

Does he look like a bitch?

a.k.a. She's got the look

a.k.a. Get the picture?

a.k.a. Back to the suture

Identification and interpretation in *Kill Bill*

University of Gothenburg
Department of Cultural Sciences
Film Studies, Master
Dissertation submitted 2/6-2015
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Abstract

SUBJECT: Film Studies

INSTITUTION: Cultural Sciences

EXAMINER: Ola Stockfelt

TITLE: *Does he look like a bitch? A.k.a. She's got the look A.k.a. Get the picture? A.k.a. Back to the suture: Identification and interpretation in Kill Bill*

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ESSAY: Master

SEMESTER OF VENTILATION: Spring, 2015

In my essay I examine how the identificatory process of a spectator watching a cult film is altered when the film in question has a female protagonist and a high level of self-reflexivity (and other typically post-modern traits, such as pastiche and referentiality). I compare and combine different theoreticians who analyze these phenomena in order to see how the convergence of the elements create new, unforeseen effects that so far have not been explained. Identification and self-reflexivity have been studied separately, but I show that when combined, they sometimes produce new effects, and even though the result does not always differ fundamentally from when one watches a 'traditional' film, the process through which this result is attained is sometimes altered.

Keywords: Self-reflexivity, identification, interpretation, Quentin Tarantino, pastiche, irony, Kill Bill, cult, gender.

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1. Introduction

One topic of conversation I have been bothering my friends and acquaintances with is the subject's relation to the filmic text, the identification with characters, or lack thereof, and one's interpretation in relation to the text as such. Opinions vary, and the academic texts treating the subject shows that it is, mildly put, complicated and full of nuances. At first glance it is difficult to ascertain whether the spectator is aware of the external positioning in relation to the events portrayed, or if she is temporarily oblivious to the artificiality of the text. If the latter is true, it is still unclear what this means more specifically, for instance whether the spectator identifies with one/several character(s) to such a degree that she adopts their portrayed emotions entirely.

Things get even more complicated when the text makes no attempt to adopt the qualities of suture claimed by 'conventional' narrative films, and when the spectator and the protagonist are not of the same sex. A text that addresses the viewer without trying to tone down or hide its own construction seems to require a radically altered approach, especially when the protagonist is female in a genre whose audience consists primarily of men, which implies that it is not evident which practice of interpretation and identification that this would entail.

1.1 Disclaimers

I will talk about cult movies, a sometimes vague and polysemic notion that can be problematized and deconstructed, but that is not the purpose of the essay. I wish to explore certain effects of cult movies, but adopt the point of view of Umberto Eco (as developed by Barry K. Grant) without any further examination of the concept as such, as this is not pertinent to the questions the essay will address. Eco notes that cult movies must have an element of imperfection, and preferably a degree of intertextuality and use of archetypes. By intertextuality he means '[...] stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual tradition [...]'¹, and by archetype '[...] a preestablished and frequently appearing narrative situation [...]'². The cult film does not have to be universal, its appeal can be limited to a cultural area and/or historical period. Still, Eco thinks that it is important to keep in mind that the notion of cult does not indicate whether the use of clichés is deliberate or not.³ Post-modern movies deliberately use different *topoi* as a means of coping with the spectator's putative familiarity with them. Barry K. Grant goes further in the attempt of defining cult, picking up where

1 Eco, Umberto 'Casablanca: Cult movies and intertextual collage' in Mathijs, Ernest & Mendik, Xavier (red.), *The cult film reader*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2008, 69

2 Ibid., 69

3 Ibid., 74

Eco left off, and notes that cult films are not limited to any genre in particular; cult seems to transgress these boundaries, unaffected by them. Transgression also happens to be the common trait that Grant identifies in cult movies, be it of subject matter, attitude or style.⁴ Transgression does not seem to be the only defining element: the movie is simultaneously recuperating that which is violated, usually in the ending.⁵

I also want to address the issue of misogyny that some theoreticians claim to find in the films I will analyse in-depth, *Kill Bill vol 1 and 2* (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 2003/4). While these people do provide an important point of view and show that the films can be perceived as misogynistic, they do not add much else, and will therefore not be of too much interest to the analysis. Basak Göksel Demiray is convinced that the films objectify the Bride (the protagonist of the film) at regular intervals throughout the entire story, and he describes several instances of how men mistreat her.⁶ The problem with Demiray is the selective nature of the analysis. He disregards scenes that problematize the alleged misogyny, and more importantly: he does not separate the content from its presentation. Even if the Bride is mistreated, Demiray does not elaborate on how cinematography conveys that as something positive or negative, which could have changed his analysis on a fundamental level. Likewise, Jenny Platz believes that the movie celebrates the rejection of femininity, seeing that the Bride is empowered by adopting masculine traits.⁷ Platz does not discuss female characters that adopt masculinity but are defeated anyway, neither does she take into account the fluidity of gender, as others have. Jessica Hope Jordan, for one, believes that the female appropriation of masculine traits (such as the gaze) can on the other hand work as a means of deconstructing patriarchal structures as well as representations of women as passive objects which allows them to appear as '[...] active participants in the construction and control of their own spectatorship.'⁸

All this amounts to the conclusion that the same material can be interpreted in different ways, which is too trivial a matter to be discussed in the dissertation; it rather serves as a basis that is important to remember throughout the analysis. It is with this in mind that the analysis can take place.

Last but not least: I will use the female pronoun to refer to the putative spectator throughout the entire essay, but this is a matter of practicality. Unless stated otherwise, the same effects apply to

4 Grant, Barry K., 'Science fiction double feature: ideology in the cult film' Mathijs, Ernest & Mendik, Xavier (red.), *The cult film reader*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2008, 78

5 Ibid., 78

6 Demiray, Basak Göksel, 'The Avenging Females: A Comparative Analysis of Kill Bill Vol. 1-2, Death Proof and Sympathy for Lady Vengeance' in *Cinej cinema journal*, 31f

7 Platz, Jenny 'Return to the Grindhouse: Tarantino and the modernization of 1970s Exploitation Films' *Enthymema*, 12/2012, Issue 7, 529

8 Jordan, Jessica Hope 'Women refusing the gaze' *Heroic Age*, 2006, Volume 9, §36

people of both sexes.

1.2 Purpose and research question

The purpose of the dissertation is to explore how self-reflexivity, the film's apparent awareness of its own construction and artificiality - and postmodern stylistic traits related to this, such as pastiche, the imitation of art, and referentiality, the text's deliberate allusion to other texts - affect the spectator's comprehension of the text, more specifically her identificatory and interpretative processes in relation to such a text that features a female protagonist. Discussions will cover how the viewer is 'manipulated' by the film, her belief in the alleged veracity of it, with what/whom she identifies and, on a more universal level, how the text allows for the spectator to adopt different 'positions of interpretation.' The questions this dissertation will address are:

- How does self-reflexivity alter the spectator's comprehension and interpretation of a cult movie?
- How does the gender of the protagonist in a self-reflexive cult movie affect the spectator's identification, and comprehension of the film?

1.3 Theory and method

I will discuss self-reflexivity in film, using Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* as a starting point (referring to both movies as one for methodological reasons, except in instances where it is more advantageous for practical reasons to separate them). The reason why I chose *Kill Bill* is that it has several qualities that problematize theories of identification in different ways. The protagonist is a woman, the cult movie genre does not seem to invite the spectator to the same kind of suture as 'conventional' genre-films, and perhaps most important of all: there is a high degree of self-reflexivity. Cult movies are problematic, inasmuch as they depend on the use of tropes and clichés, and I will examine how they effect the viewer's comprehension and interpretation when the use is deliberate. Some of the people writing about identification have been influenced by psychoanalysis in varying degrees. I will adopt the terminology (out of practicality) but I retain a critical distance to the ideology itself, so as not to adopt it in too careless a manner. I believe that psychoanalysis can provide a good insight into the identificatory processes as long as one makes sure not to adopt everything in it without careful consideration; one need not throw out the identificatory baby with the oedipal bathwater.

Notions that are vital to the dissertation are: self-reflexivity, identification and pastiche. These notions can be interpreted in different ways, so I will start by presenting different theories on the subject, followed by my own definition, what I personally mean when I use the terms.

In order to analyze these phenomena I will make a close reading of significant scenes in *Kill Bill* where the questions of identification, self-reflexivity and pastiche are pertinent, and where they are more prone to interfere with the interpretational processes of the spectator. This does not mean that specific events in these scenes will always have a crucial impact on the analysis, sometimes general traits and recurrent phenomena will be of more interest. Some of these recurrent elements can easily be linked to questions of how the gaze affects identification and/or objectification, such as how the Bride commences each fight with her characteristic gaze accompanied by the musical signature indicating that the person in question partook in the attack on her wedding, or how she at other times, when put out of action, is the object of the gaze of the male characters present. There is a multitude of theories on these notions, and I will apply them when necessary and compare them to each other to see how they hold up in the case of *Kill Bill*, if they are refuted or corroborated, or if the text is, perchance, so polysemic and ambiguous that none of the theories can be applied as is, but perhaps a modification and/or combination of them could to produce a satisfactory conclusion.

2. Previous research

2.1 Identification

2.1.1 Grodal and cognitive psychology

I will assume some of the theories of identification as presented by Torben Grodal, as he provides a good addition to the psychoanalytic theoreticians.⁹ Grodal's take on identification is that the spectator is generally (with some exceptions) attempting to recreate the experience of the character on-screen, simulating her by constructing her perception. These constructions comprise the actant's vision, kinetic sensations, sentiments, emotions, goals and assessments of how to carry these plans into effect. Note that the presence of the actant with whom one identifies is not a prerequisite for this kind of identification. Grodal mentions that when a villain forms a scheme against the hero one feels fear, as the spectator still identifies with the hero, and still focuses on the hero's interests.¹⁰

According to Grodal, the identification takes place on such abstract a level that it can act as common ground to all putative viewers, regardless of differences. As he mentions himself, a man reading a book with a female protagonist will still be able to understand the motivations and acts of the protagonist, even though he is not of the same gender. In my view, this is a very important point to keep in mind: while it is important not to neglect any possible effects entailed by differences

⁹ Grodal, Torben, *Moving pictures: a new theory of film genres, feelings and cognition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997

¹⁰ Ibid., 91

between spectators and actants, it easily becomes a 'slippery slope' leading to nominalism, underestimating what people *do* have in common, especially since such traits are fundamental to what it means to be human. (This is not to say that differences do not play an important part to the viewer, recognition of similarities could possibly simplify identification.)

According to Grodal, cognitive identification need not be voluntary, such as when the acts of the character go against the volition of the spectator. He takes the example of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1960). When Norman Bates dumps his car in a marsh (with the recently killed woman inside) in a marsh, it sinks a little bit, but then suddenly stops. Had the viewer been in the position of an all-perceiving altruistic entity she would have hoped for failure in his undertaking (no pun intended), but instead she feels relief when the car starts sinking again. After a sustained 'realization' (Grodal's expression) of the emotions of Norman Bates, cognitive identification comes naturally.¹¹ Since this realization is required to give his acts meaning and coherence, and he is the only character left that has been presented in detail, Grodal seems to suggest that cognitive identification with him seems almost inevitable. Had another character been allotted as much screen-time she could have acted as an alternative, another possible point of identification, but the void that is created when Marion Crane dies must be filled and only one character is provided.

Birger Langkjaer has objected to Grodal's emphasis on the appropriation of the feelings of the actants, saying that if this were the case, the spectator would presumably suffer great trauma in scenes of a more violent kind. Langkjaer believes that the spectator, though she may feel quite engaged with the story, retains enough of a distance not to be too affected by the events, while still experiencing relatively strong emotions.¹² However, this might be a misunderstanding on Langkjaer's part. Grodal differentiates between genres, claiming that there is no universally applicable theory that will fit all kinds of films, not even traditional narrative ones. Sympathy cannot be equated with empathy, even though, as Grodal says, the latter is usually a result of prolonged cognitive identification.¹³ He emphasizes the possibility of distance to the actants. In the case of horror, he sees the fictional framing as imperative for the very possibility of pleasure. The spectator can simulate the story as if it were true (identifying with a character in it), knowing that it really is not, that it is a '[...] hypothesis, [...] a game from which we can bale out.'¹⁴ He sums it up by stating that 'All fictional forms of identification and empathy are hypothetical simulations of non-fictional types of experience.'¹⁵ The division between real and fictitious is more conspicuous in what

11 Ibid., 94f

12 Langkjær, Birger *Den lyttende tilskuer: Perception af lyd og musik i film*, København, Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet 2000, 58, 94

13 Grodal, 157

14 Ibid., 102

15 Ibid., 103

Grodal calls 'metafiction', where there is a filter between the viewer and the text, which positions the viewer in '[...] different, “extradiegetic” and more or less real-world contexts.’¹⁶

Grodal says that the distance created by metafiction seems to be inevitable, as it activates two frames of meaning simultaneously. While simulating the fictional world, the viewer retains an awareness of the self. According to Grodal this might actually give a higher 'net' activity, but also distraction, impeding full attention to either of the frames.¹⁷ The viewer has to identify with a putative kind of spectator as implied by the context, for instance a detached 'scientific' observer, or a viewer of art film.

Still, Grodal stresses the importance of keeping in mind that the spectator always makes an evaluation of the veracity of the text, fiction never seems to influence the spectator's comprehension of the outside world. Grodal takes the example of *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, UK/USA, 1981). No spectator has any difficulty in distinguishing the fictive city in the movie from the real one. On the other hand, Grodal states (referencing Gombrich and Hochberg), we can infer qualities from real-life experience when constructing the diegetic world. Qualities of mundane objects do not have to be explained.¹⁸ (While Grodal does not say so explicitly, one can also assume that most laws of logic and causality apply in the diegetic world as well, unless specifically stated otherwise.)

This is not to imply that the *experience* of the text is affected fundamentally by belief in the texts alleged veracity. Says Grodal: '*There is [...] no simple correlation between the strength of a given experience and the reality-status of the object of the experience.*'¹⁹ (Emphasis in original.) The evaluation of the reality-status of the text is chronologically posterior to the registration of changes in external stimuli, which is an automated process on a non-conscious level. Grodal describes the former as a meta-activity that requires conscious attention, and draws a parallel between the engagement with cinematic structures and a game of chess: during the game, the players do not consider the ontological qualities of the pieces, they are too busy calculating upcoming moves.

2.1.2 Christian Metz and the mirror phase

Christian Metz could be one of the most influential people in the area of identification in film studies, as many others comment on and/or draw upon his theories, depending on the person's relation to psychoanalysis (since it has had a significant impact on Metz's theories).

16 Ibid., 177

17 Ibid., 177

18 Ibid., 25, 28f

19 Ibid., 32

Metz outlines the ontological nature of film.²⁰ He says that it differs from other artforms as it engages more senses than a purely auditive or visual medium. He thinks that in this respect it is a lot like theater, the difference being that the fiction of a play is only a convention, it takes place on the same phenomenal plane as the spectator. (There is nothing in the theater itself that separates the participants from the spectators, save the tacit consent between them.) The film itself is just as real as the theater, but the ontology of the content differs from that of the medium. The images are pure replicas, regardless of their veracity they are mere copies of the past.²¹ Metz compares it to a mirror reflecting the world, and it is the next step that has been the cause of skepticism among some theorists. He compares the cinematic mirror to Jacques Lacan's theories of the mirror phase. When the infant sees itself in a mirror, it recognizes its own image. This is an important part of the shaping of the infant's ego, it is during this phase that it understands its positioning in the world. The obvious problem that Metz points out with the image of cinema as mirror is that it lacks the subject gazing at it. The spectator can look as much as she wants without ever finding her replica in the image.²²

This need not be a problem at all, says Metz. The spectator of a movie has already undergone the mirror phase and does not need to recognize her own image before constructing a world of objects, she can do this without seeing herself as a part of that order. This led Metz to believe that the spectator does not primarily identify with any of the characters, but rather with the gaze itself. Identification remains important, without it nothing would make sense, but all identification with the people on-screen will be secondary to the primary identification of the look *per se*.²³ This, he explains, also does away with the problem of the spectator's relation to the film when there are no characters on-screen. Film does not cease to 'work' during establishing shots, panoramic pictures or other scenes that feature no character with whom one can identify.

This has consequences for the relation to the film, Metz says. If the spectator sees herself as an all-seeing act of perception, it makes her aware of the fact that she is watching a film. She knows that she does not partake in the action portrayed, but watches it from a distance, in the cinema.²⁴ Nevertheless, the spectator wants to believe, pretending that the film is true, and is disappointed if the illusion is not respected (for instance a lack of verisimilitude). Metz states that all people have a credulous person 'within' themselves, the same part of us who still believes that every person has a penis. There are some ways that cinema can 'reveal' its own illusion by dividing the film into

20 Metz, Christian, *The imaginary signifier: psychoanalysis and the cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind., 1982

21 Ibid., 43

22 Ibid., 45f

23 Ibid., 46f

24 Ibid., 48

several layers, ascribing them different ontological properties. A film within a film can be presented as illusory, meaning that the primary film must be true. The film can also remind the spectator of the distance to the actions portrayed, making her aware of how she is not duped by the film; once reassured she can allow herself to be duped a little longer.²⁵ Metz does not believe that one can speak of a filmic illusion in the true sense of the word, only dreams are convincing illusions; film has an impression of reality, but is not mistaken for it. The perceptual gap between film and reality is decreased gradually, but just like in a daydream this process is never fulfilled. There are different cinematic states, but the spectator almost never forgets that she is watching a movie.²⁶

The notion of identification with the gaze itself seems a little vague, but Metz specifies that it is with the camera that the spectator identifies; it is absent, but represented by the projector. Otherwise the camera-movements would have been confusing and incomprehensible to the viewer, she knows that she is not turning her head, yet the image changes. Her identification with the camera makes her a transcendent, all-seeing subject in relation to the image, not an empirical one, and her gaze is dispersed all over the screen.²⁷ (In my view, identification with the camera would be the very *cause* of the problem of image movement. By acknowledging the existence of the camera one also acknowledges its movement, without being able to explain it. The movement implies some kind of interaction with the course of events while the spectator knows that she does not and *cannot* intervene. Metz ends up creating the very problem he intended to solve.)

The viewer should not be regarded as passive, as Metz says that observing is not an entirely passive act. She receives the image in the sense that the photons bounce off the screen and reach her retina, but it is by her own volition that she does so as she 'casts' her eye on the screen. She controls the reception of the image and can stop it whenever she wishes by simply closing her eyes or leaving the cinema.²⁸ Just like the camera she is passive and active, she receives and produces the image at the same time.

Assuming that the spectator identifies with the gaze, do different camera-angles affect her comprehension of the spectacle, or does the intelligibility of the image remain unaltered? According to Metz this does influence the interpretation, but not necessarily in the sense that different camera-angles are tied to specific effects. It is the change itself that does something to the interpretation, it reminds the spectator of her emplacement outside of the fiction. The standard framing becomes a 'non-framing', but by altering it the spectator is reminded of her position.²⁹

25 Ibid., 72ff

26 Ibid., 104ff, 130

27 Ibid., 49ff

28 Ibid., 51

29 Ibid., 55

2.1.3 Laura Mulvey and the male gaze

Like Metz, Laura Mulvey makes no attempt to hide her psychoanalytic influences.³⁰ She makes an important contribution to the explanation of the mirror-phase: the recognition of the self in the mirror is also a *misrecognition*. It takes place during a time when the discrepancy between physical ambitions and motor capacity is particularly palpable. The image is seen as an ideal ego, more complete than the experience of the own body. The re-introspection of this as an ego ideal enables the infant to identify with others later on in life.³¹

The nature of cinema allows for the temporary loss of the ego, says Mulvey. While caught in the filmic impression of reality the spectator forgets who and where she is, '[...] nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition.'³² At the same time, the ego is reinforced through the ego ideals produced (movie stars, for instance).

Mulvey speaks of two kinds of identification, related to scopophilia and narcissism respectively. The former is a result of sexual instinct and consists of a separation between the subject and the object on-screen, which is conceived as an object of erotic interest. The latter implies a recognition of the subject's like on-screen. The Freudian division between active/male and passive/female results in the women on-screen being objects of the male gaze, having the quality of what Mulvey labels *to-be-looked-at-ness*, playing to male desire, a spectacle that freezes the development of the story when she enters the frame.³³ The gaze of the spectator and of the character coincide as the woman is defined as an erotic object for both of them, without affecting the narrative verisimilitude.

Could it ever be the other way around? No, says Mulvey, because the male subject is not prone to sexual objectification and this kind of exhibitionism. He has the active role of narrative progresser, articulating the look and creating the action. He is the owner of the look, being the surrogate for the viewer, sharing his control over events through identification. This is also made possible through the above-mentioned misrecognition. Just as the *doppelgänger* of the mirror is more complete than the infant, the surrogate on-screen can exert power in a way that the viewer cannot.³⁴ The spectator's look coincides with the gaze of the protagonists, which subordinates the two other looks, that of the camera (recording the event) and that of the spectator (looking at the screen), ultimately disavowing both.

This makes her theory similar to Metz's, especially since the application of psychoanalysis leads both of them to the conclusion that the spectator identifies with the gaze. What is interesting is

30 Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and other pleasures*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989

31 Ibid., 17

32 Ibid., 18

33 Ibid., 18f

34 Ibid., 20

the difference in the topic of suture, since Metz is convinced that the look with which one identifies is that of the camera/projector. As explained above, this does away with the problem of scenes that do not have any human actants, but Mulvey's theory is more appropriate in the scenes that *do*. Their essays being contemporary, it is striking that she does not address that issue whatsoever. If cinema is dependant on the sexual instincts of the spectator and the relation between cinematic subject and object, how can one explain scenes void of any characters? This problem only seems aggravated by Mulvey's theory, if desire is imperative the illusion of cinema should be dispersed whenever a character carrying - or being the object of - the viewer's desire exits the frame.

Mulvey acknowledges only in passing that there are movies with female protagonists, but explains that it is beyond the purview of the essay, rendering the theory less useful; the phenomenon can be observed everywhere, except where it cannot. Neither does she present any theory on how a female spectator perceives the film. Fortunately, she tackles both of these issues in another essay.³⁵

Mulvey develops her theory by saying that a female spectator might, because of her gender, simply fail to find any pleasure in the text. She may also, on the contrary, find it exhilarating and exciting to finally be allotted the control provided by the identification with the hero, as the masculine pleasure is the structural center of most Hollywood genre films, which allows her to '[...] rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity [...]'.³⁶ Mulvey gives a neat summary of the elements rendering this possible: '[...] Freud's conception of "masculinity" in women, the identification triggered by the logic of a narrative grammar, and the ego's desire to fantasise itself in a certain, active manner.'³⁷

2.1.4 Teresa De Lauretis

The theories of De Lauretis are pertinent for the essay, as they draw upon the theories and ideas of Metz and Mulvey, and thus they will receive more attention in the next chapter. De Lauretis reasons similarly to Metz's theories of identification, while keeping the difference of gender in mind.³⁸

35 Mulvey, Laura, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the sun* (1946)' in *Visual and other pleasures*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989

36 Ibid., 29ff

37 Ibid., 33

38 De Lauretis, Teresa, *Alice doesn't: feminism, semiotics, cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984

2.1.5 Carol Clover: Female protagonists in exploitation movies

Carol Clover analyzes exploitation movies, more specifically slasher and rape-and-revenge, but I believe that her theories are relevant in most kinds of cult movies.³⁹ (They are, in any case, pertinent to this essay, as *Kill Bill* clearly belongs to the category rape-and-revenge, and the theories on slasher are applicable to most genres with a female protagonist.)

Clover clarifies that the target audience of slasher films consists predominantly of adolescent men.⁴⁰ What concerns Clover is why a male audience would have a predilection for a genre where the protagonist is almost exclusively female. The theory that people are inclined to identify with characters of their gender would make little sense, as male characters are frequently killed off quickly and/or in gruesome ways. The murderer is often male, but too repulsive to enable any real identification. The female protagonist (the *Final Girl* as Clover names her) is the only character developed in detail who lives to see the end. How can one explain the popularity of slasher films among men when they have no man to identify with, but only a girl, and a victimized one at that?⁴¹ Clover proposes that the woman could be seen as a figurative male, as she is the hero (and according to De Lauretis the hero must, by definition, be male), but up until the end she behaves in a typically female way, and the monster in a male way. Even in the few cases when the sexes are changed, when the hero is a man and the monster a woman, they still behave in accordance with the opposite gender; the male hero cries and cowers in the same way as the female one.⁴² Clover realizes that things get complicated when seen in the light of Jurij Lotman's binary model of subject positions/functions in any narrative: the mobile one with the power to transgress borders, and the immobile, passive one, that must be overcome, which, according to De Lauretis, are male and female respectively. The Final Girl is the protagonist and *must* therefore be male to some extent.

Clover believes that the victimized role of the Final Girl could perchance only be shouldered by a woman. This could still allow men to get a vicarious pleasure out of watching her; they get to enjoy a 'forbidden' masochistic pleasure while still being able to disavow any identification by pointing to the fact that she is a woman. She works as a congenial double acting out in a way that is prohibited to the adolescent male, but not sufficiently female to disrupt the structures of male competence; she is a vessel for male masochistic fantasies.⁴³ This will pose the Final Girl as a male character, since she is the one conquering the 'obstacle' of the murderer. She is boyish in some respects. She is competent enough to find a solution as opposed to other women in the film. She has

39 Clover, Carol J., *Men, women, and chain saws: gender in the modern horror film*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 1992

40 Ibid., 6

41 Ibid., 43f

42 Ibid., 12f

43 Ibid., 17f, 51ff

an 'active investigating gaze' (Clover's expression) for which women are usually punished; in other genres it is reserved exclusively for men. The Final Girl actively seeks out the murderer herself, and after her initially passive reaction (when attacked) she faces the killer and beats him with the very same kind of phallic weapon that he uses himself, 'castrating' him, while realizing her masculinity through phallicization and assuming the gaze.⁴⁴ All the other women in the film are killed off, the only one who lives to see the end is reconstituted as masculine. This model solves one problem but creates another, equally big one: if the Final Girl is a figurative male, how could women ever enjoy the movie? The audience is *predominantly* male, not *exclusively*.

Could it be, as Clover suggests, that the spectators respond to different ontological elements of the narrative, so that the men respond to the subtext (the figurative) and women to the text (the literal)? More importantly, if identification is not limited by biological sex, why create the 'problem' of a female protagonist to begin with, why not replace the Final Girl with a Final Boy? Perhaps women are capable of 'crossgender' identification and men are not, so men have to 'transexualize' a character of the 'wrong' sex before identification takes place, but this only creates even more problems of why 'crossgender' identification must go one way only. Nevertheless, if the subtext is what 'counts', the sex of the main character should not matter and it could be advantageous to change it. Clover thinks that this is not the case, it is not only the 'content' of the character that affects the relation to the spectator, but also the 'presentation', the embodiment thereof.⁴⁵ The Final Girl is not but a man in drag, for, as Clover discovers, masculinity *per se* is not propitious in the slasher film; the men are killed off just as the women. It is the masculine traits in combination with the female body that makes the Final Girl unique. She oscillates between the masculine and the feminine, alternating between the passive and active. In one moment she screams and runs for her life, in the next she fights back furiously. She is not one gender, but both.⁴⁶ (In my view the same conclusion should be valid in rape-and-revenge, even if the division of gender traits seems a bit more polarized: the feminine is restricted to the rape and the masculine to the revenge.)

Clover has a similar theory for rape-and-revenge: the protagonist must also be perceived as female to some extent in order for the identification to work, and this will inevitably make the male spectator experience masochistic pleasure. If he identifies with the men during the rape, it would make no sense why he would endure the ensuing vengeance, unless he took pleasure in 'being killed' over and over again. If he identifies with the woman during the killing-spree in the second half he must first have identified with her in her capacity as rape victim, as the pleasure of the revenge is predicated thereupon; any which way, the assumption of the feminine posture is

44 Ibid., 48ff, 60

45 Ibid., 47, 54

46 Ibid., 63

imperative to the viewing experience of the film.⁴⁷ The narrative and cinematic devices utilized draws the spectator into the perception of the protagonist, during the painful rape as well as the gratifying murder of the assailants.⁴⁸ The latter cannot make sense without the former.

Clover reaches the conclusion that if the audience of horror movies (and rape-and-revenge, I would like to add) does not differ from other ones - and it is quite safe to assume that it does not - other audiences are probably also capable of crossgender identification, and this can probably be done in any movie irrespective of genre.⁴⁹

2.2 Richard Dyer and pastiche

My use of the notion of pastiche is inspired by Richard Dyer's.⁵⁰ According to him, pastiche is, basically, imitation in art, or more specifically, a text that the audience interprets as imitation. It is important that it is thought of as such, for therein lies the function of pastiche, otherwise it does not work. This may give it an air of elitism, as it requires a certain competence from the audience.⁵¹ It is not mere replication, neither is it exaggerated enough to become parody. It can be similar to another work but not indistinguishable from it; there is always a discrepancy, a deformation large enough to distort the sense of likeness, without it automatically turning into the ridicule typical of parody. 'A pastiche imitates its idea of that which it imitates [...].'⁵² The text as such is not altered significantly, as it is the competence of the audience that is crucial for its impact. Referring to Roger de Pile, Dyer explains that pastiche is neither a copy, nor an original. A copy tries to hide the fact that it is based on something else, whereas pastiche works better if the audience is aware of this. The difference between referring to something verbally and audiovisually is that while talking about the work one need not imitate it, but in images and music one cannot refer to it without copying it at least temporarily. Dyer sees this as an indication of how pastiche cannot be seen as something entirely new, it is an imitation, in the sense that it references other works, and at the same time avoids being a mere reproduction. Imitations can admire or mock the original (homage and parody respectively), but Dyer's notion of pastiche does neither.⁵³ Still, he emphasizes that it is not identical to the 'original', pastiche includes elements of selection, exaggeration, accentuation and concentration. The creator chooses what features of the original to include, preferably the ones that seem essential in some sense, and makes them more conspicuous (and often more frequent) than

47 Ibid., 62, 142

48 Ibid., 152, 159

49 Ibid., 227

50 Dyer, Richard, *Pastiche*, Routledge, New York, 2007

51 Ibid., 1ff

52 Ibid., 55

53 Ibid., 22f, 40, 47

they might have been in the original text; they become a kind of synecdoche where these parts represent the whole.⁵⁴

Dyer says that the awareness of its likeness to other texts obstructs the audience's engagement with the work, as opposed to traditional texts. He likens this to how an awareness of phonemes and grammar can render speech more difficult, but this does not mean that affect is incompatible with pastiche. Genres work in similar ways, assuming that the audience possesses a particular knowledge to simplify the comprehension, but one must not mistake an instance of genre for a pastiche of it.⁵⁵

The ingredients in a pastiche are usually from different genres, modes, periods etc., and do not always go together readily. Dyer compares pastiche to a pie (to which it is linked etymologically) where the pieces are kept intact and on large enough a scale to keep their 'flavour'.⁵⁶ This is not enough for it to be labeled pastiche, it also requires a certain specificity. Dyer uses the sonnet as an example. To write a sonnet is simply to follow a set of rules, in order for it to be pastiche it has to be reminiscent of something else, such as English romantics or French symbolists.⁵⁷

2.3 David Bordwell and interpretation

David Bordwell notices a division between different kinds of interpretation.⁵⁸ He speaks of what he calls the 'referential meaning', which is the comprehension of the events as such. This includes, but is not limited to, the construction of the diegetic world (the *fabula*), conceptions of causality and time etc. with the aid of intratextual and extratextual referents. Bordwell notes the difference between *comprehension*, understanding the apparent and direct meanings, and *interpretation*, the unravelling of hidden meanings. As much as movies are 'open to interpretation', Bordwell states explicitly that they are not a case of relativism; they provide the audience with cues that have to be structured into patterns that finally entail a conclusion. There is a meaning in the text, but it is inert until it is included in a process of making meaning. Different people look for different cues to make their own personal interpretation, depending on what perspective they have (a critic and a laid-back audience may look at movies differently), but the cues themselves are intersubjective, they exist outside of the spectator and everyone in the audience can agree that they

54 Ibid., 56ff

55 Ibid., 4

56 Ibid., 10

57 Ibid., 93

58 Bordwell, David, *Making meaning: inference and rhetoric in the interpretation of cinema*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989

are there; the links between scenes, on the other hand, have to be structured by the viewer for the movie to make sense.⁵⁹

The level Bordwell believes to be 'beyond' that is the 'explicit meaning', which belongs to passages where the text seems to speak directly to the viewer, for instance when Dorothy says, in the ending of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, USA, 1939), 'There's no place like home.' The one beyond that is the 'implicit meaning', where the text seems to speak indirectly in a more symbolic manner. In the case of *Psycho*, Bordwell explains that the referential meaning comprises the events including Norman Bates and Marion Crane, the explicit meaning is that madness can be overcome by sanity, and the implicit meaning could be that madness and sanity cannot be distinguished easily. The units that constitute the implicit meanings can be labeled 'themes', and it is on that level he thinks that irony can be said to exist. The final speech in *Psycho* gives an over-explicit explanation of insanity, but the theme in the implicit meaning could be that everything leading up to that point indicates the contrary, that the line is blurred.⁶⁰ The implicit meaning is where Bordwell thinks that the spectator can attempt to make sense out of anomalous and/or contradicting elements.

2.4 'This time it's personal' - My interpretation of the phenomena

With self-reflexivity I refer to stylistic traits and qualities that indicate that the movie is 'aware' of its own artificiality, that it is indeed a product. This may be achieved by, for instance, 'breaking the fourth wall', addressing the spectator. *Kill Bill* is pervaded by stylistic traits such as pastiche and referentiality, traits that all might make the viewer aware of the movie's artifice, while at the same time acknowledging that the movie itself is aware of the audience's awareness. Self-reflexivity, in my view, is the phenomenon of when the spectators are aware of the fact that they are only watching a movie, and the movie itself is aware of this as well. If one assumes that a conventional movie tries to construct a seamless narrative without bringing any attention to the construction *per se*, a self-reflexive one does the opposite, constantly redirecting the viewer's attention to its constituent parts. Case in point: In *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, UK et al., 2006) James Bond orders a vodka-martini, and when the bartender queries whether he would like it shaken or stirred he replies 'Do I look like I give a damn?' The spectators must, in order to appreciate the humorous element in his answer, have a previous knowledge of the clichés and tropes specific to the earlier films in the Bond-franchise in relation to Bond and vodka-martinis; the point of the comment is the evocation of conventional practice in other Bond-films (the drink itself is a staple in all movies,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2ff, 8

⁶⁰ Ibid., 8f

even the less self-reflexive ones), the film is overtly bringing attention to the protagonist's earlier obsession with the preparation of his drink. The best example of this phenomenon might be *Scream* (Wes Craven, USA, 1996). Throughout the movie the characters discuss clichés in slasher films, while actually being in one themselves, indicating that the movie itself is 'aware' of the formalistic practice of the genre, an even mixture of derision of and adherence to the tropes. One character watches *Halloween* (John Carpenter, USA, 1978) and shouts at Jamie Lee Curtis to look behind her, while the murderer who has been haunting his hometown the last weeks is standing right behind him. (Comedy in itself does not equal self-reflexivity, even though they often seem to go hand in hand.) If a traditional film makes use of voyeurism, trying not to make the spectator aware of that it knows that it is watched, a self-aware movie is exhibitionistic, gladly displaying itself.

I will speak of different kinds of interpretative and identificatory processes in the spectator's relation to the filmic text. When I speak of identification I personally assume that the viewer is concerned in, and devoted to, the destiny of the protagonist to such a degree that events afflicting her (the character) evokes a strong emotional response in the viewer, making her (the viewer) care so much that she almost perceives the protagonist as real, trying to recreate the emotions that she imagines the protagonist experiences to as high a degree as possible. (Note that this is only true where identification is complete, as Grodal implies there are instances where identification is not preferable.) The spectator does not evaluate the veracity of the film at all, I believe that she (during the screening) is too concerned with the events portrayed to consider whether they are true or not.

With pastiche I mean a text that is deliberately made to be similar to another, but it is not to be confused with parody. Pastiche does not make fun of the original, it is not aimed at mocking but simply evoking the air of the original, reminiscent of something else. *Star Wars* (George Lucas, USA, 1977) can be seen as pastiche, influenced by old science fiction series. It is made deliberately to *resemble* the original. The viewer must never forget that it is but a simulacrum, inspired by something else. The entire point is that it is *like* the original without actually being it. It is neither original, nor copy, but an interpretation of sorts exposing its own influences and intertextuality.

2.5 Previous research on Tarantino

2.5.1 Eve Bertelsen

Eve Bertelsen sees the oscillation between genres as an intrinsic constituent of Tarantino's filmmaking, one prominent example being *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 1994) that starts

out in the crime genre, but is rendered comic when overwritten with the codes of situation comedy.⁶¹ What is quite interesting, Bertelsen notes, is the different forms of identification offered by these two genres. The film is structured as a *mise en abyme* where the '[...] cultural debris of the text mirrors the subjectivity of its characters, and the fictional predicaments of its protagonists mirror the decoding dilemmas of the film's spectators.'⁶² Bertelsen does not consider personal experience of a particular genre as necessary to the spectator's interpretation when she (the spectator) tries to understand generic qualities; a genre can work as a referential field that the viewer recognizes without ever having encountered any of its specific instances. Tarantino's movies are replete with overblown generic cues, and its abundance of genre reinforcers '[...] seem to promise viewers all the traditional identifications and pleasures of the Hollywood crime movie.'⁶³ She says that the use of generic conventions is deliberate, and serves to invite the viewers to certain interpretative operations, promising them the traditional identifications of Hollywood crime movies. The conventions included are familiar enough to align the viewers in distinctive ways in relation to the text, seducing them into it, but Tarantino strategically employs them so as to deny them the sole viewing position (identification with characters and plot) usually offered by popular genres. The audience is thought to be versed in the topoi of the genre, it goes without saying that the film requires an ample media knowledge. The ambivalent and contradictory manner is a result from this play with the audience's viewing habits and filmic knowledge.⁶⁴ They are expected to recognize and respond to particular cues and tropes, to predict the course of events and align themselves with the characters, allowing the conventions of the genre to supervise their reading, but once this is done Tarantino throws their performance into relief. Not only must the spectator be versatile enough to revise and adapt her activity, she must also willing to do so; the text does not mock the spectator, it is dependant on her assent and complicity, her voluntary modification of her response to the new incoming cues. Bertelsen stresses this mixture of genres in *Pulp Fiction*. The themes and characters are derived from the genre of crime, but the narrative is driven by interactions and dialogue that are typically comic in nature. 'While the fabula material in all of these episodes belongs to the crime film, its treatment (tempo, register and narrative organisation) is strictly sitcom.'⁶⁵ The action is violent and hyperbolic, but the comic is ubiquitous, the very combination of genres transforms the movie into a sustained joke. Crime and comedy are the genres that influence the movie most distinctly, but there is nevertheless an abundance of other genres referenced, if only for brief

61 Bertelsen, Eve "'Serious Gourmet Shit': Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction' *Journal of Literary Studies*, 06/1999, Volume 15, Issue 1-2 8f

62 Ibid., 9

63 Ibid., 14f

64 Ibid., 18

65 Ibid., 17

moments, such as horror and musical.⁶⁶ The decoding thereof does not rely on common sense, but accumulated knowledge of generic conventions and their workings.

As made clear above, Bertelsen thinks that the film is dependant on the use of *topoi* and the audience's familiarity with them, but not only are they used, they are presented as such. They are constantly depicted as mere tropes; the excess of subversive tropes impedes any attempt to identify with them. Referring to Gavin Smith, she says that this effect is reinforced by the scrambled narrative which reminds the viewer that she is subjugated by the codes of genre. The conflicting genres work as a means for the movie to comment upon its own construction.⁶⁷ Without any warning the characters find themselves in another ontological universe that alters the narrative elements and invokes a new set of rules. This is done, at some instances, when the suspense is about to reach its climax, reinflecting the narratological structure, rendering it comic in tone. Bertelsen mentions the scene where Mia Wallace has overdosed on heroin and Vincent stabs her in the heart (simultaneously referencing both *Halloween* and vampire lore), she is 'revived' and the tense ambiance is dispersed and replaced by laughter.

Bertelsen observes that Tarantino's movies have sometimes been criticized for the light-hearted way they handle social taboos and problems like violence and racism (I would like to add misogyny as well), letting the viewers 'off the hook.' She addresses, more specifically, the accusation of Sharon Willis, who thinks that the spectator is distracted by the nostalgia, the references and the odd stylistics; the disorienting textual elements prevent the viewer from noticing the problematic discourses that are represented in the text. Willis says that the text asks the viewer to mobilize her viewing competence, but 'fascinate' (her word) by covering up ethical issues behind a veil of irony. She thinks the issues are reduced to mere *topoi*, transgressive discourses are presented as uncontroversial and innocuous.⁶⁸ Bertelsen refutes these accusations and draws a parallel to Freud's definition of a joke, which is a collision between two meaning systems in a compressed story where a '[...] phrase or action is replaced by something linked to it in a conceptual connection.'⁶⁹ In real life any such conflict would require labour and extended personal effort, but the brevity of the joke works as an economical mechanism which provides the listener with a form of release from anxiety with but a small expenditure of energy. A person ignoring the mechanism of humour will inevitably feel offended, since the very function of humour is to let the audience 'off the hook', and pointing this out is superfluous, since there would be no humour if taboos were never to be transgressed, especially considering that '[...] transgressive humour is the lifeblood of

66 Ibid., 23ff

67 Ibid., 21ff

68 Ibid., 28

69 Ibid., 16

Tarantino's comic texts.⁷⁰ Not only does she see Willis's accusation as redundant, but even as incorrect. The citing of violence and macho behaviour is not frivolous, it dismantles these notions, makes them look ridiculous. Usually they are positioned safely in the closed system of genre, but by detaching them from this safe 'haven' they are exposed and examined.⁷¹ Bertelsen admits that it is still open to interpretation whether Tarantino manages to do this, but at least it is, theoretically, possible to deconstruct issues in this way.

2.5.2 Michael Rennett

Michael Rennett bases his analysis of Tarantino on the term 'director as DJ' (coined by Jim Smith and D.K. Holm), when referring to Tarantino's cut-and-paste style of filmmaking, because of the similarity with the way a music DJ would go about combining sounds from older songs to create a new sound, also known as 'sampling'.⁷² Rennett refers to another theoretician treating the notion, Paul Miller, who explains that this can go to extremes and make the final product too saturated with citation. Rennett elaborates on this, saying that just as in music, the movie fails to generate synthesis with too much citation. The movie becomes cohesive only if the quotations are weaved together in a way that makes sense to the spectator.⁷³ Movies seem particularly suitable for references, seeing that they provide the director as DJ with the narrative, auditive and visual aspects to work with. Rennett sees them as different layers, so the coherence of the narrative is not that easily disrupted since these different layers do not necessarily interfere with each other, and makes it possible for the director to allude to different texts at the same time. Costuming, cinematography and production design can be used in different ways without interfering with each other. The references all work on different levels and manage to make the narrative flow uninterrupted. In the case of *Kill Bill*, Rennett mentions that themes by Ennio Morricone are used, combining the kung fu movie-look with an air of western.⁷⁴

Rennett states that this does not mean that the director can fill the text with references as long as they remain on different levels. As he stressed above, they have to actually convey something apart from the fact that they draw upon another text. He sees the Bride's yellow tracksuit as an obvious reference to Bruce Lee's outfit in *Game of Death* (*Siwang youxi*, Robert Clouse et al., Hong Kong/USA, 1978), but it would not leave much of an impression, were it but a superficial

70 Ibid., 17

71 Ibid., 29f

72 Rennett, Michael 'Quentin Tarantino and the Director as DJ' *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 04/2012, Volume 45, Issue 2 pp 391-409

73 Ibid., 392ff

74 Ibid., 395f

homage; it works in this new context because the Bride, just as Bruce Lee, has to fight several enemies with different fighting methods, such as oriental martial arts.⁷⁵

2.6 Previous research on *Kill Bill*

2.6.1 Lisa Coulthard

Lisa Coulthard emphasizes the generic conventions and excess of aestheticized violence that deflects, invites or simply provokes the viewer's attention toward its discourses related to gender, race, power etc. Her point is, more specifically, that the representational codes and modes of the violence represented have the potential of being transgressive, but could also act as regressive, presenting dominant ideological constructions in the guise of liberating and subverting fantasies of omnipotence.⁷⁶

2.6.2 Anneke Smelik

Anneke Smelik believes that *Kill Bill* differs from other movies in its representation of women, and that classic feminist theory cannot be applied in the case of the Bride.⁷⁷ She does believe that woman as phenomenon can still be seen as the source of sexual differentiation, she reminds man of her otherness, but Smelik does not see why one would have to go as far as connecting this to terms of castration and lack.⁷⁸ I find this to be a very important point of hers. Refraining from a strict use of psychoanalysis does not automatically expunge all the effects promoted by it, there is still a biological difference between men and women that can never be denied, endocrine and anatomical features unique to each sex.

2.6.3 Maud Lavin

Maud Lavin explores some of the potential ways of seeing *Kill Bill*, inspired by psychoanalysis, without accepting the entire school of thought.⁷⁹ A fundamental part of Lavin's thoughts is based on

⁷⁵ Ibid., 397

⁷⁶ Coulthard, Lisa 'Killing Bill: rethinking feminism and film violence' in (ed.) Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra *Interrogating postfeminism : gender and the politics of popular culture* Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, 158

⁷⁷ Smelik, Anneke 'Lara Croft, Kill Bill, and the battle for theory in feminist film studies' in Buikema, Rosemarie & Tuin, Iris van der (red.), *Doing gender in media, art and culture*, Routledge, London, 2009, 179

⁷⁸ Ibid., 181

⁷⁹ Lavin, Maud, *Push comes to shove*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/ London, England, 2010

Paul Duncan's claim that people who are prone to becoming victims of violence are drawn to the concept of retaliatory violence. Lavin says that women are usually the physically smaller sex, which is a disadvantage in a physical confrontation, but are also limited in the social space in areas that are not related to size. Since women fear finding themselves in such disadvantageous situations (as they often do) she thinks that a text like *Kill Bill* should appeal to them even more.⁸⁰ It gives them an added pleasure when they witness the furious Bride strike back at her enemies with justified violence. Another reason why she believes women in particular should take pleasure in the violent spectacle is their almost hereditary enmity with their siblings. Freud asserts that every woman he had talked to had, at one point, dreamt of killing her siblings, and Lavin sees the members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad as a group of siblings with Bill as their father figure. This is a theme that is never fully developed, but it permeates the entire story. The Bride's conversations with the different members shows an intimate, almost familiar bond between them. One example is how the Bride and O-Ren finish each others sentences when reciting the old slogan 'Silly rabbit, tricks are for kids', which is also an obvious inside joke of theirs, alluding to the Bride's real name Beatrix Kiddo. Another is the song from the intro, where the lyrics talk about the amity of two kids.⁸¹

Lavin also refers to Dolf Zillman's objection to the simplistic theory that the spectator only identifies with one person (the protagonist), and his theory that spectatorship is more fluid in nature. Lavin believes that the witness position of the viewer makes it possible for her to experience affinities in relation to several characters, even the antagonist, but it also places her inside the fiction and in the audience at the same time.⁸²

According to Lavin, *Kill Bill* encourages this kind of fluid identification even more through the way the characters are established. The Bride is far from innocent herself, but it is her blurred morals that create a spectrum where the spectator is allowed to connect to her (the Bride) in an intimate manner through her (the spectator's) own desire to kill. According to Lavin it is harder to connect to a purely good character, such as Lara Croft, when she kills.⁸³ Lavin seems to think that the righteousness of Lara Croft becomes an obstacle, something that separates the spectator from her, as opposed to the Bride who has the same forbidden desire as the audience.

Lavin thinks that sympathy (or empathy, it is not clear which Lavin alludes to) for the Bride is promoted through the construction of the diegetic world, in three different ways. There are no plausible representations of romantic affection or amity, which results in a lack of social space, and

80 Ibid., 109

81 Ibid., 116ff

82 Ibid., 111f

83 Ibid., 115

thus one should feel no guilt when violating that space. Secondly, the Bride never negotiates, which means that there is no demand for sympathy for anyone who tries to negotiate to sustain the social space. (It is unclear why Lavin believes there could be no discrepancy between the actions of the Bride and the mentality of the spectator.) Thirdly, the Bride is very narcissistic, killing her 'siblings' and ignoring the intersubjective space to preserve herself. This makes her into a regressive dream with a license to kill. Lavin says that the acceptance of one's own aggression is a key that can unlock regressive, narcissistic moments, memories of days of old before the realization of the interdependence between siblings that secured survival. The Bride is a pleasant break with the classic female victim: she gets to strike back several times after the victimization, with aestheticized violence.⁸⁴

Lavin also believes that there is an ever-present distance between the text and the spectator. She compares the aestheticized violence to samurai films with a very strict choreography, and to unrealistic violence in video games and comics, but it is the aesthetic distance in references to eastern and western action films that allows the spectator to explore her forbidden desires related to mortality and lust for blood.⁸⁵ The pleasure derived from watching stars becomes even more significant in *Kill Bill*, as the text has been emptied of almost everything save Uma Thurman's (the protagonist's) violent display, and the distance established elicits a selective emotional response in the spectator and creates a relaxed nature of spectatorship.⁸⁶ (Why selective? Because Lavin objects to Coulthard and says that the scenes vary in their impact, the reunification with the daughter is not at all as convincing and emotional as the violence.)⁸⁷

2.7 John Fiske

John Fiske studies television primarily, but some of his theories address phenomena that, in my opinion, are recurrent in Tarantino's movies, in particular the use of excess.

Excess as hyperbole works through a double articulation which is capable of bearing both the dominant ideology and a simultaneous critique of it, and opens up an equivalent dual subject position for the reader.⁸⁸

This is very much like the dilemma presented by Coulthard: the content can either sustain or

84Ibid., 121ff

85 Ibid., 108f

86 Ibid., 125-6

87 Ibid., 113

88 Fiske, John, *Television culture*, Methuen, London, 1987, 91

critique the dominant ideology. Fiske, however, presents a revolutionary angle of approach: the split between the two could be a false dichotomy. He thinks that it is possible not only to enjoy both of these ways of looking, but to adopt them *simultaneously*. 'The reader can both enjoy the compliment and response and at the same time be (slightly) critical of her/himself for doing so.'⁸⁹ This is made possible by including a subtext, parodic or subversive in nature, parallel to the text itself. The viewer has no problem reading and enjoying both texts, even though this renders her subjectivity somewhat disunited.

Another phenomenon Fiske explains is semiotic excess. As opposed to excess as hyperbole this is a characteristic of television in general, not a textual device. The abundance of meaning in television (as well as in movies, I believe) cannot be controlled by the dominant ideology, making alternative readings possible thanks to traces of resisting discourses.⁹⁰ This, in my opinion, may be the cause of Coulthard's ambivalence when trying to make sense of the competing meanings in *Kill Bill*. However, this does not result in sheer relativism where all interpretations are ascribed the same veracity, neither in anarchic and unstructured polysemy where the interpretations are equally probable. 'All meanings are not equal, nor equally easily activated [...].'⁹¹ As implied above, the subtext exists in *opposition* to the text.

Fiske also has some theories on intertextuality, which he describes as the necessity of reading a text in relation to other ones, and the range of textual knowledges that affect it. The text does not necessarily refer to other texts in particular, so the reader does not have to be familiar with a specific text to 'get it.' Even when a text *does* allude to one specific text, the audience does not need to recognize that particular connection (it is likely that they quite often do not), but use their general textual knowledge.⁹² In *Kill Bill* I find several examples of this, one being the concept of the avenging female samurai, alluding to *Lady Snowblood*. (*Shurayukihime*, Toshiya Fujita, Japan, 1973). The majority of the younger part of the audience probably has not seen that particular movie, nevertheless it is likely that they could recognize jidaigeki in general, even if this knowledge did not originate from first-hand sources, but allusions in other movies or parodies. (I think that this is quite similar to Bertelsen's thought on how only the recognition of a referential field is necessary for the referentiality to work, despite a lack of first-hand experience.)

Fiske also presents two different theories on the definition of a character. According to the first, realism, the characters represent 'real' people, in the sense that they have their own unique personality. The personality is never fully represented, only hinted, conveyed through cues, making

89 Fiske, 91

90 Ibid., 91

91 Ibid., 93

92 Ibid., 108

the spectator 'fill in the blanks' herself by using her own real life experience of social interaction until the character becomes 'real.' Sometimes the phenomenon becomes almost extreme, such as when fans of a soap-opera write letters to, not the actors, but the characters they portray. This only goes to show that the illusion of a character is just as real as the spectator allows and/or makes it out to be. The opposite, structuralism, considers the character as a textual device. The character does not embody a 'real' person in the way proposed by realism, instead she is thought of as a discursive manifestation, an ideological representation, who is defined through her relation (and differentiation) with other textual elements. The spectator is not restricted to one of these modes but can oscillate between them or choose either to make different interpretations possible, or to do both readings with a varying emphasis. A viewer who agrees with the dominant ideology promoted by the text will more easily accept the character as 'real', but someone who disagrees will perceive her as a manifestation of ideological values.⁹³

Fiske's explanation of identification, which draws upon Freud, only seems compatible with the 'realistic' reading, since it presupposes that both the spectator and the character are thought of as unified and complex individuals. The spectator projects herself into the character until they are merged, and the character allows her to live out her unsatisfied desires through a kind of wish-fulfillment. As mentioned above, characters are somewhat 'fragmented', and it is the 'filling in of blanks' that makes identification with them possible in another way than with real people. Some viewers claim that one of the biggest sources of pleasure is just that, the possibility to share experiences and emotions with the characters. Ideologists criticize how this naturalizes and perpetuates dominant values, but even though this projection seems to be involuntary it is not unconscious, the spectator is always aware at some level of what she is doing and is not 'lost' in the character. Being in control she is not turned into an unconscious recipient of the dominant ideology, Fiske thinks that she can create her own meanings, but this also means that she can choose deliberately to believe that the fiction is real to increase her own pleasure, or at the very least act as if she did (for instance by writing letters to the characters). It is important to keep this in mind. In order for the 'deception' of the text to work it needs the consent of the spectator. This means that the spectator is positioned in- and outside the text simultaneously. She has to be aware of the illusion in order to be able to submit herself to it.⁹⁴

93 Ibid., 174

94 Ibid., 170ff

3. Theoretical perspectives

3.1 Teresa De Lauretis

De Lauretis starts out on a fundamental level, explaining how social values and symbolic systems are inscribed into the subjectivity through codes.⁹⁵ Like Mulvey, she believes that films are influenced by a patriarchal ideology, the difference being that women are completely excluded from movies, placed in a void between the projector and the screen. They are displaced, finding themselves outside of the semiotic system, outside the signs, their subjectivity is never represented.⁹⁶

As opposed to Grodal, but similar to Metz and Mulvey, De Lauretis is overtly influenced by psychoanalysis, but presents several plausible theories and conclusions on which many can probably still agree. She says that the reason why people feel engaged with the story presented is that the spectator is addressed personally by the text and engaged in the viewing process subjectively; her (the spectator's) fantasy is bound to the image. The cinematic representation maps the social vision and inscribes it into the subject. This binding of fantasy affects the spectator as subjective production: it inscribes and guides desire; cinema participates in the production of different kinds of subjectivity that are created individually but are social in nature.⁹⁷ Codes and social formations define positions of meaning, but De Lauretis adds that the viewer reworks these positions into a personal, subjective position. The subject is implicated and constructed, but not emptied. Cinema is a semiotic apparatus where the encounter takes place and the individual is addressed as a subject.

Note that De Lauretis does not claim that only men are addressed by cinema, despite women's exclusion; both are addressed, but as male.⁹⁸ She also says that dominant cinema places the woman in a different position of meaning: she is specified as a negative term through sexual differentiation and is constituted as the foundation for representation. In classic cinema the woman is also positioned as a spectator-subject, it shapes her identification and guides her desire, making her an accomplice in the creation of her womanness. In this way De Lauretis thinks that cinema and language are homologous in the way they work in/as subject processes, but this is a conclusion she reaches because of her belief that all sign systems are organized like languages.⁹⁹

According to De Lauretis, one cannot speak of 'good' and 'bad' images of women, since that would presume that the production and consumption of the images takes place on an ahistorical

95 De Lauretis, 3f

96 Ibid., 8

97 Ibid., 8

98 Ibid., 192 n17

99 Ibid., 14ff

plane, and this is never the case. The movie and the people connected to it are always in a historical context, colored by the patriarchy.¹⁰⁰ The cinematic text is not only influenced by the context, but dependant on it, since it is its spatiotemporal positioning that defines it, what in the iconic text that counts as a sign and its purposefulness. These factors define the complexity of the communication and how it should be read.¹⁰¹ De Lauretis refers to Umberto Eco's claim that the signification of the image can be relayed, through intertextuality, to other images, and though she agrees partially she wishes to widen the purview of this process. Intertextuality is not limited to concrete manifestations in the shape of images, but can also rely on nontextualized discourses and social practices.¹⁰² She accuses Eco of simplifying the interpretational process by neglecting all conceivable cultural differences between the recipients' interpretations, and what these could entail, even though these differences are likely to result in interpretations just as heterogeneous as the people themselves. According to De Lauretis, the images cannot be seen as meaningful in themselves. It is the context that establishes the relevance of the units and what counts as a sign in a communicative act. The purposefulness of the codes are within the practice of signification, defining the complexity of the communicative act; what and how much one 'sees' in the text. One must never forget (which she claims that some people do) that the subject is materially, historically and experientially constructed through prior engagement in narrative genres.¹⁰³

De Lauretis shows that this makes the meaning-making primary. The images are implicated in the narrative and inscribed with desire, but it is only after the subject's involvement that identification can take place. The narrative is not a code like any other, but a condition for processes of identification and signification. De Lauretis uses J. Hoberman's theories and notes that no cinematography in the world could possibly alter the spectator's assessment completely, for instance images of a heart-surgery will probably evoke stronger feelings than images of trees, no matter how you use the camera. This leads De Lauretis to the conclusion that 'positive' images cannot be created through a simple reversal of roles, or stories about liberation. It is only through the narrative that one can address issues of the spatiotemporal positioning of the female spectator ('narrative' does not only mean story and characters, but the discourse of temporal movement and the positioning of desire). This is because the images are already implicated in the narrative, defined by positions of identification and desire.¹⁰⁴

De Lauretis addresses a problem that is created with this reasoning: if the film addresses everyone, it must also provide everyone with points of identification. With what do women identify,

100Ibid., 38

101Ibid., 48

102 Ibid., 48

103 Ibid., 48, 106

104 Ibid., 79ff

given that they are already socially constructed subjects; what positions are made available to women?¹⁰⁵ If people in the audience identify with their respective sex on-screen, men would be confirmed in their position of mythical subject, whereas women would be confined to their part as monster/obstacle/landscape. How can a woman be engaged as a subject if she is repeatedly to identify with an object? To answer this question, one must perhaps first answer what identification is. De Lauretis refers to Laplanche, according to whom identification in psychoanalysis entails an assimilation of attributes and qualities belonging to another subject, and the alteration thereof. A series of identifications of this kind constitute and specify one's personality. The subject is involved in a series of relationships, a process. This process is inscribed into textual, discursive and behavioral practices, that also sustain it. It is therefore impossible to see oneself as an inert object or sightless body, nor is it possible to see oneself altogether as other; the ego is always active, even if on a minimal level. De Lauretis presents another way of looking at masculine/feminine qualities, saying that they are not traits as such, but the position of the subject in relation to desire. Freud implies that women can alternate between these, and De Lauretis speculates that women could therefore possibly alternate between identification with the camera (subject) and image (object of the gaze). The problem she spots with this is that the image is a figure, one perceives it all the time, as opposed to the gaze; one can see the image, but one never sees oneself watching.¹⁰⁶ One cannot be replaced with the other, as the image has to be inscribed as image by the gaze. De Lauretis's solution to this problem is that a woman identifies with the subject as well as the space of the narrative movement. Both are possible at the same time, given that both are figures, implicated in the process of the narrative, and they sustain both positions of desire: the desire to the other, and the desire to be desired. She criticizes Metz's theory of primary identification, partly because of the difficulty of retaining the distance to the image required by a pure act of perception, partly because it is not primary, it presupposes the identification of the figures of narrative movement. More importantly, he does not specify the limitations of the analogy to the mirror phase, and talks about the spectator as if she were a neutral subject, lacking historicity or any other preexisting identifications. Cinema is not an act of pure perception. The images are placed in a certain position in relation to desire, coded with a certain potential for identification, and are significant in relation to the subjectivity of the spectator.¹⁰⁷

105 Ibid., 121, 136

106 Ibid., 142f

107 Ibid., 141ff

3.2 Lisa Coulthard

As explained earlier, Lisa Coulthard emphasizes the potential transgressiveness within the representational codes and modes of the violence represented, but these modes could also present dominant ideological constructions in the guise of liberating and subverting fantasies of omnipotence.¹⁰⁸ Lisa Coulthard thinks that *Kill Bill*, being a typical post-modern hybrid text, can be seen as clear and unequivocal, as an ideological fantasy of femininity (the violence is tied the ideology of victimhood, whiteness, heterosexuality and maternal sacrifice) but the violence and the femininity presented can also be read as ironic and complex. She notes that the viewer's attention is redirected towards the surface, where the explicit intertextuality uncovers contradictory and complex generic combinations. Setting, *mise-en-scène* and choreography confirm the spectacular nature of the violence, as well as the referentiality of the pastiche (the violent knife-fight in a Disney-fied McMansion, the samurai duel in a serene garden accompanied by Mexican guitars). The duels all have their own stylistic signatures with different generic and cultural references. Add the fact that the women of the film are skilled warriors, they are not inferior to men, and the Bride is always in control, bringing the fight to a close.¹⁰⁹

However, Coulthard adds that each time the Bride is passive and neutralized, she is objectified by on-looking men who redirect the attention to her beauty, both diegetically and aesthetically (they are all filmed with the same overhead-shot), but she admits that this could be seen both as a promoting and as a critique of victimization and erotification of women in cinema.¹¹⁰ Coulthard herself suspects that it rather does the former. The nostalgia for old genre-films accentuates the conservative functions and values presented therein, in spite of the pastiche and ambivalence. The stylistic references retain the intrinsic problems of the modes referenced. Thus, by referencing ex-, teen- and blaxploitation, kung fu-movies, western etc., *Kill Bill* not only replicates, but reinstates the values of the genres. The cultural and ideological ramifications of these genres are already problematic, or at least complex, in their relation to feminism, and Coulthard does not think that pastiche will necessarily expunge these problems. One could claim that the referentiality reduces the tropes and stylistic signatures to mere surface, free from the ideological implications, but the construction of gender and violence shared by the different genres indicate that eliminating them is not that simple.¹¹¹ She refutes the claim made by Clover, that reduction of the narrative to loosely connected acts distances the violence from character development and/or psychology. Coulthard argues that it is the very reduction that makes the narrative coherent, also

108 Coulthard, 158

109 Ibid., 159f

110 Ibid., 160f

111 Ibid. 161f

ascribing the violence coherence, as it is seen as instrumental, rational and justified; the emphasis on the violence does not disrupt the narrative, it constitutes it, it cannot be separated from the structure, which in turn brings the visual, narrative and ideological foundation to the violence. Even when seen as ironic, the violence is not freed from its redemptive effects in the narrative.¹¹²

This leads Coulthard to the conclusion that one can find the dominant ideological and cultural construction of womanness in *Kill Bill*, tropes constituting the relation between violence and femininity while maintaining an ostensible distance to the patriarchy, but she acknowledges that it is hard to criticize it for its excess of violence when the film as well as the audience know that it is the very reason for its existence, and (as mentioned) the tropes are perhaps too bound up with the surface to receive any critical attention.¹¹³

3.3 Anneke Smelik

As mentioned in chapter 2, Anneke Smelik believes that *Kill Bill* differs from other movies in its representation of women, and that classic feminist theory cannot be applied in the case of the Bride.¹¹⁴ Smelik agrees that woman as phenomenon can still be seen as the source of sexual differentiation but does not see why one would have to go as far as connecting this to terms of castration and lack.¹¹⁵ Neither does Smelik deny the phenomenon of voyeurism, but still without adhering too faithfully to psychoanalysis. Mulvey's theories are limited to classic Hollywood film, so one should not be surprised to find that things might have changed in times of increased gender equality, and according to Smelik they have. She believes that to-be-looked-at-ness has not decreased, but on the contrary it has increased lately; female nudity and objectification is more common. What has changed on a more fundamental level is the gaze, which Smelik no longer believes is male, instead it has become neutral, no longer aligned with a male character acting as an owner of the look. Smelik draws on S. Hall, who claims that the male has lost his 'authority' in other areas as well, and M. Simpson, who notes that male bodies are also eroticized and objectified. This leads Smelik to the conclusion that *both* sexes are eroticized, both of them enjoy the erotic spectacle of the other sex, which she sees as an equal representation as both sexes share the activity of looking and the passivity of being looked at.¹¹⁶

Smelik continues to draw upon psychoanalytic phenomena, without accepting its premisses of sexual desire and the like, when it comes to the lacanian mirror phase. She says that the

112 Ibid., 162ff

113 Ibid., 167

114 Smelik, 179

115 Ibid., 181

116 Ibid., 182f

identification with the actor on-screen is quite similar to the infant's identification with the mirror image, and that this 'misrecognition' with the powerful character in the movie is reminiscent of the identification with the ego ideal in the mirror (not too far from Mulvey, in that respect). Since the arrival of strong female protagonists women are also allowed to identify with an ideal corresponding to their sex. Smelik mentions Lara Croft as an example of a heroine who combines ideals of power and independence with traditional feminine qualities such as beauty and attractiveness (idealized as well), all without ever losing her agency. The gaze can also be narcissistic (a desire to be), not only voyeuristic (a desire to have), which could be related to the fact that ideals have changed. Beauty is not enough, it has to be combined with fitness, a slim and muscular body.¹¹⁷ Smelik criticizes De Lauretis and Mulvey for being too confined to the orthodox psychoanalysis. Contrary to several psychoanalytic theories, Smelik says that it is not only possible to express female desire and subjectivity in mainstream cinema, but that it has already been done by giving the point of view (narratologically and visually) to a female character, letting her dominate the look of the camera and giving her an active role in the narrative. According to Smelik, this prevents voyeuristic objectification and promotes narcissistic identification. Since the introduction of strong, female protagonists women can identify with a beautiful ideal woman, someone who can combine good looks with power and who does not have to give up her agency in favor of her beauty. The narcissism illustrates the protagonist's independence and grants her control over her to-be-looked-at-ness. Smelik suspects that psychoanalysis simply is not suitable for interpretations of contemporary movies. She refers to R. Stam and P. Kramer, and explains that the aesthetics of postmodern cinema break with the classic structures of narration and representation, giving spectacle and sensation a priority over round characters and plot; narrative fragmentation replaces the oedipal plot.¹¹⁸

Smelik explains that what separates the Bride from Lara Croft is that the Bride's body is not at all eroticized. She has blonde hair and a body in good shape, both of which meet the contemporary criteria of beauty, but the camera never examines her body in an eroticized way, nor the body of the other female warriors either for that matter. Despite being a ruthless warrior, there is a strong emphasis on the tenderness of motherhood. The Bride does not wish to kill Vernita in front of Vernita's child, and the Bride herself receives sympathy by the assassin Kim sent out to kill her when she explains to Kim that she is pregnant. (Kim even turns around to congratulate her before leaving.) Smelik says that the only time the Bride cries is when she meets her child for the first time,¹¹⁹ but her recently commenced motherhood does not make her any less merciless when she

117 Ibid., 182ff

118 Ibid., 187

119 This is not really true: she screams in agony when waking up from her coma and when she is buried alive, and

kills Bill with the very same technique he claimed Pai Mei did not teach anyone, even though he hated caucasians, loathed Americans and despised women.¹²⁰

4. Analysis

In the analysis I will discuss references to other texts when necessary, if they are elucidative and if there is reason to believe that it is indeed a reference (there seems to be some dissent among fans on that topic). For instance, the Bride's yellow outfit is an obvious reference to Bruce Lee's character in *Game of Death* and may give an indication of how she should be perceived when finding herself in a similar situation, for instance when facing multiple opponents in close combat, whereas others seem like fun trivia for the cinephile, but do not really add any insight into the narrative. According to IMDB, when the Bride rings a doorbell it is allegedly a reference to *Shoot the pianist* (*Tirez sur le pianiste* Francois Truffaut, France, 1960).¹²¹ Tarantino being a cinephile and fond of the French New wave I do not have any reason to doubt that this is true, but it does not add anything to the spectator's comprehension and interpretation of the scene. Some of the references are disputed: the scene where the Bride is talking to her toes has been interpreted as an allusion, but with reference to three different movies and one episode of a TV-series.

The analyses of the events will be in the same order that the scenes are presented in the film. Should the scrambled chronology be too confusing one can study the appendix where I structure the events portrayed in chronological order. (This appendix is not essential to the analysis and discussion, but clarifies how the segments relate to one another temporally.)

There are several instances where the Bride attacks or is attacked, but these are not limited to physical violence, they also include Buck's rape or Elle's visit at the hospital when she is about to inject poison into the Bride's IV. Throughout the assaults and their aftermaths, it is interesting to note that they are all obsessed with gaze in one way or another. Not a single encounter seems to take place without the gaze being a matter of dispute.

4.1 Texas wedding chapel massacre

The very first assault on the Bride can barely be called a fight, but has to be addressed, because it

while she does not actually shed any tears it has to be on a par with crying

120 Ibid., 189f

121 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266697/movieconnections?ref_=tttrv_sa_5, used 6/3-2015, no information available on author or the date of publication available.

sets the tone of the events to come. Before the film begins the classic 'Shaw Brothers'-logo is shown with its accompanying music, followed by an equally old segment informing the spectator that the main feature will begin. After that the screen goes black, and an 'old klingon proverb' appears on-screen: 'revenge is a dish best served cold.' These sequences all establish the style of the film before it has begun. The intertextuality is made so evident that not even less culturally 'literate' people can avoid understanding that the film has a foundation based on other texts. The quote about revenge is taken from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer, USA, 1982), but is quite similar to a quote from *The Bride Wore Black* (*La Mariée était en Noir*; Francois Truffaut, France, 1968), where a man states the very same thing about revenge but phrased in a slightly different way. Already the text is saturated with references.

4.2 Vernita Green a.k.a. Copperhead

The first fight depicted (the second one chronologically) takes place in the home of Vernita Green, a.k.a. Copperhead, a.k.a. Jeannie Bell. When Vernita opens the door the image turns red and the camera immediately zooms in on the Bride's eyes while all sound is blocked out by an excerpt from the theme to the TV-series *Ironside* (Collier Young, NBC, USA, 1967-1975), and a fight ensues. The screen turning red, zoomed in on the Bride's eyes with a superimposed flashback of a past trauma is a reference to *Death Rides a Horse* (*Da uomo a uomo*, Giulio Petroni, Italy, 1966) where the protagonist does the exact same thing when encountering one of the people who killed his family 15 years ago. Even if one does not make the connection to these particular texts, the extreme close up of the eyes is reminiscent of spaghetti western cinematography à la Sergio Leone (which I will refer to as 'Leone close-ups'), and the fast zoom is similar to those used in kung fu-movies. (This kind of look will be referred to as the 'death-stare' from now on.) The women start fighting in a stylized way with choreography reminiscent of martial art-movies. When the Bride is lying on the ground Vernita attempts to hit her with an axe-kick, and Vernita is filmed from below in a 'frog-perspective', while the reverse-shot of the Bride is an over-head shot, reminiscent of that in the opening, making her look inferior and subordinate once more, but she quickly parries the kick and gets back on her feet, prepared to fight again. The fight continues, and the woman who briefly seemed like a domesticated housewife has turned into a warrior reminiscent of blaxploitation films, complete with knife and threatful poses. During the entire fight sound effects are exaggerated and stylized.

As they face each other in the TV-room a schoolbus stops by the curb outside, dropping off a young girl, and Vernita pleads with her eyes for the fight to stop. The same instant the girl enters the

house the women turn to her, hiding their weapons behind their backs, and Vernita adopts her housewife masquerade once more during the conversation with her daughter, Nikki, but still drops one or two bad words like a stereotypical blaxploitation character, despite the daughter's young age.

During the women's ensuing conversation in the kitchen Vernita resumes her pleading verbally, explaining that she has changed since their last encounter: she truly regrets what she did to the Bride and has settled down since then with her husband and child. The Bride explains that in order to get even with Vernita she would have to kill her and the rest of her family, finishing by saying 'That would be about square' while drawing a square in the air with her finger. This is a reference to Thurman's character Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction*, who draws a square in the same way while accusing Vincent Vega of being a 'square'. In *Kill Bill* this indicates an awareness of the artificiality and spectacle as well as the dependence on other texts. The connection between Uma Thurman's characters is reinforced by her skills in close combat with edged weapons (which will become even more evident later on), because in *Pulp Fiction* Mia Wallace tells Vincent that she starred in a pilot of a TV-series called *Fox Force Five*, where her character was skilled in combat with knives. The fact that Mia Wallace's character was artificial in what was already quite an artificial text makes *Kill Bill* look like a *mise en abyme* without being placed within another story, it gains artificiality through the relation to the text within the text of *Pulp Fiction*. (This is reinforced by Mia's description of the rest of the team, where three members of Fox Force Five mirror the three other female members in the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad: blonde, black and Japanese.)

Despite Vernita's seemingly honest plea for mercy she (Vernita) persists in her use of profanity, faithful to a stereotypical blaxploitation-portrayal of a sassy black woman. Without warning she aims a box of cereal at the Bride and fires a gun concealed within. The housewife-image seems to have been no more than an image, why else would one keep a gun hidden in the kitchen four years after retirement from the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad (DVAS)? The Bride quickly reacts by kicking her cup of coffee towards Vernita and throwing a knife in her chest. When Vernita lies dead on the ground she is filmed from an angle very similar to the one from which one saw the Bride as she lay beaten up on the floor of the chapel. (From now on I will refer to it as the 'victim-angle.') When the Bride stands over her, looking down at the corpse, she, on the other hand, is filmed from the same angle as Vernita was in the flashback. (This angle will henceforth be referred to as the 'superior-angle.') The Bride has thus reclaimed the position of the superior, and also the gaze. In the flashback she was looked down upon by Vernita, she was victimized and maybe even objectified. That effect is completely reversed as both persons now occupy the opposite position. The Bride's honor has been restored.

As the Bride leaves the house and enters her car, a voice-over in Japanese speaks poetically

of vengeance and battle. It almost seems misplaced, but makes the scene more epic in nature, reminiscent of old jidaigeki or kung fu-movies. The Bride produces a list with names and strikes Vernita's. This links her yet again to another film about vengeance, the aforementioned *The Bride Wore Black*, where the protagonist's husband is killed during the wedding and she goes on a quest to find and kill all of the people involved in the assassination, ticking their names off one by one on a list of hers.

4.3 Hospital sans hospitality

During her stay in the hospital the Bride falls victim to different kinds of assault, both of them victimizing her further after the incident in the chapel. The first one occurs shortly after the massacre, but exactly how long is not evident. Elle Driver enters the hospital, whistling a melody from *Twisted Nerve* (Roy Boulting, UK, 1968), lending her the air of pathology of the psychotic character in the film. When she enters the Bride's room she is filmed with the superior-angle when looking down on the comatose woman, who is filmed with the victim-angle. Elle expresses her disdain for the Bride while preparing a syringe filled with poison, but Bill phones her, telling her to abort the mission. Elle reluctantly obeys but insults the Bride one last time from the superior-angle before leaving.

Four years later the Bride wakes up moments before a nurse named Buck and a stereotypical redneck enter her room. They stand by the end of the bed, filmed in the superior-angle, looking at the Bride who is pretending to still be in a coma (in the victim-angle) and Buck informs the redneck of the rules of intercourse with the Bride, while referring to her in a most demeaning way, as if she were a commodity. The Bride is objectified by their male gaze, by men who regard her as nothing more than a means of satisfying their own needs, exploiting someone helpless for their own pleasure. Buck leaves the redneck on his own, and he lies down on top of the Bride, telling her that she is the most good-looking girl he has had that day, further emphasizing his demeaning way with women. The camera moves until he is out of frame and he suddenly starts shouting at the top of his voice. Cut to the Bride biting his lower lip while he tries to get away from her. Note that this is shot from the side, on eye-level. She is no longer objectified by the redneck, but is, visually, on the same level as him; she has brought him down from his superior position and liberated herself from the patronizing positioning as an object. When Buck returns he is startled by what he finds: the bloody redneck, neutralized (probably dead) on the floor, next to an empty bed. This we see from his point of view. He cannot find the Bride, and neither can the spectator. In a reverse-shot of Buck the camera lowers, only to reveal the Bride hiding behind him. She escaped his objectifying gaze as

well, and after cutting his Achilles tendon (with a buck knife, ironically enough) she drags him over to the door and bangs it against his head. Now *he* is filmed from above, the victim-angle, and she from below, the superior-angle. Just as in the fight against Vernita, the Bride has changed position, punishing anyone who dares patronize her. It is interesting to note that Buck and his client are the only people killed who are not involved with the DVAS in any way at all, only because they dared disgrace her the way they did.

4.4 O-Ren Ishii a.k.a. Cottonmouth

The showdown in the House of Blue Leaves is the longest battle in the entire story, but what is interesting to this dissertation is first and foremost the fight against O-Ren, and the scenes leading up to their first encounter.

There is an important build-up to the battle before either of the parties even enter the House of Blue Leaves. The Bride arrives in Tokyo, and the theme to *The Green Hornet* (George W. Trendle and Fran Striker, ABC, USA, 1966-1967) is played during her trip, making her reminiscent of a comic book superhero on her way to do battle with a super-villain, removing some of her air of seriousness. O-Ren, sitting in her car, looks right into the camera, meeting the gaze of the spectator. When the Bride stops her motorcycle right next to the car of Sofie Fatale, O-Ren's best friend and lawyer, she stares at her for a moment without being noticed by her. The Bride's clothes are almost identical to those of Bruce Lee in *Game of Death*, in which the protagonist, just like the Bride, disguises himself with a motorcycle outfit and hides his face with the helmet. This makes the Bride reminiscent of the typical kung fu movie-protagonist and gives a hint of what is about to happen.

In the club, the members of the Crazy 88 all wear black masks similar to that worn by the character Kato in *The Green Hornet*, maintaining the comic-book air, while adding yet another reference to Bruce Lee (the actor playing Kato). The Bride approaches the room on the second floor where her enemy sits with her subordinates, but O-Ren sends her bodyguard, Gogo, to scout for threats. Just like in the hospital, the Bride evades not only the look of Gogo, but that of the audience. Gogo's point of view examines the big room, but the Bride is revealed to be hiding in the ceiling. When she goes to the bathroom her attention is caught by the ringtone of Sofie's cellphone. She opens the door to the toilet and sees Sofie standing by the mirror, oblivious of her presence. She avoids Sofie's gaze and looks at her with her death-stare, she is in total control of the gaze.

Cut back to O-Ren. She suddenly hears the Bride shouting (in Japanese) 'O-Ren Ishii, you and I have unfinished business.' Now that O-Ren has been granted permission, she can finally see the Bride. 'Leone close-ups' of both women's eyes make this into a battle of the gaze, both claiming

it as their own. The song playing in the background is the theme from *Death Rides a Horse*. Thus, this short encounter has numerous references: the Bride's clothes and the black masks both reference Bruce Lee, the soundtrack is from an old spaghetti-western, as is the death-stare aimed towards O-Ren, the sound accompanying said stare is from an old crime-series, and the look of O-Ren references *Lady Snowblood*, very fitting since that is a rape-and-revenge film set in Japan.

The fight between the Bride and O-Ren is not too different from the one against Vernita, it is stylized and aestheticized. The Bride exits the House of Blue Leaves only to find herself in a snowy garden, a milieu that is quite different to the blood-stained interior she just left, the contrast is quite conspicuous. The Bride's stark yellow outfit stands out against the white snowy landscape, making her into a mobile actant who can cross between (and act inside) different spheres, not limited by exterior objects.

The scene is even more reminiscent of *Lady Snowblood* now that the milieu and O-Ren herself mirror the setting and main character of the film. The music that starts playing, however, is not related to samurais, nor western. Wikipedia describes this particular version of the song (the original version was released in the 70's) as a mixture of disco, flamenco, salsa and Latin in general, and while I do not want to rely on a website consisting of user generated content, the description seems fitting.¹²² The music is something you could dance to, making the battle seem more like a dance. It is choreographed to look good visually, and the movement of the women is synchronized at times, as if they were performing a violent kind of tango.

The music continues until the Bride is cut across her back. The dance has finished, and so does the music. She lands on her back, and is once more shot from the victim-angle, while O-Ren smiles smugly. When the Bride rises they continue their fight, this time in silence, making it more solemn than the preceding dance. The Bride finally kills off her opponent, cutting off the top of her crane, exposing the brain inside.

4.5 Budd a.k.a. Sidewinder

When Budd returns to his trailer after a day at work he looks out over the desert landscape surrounding him, searching for the Bride. He then enters the trailer, and the camera lowers only to reveal the Bride hidden underneath, accompanied by a chord on an electric guitar. The synchronization of the guitar and her appearance suggest that the audience returns to her perspective from now on. Just like in the hospital she evades the gaze of the man present as well as

¹²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_Let_Me_Be_Misunderstood#Santa_Esmeralda_version used 6/3 2015, no information on the author or date of publication available.

that of the spectator, and enters it again at her own will. She looks inside the trailer through the opening between the door and the floor of the trailer. She can see Budd, but he cannot see her; the audience has access only to her subjectivity. When he looks out of the window she presses herself against the trailer and avoids his gaze once more. A sudden turn of events takes place when the Bride opens the door to rush in, only to be thrown back by a shotgun-blast of rock salt. (She does not even have time for the death-stare before being shot.) She's lying on the ground, neutralized, approached by Budd and accompanied by the theme from *A Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dollari*, Sergio Leone, Italy/West Germany/Spain, 1964) which is played when the protagonist is shot down with a rifle. Standing over her, Budd is filmed with the superior-angle and the Bride with the victim-angle, blood-splattered and reminiscent of the massacre in the chapel. Budd tries to objectify her by commenting upon her breasts, but the camera does not follow his lead. Her chest is barely visible, and no details can be distinguished through the torn and blood-stained clothes. Budd may regard her as an object, but receives no support from the cinematography.

The result of the camera's ambiguous positioning does not seem to alter the identification. The camera is ambivalent, first showing Budd but not the Bride and then vice versa, but the music seems to align the spectator with the Bride, thus the spectator should share her anger and humiliation. When the Bride wakes up in the back of Budd's truck he pulls her out on the ground and looks down on her with an acquaintance of his, commenting on her looks once more and making fun of her ('White women call this "the silent treatment", and we let 'em think we don't like it'). The two men are shot from the superior-angle, whereas the Bride is not shot from the victim-angle, but from the side, the camera shares her eye-level. When Budd threatens to empty a can of mace in her eyes the traditional angles are used: Budd is shot from superior-angle, the Bride from victim-angle, making the conversation quite similar to the massacre, especially since the Bride is once more bruised and bloody. The last shot of her is from the side, bringing the camera down to her eye-level again, restoring the spectator's alignment with her perspective.

The Bride is placed in a coffin, lowered into the recently dug hole that is soon filled again with dirt. She is tied up and buried alive, rendered immobile in a space from which she cannot move. She is, by definition, feminine, but her confinement does not last very long. After a flashback to the training with Pai Mei she starts punching her way through the casket and crawls up through the dirt until she reaches the surface. It is important to note the theme played in the background, from *The Mercenary* (*Il Mercenario*, Sergio Corbucci, Italy, 1968). The melancholic whistling intro starts playing when the Bride is buried, but after the flashback it continues and proceeds to the more uplifting part with guitars and trumpets, underlining her progress, and finally, victory. Since it is the same theme, a unity is created between the two segments, the latter is not a contrast, a change, but a

natural progression. The male attempt to immobilize her ultimately fails and was always doomed to do so; she has reclaimed her masculinity and, with it, her subjectivity.

What is also interesting to note is that the Bride does not say anything to Budd. When answering a question she nods, but she never utters a single word. This also works in defense of the Bride's independence and liberty. She does not deem Budd worthy of talking to her, it would be beyond her dignity to lower herself to the level of a hillbilly like him. He does not even fight her in a fair way, but beats her through 'unfair play.' The women she fought earlier were her equals, accepting her challenge to close combat, but Budd 'cheats' by using a shotgun even though his Hattori Hanzo is still in his trailer.

4.6 Elle Driver a.k.a. California Mountain Snake

When the Bride once more reaches Budd's caravan she arrives at the same time as another former DVAS-member, Elle Driver, is greeted by Budd and enters the caravan. The Bride looks at both of them with her death-stare (which goes to show that the lack thereof in her first encounter with Budd had nothing to do with gender or sex, but simply the element of surprise).

The Bride does not interfere during the meeting between Elle and Budd. Their interaction does not concern the Bride at all, as they both believe that she is dead. The spectator then finds herself in a position where she cannot connect the events to the protagonist, and cannot cheer on or fear for the Bride. It is unlikely that one would identify with Budd after his treatment of the Bride, so that only leaves Elle. She happens to be quite similar to the Bride, what with her blonde hair and blue eye. Budd opens his newly acquired bag of money and is bitten by the black mamba Elle had hidden within. This probably aligns the spectator's sympathy with Elle. She may have participated in the massacre, but her killing of Budd acts as vicarious retaliation on the part of the Bride, especially when one considers the fitting choice of snake (Black Mamba was the Bride's codename in the DVAS). When Budd is lying on the floor, dying, Elle looks down upon him in the same way he looked down on the Bride, she is in the superior-angle and he the victim-angle, so justice is administered even if it is not done by the Bride personally. Elle callously recites information about the black mamba, taken from the Internet, adding 'You should listen now, 'cuz this concerns you', a line taken straight from *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 1997), yet another way the film is explicitly linked to the authorship of Tarantino. Elle expresses her contempt of Budd and he dies disgraced and pathetic.

Just when Elle is about to leave, the Bride comes flying in through the door, feet first, and

kicks her back into the trailer. The kick is a point of view-shot from the Bride's perspective, bringing back the spectator's identification to her. Elle tries to unsheath the sword but the Bride quickly pushes it back into the sheath, Elle's attempt to make use of the phallus is denied by the Bride. Throughout the fight Elle's attempts to draw the sword is prevented either by the Bride or by her own incompetence (the trailer is not spacious enough to allow her to unsheath the sword completely). The fight is just as choreographed and stylized as earlier ones, with exaggerated and unrealistic sound effects; old kung fu-movies spring to mind immediately.

There is no question of whether identification or objectification takes place during the fight, despite the distancing evoked by the stylized kung fu-fight. Just as when facing Vernita and O-Ren, none of the fighters are eroticized in any way, their clothes do not reveal anything and the camera never lingers on any feminine body parts, so the question is not *if* one identifies, but with *whom*. The women mirror each other to a certain extent what with their long, blonde hair and their martial art-poses, they even perform the same push-kick simultaneously and knock each other to the ground, but the spectator probably still identifies with the protagonist; it would be unlikely that the viewer would lose her sympathy for the Bride simply because she identified with Elle for a brief moment. One of Elle's punches throws the Bride to the ground in a shot that is quite similar to the flashbacks in volume 1, where one could always see Elle deliver the hit that knocks her out. The spectator is reminded of the massacre and cannot avoid sympathizing with the Bride.

The Bride finds Budd's Hattori Hanzo sword and Elle finally unsheaths hers (the one actually belonging to the Bride) and they face each other in the corridor of the trailer. The music played is one of the themes from *Navajo Joe* (Sergio Corbucci, Italy/Spain, 1966). The fight switches genre from kung fu to jidaigeki/western in a genremix that probably sustains the distance to the viewer. Elle reveals that she killed Pai Mei, so if the spectator still had any lingering sympathy for Elle it is gone by now. This is the third time she is depicted poisoning someone (though she did not finish the job when she was about to kill the Bride in the hospital), and each time she has been portrayed as a sadistic and unsympathetic person who enjoyed murdering people in a despicable way (as opposed to the Bride facing them in a fair fight), giggling like a one-dimensional villain from a cartoon or an old b-movie when retelling the murder of Pai Mei. Both of these women have worked as assassins, the Bride must have killed approximately the same amount of people as Elle, even enjoying it (though this fact is revealed later on in the film), but her sense of 'fair play' and dignified manners should make the spectator inclined to sympathize with her instead.

The fight ends when the women are crossing their blades. A 'Leone close-up' shows the Bride's eyes, after which she plucks out Elle's eye (the only one left), squishes it under her foot and leaves Elle to her fate in the trailer. The last Leone-shot is a final claim of the gaze, the one to which

she was submitted herself in the massacre, and she deprives Elle of the gaze once and for all by eliminating her ability to see. The subjectivity is restored in this case as well.

4.7 Bill a.k.a. Snake Charmer

The first encounter between Bill and the Bride is initially not too different from the one with Budd. The Bride enters his home, very much like she entered Budd's trailer, but is too surprised to enter the death-stare when she finds her arch-nemesis together with the daughter she thought was dead. Instead of the death-stare there is a brass instrument playing in an exaggerated and dramatic way, still giving the distanced feeling of watching an old cult movie in the same way the death-stare did. Bill and the daughter, B.B., shoot at Bride in the same way Budd surprised her with a firearm, but with toy-guns. After the initial surprise she plays along and pretends to have been shot, falling 'dead' to the ground after dropping a cliché line ('B.B., I should have known! You are the best!'), making the game a *mise en abyme* mirroring the air of the film. B.B. approaches her mother and is, when looking down on her, shot from the superior-angle. The Bride is shot from the victim-angle, but for the first time ever she finds herself in that position voluntarily. She has taken control of the victim-position and can enter and leave it at her own will, no longer subject to someone else's power. This puts her in the paradoxical position of a passive actant who has mastered both sides of the masculine and feminine spectrum of qualities.

The first conversation between the three people is ridiculously idyllic and melodramatic. This palpable break with the violent content acts as yet another reminder of the mixture of genres, and a sudden change of style like this works against the suture of the spectator. It simply is not possible to take the scene seriously. B.B. tells her that when first she saw her mother, she said that it was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen in her life. She admits it with a child's typical reluctance, almost embarrassed, but is encouraged to do so by Bill. This is the first time the Bride receives a compliment that cannot be seen as objectifying at all, it is an expression of honest admiration. When they sit down to eat Bill also compliments her looks, but this cannot be compared to earlier instances where the Bride always was incapacitated; this conversation is between equals.

After the evening meal the Bride watches a movie with B.B. until she (B.B) falls asleep. When the Bride leaves the room a sampling, a mix of two songs, is played: 'She's not there' performed by The Zombies and 'St Louis Blues' performed by Bessie Smith. The two songs are interspersed with each other and the lyrics of each song mirror the state of the Bride. This provides the spectator with a very deep insight into the emotions and the psyche of the Bride, while the sampling itself works as a reminder of the cut-and-paste nature of the movie as a whole. The song

thus works in the paradoxical way of, on the one hand, bringing the spectator even closer to the Bride, while simultaneously making sure that one never forgets that everything is one big intertextual collage of references. The lyrics are as follow:

My man's got a heart cast like a rock in the sea
Well no one told me about her, the way she lies
Well no one told me about her, how many people cried
Well it's too late to say you're sorry
How should I know, why should I care?
Please don't bother to find her
She's not there

The first line makes the Bride a much more round character. Up until now she has expressed nothing but hate towards Bill, but the song hints that she still has not forgotten the infatuation she once felt, even if she is crossed with him right now. The time they shared still means something to her and cannot be forgotten completely. 'No one told me about her' probably alludes to B.B. and the fact that the Bride was unaware of her existence until recently and 'how many people cried' could allude to all the people whose lives had to be taken to finally get to her. The fourth and fifth lines speak for themselves. Even if the Bride once was in love with Bill and is relieved to find that her daughter is alive and well, she cannot forgive Bill for what he did, and it is far too late for any apologies. She could not have known that he was taking care of their child, neither does she care much; they still have unfinished business. The last two lines may address Bill. He should not try to find the old Bride, the one he knew before the massacre. The Bride herself has moved on and the person she used to be, the one in love with Bill, is long gone.

The Bride and Bill talk about their past, but as Bill knows that the Bride will not answer any questions truthfully he injects her with a truth-serum (against her will). While waiting for the serum to work he talks about his love for super heroes. The reason for this is, at first, unknown, so the scene becomes poetic and temporarily disrupts identification, making the communication a performative act instead of an informative one.

When Bill interrogates her it is revealed that the Bride never believed her marriage with the man from Texas would last, she knows that she is not fit for family life. She also admits that she took pleasure in each and every murder she committed during her journey. In this respect, she is much more like the stereotypical man, fit for fighting rather than parenthood. The Bride and Bill both explain why they acted the way they did. Bill thus gets an opportunity to explain his actions, inviting the spectator to sympathize with him. When he believed she had been killed (during an assignment) he had mourned for three months until finally seeking vengeance on whomever had

taken the life of his lover, and as he explains, it is a very mean thing to let someone who loves them believe that they are dead, but he still got '[...] very sad' (as he says himself) when he had shot the Bride and realized what he had done. Unlike other 'traditional' arch-enemies Bill has a sympathetic and emotional side. However, it is not likely that one identifies with him. When the Bride explains why she chose to leave we get to see those events in a flashback. She is still in control of what is to be seen and what is not. Bill did not get a flashback, she did, because she still controls the gaze. When Bill has been hit with the five-point-palm-exploding-heart-technique, a theme from *Navajo Joe* starts playing as he starts walking, and he accepts death stoically, just like Navajo Joe.

5. Discussion

I will start the discussion by analyzing the 'standard' relation to cinema as suggested by the theories presented in the introduction, to clarify the 'status quo', which will be necessary before I problematize this in relation to self-reflexivity. Finally, I will consider the effects of the main character's gender in a self-reflexive text.

5.1 'It's complicated...' - The spectator's relation to the self-reflexive cinematic illusion

The question of the spectator's position in relation to the cinematic text has been discussed by many of the theoreticians and has to be addressed before moving on to how it can be altered, but few of the theoreticians provide a fully satisfactory answer.

As opposed to Metz and Mulvey, De Lauretis's theory on the inscription and guidance of desire at least attempts to explain the engagement of the spectator (Metz and Mulvey both say that there is one, but do not fully explain the nature of it). She (the spectator) is addressed personally by the image, and this would speak for an active viewing process. It is the dialectic relation between the spectator and the text that makes De Lauretis's theory seem plausible. The ideology is inscribed into the spectator, and because it is in her she gets a stronger relation to the text, and it is reinforced as the spectator reworks it and makes it subjective. The same principle can be found, though somewhat updated, in Smelik's line of reason. If the gaze is neutral in modern movies, it means that people of both sexes can enjoy the film, even a more eroticizing spectacle, since both 'sides' offer the same kind of pleasure, even though their respective engagement (identification and erotification) are linked to different characters.

Both De Lauretis and Smelik gain even more credibility in combination with Fiske. In a text saturated with meaning (the phenomena of semiotic excess and excess as hyperbole) it could

theoretically be possible that men and women alike are eroticized, which means that all spectators can choose the erotification (and thus also identification) they prefer. As for De Lauretis, her claim may seem irreconcilable with Fiske at first sight (how can desire be inscribed and guided if the viewer can pick any meaning he wants?), but at a closer look she cannot make sense without Fiske.

It is likely that the spectator cannot be inscribed with any message theoretically conceivable. As Fiske has demonstrated, a character too far away from the ideology of the spectator will not be perceived as a person, but as an ideological textual device designed with the sole purpose to convey said ideology (which should make the viewer impervious to any attempts of manipulation). The spectator can probably be affected to some extent, adopting some of the ideology presented, but too big a contrast will only generate opposition. It is because of the excess that the spectator can choose whichever message he prefers presented by the text, and will thus willingly submit to the text's control of his desire. De Lauretis sometimes seems to suggest that the film is in total control, that it can manipulate the spectator into adopting any ideology, and she does just that: she *suggests*, she never explicitly says that the reception works that way. She says herself that a text is dependent on its spatiotemporal positioning, which does not undermine the possibility of there being an absolute meaning in the text, only its accessibility. The impossibility of accessing the absolute meaning does not in itself work as a proof against its existence (that would be relativism), but it is less pertinent whether there actually is an absolute meaning or not if it is unattainable. De Lauretis says herself that the spectator adopts the ideology but alters it somewhat and makes it subjective. If the historicity of the text and its reception define its apparent meaning, partly or fully, it gives the spectator the opportunity to access different parts of the ideology. The fact that a text can be read in two diametrically opposed ways (excess as hyperbole) only means that people of all groups can be inscribed with desire as presented by the text - since it can inscribe both - and thus allows for all to have their desires guided by the text.

In some respects De Lauretis (and also Smelik to a certain degree) is not far off from Grodal, her conclusions have some things in common with his, and sometimes seem to depend on them. Grodal says that the identification takes place on such abstract a level that minor details need not matter. De Lauretis's theories must presuppose this to a certain degree in order to be valid, otherwise they would be undermined by most actual instances of reception. Few people in the audience of *Kill Bill* could possibly have first-hand experience of wedding-massacres or samurai-duels, but they can nevertheless relate to them in one way or another, otherwise it would not seem likely that ideology could be inscribed. If the text differs too much from the viewer's own ideology it is not likely that it could be reworked into something subjective, as the transformation would be so fundamental that the ideology is more or less replaced by another instead of being reworked. The

subjectivization proposed by De Lauretis works even better if one accepts Lavin's theory that all women have wanted to kill their siblings: the film could work as an outlet for their emotions each time the Bride encounters one of the other members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. It should not matter that they have long since lost their wish to act out these emotions, Lavin explains that this is a *regressive* state, and as Grodal showed one's subjectivity is aligned with the character's even in situations where one would not usually sympathize and/or empathize with the person in question.

De Lauretis's theory on the subjective reworking in relation to cinema should become even easier in a case like *Kill Bill* where the female spectators have already felt the same thing, and simply have to remember these repressed aspects of their desires. Norman Bates's attempt to hide the body of Marion Crane evokes empathy, even though most people do not sympathize with pathological murderers, so it should be possible (and much easier) when one shares (or, rather, shared, as these desires belong to the childhood) the goals and desires of the protagonist. This explains why *women* can enjoy *Kill Bill*, but if men have not had the same urge to kill siblings (and Lavin does not say that they do) one cannot explain why they would empathize with the Bride, but this is a matter I will address in the next part of this chapter.

As for Lisa Coulthard, one can question her line of reason and the conclusion she reaches by contrasting her theories with those of David Bordwell. Coulthard has quite a simplistic view on interpretation, one that seems to suggest that comprehension and interpretation coincide. She seems to believe that the ideology conveyed is an intrinsic constituent of the text, but I would like to open up for the possibility that cinema perhaps is not able to stretch beyond its capacity of presenting descriptive statements, which would make it a false allegation to accuse the text of the ideology promoted, since it would already be incorrect to claim that the content is prescriptive. One must be careful not to confuse the content of the text with the personal interpretation, the ethical discussions and ideological statements perceived to be in the text arise partly in a dialectic relation with the spectator, as explained by Bordwell. The narrative is also dependent on this kind of dialectic, as Bordwell says when he explains that there are certain 'cues' that make the spectator understand the content in a certain way. However, the principle of these dialectics still differ. The comprehension of the fabula through the interpretation of the sujet is, according to Bordwell, limited (at least in traditional Hollywood-movies). It seems like the first two levels do not offer much interpretational freedom. All conclusions must be founded in the text and in accordance with what it seems to convey explicitly. The third one, on the other hand, is more complex. My interpretation of Bordwell's theories lead me to the conclusion that the interpretation of themes and messages seem to originate primarily from the spectator (the message is in the eye of the beholder), whereas the

narrative's constituents are conveyed through the text and are 'outside' of the spectator. The implicit meaning is primarily shaped by the interpreter, fitting together different pieces of information in a way that is never promoted by the text itself, at least not explicitly, making different interpretations equally plausible. (Bordwell says himself that people employ a specific theory when looking for cues, and that implicit meaning derives partly from an attempt to reconcile seemingly anomalous and/or contradicting elements in the text, both of which are implied to be quite personal rather than intersubjective.)¹²³ The creator may intend to promote a specific ideological message, and the spectator could even interpret it in the way the creator intended her to, but the text would in fact be void of any message, a pure description without committing itself to any specific ideology; any ideological interpretation would be a kind of misconception. Coulthard's interpretation is thus highly subjective (as are all interpretations, in that case), and it would be incorrect to say that *Kill Bill* is actually misogynistic; the misogyny is restricted to her own personal interpretation. Bordwell himself says that textual elements can be grouped into different categories by different people, what one viewer thinks of as explicit meaning can be regarded as implicit by another, so not only meaning but *sorts* of meaning can vary a lot.¹²⁴ Be that as it may, one must separate the cues from the interpretation, which Coulthard does not do. Bordwell's hierarchy of meanings is still quite restrictive, and some processes can only fit into one of the categories, regardless of how overt the interpreter may think the meaning is, the fundamental difference between comprehension and interpretation remains. Thus, it seems like the interpretation is beyond the text itself.

It could also be that Coulthard is correct, and there is a specific ideological message. It is perhaps neither apparent nor specific, but sufficiently accessible for the spectator to render a personal interpretation possible. Some interpretations may seem to be promoted and others may not, but the recipient's reaction and way of dealing with the text is beyond the text itself. This entails a difference between actions presented by the text and the ones promoted, which in turn renders empathy possible even with characters acting against the ideology of the spectator. The Bride is violent and ruthless in all of the scenes analyzed, and even though the spectator would never adopt that behaviour she can still distinguish the Bride's goals and aspirations, and empathize with them. De Lauretis's claim that desire is manipulated seems to be fundamental to the comprehension of the text, but I believe that desire is 'manipulated' in two ways for this to work: to fully empathize with a character, the spectator probably has to attempt to appropriate the feelings presented (this would be the inscription and guidance of desire of which De Lauretis speaks), but in order for this to take place the spectator first of all has to overlook the details that separate *her* desire from the

123 Bordwell, 4, 8

124 Ibid., 10

protagonist's, making her desire less specified. De Lauretis's theory thus has to be combined with Grodal's theory of the abstraction taking place during identification.

This conclusion is almost imperative for the spectatorship of any movie. The Bride is not a sympathetic character, she has committed her share of murder in the past, no more justified than any of the other members of the DVAS, but the only violence the audience gets to see takes place after the massacre, and (as Lavin explains) retaliatory violence can be enjoyed in a different way. Still, this could not possibly be enough, as few people would promote retaliation through murder, justified or not. Identification cannot take place without solving the problem of the ideological discrepancy separating the viewer from the text. One solution could be that the spectator would need to be placed within a different framework of ethics. De Lauretis points out the fallacy of treating the text and its recipients as ahistorical entities, but at the same time she does not seem to think that the reception of the text depends entirely on the context of the production and reception. As mentioned in the introduction, an image of heart-surgery will evoke a stronger emotional reaction than an image of a tree, which shows that there is some intrinsic quality within the text that guides desire (otherwise relativism would be inevitable), and this seems even more probable when compared to Grodal. The fantasy of the spectator is bound to the image, which makes it easier for her to relate to the fabula than if it had been inscribed *ex nihilo*, and probably encourages even stronger engagement with the text when that which is conveyed can be defined in relation to the subjective desire of the spectator.

However, guidance cannot be enough; the spectator needs an ideological point of reference within the text in order to comprehend the evaluation of the actions from the protagonist's subjective framework in relation to the filmic ideological idiosyncrasy. De Lauretis's theory needs to be developed, and others provide different alternatives on how one can do this. If one looks for an implicit, ideological meaning, and not just the two that are more related to narrative meaning (referential and explicit meaning), then a combination of De Lauretis's and Fiske's theories can once more make the text enjoyable to everyone. Those who dislike the violent content of *Kill Bill* can see it as a critique of the destructive consequences of embracing aggressive urges and a longing for revenge, while the others can enjoy the Bride's retaliation. One picks the meaning that one prefers (Fiske's notion of excess) and reworks it into something subjective (De Lauretis's theory on subjectivization). Another solution would be to apply Grodal's theories of identification on the area of ideology. If the protagonist's goals and mentality can be abstracted enough so that any putative spectator can relate to them, surely one can do the same thing with ideology. People who dislike the very concept of violence acted out in reality could then make the ideology abstract, and see it as a fight between good and evil, just and unjust. The subjective reworking combined with ideological

abstraction allows all spectators to understand cinema through their own framework, aiding comprehension without turning into relativism.

Here it is even more important to keep in mind the different kinds of meaning as explained by Bordwell. The explicit meaning could include ideology that is contrary to that of the spectator. The Bride kills people, but we as spectators are encouraged to empathize with her anyway. The explicit meaning seems to be adopted momentarily and only lasts as long as the movie itself; afterwards the ideology is abandoned by the spectator. Note that this does not contradict De Lauretis's theory on desire, at least not entirely. It is possible for the movie to inscribe desire into the viewer (and guide it), but the inscription is not permanent, it is only adopted as long as it is needed to make sense of the fabula. Fiske's claim that one sees a character as a textual device if she represents an ideology one dislikes is only a problem if the ideology is prescriptive and belongs to the 'implicit meaning.' Thus desire on the explicit level could perhaps even be inscribed *ex nihilo*, as the viewer knows that the ideology is just a part of the fiction, especially since she never forgets that the film itself is fictitious (as both Grodal and Metz explained). To summarize, the 'explicit meaning' could be seen as a constituent of the idiosyncratic structure of the film, which will only be adopted momentarily and perceived as a prerequisite of narrative comprehension, not as an ideal to be incorporated in real life.

A problem not resolved by any of these theories is how the interpretation may be altered. How does the reception of a cult movie change when said movie is self-reflexive? Coulthard addresses this question when she says that movies like this one is watched for the violent spectacle it provides. This suggests that one of the main attractions is the aestheticized violence and the choreographed fights, not the narrative development and character arcs. I would thus argue that the recognition of the focus on aesthetics prevents suture, but at the same time expunges some problems of identification, since some elements cease to be problematic when the film is but a violent spectacle. Coulthard admits that it is hard to criticize cult movies for the excessive violence, as creators and audience alike know that they exist only for that reason. This shows that the audience has a certain attitude towards this kind of cult movies, they are prepared for the shallow entertainment and receive it in another way.

Smelik promotes this conclusion. In her opinion, post-modern movies differ from 'classic' narrative and representational structures in their aestheticization and narrative fragmentation, and as is quite evident in my analysis, several of the scenes seem to focus more on the visual spectacle than anything else. Coulthard objects to similar claims by saying that it is the loose connection between scenes that acts as a structural device, but this has nothing to do with the spectator's comprehension of the content of the text. The narrative structure, as loose as it may be, does not

counteract the aesthetic spectacle and the abundance of film references, both of which are given a high priority in *Kill Bill*. Smelik's claim is reinforced by Bordwell's explanation on how people apply different theories in the search for the cues necessary to 'make sense' of the film; the clichés in a self-reflexive cult movie might just be that kind of cues that allow the audience to enjoy content that in other contexts would have been regarded as poorly made, and the emphasis on spectacle could be enjoyable in itself, even though it would make any other movie seem frustratingly shallow and empty.

In my analysis I argue indirectly that the text possibly subverts some of the tropes (which Coulthard admits is possible in theory, but personally did not consider likely in *Kill Bill*), which should also subvert their effects, but this is not to say that tropes and clichés do not exist, quite the contrary. Even a subversion needs to be put in relation to what it opposes in order for it to work, but this is not the main issue. Throughout the almost four hours long tale of revenge, the text is saturated with clichés from different traditions, as I showed in my analysis: western, jidaigeki and kung fu-movies all contribute in their own way. The continuing theme of rape-and-revenge, the duels etc. constantly remind the spectator of the intertextuality. Both Coulthard and Smelik seem to agree on the fact that the film is not enjoyed for its narrative depth, as could be the case in 'traditional' movies, but does this mean that the spectator ceases to care for the protagonist, and therefore does not identify with her? Could it be that the self-reflexivity creates an emotional distance between the viewer and the Bride? Coulthard and Smelik do not answer these questions, but with their conclusions in mind one can turn to other theoreticians to shed some light on this aspect. Dyer says that the awareness of the pastiche's similarity to other texts obstructs the engagement with the text (just as awareness of grammar renders speech more difficult), but he stresses that this does not prevent affect. This means that Grodal's theory that the spectator tries to recreate the feelings of the character is not necessarily proven wrong, it is possible in theory even when the characters are shallow and/or recognized as tropes. The question of whether one recreates the character's feelings or simply 'enjoys the show' could also be a false dichotomy, as explained by Fiske. Even if one chooses to see a character as a textual device, this does not exclude the possibility of seeing him as a character as well, at the same time. More importantly, the distance created by the aestheticization does not necessarily lower the spectator's engagement with the text; according to Grodal the veracity of the text does not necessarily influence the viewer's experience of it. In cult movies, this could potentially mean that the audience should not lose affect to the protagonist due to the huge amount of clichés, and the self-reflexivity does not seem to alter this either. One good example in my analysis is the use of the song played before the encounter with Bill. It gives a deeper understanding of the Bride's inner life, inviting the spectator to feel sympathy

and/or empathy, but at the same time the nature of the remix reminds the spectator of the cut-and-paste nature of the entire film, preventing her from forgetting the artificial aspect of it. In conclusion, Coulthard's and Smelik's emphasis on the distancing created through the fragmented plot and aestheticized violence does not seem to imply that affect (and therefore identification) is rendered impossible, not even unlikely. Add to the fact that De Lauretis says that one can never see oneself as a sightless body, as opposed to what Metz claims. No matter how distanced one may seem to be from the events portrayed, De Lauretis seems to say that one always sees the image and therefore has to identify with *someone*, since it is impossible to identify with the gaze itself; one can see the image, but one cannot see oneself watching.

The viewer does not seem forced to see the character either as a textual device or as a character, and neither perspective can be said to be the favored by all spectators in all contexts. The choice seems to vary, depending on the ideology promoted by the text. Fiske says that a spectator disagreeing with the dominant ideology of the text will see characters as textual devices, carriers of ideology, but he never says that this makes the spectator unable to oscillate between the viewing positions. He also says that all texts have a subtext, running against the dominant ideology, so in theory all texts could be enjoyed by all audiences. Those who disagree can simply read the text 'the other way', or enjoy both positions. The problem with a self-reflexive cult film is that it seems to propose one viewing position only. The tropes included are deliberately put there to create certain effects through the clichés. Naturally the result does not necessarily convey the intentions of the creators, there are no intrinsic qualities separating deliberately applied clichés and tropes from other ones, but there should be a difference in the structure of the text and therefore the reception of it. A 'regular' cult film is still quite similar to a 'conventional' film in the sense that their narratives are structured in similar ways, one difference being that the cult film uses textual devices that have already appeared in several preceding texts. A spectator not acquainted with a sufficient number of texts will not recognize the textual devices as clichés, and will treat both texts in the same way, but a self-reflexive one must be seen for what it is. As Dyer explained, pastiche needs to be recognized as such in order for it to work. (Thus one cannot claim that the effect may be different if the spectator lacks the competence required to identify, if not specific references, then at least the referentiality per se; should the spectator avoid doing this, she could justifiably be accused of 'not getting it', which is probably not an unusual reaction in the encounter with the text, but for now it is not pertinent.) A 'traditional' cult film works in spite of the clichés, the self-reflexive one because of them, it is the very glue that keeps the text together. Coulthard disagrees with Clover and says that the rape-and-revenge films work because they lack any real structure, the loosely connected scenes of violence create a coherent image. In the same way the self-reflexive cult film in all its

postmodernity builds its foundation on something as oxymoronic as a homogenous incoherence that allows it to stick together.

Coulthard does not believe that irony liberates the text from the ideology presented, which should have certain effects on the spectator's comprehension of it. However, such a reading is not supported by the structure of the cult film, neither by her analysis. As Coulthard says, both the creators and the spectators know that the text exists for the sole purpose of spectacle and violence, and this is reinforced by Lavin's claim that the aestheticization of the violence in *Kill Bill* distances the audience, and that some of their pleasure is derived from watching the performance of Uma Thurman, which makes her believe that the ending is just as ironic and self-reflexive as everything leading up to it; it would seem strange for the film to suddenly abandon the tone that has permeated the entire narrative. The pleasure experienced in the case of self-reflexive cult films thus seems to originate from the awareness of the artificiality. Coulthard seems to suggest that the audience, as opposed to Metz's theory, does not even attempt to lose itself in the fiction, but rather enjoys being outside of it.

Coulthard problematizes the comprehension and interpretation of a text where these depend on connections to other text. The problem with her discussion is mostly that she does not allow for the possibility of similar kinds of material having different meanings, at least not in cases where it could prove her wrong, perhaps reading too much meaning into passages that seem quite shallow. She admits that the spectator's attention is constantly redirected towards the surface, so it seems contradictory to speak of the ideological fantasy of femininity in the way she does if the movie is 'shallow' and 'empty'. The Bride may be white and heterosexual, but traits ascribed to a character do not necessarily act as ideological markers, and even if they do they are somewhat open to interpretation. The Bride is beautiful, as many heroines before her, but as opposed to Coulthard, Smelik addresses the aspects that *separate* the Bride from her precursors, which seems to be more important than their similarities. The Bride is beautiful, but as Smelik shows, this does not influence her agency and independence, which is stressed by her physical fitness. Coulthard criticizes scenes where the Bride is neutralized and men compliment her looks, but the scenes I analyzed all end with the Bride recuperating the gaze and striking back, displaying an idealized combination of beauty and prowess. According to De Lauretis it is impossible to see oneself as an inert object, but the difference between the Bride and 'classic' exploitation-heroines is that the Bride never seems fully inert, perhaps not even in scenes where she is neutralized, because (as I showed in my analysis) she never really stops fighting, not even when bound up and gagged. She may be beautiful, but she refuses to be victimized.

Coulthard finds it problematic that *Kill Bill* is sometimes similar to old cult movies, but does

not produce any convincing arguments as to why its scenes would convey the same ideology as the films that inspired it, other than that the visual and thematic similarity must convey the same message (as if controlled by some law of nature), neither does she explain why it most likely does not act as a critique against said ideology. The question she has to answer, but never does, is why a misogynistic content exclusively translates into the promotion of a misogynistic message. She is open to the possibility that the violence could potentially be empowering, but still comes to the conclusion that an ephemeral defeat can undo all the subversive effects up to that point. Coulthard claims that one of the main reasons why *Kill Bill* has these effects is the apparent references to what she considers to be problematic texts. As Dyer explained, music and images cannot imitate something without actually being *like* it, as opposed to speech.¹²⁵ Sequences referring to exploitation will therefore also be almost identical to that genre. A combination of Coulthard's and Dyer's theories responds to De Lauretis's explanation of intertextuality not being limited to visuality, it can also include non-verbalized discourses, which defends Coulthard's claim that the ideology of exploitation could be included as well. I would argue that the ideological implications in the texts referenced are not as inevitable and evident as Coulthard makes them out to be, but more importantly there is, as in the discussion above, the problem of determining the signification of the content, and just as portraying does not equal promoting, referencing does not necessarily equal yearning for. Her claim that pastiche does not eliminate the ideological traces within the sources presupposes a simplistic model of interpretation, one that is disproved by De Lauretis's fundamental conception of cinematic interpretation (as well as Fiske's theories and phenomena). Since the viewer can rework the text (according to De Lauretis), it is plausible that some people see the text as misogynistic as Coulthard does, but this could, as stated earlier, be a case of people 'not getting it.' Coulthard implies that the text is not liberated from the ideological connotations, but thanks to self-reflexivity these do not necessarily remain in the text. Bertelsen points out that the self-reflexivity has some things in common with a joke, in the way that one says one thing but means another. The disrespectful way in which a taboo is treated is the very *point* of a joke, pointing out that it can be offensive is stating the obvious while disregarding the crucial difference between a joke and a statement, and not realizing this could be fatal to the comprehension of the film. It is not a question of making a personal assessment of the ideological ramifications in relation to one's own morals and ethics, it is on the fundamental level of actual comprehension.

Another flaw in Coulthard's argument appears in the light of De Lauretis's fundamental view on cinematic comprehension being altered by the historicity of the subject. *Kill Bill* cannot be studied as if it were an ahistorical text whose recipients lacked any personal experience. The fights

125 Dyer, 22

analysed in the preceding chapter have to be seen with other cinematic styles in mind so that they can be placed within the 'correct' network of connotations and associations, otherwise important aspects will be lost and the spectator will misconstrue the film. Vernita Green's use of profanity will naturally make her look like a stereotypical black sassy woman, but the emphasis is on her bond to the model itself, not the qualities therein, which stresses her artificiality. Coulthard's conclusion is disproved indirectly by other theories (which seem related to De Lauretis's theory of spatiotemporal positioning of the text and historicity of the subject), for instance Grodal's explanation of connotations. It is important to separate association from connotation, and to keep in mind the different comprehensions and interpretations these entail. In one experiment people were supposed to determine whether a word was 'real' or made up, and they replied faster when the words could be linked to each other, which shows that phenomena activate networks of associations on an unconscious level, but this does not mean that one phenomenon/unit/entity connotes the other. Grodal takes the example of bread and butter. Bread is associated with butter, but that does not mean that it *connotes* it as well; bread is surrounded by a network of associations that provides it meaning, in which butter is one unit among many.¹²⁶ In the same way Coulthard overestimates the signficatory aspects of the intertextuality, presupposing that possible associations to other texts also equal connotations. The entire point of pastiche, as Dyer explains, is that it is *like* something without actually *being* it, and if there were no difference in significance the text would cease to be *related* to another, and instead *become* it. It has to be reminiscent of another text, meaning that (just as De Lauretis says) one has to take into account the historicity of the text.

Another fallacy in Coulthard's essay is that she sees aesthetics and ideology as inseparable, but aesthetical and ideological qualities cannot necessarily entail each other. Anything else would be preposterous, as if a genre was inextricably tied to certain values from which it could not free itself. The introduction of self-reflexivity seems to be the ingredient that unlocks the possibility of expunging these ideological residues. Bertelsen's interpretation of Tarantino shows that the ideological discourses are not perceived in the same way as in the 'original' texts (in line with Dyer's explanation of the comprehension of pastiche). When included in closed systems of genre they may be beyond criticism, but once detached they become more conspicuous and can be exposed for what they are and, consequently, examined in a different light, rendering deconstruction (even ridicule) of them possible. Just as De Lauretis says, the spatiotemporality of a text has crucial effects on the comprehension and interpretation of the spectator.

One could ask why an interpretation including irony is more likely than Coulthard's. After all, as argued above, if the question of ideology was thought of as redundant, Coulthard's objection

126 Grodal, 65

would be a matter of highly subjective interpretation instead of intersubjective comprehension, but as Bordwell explains, it is on that very level that irony takes place. Coulthard's arguments cannot be irrelevant if one accepts the possibility of irony, as both take place on the level of interpretation, but it is for that very reason that her argument most likely is not valid. Option one is that *Kill Bill* is all about surface, but then one cannot blame it for having a misogynistic message, because there is no message at all. Option two is to explore the ideological elements of the text, opening up for the sexist ideology proposed by Coulthard, but at the very same time one is forced to open up for the possibility of irony - which seems much more probable seeing that the text is a pastiche - incorporating the elements in a self-reflexive manner. Put briefly, the sexism is either absent or mocked, but it never seems to be promoted, which in turn makes identification more probable than objectification.

On a more fundamental level, the way Tarantino mixes genres seems to undermine traditional identification deliberately. As Bertelsen explains, the text promotes some interpretative operations and then deliberately subverts them, denying the audience the sole viewing position common in other genres. 'Sole viewing position' should not be understood as identification with but a single character, in any case Bertelsen does not seem to suggest it herself, but it rather seems like she alludes to the mode of reception, since the text is quite polysemic, mixing genres and rendering them hyperbolic. This deliberate play with tropes and the audience's media knowledge is almost reminiscent of 'cinema of attractions', where this dialectical process in itself is worthy of the spectator's attention. Yet again, this does not undermine any engagement with narrative development, as explained above by Grodal. What ultimately prevents complete identification is not the inclusion of tropes and generic conventions, but the presentation thereof; they are depicted as mere tropes. Add to this the fact that the mix of genres allows the movie to comment upon its own construction, and the scrambled narrative in *Pulp Fiction* reinforces these effects. All of this can also be found in *Kill Bill* to an equally high (if not higher) degree. This does not mean that the spectator's engagement is lowered, the only element affected is the belief in the 'cinematic illusion'. If no identification at all would take place, it would mean that the spectator would in no way attempt to recreate the putative emotions felt by the characters, which in turn would undermine comprehension of acts and their motivation. In short, one probably identifies with characters in a self-reflexive film, but always remains conscious of their fictiveness, as both of these aspects seem important to fully understand the film.

5.2 'I'd never do that with a woman' - crossgender identification

Another important question is how the possibility of crossgender identification is altered by self-reflexivity. This matter is quite complex, as the theoreticians already have different perspectives on how the phenomenon works in 'traditional' cinema.

As for De Lauretis's model, there is the issue that her theories on the historicity of both the text and its creators undermine her conclusion. She claims that cinema is influenced by the patriarchal structures, but also that cinema participates in the production of subjectivity, making it into circular reasoning: the patriarchal society shapes cinema and the patriarchal cinema shapes society, but does one create the other, or is the creation reciprocal? Another equally big problem is that she has not proven that this is *necessarily* true; in theory, cinema could represent female subjectivity if only someone would choose to do so, in a society without the patriarchal influences. Besides, even if cinema defines masculine positions of meaning, De Lauretis still says that these positions are reworked into personal, subjective positions. This is not far from Smelik's theory on 'equal erotification', and also opens up for the possibility of women finding their own subjectivity in cinema. De Lauretis still maintains that men and women are expected to comprehend movies in the same way (as they both are addressed as male), but I find it unlikely that they could ever do that in practice. De Lauretis criticizes this herself by referring to the difference in semantic knowledge and visual experience between men and women, the significance of which cannot be overestimated. Women have never experienced any subjectivity but their own, so even if they are only offered a masculine one that they have to attempt to recreate, I believe that the result will always be influenced by their own subjectivity, 'translating/adapting' the cinematic message into something to which they can relate themselves. This makes Smelik's theory much more probable, since it is more likely that women are more prone to adopt the female subjectivity present in the text than that they should make any attempt of appropriation of a subjectivity to which they cannot fully relate. Thus, even if there were a patriarchal, masculine subjectivity available in and promoted by the text, a woman would never be completely aware of this, as her interpretation is mediated through her own non-patriarchal subjectivity, and since there is a position available to her that is easier to adopt.

Another crucial question is the importance of the Bride's sex and/or gender. According to Smelik, both sexes are objectified in modern movies, but there are not many men available for women spectators to eroticize in *Kill Bill*, which should entail that only the women suffer from objectification. If the Bride is objectified, portrayed so as to elicit the desire of men, it would seem less likely that they could identify with her; objectification entails a distance that prevents identification, empathy and sympathy. However, just as objectification is possible for men and

women, Smelik is open to the possibility of cinema representing the subjectivity of both genders; the gaze can be narcissistic as well as voyeuristic. Thus it is important to establish how the portrayal seems to encourage a certain comprehension of the nature of the protagonist. Should one accept the possibility of identifying with a woman, at least in theory, the question remains whether this is possible in practice. The Bride, as strong as she may be, is sometimes neutralized by men, and every single time they objectify her by commenting on her looks. However, one has to keep in mind Smelik's claim that her body is not eroticized, just as I showed in my analysis. She also adds that female subjectivity can be expressed if the protagonist is given the narratological and visual point of view, and as discussed in the analysis this seems very likely in *Kill Bill* for several reasons. First of all, the Bride being neutralized does not in itself make her any different to male heroes. Secondly, most of the time the Bride is neutralized by *female* assailants. As shown in my analysis, these moments may be brief, but pertinent nonetheless. Among the members of the DVAS only one is male, not counting the leader, so the image of them looking down on the beaten Bride together is hardly misogynistic. (The first time they may carry out the orders of a man, but this does not deprive them of agency, as all of them have chosen freely to work for him, and later choose not to do so; they are never forced to do anything.) Thirdly, there is nothing suggesting that the sympathy of the viewer should be aligned primarily and/or only with the men. (Any other claims would have to rule out the possibility of identification with the Bride right from the start.) As I stressed in my analysis, the camera is rarely aligned with the position of the men; they comment on her good looks, but the spectator is not encouraged to partake in their erotification of her, on the contrary they (the men) are portrayed as shallow and unsympathetic people. As argued above, there are instances where the audience seems to share the perspective of a man, but this only shows even more clearly that the Bride is in control of the gaze. Buck returns to her room in the hospital and a point-of-view shot shows his gaze searching the room for the woman that he has abused for so long, but she has reclaimed the gaze and can thus avoid it if she wishes to. Buck (and thus the audience) is punished by the Bride, not the other way around. It is very likely that it is the Bride's subjectivity that is expressed.

According to De Lauretis the hero is always male, and if the Bride can construct her own subjectivity by obtaining a fundamentally male quality, the spectator's subjectivity can be aligned with hers (since one cannot identify with anything but a subject, as explained by De Lauretis). As I showed in my analysis, she overtly refuses the gaze over and over again, be the assailant male or female, and always reclaims it in the end. One could object to this practice. As mentioned above, Coulthard thinks that *Kill Bill* replicates and therefore reinstates the values of different genres. Does this mean that replicating the male gaze also reinstates it, ultimately sustaining a fundamentally

patriarchal structure? Probably not, considering that De Lauretis says that codes are '[...] below the conscious awareness of the viewers [...]'.¹²⁷ She implies that this is also valid for cinematic codes, so in a 'traditional' movie it could be true that this practice would 'salvage' a misogynistic device, but a self-reflexive one seems to differ in that respect. The codes do not seem to be structured seamlessly so as not to catch the viewer's attention, quite the opposite. As Bertelsen said, tropes in Tarantino's movies are detached from the safe 'haven' of genre. In the same way I believe patriarchal structures do not pass unnoticed in a work that presents them in such overt a way. By acknowledging the gaze one reinscribes its *existence*, but by doing it in this way one can expose it and deconstruct the naturalization of it, and it seems more advantageous to the Bride to invert it rather than transcend it.

In this light the Bride should seem like a strong protagonist, but Coulthard does not think so, instead she claims that femininity is recuperated as the Bride finally returns to the non-violent domestic space of the mother, leaving the violent sphere of the warrior. Coulthard seems to have a more 'serious' interpretation of the ending, rejecting ironic interpretations, but even with her own 'serious' mode of reception her conclusion is not too plausible.¹²⁸ First of all, if one accepts the combination of De Lauretis and Lotman which always makes the hero male, the Bride could never be strong without embracing masculine qualities to a certain degree, but this does not mean that it is unnatural for women to do so, that they will and should abandon masculine traits as soon as the natural order is restored. Secondly, as Smelik explains, there is a reverence for motherhood, not disdain. Vernita Green shows devotion to her maternal side during the fight, but this is not the reason of her eventual loss. The Bride willingly pauses the fight out of respect for Vernita's duty as a mother (in the same way Kim agreed to stop fighting when understanding that the Bride was pregnant); if anything this is a positive assessment of femininity, an indication that it is cherished and more important than bloodshed.

Therefore I see the discussion of the ending as either ironic or recuperative as a false dichotomy. Naturally it can be read in both ways, but since motherhood has been established as valuable and reconcilable with strength it seems more likely that the Bride's reunion with B.B. does not signify an abandonment of her role as a warrior, but the ultimate unification of the Bride's two roles of being a mother and a warrior. Bill says during their last conversation that the Bride, being a natural born killer, could never have gone through with the life as a housewife she had in mind when leaving the DVAS. Thus the Bride has not and cannot be incorporated in the stereotypical model of women, it is not in her nature. Instead she recuperates her maternal side while still holding

127 De Lauretis, 48

128 Coulthard, 165f

on to the fierce killer inside of her. Her daughter B.B. is not made out to be the typical four-year-old, she has already had her first kill (her goldfish), so their life together will be anything but conventional. In this case the self-reflexivity seems more like 'false irony': the ending is presented in an exaggerated style, as if it were ironic, but there is nevertheless an authentic reverence for the Bride's role as both mother and warrior.

If one elaborates on De Lauretis's claim that contextual elements and subjective experiences influence the spectator's comprehension and/or interpretation, one will inevitably reach the conclusion that men and women perceive the text in different ways, as argued above. This is somewhat in line with the theory proposed by Smelik, as she acknowledges differences in subjectivity in relation to sex. If both sexes are *eroticized*, then cinema must also be capable of representing the *subjectivity* of each gender, simultaneously. Objectification cannot take place without a subject taking part in it, which allows for a Mulvey-esque gaze to be claimed by both genders, much in line with Smelik's theory that men and women alike get the opportunity to identify with their respective ideal. (Naturally one could counter this by seeing the camera as the subject as Metz proposed – which would eliminate the need of one specific character carrying out the objectification of another - but just as De Lauretis I deem this very unlikely, since the camera is absent; it is represented by the gaze with which one cannot identify, as one cannot see oneself looking, so objectification still requires at least two characters: one that objectifies and one that is objectified.) Either way De Lauretis's theories must be altered, otherwise they do not even allow for the theoretical possibility of strong, female protagonists with whom one identifies. If cinema is truly able to inscribe and guide desire the way De Lauretis thinks it does, she must allow for the possibility of it representing all spectators' subjectivity, regardless of gender, which opens up for the possibility of female subjectivity being expressed with a female protagonist, such as the Bride. On the other hand, if cinema is powerful enough to inscribe desire *ex nihilo* in spectators it should be possible for cinema to convey female desires so that men can appropriate them. If desire cannot be inscribed this way, it will be rendered subjective to fit the recipient (as argued above); female subjectivity is not ruled out in either case.

With De Lauretis and Smelik in mind, it thus seems likely that the relation between the spectator's sex and that of the protagonist in a self-reflexive film will have an impact on the interpretational and identificatory processes, so the question that remains is exactly what these effects turn out to be. Clover speculates on the possibility that women focus on the text and men on the subtext, but is it really possible that one could be oblivious of the protagonist's sex, and more focused on the meaning within her, when all images of her act as constant reminders of her sex? Especially when the artificiality of the images is stressed? I believe that this depends on the relation

to the text. If a self-reflexive cult movie is all about surface, the sex becomes much more pertinent (since it is a visual trait in a text that incessantly emphasizes visuality), but at the same time 'complete' identification (to the point that one almost forgets her fictiveness) does not seem as likely anyway if she is perceived as a textual device, as a trope or cliché. On the other hand, if one thinks of the Bride as a round character (which is possible, considering the character development that can be found in *Kill Bill*) one returns to the discussion on how identification takes place in cinema. One does not have to believe in the veracity of a text to feel some engagement with the characters.

Still, sex need not be a problem if one applies lacanian theories in the same way that Smelik does. Since misrecognition is a fundamental part of the identification, sex should not matter; the discrepancy between spectator and character remains crucial to the relation established between them, and there is no apparent reason why one trait constituting this discrepancy would become an obstacle that ultimately prevents identification during certain circumstances. (The discrepancy of veracity between the film and the real could possibly be incorporated as yet another aspect of the misrecognition). Now, from a psychoanalytic point of view this could defend women's identification with men, as women are made out to be inferior to men ('non-men') and, as suggested by Mulvey, women finally get to act out the masculinity that lies dormant within them, but one can still criticize the theory of men identifying with women. Should masculinity be the ideal yearned for by everyone, why would men idealize the 'inferior' sex? If cinema cannot inscribe desire as freely as De Lauretis thought (because of reasons explained above), one cannot assume that a masculine subjectivity is the only one available for the spectator to adopt, and even though female subjectivity is available, as explained by Smelik, it still does not seem evident that men would automatically adopt it. Men must, by definition, be mobile and strong, anything else is considered a failure, so female experiences could be seen as a 'guilty pleasure' (as suggested by Clover), something forbidden that men indulge in because of the taboo to do so. While this is possible, the question is whether it is really plausible.

Thus it seems like the theories of Smelik and De Lauretis need to be developed in some aspects. If men only identify with masculine characters (be it a man or woman), does this mean that they switch viewing positions when masculine traits are temporarily lost by the female protagonist? As De Lauretis showed above, one cannot identify with an object, so the neutralization of the Bride could interrupt identification with her. Clover acknowledges the possibility of men identifying with the assailants during the rape, but it does not seem likely that one identifies only with the men throughout the entire film, at least not if one supposes that men do want to avoid masochistic instances later in the film when they are killed one by one. One thing to note in rape-and-revenge is how male and female characters mirror each other in questions of sadism and masochism. The

woman is tortured in the beginning, and later the balance of power is changed to make her the superior and sadistic agent, torturing the assailants. Whomever one chooses to identify with, it inevitably leads to masochism. Clover examines fluid spectatorship (identifying with the men during the rape and with the woman during the vengeance), but does not deem it probable, because then the movie would not make much sense. Any pleasure derived from the vengeance is dependent on the masochistic experiences in the beginning. However, I would not reject this solution because of *that* reason. If fluid spectatorship is possible and frequent - and it seems like it is - then few movies would make much sense since the interdependence among the scenes would always exclude some pleasure no matter which character one empathized with, and this does not deprive the spectator of any pleasure when watching the movie. Instead I believe that the male identification with a female protagonist works in fundamentally the same way as female identification with a male character. As De Lauretis stated above, the spectator's subjectivity is limited to the personal experience and historicity, so men will perhaps not be able to fully grasp every tenet of female subjectivity, but the reception thereof will allow for a basic comprehension and a subsequent reworking that allows for an approximative appropriation, very much in line with De Lauretis's inscription and guidance of desire. In conclusion, the sex of the protagonist in combination with self-reflexivity does not seem to alter the identificatory and interpretative process on a fundamental level, at least not its result, so spectators of both sexes will ultimately have a similar comprehension of and identification with the main character.

Does this mean that the sex of the protagonist is never pertinent, that the qualities embodied are not affected by the body itself? According to some theoreticians sex does indeed seem to matter in some respects. De Lauretis (and Mulvey) speaks of the objectification of the female body, as if female characters had a disposition for objectification, and according to Clover the body of a character cannot be regarded as a neutral vessel filled with information that is unaffected by the body to which it is ascribed. As mentioned above, the self-reflexivity emphasizes visibility, so a self-reflexive cult film should have an even bigger inclination for objectification. However, it is because of this very reason I believe that the empowering effects must be even bigger when this body refuses the gaze, as opposed to a male character where it seems to be more 'natural' to claim it, especially in a self-reflexive film (where the shallow nature of the text brings more attention to the sex of the character). Grodal's theory of abstraction should perhaps not be thought of as a means of eliding the significance of biological sex, but rather as a way of opening up for identification regardless of it. This means that men can identify with women anyway; they retain an awareness of the things that separate them from women, still capable of relating to a character of the opposite sex, but understanding it in relation to their subjectivity. This is yet another example of how desire

is inscribed and guided as explained by De Lauretis and indirectly developed by Smelik. Men have not experienced female subjectivity, but comprehension of it is made possible through the guidance of the film, where they rework it to fit their *own* subjectivity. In conclusion, it seems like that while the sex of a character in a self-reflective cult film does not impede identification, it is nevertheless pertinent to the comprehension of her.

6. Conclusion

How does self-reflexivity alter the spectator's comprehension and interpretation of a cult movie? How does the gender of the protagonist in a self-reflexive cult movie affect the spectator's identification, and comprehension of the film? Throughout my analysis and discussion I have showed that self-reflexivity (and typically post-modern traits related to it, such as referentiality and pastiche) alter the spectator's comprehension and interpretation of a cult movie with a female protagonist. The self-reflexivity encourages a specific interpretational and identificatory position of the audience in order for them to fully 'make sense' of the cinematic text. The overt commodification of the self-reflexive film implies that there is a mutual understanding between audience and creators that the violent spectacle is the 'main attraction' of the movie, and the 'shallow' nature of a post-modern film invites the viewer to enjoy the surface, never promoting a consideration of the ideological ramifications of the narrative. This does not mean that the spectator's engagement with the text decreases, nor does it prevent identification. A post-modern film accentuates its own commodification and aesthetics, resulting in a much more 'shallow' cinematic text that emphasizes spectacle over narrative; the scenes have a much looser connection compared to a 'typical' Hollywood film. However, the loose structure of the film serves to connect the fragmented fabula, but without promoting any reflections on the fabula itself, such as an assessment of ideology within the text. In the specific case of *Kill Bill*, narrative unity seems to be subordinate to the aestheticized violence. The film is saturated with references to such a degree that the goal seems to be to create the air of the films referenced, rather than incorporating these aspects in a more thorough development of characters and plot, but it is because of the consistent mixing of genres throughout the entire story that ultimately makes it coherent and homogeneous.

If a spectator is always aware of her own spectatorship (but in a state of denial thereof) when watching a conventional film, in the case of self-reflexive cult she is aware of her own awareness, but this awareness is necessary to the dialectic relation between the spectator and the cinematic text, since the intertextuality demands a conscious interpretational process and an evaluation of the semiotic aspect of the references. They are not comprehended in the same way as in the 'original'

texts where they first appeared, they are presented and understood as mere *topoi*, but this is a prerequisite to clarify the signifying purposes they serve and to prevent certain interpretational positions. No film is ever seen on an ahistorical plane by a *tabula rasa*-spectator free from experiences prior to the screening, but this is even more important to keep in mind when watching a self-reflexive cult film, where these factors are used consciously when conveying the fabula through its emphasis on the relation to other texts, encouraging a specific kind of comprehension of it. This does not mean that the spectator's engagement is lowered, there seems to be no causal relationship between engagement and the alleged veracity of a cinematic text, since the evaluation of the textual components' ontology seems to take place on another level than the primary reception of the text. Neither does it prevent identification entirely, since this is a prerequisite to understand the motivation of the characters (in order to understand the fabula), but the focus is nevertheless on the violent spectacle, not on story development or character arcs.

I have also shown that the sex of the protagonist in a self-reflexive cult film seems to alter some aspects of the spectator's identification and comprehension in relation to the cinematic text. Modern movies can represent the subjectivity of both sexes, and when only one of these subjectivities is offered spectators of the other sex will be able to 'recreate' that subjectivity, to rework it into something personal to which they can relate. Sex can also be used to the character's advantage. The self-reflexive cult film's focus on surface makes sex even more conspicuous, but that only makes the empowerment even bigger when a female protagonist adopts masculine traits and fights back, since the combination of her sex and gender-traits usually reserved for men emphasizes her subversion of certain gender-discourses. The self-reflexive cult film inscribes and guides a subjectivity that can be appropriated by the spectator without leading to an interpretational *laissez faire* where any kind of interpretation would be conceivable. Men and women seem to have different kinds of subjectivity, but an appropriation of the protagonist's subjectivity seems possible anyway, regardless of sex, since the element of misrecognition could be fundamental to identification (if one adheres to the lacanian mirror-phase in one form or another). This appropriation allows the spectator to rework the protagonist's subjectivity so that she (the spectator) can, not only understand it, but also relate to it, so that all spectators ultimately share a similar approximative comprehension of the protagonist by using their own personal experience (thus it never becomes any kind of relativism, all kinds of appropriation are not equally promoted).

If one opens up for the possibility of speaking of ideology in the text, one must at the same time be open to the possibility that the conscious application of certain tropes is made in an ironic way, which exposes them and promotes a critical examination, possibly subverting the ideological

implications they carried in the texts in which they 'originally' appeared. The cinematic text is saturated with associations to other texts, tropes that in other contexts could have been understood as misogynist and objectifying and therefore could have prevented identification, but the self-reflexive use of them must be recognized as such, anything else is a pure misconception. The point of pastiche is that it is like something without actually being it, it cannot be judged in the same way as the text on which it is based. The ideological associations are subverted through the use of self-reflexivity, the syntagmatic relation between tropes creates a structure that exposes and therefore is able to undermine the pejorative ramifications of certain kinds of portrayal; by introducing the element of ideology one also inevitably makes an ironic reading possible, which seems more likely in the case of self-reflexive cult films. In short, the historicity of the spectator and the text differs from that of the 'original' text and its contemporary recipients, which entails the decontextualisation of pejorative elements, which are therefore exposed, so that they can be examined and deconstructed.

On the other hand, one could consider *Kill Bill* to be but a violent spectacle, a collection of loosely connected sequences of aestheticized battles replete with pop-cultural references, and then the text itself becomes too 'tied up' with surface to open up for any ideological ramifications, as these belong to another interpretative level. (One could also claim that there is an idiosyncratic ideology present, that is only adopted during the screening of the movie in order to understand the narrative and the characters, but the result would still be the same: no ideology would be adopted permanently as a consequence of watching the movie.) One could criticize a typically post-modern film such as *Kill Bill* for including misogynistic elements from the films referenced (which would entail objectification and prevent identification), but then one would neglect important aspects that separate this kind of movie from the texts to which it alludes. Apart from the fact that the protagonist recuperates the gaze by using excessive violence after each time she is neutralized and objectified (by other characters, not by the camera), the focus on surface - as well as narrative fragmentation - commodifies the work and redirects attention from what would commonly be seen as problematic, it is simply too 'shallow' to include any message; it becomes descriptive instead of prescriptive. Looking for messages in a text that clearly does not invite to such interpretational activities could instead lead to 'projecting' messages into the text that are not there. *Kill Bill* thus manages in 'eating its cookie and having it too' through its dependence on its historical positioning and the experience and knowledge of the spectator, it can be either amoral or indirectly feminist (through the ironic application of tropes sometimes found in misogynist texts), depending on how it is approached. The clichés and tropes end up as either ironic - thus working as a critique, ridiculing

the 'traditional' use of them - or simply too shallow to serve as a carrier of ideology; in neither case is it misogynist, so in both cases identification is possible for spectators of either sex. Should one still prefer a 'serious' reading to an ironic or 'shallow' one, one has to keep in mind that post-modern movies differ from 'traditional' ones in its equally eroticizing portrayal of men and women alike. To insist that women are objectified easily becomes intellectual 'navel-gazing' if not put in relation to the portrayal of *men*. One could problematize this from an ethical point of view, but it is nevertheless a sign of equality; both sexes are treated in the same way, if that way is unethical or not is up to moral philosophers to decide. Identification with the protagonist in a self-reflexive film remains possible, regardless of sex, even if it differs in some aspects from the 'traditional' kind.

Summary

In my essay, I see how identificatory and interpretative processes are altered when the movie in question, in this case *Kill Bill*, has a high level of self-reflexivity, and features a female protagonist. I show that these processes problematize established theories in this area, and that some theories have to be updated and sometimes combined to produce satisfactory answers to how identification and interpretation works.

The historical and experiential shaping of the spectator will inevitably affect these processes, as will the spatiotemporal positioning of the film itself. Nevertheless, the basic comprehension of a film should not vary between viewers, as comprehension takes place on a level where the decoding depends on factors independent of the viewer, even if the semiotic units are assembled in the dialectic relation between the viewer and the film. The result is that the plot and characters are intersubjective in nature, there is not much interpretational leeway. Even if the plot is intersubjective, the process leading to comprehension thereof is not. It is by reworking the subjectivity of the character, to make it 'fit' one's own, that 'full' comprehension is made possible; it is by relating aspects of the character to personal ones - by incorporating these into one's own network of associations – and by rendering the subjectivity more abstract, that one can embrace it more freely. This allows for comprehension of, and identification with, a character of the opposite gender of that of the spectator, as well as a stronger engagement with the text. Identification is even easier in the encounter with post-modern movies, where erotification of both sexes has increased, which makes it even easier for the viewer to be placed in an advantageous interpretative position that is more reconcilable with her own subjectivity. This does not mean that gender is irrelevant, and that only the subtext would be of value. The text, the 'surface', can also convey important

information on the the character in question, and may even alter the comprehension of her: a woman who embraces masculine qualities will probably be perceived as even stronger, since it is, traditionally, not 'normal' for her to do so.

The ideology in the film does not necessarily alter these processes, as it differs in nature depending on which level it is placed. A film can have an ideosyncratic ideologic structure that is not to be understood as prescriptive, but rather as descriptive, and only applies to the characters in the film. This ideology has to be understood but not embraced, it only serves to clarify the goals of the characters and the development of the plot, which allows the spectator to empathize and/or sympathize with a character not acting in accordance with her own morals and ethics; it is only embraced as long as the duration of the film and abandoned afterwards. There can be a discrepancy between the ideology presented and the one promoted by the text. In fact, a film as 'shallow' as *Kill Bill* can even be seen as fully void of prescriptive ideology; this shows that a film can be enjoyed as a 'shallow' spectacle, especially in a case like this where self-reflexivity and pastiche are recurrent qualities. Self-reflexivity and pastiche also allow for a movie to subvert elements that have been glorified in other contexts, if one would prefer an 'ideological' reading of the text. When originally presented they may have been protected in the 'safe haven' of genre, but by detaching them from the original texts they can be exposed, examined and finally deconstructed through an ironic application of them. Thus it is still possible for the spectator to perceive the text as either free of ideology, or as a critique of the values presented; the spectator can even enjoy both of these positions simultaneously.

Self-reflexivity and pastiche can also problematize the spectator's engagement. The overt awareness of the artifice that permeates the film acts as a constant reminder of the fictiveness, preventing complete suture into the cinematic illusion. The high level of references to popular culture requires that the spectator is somewhat 'detached' from the drama, if she is to be able to decode the semiotic element of the allusions. However, this detachment does not seem to have any correlation to the spectator's engagement. The spectator can retain her interest in the fate of the protagonist regardless of her awareness of the fictitious nature of the film, and her identification with and comprehension of the protagonist is not impeded by this factor; identification with a character even seems imperative for any engagement with the text.

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Performed by Santa Esmeralda

Music Sales Corporation o/b/o Premiere Music Group / Universal Music S.A. Division Mercury (France)

Under license from Universal Music Enterprises

'She's not there', Written by Rod Argent, Performed by The Zombies

Published by Marquis Music Co. Ltd.

Licensed courtesy of Marquis Enterprises Limited

'St. Louis Blues'

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Appendix

There are some events in the story that are only hinted by the plot that are not included below because they are presented in very brief segments as complementary details (not impacting the narrative to a great extent), or because it is impossible to determine when they take place. Such events include (in the same order) when Sofie Fatale answers her cell phone during the beating of the Bride, and when Pai Mei tears out one of Elle's eyes and when she subsequently poisons his food.

0. O-Ren Ishii sees her family get killed. Later on in life she kills the yakuza-boss responsible and grows up to be one of the best female assassins in the world.
1. Bill and the Bride sit by the campfire. Bill tells her about Pai Mei.
2. The Bride undergoes training under Pai Mei's supervision. For how long is not clear. Bill advises her to take it easy the first year, but more than that is not said or even hinted.
3. The Bride discovers, during a mission, that she is pregnant, which makes her decide to leave the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. She is attacked by an assassin, Kim, who leaves her be when informed on her pregnancy.
- 4a. Bill encounters the Bride during her wedding rehearsal. DVAS enter and slaughter everyone inside the chapel.
- 4b. Bill shoots the Bride in the head.
5. The local police inspect the chapel where the massacre took place.
6. Elle Driver visits the Bride, who is in a coma.
- 7a. The Bride wakes up, four years after the massacre.

- 7b. The Bride leaves the hospital with a stolen vehicle.
8. The Bride travels to Okinawa, Japan, where she resides one month in wait for her Hattori Hanzo sword to be made.
9. The Bride travels to Tokyo where she kills O-Ren Ishii and her posse, the Crazy 88.
10. The Bride interrogates Sofie Fatale and (literally) drops her off at the hospital.
11. Bill talks to Sofie fatale about the recent massacre of O-Ren and her gang.
12. The Bride travels to Texas, where she kills Vernita Green.
13. Bill talks to Budd about the Bride.
14. Budd goes to work, returns, and neutralizes the Bride. He buries her alive.
15. The Bride breaks free and escapes her tomb, and walks all the way back to Budd's trailer.
16. Elle Driver visits Budd to purchase the Bride's sword. Budd is killed by the black mamba hidden in the bag of money. The Bride enters the trailer and kills Elle.
17. The Bride visits Esteban, a father figure of Bill's, to find out where Bill is.
- 18a. The Bride finds the place where Bill is staying with their daughter, B.B. They talk.
- 18b. The Bride and Bill continue their conversation, end up fighting, and the Bride performs the five point palm exploding heart technique on Bill, who dies.
19. B.B. watches TV in a motel room while the Bride is crying out of joy in the bathroom.
20. Mother and daughter Kiddo drive off (into the sunset, one dares suggest).

The segments are presented in the following order:

Volume 1: 4b, 12, 5, 6, 7a, 0, 7b, 8, 9, 11 interspersed with 10

Volume 2: 4b, 4a, 13, 14, 1, 2, 15-17, 18a, 3, 18b, 19, 20