



## [Haywire](#) and female action heroes

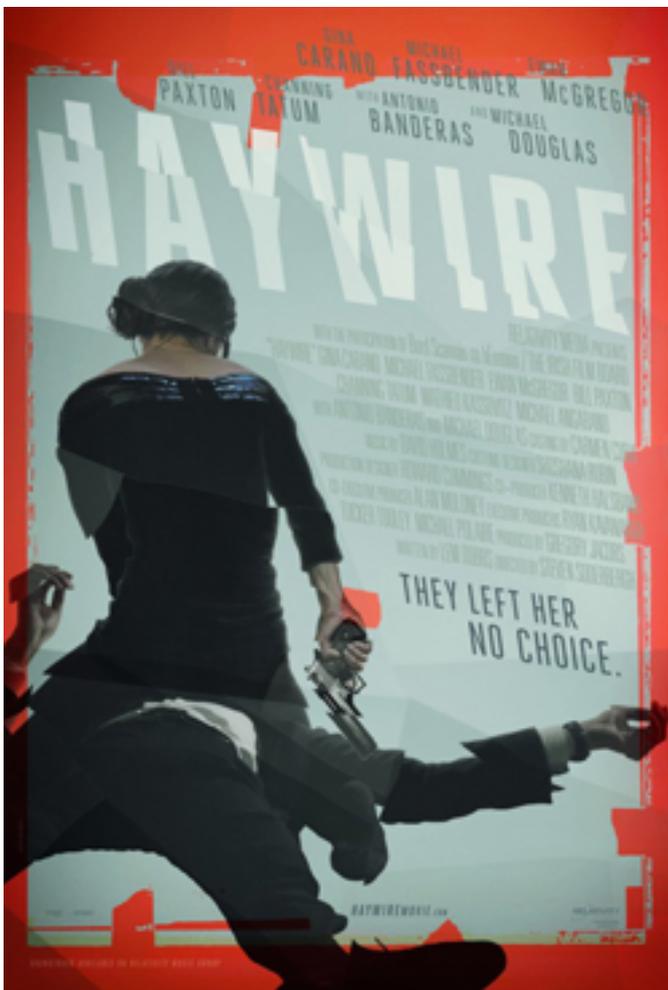
Reviewed by [Ian Betts](#) January 2012

**Gina Carano** is an extraordinary woman: star of American Gladiators and professional Mixed Martial Arts, she's a lethal purveyor of rib-busting kicks and jaw-shattering blows. Undefeated until her recent encounter with Cristiane 'Cyborg' Santos (has since been accused of steroid use), **Carano** is known for her untarnished good looks, indomitable grit and killer moves such as the 'rear-naked chokehold'.

She's no lady... well, not in the Victorian sense of the word. She was recently quoted as saying, "I think everybody should get punched in the face once in a while just to, like, wake them up, you know?"

In fact, Carano represents a new kind of woman, who despite fighting in a cage seems no longer bound by old-fashioned notions of gender. So it's not surprising that she's now found her way on to the big screen. Gentlemen, beware: this is one woman ready to take on the masculine world of action movies and teach them a lesson in limb-cracking sadism.

And that's exactly what she does in Haywire, Steven Soderbergh's latest film. Brutal and belligerent, Carano stars as Mallory Kane, an assassin contracted out by Kenneth (Ewan McGregor) to do the dirty work of various government and law enforcement agencies. She spends the film despatching her male co-stars with bone-crunching combinations of knees, elbows and thigh-throttling choke moves, the fights all being filmed in real time so that you experience both her violent dynamism and cold-hearted efficiency as a military-trained contract killer: vases crash into faces, necks are broken against shelves and Mallory glowers menacingly in contemplation of her next male victim.



Speaking of which, McGregor stars alongside established names like Michael Douglas, Bill Paxton, Channing Tatum, Antonio Banderas and the chilling Michael Fassbender; I won't spoil the story by saying which of them fall foul to her hand-to-hand onslaught, but be sure that this is Carano's film and no man can better such a robust and muscular combatant.

It's an equally well-executed piece of cinema. As you'd expect from Soderbergh, the narrative is slick and efficient; recalling the upbeat exposition of the Ocean's series, an early montage of post-it notes, newspaper clippings and surveillance footage is used to introduce the ominous Barcelona mission while the austere colour filters that we saw in *Traffic* lend the cinematography a steel-cold realism, something echoed in the coincidental nature of the locations where each showdown takes place.

There are neat storytelling tricks, such as the confidant that Kane kidnaps to bandage her arm and take her version of events to the authorities; timely flashbacks establish the heroine's good reasons to be disgruntled with potent, brow-filled close-ups that remind us of *The Limey*, the director's other collaboration with writer Lem Dobbs where Terrence Stamp's aging cockney gangster seeks revenge for his daughter's death.

And while it's interesting to see this character type played out as a female, can we consider this a breakthrough for women? Certainly, Carano's character is the main agent for change in the film, something that would refute Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' that suggested women were only treated as objects in commercial cinema. It seems time, and movies, have moved on.

Yet although Kane bludgeons her way through this world of violence successfully, it is still a man's world that she must conquer. 'I don't wear the dress,' she grizzles, before showing up in a particularly sparkly one in the very next scene - looking as elegant and as chiselled as they come. Kane still plays the spy game according to the rules that men have set, which is for the best, considering there are no other prominent female characters in this film.

In fact, most of the time Kane behaves like the men she vanquishes. Later on, McGregor's Kenneth bears the task of explaining the high-on-intrigue, low-on-detail plot and warns that, 'you shouldn't think of her as being a woman. That would be a mistake.' As we pursue Mallory Kane across Europe and back into the U.S. in order to clear her name, you get the feeling that this is no more than another Bourne story being replayed with a female in the driving seat.

Funnily enough, Haywire isn't the first Hollywood film to put a female lead in the stereotypical action hero role. Angelina Jolie botoxed her way through **Salt**, a poor-woman's attempt at a Bourne/Bond-esque lone-spy thriller, while Joe Wright took it a step further by unleashing a 16 year-old assassin in Hanna. You can't help but feel a clichéd genre is being constantly rehashed with increasingly younger girls at the helm just to squeeze some more cash from the limited premises it supports.

While putting women in these roles may seem relatively progressive to producers in Hollywood, the goal remains to entrance audiences with the same cocktail of sex, violence and explosions. These movies continue to exploit and objectify women.

Taking it to the extreme is the film **Kick-Ass**, where an 11 year-old vigilante named **Hit Girl** calls a drug dealer the c-word before slicing off his limbs. In an ironic reinvention of the superhero genre, these scenes play as sarcastic eye candy, but you wonder why the narrative relies on the same genre conventions and audience gratifications that it aims to satirise. Call me cynical, but I think it's pretty unlikely that action or superhero films will ever provide a credible discourse on post-feminist gender roles by seeking to please the same audiences as their predecessors.

