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“She’s a little blood-spattered angel”: The portrayal
of Beatrix Kiddo in *Kill Bill* (2003-2004)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kill Bill Vol. 1 and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* are two films written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, released in the years 2003 and 2004 respectively. They belong to the category of action films or, to be more specific, to the category Yvonne Tasker (2015) calls “hybrid action movies” (157), since they use conventions from a number of different genres (such as the samurai, spaghetti western, martial arts and the rape-revenge) and they self-consciously incorporate many references to other movies and styles. *Kill Bill* was originally intended to be released as just one film, but since the movie would have been too long, it was released as two volumes.

The films tell the story of Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman), better known as “The Bride”, a woman who is a professional assassin in the DiVAS (Deadly Viper Assassination Squad) and who spends both movies taking revenge on those who tried to kill her and her baby. Beatrix is romantically involved with her boss Bill (David Carradine). When she finds out she is pregnant, she decides to leave her assassin life behind for the sake of her future baby, so she escapes without telling anyone and adopts a new identity. On the day of her wedding with another man, with whom she intends to live a normal life away from crime, her now ex-lover Bill shows up. With the help of other assassins, Beatrix’s ex-associates, they kill everybody in the chapel and then shoot her in the head. She falls into a coma and, when she wakes up four years later, she realizes her baby is not there anymore and has probably died. As a result of this, she decides to take revenge on every single person who took part in the killing, leaving Bill as the last person to kill in her list.

The critical reception of these films in the years 2003 and 2004 was very positive overall. Many critics praised Uma Thurman's character, emphasizing the power that she emanated and describing her as a "warrior queen", a "martial arts mom" (*The Guardian*, 2004) and an actor able to play "the most physically arduous female role" (*Variety*, 2003). In general, reviewers saw Beatrix as a feminist figure and highlighted how empowering it was for women to have a female lead in action films. As one article from *The Village Voice* (2003) pointed out – "if *Kill Bill* has a subtext, it's all about the danger of disrespecting women".

Interestingly enough, almost no review at the time called attention to the ambivalence that surrounds the representation of women in the two films. This ambivalence, however, was the focus of some scholarly work on the films in the years that followed. Some of these features include the films' view of maternity as the most important stage in a woman's life (Schubart 2007, Dawson 2014 and Platz 2012), the representation of female rivalry (Reilly 2007 and Schubart 2007) and the subordination of the female characters to a man (Roche 2018 and Prorokova 2016). So even though Beatrix is a very strong and determined woman who is able to kill anyone who gets in her way, the films also include some contradictory features that problematize the view of Beatrix as a feminist icon. As Reilly (2007) puts it "the film's title of course indicates the female's need to kill the patriarch responsible for putting a bullet in her head, but the textual evidence at work in both films points to a complicated view of patriarchal and feminist relations" (40).

This essay explores the films *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* and their portrayal of Beatrix Kiddo. It starts with an introduction to the different feminist waves and the action film in order to provide a context for the reading of the film that follows.

The analysis of the films proper starts with a section on the portrayal of female characters in Quentin Tarantino's films and then looks into some of the ambiguities regarding this character of Beatrix Kiddo, specifically those regarding her identity, her relationship with other women and the role of motherhood in the film.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: FEMINIST WAVES

The feminist movement is not a static one. In fact, it has undergone so many changes since it emerged that some critics even talk of different feminisms (Krolokken & Sorensen, 1). This section is an overview of the three feminist waves. However, the ones that matter the most in this essay are the second and third waves, since their contrasting views regarding maternity and femininity will be relevant for the analysis of *Kill Bill*.

The first feminist wave arose in the late 19th century in the Western world, and it was mainly concerned with obtaining equal civic rights for women. Women in several Western countries demonstrated for their right to vote giving rise to the suffrage movement. They finally won the vote in the 20th century (in 1920 in the United States). As has often been pointed out, first-wave feminism was exclusive, since it mostly consisted of white, middle-class, well-educated women (4). The main aims of this first wave were to confront the stereotype of “proper” feminine behaviour. Other aims were to challenge the assumption of women as belonging to the domestic sphere and at the service of their husbands, and to achieve the same treatment and recognition as men, with access to the same positions (5).

The second feminist wave is associated with the feminism of the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (7). It started with protests against the Miss America Pageants. Second-wave feminists denounced that women were oppressed by the beauty culture and that their looks were considered more important than their intelligence (Genz 53-56). An essential feature of this wave of

feminism was the idea of sisterhood, which promoted that women could collectively empower one another (Krolokken & Sorensen, 9). Another key issue was the right of women to have control over their bodies. Before, women had always been regarded as inherently linked to motherhood and the house sphere. By contrast, second-wave feminists saw sexuality as disconnected from the obligations of marriage and motherhood. They were also discontent with the lack of social power and political influence women had (11), and there was a demand of representation in public institutions. Along these lines, there was an explosion of research and teaching on women's issues, which developed into the field of feminist studies.

The third feminist wave began in the 1990s. Third-wave feminists have the advantage of having been born with the privileges that first and second-wave feminist fought for (15). Unlike second-wave feminism, it does not reject femininity but regards it as one potential way of empowerment for women. In fact, the phenomenon known as "Girl Power," which asserts sexual subjecthood and the right to the "pink things" of stereotypical girlhood, is one of the many faces of this third feminist wave (Genz 85-88). This wave is also concerned with issues such as domestic violence and the oversexualization of women in the media. They also criticize previous waves for providing a fixed definition of womanhood (17). Second-wave feminists' views on motherhood, for instance, were revised by third-wave feminists, who started to regard women's capacity to bear life as unique and empowering. Another controversy they drew attention to was the sexist language and derogatory terms for women, which some third-wave feminists reclaimed and started using among themselves as empowering. Third wave feminism is also characterized by the debates surrounding the use of the term postfeminism. As Stephanie Genz (2009) points out, some critics refer to "postfeminism" as a kind of "anti-feminism", due to the prefix *post-*, which "is used to

suggest that the project of feminism has ended, either because it has been completed or because it has failed and is no longer valid” (20). For those critics, the term postfeminism implies that the goals of feminism have already been achieved and, therefore, feminism is no longer necessary. Genz, on the contrary, relies on critics such as Patricia Mann and Ann Braithwaite and sees the term postfeminism not as a “denial (or worse, death) of feminism but to an altered stage of gendered conflicts and transformations” (25). Postfeminism is for her a “frontier discourse,” “a point of conjecture between a number of often competing agendas” such as the shifting relationships between femininity, feminism and female victimization (25). Postfeminist femininity presents, for Genz, multiple layers of female objectification that “oscillate between subject and object, victim and perpetrator” (26). Genz sees postfeminism as characterized by conflict, contradiction and ambiguity.

This is a simplified summary of the evolution of the feminist movement, but it can be useful for the exploration of the ambiguities regarding the character of Beatrix in the two *Kill Bill* films.

2.2. THE ACTION FILM

As it has been pointed out before, the two *Kill Bill* films could be considered hybrid action movies, both because they mix various genres and because they include references to other films. Tasker (2015) describes the action genre as follows:

Associated with narratives of quest and discovery, and spectacular scenes of combat, violence and pursuit, action and adventure films have been produced throughout Hollywood’s history. They are not restricted to any

particular historical or geographic setting. (...) The basic elements of physical conflict, change and challenge can be inflected in any number of different directions. Action can be comic, graphically violent, fantastic, apocalyptic, military, conspirational and even romantic (2).

She also declares that some of the themes in action movies are the quest for freedom from oppression, the hero's ability to use his/her body in overcoming enemies and obstacles and physical conflict or challenge in battling human or alien opponents (2).

Prorokova (2016) argues that, for decades, the action genre has been a man's world (41). The protagonist and most characters in action films are usually male and the films are commonly addressed to male spectators. Nevertheless, things have recently changed within the action genre. This is because women started to be included as important or main characters in action films at the beginning of the 2000s – *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *Resident Evil* (2002), *Underworld* (2003) and *Catwoman* (2004) are some examples. However, this trend is also believed to actually have started during the 1970s, with films like *Alien* (1979), *Lady Snowblood* (1973) – which Tarantino took as a reference for *Kill Bill* – or blaxploitation films like *Foxy Brown* (1974). As Platz (2012) points out, “exploitation films from the 1970s and early 80s (...) were the first films to allow women to actively control the narrative and the course of events in a film” (528). Nowadays, the amount of action films with female leads is increasing, with films like *Lucy* (2014), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019) or *Captain Marvel* (2019). Schubart (2007) talks about the proliferation of female characters in action films in relation to feminism:

Today's active, aggressive, and independent female hero is clearly a child of feminism. But to read her as an answer to or even as the end of feminism

would be a mistake. The female hero is an ambiguous creature and whenever she appears, ambivalent reactions follow. On the one hand, a woman performing actions which society has so long associated with men has the instant taste of a revolt against traditional gender roles. On the other hand, a closer look to the actress playing the female hero reveals a figure deliberately composed as ambiguous (6).

Beatrix is a female hero in *Kill Bill* and, as was mentioned in the introduction, she was read as a feminist icon when the films were released. Nevertheless, as Schubart's quotation points out, female characters in action films are usually ambivalent characters, and Beatrix is no exception here. The analysis that follows starts with a section on the female characters in Quentin Tarantino's films, to then focus on some of the ambiguities surrounding the character of Beatrix Kiddo.

3. KILL BILL

3.1. FEMALE CHARACTERS IN TARANTINO'S FILMS

Quentin Tarantino's films are usually a mixture of male genres and, consequently, mainly revolve around male characters. In fact, in one of his first films, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), there are no female characters. Nevertheless, the role of women in his films has been changing with the passing of the years, and female characters have become more prominent. In his second film as a director, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), there are three key female characters; Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), Fabienne (Maria de Medeiros) and Yolanda (Amanda Plummer). Even if they are crucial for the plot, they are also the "trouble-makers", the ones who disrupt everything and have to be taken care of (Rossouw 2013, 95-98). This changed with his next movie, *Jackie Brown* (1997), in which the main character is a woman who collaborates with the police to help them arrest a gun dealer. His next films *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & Vol.2* (2003-2004), *Death Proof* (2007), *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and *The Hateful Eight* (2013) all have women as their protagonists and heroines – except in the case of the latter, in which the female character is a villain. This tendency was only disrupted by *Django Unchained* (2012), in which the female character is a slave who needs to be saved by her husband.

Roche (2018) refers to Tarantino's recent female characters as "successful at combining 'masculine' and 'feminine' features (...) the female protagonists ultimately serve to rehabilitate 'masculinity', reframed as female masculinity, which may explain why the female protagonists seem more successful at combining the two" (94). In contrast, Platz (2012) argues that "Tarantino's films mostly fail to progress beyond the trappings of the classic exploitation films of the 1970s, still relying heavily on the excessive display of female bodies, and subjugating women to the male camera and

spectator gaze” (528). She claims that Tarantino reverses the work of classic exploitation films by limiting the traits strong women are able to possess.

Beatrix Kiddo is one of these female heroes who combine both “female” and “male” traits: she is a professional assassin, very violent and brave, but the thing she cares about the most is her daughter and the fact that she was denied a life with her. Overall, she could be considered a “masculinized” female character because she is very violent, although she is also heavily sexualized and often the object of the (generally male) gaze. According to Platz (2012), in Tarantino’s films “women are initially gruesomely violated but empowered through their taking on of aggressive male behaviours, while still remaining beautiful and feminine. (...) Women only become powerful through their victimization, a narrative device that propels the women to agency” (530). This is true in the case of Beatrix, since she only becomes powerful when she has taken a bullet to her head and been repeatedly raped. In this way, there is controversy about Beatrix being a good example of an empowered woman. Some critics see Beatrix as a symbol of progressiveness and equality – Roche (2018) maintains that *Kill Bill* is about the downfall of a perverse patriarch at the hands of the one female protagonist (87) –, while others believe that she is a “sign of oppression” since she is controlled by men and eroticized (Prorokova 2016, 42). As Platz (2012) points out, “although Tarantino is able to create strong women identical to the female warriors of classic exploitation films, he fails in totally removing the women from degrading elements of those films” (531).

What follows is an exploration of the some of the ambiguities regarding the portrayal of Beatrix Kiddo as a feminist icon. The features I have chosen for the analysis are: identity, sorority and motherhood.

3.2. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Beatrix's identity is determined by the names she is called by throughout the two films. Since her real name, Beatrix Kiddo, is not known until towards the end of the second film, she is constantly referred to by different false or code names that place her in different positions in the fictional world of the film. Yet, as this section will argue, most of these names define her in relationship to the male character, Bill.

The most used code name is that of "The Bride". She is given this name in the first film, in the scene when two sheriffs go to the Two Pines wedding chapel, where the massacre has taken place. They are investigating the crime scene, and they start talking about Beatrix; "The name on the marriage certificate is Arlene Machiavelli. That's a fake. We've been calling her *The Bride* on account of the dress". From this moment on, this is one of the names she is known by. It makes reference to her role as a wife – or rather a girlfriend, since she was not able to get married – and it reminds of her (attempted) murder at the hands of Bill.

Another name she is known by is "Kiddo", although Bill is the only one who calls her this. This is actually her surname but, as mentioned above, since it is not known by the audience until the end of the second film, it carries the connotations of age difference and affection inherent to the term in English. In this sense, the use of the term Kiddo by Bill to refer to Beatrix suggests a father-daughter relationship. Schubart (2007) has argued that Beatrix has Bill as a symbolic father figure who teaches her to fight, and whose mission "is to transform an ordinary young woman into an extraordinary hero" (33).

The third name Beatrix is given throughout the film is her assassin code name, “Black Mamba”. Every member in the DiVAS squad has a code name belonging to different types of snakes. In this way, this name defines her as a killer in Bill’s squad. The DiVAS squad was composed of four women and one man – Beatrix Kiddo, Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox), Elle Driver (Daryl Hannah), O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu) and Budd (Michael Madsen). Beatrix has a father-daughter relationship with Bill – in addition to their romantic one – and it is the same case with the other women in the squad, since it is implied that he has trained them all. As Dawson (2014) points out, “for despite the ostensible focus on mothers and daughters, there is the equally strong narrative of the female Vipers battling for the attention of Bill, the eroticized father-figure of the film. (...) He sees Beatrix and the other Vipers as his creations” (131).

Finally, after escaping from Bill when she finds out she is pregnant, she adopts a false name, Arlene Machiavelli, to construct her new (and short-lived) identity. The choice of this surname is quite interesting because of its connotations, being related to Niccolò Machiavelli, the 16th century Italian diplomat and politician. In his work *The Prince* (1513) he argues that corruption and dishonesty are to be expected in politics. Machiavelli’s well-known phrase, “the end justifies the means”, can be associated with Beatrix abandoning Bill and (almost) getting married to another man in order to protect her child. It can also be read in relation to Beatrix’s death list and final revenge on Bill. After looking at Beatrix’s names and what they imply, it could be suggested that the character has no defined sense of identity – or rather, that her identity is plural, since each name relates to a different aspect of her personality. All of the names mentioned are linked to Bill – as his victim, his daughter, and his pupil –, and she adopts the last one in order to elude him. Whenever she is called any of these names she is indirectly connected to Bill, thus having no own identity. Her whole life revolves around him.

However, another name she is known by is “Mommy”, which is the name she is called by her daughter. This is the only name which is not directly connected to Bill, but it makes reference to her role as a mother. So again, this name links her to another person, thus having no sense of identity.

It should also be pointed out that Beatrix always reaches out for a man when she needs help, not a woman. At first it was Bill, for training, and then Pai Mei (Gordon Liu) for the same reasons. She asks the famous sword-maker Hattori Hanzo (Sonny Chiba) to make her a katana in order to kill Bill, and she finally reaches out to Esteban Vihario (Michael Parks) – a Mexican pimp and one of Bill’s father figures – to ask him about Bill’s whereabouts. As Schubart (2007) points out, “women in male genres never learn from other women. They depend on men for education, help, fatherly advice, weapons instruction, and sensibility training” (30). Moreover, even if most main characters in these films are female, sorority is almost completely absent, except for two scenes which will be analysed in the next section.

3.3. WOMEN FIGHTING, FIGHTING WOMEN

Radner & Stringer (2011) claim that “lone vigilantism is the very opposite to the actual strategies advocated in feminist anti-violence efforts” (280). This means that a female lead who takes violence against women into her own hands in action movies, instead of getting the help of other women, goes against the idea of female bonding. One of the main features of contemporary feminism is the emphasis on sisterhood and the premise that women must fight alongside one another in order to defeat the patriarch. The importance of sisterhood was first perceived during the second wave, and it has been

essential ever since. Nevertheless, sisterhood is nowhere to be perceived in either of the two films. Roche (2018) claims that in *Kill Bill* “this indicates the female characters’ inability to recognize their own common subjection to the patriarch and recognition of the latter as the ultimate foe”, which are disappointing attitudes from a feminist perspective (88). Looking at the films from a different point of view, the story is about a group of women who obey a man’s plan to kill another woman; according to Prorokova (2016), “the whole idea that a group of women obey one man seems very patriarchal” (45).

Three out of the five people in Beatrix’s “death-list” are women. These are Vernita Green, O-Ren Ishii and Elle Driver, while the other two men are Budd and Bill. The fights between women are extremely violent and full of rage, and they are the ones that last the longest. In contrast, the fight against Bill carries a hidden romantic feeling and is much shorter. Also, Beatrix does not even get to fight Budd, since he shoots her the moment he sees her. So it could be affirmed that the two films focus substantially on battles between women. Some critics, such as Amato (2016), even suggest that Tarantino might fetishize violence against women, questioning whether “the treatment of his female characters is part of his fantasies or a move towards showing that women can be treated the same as their male counterparts” (69). Tarantino, on the other hand, declared in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2003 that for him there was nothing fetishistic about it, and that he thought that “it just hurts more to see two women fighting”. In another interview with *Rolling Stone* (2003) he affirmed that fights between women were “hot” and that “there’s just a naughty aspect to seeing women fight”. As can be seen in these claims, gender equality was not precisely on the director’s mind when writing and directing the fights between female characters in *Kill Bill*. For the director, seeing two women fighting is more “unpleasant” but

simultaneously “hot” because women are not supposed to fight, as they are generally considered the “weaker sex”. Female rivalry and fights between women convey an implicit eroticism.

The most outstanding case of female enmity that can be observed throughout both films is that of Beatrix and Elle Driver. Elle is Bill’s former lover, and she appears to hate Beatrix deeply, more than the rest of the squad members (“I might never have liked you. Point in fact, I despise you”). This can be noticed in the scene in which she was about to kill Beatrix while she was still in a coma, but Bill calls her to abort the mission and let her live. Elle is shown to be really angry that she does not get to kill Beatrix, probably because of jealousy; “Word of advice, shithead – don’t you ever wake up”. Another scene in which the hate that Elle feels towards Beatrix is noticeable is when Budd tells her that he has caught Beatrix, and Elle tells him that “she must suffer to her last breath”. These two characters portray the typical “ex-lover vs. former lover” rivalry, where Elle has come to “replace” Beatrix as Bill’s girlfriend, and they fight over him – or at least Elle does. In this way, Bill is impeding female sorority in the film.

It is also important to take into account the great difference between Beatrix’s fights against her female ex-associates and against men – Budd and Bill. For example, Beatrix does not get to kill Budd even if he was in her list, but Elle is the one to kill him. In fact, in the only occasion in which they get to fight, Beatrix does not stand a chance against him and she gets shot and buried alive without even being able to fight. On the other hand, the fight between Beatrix and Bill is also quite unbalanced at first. Towards the end of the second film, Beatrix finds Bill’s place of residency and she is prepared to murder him. However, she sees her daughter B.B. (Perla Haney-Jardine) is alive and the mood of the scene drastically changes at the same time Beatrix’s does (see

fig. 1). In this moment, Beatrix leaves her thirst for blood behind and starts playing with her daughter. After putting her to sleep, Beatrix and Bill start talking and Bill decides he wants to ask her some questions about why she ran away from him in the first place. For this, he shoots her with a truth serum. In this scene Beatrix is again in a position of submission and subordination before a man, which is not the case when fighting other women. Moreover, when Beatrix finally kills Bill using the “Five-Point-Palm Exploding-Heart Technique” the scene gets very sentimental. Beatrix starts crying and holds Bill’s hand while telling him that he “looks ready” for his death. This scene helps the viewer sympathise with Bill in the same way Beatrix does, since this is seen from her point of view – which means that she is the subject of the gaze –, and it makes the viewer understand that deep inside they still love each other. As Dawson (2014) points out, “avoiding revenge’s conventional tragic ending, the film moves toward romance, the mode associated with reunited families and self-fulfilment” (123). This, however, could be another instance of sexism in the movie, since Beatrix still loves the man who put a bullet in her head and stole her daughter.



Figure 1: Beatrix realising her daughter is alive

Whether the fights between women in the films are regarded as fetishistic or not, they are quite problematic. One of the reasons why this is so is because there are almost no instances of female bonding in the film, even if there is a predominance of main female characters. In fact, the only two brief moments in which women are seen cooperating with one another – that is, holding back from killing each other – are related to motherhood (Roche 2018, 89). In one scene, Beatrix has just realized that she is pregnant, and a woman knocks on her hotel room door claiming to be from the room service. It turns out that this woman, named Karen (Helen Kim), is an assassin who has been sent to kill her. While they are pointing guns at each other, Beatrix tells her that she just found out that she is pregnant and that she is scared that something happens to the foetus; “I’m the deadliest woman in the world. But right now I’m just scared shitless for my baby”. Beatrix begs Karen to look at the pregnancy test for her to believe what she is saying, and even in that situation Karen trusts her and looks away in order to look at the test. They finally agree on ending the fight, with Karen going away saying “Congratulations”.

The other moment in which some sort of female bond can be seen is the scene in which the fight between Vernita Green and Beatrix is briefly interrupted by the arrival of Vernita’s daughter, Nikki (Ambrosia Kelley). While they are fighting, they hear the school bus and see Nikki arriving home. The frame composition in this particular scene (see fig. 2) shows Beatrix and Vernita facing each other and Nikki – who just gets off the school bus – appears just in the middle of them. Nikki is purposely framed by the window and between the two fighters in this shot, since it implies that she is going to be what interrupts the fight. This scene has a compositional balance that follows the “rule of thirds”, which means that the frame is equally broken into three parts. The shot is not only aesthetically balanced, but conveys many meanings. Vernita and Beatrix are

positioned in each side of the frame, which draws equal attention to both characters. Nevertheless, this focus on them is broken the moment in which Nikki appears, thus becoming the new centre of attention and the cause of this brief instance of sorority. In this moment Vernita looks at Beatrix in the eyes as if urging her to act normal, so they hide their weapons. Vernita tells her daughter that Beatrix is “an old friend of Mommy’s” and asks her to go to her bedroom. Then, Vernita invites Beatrix to have a coffee in the kitchen and they continue arguing there. Vernita begs Beatrix not to kill her in front of her daughter, but even if that was not her intention she eventually does. Prorokova (2016) observes that “the fact that Vernita’s daughter witnesses the killing of her mother signifies that the cycle of female violence (...) will continue” (46). Moreover, that these two moments of bonding are related to maternity could imply that it is the only thing to which women can relate.



Figure 2: Nikki arriving home

3.4. I WAITED A LONG TIME FOR YOU TO WAKE UP, MOMMY

As has been argued, motherhood is the feature that brings about the few instances of female bonding in the *Kill Bill* saga, and it also brings about the resolution of the film. As explained earlier, towards the end of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, Beatrix sneaks into Bill's house in order to kill him, just to find that her daughter B.B. is alive. Bill shoots Beatrix with a truth serum and he starts questioning her. He tells her how, even if she had escaped and lived that ordinary life, she would have still been her assassin self. His first question is "Did you really think your life in El Paso was going to work?", to which she answers in tears "No. But I would've had B.B.!". Later he asks "All those people you killed to get to me... felt damn good, didn't they?" and she responds that they did. *Kill Bill* is a film about motherhood. The claim might seem surprising but motherhood is what moves the main character, and thus the narrative, through both films. As has been mentioned before, realizing that she is going to be a mother is what incites Beatrix to leave the DiVAS, and she also seeks revenge for the destruction of her future family (Platz 2012, 536). This proves that although she loved what she did, she was willing to make the sacrifice of abandoning it in order to protect her daughter; "Once that strip turned blue... I could no longer do any of those things. Not anymore. Because I was going to be a mother".

Schubart (2007) talks about *the mother*, one of her five female archetypes in cinema. Within this archetype we can find the *good mother* and the *bad mother*. The *good mother* is "nurturing and reproductive, and constitutes the mental space of the family" (30). The *bad mother*, in contrast, "wants to be in a man's place. To have a job. A career. To do what men do: work. This proves incompatible with being a mother, at least with being a traditional good mother. The mother must choose between

motherhood and career” (30). In this way, Beatrix fits accurately in the category of the *good mother*, since she chooses motherhood over her occupation, and thus exits the “male world” of action movies. This choice has proved to be problematic for various reasons. First, as pointed out earlier, it implies that motherhood is the most important phase in a woman’s life, and that her child is everything that should matter to Beatrix. Second, it suggests that she cannot combine her (violent) job with maternity, which is even more questionable taking into account the fact that Bill actually *can* combine his job as an assassin and fatherhood. From the moment the baby was taken out from Beatrix’s insides to the moment she finds her daughter – about five years later – Bill has been taking care of B.B., and he is in fact shown playing with her and behaving as a good father. This raises the question of why do women have to choose while men do not. Genz (2009) comments on this problem by pointing out the apparent incompatibility between motherhood and other aspects of a woman’s life (3). As an example, she talks about how a successful businesswoman is often perceived to have shortcomings as a mother/wife and vice versa. In the same way, the films’ narrative regards the suggestion of Beatrix as being a mother and an assassin at the same time as unthinkable, while in the case of Bill nobody calls this into question.

The fact that Beatrix chooses maternity over her career confirms, for Dawson, “retrograde, sexist ideas about the nuclear family, in which the child ‘naturally’ belongs with the mother” (2014, 130). This idea is actually reinforced at the end of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, when Beatrix and B.B. are finally together. Just before the credits we get to see an intertitle saying “The lioness has rejoined her cub and all is right in the jungle” (see fig. 3). The film here assumes that as long as the mother and her child are together, everything is the way it should be, which is a rather anti-feminist reading of the notion of family and the role of the mother. As mentioned earlier, even if this seems

problematic and gives the idea that the character of Beatrix does not empower women, motherhood is one of the issues seen differently by second wave and third wave feminists. That is, while the second feminist wave tried to challenge the idea that women's ultimate ambition and duty was to become mothers, the third wave embraced motherhood as the female power to create life. Nevertheless, neither wave denies a woman's right to retain her job.

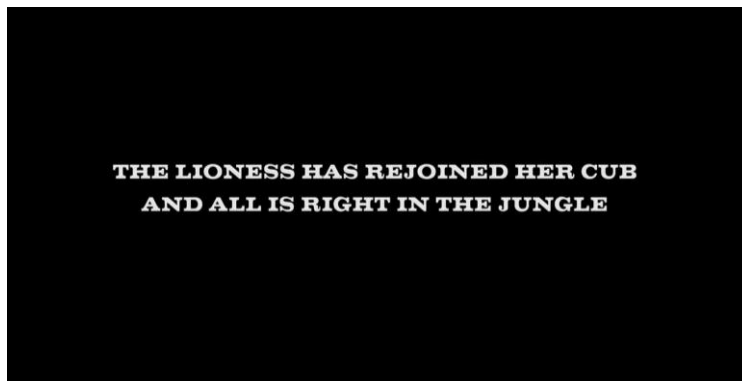


Figure 3: Intertitle in *Kill Bill Vol.2*

Yet, if we concentrate on some of the textual strategies used in the film, the ending also offers a different reading. Beatrix is, for most of the film, the object of the male gaze. Women are also objectified when fighting other women. This reminds of Mulvey's "male gaze" theory (1999), in which she argues that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (837). Roche (2018) elaborates on this by claiming that Beatrix's final empowerment is achieved through the control of the gaze (114), which is illustrated by framing. Beatrix starts being the object of the male gaze in a literal and symbolic way –

during the opening scene, for example, she is the object of Bill's and the spectator's gaze (see fig. 4). We can see a frontal close-up of her battered face after the massacre in the chapel, from a high angle that positions the viewer in a similar posture to the one Bill has, creating a point of view shot (and thus making Beatrix Bill's and the spectator's object of gaze). This situation gradually changes and is finally reversed at the end of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, when Beatrix finally kills Bill (see fig. 5). Here it is Beatrix who is the subject of the gaze, and the viewer can see Bill, the new object of the gaze, dying from her point of view. It is in this scene when it can finally be said that Beatrix defeated the patriarch not only by killing Bill – and hence completing her “Death List” – but also by mastering the gaze. All these achievements – the mastery of the gaze and the accomplishment of her revenge on the five people who betrayed her – allow her to have a happy (implied) ending with her daughter. It could be argued that Beatrix brings about the downfall of Bill's patriarchy through her constant empowerment during the film. Still, it is interesting that the protagonist is a beautiful woman who is object of the viewer's gaze for most of the time, which also points to the fact that even such a powerful woman has to be pretty. This also reminds of Banet-Weiser's (2018) observation on CoverGirl's empowering campaign #GirlsCan, which started in 2014. It featured female celebrities affirming that “girls *can*”, alluding to female empowerment. Nevertheless, all the women depicted in the add are beautiful, which proves that the economy of visibility privileges beauty and the body (52). It is the same in the case of *Kill Bill*, in which not only Beatrix, but all strong women (specifically the DiVAS female members) need to be beautiful. These films portray very powerful women, but also very good-looking and almost always objects of the gaze, which can be very problematic. This is one of the many ambiguities of the film regarding Beatrix, and it

could finally be claimed that there is not a correct way of defining her. Ultimately, the interpretation of Beatrix will depend on who is conducting it.



Figure 4: Beatrix in the opening scene of *Kill Bill Vol. 1*



Figure 5: Beatrix as the subject of the gaze while Bill dies

4. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have offered a close reading of the ambiguous portrayal of the *Kill Bill* protagonist Beatrix Kiddo as a feminist icon. For this, I have focused on three basic features present in both films – identity, (lack of) sorority and motherhood – and the contrasting information they offer on the character. The brief overview of the three main feminist waves and the examination of the role of women in action films and in Tarantino’s cinema helps contextualise the analysis and support my contention.

In the first section of the analysis I have focused on Beatrix’s identity. Beatrix is known by several code-names, and almost every one of them connects her to Bill, which signals her dependence to the male character. Regarding the relationship between female characters, there is almost no instance of sorority in either film. In fact, the only instances of female bonding are related to maternity, as if it was the only thing women have in common. Finally, I have argued that *Kill Bill* is a film about motherhood, since what moves the protagonist is revenge for the killing of her future daughter. Having analysed this, it would seem like the character of Beatrix Kiddo is constructed upon quite misogynist features.

Nevertheless, as this essay claims, these films are full of ambiguities which question the reading of Beatrix, since she is also presented as an extremely strong female character that ultimately defeats the patriarch. This is related to Mulvey’s “male gaze” theory; Beatrix started being the object of the (mostly male) gaze, but she progressively appropriates it and ends up being the subject of it. In this way, it is implied that she defeats the patriarch by mastering the gaze that objectified her.

The ambiguities surrounding the portrayal in Beatrix in *Kill Bill* can be related to the ambiguities regarding feminism and postfeminism in our contemporary historical

moment. Banet-Weiser (2018) elaborates on the gaze theory and connects it to today's situation concerning popular feminism, especially as regards advertising and consumerism. She examines feminist discourses that focus on self-confidence, body positivity and individual achievement, like the *Always*' self-esteem-boosting #LikeAGirl campaign, which encourages empowerment for girls in regard to sports (42). However, she also explores violent misogynist phenomena such as men's rights movements – which mirror and mock feminist campaigns –, and toxic geek masculinity. By showing how popular feminism often meets with sexist backlash, Banet-Weiser demonstrates how today society is also full of ambivalence. Moreover, as has been argued in this essay, some films – like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* – can reflect this ambiguity surrounding feminism.

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