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Life Imitates Art

As a woman in the modern age, I find it hard to approach the subject of femininity without a little bit of apprehension. Ideas of feminism are thrown around with such strong conviction, it's hard to see how this forceful narrative can bring us into a brighter light of strength. As a personal preference, I have always detested violence and the violent acts of mankind. My apprehensions however were strongly challenged by the *Kill Bill* film series. As I grew more and more curious about the development of the plot I began to realize why stories of feminine fierceness are so important to tell on screen. Through Kiddo's character I was lifted up out of my own mind of doubt, and left feeling stronger and more powerful towards a world that oppresses the feminine agent. Through Uma Thurman's Kiddo, many women have felt this infusion of power back into their lives, allowing them to embrace what is fair and just. This revelation is mirrored by Thurman's own experience in digging up pain of the past during the height of the #Metoo movement. In this essay I will contrast Kiddo's visible heroic quest for violence in the *Kill Bill* series with Thurman's years of silence in real life, providing for a genuine allegory for women who challenge notions of the patriarchy by searching for vengeance in the real world.

Beatrix Kiddo's story of revenge is a modern amalgamation of striking imagery, dripping red blood, and violence, violence, violence. Truly, the whole movie is in opposition to itself, leaving critics able to say "This has never been done before!" while simultaneously making various lists of call back references that Tarantino scrapbooks together for the Bride. Aaron Anderson calls this process, the use of iconography in which we play with a variety of familiar themes in order to effortlessly communicate our narrative. Aaron Anderson is a professor of applied arts at the VCU School Department of Theatre, and specialized Fight Director for stage combat on screen. He notes that, in fight directing, we use iconography for three main reasons. Firstly, for inspiration: he says, "it is the nature of the creative

process itself that art tends to beget other art... [and] even more difficult to invent an original concept than... to play with variety within familiar themes,” (Anderson, 3). Secondly, for economics: Anderson hinges on the idea that film *fights* are a consumer-driven product and the industry produces them primarily because there is some primordial human taste for a visceral action in all its flashing glory. Thirdly, and most importantly so, the use of movement as a “visual short hand” (Anderson, 3). For fight directors, movement itself is the language of power. So perfectly simplistic, Anderson tells us that whenever there is a clear “winner” and a clear “loser” a quick and easy translation of power is transferred through the screen. So if, Beatrix Kiddo (a.k.a. The Bride a.k.a. Black Mamba a.k.a. Mommy) wins every fight, and she does, then she ought to be the most powerful woman in the world. The Bride even self-anoints herself the title in *KBV2* while negotiating her life, “I’m the deadliest woman in the world, but right now I’m scared shitless for my baby,” (Tarantino).

Understanding Tarantino’s intentions with all of the flashy iconography and ferocious savagery demystifies some of the *creative genius* we often hear about when Tarantino is referenced. This is important in the scope of this essay as it is essentially a critique of his treatment towards Thurman during the time of production. With that in mind, we will address this idea of power in two parts: 1.) as confronted by Uma Thurman in her declamation of Harvey Weinstein and Tarantino during the filming of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1 & 2*, and 2.) as portrayed through the screen in the world of the film. The key idea that we will challenge is the representation of Thurman’s character: Beatrix Kiddo, a hardwired assassin with no remorse and its contrasting implications for Uma Thurman: a real life actress in the midst of the height of her career’s success. It’s hard to imagine a world where the exploitation of Thurman at the hands of her employers didn’t affect her performance on screen. The troubling part is how, in 2002, Thurman’s reputation was important enough to her to coerce her into silence. Moreso, looking back at this situation in light of the sinister information that she shared with the world, a dark red picture of exploitation is painted over the entertainment industry at the time.

After sifting through the plethora of menagerie and fandom in *Kill Bill* analysis, I stumbled upon a different light of Tarantino's spaghetti western, kung fu film lovechild. In 2018, the New York Times Article, "This is Why Uma Thurman Is Angry" was released, and Thurman announced exactly that, she was angry. Over fifteen years of silence had passed, and the actress had still never openly called out Harvey Weinstein and Quentin Tarantino for their heinous decisions during the filming and release of *Kill Bill: VI&2*. I was stirred to the core of my soul, scanning my eyes across the deeply troubling descriptions of sexual assault Thurman had faced, trapped in hotel corridors and wriggling out of the grasp of Harvey Weinstein. The disturbing imagery didn't stop there. The press had inserted a video from the point of view of a camera shakily mounted on the back of a Karmann Ghia, during Tarantino's filming process. Thurman wrestled with the car until it drifted off the road, smashing her into a palm tree. What made this particular cut so ruthlessly unnerving was the context in which it was withheld and held over the head of Thurman, leveraged as a piece of a crime she would not be able to prove for fifteen years. The story went that, in the famous scene, where Kiddo is on her way to kill Bill, she was asked to do this stunt herself. Thurman insisted that, "Quentin came in my trailer and didn't like to hear no,... But that was a deathbox that I was in," (Dowd, 8).

For Thurman, the physical damage was as just as detrimental and mentally corrosive as the silence. Thurman emphasized, "The steering wheel was at my belly and my legs were jammed under me... I came back from the hospital in a neck brace with my knees damaged and a large massive egg on my head and a concussion." In the wake of the extensive accumulation of deceit uncovered by the #MeToo movement, Uma was furious that there had not been more legal repercussions against Weinstein. She ramped up the pressure for Tarantino to return the evidence of the crash footage to her for legal evaluation. The actress noted, "Quentin finally atoned by giving it to me after 15 years, right?... Not that it matters now, with my permanently damaged neck and my screwed-up knees." Dowd notes that Thurman was in tears when she admitted, "'When they turned on me after the accident,' she says, 'went from being a creative contributor and performer to being like a broken tool.'" This sentiment demonstrates the power

that Tarantino held over Thurman in the moment, in terms of her career, her public image, and her connections in the film industry. Thurman was exploited as a “tool” under the guise of the luxurious industry (Dowd, 9).

She was used as a fragment of the grand design of the entertainment industry, fourth wave feminism was popular at the time and so that was what went mainstream. In the context of business, Thurman’s selfhood, identity, and personal integrity was written in as a note in the bottom line for Miramax’s budget. She was forced to give away parts of her sense of self, her identity, and her personal sanctity. At an institutional level, there was a dark camaraderie, a pact of silence, among Weinstein’s powerful men and executives, rendering everyone a pawn in his abuse, whether through direct complicity or by accepting the hollow semblance of justice when he was called out. This complicity ensured that even attempts to confront him yielded only token consequences. Lack of immediate action denied many the retribution, restitution, and restoration Thurman so urgently sought that critical moment of need. This is an example of a troubling cultural behavior in which women are silenced, creating a legacy of men who escape accountability for their abuse.

Due to the all encompassing patriarchy of the entertainment business, circa 2003, Thurman’s truth was vaulted behind the many locks of legality, power imbalances, and promotional tours. Uma Thurman felt it wasn’t viable to speak out until years after the abuse had occurred. The fact that Uma Thurman had to wait fifteen years to release a complete statement is unnervingly allegorical to the experience of her comas on screen. In particular, scholar Natalia Pérez argues that Beatrix’s ‘live burial and escape’ is a metaphor in which she has literally and symbolically been buried alive by the patriarch, symbolized by Budd and Bill (Pérez, 26).

According to Pérez, Beatrix’s “live-burial-and-escape” is a symbol of *katabasis* or the “descent into the underworld” which deals with a hero’s death and resurrection. She notes that Joseph Campbell’s

The Hero with a Thousand Faces features the archetype as an essential part of the hero's journey. The most popular examples of katabasis include Odysseus' descent into Hades or in Christian religion with Jesus Christ's resurrection as the peak example. Pérez notes that this rare inclusion of The Bride in the world of (male) heroes is a declarative example of film in which a woman undergoes the traditional (male) hero journey (Pérez, 12). Additionally, katabasis often involves a vision which is related to an encounter with a paternal figure who provides the hero with important information and advice (Pérez, 12). In *Kill Bill: Vol 2* we see this resurrection, when after Beatrix's altercation with Budd in the camper. Beatrix is helpless at the hands of a man, when Budd threatens to burn her eyes before he buries her alive. In the words of Pérez, she has literally and symbolically been buried by the patriarchy and her victory turns her into a role model for all oppressed women (Pérez, 26). Beatrix will get her own katabasis, "literally coming back from the dead" (Pérez, 13). It is a sequence about a victim defeating his enemy against all odds, which is what happens when Beatrix manages to escape the grave with her bare hands.

As Budd scoops piles full of dirt onto the lid of a pine box nailed shut, we see the Bride in a state like we've never seen her before. Her breathing grows heavy, panicked as her heartbeat echoes inside of the coffin. Her hysteria of feeling trapped within, clawing at the wood lid of the box echoes the inner turmoil that can arise from institutional oppression, if we have taken one too many hits. In life, I often hear discontent sentiments about our society muddling a much deeper feeling of inner turmoil that rarely reaches the surface. Internally, female anger can have this effect but we deem it a much more appropriate language that can be understood collectively. In the vision of *Katabasis*, Pérez emphasizes that The Bride's flashback to "Pei Mei's cruel tutelage" is an example of a situation in which she has to deal with a "glass-ceiling" or in this case "wooden-ceiling" (Perez, 14). Through her training, Beatrix must undergo complete transformation of the inner self, overcoming a physical manifestation of violent misogyny. Not only is Pai Mei characterized by his misogyny, he is also seen as extremely powerful. In Bill's words, Pai Mei, "is worshiped by some as a god and by others he is feared as a devil" and "has nothing but contempt for women" (Tarantino). This characterization mirrors the societal feelings towards the patriarchy, a

system that perpetuates a sickening concentration of power in the hands of the oppressors. Despite all of his problematic misogyny, Pai Mei gives The Bride the advice that will save her life, “It’s the wood that should fear your hand, not the other way around” (Tarantino).

Pérez points out that the fact that Beatrix is willing to put up with Pai Mai’s humiliations in order to learn the skills for her revenge does not offer a lot of direction for a feminist reading. However, in a more nuanced analysis, it’s important to note that this sort of contempt for women is a reality for contemporary women who face domestic violence and gender violence today. Beatrix’s ability to push beyond all odds introduces a feminine icon who blinks not in the face of a very real sexist environment. Pérez notes that this claim could be considered controversial from the feminist view because it seems to “suggest that women can only be strong if they become masculine,” (Pérez, 10). However, in terms of cultural implications, Uma herself attested to the many women it inspired to gain agency and leave situations of domestic abuse and violence. Introducing feminine icons into the timeless tradition of heroism, is no doubt an empowering feat.

Through revisiting Anderson's concepts of visible power in film, we can understand why exactly heroine narratives are so important for a progressive collective consciousness. In addition to the marked spectacle of violence, violence plays a role in the character’s inner journey, representing exchanges of power between characters. Every choreographed fight is a narrative for an implicit power struggle. Anderson notes, “No matter the technique or skill level of the fight, even fights that are just ‘plain bad’ are a visual shorthand for power struggles. The nature of combat implies a negotiation between two or more competing interests,” (Anderson, 3). Often, the power gained in these exchanges is almost always of a fundamentally violent nature. Violence is simple and captivating, and beneath the simplicity, is a powerful message. The savage image of a blood thirsty Beatrix Kiddo, covered in sweat will stick with us viewers. Anderson emphasizes, “the main reason violence becomes so important to telling these types of inner journeys on film is that acts of violence make the idea of personal power itself visible,” (Anderson,

3). By learning a historically violent art (martial arts), and therefore a historically masculine art, Kiddo breaks the mold of what femininity looks like and films and redefines our picture of feminine fierceness.

In the end, *Kill Bill* becomes more than just a cult classic, action packed with cinematic flourishes, rather it becomes a paradoxical allegory of both empowerment and exploitation. For Uma Thurman, the narrative of *Katabasis*, a resurrection and rebirth, portrayed in the film unsettlingly mirrors the personal resurrection she had to perform in real life. In her words, she was, “solving [her] own Nancy Drew mystery,” when she finally strung out the evidence of the debilitating car crash (Dowd, 8). Fifteen years of silence, institutional betrayal, and physical trauma left her buried six feet underneath the very industry that made her a star. Like Beatrix pushing her fist through the pine box, despite the splinters and unbearable blisters, Uma Thurman returned, pushed to her limits, but undeniably alive. The actress posted a deliciously vengeful remark directly addressing the situation, “I am grateful today, to be alive, for all those I love, and for all those who have the courage to stand up for others... I feel it’s important to take your time, be fair, be exact, so... Happy Thanksgiving Everyone! (Except you Harvey, and all your wicked conspirators - I’m glad it’s going slowly - You don’t deserve a bullet)” (Uma). The legacy she leaves behind is both heroine and human, a woman who survived the exploitative underworld, and came back against all odds with her story and power intact.

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