male characters such as Craig Garrett, Rojas, the detectives’ friends and foes, even superior officers. Early in the movie, Mullins makes a show of looking around her Captain’s office for his “balls” when she doesn’t get her way. She calls an officer “motherfucker” (a favourite expletive throughout the movie) and a perp a “piece of shit”.

Julian Vincent (Michael McDonald) is the second-in-command of Larkin's organization. During interrogation, Mullins plays Russian roulette with Julian’s genitalia to get him to talk. Towards the end of the film, Ashburn shoots DEA Agent Simon Adam (Taran Killam), who is in fact the mastermind, Simon Larkin, twice in the crotch.

There is no subtlety regarding Freudian laced hatred of the male phallus in *The Heat*, and the ideological feminist triumph over patriarchy it represents. In bringing down the bad guys, and overcoming the bad [male] cops, Mullins and Ashburn have become “sisters”, a message which Mullins scrawls in Ashburn’s high school yearbook. Mullins gets a distinguished service award, and although Ashburn does not get her promotion, she happily settles into a position in Boston to continue fighting crime. In reality, both would likely have been fired and charged with multiple crimes, since they acted while suspended.

Narcissists do not follow the rules, and America celebrates this phenomenon, with the most self-absorbed celebrities being female reality TV stars (Taylor, 2011). The number of youth classified as narcissists has doubled in the past 3 decades, and is now held to be about thirty percent, so many youthful viewers may identify with the selfishness, self-importance, and disregard for others, embodied by Ashburn and Mullins.

What else may account for *The Heat*'s success and popularity?

Katie Dippold won the Best Comedic Screenplay at the American Comedy Awards (2014) but as Paul Travers (July 8, 2013) notes, "The subtext in the all-over-the-place script by Katie Dippold is that women can behave just as boorishly as guys. Point taken, but that point gets tired very quickly."

Could it be that in an age of political correctness, *The Heat* allows viewers to be irreverent for 117 minutes?

The Heat does show how both men and women may conform to being "assholes", inflicting racism, sexism, and ablebodism, for example. Because misandry is more tolerated than misogyny in society, the fact that Mullins and Ashburn are women may underscore their vile behaviours, particularly towards male characters. That Ashburn and Mullins behave in narcissistic ways—opportunistic, cunning, obnoxious, and isolationist, may be mitigated by a prevalent ideological feminism notion of the glass ceiling—tacit yet unbreakable barriers supposedly limited to women and minorities attempting to rise through the ranks in institutional hierarchy, in this case, law enforcement.

However, *The Heat* does not merely replicate, but exemplify, negative traits commonly associated with patriarchal males in pop culture. Mullins is particularly racist, ableist, and sexist. Archie Bunker, the quintessential parody of a male chauvinist pig, comes across as a puppy dog in comparison. Ostensibly encouraging us to excuse their extreme incivility by being women in male-dominated law enforcement, Ashburn proffers, "Being a woman in this field is hard. Men are just so intimidated by me" but as Morgenstern (July 27, 2015) observes:

Mullins's insanity can be extremely funny from time to time, but her anger grows as punishing for the audience as it does for the victims of her unrestrained police work, and Ms. Bullock is more to be pitied than censored in her thankless role of straight woman to a garrulous psychopath.

Both Mullins and Ashburn have difficulties sustaining satisfying relationships. They are overbearing, manipulative, hypersensitive, self-important, and braggarts, fitting multiple characteristics of narcissism, if not psychopathy. This might be partially explained by examining the phenomenon of power in capitalist society, as portrayed in movies, such as *The Heat*. According to bell hooks (2004, p. 55):

As women have gained the right to be patriarchal men in drag, women are engaging in acts of violence similar to those of their male counterparts. This serves to remind us that the will to use violence is really not linked to biology but to a set of expectations about the nature of power in a dominator culture.

As the old adage goes, “Two wrongs do not make a right.” Boorish behaviour is boorish behaviour, whatever the sex or gender of the offender.

In the real world, neither Mullins nor Ashburn would have received accolades for their insubordination but the North American public glorifies Thelma and Louise-type anti-heroines. In pop culture, as in much academic literature of an ideological feminist nature, a gynocentric stance permits largely unfettered attacks on men, as a homogeneous group. Men are equated with evil and women with goodness. The idea that Mullins and Ashburn are rebelling against a patriarchal glass ceiling in law enforcement may not only excuse their abhorrent behaviours but also gain viewers' applause. When we all “know” that women are subjugated in male dominated professions, and that women are all inherently good, it may become impossible for many viewers to process that Ashburn and Mullins are “assholes” or narcissists. This knowledge is not bearable.

They are merely fighting against “the man.”

On a redeeming note, perhaps *The Heat* allows audience members to laugh at tense situations in a capitalist workplace, where an increasing number of narcissists and sociopaths run rampant, and workers have little recourse? A number of books have been written on this phenomenon, including *Bullying: From backyard to boardroom* (McCarthy, Rylance, Bennett, & Zimmerman, 2001), *The no asshole rule: Building a civilized workplace and surviving one that isn't* (Sutton, 2007), *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement* (Twenge & Campbell, 2009), and *Assholes: A theory* (James, 2012).

Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy are talented actors, beloved by millions of fans, and within the movie industry. Certainly, Bullock and McCarthy wholly invest in their ridiculous roles as Ashburn and Mullins. *The Heat* captured the People's Choice Awards (2014) for Best Comedic Movie. For her role as Ashburn, The Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards (2014) nominated Bullock for Best Actress in a Comedy, while The Women Film Critics Circle Awards (2013) hailed McCarthy as Best Comedic Actress in her role as Mullins.

Fortunately, The Alliance of Women Film Journalists (2013) saw fit to nominate McCarthy for the EDA (Eda Reiss Merin) Award for Actress Most in Need of a New Agent for her 2013 roles in *Identity Thief* and *The Heat*.

There is some common sense, after all.

Overall Rating (1/5): Watching *The Heat* is like going to a junior high school improvisation night, catching your kids mouthing off and behaving like beasts, and wanting to yank them off the stage, only to sit paralysed in utter embarrassment.

The Heat is demeaning, sending a message that narcissism is acceptable and funny when the protagonists are women. To achieve gender parity, we need to acknowledge that both women and men in positions of power can show strong collegial and leadership skills, or paradoxically behave like "assholes". We need to question the celebration of narcissism in cinema, and problematize what this says about our cultural norms and values, including racism, ablebodism, misogyny, and misandry.

REFERENCES

- Black, W. (2014, December 8). How watermelons became a racist trope: Before its subversion in the Jim Crow era, the fruit symbolized black self-sufficiency, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/>
- Hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- James, A. (2012). *Assholes: A theory*. New York: Doubleday.
- Mavin, S., & Williams, J. (2013). Women's impact on women's careers in management: Queen bees, female misogyny, negative intra-relations and solidarity behaviours. In S. Vinnicombe (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Promoting Women's Careers* (pp. 178-195). Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- McCarthy, P., Rylance, J., Bennett, R., & Zimmerman, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Bullying: From backyard to boardroom* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, N.S.W.: Millennium Books.
- Morgenstern, J. (July 27, 2015). The Heat, *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323419604578571511433528452>
- Nathanson, P., & Young, K. (2001). *Spreading Misandry, The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Puig, C. (2013, June 28). 'The Heat' throws women into the buddy-cop mix, *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2013/06/27/the-heat-review/2367063/>
- Rabinowitz, P. (2015). Street/Crime: From Rodney King's Beating to Michael Brown's Shooting. *Cultural Critique*, 90, 143-147.
- Ronningstam, E. (2011). Narcissistic personality disorder: A clinical perspective. *Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 17(2), 89-99.
- Simmons, B. J., Falto-Aizpurua, L. A., Griffith, R. D., & Nouri, K. (2015). The portrayal of albinism in pop culture: A 360° change from previous ideology. *JAMA Dermatology*, 151(3), 258.
- Smolewska, K., & Dion, K. L. (2005). Narcissism and adult attachment: A multivariate approach. *Self and Identity*, 4(1), 59-68.
- Sutton, R. I. (2007). *The no asshole rule: Building a civilized workplace and surviving one that isn't* (1st ed.). New York: Business Plus/Hachette Business Group.
- Taylor, J. (Producer). (2011). Narcissism is alive and well in America: Is narcissism in America an epidemic? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-prime/201105/narcissism-is-alive-and-well-in-america>
- Travers, P. (July 8, 2013). The Heat, *The Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/the-heat-20130708>
- Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2009). *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement* (1st Free Press hardcover ed.). New York: Free Press.

AUTHOR PROFILE



Douglas Gosse is a professor in the Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario, Canada. He is a critic of documentaries, movies, and popular culture.

Contact details: douglasg@nipissingu.ca

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL (NMS) IS AN OPEN ACCESS ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FACING BOYS AND MEN WORLDWIDE.

THIS JOURNAL USES OPEN JOURNAL SYSTEMS 2.3.4.0, WHICH IS OPEN SOURCE JOURNAL MANAGEMENT AND PUBLISHING SOFTWARE DEVELOPED, SUPPORTED, AND FREELY DISTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE PROJECT UNDER THE GNU GENERAL PUBLIC LICENSE.

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTP://NEWMALESTUDIES.COM](http://newmalestudies.com)