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WHY SHOULDN'T SHE SPIT ON HIS GRAVE?
CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE REVENGE NARRATIVES
IN AMERICAN POPULAR FILM FROM THE DEVELOPMENTAL
POINT OF VIEW

One of the premises of developmental psycholinguistics is that we live our life according to certain narratives that are learned through language and media. These narratives teach children to express emotions and to attribute actions in a variety of life situations; they construct the way in which the threatening feelings such as anger, injustice, or the urge of vengeance are experienced. In this paper, we present a critical analysis of the gendered discourse in popular American cinema, based on the plot analysis of 60 films featuring male or female protagonist seeking revenge. We use critical discourse analysis to decipher the patterns of the gender roles, behaviors, and emotions, which these movies intent to force upon the viewer. As the psychological research does not clearly testify to gender differences in the experience and expression of the trait anger, we would like to argue that it is a matter of the socially moderated narrative patterns, rather than inborn tendencies, that urges boys and girls to play such different roles in those situations as well as experience them in distinct ways. Our most crucial conclusion is that Western societies have developed the narrative-based mechanisms which later helped to successfully discourage women from expressing anger in the form of physical aggression, under the threat of being left out of the discourses of femininity and, in some cases, humanity.

Key words: gender, narratives, discourse analysis, revenge

Introduction

While interviewed on his perception of the role which anger emotion plays in his everyday life, an 11-year-old boy claimed that anger can be somehow

useful sometimes, even if just a little bit. When asked to elaborate, he argued that anger could help him:

By się zemścić, jak ktoś zabije Twoją siostrę
To avenge, when someone murders your sister

The concept of multidimensional storytelling, developed by Barbara Bokus (1997), assumes that, with age, children demonstrate a growing complexity of their narrative field structure — their stories, up to some point composed merely of a consecutive string of events (*narrative line*) start gaining depth created by the *narrative field* (spatial and general context of the narrative). A narrative — whether its form is oral, written, or multimodal — is always a complex cultural being. It always assumes a contextualization (Polanyi, 1985) — of the characters, the setting, the motivations, even the very events. Gender identity of the characters is one of such contextual variables. Even when the same behavior is taken into consideration, different motives, reasons, and evaluation are attributed, varying on the gender of a character. Those scripts are being internalized through the means of socialization within a broader cultural discourse. In the example above, the interviewed boy is already conscious of the fact that he should deploy his anger to avenge a potential murder of his sister. However improbable such situation might seem to be in his peaceful life, the possibility of it is already rooted deeply in his consciousness: It has become a part of his cultural narrative. The furious willingness with which this little boy is ready to avenge the murder of his sister provides for the imaginary reference perspective to the heroic narratives of our culture.

Physical aggression has always been a domain of men. It is a stereotypically male way of solving any issues, establishing hierarchy, mating, or simply getting rid of the stress. Psychological research indicates that the trait gender differentiates people regarding their willingness to act violently (both physically as verbally), regardless of their age (Baillargeon et al., 2007), cultural background (Archer, 2004), or ethnicity (Archer, 2004). It has been proven using diverse methodologies, including objective laboratory measures (Bettencourt & Kernahan, 1997; Bettencourt & Miller, 1996) as well as observatory measures (Archer, 2004). As shown in a meta-analysis (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008), gender differences are present already in childhood and continue during adolescence. To explain this phenomenon, researchers have often focused on the evolutionary theory of sexual selection (Archer, 2009), according to which men's aggression is an echo of the primordial necessity to compete with other males for one and the same partner; as well as on the social learning theory (Bettencourt & Kernahan, 1997; Wood & Eagley, 2002), according to which aggression is an inevitable consequence of the traditional role of a man as the sole breadwinner and guardian of the family. The followers of both of those theories

have ever since been struggling with finding the key mediator responsible for the difference in the level of aggression in the two genders. The most obvious (and traditionally thought of as certain) mediator — mainly the trait anger — according to Archer's (2004) extensive meta-analysis has been proven not to be relevant whatsoever when it comes to differentiating men and women in relation to their willingness to act aggressively. Women's nature is not at all, as we all used to think, more gentle than men's. Their experience of anger is equally intensive, and its psychophysiological indicators are the same as in men. This suggests that if men and women do not differ in the way they experience anger, the difference in their tendency to act violently occurs rather at the level of permission they give themselves to express this emotion (Björkqvist & Niemelä, 1992; Campbell & Muncer, 1994).

The recent study by Wilkowski, Hartung, Crowe, and Chai (2012) points at yet another interesting factor: the need for revenge as the only relevant mediator of the gender differences in the expression of anger through physical violence. "Men don't just get mad; they get even" - sums up ironically the title of the groundbreaking article. Revenge as the basic source of motivation for aggressive behavior is supposed to serve men as the means of reassuring and maintaining their position within their social circle whenever this position is threatened by some external or internal aggressors. Past research by Nisbett (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) had already linked the physical violence to the need for revenge in his theory of the "culture of honor", indicating that among societies which define masculinity through the traditional values such as honor, physical violence is far more frequent and acceptable than in it is among cultures which do not consider such values relevant whatsoever. Wilkowski's team's discovery seems to explain in a rather satisfying way the gender differences in physical aggression in the light of social learning theory.

Wilkowski's article (Wilkowski et al., 2012) and other studies mentioned before providing us with a clear conclusion: Women just tend to avoid any form of revenge. They don't, on contrary to men, experience pleasure on a neuronal level while looking at the cyber-suffering of their enemy, who had been cheating them in a video game (Quervain, Fischbacher, Treyer, & Schellhammer, 2004). Research proves that, unlike men, women consider direct physical and verbal aggression in expressive rather than instrumental terms (Driscoll, Zinkivskay, Evans, & Campbell, 2006). Violence for women is directly linked to a threatening feeling of the loss of control over oneself and one's emotions. Men, on the other hand, see violence as a basic instrument helping them to achieve their goals through the gain of control over others (Campbell & Muncer, 1994). Women are also characterized by a high propensity to experience the feelings of guilt at the very thought of the harm and suffering their aggressive behavior might cause in someone, while in men, the same thoughts evoke pleasure and relief. Women, much more

often than men, tend to consider the negative consequences of their violent behavior for themselves as well as for their potential victims (Campbell & Muncer, 1994).

Anxiety, guilt, loss of control vs. satisfaction, relief, sense of agency — this way one could sum up the extremely distinct emotions men and women experience while thinking of getting revenge for their harms. Having all the experimental studies proven the point, we are still wondering what is it in our society that goes on keeping women so literally afraid of their fury? What is there in our culture that prevents them from expressing their anger, since both biology and psychology have equipped them with the mechanisms which allow them to experience this emotion exactly as men do?

In our paper, we would like to focus on the aspects of the gender differences in the willingness to act aggressively which the quantitative psychological studies tend not to consider — the discursive and cultural motivations for our behavior. We believe that a new, qualitative methodology might shed new light on the results confirmed by the quantitative studies, as well as supplement them. Starting from the premise based on the Wilkowski's (Wilkowski et al., 2012) argument — that it is not anger but the need for revenge that moderates violent behavior in men and women — we would like to offer an analysis of the revenge narratives present in the contemporary Western culture and search in them for the discursive roots of the differences in this basic need. Through the means of the Critical Discourse Analysis, we shall argue that the narratives rooted deeply in the Western societies continue keeping us in fear of the vengeful woman's figure. As the subject of our analysis we chose the contemporary popular American cinema. We believe that the close reading of the narratives offered by the popular cinema is essential for the understanding of the discourse which governs our society. We are therefore ready to claim after Theodor Adorno (1991) that "the masks of the film are so many emblems of authority" (p. 95). And after Foucault (1972), that nothing is as crucial for maintaining the authority of a discourse, as hiding itself behind the veil of neutrality.

Teun Van Dijk (2008), the precursor of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory, defines the purpose of his research as the search for the relationship between the use of language and the type of narrative it creates, and the naturalization of certain specific points of view, legitimization of power, hierarchization of knowledge and authority, and the discrimination of specific social groups. The discourse, according to Van Dijk, organizes our cognition and thus influences the way in which we perceive the social world and our role in it.

The CDA is rooted in the theory of Michel Foucault (1972), especially regarding understanding the concepts of discourse and power and the relation in between those ideas. The French narratologist was the first to propose the inclusion of discourse as an epistemological category crucial for

recognizing the system of values, beliefs, needs, and aspirations of a given society, as well as the many ways in which meaning can be generated. In his *Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault (1972) argues:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functioning's, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation. (p. 38)

The concept of *discursive formations* not only draws attention to the lack of a monolith in the structure of discourse, but it also points out to the most crucial qualities of this structure: thematic consistency, regularity of occurrence, and the degree of conventionalization (common understanding). Reading of discourse, according to Foucault (1972), allows us to uncover the "right of what can be said" and reveals to us whatever had been cast beyond the system of knowledge and the "archives" of the discourse: the eliminated and marginalized content. And that exactly is the fundamental vocation of the Critical Discourse Analysis theory.

Crucial for the Critical Discourse Analysis theory are also Foucault's (1977) findings on the perverse link between the discourse and power. The role of *power*, understood by Foucault as a system of relations, social practices, and culturally held beliefs, is to maintain a "regime of truth" beyond which an individual living in a particular culture is epistemologically unable to reach. Foucault (1977) argues that to *rule the people* means to be able to create and form their reality: Power in his concept does nothing else but "... produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (p. 194).

The production of reality through discourse consists of the institutionalization of the knowledge/truth complexes. Among the means of production Foucault (1972) mentions: the book-system, publishing, libraries, laboratories, etc. These institutions also determine the principles of control, selection, and organization of the discourse. Those rules are based on the three, formulated in the course of history, procedures of exclusion: prohibition, division and rejection, and the opposition of truth and falsehood. By appropriating the truth, monopolizing memory and the view of history, the discourse authoritatively decides on whether to include or exclude particular contents from the archives of social knowledge.

With this theoretical and methodological basis, we can now return to the basic question that this work tries to answer: Where do the discursive differences in the tendency to aggression in men and women come from? Or rather how has the social discourse managed to create such a dense aura of fear around the idea of female aggression?

To answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at the discourse of female aggression available in our culture — mainly the culture of the Western, highly developed democracies — the culture which has now been serving for years as an instrument of power for the discourses such as patriarchy and capitalism. Belinda Morrissey (2003) dwells on that subject in a very comprehensive way in her book *Women Who Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity*. The scholar elaborates the idea that the discourse on violence committed by of both genders is created by a perverse sort of cooperation between the legal system and the media. The media protects the legal order of the state by filling up the traumatic loopholes which the violence creates in the discourses of citizenship, social justice, or the inner goodness of human nature. The cruelty of violence is a castaway of the hegemonic discourse: It is inexplicable, overwhelming in its transgression of everything that is considered natural, and therefore it constitutes a threat. The narrativization of the unimaginable domesticates the trauma: Supplies it with a sense of causality, allows it to be explained in a way that does not threaten the current status quo. It also frees the public from the independent search for the causes of violence, even exempts them from thinking about why the very idea of violence evokes such extreme fear in them, instantly providing ready-made answers. As Morrissey (2003) claims :

Violence implies chaos demonstrated in the inability of the society to keep control of its citizenry. It is up to the media, then, to maintain an illusion of control and order by casting violent criminal events as morality plays where the outcome is always assured and dominant hegemony always reinstated. (p. 17)

Morrissey argues that the primary purpose of the media discourse on violence is to provide it with the characteristics of a "moral parable" casting the crime as a direct consequence of behavior socially perceived as a transgression of the discourse and making its occurrence seem justified. Among this kind narratives, we can often find the crimes of love, crimes of greed, crimes coming from the harsh economic conditions. The choice of narrative depends on whether the criminal, from the perspective of the status quo, deserves to be included in the discourse or not. In the case of particularly brutal or inexplicable violence, the aim of the media is not only to redeem society from the feelings of responsibility for the crime, but also to free the citizens from the terrifying possibility of identification with the criminal. Being the voice of the discourse, the media in such cases shout out unanimously: "Don't you worry, they're not one of us!" This healing mechanism can occur thanks to the processes of dehumanization of the transgressor. Significantly, murderers are often addressed by the media with the nicknames which aim to emphasize their inhuman character, such as "a vampire," "a monster," "a slayer," "a beast." In the words of Morrissey (2003):

Murderers considered to have performed especially dastardly acts are transformed into monsters in these accounts and are thus disconnected from their societies and from the human race in general. This resolute distancing allows for the denial of any suggestion of societal culpability or responsibility for such deeds. (p. 16)

Apart from those basic, "taming of the beasts" mechanism of narrativization as developed by the media discourse, there is yet another process, particularly important within the context of this work: the differentiation of the crime narrative based on the gender of the criminal. As it is easy to presume, the crime has a much greater threatening potential for the status quo when a woman commits it. As Morrissey (2003) points out :

Violence is viewed as one of many possible behavior patterns for men; it is not strikingly unusual even when extreme. This means that when a man kills he can expect that his crime will be both imaginable and possibly even seen as human. Indeed, male crime in all forums, from the fictional to the factual, is frequently articulated, debated, portrayed, glorified, even fantasized. (p. 17)

Regardless of the narrative devices used to cover up for his bestiality, one thing is always certain: When a man commits a crime never is he deprived of his authorship, agency, and decision-making in his actions. On the other hand, women are almost always "shield" from the responsibility for their crimes. It has to do with the two gender roles strongly present in the patriarchal discourse of the Western societies: the narratives of a *virgin* and of a *fallen woman*. According to this discourse, all women must fit into one of those two categories: The first of them presupposes a proper fulfillment of the administered social role as a perfect mother, a tender lover, a subordinate, gentle creature, under any circumstances casting any castration threats. The second narrative balances on the border of what is thought of as humanity — it is a category of the deviant, perverted women for whom the patriarchal society cares about only regarding a potential fulfillment of erotic fantasies.

Any crime should automatically position a woman in the second category, but that would constitute a serious threat for the discourse of femininity in general: It would be rather difficult to explain the shameful history of the widespread cases of crimes committed by the exemplary middle-class representatives. Therefore, the patriarchy had decided to create a gateway for its wives, mothers, and housewives in the form of the *victim brought to the extreme narrative*. This discourse, depriving a woman of any agency, but at the same time freeing her from the responsibility for the crime, is often accepted in the cases of the virgin-women. As Morrissey (2003) argues: "Female killers gain humanity under only circumstance — when they can be represented as politically neutered victims" (p. 17).

What about a situation when the crime is committed by a woman of the second category? Here the problem becomes a bit more complicated: No one is interested in relieving them from responsibility. Nevertheless, the mere awareness of the presence of such a transgressive individual in our society constitutes a threat to the status quo. Therefore, though seemingly maintaining her agency, the fallen woman is in turn stripped of her humanity — a castaway to the discourse of femininity, she becomes, in the eyes of society, a devourer, a zombie, a praying mantis.

Morrissey (2003) argues that patriarchal societies have developed effective mechanisms that protect them from even allowing the notion of an "aggressive woman" to enter their consciousness. According to the discourse which produces our reality, women are simply not capable of aggression: If they commit violence, they have either been forced to do so (in this way the male predator is the sole responsible for the crime), or they simply are not women but degenerate monsters. In Morrissey's words:

These portrayals repeat traditional and "safe" positionings of male power and female passivity rather than explore the radical and threatening potential for new models of female agency suggested by the woman's fatal response. (p. 25)

One could say that at the moment when a woman decides to express her anger by raising her hand against the causer of this emotion, she must first face the ultimatum imposed on her by society: Either she renounces that hand or she renounces her humanity. At the same time, a man must only decide if this way of getting even is worth the trouble. Such is the power of discourse.

Discourse analysis and the popular cinema

Coming from the Morrissey's (2003) findings on the discourse of female aggression present in the media, we would now like to analyze the very same discourse, but as represented in the popular American cinema. We decided to analyze Hollywood products because, in our opinion, the narrative cinema can be characterized by the same pretension to "show how it really is" as the media. Cinema has the advantage over other areas of human creativity: of functioning in the visual sphere — the easiest to perceive for the senses of a healthy person — and of having the biggest potential for the mimesis of reality. Cinema, in its popular version, surpasses other visual arts, such as photography, sculpture, painting, cinema, in its ability to create, reproduce, and preserve a narrative. To sum up, none of the other areas of human creativity has such a strong potential for being a carrier of the discourse.

It is exactly this potential that had horrified the philosophers of culture, such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, who among the paroxysm of moving images managed to identify a multitude of masks of the authority. Sergei Eisenstein (2014) remarked that "language is much closer to the cinema

than a painting" — this outstanding theoretician and director already in the 1920s was working on how montage could be used as a kind of syntax of the text conveyed by the image. Cinema as an instrument for generating and legitimizing discourse is also the subject of Todd McGowan's (2007) research. This American lacanist created a theory of narrative cinema in which the discourse disguises itself in the form of fantasy. Narrative cinema is a visualization of the society's fantasy of an ideal reality. However, in Lacan's theory, just as the key to the functioning of the discourse is its pretense to represent a natural order of things, the same is true for imagination — it has to keep an appearance of reality. A fantasy that exposes itself as a fantasy becomes counter-discursive. In the words of McGowan (2007):

The political valence of fantasy in a film depends on how the film depicts excess: if it uses excess to fill in ideological gaps and pacify the spectator, then it functions as an ideological supplement; but if it allows excess to stand out and distort the spectator's look, then it functions as a challenge to ideology. (p. 37)

The cinema which exposes its fantasmatic character belongs to the sphere of the artistic cinema: We can find such mechanisms in the postmodernist works of Lynch or Tarantino, or among the *authors* of the European cinema. The subject of our interest, however, is the first category of the films mentioned by McGowan (2007): the "ideological supplement" which "fills in the ideology gap" with the excess of fantasy. What interests us in this research is the Hollywood's mass production cinema, which until the rejection of the Hays Code's morality in the late 1960's, had managed to keep the entire Western hemisphere in the conviction that in the United States all people were white, wealthy, happy, and heterosexual, and even the married couples slept in separate beds. However, the fact, which recently the vision reproduced by Hollywood has become, in certain areas, far more liberal than it used to be, does not necessarily mean that its products have suddenly become counter-discursive. Hollywood continues to faithfully follow the paths trodden by the tastes of the American middle class while legitimizing and reproducing its fantasies. This thesis will be proved by the examination of how the narrative of the male and female violence offered by the Hollywood cinema parallels the same gendered discourse present in the American media, as discussed in the previous chapter of this paper.

Methods of sampling and analytic approach

For our analysis, we have examined the revenge narratives present in 60 films produced by Hollywood major studios in the 21st century. The primary selection criteria were: the narrative line, the English language, and the place of production. The pop-cultural character of the films was also an important criterion; we did not want to include in the analysis any texts in which

narrative exploitation could have been a conscious artistic device. Also, we would like to point out that we intended to possibly randomize the method for the selection of the particular works: We have chosen the films that had shown up as first after the search filters and keywords such as "revenge," "vengeance," and "crime" had been applied. For the search of the movies, we used the largest online movie database (imdb.com). The analysis was done by the first author according to premises of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Weiss & Wodak, 2007). All films were watched and analyzed from the perspective of the study questions. The analytical focus was put on plots and evaluative elements in the film narratives. In line with CDA guidelines, the role of the researcher in this process was active and engaged. CDA as an approach strives to be critical towards existing power imbalances in society. Thus a critical, philosophically, and theoretically informed position of the researcher is assumed.

Results and discussion

The first important analytical observation was that the films that feature a female protagonist seeking revenge are fewer and much harder to find. There was an unsettling easiness in distinguishing the gendered discourse of the films that we have managed to collect. The fundamental difference can be already noticed at the economic level: Revenge movies which feature a man as the main character are the high budget productions; record-holders such as *Gladiator* or *The Patriot* (2000) exceed \$ 100,000,000. None of the films falls below the \$ 10,000,000 budget. As for the revenge films featuring a woman as the main character, only for four of them (*The Brave One*, 2007; *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo*, 2011; *The Last House on The Left*, 2009; and *Enough*, 2002) a budget of more than \$ 10,000,000 was available at all, while in the most expensive of the films — *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* (2011), with a budget of \$ 90,000,000 — the subject of the feminine revenge is a secondary thread for the story of the main male character. On the basis of this observation, it is already easy to tell how marginal and even unattractive, from the perspective of the Hollywood's big businesses, the subject of female aggression and revenge is. At the same time, we also see how alluring and fully justified in its presence is the subject of male aggression.

Another difference, which is already a part of the narrative analysis, but which can be already noticed before going deeper into the analysis of the narrative lines, is the way in which these movies are titled. Among the titles of the films in which the main role is played by a man, it is easy to find the following tendencies:

1. Direct reference to the main character's identity (including *Gladiator*, 2001; *The Count of Monte Cristo*, 2002; *John Wick*, 2014; or *Conan the Barbarian*, 2011);
2. A reference to the idea or value which the main character is supposed to represent (including *Law Abiding Citizen*, 2009; *The Punisher*, 2004; *The Patriot*, 2000; *I Am Wrath*, 2016; and *Hero Wanted*, 2008).

A rather different tendency can be noticed in the case of the titles of the revenge movies featuring a female protagonist:

1. Alluding to the heroine's identity as a victim, often using a verb in the passive voice (including *Contracted*, 2013; *Avenged*, 2013; *Gone*, 2012; *Felt*, 2014; and *Descent*, 2007);
2. Alluding to the cruelty and extremism of the heroine's situation (among others: *Bound to Vengeance*, 2015; *I Spit on Your Grave*, 2010; *Enough*, 2002; *Run! Bitch! Run!*, 2009; *Monster*, 2003; *Chaos*, 2005; *Wound*, 2010).

At the very first glance, one can see that the very way in which these films are titled reflects the mechanisms described by Morrissey (2003) in her analysis of the media discourse. Men's aggression fits perfectly in the discourse, especially when neutered by the traditional narrative of the justifiable revenge. Men are not ripped off of the responsibility for their crimes: The titles of the films indeed emphasize their individuality. In the case of the female protagonists, however, the situation is quite the opposite: The film titles do not really announce any "quest for justice" narratives, but rather an entertaining spectacle of a victim brought to the extreme instead. Further analysis of the main narrative lines of those films confirms the same assumptions.

While analyzing the discourse present in the films featuring a male protagonist, we have distinguished the following narrative tendencies. Films are discussed in chronological order:

1. The man's anger is caused by the death or suffering of his loved ones. The reason for the personal revenge is a justified mistrust in the functioning of the legal system.
 - *Memento* (2000): A man struggles with amnesia while seeking justice for his murdered wife;
 - *Gangs of New York* (2002): A young man returns to New York to find his father's murderer;
 - *Drive Angry* (2004): A furious father escapes from hell to take revenge on the man who killed his daughter and kidnapped his granddaughter;

- *Four Brothers* (2005): Four brothers seeking revenge for their mother's death;
 - *Death Sentence* (2007): A model representative of the American middle class, witnesses the murder of his son. Not satisfied with the verdict of the court, he decides to restore the justice by himself;
 - *Hero Wanted* (2008): After waking up in a hospital, a man decides to track down and murder the man who had left him and another man to die during a bank robbery;
 - *Acts of Violence* (2010): A man sets out on a mission to kill the man who raped his wife;
 - *Prisoners* (2013): When Keller Dover's daughter and her friend disappear, he decides to take matters into his own hands, while the police cannot stand up to its duties;
 - *Blue Ruin* (2013): The life of a quiet outsider turns upside down when he decides to return to his native village and get revenge on the past perpetrators and protect his family;
 - *Furious 7* (2015): Deckard Shaw prepares revenge on Dominik Toretto and his family, for his comatose brother;
 - *I Am Wrath* (2016): A man seeks revenge on a group of corrupt policemen who are unable to find the murderer of his wife;
 - *Message from the King* (2016): Mysterious outsider Jacob King returns from South Africa to LA to avenge his sister's death.
2. Man's anger is caused by the unjust, corrupt, and perverted system. Although in most cases the catalyst for revenge is the suffering of a loved one, in the case of these films, the revenge itself has openly public character.
- *Gladiator* (2000): A just Roman general fights a corrupt emperor, trying to restore the justice for himself, his murdered family, and ultimately to the entire Empire;
 - *The Patriot* (2000): A good-natured farmer becomes a vengeful revolutionary leader during the American Revolution when a British officer brutally murders his son;
 - *Shaft* (2000): A New York detective goes on a private mission when he realizes that the son of a local real estate magnate may not be brought to justice after a racially-motivated murder;
 - *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002): A young man, unjustly imprisoned by a false friend, escapes from prison in search of revenge;
 - *Collateral Damage* (2002): When his family dies in a terrorist attack, a young firefighter decides to find the responsible one by himself;

- *Open Range* (2003): A former gunslinger is forced to return to his profession when he and his cattle herd are threatened by a corrupt sheriff;
 - *The Punisher* (2004): A secret FBI agent transforms into a vengeful murderer when his whole family is brutally murdered;
 - *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009): A frustrated citizen decides to take matters into his hands when a corrupt court pardons the murderer of his family. Not only the murderer but also the prosecutor and other officials, who form the part of the system, are in danger;
 - *Conan the Barbarian* (2011): A vengeful barbarian seeks revenge on the man who attacked his village and killed his family;
 - *Seeking Justice* (2011): After his wife is raped, the man decides to use the services of the local vigilante group;
 - *Bad Ass* (2012): A Vietnam war veteran decides to take matters into his own hands after his best friend is murdered, and the police are not interested in solving the case;
 - *The Lone Ranger* (2013): A Native American warrior Tonto tells stories that have transformed John Reid, a man of law, into a legend of justice;
 - *Last Knights* (2015): A fallen warrior prepares an uprising against a sadistic ruler to avenge his disgraced master;
 - *The Foreigner* (2017): A modest businessman seeks justice when his daughter dies in a terrorist attack. The basket-and-mouse game begins with a government representative whose past seems to be related to the identity of the murderers.
3. A man, who had been forming a part of the corrupt system, as a result of the observed harm, decides to rehabilitate himself through the open revenge on his former allies. This type of narrative is relatively the rarest, but it can also be considered a tendency.
- *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (2003): Will Graham is a former gangster who had given up the business for the serenity of the rural life. He decides to leave this shelter whenever he finds out that his brother committed suicide;
 - *Man on Fire* (2004): A former killer for rent seeks vengeance on people who committed an unspeakable crime on a family he was supposed to protect;
 - *Machete* (2010): After being deceived by a man who had hired him to murder a Texas senator, a former agent begins a brutal campaign of vengeance against his former boss;

- *John Wick* (2014): A former killer for rent returns from retirement to get revenge on gangsters that took everything from him.

The discourse that can be found in the films whose main character is female is diametrically different. Below are the three types of the narrative lines that we have distinguished:

1. Revenge as a reaction to traumatic personal harm (almost always rape, always physical abuse) in the face of the lack of faith in the efficiency of the system. A woman as a victim driven to the extreme.
 - *Enough* (2002): A tortured wife goes from a helpless victim to a vengeful heroine;
 - *Monster* (2003): Based on the life of Aileen Wuornos, the film tells the story of a prostitute who became a serial killer;
 - *Hard Candy* (2005): A teenager takes on brutal revenge on a man he accuses of pedophilia;
 - *Bad Reputation* (2005): A shy girl is raped at a party by a group of colleagues, and the whole situation is recorded and published on the internet. Abused and humiliated victim decides to accept the imposed identity and execute justice from all who those who had turned her life into hell;
 - *The Brave One* (2007): A devastated woman tries to cope with the trauma of a bestial rape by seeking revenge on her tormentors;
 - *Rasche Rd.* (2008): Emily is a wounded young woman trying to cope with the trauma of the many years of abuse by her father. She decides to find "the man who made her the woman he is today" and take her revenge on him;
 - *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011): Lisbeth brutally rapes and tortures her abuser, who is also her legal guardian;
 - *Gone* (2012): When her sister dies, a woman is convinced that her former abductor has returned and decides to take matters into her own hands;
 - *Julia* (2014): Julia Shames seeks help after a brutal attack and becomes a participant in a quite an unconventional form of therapy: She has to take revenge on every one of her tormentors.
2. Exploitation cinema. The motif is the same as in the previous group of the films (rape-revenge), but devoid of any reflection on the functioning of the system. The suffering inflicted on a woman is, in this group of films, equally important in the narrative terms as her consecutive revenge: It is a subject to the same degree of exploitation. A woman as an ultimate avenger surpasses the bestiality of her abusers.

- *Chop Shop* (2003): A story of a woman who is ready for anything to restore her dignity through cruel vengeance on her tormentors;
 - *Chaos* (2005): Two girls are lured to the hut of their torturer with the promise of drugs. They experience a night of torture, rape, and humiliation;
 - *Summer Scars* (2007): A group of teenagers is raped during a holiday trip through a tramp;
 - *Run! Bitch Run!* (2009): Two girls from a Catholic school knock on the wrong door while selling toys and fall victims to brutal sexual violence. One of them returns;
 - *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010): A young writer takes on brutal revenge on the rapists who attacked her while she was looking for inspiration in a secluded cottage;
 - *Ticked-off Trannies with Knives* (2010): A transsexual group is brutalized and left to die. Those who manage to survive, decide to avenge themselves and their friends on their own;
 - *I Spit on Your Grave II* (2013): An aspiring model is raped by her photographer. After waking up, she learns that she has been deported to Serbia, where a series of unimaginable torture, rape, and humiliation ends with an attempt to bury her alive. The girl miraculously survives and begins a terrifying campaign of revenge;
 - *Big Driver* (2014): A writer implements a cruel plan of revenge after experiencing a brutal attack;
 - *Bound to Vengeance* (2015): A young girl, chained in the basement of a sexual predator, escapes and decides to repay her abuser;
 - *I Spit on Your Grave: Vengeance is Mine* (2015): After a violent rape, Jennifer changes her identity, moves to another city, and joins a support group. Everything changes when her friend is murdered and the killer avoids responsibility. Jennifer comes back on the path of revenge.
3. In the third group of films, revenge is also a consequence of rape or another form of physical abuse. However, women's revenge is not carried out personally: It is executed with the support of family, friends, ghosts or, in extreme cases, supernatural abilities acquired as a result of the trauma.
- *Central Park Jog* (2002): Trisha is brutally beaten and raped while jogging in Central Park. As a part of her revenge, she decides to enter into a deal with Sniper Jack and eventually get rid of all criminals from Central Park;

- *Teeth* (2007): A degraded and abused teenager discovers that the teeth in her vagina can be an effective instrument for the execution of justice;
- *Descent* (2007): A college employee is raped on a date by one of the students and unsuccessfully tries to return to a normal life. Finally, she decides to find relief in a brutal rape, which she conducts on her abuser together with a colleague;
- *Tomboys* (2009): After a violent rape, Kat realizes that the corrupt legal system will not guarantee her justice. Together with her gang of tomboys, she kidnaps a serial rapist and finds revenge in a series of brutal tortures;
- *The Last House on the Left* (2009): After the kidnapping, rape, and murder of two teenagers, the perpetrators unknowingly find shelter in the home of the parents of one of the victims. When the truth comes to light, the mother and father indulge in a sequence of brutal acts of revenge;
- *Wound* (2010): A girl returns from the underworld to mistreat her mother, who left her to die after she had been raped by her father;
- *Girls Against Boys* (2012): After being used by an older man and being raped on a date by another, a teenager forms a bloody duo with her psychopathic friend who turns out to be a murderous spirit of revenge;
- *Avenged* (2013): A deaf girl is raped and left to die by a group of the descendants of the slayers of a local Native American tribe. Justice, however, approaches them when the spirit of an Apache enters the girl's body, seeking a bloody revenge;
- *Contracted* (2013): A young woman is raped at a party after she gets unknowingly drugged by a stranger. It soon turns out that she has been infected with a virus that can easily be used as an instrument for revenge;
- *Felt* (2014): A woman, with the help of her art, produces a brutal alter-ego to deal with the traumas she has experienced because of many men in her life. Unfortunately, soon the products of her imagination take control over her.

It is without a doubt that the study would benefit from a deeper micro-level analysis of the narratives. However, due to the limitations brought by the supposed size of the article, the inclusion of such an analysis was not possible for the authors. We are however planning to conduct the micro-level analysis of the featured texts in our further studies.

Conclusion

The analysis of the narrative lines present in the American revenge cinema allows us to claim that the discourse of feminine violence offered by Hollywood reproduces and multiplies the same discourse as present in the media world. The distinction in the way in which the male and female aggression are represented in these movies is a pure reflection of the dichotomies rooted deeply in the shared consciousness of patriarchal societies, such as the rationality-emotionality, activity-passivity, or the public-private.

Masculine aggression is not considered as an emotional reaction to the personal harms: It is a purely rational decision, helped by the natural vocation for the solitary fight, to accept the responsibility and fight back. The beneficiary of this decision is the whole society. Men's violence restores the order: It is a tool of justice. Even if the system sometimes fails, every male citizen should always be ready to take on a heroic mission to enforce the patriarchal Order of the Law. Female aggression, on the other hand, is always the result of emotional trauma, it is purely personal. Even if in some films the proper functioning of the system is taken under consideration, the heroine is always in the position of a victim of this system: She always acts in parallel to or in spite of its existence, never in the contra. A woman, represented in the film as by nature a gentle and sensitive creature, is driven to the extreme by the cruelty that has been inflicted on her. As a result of the trauma, a woman ceases to be herself — in some of the films literally, in others as a metaphor, through a terrifying change of personality. There are also other consequences of the female aggression. Since a woman's motivation is purely personal, the revenge itself becomes the goal, rather than a tool for achieving a higher good. The conclusion with which the viewer of these films is left is clear: Feminine violence does not restore any order, it is in its essence a transgression. The films accentuate the transgressive quality of female vengeance by underlining its lethal consequences: It produces chaos, it destroys a woman and transforms her into a perverse, bloodthirsty monster. A vengeful woman disturbs the established order and therefore brings destruction upon herself.

If it is true to say that cinema is a mask of authority, then analyzing the discourse present in those films raises an extremely unpleasant reflection on the symbolic system in which we happen to live. These films replicate and legitimize the harmful discourse of the female aggression as transgressive and pathological, being in inherent conflict with the mild, sensitive, and passive feminine nature. How dangerous are the consequences of this type of narrative, Morrissey (2003) demonstrates in her study:

These stock narratives of women who kill have very far-reaching effects. They can adversely affect the legal treatment of the individual female offenders themselves and can militate against their receiving any

sort of rational justice. However, the effect of these tales is even more disturbing and pernicious than this. These stories affect the representation of women in general and the meaning of the feminine because they deny female agency and a concept of women as active, human subjects. (p. 23)

What is equally disturbing is the fact that those stock narratives have strong formative effects on the youngest members of our society. Revenge, with just a few exceptions, is not often the subject of the films directed to children, neither does it appear in the research on the children themselves, except maybe in the context of the adults' attitudes towards revenge, such as in the case of the Bedouin-Arab children (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999). Nevertheless, children and adolescents are shaped and formed by the adult culture and brought up to reproduce its patterns. Hence, the 11-year-old boy quoted in the introduction to this paper can proudly refer himself to the heroic narrative and identify himself with the imaginary role of his sister's avenger. Girls, however, grow up in the narrative context that does not offer them heroic imagery and reduces them to the roles characterized by passivity and victimhood instead.

The point of this study was to look for the discursive roots of the gender differences in the willingness to take on revenge, and the authors have managed to trace these roots back to the popular Western cinema. What the authors consider to be most important of the findings is that these films continue teaching women to fear their own aggression. They show women that any attempt to express such basic emotions as anger, even in the most extreme of the cases, threatens to disintegrate their identity and, on the screen often literally, turns them into monsters.

However, the study is not free from limitations. One of the most important of them, in the opinion of the authors, is the need for the inclusion of a micro-level analysis of the narratives present in each of the movies. This would allow us to consider the patterns of behavior, expression of emotions, as well as types of motivations, that these films transmit to society. This, however, will be the subject of our further studies.

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