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# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

“My baby shot me down”: Gender Violence and  
Survival Energy in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*  
(2003, 2004)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“‘Revenge is a dish best served cold’—Old Klingon Proverb”. This reference to the popular television series *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1968) is placed at the beginning of Quentin Tarantino’s 4<sup>th</sup> feature film, *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004). On the soundtrack we hear some agitated breathing that will soon be revealed as coming from character of Beatrix “The Bride” Kiddo (Uma Thurman). The next shot is a black-and-white close-up of a “blood-spattered” Beatrix in a bridal dress. An unidentified male character tells her that he is not being sadistic but masochistic, since he is actually hurting himself by killing her. The female character replies “Bill, it’s your baby”, and he shoots her in the head. This opening scene encapsulates the revenge motif at the heart of *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *2*. The second volume’s<sup>1</sup> initial sequence is essentially the same. The dialogue is replayed over a close-up of The Bride just before Bill (David Carradine) fires his gun at her. This time the scene is followed by a shot of Beatrix, also in black and white, driving a convertible and telling us that she is on her way to “kill Bill”. When the movies were released in 2003 and 2004, Uma Thurman’s character was soon labelled as a feminist icon—after all, *Kill Bill* has at its centre a woman that takes revenge on the patriarchal system that has tried to kill her. Thurman’s Beatrix became a feminist heroine or, as Peter Bradshaw put it, a “warrior queen, martial arts mom”.

However, what was—and still is—to many a feminist icon, has recently started to be read as a textual representation of misogyny and the patriarchal oppression of women. One of the most important landmarks in this direction is Uma Thurman’s denunciation of mistreatment on the part of the movie’s executive producer, Harvey Weinstein, and the director himself, Quentin Tarantino (see Dowd). While the article’s subtitle—“The

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<sup>1</sup> The movie was written as a single film but then released as a film in two parts: *Kill Bill Vol.1* (2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004).

actress is finally ready to talk about Harvey Weinstein” (ibid)—suggests that the piece is about Weinstein’s sexual harassment, what emerges from the article is that what actually hurt Thurman the most was Tarantino’s abuse. As she puts it: “I had really always felt a connection to the greater good in my work with Quentin and most of what I allowed to happen to me and what I participated in was kind of like a horrible mud wrestle with a very angry brother. But at least I had some say, you know? [...] Until the crash.” (ibid). Here, she is referring to a car accident she had because Tarantino forced her to do her own stunts in *Kill Bill*. When Thurman asked Tarantino to give her the filmic proof of the crash so that she could sue the producers, he refused.

It is true that Tarantino’s abuse of Thurman was not a sex-related kind of abuse. In fact, it looks closer to the “anything-for-the-sake-of-art” type of abuse, the one that happens when a director pushes an actor to the point of psychological breakdown and/or physical damage—as was the case, for instance, of Alfred Hitchcock and Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* (1963) and of Stanley Kubrick and Shelley Duvall in *The Shining* (1980). According to Thurman, it was the director himself, not an actor, that pretended to strangle her and spitted on her in some of the scenes. This revelation was read by many as a type of patriarchal abuse. Film actor Jessica Chastain commented on the “incident” in her Twitter account: “[d]irectors inserting themselves into a scene depicting abuse is crossing a boundary. How can an actor feel safe when your director is strangling you?” (Nordine). Thurman herself described the breakdown of her friendship with the director in similar terms in the interview mentioned above, “This Is Why Uma Thurman Is Angry” (Dowd):

Personally, it has taken me 47 years to stop calling people who are mean to you ‘in love’ with you. It took a long time because I think that as little girls we are conditioned to believe that cruelty and love somehow have a connection and that is like the sort of era that we need to evolve out of. (ibid)

Many have recently tried to save the movie from these attacks on its director, or at least to protect its feminist potential. This is the case of Kate Erbland's "The Feminist Legacy of 'Kill Bill' Never Belonged to Quentin Tarantino" and *The Take's* "Kill Bill's The Bride: A Feminist Hero?". Both pieces are aware of the controversies regarding the film's status as a feminist text but still find the feminist potential of the film in the character of The Bride, a claim shared by Thurman herself. According to Erbland, Thurman has declared that some women had told her that "the film helped them in their lives, whether they were feeling oppressed or struggling or had a bad boyfriend or felt badly about themselves, that that film released in them some survival energy that was helpful".

The aim of this essay is not to decide whether *Kill Bill* is a feminist film or an anti-feminist one. What this essay will try to do is to explore the feminist potential of the film—that is, the "survival energy" Thurman referred to—in the context of today's #MeToo Era and what is now being called the fourth wave of feminism. This essay starts with an introduction to the feminist waves up until the #MeToo Era. This is followed by a section on Tarantino's relationship with feminism. The analysis of the film is divided in three parts. Sections 1 and 2 are devoted to the analysis of two specific scenes that I think are especially relevant in the context of contemporary feminism, namely, the scene in which Beatrix is buried alive and manages to escape and her final confrontation with Bill. Section 3 addresses some of the film's problematics in the context of contemporary feminism, more specifically in relation to motherhood and individualism.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. FEMINISM(S)

Feminism is a complex concept. Second-wave feminist writer bell hooks defines it as follows: “[s]imply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression” (qtd. in Boyle 8). Beyond this, there has been disagreement as to how to end this sexist inequality, and even as to what really defines (or should define) women. In this sense, Boyle refers to the metaphor of “feminist waves” as “understanding feminism *in* movement: a feminist theory which is itself continually being refined and contested, not least in response to internal and external critique” (9). This division of feminism in waves is now widely agreed upon. It classifies feminism “into three ‘attitudes’ or ‘generations’” (Spencer 298)—some even talk about a fourth wave (Boyle 10) in relation to the feminist revival that has happened especially in the realm of social media in the last decade, also known as #MeToo feminism (see Abrahams and Boyle).

The first wave or generation is generally located throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Generally speaking, it was concerned with women’s civil rights and responded to women’s exclusion “from political, social, public and economic life” (Gillis et al. xxi). This first wave gave rise, among other things, to the suffrage movement, which culminated in some parts of the Western world when in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some women won the right to vote. According to Phillips and Cree, first-wave feminists defended that men and women were “equal but different” (10). First wave feminism never tried to speak for all women. In fact, it was placed within the realm of educated—that is, upper-class—white women, which accounts for some of the problems contemporary feminisms find in the first wave.

The second wave started in the 1960s when some groups of women realised that, despite having been politically equated to men, substantial change had not really taken

place (Phillips and Cree 11). Second wave feminists focused on issues that specifically impacted on women's lives such as reproduction, sexual violence, domestic labour and expressions of sexuality (Gillis et al. xxi). At the same time, there also started to be "a growing recognition of differences between women; women were not all the same, and it became increasingly clear that white, middle class, able-bodied feminists had ignored what became referred to as 'the contradictions of oppression'" (Phillips and Cree 12). This gave way to the rise of third wave feminism.

Third wave feminism started as a kind of opposition to the former generation. This oppositional attitude has been criticised by some, who state that third wave feminists have been "extremely eager to define their feminism as something 'different' from previous feminisms" (see Gillis et al. xxii). Based on postmodernism and poststructuralism (Phillips and Cree 12; Gillis et al. xxv), third wave feminists "prefer contradiction, multiplicity and difference" (Gillis et al. xxiv), and see former feminisms as "rigid" (xxv) and "divisive rather than dialogic" (ibid). The negative vision on the previous generation has also dangerously aligned it with a kind of anti-feminist reaction known by many as "post-feminism".

In its "more widespread media form" (xxvi), post-feminism claims that women's movements are "no longer relevant" (ibid), thus suggesting that those still concerned with women's rights are "embarrassingly out of touch" (ibid). According to postfeminism, feminism is no longer necessary since female empowerment is supposed to have already taken place. In this sense, postfeminism turns a blind eye to current instances of sexist inequality and dismiss them as something else. On the other hand, postfeminism understands empowerment as consumeristic freedom of choice, which only includes a very specific type of woman: a privileged woman with enough means to be (economically) independent (ibid). It is to this type of postfeminist empowerment that

female action heroes have frequently been related (see Coulthard and Stasia), especially because the way in which these characters enact different forms female empowerment seems to suggest that it is women's lack of trying—and not the system—that is to blame for women's inequality (Stasia 240).

In this line, Cristina Lucia Stasia admits that although “postfeminism was initially conflated with antifeminism [...] it is more closely related to power feminism [...] [for which] equality is achieved by seizing power not changing power structures” (ibid). Yet, the alignment of this type of feminism with neo-liberalist activism seems to have “rendered problematic some of the possibilities for feminist political action” (Gillis et al. xxviii). Feminism is, in its essence, “collectivist”, in that it fights for the end of sexism for every woman, not just for those who are powerful enough to earn equality. This seems to be the reason why third and, especially, fourth wave feminisms have put so much emphasis on “sorority”, that is, erasing all (liberal) competition with other women and instead trying to help each other out. This relationship between post-feminist individualism and the self-empowered female action hero will be basic for my exploration of *Kill Bill*'s ambiguity in relation to feminism.

As for the newly emergent fourth wave, since the ending of the 2000s there seems to have been a “feminist revival” (Abrahams). This revival has been seen especially in “public commentaries in popular media reasserting a need for feminism in some form or another” (Phillips and Cree 13). These fourth wave feminists seem to be taking “forward the agenda of third wave feminists” (14). One of its landmarks is the popular #MeToo Movement that became famous when Alissa Milano asked on Twitter for every woman that had been sexually harassed or abused to answer “Me too”. Milano's intention was to raise awareness of what she saw as an invisible or even culturally-sanctioned problem. The initiative “galvanised literally millions of people (particularly women) globally to



speak out about sexual harassment and abuse” (Boyle 7) and has given way to constant social commentary about “domestic and sexual violence” (Abrahams). It is within this #MeToo *moment* (according to Boyle 7) that I want to analyse *Kill Bill*’s survival energy and feminist potential.

## 2.2. TARANTINO AND (POST)FEMINISM

In an interview for *Entertainment Weekly Magazine* in 2004, executive editor Mary Kaye Schilling, thinking about the increasingly important—and multi-dimensional—roles women were acquiring in Tarantino’s films, asked the director whether he considered himself a feminist:

I almost feel weird about categorizing [myself] as feminist. Not because I am demonizing the word, but I think it’s more of a femininity, an appreciation for women rather than a label. It’s not hard to figure out. I was raised by a single mom who came from white-trash beginnings. She created a very nice career for herself as an executive, a legend in her own time in the HMO field. She was going out to eat in nice restaurants, paying her own way. She drove a Cadillac Seville, and she was leading the life. (Peary 370)

Tarantino’s answer is worth quoting at length because of the many interesting issues it brings about. Why does he feel “weird” about being labelled a feminist? Even if he says he is not demonising the word, his reticence could be reminiscent of the post-feminist frown not only on second wave feminism but on feminism in general. Diane Negra said that post-feminism “constructs feminism as other, as extreme [...] [characterized by] its rigidity and propensity to take things ‘too far’” (Tasker and Negra 19). Tarantino defines feminism as an “appreciation for women” and draws from the “from-rags-to-riches” history of his own mother, which, apart from her gender, sounds like another version of the American self-made man. According to the director, his mother “was leading the life” because she was able to “eat in nice restaurants, paying her own

way” and “drove a Cadillac Seville”. This could well be linked to this “neo-feminism” of the 60s that according to Hilary Radner is in great part responsible for ““post-feminist” culture, which [...] has very little to do with feminism” (2)—in other words, a feminism for which freedom meant freedom of choice within a neo-liberalist context (ibid).

According to David Roche, after the almost all-male *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Tarantino has made “a series of female-centered films (*Jackie Brown* [1997], *Kill Bill*, *Death Proof* [2007]) and has, with the relative exception of *Django Unchained* [2012], included strong main female characters in all his films since” (75). Yet, one should wonder whether these female characters respond to a post-feminist idea of the empowered action heroine (see Stasia) or to feminist (collectivist) ideals *per se*. For David Roche, the influence of feminist film theories in Tarantino’s films is “evident as early as *Kill Bill*” (76). He argues that his “feature films take into account and address [the] main [feminist] tenets concerning narrative cinema” (ibid). Interestingly enough, while constantly referencing specific genre films traditionally related to patriarchy, such as the Western or Kung-Fu films, Roche defends that Tarantino actually is deconstructing these genres in terms of gender, that is, “redeeming [them] by queering [them]” (ibid). Roche sees an active political engagement on Tarantino’s films, whose plots are more often than not based, he argues, on an “assault on patriarchy” (ibid).

In this sense, Roche declares that, till *Jackie Brown* (1997), women were either absent from the film, as is the case of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), or relegated to subordinate roles, as happens in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (77). As he argues, whereas both *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) depict female elements as threatening to a harmonious male world/genre (ibid), *Jackie Brown* (1997) becomes a turning point in that its *femme fatale*, Jackie (Pam Grier), acquires authorship and plays a major part in her plan, resembling the former films’ “heist [male] masterminds” (78). This will also be the case

of The Bride in *Kill Bill* and Shoshanna (Mélanie Laurent) in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). These two movies also include a rape-revenge plot, which is also the case of *Death Proof* (2007). For Roche, this “reliance on the rape-revenge as an overarching structure is both formal and political” (82), enabling for both gender and genre reversals (ibid), as if symbolically letting women take vengeance on traditionally male genres and, in a way, mainstream cinema (83). He points out that the rise of a matriarchal figure in *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Kill Bill*, *Death Proof* (2007) and, to some extent, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), suggests that women are strong enough to bring their respective patriarchs down (94). Roche states that these heroines’ success is a consequence of their mixture of typically female and male features (94). This claim could also be considered controversial from a feminist standpoint since it seems to suggest that women can only be strong if they become masculine. Yet, for Roche, this is part of the process of “queering” of genres through gender that he sees as a staple of Tarantino’s films.

Roche also finds the influence of crucial feminist theories in Tarantino’s films, as is the case of Laura Mulvey’s views on the “fetishizing and/or voyeuristic male gaze of mainstream cinema” (103). According to Roche, his “female-centered films” would actually aim to deconstruct this “phallogentric view of femininity” by positioning women as “subjects of the gaze and the voice” instead of passive fetishistic objects (110). Roche also celebrates the fact that, even when *Kill Bill* presents women as fetishistic icons, they are not sexualized, but rather “fetishized as martial arts icons” (115).

Laura Bogart describes Tarantino as a “subversively feminist filmmaker” until *The Hateful Eight* (2015). She argues that, whereas before violence against women had always been a catalyser for a “roaring rampage of revenge”, which meant their empowerment, in *The Hateful Eight* (2015) we only have “gleeful violence” not only against its main female villain, Daisy Domergue (Jennifer Jason Leigh), but against any

other woman appearing in the film (ibid). She also criticises the drastic change in his female characters' strength, already from *Django Unchained* (2012) onwards. As she puts it, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) is portrayed as the "traditional action hero wife, who suffers mightily and looks good doing it".

Roy Chacko and Allison J. Scharmann's views on Tarantino's films differ from those mentioned above. For them, Tarantino has never been a feminist. Scharmann even claims that "for every Beatrix Kiddo or Jackie Brown [or even Shoshanna Dreyfus], there is a Broomhilda von Shaft or a Daisy Domergue", rendering the fuss about Tarantino's "strong female character" a myth. In the same line, Chacko claims that Tarantino's films have recurrently "revelled in extreme violence against female characters".

As can be seen, the feminism of Tarantino's films is open for debate. It will be this tension in between potentially feminist features and post-feminist (negative) ones that this essay will try to untangle. As will be argued, in spite of its many ambiguities (or maybe because of them), the film seems particularly attuned with some of the defining features of the fourth wave feminism and the #MeToo Mo(ve)ment.

### 3. *KILL BILL*

#### 3.1. THE BRIDE'S DESCENT INTO THE UNDERWORLD

This section will deal with The Bride's live burial and her successful escape, running from the ending of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*'s "Chapter 7: The lonely grave of Paula Schultz" (00:31:04) throughout "Chapter 8: The Cruel Tutelage of Pai Mei" (till 1:03:07), which includes a flashback involving The Bride's apprenticeship with Pai Mei (00:39:15-00:57:33).

Beatrix's "live-burial-and-escape" oozes symbolism. It is, to start with, a version of the *katabasis* or the descent into the underworld, a recurrent motif in both Western and Eastern artistic and mythological texts since Antiquity. It deals with a hero's death and resurrection, either metaphorically or literally. Its importance as an archetype is dealt with in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (cf. 163-70), where it features as an essential part of the hero's journey. The most popular examples belong to Greek Mythology—such as Heracles' or Odysseus' descent into Hades—, but also to Christian religion, with Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as its epitome. Despite their many differences, most—if not all—heroes share a common trait: they are male. Bogart highlighted this inclusion of The Bride in the world of (male) heroes by declaring that this was one of the first films she had ever seen in which a woman underwent the traditional (male) hero journey.

Besides the obvious apotheosis that the hero's resurrection implies, more often than not, katabases involve a *vision*. Vicente García Escrivá relates these visions to an encounter with a paternal figure, who provides the hero with an important revelation or word of advice (93). The irruption of Pai Mei's (Gordon Liu) cruel tutelage in the scene in the form of a flashback fulfils the role of Beatrix's vision. He was Beatrix's master and it seems fitting, then, that she will turn to him in her moment of greatest need. After the

vision, Beatrix will get her own apotheosis, literally coming back from the dead. Her figure when she walks in the desert towards Budd's (Michael Madsen) camper in order to resume her revenge will even evoke that of a goddess, as can be seen in figure 1.



Figure 1: The Bride walking barefoot towards Budd's camper.

Her apotheosis is also marked by the music: Ennio Morricone's "L'arena". The piece belongs to a movie by Sergio Corbucci, *Il Mercenario* (1968), one of Tarantino's favourite directors of all time (see "Tarantino Vows Love..."). Tarantino also used this song in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and has made further reference to the scene from *Il Mercenario* in *Django Unchained* (2012), with Candy's (Leonardo DiCaprio) death. Corbucci's scene features a duel between one of the movie's main characters, Paco (Tony Musante), and his enemy, Curly (Jack Palance). The scene's climax takes place when Paco, who has been shot in the shoulder, discovers that he has managed to hit Curly in the heart. It is a scene about a victim defeating his enemy against all odds—which is what Beatrix does when she manages to escape from the grave with her bare hands. The song in *Kill Bill* starts when Budd takes her to the tomb and is abruptly cut short the very moment the tomb closes, when everything turns black and we can only hear The Bride's gasps. It seems to suggest that she has lost all hope, and therefore there is no way for her to get out yet. Once she manages to calm herself down, there is a flashback of her long and arduous learning process with Pai Mei. In the flashback we see Beatrix unable to use the sticks to eat—because of the physical hardships she has been enduring in the tutelage—while Pai Mei urges her to try again. Just when we she manages to eat the first handful of rice and Pai Mei smiles in pride, the song starts playing again. She had lost all

hope, but now she sees that just as she managed to eat when it looked impossible because of the pain, she will be able to get out of the grave. Accordingly, the nearer she is to getting out, the louder the music sounds, till the moment in which she gets her head out of the cemetery's dirt. Her apotheosis has taken place: she is risen.

It could be argued that the fact that Beatrix needs a male tutor goes against the feminist potential of the film. Besides, Pai Mai is not only a male character but also one who hates women. In Bill's words, Pai Mai "has nothing but contempt for women" (00:45:21-00:45:23). Pai Mei also tells The Bride that the only thing "Yankee" women can do is "order at restaurants and spend a man's money" (00:52:11-00:52:15). The fact that Beatrix is willing to put up with Pai Mai's humiliations and despise for women in order to get her revenge seems another version of the-end-justifies-the-means motto and does not seem to have a lot to offer for a feminist reading. Yet, it could also be argued that The Bride brings up Pai Mei's cruel tutelage as an example of a situation in which she has had to deal with a similar "glass-ceiling"—or rather "wooden-ceiling". Just as she was able to break out of Pai Mei's prejudices about women and show him she was worth of his tutelage, she will be able to break out of this prison. Actually, we will learn later on that she was so worthy of Pai Mei's lessons that he taught her techniques he had not even taught *Kill Bill*'s worst patriarch: Bill.

And just as the physical hardship of being buried alive is equated to her apprenticeship with Pai Mei, it is also evident that Beatrix' katabasis could be taken as a *mise-en-abyme* for her whole story. The scene in which Beatrix is buried alive by patriarchy—symbolised by Budd and his friend—and still manages to escape is a mirror of the whole film: a film in which the patriarchal system almost destroys a woman, who will nonetheless be strong enough to defeat it. She has been entrapped in a patriarchal world symbolised by Bill, and she will break free from it. This link is constructed not

only by her reflection on Pai Mei's misogynistic tutelage, but by the many parallelisms with her first descent into the underworld: the (in)famous Massacre at Two Pines that left her in a four-years coma. Both "descents" are caused by men—Bill's *coup de grâce* and Budd's burial—on accounts of her breaking Bill's heart. Both are impossible to overcome and yet she does overcome them. And in both we see her helpless at the hands of a man, gasping and sweating because she sees no escape (see a re-enactment of both films' initial sequence when Budd threatens to burn her eyes before he buries her in 00:34:02-00:35:33, and figures 2 and 3). As a matter of fact, the same camera angle in which we saw her "looking dead" in the initial sequence will be used for showing her within the coffin, both in black and white (compare *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, 00:04:05-00:05:05 with *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, 00:37:37-00:38:46 in figures 4 and 5).



Figure 2: The Bride right before Bill shoots her.



Figure 3: The Bride right before Budd buries her alive.

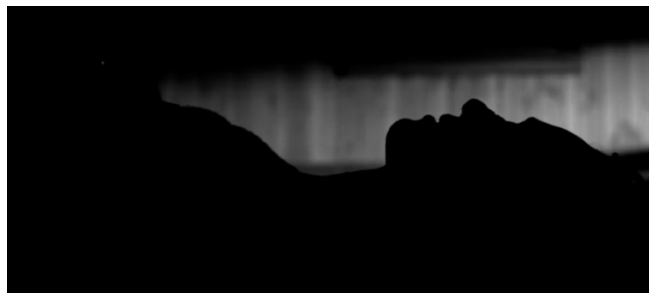


Figure 4: The Bride presumed dead.



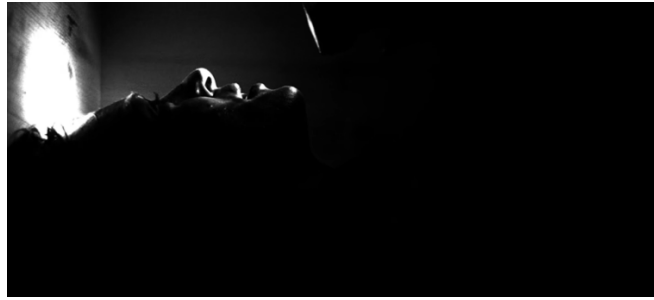


Figure 5: *The Bride right after being buried alive.*

In her *katabasis*, Beatrix belongs within a very long tradition of Western and Eastern heroes. The fact that within this patriarchal tradition she is a female hero already makes it potentially interesting for feminism. But her story is not just any story of oppression. She has repeatedly been buried alive, either metaphorically, as was the case with Pai Mei's cruel tutelage or with Bill's massacre at her wedding rehearsal, or literally, as is the case here at the hands of Bill's brother. In any case, she has been buried alive by patriarchy, and she will rise as an apothecic hero to destroy it—she will break free from Paula Schultz's grave, and she will “kill Bill”. And, in doing so, she will break free from patriarchy and emerge as a role model for all oppressed women.

### **3.2. THE BRIDE'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS: VENGEANCE AND REBIRTH**

This section will deal with yet another essential step in the traditional hero's journey, what Campbell calls “the ultimate boon” (cf. 305-38)—that is, the ultimate test in which the hero faces that which motivated the quest: in this case, Bill. This ultimate encounter is placed inside the film's tenth chapter: “Last chapter: Face to Face” (*Kill Bill Vol. 2*, 1:21:18).

As has already been mentioned, The Bride's quest is intrinsically linked with feminism. She is going to take revenge on Bill, the patriarch that decided to kill her and her baby—presumably—only because she decided to leave him. This is, after all, an example of what we know today as “gender violence”, or more specifically “domestic violence”, one of the main concerns of contemporary feminism. According to a report by

the European Commission “22 % of all women who have (had) a partner have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner since the age of 15” (“What Is Gender-Based Violence?”). It is a kind of violence men exert on women because they see them as “objects to use for their pleasure and bidding” (Patrick). A close look at *Kill Bill*’s main villain shows how deeply rooted this kind of behaviour is on him. He controls all the women around him, making them either kill or not kill (see Elle Driver’s [Daryl Hannah] failed attempt at killing Beatrix in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* 00:22:51-00:24:49), or using them as sexual objects, as is the case of all the members of his Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. And, should this power fail, he will not doubt to regain his control by violence.

Another very interesting way in which Bill exerts his power over women is through manipulation, not by accident is his codename “Snake Charmer” (*Kill Bill Vol. 2*, 2:06:39). Interestingly enough, at the end of the quest, Bill is ready to attack Beatrix with a weapon stronger than Vernita’s (Vivica A. Fox) knives, O-Ren Ishii’s (Lucy Liu) katanas, or even Budd’s live burial: her daughter. He shows off his *amazing* skills as a devoted father—playing with B.B. (Perla Haney-Jardine), making her dinner and taking her to sleep—and even a devoted (ex)lover, telling B.B. about her mother’s love for her. He will also strategically say how sad he felt when he (almost) killed Beatrix, yet, he had to do it because she left him no other choice: “there are consequences to breaking the heart of a murdering bastard” (1:57:28-1:57:34). Like many contemporary instances of everyday sexism, Bill is blaming Beatrix for what has happened to her. Fortunately enough, Beatrix will be “wide awake” and will not fall into Bill’s emotional trap. Even the song preceding her confrontation to Bill declares: “it’s too late to say you’re sorry [...] Please don’t bother trying to find her, she’s not there” (1:39:51-1:40:01).

In any case, it is more than clear that, as much as Bill claims to love Beatrix, he always sees her as an inferior, a beloved object but object nonetheless. He makes it more

than clear that he is “the man” (00:06:43)—as opposed to her only being his woman, however special, we could assume. Bill’s use of fetishist phallic weapons is one of the ways in which he tries to assert his manhood. The first time we see him—although faceless—patronising Elle, his power is represented through his slow sheathing and unsheathing of his katana, which he eventually sheaths in a very aggressive way the very moment he finishes giving Elle orders (see figure 6 and *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, 00:23:00-00:24:35). There are also sexual undertones to his explanation of how his truth serum dart will function inside Beatrix—after all, he is forcing her to reveal her true feelings to him, in an emotional rape of sorts (see *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, 1:43:43-1:43:53).

Normally, rape-revenge women use a “replacement phallus”, like swords or pistols, to exert their vengeance (Patrick; see also Coulthard 157). In opposition, The Bride’s final fight is with her own body, with her own hands: she does not need a body extension to defeat a man because, being a woman, she is strong enough. Of course, she also used instances of “replacement phallus” throughout the film, recalling the queer nature Roche claimed Tarantino’s female characters possessed. And yet, Roche also emphasises the relevance of her defeating the patriarch solely as a woman. Not only does she dress in a rather feminine fashion for her “ultimate boon”, but she significantly enough disarms Bill only with her own sheath. If the katana had symbolised the phallus and the power it represented throughout the film, the sheath very clearly symbolises the vagina (etymologically the word “vagina” comes from the Latin word for sheath, *vāgīna*). But an even more relevant aspect—it clearly is to Bill—is that she kills him with Pai Mei’s Five-Point-Palm-Exploding-Heart technique, the one that Bill claimed Pai Mei taught to no one—but to her. Its deep resonance takes us to the former section and Pai Mei’s misogyny: it shows that Beatrix, a woman, has been the best of Pai Mei’s students.

Bill's shock is more than understandable: the woman he had used and abused, the inferior being he had possessed has become better than him.



Figure 6: Bill meaningfully sheathing his katana.

After Beatrix kills Bill, she cries for the man she once loved and wipes her tears. Next time we see her, she will be crying out of joy. A close look to the evolution of her clothes in this last section of the movie shows a clear progression in her character in terms of gender representation. She is wearing dark jeans and a shirt and a black leather jacket in the scene at Esteban Vihaio's brothel, we see her in a soft-blue shirt and a long skirt (but still a leather jacket) right after she enters Bill's hacienda. Later on she drops the leather jacket for an orange scarf and we finally see her wearing all-white vaporous clothes in a scene with B.B. (see figure 7). Through costume we can see that she is now a new woman, and a rather motherly one—she has become the “clear slate” she told Bill B.B. deserved to be born into (1:54:54-1:54:58). Her rebirth is also shown by the choice of music right after she performs the technique. The film uses the soundtrack of another of Sergio Corbucci's films, *Navajo Joe* (1966), but this time he will mix two songs: “The Demise Of Father Rattigan (The Demise Of Barbara)” and “The Return Of Joe”. Interestingly enough, the official *Kill Bill*'s soundtrack calls this mix “The Demise Of

Barbara and The Return Of Joe”, as if ironically reversing what literally happens: the demise of the patriarch and the return of the new Beatrix.



*Figure 7: The Bride's evolution in clothing.*

As will be argued below, this new Beatrix is not without contradictions. Yet, she has managed to break the connection between “cruelty and love” that Thurman referred to in the interview mentioned above (Dowd). This is what makes her the ultimate feminist hero—at least regarding fourth-wave feminism and gender violence: her self-acknowledgment of her own dignity and rights as a woman, and her strength when it comes to breaking free from the man she loves when all he can do is hurt her. She has

taken her revenge on the patriarch while proving that she is as strong as him. And she has been born again, because, at long last, she has managed to not only avenge herself, but to completely break free from any instance of patriarchy that shadowed her new life.

### **3.3. “REVENGE IS NEVER A STRAIGHT LINE”: THE BRIDE’S AMBIVALENCE AS A FEMINIST HERO**

This essay has explored some specific scenes from the movie in terms of feminist empowerment. However, as strong as the feminist implications of these scenes may be, we should never forget that the type empowerment it offers also has plenty of shadows and contradictions. This section’s main aim is to explore some of the ambivalences in The Bride’s feminist potential. Like Hattori Hanzo (Sonny Chiba) told this “yellow-haired warrior”, “[r]evenge is never a straight line: it’s a forest; and like a forest it’s easy to lose your way... to get lost... to forget where you came in” (*Kill Bill Vol. 1*, 1:42:07-1:42:27). In a very similar way, the feminism of this film is not without problems. Lisa Coulthard, for instance, criticises the film’s “discourses of idealized feminine whiteness, heterosexuality, victimhood, sacrificial purity, maternal devotion, and eroticized, exhibitionistic, sexual availability” (158). As can be seen from Coulthard’s quotation, the potential problematics of *Kill Bill* may grow *ad infinitum*. This section will only focus on two main potential sites of anti-feminism: the film’s huge emphasis on The Bride’s maternity (“maternal devotion” in Coulthard’s words) and her rampant individualism.

Regarding the film’s emphasis on Beatrix’s role as a mother, we need only to see *Kill Bill Vol. 2*’s end-credits to see that “Mommy” has become a new code-name of sorts for Beatrix (see figure 8). Tarantino himself alluded to this inseparability of Beatrix and her motherly nature in an interview for *IGN* in 2004 (Otto). According to him, B.B. was not originally thought to be alive, but he chose to make it so after seeing how Thurman behaved with her little child Maya Hawke: “Uma was a mother, that’s what she did. So

as you start learning about her, that's what you start taking away" (ibid). In this line, Thompson warns about the emergence of "New Momism" that would render women "not complete without a child [...] [to whom] she must devote herself utterly". The newness in this "Momism" is that it is "not about the subservience to men [...] [but] to children" (Thompson). This seems to connect directly with The Bride's explanation for abandoning Bill and her all-too-dangerous job:

before [the pregnancy test's] strip turned blue, I was a woman, I was your woman. I was a killer who killed for you. [...] I would have jumped a motorcycle onto a speeding train... for you. But once that strip turned blue, I could no longer do any of those things, not anymore, 'cause I was gonna be a mother. (*Kill Bill Vol. 2*, 1:53:53-1:54:25)

This declaration of intentions on the part of Beatrix, united to the fact that the job she leaves is not *any* job, but one that she was the best at, further problematises the issue. Her self-sacrifice becomes absolute: she is erasing her own identity for the sake of her child, even when she did not believe that it would work for her, as she acknowledges under the effects of the truth serum (see 1:47:50-1:48:07).

Two main problems stem from Beatrix's "self-effacement" (see Thompson): her apparent need to leave her job once she becomes pregnant and the deep effect this has on her identity. As for the latter, following what was discussed above in relation to The Bride's re-birth, it could be taken not as a negation of her own self, but rather as a redemption. In other words, it is not that she sacrifices her own true identity for her daughter, but that her daughter's life has the power to transform Beatrix' identity into that of a life-giver, however powerful. In this sense, Bogart declares that "Beatrix's journey [...] is also about contemplating the nature and purpose of her own power; hers is a story equally of redemption and revenge. In obliterating the Deadly Vipers, she goes beyond being Bill's woman, a woman who would jump motorcycle onto speeding train for him, and becomes her own woman". Of course, this "redemption-through-maternity" raises as

many problematics as it solves, especially taking into consideration that feminism itself is constantly redefining the meaning of motherhood for women. Some feminists, however, have tried to reconstruct motherhood for the better, as is the example of Adrienne Rich's concept of "mothering", that is, female "potential relationship to her powers of reproduction and children" (ibid), as opposed to the patriarchal take on the institution of "motherhood". In any case, this potentially empowered take on maternity never takes it as a given that mothers should leave their jobs. So, this leaves us with the question of her leaving her—we could say—"dream job". Even if, because of its ambiguity, it can be read as a mother leaving her job for her child, it could also be claimed that her sacrifice is not motivated by her being a mother *per se*, but by her being a parent, regardless of her gender. It is also worth mentioning, that even as a "Mommy", she does not leave her katana (see again figure 8), which could well suggest that her power will remain in her though she chooses to use it for life instead of death.



Figure 8: *Kill Bill Vol. 2* end-credits for *The Bride*.

Concerning The Bride's excess of individualism, there are many things that one should take into consideration. To start with, this individualism is partly justified because of the intertextual nature of the film. That is, the action/exploitation genres it makes reference to are inherently individualistic, take, for instance, the Western or the rape-revenge movies (Coulthard 163). In the context of feminism, this becomes especially problematic in that feminism's aim is, as mentioned above, to end sexism in general—Coulthard goes as far as to argue that constructing the rape-revenge's plot around an individualistic quest makes it "ultimately an exercise in conserving, neutralizing, and



containing the violence it suggests” (ibid). As much as this end of sexism has its specificities in what regards every woman’s particular issues, it still has a collectivist nature of sorts. In other words, it seeks the empowerment of a collective, not of a few “self-made” women. In this sense, the fact that *Kill Bill* restricts its female revolutionary violence to a single individual to the point of self-cancellation (Coulthard 163; see 173) becomes very problematic. There is not a single instance of The Bride trying to help, either directly or indirectly, other women who are oppressed by the same patriarchal system that oppressed her. Actually, she does not even seem to understand that the women around her—that is, the ones she kills to get her revenge—are as tied to Bill as she was. In this respect, Roche criticises The Bride’s lack of recognition of her similarities to those she kills: “[t]he irony is that the Bride’s quest for revenge leads her to kill or maim her own doubles (O-Ren, Sofie [Julie Dreyfus], Vernita, Elle)” (88). However, we should take into account that her need to kill those women in particular seems to be rooted in a code of honour very specific to the genres *Kill Bill* is based on. As a matter of fact, those women, as well as Bill and Budd, seem to acknowledge the fairness of her quest—as Budd puts it, “[t]hat woman deserves her revenge... and we deserve to die” (00:17:34-00:17:45). In any case, contemporary #MeToo artefacts such as *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-2019) and *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020) will put a much bigger emphasis on sorority, even in between female victims and female victimisers.

The problem with *Kill Bill*, then, is that it poses too much importance on Beatrix’ status as a lone-wolf (see Peary 371), always at the expense of feminist sorority. It becomes a rather exaggerated example of individualism, if a female one. Nevertheless, beyond the clear links this has to neo-feminism and post-feminism as explained above, I believe this “rampant individualism” (Coulthard 163) still can be of great use to contemporary feminism and its emphasis on women as survivors. After all, it seems to

me that in any process of empowerment, either individual or collective, there is a need for an “individualistic” kind of force—that is, a person’s self-realisation of one’s power and rights. Only when acknowledging one’s individuality in these terms can a survivor actively look for empowerment. Of course, this empowerment should never happen at the expense of others; actually, as third-wave feminism tried to show, every individual empowerment is but a part of a collective movement towards the end of sexism. And yet, this movie seems to emphasise only one part of this process, the individual one. It could well be that this excess explains the “survivor energy” the film seems to exude. Thurman herself accounted for the many testimonies of women who had been helped by it and had thus been able to leave a situation of abuse (Erbland). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra conceded that the “images and icons of postfeminism *are* compelling” (21), and that as well as rejecting feminism, postfeminist action icons also evoked and popularised it. It all seems a matter of critical attitude in watching this film—as long as we are aware of the limitations, we can well take advantage of this film’s quintessentially powerful potential.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This essay has explored the feminist potential in Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, especially within the context of contemporary feminism and its emphasis on gender violence. Despite its many feminism-friendly elements, many have criticised the many problematics the film brings to the fore. However, there still seems to be some elements that evoke feminist theories of empowerment. With this purpose, after an introduction to the different feminist waves and to some of the debate regarding Tarantino's ambiguous relationship with feminism, this essay has analysed two scenes that seem especially relevant in the context of #MeToo feminism, namely, The Bride's live burial and apothecotic escape and her final confrontation with Bill.

The first section of the analysis calls attention to the mythical undertones the live-burial-and-escape has. It explores the implications of placing Beatrix Kiddo along with the greatest heroes of Western and Eastern civilisation. It also looks at the specificity this assimilation has in her being an abused woman, that is, how it gives her the position of champion of feminism and abuse survivors. Because she has literally and symbolically been buried by patriarchy, her victory turns her into a role model.

In the second section, this essay has considered the way in which she finally gets her revenge and kills her former lover, Bill. It has explained first how she abandons her queerness to personify femininity, so that Bill's hyper-masculinity and misogyny will be utterly defeated. Then, her mission has been interpreted as not only revenge, but also rebirth, as her killing Bill is actually a way of liberating herself so that she can become a new woman, not an assassin but a life-giver.

The third and last section has dealt with some of the film's most ambiguous and problematic aspects: the film's extreme emphasis on The Bride's role as a mother and her excessive individualism. For the former, this essay has argued that the ambiguity the issue

is dealt with gives way both to conservative and progressive interpretations, as is usual with postmodern texts. As for the latter, it seems clear that Beatrix Kiddo fails to identify the structural problem that lies behind her abuse, which in turn makes her empowerment quest maybe too individualistic to be categorised as feminist. In any case, this essay has also defended that this excess can also be for the better, as this makes it possible for the film to pass its empowering potential onto the audience. In spite of its many ambiguities, *Kill Bill* is a powerful articulation of the survival energy that has become one of the defining features of fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement, and, as such, a powerful weapon against the pressing issue of gender violence.

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