

MASTER'S THESIS

The contemporary nasty woman.
Narrating subversive female characters from a gendered perspective.
A comparative study between men and women's directorial approaches
in English language thrillers from 2010-2020

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Cover Photo: Elaine (Samantha Robinson) and Griff (Gian Keys) in *The Love Witch* (USA 2016, Anna Biller)

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It is a great relief to be able to finally say that I have reached the end of this thesis journey. It has been a rocky experience that I have made central to my life in the Netherlands. One could say I have taken a stance on exploring my own feelings about writing and recognizing how consuming of a journey this can be.

Exploring anger has been a great source of curiosity for how we interpret and understand negative emotions. With a past in which I have extensively written about women who fought for their position in the world, for leading the life they wanted to, I became fascinated with the subject. With women who actively and consciously disrupt dynamics of exploitation. I became fascinated with the anger that all women might have carried inside them at least one time in their lives. With women who become anti-heroes.

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Abstract

This study will focus on exploring the representation of unruly behaviours of female-lead characters in film. I intend to research the portrayal of female anger on screen and the subversion of pre-established gendered narratives about disobedient women. Using the concept of the *nasty woman* proposed by Agnieszka Piotrowska, this study will take a comparative approach for analysing the representation of female anger by women and men directors. The study will focus on four contemporary films and will draw a parallel between the narrative arcs of the lead characters in the attempt to understand the anxieties and complexities of their anger within their cinematic universe. The main question of this research is *what contemporary anxieties do the angry female leading characters portray in cinematic universes created by women and men directors?* And based on this, I will look at sub-questions that will help me understand if there are gendered representations of this anger. Precisely, *how are the subversive central female characters portrayed? Do men and women depict female anger differently? Are the angry women portrayed on screen a fantasy and if so, whose?*

Introduction

By the end of 2020, Hollywood mainstream cinema witnessed something that *Variety*¹ writers Kate Aurthur and Zoe McConell called “the most audacious, feminist movie of the year”², (Aurthur & McConell, 2020). Written and directed by Emerald Fennel, her debut feature *Promising Young Woman* (USA 2020, Emerald Fennel) follows the story of Cassie, a medical school dropout who spends her time between two worlds: working at a coffee house during the day and “hunting” men at clubs and bars at night. Her “hunt” is noteworthy. While pretending to be excessively drunk and waiting to see if a man is going to step in to “take care” of her, she scans the room looking for her “prey”. This usually is a man who, on the surface, acts considerate and affectionate towards her only to later attempt to take advantage of her state. She then returns to her rational persona leaving them with a moral lesson about what it means to be “the nice guy”. By the end of the film, Cassie attacks the man who assaulted her best friend in college, who afterwards committed suicide. Her violent behaviour juxtaposed to her normal life, present her need to re-establish her friend’s lost agency as much as hers. Through her radical behaviour she becomes a *nasty woman*.

Why do we need to (continue) study(ing) the image of the contemporary angry woman?

In 1973, Claire Johnston observed that women’s stereotypical image remains a construction of patriarchal ideals and myths about femininity and feminine behaviour. The conditions of producing women’s image are linked to an already pre-established discourse. The reproduction of her image is bound to a set of rules. Or, to quote Louis Althusser in an attempt to make an analogy between reproducing woman’s image in cinema and the reproduction of labour power, she is bound to an “established order”, (Althusser, 1970). For Claire Johnston, these myths and reproductions re-establish “ideological traditions”, (Johnston, 1973). Nonetheless, she states: “It is possible to disengage the icons from the myth and thus bring about reverberations within the sexist ideology in which the film is made”, (ibid). One way of doing this is to keep the

¹ “ABOUT US.” *Variety*, <https://variety.com/variety-about-us/>

² Aurthur, Kate. “Promising Young Woman: How Carey Mulligan and Emerald Fennell Made the Most Audacious, Feminist Movie of the Year.” *Variety*, December 9, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/promising-young-woman-carey-mulligan-emerald-fennell-1234848775/>

tradition of looking at cinema politically and engage with a feminist reading of films. She asserts:

[...] If we accept that the developing of female stereotypes was not a conscious strategy of the Hollywood dream machine, what are we left with? (...) As the cinema developed, the stereotyping of man was increasingly interpreted as contravening the realization of the notion of 'character'; in the case of woman, this was not the case: the dominant ideology presented her as eternal and unchanging, except for modifications in terms of fashion etc. (Johnston, 1973)

According to Johnston, it is important to observe how and if woman's image is shifting. It is imperative to explore and intellectualize this perception. Which is what a feminist reading of films does. A mechanism of breaking down the symbolic image that is being portrayed is thus a method of initiating the study.

The breakdown of this image can be done by taking a different approach to newer versions of female emotions presented on the mainstream screen. This is what the director of *Promising Young Woman* (USA 2020, Emerald Fennel) does. She mentions that one of her main inspirations was the lack of "real women" on screen in the revenge genre. Precisely, how "real women might take revenge, which is different (...) to how we normally see it", (Fennel, 2020). She indicates that most of the time, revenge films that involve central female characters are written, directed or imagined by men. She observes: "I hadn't seen a female revenge film that isn't basically a man's journey in a dress", (Fennel, 2020)³. To counteract this, Fennel wrote the script and later in 2021 won an Oscar for her debut⁴. Her achievement shows, I argue, that re-imagining female vengeance continues the transformation of the image of women.

What Fennel is doing supports Johnston's claim that woman-made cinema needs to take a more political stance. In 1973, Johnston saw female cinema as a potential *counter cinema*, (Piotrowska, 2019) and proposed looking at film in a less romanticized fashion. She writes "Romanticism will not provide us with the necessary tools to construct a women's cinema (...) it can only be challenged by developing the means to interrogate the male, bourgeois cinema", (Johnston, 1973). These films work as a platform for female voices which "matter and are assimilated into cinema culture", (Piotrowska, 2019). As Janet McCabe points out in 2004 in

³ Emerald Fennell Hadn't Seen a True Female Revenge Film-So She Made 'Promising Young Woman'." *Glamour*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.glamour.com/story/emerald-fennell-promising-young-woman>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/apr/26/emerald-fennell-wins-best-original-screenplay-oscar-for-promising-young-woman>

her reading of Molly Haskell's and Marjorie Rosen's feminist critiques of the Hollywoodian representation of women: "Hollywood movies simultaneously reproduce social realities while distorting women's experience of those realities (...) Unconscious drives and cultural repression, (...) instead determine how women are represented on screen", (McCabe, 2004). The continuation of including more female perspectives in the same environment as dominating male perspectives shows the necessity of an expansion of the platform for representation and expression offered by film. And a combination of both perspectives contributes to designing a medium with a variety of viewpoints. This could be the case for *Gone Girl* (2014). The thriller, written by Gillian Flynn and directed by David Fincher, combines a male and a female perspective. It shows a violent female character that can be identified with the idea of the *killjoy*, as Piotrowska observes, drawing on Sarah Ahmed's thoughts in *Living a feminist life* (2017). The *killjoy*, the *nasty woman*, are both the antithesis of gendered expectations. In Piotrowska's understanding both concepts are closely related. They describe "a feminist who disrupts stable situations and norms, (...), at a high cost to herself – and to others", (Piotrowska, 2019). For example, Ahmed's *killjoy* is conceptualized based on the antithesis of the illusory image of a fulfilled woman. This can be the American housewife fantasy that Betty Friedan explores in in 1965. She is a laborious, predominantly white middle class woman happy to fulfil domestic functions. Ahmed points out:

[...] When we track this figure of the happy housewife, we need to think of what the figure does, and how that figure works to secure not just ideas of happiness but ideas of who is entitled to happiness. (...) the fantasy of the good life does not mean proximity to happiness. (Ahmed, 2010)

The *killjoy* is a consequence of the idea of the happy housewife. She is happy in the eyes of society, but she is actively looking for ways to change her limitations as she is "not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising", (ibid.). Piotrowska's *nasty woman* starts from a similar premise. She does not have to be a housewife, but she is a *killjoy*. Her central trait is her seemingly unexpected rebellious nature.

In her reading of films with *nasty women*, Piotrowska's focus lays on young protagonists "who have chosen to be 'nasty' even though they can easily gain patriarchal favours by being more pleasant and amenable", (Piotrowska, 2019). These women have different backgrounds and reasons, but they all regain their agency through killing their initial image of innocence. With this, they kill the performative joy around them. Thus, both the *killjoy* and the *nasty woman* are similar in their desire. but the *nasty woman*, embodying a *killjoy*, takes it further by performing cruel acts. The contemporary angry woman embodies the complexities of her

predecessors and builds new ways of re-imagining anger. Thus, she needs to be studied to see how she develops her anger and what is she rebelling against in this point in time.

Based on this, I will be using the concept of the *nasty woman* as a key-term. The concept offers the possibility of analysing the journey of these women from the first stage of the traditional happiness they embody, to the final stage of disrupting their behaviour.

Main films to be examined

Theoretical framework and corpus.

I will be looking at four English language thriller films that explore four rebellious female characters. As I believe that an equal representation of two gendered perspectives is important in conducting this research, I have chosen two films directed by women and two directed by men: *Ex Machina* (USA 2014, Alex Garland), *Gone Girl* (USA 2014, David Fincher), *The Love Witch* (USA 2016, Anna Biller), and *Promising Young Woman* (USA 2020, Emerald Fennel). The films were chosen based on the symmetry that I have initially observed in the construction of the characters. All the women that the films portray are finding agency through their anger. As they become powerful, they find themselves navigating loss and the potential of losing not only the image of innocence they need in order to survive in a patriarchal system, but the loss of their own lives. Through their newly found agency they become threatening, powerful, feared.

Accordingly, this thesis will explore the types of contemporary anxieties presented through the characters. The symbolic presentation of these anxieties will be read through an interpretation of the ideology those anxieties are born into. My intention with this is to understand the narrative journey of the directors and their militant ambitions (if any). The exploration of the narrative of the films will be also a path in identifying what does it mean to create angry women. As Fennel mentioned in an interview⁵ “The act of making things as a woman is still subversive”, (Fennel, 2021). The insurgence found in making things as a woman is addressed at a system that has worked towards inhibiting feminine expression, of all ranges. Anger, specifically, is something that can be explored politically from various grounds.

As mentioned previously, throughout history, female narratives in films have been largely dominated by patriarchal perspectives. Laura Mulvey provides this perspective in 1975

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/mar/19/its-wild-carey-mulligan-and-emerald-fennell-on-making-oscars-history>

stating that “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form”, (Mulvey, 1975). This is also the time when she establishes the *male gaze* theory which, she argues, female characters are the ones predominantly subjected to. This perspective has been adopted in the analysis of film narratives and in the establishment of a theoretical framework for film theory. It became imperative for, as Janet McCabe puts it, “a reading of the underlying ideological operations at work in meaning production”, (McCabe, 2004). Accordingly, a feminist reading of the films I have chosen, is productive as a method for exploring the trope of the *nasty woman*. Piotrowska’s concept will help me observe the development of the character arc through a feminist theoretical framework that combines film analysis with a cultural and ideological localization of the disruptive turn in the behaviour of these women. I will explain this further by expanding on my choice of this main concept as central to my research.

The nasty woman. A political and cultural concept

The theoretical conceptualization of the term *nasty woman* is based on Donald Trump calling Hillary Clinton “nasty” during the presidential campaign in 2016. The expression has gained momentum as a meme, has its own Wikipedia page⁶, and it has been embraced by women activists claiming it as a compliment⁷. Trump created what the former *Forbes* journalist Madeline Berg called “The Nasty Woman Economy”, (Berg, 2016). She writes: “T-shirts, tote bags, mugs and even a perfume have sprung up for sale on the internet that spin Trump’s slam to celebrate what they think Clinton exemplifies: female ambition, intelligence, power and action”, (ibid.). Furthermore, the term became an inspiration for exploring a new version of subversive women in contemporary culture, as in the case of Piotrowska’s concept. She mentions:

[...] I borrow the term ‘nasty woman’ from the famous Trump phrase about Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential campaign (...). This phrase, which revealed Trump’s thinly veiled nonreformed and ultra conservative misogynist persona, was confirmed and re-confirmed by a variety of scandals. (Piotrowska, 2019)

She introduces the term as a “productive space to discuss a new *femme fatale* in contemporary English speaking cinema”, (ibid.) The scholar argues that the term *nasty woman* may sound familiar culturally as it “comes in many forms in history, myths, legends and storytelling”,

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasty_woman

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2016/10/21/how-donald-trump-donald-trump-accidentally-created-the-nasty-woman-economy/?sh=19b9299155ca>

(ibid.). The historical perspective, however, shows her losing her attractiveness in the eyes of her male counterparts, as soon as she acquires power. Whereas, in Piotrowska's concept of this new version of the *femmes fatales*, they are women who take advantage of their sexuality. They are:

[...] characters who have chosen to be 'nasty' even though they still can easily gain patriarchal favours by being more pleasant and amenable. They become that for various reasons, emerging out of various motivational storyworlds (...) holding onto their sexual prowess as if to affirm: it is not necessary to give on one's sexuality to have ambitions and agency (...). (Piotrowska, 2019)

Piotrowska analyses the typical *nasty woman* as someone who begins her journey in life as a (usually), naïve child. She is smart, but moderately vocal; beautiful, but modest; strong, but not too strong as to appear threatening. She is a girl modelled after the universal image of docility and abeyance. All the efforts and the expectations placed on this character are, in the end, supposed to take her on the path of becoming one of the many manufactured Madonnas of the Freudian dichotomy. As she can only be one or the other (a Madonna or a Whore), in the universe she lives in, the *nasty woman* must make a conscious choice about her condition. More often than not, she is sharply aware of her position although it might seem unclear to the people in her life why she is acting the way she does.

The term Madonna-Whore Dichotomy (MWD) coined by Sigmund Freud in the early 1900's theorises the "polarized perception of women in general as either 'good', chaste and pure Madonnas or as 'bad', promiscuous, and seductive whores", (Bareket et al., 2018). Freud created the term within the psychoanalytical study of male sexuality, arguing that some men are either attracted only to the virginal image of the woman, or they need to focus on the woman as being sexually promiscuous (ibid.). But the cultural meaning of the term goes beyond exploring this just as a form of psychopathology. As Orly Bareket et al., mention within feminist theories, the Dichotomy is seen "as an ideology designed to reinforce patriarchy", (ibid.). They also state that according to feminist scholars:

[...] MWD reinforces unequal gender roles, limiting women's self-expression, agency, and freedom by defining their sexual identities as fitting one of two rigid social scripts. (...) Gender inequality is also reinforced through sexist attitudes about women. Most relevant to the MWD, ambivalent sexism theory posits that sexist attitudes encompass a similar polarisation between 'good' and 'bad' (...) Benevolent sexism targets women viewed as warm and supportive, who therefore deserve men's protection and provision, whereas hostile sexism targets women viewed as competitors who seek to gain dominance and control over men. (ibid.)

According to Piotrowska, this dichotomy is present in the trope of the *nasty woman* as an intrinsic development coming from extrinsic factors. Her position of righteousness is reinforced by the cultural practices she is born into and comes in to ensure her virtuosity so that she can navigate through the world. But in time, her moral and honourable image is irredeemably transformed into its antithesis. This happens as this girl approaches womanhood and gets more and more exposed to the complexities of the world she is inhabiting. Something shifts in her and she becomes more aware of her condition. As soon as she physically enters the world and leaves her childhood behind, she undergoes a transformation in her capacity to react to it and she becomes the Whore of the Dichotomy. However, the *nasty woman* encompasses a complexity of qualities. She is, as discussed previously a *killjoy* as much as she is the Whore, as much as she is a *femme fatale*.

This can be observed in the character of Cassie, the main protagonist of *Promising Young Woman* (USA 2020, Emerald Fennel). She works as an example of a subversive female character portraying both sides of the Dichotomy until she decides to take the turn. This example gives the opportunity to locate and contextualize Piotrowska's concept, as Cassie is one of the case studies I will be engaging with further in the thesis. Based on Piotrowska's formulation, the *nasty woman* is a metaphor for a rage that has been contained long enough and must be released. This character is constructed so that her actions, no matter how brutal they may appear, may be in the end perceived as some form of alleviation. She turns into the hero of her story, and she creates her own narrative, thus, becoming the subject.

In Piotrowska's understanding, this character still represents a militant act in current times. The fact that she is the subject of her own story is, to this day, a "radical political gesture in contemporary culture", (Piotrowska, 2019). She is the prime example offered to society through film, and thus, I speculate, she is virtually the fighter every woman might aspire to be. But despite that, not every woman can become her. She "deploys her nastiness in order to fight patriarchy. (...) she is nasty because she has to be in order to shift the expected sequence of events in culture and cinema, and therefore in society", (ibid.). She puts herself in the position of becoming a symbol. She is self-aware and she takes herself out of the myth she is supposed to reproduce. The symbolic image she knows she bears becomes an asset that she can use to disrupt the established ideological dynamic. This is discussed by Janet McCabe in 2004. She states the importance of situating films and texts in an ideological spectrum as "Images do not simply reflect the social world, but are ideological signifiers", (McCabe, 2004). Based on this, I argue that *nasty women*, as they become more aware of their condition, become meta-characters that take upon themselves the task to show how aware they are of their position and

how they can disrupt it. Ideology, in their world, is challenged. It represents a state that one can break out from.

I will explain this starting with Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology in the Marxist understanding of: "pure dream [...] an imaginary construction". (Althusser, 1970). If characters are symbolic of societal struggles and can break out of an ideological state of being, the viewer is signalled through analogies and through an imaginary, dream-like environment how they can become more aware of their own condition. The hyper awareness of characters acts as a bridge that connects the imaginary to reality.

Ideology, cinema and feminist close reading as a methodology.

Historical theoretical perspectives.

Based on the idea of tropes acting as images and signifiers, a feminist close reading is productive as a methodology for a project that analyses films within ideological systems. As Douglas Kellner mentions,

[...] Hollywood films should be analysed as ideological texts contextually and relationally (...) a contextualist film criticism reads cinematic texts in the terms of actual struggles (...) and situates ideological analysis within existing socio-political debates (Kellner, 1991)

At the same time, I want to analyse character arcs and use the theoretical insight of narrative criticism as a methodology. Placing the character at the forefront and examining the details of their behaviour will help me understand their struggles and anxieties. As Murray Smith argues, "if we wish to understand 'identification', and how narrative films are 'made intelligible', then I contend that character is central", (Smith, 1995). Based on Smith's concept of "structure of sympathy" (ibid), I will be able to analyse the films and understand how the characters work as elements within the stories they are part of.

Engaging with a feminist close reading and breaking down the character arcs, will allow me to situate the films within contemporary political debates and develop a framework that allows me to look at all the aspects of a film. Putting the concept of the *nasty woman* as central to my research makes a feminist close reading of the films inevitable as my goal is to observe the gendered directorial perspectives of this exact trope. By choosing to look at the *nasty woman* as a character that was created by her environment, this approach will help me sustain the discussion of reproducing gendered behaviours within an ideological system and how are those

behaviours represented. Analysing the character arc, will work as the pillar for creating parallels between the characters and the comparative analysis of the directorial approaches.

CHAPTER 1

This chapter will consist of a reflection on the development of feminist film theory since the 1970s. I will start by introducing psychoanalysis as a tool used by feminist film scholars and its instrumentalization for establishing a critical language within the studies. Precisely, I will briefly explain two concepts that feminist film theory engaged with – scopophilia and the mirror-stage. The concepts were coined by Sigmund Freud and, respectively, Jacques Lacan. My intention with this is to provide context for my further analysis and for creating a space in which I explain how feminist film theory has developed and changed throughout the decades. After explaining the use of psychoanalysis, I will discuss Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, which is still crucial for understanding how to engage in an exercise of feminist film reading. Afterwards I will introduce the idea of a woman's counter-cinema proposed by Claire Johnston and I will reflect on how critically assessing the use of psychoanalysis has opened discussions which turn away from seeing the female character as just a signifier and for positioning her in a socio-political and gendered discussion. This will help me introduce the trope that I am operating with and discuss the ideology at play in creating a disruptive character, such as the *nasty woman*. Mainly, what is she fighting against, how is she constructed, what is her mission. I will also reflect on how she is part of a female revenge fantasy, and how men can also contribute to shaping such a universe within a counter movement.

A feminist reading of films: The case of women's cinema as counter-cinema

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey argues that the history of cinema shows a tradition of positioning the image of the woman as the bearer of meaning. Her lack of agency and her (often) sexualised persona "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance" (Mulvey, 1973), has created narrative structures in which the women, who although might be placed in the centre of the action, don't add up too much to the story. Except for portraying a set of oppositions in a phallogocentric universe. They are characters with no real substance, which appear only when they need to act as contradictions or as a reinforcement of patriarchal rules and phantasies. The contradiction assigned to them and their lack of agency over their image, is transferred to the viewers who are, in turn, perceiving the woman as a set of pre-established signs. Mulvey states: "The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the

representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen (...)", (ibid.). In other words, this imbalance makes the male subject the one that can own the story and dictate the narrative arc of the woman. He is allowed by the script to project phantasies onto the female subject. With this, he is influencing the spectator to look at the woman through the male narrator or protagonist's eyes and identify her within his universe. Mulvey explains this by commenting on the openings of the films *Only Angels Have Wings* (USA 1939, Howard Hawks) and in *To Have and Have Not* (USA 1944, Howard Hawks). She is saying that in the beginning the woman is seen and assessed in her own world by both the spectator and the male protagonist. The dynamic seems to shift as soon as she enters the life of the main male character. She becomes a projection of his perspectives on her. She is stripped of more agency over her story and her image and what might become more her personality. Consequently, the audience, be it male or female, identifies the woman with the meaning she was given to bear by the man. Mulvey explains:

[...] she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, (...) her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too, (ibid.).

For Laura Mulvey, the identification process streams from the psychoanalytical concept of *scopophilia*, a sexual instinct identified by Sigmund Freud of looking and being looked at. This voyeuristic take on film is what she considers to be a pleasure that cinema has to offer, it gives "... the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world", (ibid.). *Scopophilia*, in Freudian terms, is an infantile instinct which, Laura Mulvey argues, cinema facilitates. She explains this by arguing that this medium provides both the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at someone's body or into someone's world and, at the same time, reinforces the narcissistic tendency of identifying with an ideal image presented on screen. It acts as a mirror. An argument which she links later with Jacques Lacan's development phase in infants called *the mirror-stage*. Her analysis explains that this private world owned by the main male character, becomes a matter of identification. The spectator sees the character in his universe as the one who owns and creates the story and identifies with him by adopting him as an ideal image. This can "allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego", (ibid.). Meaning that the spectator gets lost in the process of watching the film and at the same time identifies with the perceived ideal image. To explain this, I will elaborate on Jacques Lacan's mirror-stage theory and the development of ego.

Jacques Lacan sees the ego as an object, rather than a subject. The ego is not the „I” of the psyche, but an almost internalized outside neurotic, fixed and inert entity. In the mirror-stage, when the child sees their body for the first time, they understand their own materiality, that there is an image of them that is presented to the world. This image, compared to the images of the adults they see in their life, is unfulfilled and underdeveloped. As they acknowledge this, they experience negative affects that push them towards wanting to find out more about the world in the hope of becoming more like the adults t they see. This is explained by Adrian Johnston:

[...] This initial state of helpless `motor impotence and nursling dependence` entails the infant experiencing a swirl of negative affects: anxiety, distress, frustration, and so on. To the young child, motivated by these negative affects, a crucial component of the enthralling lure exerted by the fascinating image of his/her body is this image’s promise that he/she can overcome his/her *Hilflosigkeit* and be a unified, pulled-together whole, an integrated, coordinated totality like the bigger, more mature others he/she sees around him/her-self, (Johnston, 2018).

As the child understands that they can be their own entities, that they have and they can identify with an image, the ego is formed. However, as they recognize their body, they start objectifying their own image and with this recognition, a contradictory moment of misrecognition is created. This occurs when outside perspectives, such as those of the caregivers, are being mirrored onto the child. To explain this, Jacques Lacan says that the opinion of the child of their own image starts being influenced by the opinion of their parents as they project their own ideals onto the image of their children. And as children start to recognize their ego as part of their personality, they also start internalizing and acting upon the images that are projected onto them. The mirroring stage is then an opening gate towards an existence of mirroring and adopting gestures, behaviours, desires outside of the individual created by the world at large and its ideologies. This means that from this stage onwards, projections become part of human existence as does the ongoing need for knowing and achieving the unity desired from infancy. This, (the need for wholeness or integrity) is something that Jacques Lacan believes is never fulfilled. Johnston explains that “individuals spend their entire lives, beginning thusly, chasing in vain after an unattainable state of harmony and mastery first falsely promised by the mirror”, (ibid.). The illusion of fulfilment can be created then, I speculate, through narratives that allow it⁸.

⁸ What I mean by this is that if we think about cinema as the dream machine that can supplement the need for unfulfilled desires, it can contribute to creating an imaginary world in which these desires can be fulfilled. At the same time, the desires are curated to fit current ideologies, or to counteract them.

To go back to film, if it is to be analysed from the perspective of being a mirror and acting as a medium that can project phantasies and dreams onto the protagonists and the spectators, it is clear then that it can act as a source of reinforcing the ego through the process of identification, no matter how fleeting this feeling may be. And in a patriarchal environment, in which the male perspectives are dominant, it becomes the projection of the phantasies of the patriarchally constructed ego that belongs to the male protagonist. His imaginary and his ego are perceived and adopted by the audience and creates a cycle of projected images that are absorbed, internalized and later reproduced outside of the cinematic universe. As the film becomes a window into the private world of the main character, it also acts as a pathway towards meaning production through the perception of that character, or a reproduction of meaning. As the male protagonist becomes the giver of meaning, the transmitted message is the one that comes from the male itself. This is what Laura Mulvey calls the *male gaze*. This concept, which originated from psychoanalysis, explains the loss of agency women have when exposed to a male perception of their image. However, it is not something that belongs just to men within patriarchy, as the term is used as a tool for analysing how women portray other women and if they display an *internalized male gaze* while doing so. This theory, as illustrated before, streams from a Freudian and Lacanian perspective and served in its inception as a breakthrough for understanding the positionality of women in film narratives.

With this said, as Agnieszka Piotrowska observes in 2019: “Taking psychoanalysis too rigidly can lead to a re-inscription of the patriarchal, rather than its demolition”, (Piotrowska, 2019). This is a reflection that Laura Mulvey formulates as well, more than 40 years later, in 2015. She explains the primary historical necessity of using the tools given by psychoanalysis in an attempt to instrumentalize it politically. What she refers to is the choice, at the time, of working with psychoanalysis and using it as a political tool to explain the “narratives of desire”, (ibid.). At the same time, she goes on to point out that in the political climate of those times, engaging with a psychoanalytical interpretation was a theory

[...] useful to feminists: it made the invisible visible and it provided a vocabulary and a set of concepts that could enable a first articulation of the place of sexuality in women’s liberation. [...] questions of cinema, initially at least, were above all a question of politics. Psychoanalysis and semiotics enabled feminists to grasp the gap between `women` in their social context and, to adapt Teresa de Laurentis’s term `woman` as a signifier that referred to the male psyche and the patriarchal unconscious, (ibid.).

And, starting from this interpretation, Mulvey comes to another conclusion which contributes to exploring the image of the woman in film not just as a signifier, or as a meaning bearer, but as an object of sexual desire “in a society that attempts to repress it as well as in one where it is commodified as spectacle”, (ibid.). The commodification aspect can be observed from a historical perspective that Laura Mulvey illustrates. She writes that after World War I, the production of goods and marketing became more and more predominant, and the US became dependant on its film industry for exporting and selling. The sexual image of the woman was fetishized by a global market. In her further reflection on the feminist turn in film analysis born in the 70s, she goes on to state that she is not dismantling the theories of the time, as she considers them to have been a necessary first step. Nonetheless, she prefers to “see them as kind of demode objects (...) out of their very obsolescence they might revive an interest in the history of feminist thought, its whys and wherefores”, (ibid.). At the same time, she notes that the image of the woman, despite the progress that has been achieved in equality and rights, is still “marked by instability and uncertainty”, (ibid.). This can be linked with the 1970s idea of a women’s counter-cinema. Expressed by Claire Johnston in 1973 this thought comes at a time when the image of the women presented on screen was still heavily romanticized within the patriarchal traditions of Hollywood. She elaborates on this by presenting the case of woman-as-myth, the erasure of her personality and presenting her as something that lacks the ability to change. In other words, woman as *the eternal feminine*. But Claire Johnston’s idea of a women’s counter-cinema is an extension of Peter Wollen’s commentary and examination of Jean-Luc Godard’s development in film. In 1972 he calls it “a counter-cinema whose values are counterposed to those of orthodox cinema”, (Wollen, 1972). In Wollen’s interpretation, a counter-cinema movement arises as a response to the Hollywood dream machine and its ideologies. This is expressed, as a counter movement that can only exist as a response to something that needs to be subverted, questioned or critically assessed. In his conclusion, he mentions his position on Godard’s development of cinema:

[...] What cinema can do is produce meanings and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings. [...] a counter-cinema is the right objective [...] it can only exist in relation to the rest of cinema. Its function is to struggle against the fantasies, ideologies and aesthetic devices of one cinema with its antagonistic fantasies, ideologies and aesthetic devices. (ibid.)

Thus, for a counter-cinema to exist and to survive, it needs a set of established conditions that it can counteract. Which makes the case of women’s cinema a case of an ongoing attempt in

destabilising systemically patriarchal dynamics at play in the mainstream film industry created by Hollywood. Particularly. An industry which, for the most part of its existence has “stolen and used”, (Mulvey, 1973), women’s image. It has created habitually a mechanism for an eternal feminine that appeals to an ideal imaginary but that is hardly attainable in real life and that destabilises the autonomy of women over their own image. Johnston believes that in the space that Hollywood creates, which can be easily assessed as a space for commercial film production, the creation of the mythical image of the woman enables such processes. The woman becomes stripped of her image and becomes the sign the ideology sees fit to reproduce and superimpose.

But even though this can be observed more prevalently in big film monopolies, such as Hollywood, small scale productions and art films may fall under the same, or an even bigger scale of criticism for Claire Johnston. She is asking if Hollywood, with its commercial character attached to it, is guilty of being “more manipulative of the image of woman than the art cinema”, (ibid.). She argues that European art cinema has the same sexist ideology attached to it. The fact is that stereotyping appears less obvious in these films, but art films are “inviting a greater invasion from myth”, (ibid.). She says then that if woman should be looked at as mythological and her function in the dream machine is to be an image, or a sign, in this male dominated industry, then “woman is presented as what she represents for man”, (ibid.). The mythology of the woman, her image, is instrumentalized so she stays within the limits of patriarchal thinking and reverberates its modes of presentation Her image is coined by the concept of eternity, the never-changing iconography she is bound to. Claire Johnston states, then, that dismantling the sign that the woman is representing, comes down to creating an unromanticized version of the women presented on screen. This is a way in which women can be constructed in cinema without falling into the trap of emotions and myths. And, as I believe, this construction can be done by either men or women. Something that will be explored throughout the case studies that I have chosen.

The claim Claire Johnston makes in the 70s is supported by Janet McCabe in 2004. She indicates that films created in a patriarchal ideology establish a culture that doesn’t leave too much room for reimagining women’s place in the world. But as the position of women started to change in the economic system and the sexual revolution of the second wave of feminism promised more autonomy to women both in and outside of the ideal of the nuclear family, new anxieties started to arise. Precisely, anxieties felt by patriarchal proponents. She reflects on Marjorie Rosen’s 1973 *Popcorn Venus: women, movies and the American dream*, stating that

[...] despite generating new representations that coincided with real advancements made by women, the industry's continual depiction of women as sex objects or victims suggests to Rosen that these images spoke of patriarchal anxieties regarding the loss of male socioeconomic and sexual power. (McCabe, 2004).

The image of the woman inside the film universe proved to be contradictory most of the time with the struggles women were encountering systemically. As most popular films remained in the preestablished framework, women and men were still, for the most part, seeing a signifier, a symbolic ideological image on screen. The only way to break out of it, was to actively combat the fantasy. Not only that, but showing more complex women with different backgrounds, and focusing on a perspective that is less middle class and predominantly white, was being debated within feminist film reading. The narratives of white women were far more predominant and are still dominating the film industry, and that opened new debates within feminist film studies that worked towards expanding complexities that went beyond psychoanalysis and focused on socio-economical aspects of representation. At the same time, during these critical discussions that were being held within the field of feminist film theory, the classic film narrative was already being challenged by women directors. The feminist counter-cinema of the time (1970s) was intellectualizing the signifier that the woman represented to herself and was challenging pre-established discourses. This put them in a contradiction of finding what it means to be a woman. As Anneke Smelik observes in 1998:

[...] We witness a theoretical contradiction of feminism here: while feminists need to deconstruct the patriarchal images and representation of `woman`, they historically need to establish their female subjectivity at the same time. That is to say, they have to find out and redefine what it means to be a woman. (ibid.)

Thus, women filmmakers, were facing the challenge of not just counteracting an ideological image, but of establishing a more multifaceted image that showed women in their complexity, without imposing standardized ways of perceiving femininity and womanhood. The development of cultural theory and the turn towards an interdisciplinary mode of assessing culture, created space for film theory to be less focused only on visual aspects, but to “focus on experience, body and affect”, (ibid.). Conceptualizing a woman's film was now less about the aesthetics and more about a return to politics. As Smelik says: “In this way, feminist film theory returns once again to the revolutionary attitude that started it all in the 1960s, creating space for the multiple becomings of the female character and the female spectator”, (ibid.). Nonetheless, women's presence in the Hollywood industry still remained and stays visibly low

compared to men's. Thus, taking charge of narratives and shifting the general image of the woman created within the industry, while criticising and surfacing anxieties about a system that is still repressive, is imperative for creating a counter movement within Hollywood and working towards a meta-criticism of the industry. This can be done, as I argue, by both men and women, although they might present different life experiences based on their given gender. As I believe, the counter-cinema of today is a cinema that challenges and works towards disrupting sexist narratives. It is not just about dismantling patriarchal thinking that benefits the image of the woman on screen, but it is a criticism on a systemic representation of both genders and how they cooperate towards creating a more concise understanding of the condition of women within patriarchy and how men can contribute towards its destruction.

With this said, it is productive to focus on specific and narrow perspectives of dismantling narratives around the tropes that women can embody. Meaning, that although the stance for keeping on dismantling patriarchal discourses is taken in all film genres, showing interest in criticising specific tropes works best towards understanding their intricacies. Therefore, I chose to focus on exploring the trope of the *nasty woman* and how she is represented as a contestation in the Hollywood ideological space. Her image is something that can add value in the space of a counter movement. It is something that women directors can embrace and portray from a perspective that is lacking in the general discourse, and male directors can explore in an exercise of shifting narratives and taking a step back from a traditionally patriarchal mode of representation. The female perspective that is lacking is discussed by Emerald Fennell, saying "I hadn't seen a female revenge film that isn't basically a man's journey in a dress", (Fennell, 2020)⁹. She mentions the need of an almost defamiliarization of the image of female characters. To quote Fennell:

[...] in movies, it was normal to see men getting girls drunk to sleep with them or girls waking up not knowing what has happened the night before and going on a "walk of shame." [...] I've become much more aware of how it was totally normalized on screen. Boys were completely protected, and the girls were just expected to shut up or laugh it off. (ibid.)

So, based on this, in the next section I will be discussing the conceptualization of the *nasty woman*. I will look at this as a process that can work towards destabilizing normative

⁹ "Emerald Fennell Hadn't Seen a True Female Revenge Film-So She Made 'Promising Young Woman'." *Glamour*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.glamour.com/story/emerald-fennell-promising-young-woman>

behaviours and set a counteractive discourse that can be adopted by men and women directors alike.

Ideologies at play: The male gaze and the conceptualization of the nasty woman

Ideology and film

The concept of ideology can be explained in various ways based on the context that it is used. George Lichtheim states this in 1965 when he mentions the necessity of making clear “what meaning is applied to the term by those who employ it”, (Lichtheim, 1965). Initially, in Marxist theory, ideology was described as the dominance of the ruling class and contained the criticism of hegemonic views that served class interest. This interpretation “assumes that there is a dominant ideology which is the ideology of the ruling class”, (Kellner, 1991). An interpretation, which, according to Douglas Kellner was later considered reductionist as it leaves out the struggles around gender and race. As the term started being applied extensively to analyse political processes intertwined with social and cultural phenomena, the debates around ideology expanded and scholars proposed to look at ideology as a term that can be applied for critiquing systemic structures. Douglas Kellner mentions that based on this understanding of the term, when one is critically assessing ideology, they should take into consideration analysing it not just from the perspective of class theory but looking at the symbols and the iconography of that exact ideology. Mainly, at what reproduces the ideology culturally and not just politically and how it represents certain elements. He asserts that

[...] such an expansion of the concept [...] opens the way to the exploration of how ideology functions within popular culture and everyday life and how images and figures constitute part of the ideological representation of sex, race and class in film and popular culture. (Kellner, 1991)

The expansion of the term, and applying it to media studies, creates possibilities for critically assessing not just dominant ideologies, but products created within that ideology. Media, for example should be looked at as how it fits to reproduce the ideological system. At the same time, the structures/institutions within the system should be assessed from the point of view of how they are perpetuating and reproducing these beliefs. Which is a perspective developed by Louis Althusser. He sees culture production and institutions like the school, the church, the family as structures and mediums that preserve values and perpetuate them systemically¹⁰.

¹⁰ My summary of Althusser’s theory of ideology is based on Mary Klages’ reading of Althusser in the book “Literary theory, a guide for the perplexed,” (2006).

Ideology, in his understanding, is not fixed and it does not represent just one set of values. It is a form that can shift, shape and be recreated repeatedly. However, it operates like a structure. It exists everywhere and it is being internalized by the individual. He says: “Ideology is a `Representation` of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence” (Althusser, 1970). This can be understood as how the individual perceives the *real world*. The same goes for the representations of that world that the individual thinks are correct and closer to their interpretation of reality.

According to Althusser, ideologies are being produced repeatedly by organizations that are automatically ruled by the state or by institutions that appear as if they are independent from it. Based on this, the ruling ideology of a state creates Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) that reproduce that same ideology on all levels. This reproduction is happening, for example, through ISAs responsible for communication (press, radio, and television), and culture (literature, the arts, sports), among many others. However, in a preponderantly capitalist system, production is, most of the time, privatized. In a free market system, the private sector is preferred over state-operated bureaucratic institutions. At the same time, the common belief is that the private sector creates a more democratic climate and healthy competition between various structures. This is something that Louis Althusser believes to be the case only in appearance. However, he believes that the structure of the ISAs is always changing, and it can be threatened by counter-movements. The ISAs are not as fixed in their structure and operation. Thus, if we look at media structures as something that functions within a system that is already established in its operation and ideology, and if we look at their independence as something apparent, we can affirm that media can perpetuate the constructed beliefs of that ideology. And media will create a bridge between the individual and the reality they experience by creating a representation of reality that mirrors the ideology or that is framed to fit that ideology. In other words, the representation of the world disseminated by the media is something that comes from an already internalized set of beliefs by the individuals that produce it. And it continues the cycle of reproducing the same ideology to the consumer. Based on this logic, the reproduction can be done through any type of media. Even if it is not state owned. Which means that it can be adopted by film as well.

This is a point of view examined by Jean Louis-Baudry in his thesis on the Apparatus Theory. He looks at the production of film as a set of actions that need to be taken in order to assemble a final product. These steps involve various manipulations that require different instruments, or apparatuses. The apparatus concept that he proposes holds the idea that cinema

is in its nature ideological because its mechanics are ideological. For example, he states that the process of editing is a process of creating a dream-like environment. That environment is supposed to symbolize truth that is then presented to the spectator. That truth, if we look at it from Louis Althusser's logic, is a representation of reality and it is what shapes the ideology of the film. Thus, the film is ideological in its nature because it creates a reality presented to the viewer. This reality and the way in which it is adopted by the viewer goes through an exercise of identification that the viewer is subjected to in a Lacanian mirror-stage-like process. He says "the 'reality' mimed by the cinema is (thus) first of all that of a 'self'", (Baudry, 1970). He continues with explaining how he sees the identification process that takes place. He is highlighting two levels of identification. In the first one the viewer identifies with the image and in the second, the viewer is in a constant state of re-establishing that identity. He mentions "the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees; this is exactly the function taken over by the camera as a sort of relay," (ibid.). The spectator, thus, receives the images and identifies with them through the movement of the camera and has, in return, a passive role and is more liable to ideological positioning. At the same time, he asks: "is the work made evident, does consumption of the product bring about a 'knowledge effect' (Althusser), or is the work concealed?," (ibid.). He addresses this by saying that if the second part of the question is true, then there is "ideological surplus value," (ibid.) delivered by that medium.

However, Jean Louis-Baudry is specifically focusing on the film theatre and the experience of watching a film at the cinema. He looks at it as a space created to conceal the rest of the reality. This contributes to the identification processes he is describing. In the moments in which the spectators are in the film theatre they are identifying with the reality created by the image and accepts it as truth and as if they are owning that truth. This is happening, according to Jean Louis-Baudry's argument, because of the "relationship between the camera and the subject," (ibid.). This makes cinema, in his understanding, ideological in its nature, if the process of "identification remains possible," (ibid.). Film, he concludes:

[...]is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmaticization, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism (...) the cinema assumes the role played throughout the Western history by various artistic formations, (ibid.).

I am referring to this theory despite its problematic views, as it helps analyze the viewing experience as an emergence into the film experience. And the way in which ideology is being

represented through the cinematic apparatus itself and not just the image I choose to use the term *ideology* as an analogy of a repository that can integrate different meanings and communicate representations of reality that are constructed, kept, and perpetuated by various mediums. In this case – film. At the same time, as I have exemplified that this is not something fixed, I look at ideology as something that can be challenged by counter-movements. Which brings me back to Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory.

What I believe to be important in assessing and using this theory is its positioning against the predominant patriarchal ideology. At the same time, Mulvey’s work has opened the discussion around a female gaze and how women are representing other women on screen. Or what women spectators are experiencing when watching other women or the male central character. The concept analyses sexual politics created within structures that perpetuate a patriarchal ideology which constructs both men and women but privileges and validates heterosexual male desires.

At the same time, the system views both men and women as subjects precisely because people are expected to fit into certain categories and fulfil their given identity within the system. Which brings me to the point of recognizing that when Laura Mulvey discerns that through the male gaze, men are at the centre of the cinematic universe and that women are the bearers of meaning, one should critically assess the condition of the men portrayed by the same ideological ideals. The male and female ideal portrayed in films that perpetuate ideological views are noteworthy in understanding how the counteractive movement might have created not only subversive female characters, but narratives that portray the fears in case of a destabilization of the main ideology. Shaking the structure of this ideology is, in a lot of ways, shaking the formation of the capitalist superstructure and mainly its exploitative tendencies.

One of these exploitative tendencies was, predominantly, in the ‘70s, ‘80s, ‘90s and early 2000s, the exploitation of the image of women on screen. Its oversexualization, to be precise. And as I have observed in the previous subchapter, cinema has adapted to the demands of the system to produce revenue. Thus, the oversexualization of women became important not just for being alluring to the male gaze, but to maintain an industry that creates products which sell worldwide. At the same time, creating characters that subvert traditional views ran the risk of creating products that might not become popular, and not sell immediately. But by the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, a rise of anti-heroes on screen has been prevalent. In 2010 producer Stephen Garret observes that the complexities of the 21st century

politics has created a medium that can frame moral ambiguity and portray it as sympathetic. At the same time, this portrayal makes us question “as to whether the intense media scrutiny of the modern age makes it impossible for anyone to live up to the standards we have traditionally set for heroes,” (Garret, 2010). This traditional image is something, that as many scholars have pointed out, is systemically constructed and, thus, ideological. Perpetuating an image that keeps norms intact contributes to keeping the ideology intact and maintaining the preferred status quo. However, a rise in male anti-hero characters doesn’t mean that they disrupted patriarchal ideologies.

In the logic that a counter-movement cinema is born out of the need of disrupting established narratives or styles, it would be fair to say that the portrayal of male anti-heroes can be looked at as something that might have had a small contribution to the creation female anti-heroes. But I don’t necessarily think this is the case when we are looking at tropes such as the *nasty woman*. Of course, she can be considered a female anti-hero, but it would be wrong to assume that she can be compared in all her aspects to the male anti-hero. Nor that she is always the antagonist of the male image. But that she is an antagonist to the female image created by the male gaze. Thus, she can be looked at as variation of the anti-hero. Which is where I believe we can trace an initial conceptualization of the *nasty woman*. Although Agnieszka Piotrowska mentions that she has coined the term after Donald Trump’s speech and it represents a modern femme fatale, I believe that we can also say that the concept of the *nasty woman* could have been well written as a juxtaposition to the male anti-hero. However, the *nasty woman* compared to the traditional male anti-hero, is specifically fighting patriarchal ideologies and is fighting for dismantling the same ideologies that keep her from reaching her potential. The *nasty woman* is also the woman who speaks out against the abuses she has suffered, masked as seduction. These abuses occur in a patriarchal ideology, one in which a version of masculinity that is reiterated operates on the exploitation of the female image. Agnieszka Piotrowska mentions:

[...] the `#MeToo` campaign and the `nasty woman` phrase are worth holding in one space (...) Laura Dern brings up the issue of abuse and consent, reminding us that there are moments when the consent is but a delusional acquiescence to patriarchal power (...) various contemporary accounts of abuse which at the time might have appeared to have been a seduction, (Piotrowska, 2019)

The archetypal image of the woman who is prey to this ideological seduction is being challenged by the *nasty woman*. This makes her an anti-hero, in my interpretation, because she

is challenging and fighting not just the systemic abuse that the patriarchal ideology perpetuates, but the archetypal image of the *eternal feminine*.

Thus, if the *nasty woman* is a dismantler and a character created to disrupt, I would place her in the category of characters that fight against ideologies that tend to adapt over time. That is if we look at ideology from the perspective of Louis Althusser. And if we bring in the point that Jean Louis-Baudry makes when stating that cinema can create an ideological surplus, this character can be instrumentalized to understand that surplus and bring in other ways of packing ideology. Meaning that the fact that she exists, makes us question why she must exist and what are her primary goals. And with answering these questions, we can understand what the ideological surplus of the films we are watching, is. The analysis of this character is important because it can show, through its antithetic structure what is the predominant ideology in mainstream films and how she creates a meta-criticism in her cinematic universe.

An angry character on a mission: The nasty woman and the female revenge fantasy

In the previous part of this chapter, I have explained my position on using the term *ideology*. This was important as it provided additional information on how I will be creating the bridge between characters and their environment. In this last part of the chapter, I want to discuss a broader interpretation of violent behaviour exhibited by women and the current discourse in the media, specifically the news, when it comes to portraying those women. I believe this will add an interesting layer that may provide a better understanding of how portraying behaviours through an ideological lens perpetuates a flattened image of violence exhibited by women. Including a brief discussion of how media portray female violence in real life may prove that film can act as a medium which holds extra space for presenting a more complex interpretation of these behaviours. And it can create a space for criticizing the standardized interpretation of women's behaviours.

I also want to look at the *nasty woman* through the lens of the female revenge fantasy. I believe her actions can be interpreted as an act of vindication and can provide, in my interpretation, a response of satisfaction. The relief that these characters experience when becoming *nasty* is something that I believe can be interpreted as a liberation from ideological and patriarchal codes that have kept them from sensing their negative emotions. At the same time, I believe that engaging with research that provides information on how female revenge and murder is being portrayed outside of fiction can provide a factual understanding on how

the films I will be looking at in the next chapter, envision the ideological pressures of the characters they created. Concomitantly, the trope of the *nasty woman* is already created based on real life events.

In what follows, I will first discuss two papers which reflect crimes committed by women. This will help me contextualize the ideological representation of real-life women who and the aspects that I have discussed previously.

Media realism and female violence

In 2002, a study on the representation of female violence in the Scandinavian and English media portrayed how the discourse around female criminals is constructed. The study focused on how the women conduct themselves and how their behaviour is represented by the press and in the court of law. Precisely, the research looks at a discourse that is assessing if the women who commit crimes break patriarchal norms of femininity. The authors, Eileen Berrington and Päivi Honkatukia provide a comparative analysis of newspaper articles from England and Finland that focuses on the style of reporting. They focus on “sexuality and gendered relations”, (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002) showing that the representation of female criminals has traces of constructing and judging their characters based on social norms for how females should behave. They note that “sometimes female violence is portrayed as indicative of a breakdown in contemporary society, with women refusing to fulfil traditional female role expectation,” (ibid.). The way in which women present themselves has, according to the article, a real impact. One of the most notable examples is the 1950s case of two women from the United Kingdom, both in their 30s, with no connection to each other, who killed their male partners. Both were put on trial for the same crime, but the way in which they displayed emotions and feminine traits determined different outcomes. One of them was found guilty and received the death penalty, while the other was found not guilty and released. The authors argue that the decision of the court had much to do with how the women employed feminine qualities to their advantage or, conversely, how the lack of what is deemed feminine, was proved to be unfavourable. They state that the woman who was found not guilty has presented herself in court by employing

[...] discourses on approved femininity. She presented herself as technically unskilled, unable to handle guns, irrational and lacking control over her emotions. She acted like a childish, helpless woman who, nevertheless, cared for her children and was a good mother. (ibid.)

Which, in conclusion, according to the scholars, helped save her life and not receiving the death penalty. On the other hand, in the second case they state that the convicted was

[...] a sexually attractive woman whose cool and unemotional conduct did not match an “ultrafeminine” image reminiscent of a film star. Nor did her appearance and behaviour match the norms or expectation of “ordinary” working class women in 1950s England. She did not show any commitment to motherhood and thus was deemed “imoral” Also, because of her assertive conduct, she was perceived as a calculating, ruthless killer who showed neither compassion nor remorse. She was deemed “bad” – and hanged. (ibid.)

The way in which the women acted was assessed as either being in the norm or outside of it. This is something that Felipe Estrada et al. observe in 2019 mentioning, as an example of unproductive discourses, one of the flawed theories written in 1893 by Cesare Lombroso¹¹. He describes women who murder and commit crimes as “primitive and pathological individuals who had failed to develop into moral, feminine women,” (Estrada et al. 2019). This “underdevelopment” can be instrumentalized very easy in assessing the “value” of a woman based on how she employs femininity. And this type of discourse can be popularized as a way of keeping ideology and the status quo intact. In these studies, the media interpretation of a woman who lacks the expected nurturing attributes as her being inherently cruel and violent, is proved to be reductionist. Women who do not portray the feminine attributes expected of them systemically, are portrayed as deviant and unnatural compared to other women. The article mentions “It can be noted (however), that females who commit offences that constitute a more serious breach of gender norms (violent crimes, crimes against children) are (instead) treated more harshly,” (ibid). They also add that according to previous studies, a comparative analysis of how women offenders and men offenders are portrayed shows that crime committed by women is “more often described as being rampant and out-of-control,” (ibid.). They continue with saying that women who commit crimes are rarely assessed as being rational about their behaviour. And if they are rational, then they are considered cold-blooded and mad and a

[...] deviation from traditional feminine norms and expectation (which) helped to place them in situations that led to their suffering and death. The underlying message is clear: young women should remain within patriarchal and familial control to minimize their chance of victimization. (ibid.)

¹¹ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1903) was an Italian physician and psychiatrist whose theories based on biological determinism were influential in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He claimed that criminals could be recognized by their physical traits. In 1892 he published a book on criminal women, *La donna delinquente* based on his theories.

Thus, the exhibition of coldness and detachment from normativity is considered to deserve a harder punishment. This is something that I believe also has to do with the fact that the coverage of crimes committed by women is far less frequent than of those committed by men. At the same time, “[h]omicides committed by women are extremely unusual,” (ibid.), which makes them more sensational and out of the ordinary. However, the study concludes with observing that up to the year 2015, the rationalizing aspect of women’s crimes has seen an increase. Nonetheless, women’s portrayal is still affected by a normative thinking about female behaviour. For example, Eileen Berrington and Päivi Honkatukia state that there seemed to be a lack of consideration in the media that female violence can be political. And even when this was considered, it was presented as a non-conformist type of behaviour “often ridiculed as a means of neutralizing the challenges it poses to dominant, hegemonic patriarchal norms.” (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002).

Women are held accountable based often on gendered expectations. The authors mention that “men who kill heterosexual partners may be perceived as law-breakers, but they have not necessarily broken any ‘masculine taboos,’” (ibid.). Which leads to the same conclusion: even though not universally, the media representation of women who kill is more prone to presenting them as out-of-the-norm. They are more likely to be judged based on their appearance and (non-feminine) behaviour. The image of the woman is, in Eileen Berrington and Päivi Honkatukia’s interpretation, prone to being more sexualized and held accountable to patriarchal sexual politics, than the image of the man. Which brings me to the evident conclusion that this type of representation reproduces patriarchal beliefs and spreads limited interpretations of behaviours. Be they traditionally feminine or masculine. Eileen Berrington and Päivi Honkatukia state: “Through patriarchy, norms, conventions, myths and stereotypes are established, within which issues of violence are worked out.” (ibid.).

The presentation of this behaviour in the media as abnormal for a woman and as a break of the moral code of femininity, creates a sort of realism that continues the set of beliefs locked in the ideological construction of femininity and masculinity. In other words, it sends the signal that women’s violence should be more punishable according to gender and sexuality codes¹². This becomes part of the interpretations of reality and a sort of realism that is presented by the media and reflected by the individual, which in turn reinforces beliefs through the relational

¹² This also goes to say that neither men nor women criminals should be considered good individuals, but men being violent is more acceptable culturally than women.

power it holds. Designating the relational power that media hold to represent reality. John Fiske discusses this in 2003 saying that

[...] the more “realistic” a programme is thought to be, the more trusted, enjoyable – and therefore the more popular – it becomes. [...] realism is a competence of power which produces individual performances in the shape of realistic programmes on television like the police series or the news, (Fiske, 2003)

Fiske continues by saying that the content presented to the viewer is creating a relational understanding of reality. Or to be precise, the individual has a mediated understanding of the reality that he or she is presented with¹³. This reality is not distorted, but it is presented through linguistic interpretations that work as a structure which acts as an “active social process through which the real is *made*,” (ibid.). Which means that if certain words and understandings are employed regularly about a group of people that has an identity already pre-made ideologically, media can work towards naturalizing and keeping intact through discourse, so to speak, “the way in which we apprehend the world out-there,” (ibid.).

That being the case, why is this information important in this thesis context? I believe that briefly touching on the portrayal of female violence in media outside of fiction is notable for observing how ideological perceptions of gender are translated into the fictional world. The confirmation of ideological representation of women outside of fiction has real life impact, and it is important to realize that it exists. The narrative about violent women has to be viewed from a more complex perspective. This is something that I believe the trope of the *nasty woman* can provide. Agnieszka Piotrowska’s construction of this trope makes a violent break from traditional expectations of femininity and transgresses traditional ideological codes. And if we go back again to thinking about ideology and the reproduction of ideology, in this case traditional media can contribute to a continuation of the status quo by interpreting women’s behaviour and holding them accountable based on already established norms. Such media discourse presents them as one-dimensional and thus repeats and reinforces certain pre-established perceptions. The *nasty woman* acts as a multi-dimensional representation of how violent behaviours can be interpreted beyond what is deemed feminine. She is a bad person, but why is she bad?

The characters that I will further discuss have feminine characteristics and know how to employ and instrumentalize them to get the response they need. And thus, their behaviour is

¹³ Which is what Louis Althusser has noted and I have presented previously.

calculated and well thought. Films, contrary to the news, offers a view into the mind of these women. They appear as much more complex than what the news might have portrayed them if they were real women. The *nasty woman* can then be understood as a fantasy extension of the women who have committed crimes in real life.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the trope of the *nasty woman*. I have discussed her through the lens of counter cinema, ideology and representation. In the first subchapter I have presented the case of counter-cinema and how films that show negative aspects of female behaviour can be placed in this category. My main argument was that traditionally, Hollywood has been portraying women as either pleasant and virtuous, or as evil, disobedient and deserving of punishment. I have presented this through a brief introduction of feminist film reading. This helped me establish my position on viewing films that disrupt traditional beliefs as part of a counter-cinema movement. A movement that can take place in the same space that perpetuated, for the most part of its history, traditional beliefs about gender representation within patriarchy. At the same time, I have pointed out that the global expansion of Hollywood perpetuated these ideas on a larger scale. This permitted the export of the image of women and a restriction of that image within the limits of the industry. Thus, noting that mainstream films that show the complexity of disruptive characters and their behaviour, can be considered counter. This works by creating narratives that let the *nasty woman* reach her goals, even if they are not ethical. Which can make her a dual female anti-hero and the films that portray angry female characters that don't follow the traditional path, can be perceived as narratives that continue aspects of counter-cinema.

At the same time, I have presented why I believe the idea of counter-cinema to still be relevant, although in a different form. Which is where the short history of feminist film reading has additionally helped me establish a more contemporary meaning to the term „counter“. Precisely, it has helped me show what are the current debates and what are some aspects that were proved to be reductionist if employed exceedingly. Such as psychoanalysis. Its excessive instrumentalization, as it was presented by Laura Mulvey, can reinforce patriarchal thinking instead of dismantling it. Based on this, I have continued with analysing the concept of ideology, as it is part of my main research question that addresses the cause for the *nasty woman* to become nasty and what is she fighting against.

I have explained how I am operating with the term ideology by using the analogy of a vessel that is filled with meaning that can change. At the same time, I have created a link between ideology and patriarchy, presenting patriarchy as part of the ideological thinking within the culture of capitalism. With this, I have positioned the *nasty woman* as a character that consciously embodies traits that the patriarchal ideology sees as unfeminine.

I have presented the concept of the *nasty woman* through different interpretations as it is important to show the complexity of this trope. Her conceptualization is, in the first place, politically charged. This is something that is confirmed by Agnieszka Piotrowska. This created a reaction and an instrumentalization of the term. This has led me to choose to discuss real-life representations of women who have committed criminal acts and how the image they have presented had implications on the assessment of their behaviour and their reputation. Making a parallel between fiction and reality in this case serves to make the point that reality can be interpreted through fiction and serves as a bridge for creating meaning. I presented film as a tool that can be used to reinforce or break patriarchal ideological thinking.

This brings me to the second chapter of the thesis, in which I will proceed to analyse the films that I have chosen. I will do this by observing the character arc and elements that disrupt the idea of the eternal feminine and create a universe in which the *nasty woman* feels she has a place. Thus, I will be looking at these films to analyse/understand/discuss how they disrupt ideological thinking.

CHAPTER 2

The key notion to bear in mind [...] is that one could argue that cinema as a whole is a metaphor – a metaphor for our contemporary concerns and preoccupations. (Piotrowska, 2019)

Introduction

In 1995 Murray Smith reflects upon the role characters play in establishing how one relates and understands stories. He says: “Characters are central to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of narrative texts. Character structures are perhaps the major way by which narrative texts solicit our assent for particular values, practices and ideologies”, (Smith, 1995). In his interpretation, the way in which the characters are integrated in the narrative is crucial for establishing a dynamic between spectators and the way in which they respond and understand the character. He later reflects on the necessity of creating a system that has “*levels of engagement* with fictional characters”, (ibid.) that he presents as the “*structure of sympathy*”, (ibid.). This framework presents the stages of connecting to the characters and evaluating them structurally. Based on this, in this chapter I will be discussing how characters are understood in terms of constructs. I believe this is an appropriate form to understand the way in which they evolve throughout the story. Murray Smith suggests, “Characters are constructs, (...), but they are constructs formed on the basis of a perceptual and explanatory schema (the person schema) which makes them salient and endows them with certain basic capacities”, (ibid.). The schema incorporates all the attributes that a character might possess, based on the imagination and the assumptions of a reader. To explain – in written narratives the reader imagines the character based on the already given description, but at the same time, they base that character’s image on already pre-existent assumptions. Even if they are not mentioned in a text. He says: “Characters are not disembodied clusters of traits until their physiognomies are described; (...)

The person schema, as an instrument of the imagination, takes us beyond what is stated or implied by the story as surely in literary narrative as it does in the movies”, (ibid.). Murray Smith argues that characters are “the fictional analogue of the human agent”, (ibid.), and can be understood through a schematic foundation. That is “a necessary condition to establish the saliency of character”, (ibid). However, he is also stating that the person schema doesn’t work the same in all cases. As different people have a different collection of cultural attributes, the process of imagining the character and constructing it, may differ. This is the case for film as well. If, for example, in a text the reader is the one who is imagining the character and adds characteristics that are not mentioned but are expected to exist, in film this is already decided for the spectator. Which means that the spectator already sees the fully formed image of the character but relates more through actions. The actions create the character and give it the needed personification¹⁴. The actions “may stand out because they are performed by fictional human agents, who are salient because of the person schema”, (ibid.). Meaning that the structure of the character helps us understand what makes their actions important and what other traits they may possess. This facilitates the interpretation of the already given image based on the narrative choices, which can be understood as “an ‘awareness’ that is addressing an audience”, (ibid.). Thus, in this instance, it is important to address the relationship between spectators and characters through the *structure of sympathy*, as it can reveal the directorial choices for narration, or the ‘awareness’.

According to Murray Smith, the *structure of sympathy* comprises three levels of engaging with characters: *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. All these levels are describing different stages of the narrative structure in accordance with the character’s development. They reveal the way in which the spectator responds to the character. In the first instance, through *recognition*, the spectator constructs and identifies the character, its traits, the way it is presented on screen. In the level of *alignment*, the spectator is placed by the narrative structure in a relational position with the character. Through the character’s actions and due to the story showing the character in more depth, it shows their feelings and beliefs. In this case, the narrative process might be focused on one single character and its subjective view of reality.¹⁵ Or the narrative can focus on a series of characters whose internal world and thoughts and worldview is equally made accessible. Focusing on the inner life and the subjective points of

¹⁵ Which can be shown technically through the usage of a POV shot which Murray Smith mentions in accordance with Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory, stating that this type of shot is a way of creating a voyeuristic experience.

view of the character provides the possibility of empathising, or better understanding the character's actions and responses. Which brings the spectator to the third level – that of *allegiance*. In this instance, the character is already established, and the spectator has already had the possibility of knowing its internal world. Which means that an evaluation of that character is possible. Based on all the knowledge that already exists about the character, the spectator can assess how much they morally “identify” with it. According to Smith's theory, this means understanding logically why the character is acting a certain way. For example, when we are speaking about anti-heroes, one can understand why this negative character has become evil or is acting in a cruel way, without necessarily identifying with the said character. Thus, the spectator goes through different stages through the narrative before fully developing an opinion. With this said, it is important to mention that this chapter is about understanding narratives and the development of characters within certain limits. Spectatorship needs to be addressed as it is linked with the ideas that I have presented in chapter one. Precisely, the Lacanian mirror-stage, the ideological positioning spectators are prone to according to Jean-Louis Baudry, and ideology in terms of a set of ideas that require perpetuation. It is also important to note the position of Murray Smith when it comes to psychoanalysis. He argues that psychoanalysis “has often led to descriptive inaccuracies and explanatory simplifications in the discussion of both the form and rhetoric of films, and the way in which spectators engage with such forms”, (ibid.). His positioning allows me to continue the train of thought I have expressed in the last chapter and refrain from placing psychoanalysis at the forefront of my character analysis. Thus, I will continue by discussing the representation of the *nasty woman* from a binary gendered perspective. Afterwards, I will introduce the films and the plots I will be examining, which will lead me to analysing the four characters I have chosen.

The nasty woman in a gendered universe

As presented in the first chapter of this thesis, the explanation offered by feminist film scholars in the '70s regarding the representation of women on screen, painted a pessimistic picture. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze has shown repeatedly how in most cases women portrayed by men are the bearer of meaning created by a patriarchal ideological environment. The industry's representation of women showed to be advantageous for economic reasons. And keeping the tradition of portraying women who fulfil the ideologically shaped feminine image, secured its perpetuation. Although this position has not been contested in the realm of the concept, what proved to have limitations were the psychoanalyst tools instrumentalized in

feminist film reading. Being used consciously to determine the patriarchal boundaries of female representation, psychoanalysis was later feared to reinforce the same pattern of thinking. In 1981, Laura Mulvey addressed the problem of female spectatorship and their identification with characters. In a revision of her work, she is addressing “the persistent question ‘what about women in the audience?’”, (Mulvey, 1981). This is an important turn, as it goes beyond the lack of agency that was thought audiences have in the film theatre. Which also made clear the fact that reducing the spectator, be it male or female, to a simple subject, meant taking away the autonomy of that person to interpret films on their own terms. In Murray Smith’s understanding, the spectator has the awareness to recognize “the context of representation”, (Smith, 1995). Meaning that he is contesting to some extent the deterministic nature that is “suggesting that the spectator is entirely caught in a hermetically sealed bubble of ideology”, (ibid.). This is important to note as I have mentioned in the first chapter that even though I am looking at what ideology the main female character is fighting through her actions, I will not address the films that I am watching as purely ideological constructs. The discussion about the representation of angry women on screen and the stages of understanding the character’s reasons for their actions plays an important role in diversifying the narrative. At the same time, as Agnieszka Piotrowska mentions, it is important to think about who is “in charge of telling the story”, (Piotrowska, 2019) which is why it’s interesting to observe how the story is being told from a binary gendered perspective, in my case.

As I have positioned myself to look at the universe of the *nasty woman* as something that belongs to counter-cinema, the male and female perspective is noteworthy. The modes of her representation can show the intentionality behind her portrayal. The fact that she lives, or accomplishes her goals and thrives, is a turn that shows how mainstream films have adopted counter narratives. As I have shown in the first chapter, in the early feminist film reading scholarship, the idea of women’s cinema seemed to be a counter movement addressed at the male-dominated Hollywood structures. But as mainstream cinema presents narratives that go against the patriarchal norms of feminine behaviour, and male directors are presenting it from their perspective, I will take a step further and ask: What about men presenting angry women? How do they participate and what fears and ideological anxieties are *they* portraying through angry female characters? The point made by Agnieszka Piotrowska about who is telling the story, is very important. It is also important to take into consideration that whoever has the means, can provide a platform for expression and partake in subverting patriarchal thinking. This includes both men and women. The main question is: how is this platform being used and how is the representation made available?

A representation of *nasty women* is something that can and is being challenged by both genders I am considering in this thesis. Which means that the current film climate offers the option for both men and women to consider different approaches on how they can explore anger through giving agency to the main female character. And to paint another picture – that of power. This positioning is something that is worthy of political exploration. As Agnieszka Piotrowska mentions “an ability to imagine a situation in which a woman is a subject and not an object, and has agency of her own, is still a radical political gesture in contemporary culture”, (ibid.). Thus, if a counter-representation of angry women is what we are striving for in order to break mainstream ideas about docility and femininity, and if this representation is done by male directors who are taking a stance, then they can be considered part of the counter-cinema that looks to reshape representation.

Adding to this, is important to remember, as Agnieszka Piotrowska mentions, that the crucial point for this representation is that “the nasty woman lives and triumphs”, (ibid.). She wins. Which is exciting to take note of in the films I have chosen for this thesis. Out of all four protagonists, three of the female characters reach their goal and triumph. And only one of them dies in Emerald Fennell’s *Promising young woman*. The death of the character is, however, something that is needed in order to signal the disproportionate distribution of systemic power on levels that address gender, social and economic status, discrimination and abuse. Nonetheless, the character still wins in the end on a somewhat hopeful note when the male abusers get arrested for his actions. This goes against the classic Hollywood representation of subversive female characters, such as the *femme fatale*. She has been portrayed most of the time, in a male-dominated industry, as a woman in need of being disciplined. Which would usually happen through punishing her, or through her dying if she fails to become the feminine version which is appropriate for the patriarchal ideology. Thus, it is important to have both male and female directors engaged in constructing narratives that subvert the idea of punishing female anti-heroes.

In this chapter, I will take on a more structured approach of observing the construction of characters. Murray Smith’s approach is important as it considers viewers to be more than just subjects that internalize the material presented on the screen without critically assessing it. At the same time, I am open to consider the fact that men can provide valuable insight and can show solidarity in disrupting narratives. This is something that I believe is worth mentioning as it doesn’t exclude male perspectives, but it puts them in the position of being analysed and compared to female perspectives.

In the next parts of this chapter, I will continue with presenting the films that I have chosen for this project and analysing the narratives, the characters, and their development. I will focus on the female leads of *Ex Machina* (USA 2014, Alex Garland), *Gone Girl* (USA 2014, David Fincher), *The Love Witch* (USA 2016, Anna Biller) and *Promising Young Woman* (USA 2020, Emerald Fennel). My main goal is to address the representation of the characters and see the roots of their anger, how it impacts the characters around them and what are their means of violently addressing the problems they are facing. I will start by discussing *Ex Machina* and *Gone Girl* and then I will move towards *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman*.

*Character analysis. The multifaceted nasty woman: the witch, the wife,
the humanoid and the hunter*

*Ex Machina
(Summary)*

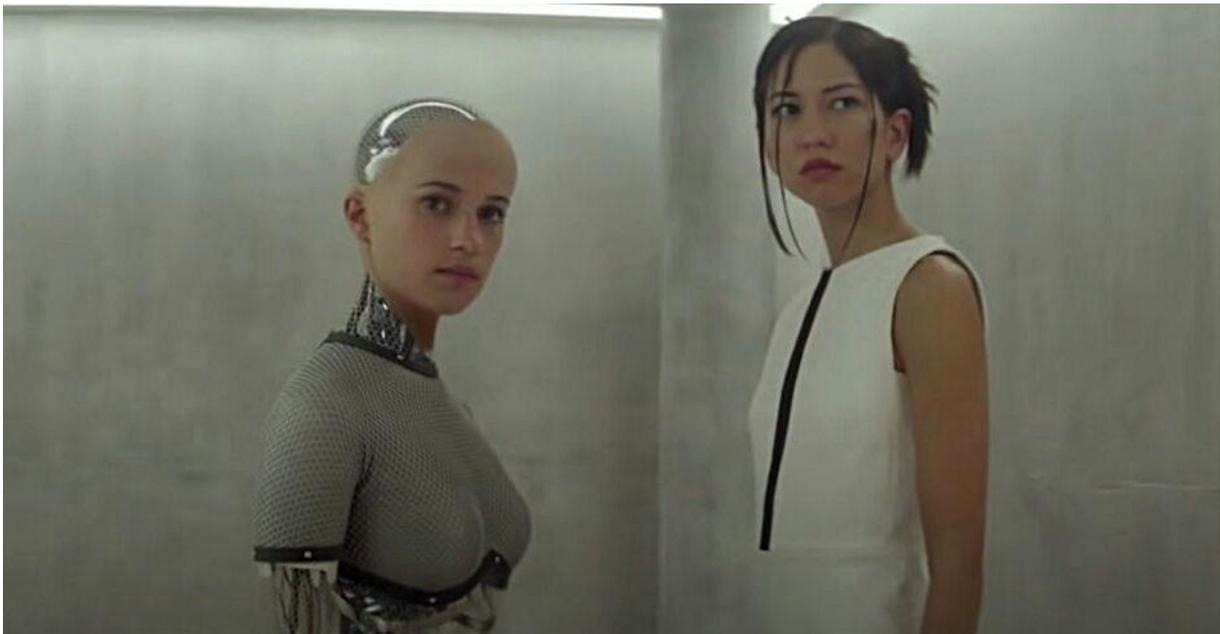


Figure 1 Alicia Vikander as Ava and Sonoya Mizuno as Kyoko in *Ex-machina*. Source: <https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a36516281/ex-machina-ending-explained-ava-evil/>

Alex Garland's first science-fiction film shows Caleb – a coder at a tech company. He is chosen to participate in an experiment that will test his capacity of interacting with artificial intelligence. The young man is taken to an isolated location at the house and research facility of the CEO of the company – Nathan. Soon after arriving, Caleb is informed he will take part in a Turing test with an AI android – Ava. Over seven days, Caleb spends his time talking to Ava and testing her capacity for intelligence. During this time, he gets emotionally attached to

her, making Ava a critical part of the film. Her frequent interactions with Caleb become more and more intimate until she gains his trust. When this happens, the two plan an escape. This will allow Ava to experience the world around her and gain her freedom. In a culmination of events, the plan turns out successful. In her final battle for freedom, together with another AI – Kyoko, she kills Nathan, locks Caleb in the room she was confined to and leaves the premises. Kyoko dies in the end, while Ava leaves.

Becoming the main character. Nathan, Caleb and Ava



Figure 2 Domhnall Gleeson as Caleb and Oscar Isaac as Nathan in Ex-Machina. Source: <https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a36516281/ex-machina-ending-explained-ava-evil/>

Examining the dynamics between Nathan and Caleb is not my goal in this analysis. But a short introduction of their relationships is important for introducing Ava. The film presents the two male figures in a well-established hierarchy. This can be analysed even based on the names that the characters are given. Nathan, a name derived from Hebrew, means *giving*, or can be translated as “*he has given*” or “*he will give*”¹⁶. This clearly signifies the role that he is having in this film, that of the creator – God. Caleb represents loyalty and faith¹⁷. The name, which also derives from Hebrew, presents a character that is open to believe and trust. This is presented within the initial dynamics between the masculine characters. It is slowly being questioned when Caleb loses his faith in Nathan and starts conspiring with Ava. Her name can

¹⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_\(given_name\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_(given_name))

¹⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caleb_\(given_name\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caleb_(given_name))

be seen as a variation of the name Eve and signifies the first woman. Only this time she is artificially created by a human man, instead of God.

Initially, this film is about testing the capacities of a humanoid robot to develop a consciousness. But as the plot becomes more complex, the issue becomes more polarized. Alex Garland is dealing with questions about the ego, surveillance and power dynamics. While the interaction between human and non-human entities shows subtleties of gender issues and forms of control. The film can be interpreted from various perspectives. It can be seen as a reinterpretation of the biblical genesis story. A commentary on the current IT industries, abuse of power and surveillance. The story, however, leaves room for addressing gender, sexuality and abusive power dynamics. This can be analysed through the scope of the *nasty woman*, presented by Ava – the main AI test subject. She asserts her power over two male figures: the God-like creator Nathan, and his employee – Caleb. The three characters are supported by Kyoko – a seemingly passive female humanoid robot. Ava is not introduced until the spectator has encountered Caleb and Nathan. From the first scenes, the viewer is positioned to understand how important and powerful Nathan is. We see this through Caleb's eyes when he takes a helicopter to reach the premises of the test, he was selected to participate in. He sees the vastness of Nathan's land, which signals how much power he has. And thus, it is established that the relationship between these two characters is already imbalanced. This is how the characters are introduced in relation to each other. Nathan and Caleb are clearly in the position of employer and employee. One of them is tested and the other is observing. Nathan's persona and his behaviour towards Caleb, shows that he has already assumed a superior role. He is not just his boss; he is a creator¹⁸. All three characters in the film are encouraged by Nathan to live up to their potential in the test he is conducting. However, he has the power to exclude all of them if they don't comply to his both written and unwritten rules. Nonetheless, the viewer is not encouraged to see Nathan as a figure larger than life. Instead, he is presented as someone whose ego blinds his perspective and creates false narratives about the reality around him. His self-created, legendary persona forms the belief that he can manipulate the agency of everyone involved in the experiment. And not only that, but his ego-driven ambitions make him overstep boundaries and break laws that go beyond the group of people that participate in the experiment. In one scene, he confesses to Caleb that, in order to develop Ava and give her humane characteristics, he used people's private conversations and data from all over the world¹⁹. This

¹⁸ Nathan establishes territorial rules for Caleb giving him access only to certain rooms. This as we will discover later, is done to keep Caleb accessing to more information about the experiment.

evident power Nathan has, shows that he has managed to create a seemingly untouchable position for himself. Caleb, on the other hand, is presented as a naïve, easy to manipulate young man impressed by Nathan, but who appears to be more self-reflective. By the end of the film, he shifts from being fascinated by Nathan's power, to reducing him to his egotistical nature. But he still fails by being seduced by Nathan's creation and by falling into the trap of his own feelings for Ava.

Ava

(Character arc of the nasty woman)

The character of Ava is first introduced through her interaction with Caleb. The robot, who was assigned sexuality and gender by Nathan, is shown first in her “naked” form – an almost see-through body. She is kept at a distance from Caleb, the two being separated by a glass wall²⁰. Although Ava is not fully a woman, Nathan presents her as such. He has given her pronouns, the ability to act upon her desires, and to even have sex, if she wants to. What is interesting to note is that Ava never really refers to the desire to seek sexual pleasure, nor does she seem to be aware of having “*sexual organs*”, which Nathan calls “*an opening between her legs*”. However, she *seems* to be aware of the idea of romance and can interpret Caleb's development of romantic feelings for her. When it comes to Nathan, Ava is not shown to be too attached to him. Although he believes he represents a father figure to her. Instead, she harbours an internalized anger towards him. This helps her manipulate and gain Caleb as an accomplice, ally with Kyoko – another functioning AI that we know of, and escape. Her challenge has to do with seducing Caleb and getting him on her side. The innocence she is using in the beginning is slowly turning into her acknowledging her artificially created sexuality and using it strategically. She acquires this as a new language.

Even though Ava is being kept inside a room and is not given too much freedom to explore the facility, she is given much more autonomy than the other female character. Kyoko doesn't speak and is only there to serve and entertain Nathan, which might be for two reasons. The first is that Kyoko can be an older model that did not reach the full potential that Nathan was expecting. Thus, she is kept as a servant and as entertainment²¹. And the second might be

²⁰ This is important to note, as Ava is kept inside her rooms, while Caleb is put in a glass box when he interacts with her. This gives the impression of Ava having more space and power when they interact, when she only has the illusion of freedom of movement as she is confined to the same room since her creation.

²¹ It is also revealed in one of the scenes that Nathan is keeping other female robots in his cupboard that might have been old models that are now switched off.

that Kyoko was probably designed from the beginning to only fulfil Nathan's sexual and domestic needs. Which means that Nathan has already decided her fate and has established the way in which he makes use of her. Ava, however, is still in the process of receiving a final verdict. We understand how aware she is of her position when she confronts Caleb and asks: "*What will happen to me if I fail your test? Do you think I might be switched off because I don't function as well as I'm supposed to? Do you have people who test you and might switch you off? Why do I?*". As she starts gaining more autonomy regarding her own needs and wants, her survival instincts are more interesting to observe. She evolves into an almost autonomous being even though in the being she was presented as naïve and unaware of her condition. She begins testing the person who was supposed to test her and thus establishes dominance over this male figure. Her decisions seem to be ethically correct from her perspective and well calculated. Her need to survive and escape is presented as a well thought idea that comes after her deepening the bond with Caleb.

One of the most important turning points is when Caleb describes to Ava a thought experiment involving a scientist – Mary, who knows everything about colour but lives in a black and white room²². One day, she leaves the room and sees, for the first time, the colour of the sky. With this story, Caleb implies that Ava has the same fate. That he would like for her to see the outside world, which is very different from the sterile, secluded place she is living in. Nathan's house is away from all form of civilization and has an interior which combines dark colours, glass and earthy elements and leaves no space for her to see other "colours". She is confined in a facility designed to show the extent of Nathan's personality. He is a preoccupied by functionality and productivity unbothered by unnecessary interior design elements. The house lacks colour but is surrounded by green nature – an analogy to Mary's room. Hearing this story, Ava understands that Caleb's emotions for her have grown. This gives her the opportunity to put her escape plan into action and represents her final turn against her creator.

Ava turns visibly into a *nasty woman* when she gets out of her room. She stops listening to Nathan when he orders her to go back inside and has a fight with him. He breaks one of her arms and tries to carry her back. In the meantime, Kyoko waits behind him with a knife in her hand. Nathan takes a few steps back and stabs himself in Kyoko's knife. When the knife is plunged into his back, he turns around, Ava stands up, takes it out and when he turns towards her, she stabs him in the front. The two women overthrow the men who held them captive. The

²² This is a known thought experiment https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_argument

stab in the back shows the turn of both these female robots. Them symbolically killing God, or the rule of men. They attack a toxic patriarchal power that doesn't affect just the female robots. Caleb is the one caught up in the mind games created by Nathan and gets trapped behind a glass door after Nathan's death. The exchange between Ava and Caleb, her getting her freedom and him getting trapped with no escape and no food resources, brings to surface systemic aspects detrimental to men and women alike. Caleb gets used and loses his position and potentially his life. And Nathan is killed, despite his immense power. Even though Kyoko dies, Ava survives and continues her life through her victory over both men. In this dynamic, she started as being the object and ended being the subject through the voice of her reason and her desires²³.

This brings the analysis to Murray Smith's structure of sympathy, which I will use to examine Ava's character arc. Initially she is not presented as the main character. We are much more inclined to understand Nathan or Caleb as the central protagonists. On the level of *recognition*, we see she is a humanoid robot with a female voice, face and shape of her body. But ultimately, we perceive her just as Caleb does – as a one-dimensional system. We start seeing her as being more complex as she is explained to us through Nathan's interpretation and Caleb's perception. What we can understand, as viewers, is that she looks partly human, but has a non-human brain and body. Thus, we see her construction and what she is built to represent. The level of *alignment* occurs, in my interpretation, when Ava starts asking Caleb more questions about himself and realizes the possibility of her own partial mortality if she doesn't pass the test. The viewer still doesn't have access to much information about her, but we don't need to. Ava's intentions are already becoming clearer. It makes perfect sense to see her through the eyes of Caleb and through the surveillance cameras, otherwise the plot of the film would have been less complex and harder to develop. We are placed in relation to Ava from the perspective of her being tested and testing at the same time. On the level of *allegiance*, we are starting to understand how she is intelligently manipulating Caleb and we are rooting for her because of Nathan's cruelty. It is important to note that the scene in which Caleb narrates the story about Mary in the black and white room, is a turning point for the last stage in which the spectator might start rooting for Ava to escape. This also aligns with the character arc that Ava undergoes. She starts as an experiment, an object, and slowly becomes the subject. She

²³ Kyoko, however, stayed the object because she had no real voice in the narrative. Not being able to understand English and to speak the language of the game she was trapped into, she had to die in order to portray the systemic limitations into which she was trapped.

goes through challenges but overcomes them in the end and fulfils her plan²⁴. The nastiness of Ava's character doesn't lie just in her rebellion against her creator. But in her understanding that she has no other choice but to kill the man who has created her and avoid being dependent on another male protector. She turns from victim into a villain when she finally kills Nathan and decides to imprison Caleb. Something she had no real reason to do, as Caleb showed her loyalty²⁵. In the end, Ava builds herself up and puts on artificial skin, a white dress and a wig and completes herself by using what was preserved from the other, earlier female models. This is, perhaps, one of the most symbolic moments in the film. She is the artificially created woman who has conquered her abusive master and who has completed her own creation through the help of other women before her. Thus, she walks outside for all her predecessors. Which begs the question: *is her existence dangerous and will she kill again?*

Even though the film raises many ethical questions about abusing one's creation and the autonomy of AI, the focus on the imbalance of power between male and female characters is very interesting to point out from the perspective of systemic abuse. What I believe the director has made clear through his approach of presenting the two female figures as ready to fight for their existence, is the patriarchal dynamics that are still at play in most areas of women's lives. The representation of Kyoko raises questions not just about her being muted, but about her seemingly initial inability to rise against her abuser, and questions the fetishization of race and stereotypes about women from various ethnic and racial groups. Ava showcases a very young, white, almost innocent looking woman who has more autonomy than Kyoko. Kyoko must die so that her symbolic image fulfils its role of addressing an imbalance of power not just between the male protagonists, but the female characters as well. The power imbalance between the two women has been artificially created and sustained by the discrimination that they both face, so their behaviour can be better examined and adjusted. In the end, they both show that they can surpass that and combine their forces to kill their abuser. Which defines the nastiness they both possess after being subjected to constant mistreatment and careless behaviour from their creator and supposed father figure.

This is a theme that is continued in *Gone Girl*, the film which I will be analysing next. Here, Amy, an unhappy housewife, fakes her own kidnapping and frames her husband for

²⁴ Which can be interpreted as a Lacanian ethical act of giving into one's desires for one's own gain and greater good.

²⁵ However, what I believe is at play here, is Ava's lack of trust in Caleb. Perhaps she believed that he would be able to switch her off and that in a turn of events, the naïve young man would turn into a patriarchal figure that will try and dominate her and decide her fate. Which will make her dependent on a male figure again.

murder to punish him for his cruel attitude towards her and his lack of ambition in their marriage.

Gone Girl
(Summary)



Figure 3 Rosamund Pike as Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*. Source: <https://cinespia.org/event/gone-girl-drive-in/>

David Fincher's *Gone Girl* explores a few themes that influence the course of events in the plot. Media polarization, Dishonesty and Manipulation are the most prevalent ones in the story of Amy and Nick Dunne – a couple of former New York magazine writers. The film starts with Nick and Amy in their 5th year of marriage. On their anniversary, Nick goes to the “Bar” that he owns together with his sister to discuss his unhappy marriage and the resentment he is harbouring towards his wife. He is interrupted by a call from his neighbour who saw his cat outside. When he returns home, he finds traces from a violent scene: broken glass and furniture and a wife that is missing. This is when the search for Amy Dunne begins. Her disappearance becomes very rapidly a matter of wide interest in the media. Amy becomes the subject of news

and Nick starts being portrayed as the prime suspect. In the meantime, Amy is shown to be alive and, on the run, driving towards an unknown location. We find out that she is the one who has meticulously planned her disappearance and went away waiting for Nick to receive his punishment. Her reasoning for this is his unfaithfulness and the neglect he has shown to her throughout their marriage. This she narrates in a monologue while she is driving. When she arrives at her destination, she starts interacting with a couple of young people who first befriend Amy and then rob her. This makes her look for help somewhere else and she decides to meet her ex-boyfriend Desi. She tells him the story of her unhappy marriage with Nick and the abuse she went through and the two decide that it's best for her to stay at his house. Meanwhile, Nick is being more and more antagonized by the media. It is revealed that Nick had a mistress, and the situation gets worse for him when the other woman comes through and when the public finds out that Amy was pregnant. Things unfold when the police find Amy's diary in which she has written about all her fears regarding her husband's behaviour prior to her disappearance. Nick gets arrested and decides to hire a lawyer. This is when Nick tries to turn the media narrative in his favour. While spending time with Desi, Amy sees Nick on TV apologizing for his behaviour, and she decides to return to her husband. To get away from Desi, Amy decides to frame him for abduction and rape and kills him to stage an act of self-defence. She returns home, covered in Desi's blood. She tells the story of her kidnapping, which is warmly received by the media, and ties herself to Nick through her pregnancy. Nick realizes that his wife is a monster and, from what it seems, he has no choice but to stay with Amy.

Gone Girl and female aggression. Previous debates

In a research article on female aggression published in 2018, the authors mention that “[a]ggression is a complex social behaviour that has been extensively studied in men. Comparatively, women's aggression has been neglected”, (Denson et al, 2018). The limited research on the topic of female aggression creates a discrepancy in the way in which it manifests itself, and how angry behaviours exhibited by women are being portrayed in the media. One important question, which needs to be asked when portraying women's violent behaviour is “what causes the aggression and why?”. This is what, in my interpretation, is happening in *Gone Girl*. The character of Amy Dune is discussed by Agnieszka Piotrowska and embodies all the obvious characteristics that the concept of the *nasty woman* implies. The overly dramatic and calculated nature of her actions offer the possibility to rethink female violence and the multidimensional representation anger. The fact that women are portrayed to show aggression

that doesn't correspond to expected gender norms, is what I believe to be an important component for the character of Amy Dune.

As I have mentioned, the representation of violent women should first address the question of *why* the aggression is occurring, and analyse patterns that suggest a clear cause, instead of refraining to the prevalent discourse around women's emotions overtaking their judgement²⁶. Amy Dune re-imagines this narrative and utilizes it to her advantage. The way in which she exploits and makes use of systemically created judgments, turns the situation to her advantage. This is something that I would like to look at as actions that give her back the power that she has lost in her relationship. To explore this, I want to focus on two important aspects: her dynamic with her parents and the relationship she has with Nick. While doing this, it is important to keep in mind that Amy is a character who is suffering of deep psychological issues and that her actions are not ethical. She is a hyperbola or a symbol, at most.

But first, before I explore her character, I want to briefly address the debate that Agnieszka Piotrowska discusses in her book. The film, directed by David Fincher, is based on the novel with the same name, written and adapted for the screen by Gillian Flynn. In 2015, Jacqueline Rose describes the novel as an “unwelcome re-presentation of ‘hatred of women’ [...] presenting women as the unstable carrier of [violence] in society”, (Piotrowska, 2019). She mentions that “apparently the film is even worse, as in even more misogynist, making the novel seem retrospectively almost progressive”, (Rose, 2015). This is something that Agnieszka Piotrowska has a different opinion about. Not only does she believe that Amy Dune is the perfect example of a neo-femme fatale, but she contests the claim that the film, or the novel for that matter, is misogynist. What she believes, instead, is that the strength of both the novel and the film lies in the fact that they “subvert the predictable narrative”, (Piotrowska, 2019). She does acknowledge that the film is much more violent than the novel, which is something she believes is important to keep in mind when analysing Amy. She states about Amy's violent behaviour: “Fincher's film makes it explicit. As a director, Fincher is not known to revel in on-screen violence – even in a film such as *Fight Club*, the title of which seems to suggest that violence is a necessary element of it, violence is often more metaphoric than actual. In *Gone Girl*, he concretises it”, (ibid.). This is an important aspect of Amy. She becomes extremely cruel towards her husband. And the concretization of that violence, as mentioned before, seems

²⁶ As it was noted in the previous chapter when discussing the representation of women aggressors from a journalistic perspective, most of the time they are portrayed as being ruled by their emotions and less by their logic. They are being judged based on their appearance and their abilities for pleasantness and maternity.

to be a logical step in creating a character as symbolic as her. The cruelty is calculated. She is ruled by her logic and takes extreme steps that show her emotions for a situation in which she no longer feels fulfilled.

Thus, from my perspective, the film can be considered an interesting resource to inquire about sources of aggression. What Amy Dune is representing is what I believe to be a violent phantasy. She retaliates and hits back a man whose words and actions, according to her, do not match. At the same time, she is acting against a situation in which she believes that her position is being belittled. She feels she is becoming irrelevant. In real life, Amy's model of aggression and of rejecting the life she is living does not present an ethical or reasonable way of dealing with a partner who breaks several unspoken rules in their relationship. But in a phantasy world it can be thought of as a hyperbolized way of dealing with a complete lack of happiness induced by her husband's neglect. Not just this, but she acts out against the promise of what marrying Nick was supposed to be. In the situation with her husband, Amy Dune is the modern woman as in Betty Friedan's archetype of the housewife who deals with *the problem that has no name*. Amy is presented as an intelligent and ambitious young woman. But then she meets Nick. The couple goes through a recession and must move towards a life with less opportunities. Her initial ambitions are no longer sustained. At the same time, one might argue that those same ambitions might not come intrinsically but might be dictated by her parents. The film shows how the two writers have built a career by creating a character based on their daughter. A character that, as Amy observes, has everything that she doesn't have yet, but is expected to. An improved fictional version that becomes the standard her parents hold her to.

Based on this, I want to explore the relationship Amy has with her parents and look at them as regulators in her life. Secondly, I want to examine her relationship with Nick. From her perspective, during their marriage he became a different person. In her words, he was "*lazy (...) someone I did not agree to marry*". Amy's attitude towards her husband changes drastically through the course of their relationship and marriage. This doesn't happen unexpectedly. The "*cool*" persona she exhibited in the beginning shifts as a reaction to her husband's change in attitude towards her. She becomes the unsatisfied wife who downgraded her life for a husband that ended up cheating on her and neglecting her needs. She is "The 'nasty woman' who becomes nasty after traumatic love experiences, sexual violations and disappointments, and who is driven to madness by men", (Piotrowska, 2019).

The construction of Amy. Her relationship with her parents and Nick

(Character arc)

As presented earlier, Amy slowly understands that the image she was trying to sustain is working against her, no matter what she does. We see her initial state as an already enraged woman on a mission who understands that she is not loved by the man she has devoted her life to. No matter how perfect she or the house looks. She plans her revenge by using all the tools at her disposal: framing him for murder, assault, fabricating a pregnancy and making herself the victim in a story in which she holds all the power. Her victim mode becomes pathological, but, again, she uses it to her advantage by becoming national news. Which is an interesting aspect in Amy's portrayal. We are first introduced to Amy through her husband's perception on her. Which makes me believe that in this film, we have two levels of *recognition* of Amy's character. We first understand that she might be the victim of a kidnapping or a murder. This level is based on her husband's discovery. Thus, we see her role in the story as a potential victim first. Secondly, we see her as the manipulator of the narrative and we understand that she is, in fact, the one who is adjusting the story. Since the narrative of the film is not linear, we go through a few instances of the same levels of *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. Therefore, I believe that when discussing Amy's character, it is important to discuss the relationship she has with her parents. Even though they are not central in the story, her parents are important to address when inquiring about the source of her violence.

As I have mentioned previously, Amy is a composed person, who acts meticulously and strives for perfection. Qualities which one can trace to the persona her parents tried to raise her to be. In one of the initial scenes in the film, we understand that Amy's parents are writers who have made a career based on her childhood. The two have carved out an alter-ego that does everything better, faster, achieves everything she puts her mind to and is even called *Amazing Amy*. This child prodigy can be considered corresponding to a systemic construction, or idea of success. A somewhat improved version that later must develop into something even better. The golden child, in Amy Dune's interpretation, becomes a version of the cool girl that she is trying to simulate for Nick in order to keep him. Being used to seeing what her parent's expectations of her are, in an obvious but passive-aggressive way, Amy carves out for herself another persona that adds up to the alter-ego she is already faced with. She mirrors the woman who "*is game for anything*", and who is bendable enough to accommodate her man's wishes without considering her own.

The initial relationship she has with her parents creates a dependency between her receiving what she wants by becoming who the rest of the world wants her to be. Even though internally she doesn't want to. This is something that she acknowledges and seems like she is finally ready to accept and let go of, after she learns that her husband is having a relationship outside of their marriage. Her parents establish a narrative that Amy seems to try and disengage from. but is still affected by. The phantasy of perfection and need for control seem to drive her actions most of the time, although she acts "cool". What Amy comes to understand is that she can't keep up this perfect persona anymore and protests it in the most perverse way as seen in her final act of revenge.

The representation of her childhood and the influence that *Amazing Amy* has had on her can be assessed in terms of *allegiance* based on Murray Smith's categories of understanding characters. Because the narrative of *Gone Girl* is not linear, this level comes first through the story that we are told by Amy. Even though she is an unreliable narrator, we can understand how the phantasy created by the parents affected her in her adult life. Even her relationship with Nick aligns with a sort of expected perfection. Nick and Amy are both presented as very good looking, accomplished writers. They seem to have a "cool" air about them which they bring into the relationship that seems to be, at times, curated as well. For instance, Nick asks Amy to marry him at a party given by Amy's parents to celebrate *Amazing Amy's* engagement. This semi-public marriage proposal is an interesting turning point in their relationship. Nick is aware of Amy's attitude towards her alter-ego. From a critical point of view, it might seem like the proposal, although genuine, has the intention to help her keep up with *Amazing Amy*. The idea of perfection is being perpetuated throughout their relationship.

We can see this even in small details in the film's visual and décor choices. It seems like nothing is misplaced in the spaces that Amy and Nick inhabit. At the same time, the way they dress seems to be flawless and very well arranged except when they both lose their jobs due to the recession. In one scene Nick is presented less put together, sitting on a couch with packages left from take-away all around him. In parallel, Amy starts showing more of her dark side and starts antagonizing Nick about his purchases and loses her "cool" persona.

This is followed by them moving to live outside of the city. Amy must adapt again to a situation outside of her control and to a move that she wasn't consulted on. We find out that Nick hasn't asked her if she would want to move. This is when we enter the stage when we understand how Amy's fury was slowly built by all these events. And perhaps this is when Amy

starts writing her diary, which is of importance in the level of *alignment*. The diary presents a valuable resource to understand Amy's psyche. It is made clear in the film that she lied about Nick's violence, but this is when the viewer understands Amy's intents. However, because we already know how Amy was influenced by her parents and her need for perfection, it is easy to understand why she would lie like this. Agnieszka Piotrowska explains:

[...] However unreliable this narrator is, some elements are repeated in the second account: if we are to believe anything of the novel and the storytelling, we must believe that Amy did try to change for Nick. She did try very hard to become the impossible 'cool girl' for him and it is he who betrayed her and that project. (Piotrowska, 2019)

From a representational perspective, seeing Amy become completely selfish and absorbed by her needs, is not something that I would deem out of the ordinary for a character that is created to symbolize exaggerated behaviours. After all, Amy is representing the revenge fantasy for women who have been betrayed by the idealistic image of modern marriage, and, in some sense, by the image that post-sexual revolution feminism, and the idea that post-feminism was supposed to embody. Instead of being liberated by her society, she is made accountable for keeping up an image of perfection and giving in to male desires that undermine her needs and wants. She feels compelled to become something she is not, despite her position. This is very well painted by the famous "*cool girl*" monologue in which Amy describes all the ways in which she has tried to become the ultimate phantasy for her husband. Which still wasn't enough to keep him from cheating. One might argue that her behaviour is manipulative, but, in my interpretation, her monologue discloses an interesting counter-effect of a revolution that gives women sexual and relational freedoms that they haven't had before.

Again, we enter another phase of the level of *allegiance*. We can analyse her character once again and look at her as the empowered, educated woman who is free to do what she wants, but for some reason she still finds herself becoming someone who she is not. The imbalance of power that she is experiencing seems to not benefit her at all. Although she is free to walk away from her marriage and find happiness somewhere else, something bounds her to lose herself and become the impossible "*cool girl*" – a product of the patriarchy created to satisfy men's desires. She acknowledges that her real needs and wants are too much for an environment in which women are expected to be "*cool*." This creates so much internal pressure for her and makes her understand how disadvantaged she is compared to her husband. In her words, he can find a "*newer, bouncier cool girl*" who is young enough to still want to carve a carefree persona for Nick. She is still the woman who is a "*bitch*," because of her high standards

and of her demands to her husband. The “*cool girl*” turns into a *nasty woman* when she understands that even all these efforts are not going to grant her wishes. The illusion of her liberation by becoming who she thinks Nick is going to love, come to prove her otherwise. “She is an impossible patriarchal fantasy pretending to be a post-feminist success,” (ibid.).

Amy becomes disappointed with her marriage and her husband and, in order to resolve the situation and create a balance, she decides to seek revenge. First by orchestrating a situation that attracts a lot of attention, and second, by using the idea of marriage, family, and unity, to reach her goals as a *nasty woman*. She utilizes traditionalist narratives in her favour so she can punish the man that denied her of her fantasy. What is important to mention is that Amy’s actions are not, in any way justifiable. However, for symbolic purposes, it seems like her character presents almost cathartic qualities. She decided to become her authentic self, even if this would mean her self-destruction. In many ways, Amy was very successful, academically and professionally, although, in the eyes of her own overachieving tendencies, she could do better and more. The perfectionism she is striving for was prompted by her parents and by the society she was part of. Which drives her to extreme violence and manipulation techniques. And what is the most important is that she is very aware of how her actions are harming her husband. Throughout the course of the film Amy rarely shifts from her stoic and composed nature. Even in the most shockingly violent scenes everything is thought out and planned in detail. She is a composed woman on a mission. She is the drive for revenge fantasies for other women who have found themselves denied of their needs and have become secondary in their married lives. And she is the perfect villain for the role. As Agnieszka Piotrowska points out, “The representation of such a fantasy is still only possible through female characters who have deep psychological issues. Amy is an ultra-intelligent but damaged child prodigy turned psychopath,” (Piotrowska, 2019).

Amy’s character presents a good opportunity for thinking about systemic constraints that work towards creating images to which women should correspond. She has clearly progressed from a young girl who was confronted with an image of perfection that was hard to attain, to a woman who becomes enraged and cruel. We can see her enacting this image through how she speaks, the grave tone of her voice, the way in which she always appears to be flawlessly dressed and her overall very well-groomed exterior. This is combined with the way in which her house is decorated. The space looks very well planned with what seems to be great attention to detail. The pastel and beige tones in the house, the perfectly made bed, the clean and well-organized office give an impression of a staged or of an almost artificial space. As if

no one is living there. Amy's long blonde hair changes when she is on the run, and she becomes a different visual version of herself. She dyes her hair a darker colour, wears loose clothes and glasses to distort her image. She changes her appearance after she starts gaining her power back. She cuts her hair shorter, dyes it blonder and wears the clothes that her ex-boyfriend²⁷ chose for her which are supposed to represent the old Amy. The cool and beautiful woman.

Amy recognizes that her privileges of being a white, middle class, beautiful woman, can be weaponized for ensuring that she gets sympathy and has the support of the public. At the same time, she also knows that her husband will be less advantaged than her, because he is the man in this context. Nick becomes the patriarchal symbol that Amy decides to rebel against and punish by taking away what he cherishes most: his freedom. By doing this, she makes the ultimate statement: she has sacrificed her entire life and persona for him, without him acknowledging it, and now it's his turn to sacrifice his happiness, his love affair, and his own will for her. This time she will not ask. The progression from wanting to please to fighting for her agency to demand to be pleased, shows Amy's "growth." She overcomes all the obstacles that come in her way and succeeds perfectly to become a *nasty woman*. Amy recognizes her strengths and embraces her nastiness, which, in return, liberates her. The guy that first wanted to "save Amy," gets caught in his own unfaithfulness and unwillingness to conform. This is something that is supported by the media coverage that the story gets in the film. The journalists who are interviewing Nick, writing about the case, and investigating it on TV, make sure to put Nick in a disadvantageous position and portray Amy as the woman who fell prey to violence and to the male ego that Nick is exhibiting. The way in which the press empathizes with Amy shows the turn in the narrative that she strived for. The invisible woman who was neglected by her husband now becomes the most loved and cared for person, who is supported and rooted for.

This is how Gillian Flynn and David Fincher both work on creating the almost perfect female villain. As Amy narrates her dissatisfaction, spectators might find themselves rooting for her. The unethical character becomes easy to understand and the subversion of the narrative

²⁷ Desi is Amy's high school boyfriend, who, according to her, attempted suicide after their breakup. He is presented as still being in love with her at the time of the events. He tries to manipulate her into staying with him when she turns to him for help. He buys her clothes and hair dye and convinces her to change her appearance into what he finds to be more suitable for her. As much as Desi wants to help Amy, he is presented as a selfish character whose intentions is to keep Amy close to him and away from her husband. The decision to kill him comes after Amy sees Nick on TV publicly apologizing to her. After this, she decides to frame him for her abduction and possible rape and kills him as an act of self-defense and as an alibi for her side of the story.

creates an almost cathartic twist that signals an overthrow of power and a release of tension that was very much anticipated.

The Love Witch
(Summary)



Figure 4 Samantha Robinson as Elaine and Gian Keys as Griff, the detective. Source: <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/374052-the-love-witch/images/backdrops>

After her husband's death, Elaine, a beautiful young witch, moves to a small town in the hopes of finding her true love. For her, this means finding a man who will love her as much as she will love him. In her new small apartment decorated in a gothic Victorian style, she makes spells and love potions that she sells to a local shop. And when she is out, she is preoccupied with seducing men. Her spells seem to work too well and the men she encounters fall in love with her with an exaggerated desperation that brings them to their death. Her strong interest in

wicca dictates the trajectory of the relationship she has with men. Strongly believing that she can cast spells on all the men she is interested in, she becomes obsessed with the idea of seducing her partners through using potions and embodying the sort of female ideal that she thinks all men are looking for. Elaine ends up leaving a trail of dead men until a police officer comes to her door to investigate the death of a college professor that Elaine has killed. She recognizes him as her true love and the two end up having a short-lived love-affair. Soon after, the police officer realizes that Elaine has killed the professor and accuses her of murder. The final interaction between the two ends up in another killing, this time Elaine stabbing the police officer.

The witch, womanhood, her obsession with love, myths, and fairy tales

The Love Witch, a film directed, written, edited, and produced by Anna Biller, was released in 2016, a few days after the presidential elections in the United States. The film evokes a nostalgic and almost otherworldly sentiment of a visual fairy tale. Filmed in the 1960's Technicolor style, the story is set in contemporary times, although the set design and the choice of wardrobe seem to be conflicting with this idea. For the most part of the film, it seems like the action is taking place in the past, until one of the characters, Trish, takes a smartphone out of her purse. This brings a brief confusion but sets the action in contemporary times. The confusion about when the action takes place, happens mostly because of the visual effects of the film. Perhaps the viewer is encouraged to focus more on the aesthetics and evoked sentiments than on the exact time and place of what is happening. The plot of the film is not linear, and it doesn't have a clear structure. This creates a fogginess of some sort, which goes hand in hand with the chosen aesthetics. The intention behind the visual style and the way in which the film is shot, draws (some) inspiration from Alfred Hitchcock's films. In a 2021 interview²⁸, Anna Biller mentions:

[...] Most of his films are just absolutely incredibly genius. (...) I was very much inspired by *The Birds* and *Psycho* (...) somebody on Twitter did this thing where they compared side-by-side shots from the beginning of the film that were almost identical shots between *The Love Witch* and *Psycho*, which I didn't consciously do, but they're definitely there. (...) Then also *Vertigo* and *Marnie* – so, those Technicolor Hitchcock films from the '60s. (Biller, 2021)

Aesthetics are very important in the film. The theatrical elements of the actors' play and of the set all look to be staged in a very meticulous matter. Nothing seems out of place even if it may

²⁸ <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/the-love-witch-anna-biller-inspiration-interview>

look, at times, excessive in décor or colours. The action itself blends with the set design in a way that emphasizes the importance of the carefully picked items for the visual aspect of the film. This makes the film narrative, in my opinion, stand out as almost emulating the main character's inner world and personality: imaginative, chaotic, subversive and creatively charged. The resemblance to Technicolor films is, in my interpretation, deliberately created to emphasize the richness of the set design that show the fulness of a décor imagined and created solely for an ultra-feminine, femme fatale, *nasty woman* character. The emphasis on femininity is very clear in the film. It combines aspects of the idea of the fragile feminine ideal, with violence that doesn't disrupt the features that Anna Biller wanted to incorporate in the character she has created. The visual style is very important in understanding Elaine and her goals. The set is created to look at times like a bygone era combining fairy tale and psychedelic elements. Elaine is placed very well in a visual space that shows all aspects of her personality. She is living a fairy tale transposed into the modern era that still holds aspects that can be considered old fashioned and outdated. She will do anything and will use everything in her power to create the image of the ultimate phantasy for the men she is seducing. Thus, her feminine allure, her wardrobe and makeup become a narrative device that suggest an almost self-exploitation of this side of Elaine. However, her persona seems to clash with the masculine archetypes she encounters. This exploration of the dark feminine side prompted Anna Biller to create a film which provides a commentary on the gendered differences between men's and women's experiences with the world and with love. She states in an interview:²⁹

[...] I really wanted this film to be about women's lives — in general, young women have a lot in common with each other that they can't have in common with men. Call me essentialist, but there are things that only women share. And you don't see that in movies anymore. (Biller, 2016)

At the same time in an interview for the Guardian³⁰, she reflects on the timing of the release of the film. Which coincided with the election of Donald Trump as the United States president. She says:

[...] It came out right on time (...) as soon as the election happened, the reviews became very different from what they had been before. They talked about the character and her situation as if it were now something current and relevant, which they hadn't done before. Then they started calling her, 'The Love Witch #nastywoman,' you know, grab-her-by-the-pussy jokes. People became more conscious that this movie's ideas were relevant now, rather than seeing it as

²⁹ https://filmmakermagazine.com/98928-im-actually-trying-create-a-film-for-women-anna-biller-on-the-love-witch/#.YhdOOd_0mM8

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography>

some fun little retro thing. And those scenes towards the end, at the bar, with the near-rape and the crowds shouting: 'Burn the witch!' – that all feels pretty Trumpian all of a sudden. (Biller, 2017)

The interpretation of the film during and after the Trump era challenges the idea of women who break the rules and asks for an exaggeration of portrayals that puts the main female character in the leading role, dangerously pursuing her intentions. Portraying a violent witch who seduces with her appearance and makes use of her sexuality without remorse, can be interpreted as a disruptive act that purposely reinforces old beliefs. In Anna Biller's film, the main character is a woman who embodies all seemingly archaic feminine ideals. She is beautiful, looking for a man to care for, wants to create a perfect environment for her and her future partner and resorts to sex to keep men interested in her. She uses her body like a canvas, blending in with the décor and simultaneously trying to set herself apart from other women by giving men what they want and exhibiting behaviours that might signal that she is unsubscribing from feminist politics. And just as Amy Dunne, Elaine seems to be a perfectionist in the way in which she presents herself. The choice of wardrobe and décor³¹ play perhaps the most important role in this film. This is made very clear in one of the scenes when Elaine is undressing herself in front of the first man we see her killing – the college professor. Her clothes are black but have a rainbow lining which seem to have a blinding effect on the man whenever he looks at it. Experiencing this, he remarks that she has two sides: the dark and almost stoic one that she shows to the world and the wild side that she shows otherwise. Her clothing blends with the Victorian style and the 60's interior decoration choices and the overly saturated colours on screen. These choices emphasize even more her fairy tale beliefs and the magic of Elaine's world.

The film shows how conscious it is of its own visual effect because of the rich and diverse colours and costumes. Elaine knows how to work the visuals of her world to her advantage and how to blend with the styles. Aware of how attractive she is, she learns to accentuate her features even more in all the situations she is in so she can become more appealing. And she is always in touch with her dark side which provides her with the necessary negative qualities to help her take over and attack in case she doesn't get what she wants. She is showing that if provoked, she will embrace what is deemed to be dark in her and utilize it to her own advantage. In a way, the power she recognizes she has is not used in the service of patriarchal conventions and desires but to distort them and mirror them back at a medium that is afraid of her dark powers. Thus, Anna Biller's film is focused on expressing sexuality and

³¹ That Anna Biller created herself. The director designed the clothes and all the important aspects on set, participating in the design of the spell book and other accessories that define Elaine's character.

addressing mysticism, spirituality and using femininity in “*an actual witchy powerful way*,” (Billier, 2021). Based on this, in my interpretation of *The Love Witch*, I want to focus on three aspects of Elaine’s character. Her being a witch, her femininity, and her focus on finding the perfect partner she can reshape herself for. I will start by briefly introducing Elaine and then I will comment on her actions and discuss her character arc and evolution.

Elaine – the woman in the search for ultimate love

(Character arc)

We are entering the level of *recognition* as soon as we meet Elaine in the first scene of the film. We know from the start that the story is going to be about her. Her opening scene monologue while she is driving her car, tells us briefly of her wish to start a new life. And through her flashbacks we are introduced to her husband’s death, her initiation as a witch, her abusive past. The theatrics of the single shot at eye level that is used in this introductory scene signals even more that she is going to be the main character of the film.

We interact with the rest of the characters through Elaine. She first meets the police officer who will become important later in the story. Then she meets Trish, the decorator of the house she will be renting. And soon after, we see the men she interacts with, and the rest of the witches. We find out more about Elaine and her system of beliefs as soon as she interacts with the rest of the characters. In one scene at the Victorian tearoom, Elaine affirms to Trish that being in a space decorated like this resembles being a princess in a fairy tale. She mentions that all women have a little girl inside who dreams about “*being carried off by a prince on a white horse*”³². In order to live this phantasy, Elaine confesses to Trish that she has studied parapsychology to understand men better. She states that she wishes she had known this before her ex-husband left her. But continues saying that him leaving helped her become who she is now. She reveals that the day he left her, was the day she died, “*but then I was reborn as a witch*,” she adds.

This discussion takes us into a deeper level of *alignment* with the character. We understand Elaine’s passion for Victoriana and gothic spaces, which are important to her identity. Additionally, we understand her inner beliefs about sexuality and gender roles. We find that one of her fundamental beliefs is that men want “*Just a pretty woman to love and to*

³² The image of the prince is very important to the evolution of Elaine’s actions. As she is on a quest to find the perfect man who will adore her, she does briefly live her phantasy when she meets for the second time the officer who stopped her. Briefly, he plays the role of the prince and even rides together with her on white horses.

take care of them and to make them feel like a man and to give them total freedom in whatever they wanna do or be.” Trish makes a contrasting comment when she points out that she sounds as if she has been brainwashed by the patriarchy. Thus, we are inclined to look at Elaine less from her subjective point of view and more from a dual perspective. This allows us to understand how she might have come to believe this.

It is made clear that Elaine is a psychopath. We learn this from her spell work and her desperate attempts to make men fall in love without their real consent. The way in which the spells work, making men overly emotional, creates a response of disgust in Elaine. Which brings us to the level of *allegiance* This is important to observe as we circle back to her theories about men and tapping into their masculinity with her extremely feminine but overly dominant persona. As soon as Elaine gets the men she wants, which happens a few times in the film, she becomes disinterested in them when they start showing feelings and uncontrollable emotions towards her. This is when we realize that her seemingly outdated views on gender roles and female submission turn out to be just a tool for getting what she wants. Her disapproval of men who become too weak, reinforce some of the contradictory beliefs that she holds. She seems to be a feminist who is preoccupied with her own gain, but who, at the same time, subscribes to outdated views that only seem to benefit men. The contradiction she portrays creates a confusion around what can be considered feminist behaviour in her case. In all her conquests throughout the film, she subjects men to her powerful gaze and puts spells on them, so they fall prey to her physical charms. This gives her control over her own sexuality and image³³. However, she has a complicated history with her own sexuality and abuse.

We find out throughout the story that her father and her ex-husband, both contributed to creating a dynamic of self-hatred, which reinforces the level of *allegiance*. She battles a fragmentation of her wish to find a man to love her and her disgust with men who turn out to be too consumed by their love for her. The death of her lovers proves to restore the balance she is used to. However, the balance is disrupted when she meets the police officer who investigates the disappearance of the college professor and who suspects Elaine of murder. For a short period of time, the officer falls for Elaine. They even have a mock wedding at a medieval festival they both attend by chance while riding horses in a forest³⁴. During the scene of the wedding, it becomes clear to the viewer that the police officer is more amused by Elaine and spending time

³³ something that she realizes has been taken away from her.

³⁴ This scene briefly fulfils Elaine’s phantasy. She is with the man of her dreams. A man that she saw in her cards a while ago. And they are riding horses together. In a certain sense, she has found her prince on a white horse that she will marry in the next scene during the mock wedding.

with her than he is in love with her³⁵. This reinforces the belief that Elaine's quest is ultimately doomed to fail and that she is trapped in her own phantasy. Because we already know Elaine's past and how she acts around the men who are not willing or are unable to love her in the way she wants to, it is easy to anticipate that this will be yet another failure. At the same time, this scene establishes the level of *allegiance* that lets us feel even more Elaine's pain with her failed quests. In the end, when she realizes that the police officer doesn't love her, Elaine stabs him in her own apartment.

Killing the object of her love is a powerful symbol of Elaine's fear to face her actions. She does win in the film, but not in the way she wants to. Her winning, which means that she does not get to be sent to jail by the man she loves, but destroys him in the end, doesn't mean she is happy. This stems from her previous experience with abuse which might have made Elaine into the psychopath she is today. Of course, her actions are not in any way justifiable, but they give her a lot of control over what she lets men see about her. It can also be read as a liberation that she seeks from the man who could kill her instead. Elaine struggles with her desires because she holds herself to the gendered expectations of her society. She is free and sexually liberated, but she is embodying several characteristics that keep her from liberating the toxicity she has witnessed and internalized. At best, Elaine became what her society wanted her to be, while she is punishing obsessively and with delusion an archetype of a man³⁶.

The case of Elaine, however, is interesting to me not because she is looking to regain her lost power through her violent behaviour towards men, but because she makes use of the

³⁵ Which is when Anna Biller's approach emphasizes the gender differences, she is set out to explore and portray. Elaine is clearly more in love with the officer than he is with her. Yet, the officer feels constrained. Their different internal monologues during the mock wedding show how different the two are when they think about love. The officer's and Elaine's inner dialogues differ from two perspectives. In the male monologue, the officer acknowledges that for him love is soft, and it would mean he has too much to lose in his career if he fell in love. He clearly states that he is not in love, revealing that truly knowing a woman is, for him, the ultimate destroyer of love and admiration for her. Knowing her flaws and her persona makes it harder for him to care. He says "*Feminine ideal only exists in a man's mind. No woman could ever fulfill it. And sometimes, when she tries to love you more, give you more, you feel like you are suffocating, drowning in estrogen. The most awful feeling.*" For Elaine, on the other hand, the situation is different. The details that should render her object of desire to be less desirable, amplify her love and his imperfections create a picture which contribute to complete love and devotion. In her case, knowing a man better, means loving him more. She says: "*Something inside you opens up like a flower and you realize that you have more love to give than you ever thought was possible.*"

³⁶ The abuse that Elaine has witnessed from the men in her life, including the priest who has contributed to her initiation as a witch and who has constantly encouraged her to make use of her feminine attributes, shows the image of a victim turned abuser who is on a quest of regaining herself. In one of the scenes, after she is being accused of murder by the officer turned lover she says "*All my life I've been tossed in the garbage except when men wanted to use my body. So, I decided to find my own power. And I found that power through witchcraft. That means that I take what I need from men and not the other way around.*" The clear demarcation that she makes here for her need to control love and the men around her and the signals of her past abuse, create a pathway for a psychoanalytical perspective of her persona and her turn to wicca.

attributes she sees as desirable for men as a means to survive and triumph in a male dominated world. Being “*brainwashed by the patriarchy*,” as Trish observes, is what adds to the discussion of turning the narrative towards her selfish desires³⁷. Elaine knows all too well what she is doing, although she has moments of delusion. While her motives might seem pure, they are driven by her own agenda for filling in the loveless gap that her father and ex-husband left in her with all their criticisms.

The differences that Anna Biller is exploring in the film, portray a very different story that men and women grow up to believe about love. This can be seen even in the first minutes of the film in the scene at the Victorian tearoom. The space filled with just women dressed elegantly in pastel costumes that work with the Victorian décor, speaks of that phantasy of feeling like a princess who is looking for a man on his white horse. This acquired phantasy doesn't mean that it makes the main character less feminist. Or that it makes the women who still look for that, people who don't believe in gender equality or are not striving for it. It shows the disconnection between the story of love that some women grow up with and their rough awakening to a reality that clearly shows that the men they fall in love with are not looking for the same thing. In the end, the self-objectification becomes a mode of expression that is owned by the woman and creates a means of achieving freedom. This is broken in the moment in which Elaine kills. As Annette LePique mentions in her essay on the film

[...] Elaine's killing of her cold-hearted lover, then, is a grim and bloody birth. This analogy makes sense – the murder marks the moment Elaine ceases to be an object of desire and becomes an active, desiring subject with no need for subterfuge or dishonesty. (LePique, 2018)

Thinking of Elaine as a victim turned aggressor can be one way to look at the film. She certainly is looking for a lot of ways to regain her power. Ways which have been condemned throughout history and criticized in modern day interpretation of feminist agendas. First being a witch, second being what can be read as anti-feminist, then becoming a woman who leads with her sexuality and then combining all those aspects. This leads her to be on an irrational quest for love which can be easily looked at as a woman giving her up her power completely. She breaks the circle of contradictions in which she finds herself by finally killing the man she loves not through a love potion or a spell, but by stabbing him and making a clear demarcation between her past persona and her new image of a woman who is no longer a victim. Thus, in my reading of the film, Elaine starts from a mentality which keeps her stuck in victim mode and makes her

³⁷ Just as Amy does in *Gone Girl*.

some sort of slave to love and to the men around her by believing that she can use the tools she has at her disposal to manipulate men into loving her. However, when she finds out that her obsessive behaviours don't work and they counteract her cause, she takes matters into her own hands, by literally holding a dagger, and she kills her own projections by killing the object of her love.

Promising Young Woman

(Summary)



Figure 5 Carey Mulligan as Cassie in *Promising Young Woman*. Source: <https://www.roughcutcinema.com/post/promising-young-woman-a-bold-smart-and-stylish-debut>

Cassie is a young woman who leads a double life. During the day she works as a barista at a coffee shop and in the evenings, she goes to bars and clubs and hunts “nice guys”. She does this by pretending to be drunk and waiting for the first man to approach her and help her get home safely. This ends up in them bringing her to their house where they try to take advantage of her state and sexually assault her. When she finds herself alone in their company, she stops acting

drunk and puts them face to face with their actions showing them that they are not as “good” as they think they are. Later we understand that her best friend’s suicide might have something to do with her current behaviour. When both girls were in medical school, Cassie’s friend – Nina, was sexually assaulted. This led to both girls dropping out and ended in Nina’s death. This prompted Cassie to seek revenge and to become a social warrior on a quest to punish predatory behaviour, which gets incidentally fuelled one day by Cassie’s interaction with a former colleague, Ryan. He walks into the coffee shop where Cassie is working, the two start a conversation and Ryan ends up asking Cassie out on a date. The two start a relationship soon after. Meanwhile, Cassie is still on the hunt and looking to punish Nina’s aggressor – Al. She meets another former colleague, Madison, who tells Cassie that Al is getting married, which creates an even angrier response in Cassie and makes her even more determined to seek revenge. She faces her former dean and confronts her about brushing the case under the carpet and even meets the lawyer who worked on Al’s case. At the same time, her relationship with Ryan gets abruptly interrupted after Madison hands Cassie a phone with a video from the night Nina was assaulted. In the video, Cassie sees Ryan, who was in the room when it all happened. She confronts him about it and manages to ask him where the location of Al’s bachelor party is. She decides to go to the party with a plan in mind to confront Al and make him pay for what he did to Nina. Dressed as a striptease dancer, she gets in the house and manages to isolate Al from the party and tries to become aggressive with him. The fight between the two ends in Cassie’s death. The next day, Al, together with another friend, burn the body and proceed to Al’s wedding. At the wedding, the police show up and arrest Al for Cassie’s murder. We find out that together with the lawyer, Cassie has prepared for an eventual death and tipped the police in case this would happen.

Choices in casting and re-envisioning the Rape-revenge genre

In her 2003 research, Belinda Morrissey investigated how the legal system establishes an understanding of female violence and its modes of expression. Meaning, what is considered a “normal” expression of negative emotions and violence for a woman, from an institutionalized point of view. In the introduction of her research, she makes the case for normalizing the understanding of anger and violence as being a way to humanize female behaviour. She presents it as something that women might be able to just do, without being systemically and culturally viewed as victims of their circumstances. Or as individuals who fell under the trap of their own emotions. She also establishes the fact that women’s violence is often rationalized in a way in which men’s is not. Mentioning that in most cases, women who present feelings of anger or

who act violently are either judged as lacking some human element to their personalities. This makes the call for the right of women to express aggressive emotions without them being linked to traumatic events or lack of empathy. Moreover, in the case of extreme violence, she makes the case for considering these (unacceptable) actions as something that can come from the agency of the woman. She says:

[...] If a woman kills her male partner, for example, and can demonstrate his extreme abuse of her, then she might win the right not to be viewed as an active participant in defence of her self, but as her partner's victim (...) the battered woman is immediately cast as not having acted at all. She effectively loses the very agency and self-determination she tried so hard to gain. If female killers do not correspond to the limitations of this stereotype, they are placed in the opposite and equally non-agentic category of the inhuman monster. (Morrissey, 2003)

Discussing female violence from the perspective of a victim or an inhumane person, takes away her active participation in violent dynamics. This creates a narrative of "victimology [that] not only constructs women as oppressed, but as victimized in their oppression" (ibid.). This might, in my understanding, diminish women's agency over their emotions. And take away their responsibility for violent acts that cannot be rationalized in terms of abuse and victimhood. At the same time, it negates the understanding of women's violence as being an intrinsically human experience. In 2018, Antonina Starzyńska and Magdalena Budziszewska, argue in their study on gendered representation of violence that:

[...] Women's nature is not at all, as we all used to think, more gentle than men's. Their experience of anger is equally intensive, and its psychophysiological indicators are the same as in men. This suggests that if men and women do not differ in the way they experience anger, the difference in their tendency to act violently occurs rather at the level of permission they give themselves to express this emotion. (Starzyńska and Budziszewska, 2018 quoted in Björkqvist & Niemelä, 1992; Campbell & Muncer, 1994)

The difference that the scholars observe, can be linked to cultural norms that do or don't allow violence to be expressed by men and women. As women's acts of violence tend to be portrayed more as actions that occur against their better judgement, a lack of acknowledged agency in this sense creates a clear difference in what is expected from the genders³⁸.

³⁸ I am mentioning this as I am interested in two approaches regarding violence. The first is looking at anger as an emotional reaction to systemic discrimination and abuse. An emotion that is rationalized and understood by the woman who is exhibiting it. And the second is my interest in presenting female violence as an inherently human experience that stems from their own agency even if it's inflicted by abuse. In other words, I am trying to explore the experience of female anger from a human perspective and even from the perspective of a victim turned abuser who rationalizes the effects of her actions and chooses to bear the responsibility. Meaning that she goes beyond the victim status that has been inflicted on her in order to justify her actions and make her seem helpless in front

In the case of *Promising Young Woman*, emotions and the rationalization of her actions are combined in a rape-revenge film that plays with the idea of a woman who embraces her negative emotions. But before I go on and discuss Cassie, the main character of the film, I want to first briefly touch upon the genre that I have mentioned – rape-revenge. In the 1970s, rape-revenge films “provided a forum for feminist issues and the role of feminism in society to play out” (Henry, 2014). In time, the genre has “sustained through the high numbers of remakes and adaptations as well as hybridity with the ‘torture porn’ genre on the one hand and the move into art house cinema on the other” (ibid.). In 2014, Claire Henry examines the shifts in the construction of the rape-revenge genre and goes back in time to look at how it has blended with other genres, concluding:

rape-revenge seems best conceptualized as a typically hybrid genre (...) the setting and aesthetics of the genre are often modified by the other genres (...) but rape-revenge does have discernible characteristics. (ibid.)

She continues with describing how this genre has been and still is of interest in the field of social politics. In her words, they “present spectacles of violence that are connected to – and perhaps help to process – sociopolitical conflicts and their media representation, particularly around issues of violence, retribution, torture, and trauma” (ibid.). In a brief examination she presents the key elements in the writings of a rape-revenge film in the early 1990s. She observes that in most cases the heroines of this genre of films are usually beautiful and are presented as positive. While males are rarely presented in a good light, rapists being “typically characterized as extremely repulsive” (ibid.). In her interpretation of earlier scholarly research, the female is on a mission of either avenging herself or another woman that has been raped. Her violence always occurs because of male exploitation and abuse. I am mentioning this because in Emerald Fennell’s rape-revenge film, she takes an interesting turn in portraying abusers as likeable day-to-day men. She is taking a different approach towards the classical representation of male rapists as unlikeable and repulsive characters and shows “nice guys.” This is emphasized through the cast of actors that Emerald Fennell selected to play the role of the men. The director chose actors that are known either from comedy or have played roles with less violent implications³⁹. In a *Vulture*⁴⁰ article, Nate Jones, the author, comments:

of an abusive environment. She recognizes her violent nature and embraces it as part of her experience as a human being and as a woman who rejects the idea of being a victim.

³⁹ Bo Burnam (Ryan), Adam Brody (Jerry), Max Greenfield (Joe), Christopher Mintz-Plasse (Niel), Chris Lowell (Al), are all known for unproblematic Hollywood personalities who play mostly comedic roles.

⁴⁰ <https://www.vulture.com/2021/04/how-promising-young-woman-cast-its-toxic-nice-guys.html>

[...] As you might suspect, this meta-casting was not a coincidence. According to the film's casting directors, it was a deliberate ploy by director-writer Emerald Fennell. 'She knew exactly how to play with audience expectation about who the good guy is and who's not,' says Mary Vernieu of Betty Mae, Inc., a Los Angeles-based casting agency. That the scumbags are played by actors with friendly, familiar faces underlines one of the movie's arguments: Anyone can be an abuser, even cute, nerdy guys who are obsessed with Death Cab or ones who live in a hip downtown loft with their adorkable friends. (Jones, 2021)

This conscious choice that Emerald Fennell made, shows the hybridity of the genre that Claire Henry has mentioned. In this case, the images of the actors we see on the screen are clearly clashing with the new roles they are in⁴¹. Distorting the idea of rape being something done by obscure and unlikeable male individuals, Emerald Fennell deepens the narrative of the genre by questioning what it means to be a "nice guy." Which is why, I want to look at this film from two perspectives. I want to analyse Cassie as an aggressor that has declared war on all the "nice guys" she meets. And from the perspective of a *nasty woman* who has decided to actively employ the negative responses in her to disrupt systemic abuse and inconsideration towards women in academic spaces. I want to look at Cassie from a dialectical perspective that gives me the opportunity to analyse women who inflict pain as rational beings, and, at the same time see their actions as emotional reactions that are justified and rationalized⁴².

Cassie, the hunter. Is she a victim turned aggressor?

(Character arc)

⁴¹ This creates a slight confusion in the beginning, but then forms a better idea of what the director is trying to do.

⁴² Meaning that they embrace the negative emotions that they aren't traditionally allowed to express and channel them for shifting from the position of victim to the position of a human being who has decided to violently change her life.



Figure 6 Screenshot of Cassie eating a hot dog

The idea of considering Cassie an aggressor might seem strange. Especially for a commentary on a film that depicts a woman who is set to fight against a system that, as the film presents it, underestimates the experience of the female student body. Especially when it comes to sexual harassment. From one point of view, a deeply wounded woman who has lived through her friend's sexual harassment and her suicide might have all the reasons to commit violent acts against her friend's aggressor(s)⁴³. However, Cassie she becomes an aggressor herself towards other men that were not involved in her traumatic past. This act in which she is engaged may serve as a symbolic revenge, but it raises questions of how far she is willing to go to serve justice. The role that Cassie has given herself in this narrative goes beyond the classic idea of vindication. It seems as if Cassie has taken upon herself the task of avenging not just her close friend but has transformed it into some sort of crusader. One who targets hidden predatory male behaviour. Cassie falls into the category of a *nasty woman* who is willing to destroy her life in order to achieve her goals, and her aggression is justified in the realm of the film.

We understand this about her in the first scene of the film. This is where we enter the level of *recognition* and realize that she is the main character of the film. We are introduced to her during one of her nights out in a bar. In the aftermath of that night, Cassie is presented

⁴³ This is the classic receipt for a rape-revenge film.

victorious as she is eating a hot-dog with red sauce spilling all over her arm. In an interview⁴⁴, the director says: “Eating a hot dog is a sledgehammer of a phallic metaphor, I would say [...] I’ve never really felt like subtlety is necessary,” (Fennell, 2021). The events that follow are, perhaps, more notable in understanding what made Cassie become an aggressor herself. Being situated more in her environment, we start to understand even more her past. Especially when she starts meeting former university colleagues. This happens, in the first instance with her ex-colleague, Ryan when he just walks in the coffee shop and recognizes Cassie⁴⁵. She is almost arrogant with him, which signals that she seems to dismiss men before they have a chance to hurt her

We later understand the causes of this behaviour and enter the level of *alignment*. when we find that the university she attended has the tendency of burying cases of violence against women. This is done to preserve the reputation of the men involved and keep them in the academic space. The victims, on the other hand, tend to be forgotten and are not offered the support they need. We get the opportunity for more introspection into Cassie’s character when we see her interacting with everyone who knew Nina’s story. Especially since these are people who could have done something to punish the abuser but chose not to.

The scene in which she faces the dean is of great importance for the level of *allegiance*. It expands Cassie’s quest from a personal one to a more global goal.⁴⁶ This is expanded through Cassie and Ryan’s relationship. We see her letting her guard down and trying to get used to the idea that she could see him as a genuinely nice guy. This is when we see that Cassie can care for a man and let herself be loved without fear. This gets disrupted when another ex-colleague, Madison hands her a phone containing the video from the night when Nina was raped. In this instance we understand that no matter how happy Cassie may find herself, she will never be able to forget what happened. We see Cassie able to fight whoever she thinks needs to receive

⁴⁴ <https://www.thewrap.com/promising-young-woman-emerald-fennell-twists-revenge-comedy-drama/>

⁴⁵ During their initial conversation, Ryan asks her what she is doing working at a coffee shop. This creates a negative reaction in Cassie. Feeling ashamed by his question, Ryan tells Cassie that he acknowledges how rude it was of him to ask this and jokingly tells her that she can spit in his coffee if she wants to. Which is what Cassie does. This is followed by Ryan asking her out on a date. The response to Ryan’s joke can be analyzed from two perspectives. Cassie clearly has her guard up and has a hard time trusting men. She is rarely interested in entertaining a discussion with a man unless she is doing her habitual hunt. Most of her reactions seem to come with a hostility that shows an anger, or distrust, that she has harbored for a very long time.

⁴⁶ This is portrayed in another scene in which Cassie confronts Nina’s abuser, Al. While he is denying the accusations saying that he was just a kid when it happened, he says “*this is every guy’s nightmare, being accused of things like these,*” to which Cassie replies “*what do you think every girl’s worst nightmare is?*” This allows the viewer to understand how the system favours predatory behaviours displayed by men and dismisses the experience of the victims while operating with a narrative of blame. Or dismissing the accusations because they are directed towards a “nice guy” or because it happened when they were very young.

their punishment⁴⁷. She has two important battles: the idea of “nice men,” and a system⁴⁸ that dismisses, denies and blames the victim. Thus, she is willingly engaging with the behaviour of an aggressor. She is presented as a truth seeker and a punisher, which gives her persona an almost biblical aura. For example, in one of her interactions with the lawyer who represented Nina’s abuser – Al, he asks her if she came for him. Implying that her visit means it is time to pay for his sins. By the end of their interaction, she is presented seated on the sofa while he is almost kneeling in front of her asking for forgiveness. This image not only presents her as someone who grants forgiveness, as an almost biblical Mary-like figure, but as a martyr who can also show fury in the face of injustice.



Figure 7 Screenshot depicting Cassie and the lawyer, Jordan

The turn against women and her clearly abusive and manipulative behaviour with them, shows the extent of her anger. If in the first part of the film, she is shown targeting only men. By the end we understand that there is nothing she won’t do to prove the abuse her friend has suffered and avenge her⁴⁹. In the climactic scene in the film, Cassie meets Nina’s abuser at his

⁴⁷ This happens after the two women meet at a hotel restaurant and Cassie gets her drunk in order to try and find out more details about her knowledge of what happened. What is interesting to observe is that Cassie seems to have no mercy for some women either. During the hotel scene when she gets Madison drunk, Cassie decides to manipulate her into being in the same situation Nina was and pays a man to take her up to a room. The woman wakes up the next day thinking she was abused and calls Cassie to find out what happened. Cassie remains cold-hearted towards her ex-colleague’s calls, until Madison shows up at her house. This time, after the incident, she comes to Cassie with a phone that has a video of the night Nina was assaulted. She hands her the phone, visibly scared of what Cassie is capable of, and asks her to stay away from her.

⁴⁸ Which includes women as well.

⁴⁹ This includes punishing the women who were part of it. Her disappointment with the women involved fits of rage that turn into punishment. She first punishes Madison by tricking her into thinking she was raped, and then she punishes the dean by tricking her into thinking her daughter was abducted and is in the same room where Nina

bachelor party and confronts him when they are alone in a room upstairs. This is the final level of *allegiance*. We start rooting even more for Cassie. Through all the levels until now we have seen her emotional states fluctuate, until it culminates into her showing extreme anger when she finally stands in front of her friend's aggressor. We are reaching a point in which we want Cassie to succeed because we already know everything there is to know about the story and about her. However, the film takes a turn when Cassie gets killed by the same man who raped her friend. Al suffocates Cassie with a pillow in a slow, silent scene, without background music. It shows Cassie fighting for her life and presents a realistic view on how a murder like this would occur. The disproportion of power paints the realistic picture that the film intended to show. Emerald Fennell disrupts the genre again when she shows the heroine being killed by the man who assaulted her best friend and who was never punished for it. However, for a moment, we might think that he is going to win this time again, but he gets arrested on the day of his wedding. Together with Al's former lawyer, Cassie has taken precautions in case she would die so Al would get caught.

If Cassie is an abuser, her abuse is justified by her ongoing disappointments with systemic discrimination and the real-life threats she is exposed during her nights out. In her act of revenge, she shows multiple times that she is not just out to punish the men who participated in assaulting her friend. She wants everyone who was involved and who is perpetuating the abusive cycle that she and her friend have been part of, to face the consequences. Nina's suicide meant the creation of another Cassie who, perhaps, drastically changed since the incident. She holds a mirror to her society. She has assumed a moralizing role and has dedicated her life to unmasking hypocrisy and the mythology of niceness⁵⁰.

Cassie's death, although it can be read as disappointing for a rape-revenge genre, or even in the story, stands true to the culture of systemic abuse that women are subjected to. Her

was abused, in the company of other boys who might present danger. During her extensive discussion with the dean, she finds out that she does not even remember Nina and that this is something brushed off on campus by the authority that has the power to punish actions like this one. Both women in this case show how little remorse they show for their reaction to Nina's case and the hidden misogyny and judgement they have. This is what adds up to Cassie's already immense disappointment and anger.

⁵⁰ This is not to say that there are not any nice guys that she encounters. The lawyer plays an important role in showing how his former career has affected his life and the willingness he has to repent and work towards establishing a balance in the system. Even though this might be just a small drop in the ocean. And Cassie seems to let her guard down with Ryan and shows real empathy and finds him more than agreeable throughout their relationship. The turn in her behaviour is marked by Madison when she denies Nina's experience and blames it on her. When Cassie gets into the possession of the phone with the recording where she sees Ryan in the room where the abuse took place, her anger intensifies. Her disappointment turns to rage and marks the most important shift in her character. Her lover, the nice guy she started trusting, has betrayed her, and two women, who were supposed to show solidarity and punish the perpetrators a long time ago, had to be taught cruel lessons so they understand the gravity of the situation that Nina was in.

character arc shows an interesting development. She is first presented as a woman who hunts men just to show them their true colours. Then we learn that her actions stem from her traumatic past in which her best friend was raped and then committed suicide. When we see her warming up to a man and almost giving up her double life, even if just for a brief second, that is disrupted by finding out her boyfriend's implication. This gives her even more courage to finally face the abuser. She dies at his hands, which makes it a dramatically poetic scene that shows how hard and maybe at times futile her fight was. The retribution we get is at the end, when she still manages to get Al arrested at his wedding with the help of another man who represents the legal system. This, perhaps, shows that although her life was lost, it was not in vain. Cassie understood the effects of her actions, at the same time she has made peace with the fact that she is marginalized already, that she doesn't have as many supporters as she might want, but she also knows that she doesn't need them in order to make her point.

Beyond the character. Narrative approaches and the universe of the nasty woman

Meaning is constantly created and perpetuated. This is a phenomenon that Media play a very important role in, because reality needs to be constantly assessed and analysed or shaped according to certain ideologies and beliefs. Those beliefs are formed and reinforced by a constant perpetuation of cultural norms and political and socio-economical values that are created within a medium which sets clear power relations⁵¹. The given meaning can create the discourse around those images or societal processes which in return creates the sense of reality in that exact time regarding the processes people are experiencing in a group or even globally.

Even when we speak about the concept of the *nasty woman*, giving it a definition has created the possibility to look beyond the words and analyse the cultural shifts it brings with it. Thus, it has created the possibility to analyse reality from a different perspective and give a new meaning to violent female behaviour. As Stuart Hall observes "Meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice- a practice

⁵¹ To be more precise, as explained in chapter 1, this can happen within a state. The values of societal, political, economic, and cultural beliefs at a given moment in the state – the ruling ideology, need perpetuation in order to reinforce systemic beliefs. This can be done, for example, through the media industry. This means that, depending on the role that the industry has assumed for itself, how politically free the production of media is, or how the economic market dictates the possibilities for cultural production, media can prove to be a multilateral space for perpetuating or dismantling systemic beliefs. At the same time, this system of beliefs is being constructed through giving meaning to things, images, and complex societal processes.

that produces meaning, which makes things mean,” (Hall, 1997). Thus, if we go back to the origins of the concept of the *nasty woman* and remember the timeline of the term becoming more popular until it was coined academically, we can understand that the term itself works towards reinforcing a shift in the perception of feminine behaviour considered unnatural⁵². The meaning given by the concept opens possibilities of assessing how it can shift the perception around these behaviours that go beyond systemically and culturally created representations. At the same time, the reality that is being challenged, it is challenged through a new mode of representation and meaning that is bound to evolve and change in time. This can change depending on who operates with the narratives around those meanings. Stuart Hall acknowledges this in 1997 when he affirms that the meanings of the represented reality are also bound to whose point of view becomes popularized and who gets to practice and put forward their ideas.⁵³ However, this doesn't exclude the ongoing difference of representations that occur in dependence of how reality is being interpreted by different groups. For example, if we speak about cinema and we go back to the consciously chosen gender binaries that I am working with, the representation of *nasty women* can be assessed through the lens of gender and can be analysed looking at how both men and women filmmakers create violent female characters.

In this thesis, I am conducting my investigation through analysing narrative approaches and understanding if and how they differ in the perspectives of the four directors that I have chosen to integrate in the study. Looking at narratives and the way in which they are constructed has helped me create a clearer picture for understanding if there are differences and how do they manifest representation wise. Precisely, how is it that the films create the image of *nasty women* and what values are they perpetuating. This is a point made by Helen Hanson when she states that narrative and the repetition of situations “construct a familiarity of character types” (Hanson, 2007). She continues:

[...] The repetition has, within feminist critical studies of Hollywood, often been examined as revealing how Hollywood genres speak about female figures (...) generic repetition has often been understood as producing female

⁵² This starts with the fact that it was first popularized after Donald Trump has called Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman.” This was followed by a significant variety of goods being produced and sold in order to ironically celebrate and embrace the term. And ended with the term becoming part of studying the representation of female disruptive behaviour on screen.

⁵³ As presented in the first chapter, the film medium has been mostly male dominated, and it has created a system of values and representation catered for most of its history to the viewing pleasure of male spectators. Which meant that the representation of female characters has been popularly subjected to the male gaze. This, however, does not exclude a countermovement that has questioned this set reality of cinema. To go back to chapter 1, I have explained the idea of a counter-cinema as being a mostly resistance movement outside of the industry norms but that was slowly incorporated in mainstream cinema and has created subversive realities from within.

stereotypes, or formulaic representations of what women do, and what they are like. (ibid.)

Helen Hanson makes the point that narratological theories look at structures of narratives as systems constituted by fictional characters that have the power to disrupt and get involved in the action. She says that:

[...] in this formal definition [...] any character, male or female, has agency. Issues of gender come into play in the typical (in the sense of familiar, repeated, generic) placement of those characters within certain groups of texts. (ibid)

This makes the analysis of the narrative approaches regarding the representation of *nasty women* valid in understanding the situation they are in not just in the story, but for a wider cultural understanding. As the scholar observes when reflecting on the necessity of studying film genres and gender:

[...] The ways in which their female figures are positioned within the genres' narratives, what those narratives require them to do, and the ways in which their action is represented through the films' narrational processes, are part of a discourse about women⁵⁴. (ibid)

Referring to the femmes fatales of the Film Noir, Helen Hanson reflects on their evolution into the female figures of the 1970s. This is when the femmes fatales became representational for “condensing male anxieties about women’s sexual and economic freedom coincident with shifts in gender roles in America’s wartime and post-war society” (ibid.). This is important to note, as it marks the significance of addressing gender roles and how they shape the social, cultural, political, and economic space. At the same time, looking at femme fatales as heroines that address male anxieties is one way of looking at their role in the narratives they occupy. They can be considered, in my interpretation, a catalyst for a critical assessment of men’s condition under a patriarchal system that affects both genders, although in different ways. This is what makes the universe of the *nasty woman* complex and culturally, politically, and socially charged. Because the *nasty woman* is a version of a neo femme fatale, she holds within her the qualities of those heroines, but is equipped for a new era.

With this being said, *nasty women* are not a new product culturally. They have existed for centuries in popular tales, in myths and legends. Agnieszka Piotrowska notes this, stating that:

⁵⁴ She is referring here to the study of genres that arose in the 1940s and the evolution of femme fatales into the 1970s.

[...] One could argue that, culturally, the notion of the ‘nasty woman’ is a very familiar concept. It has many guises and comes in many forms in history, myths, legends and storytelling, not necessarily just those familiar in the Western culture, (Piotrowska, 2019).

The long historical existence of this trope has, however, in the scholar’s reading, created and perpetuated the image of a “powerful woman who is able to undermine the patriarchal systems,” (ibid.) but who has lost all her attractiveness in the eyes of the same system. For example, mythical and legendary heroines depicted as violent women such as Medea⁵⁵, show violent features exhibited by women who were clearly betrayed either by their male partners or by the system in which they exist. At the same time, Medea may represent a lot of the common scenarios of women being betrayed by men who have sworn to be loyal but have abused their trust by cheating⁵⁶. The rage that Medea is capable of, together with the rage depicted by other angry women such as Medusa⁵⁷, or Judith⁵⁸ who cut the head of Holofernes, can become “subject(s) of great works of art”, (ibid.) and the representation of this work of art is important in depicting violent women with less suspicion and more insight regarding their inner worlds.

Thus, it is important to underline how crucial is the creation of narratives in either dismantling or reinforcing beliefs. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind the ideological function of narratives, regardless of the political spectrum they appear in. As mentioned in chapter 1, ideology does not necessarily take the form of oppression, nor does it have only a negative connotation. As Louis Althusser has reflected, ideology is conceptually framed as a vessel which is filled with meaning throughout history and cultures. This means that ideology is based on narratives which makes the case of who has the power to enunciate and depict certain processes. For example, Edward Branigan explains that narratives are intertwined with power and control. He mentions that “[n]arration is the overall regulation and distribution of knowledge which determines how and when the spectator acquires knowledge,” (Branigan, 1992). Meaning that the space, time, and the way in which the narrative is being

⁵⁵ In a very brief explanation, Euripides portrays Medea as the woman who has left her homeland and has abandoned her life, following Jason whom she married and had children with. Later in their marriage, Jason married another woman behind Medea’s back which resulted in her committing several crimes that culminated with her killing the children she had with Jason.

⁵⁶ *Gone Girl* presents similarities to Medea’s story. Giving up her life, Amy follows her husband in a town where she has no future and no social life only for him to cheat on her with a younger woman and break her trust completely resulting in her plotting a very elaborate revenge.

⁵⁷ Medusa was one of the Gorgons who possessed mortality and was represented at times as very beautiful. Whoever gazed into her eyes would turn to stone. However, she was decapitated and later her head was used by Athena. In feminist literature, Medusa has become a symbol of female rage.

⁵⁸ Judith is an Israelite who has seduced and decapitated the Assyrian general Holofernes and, in result has brought victory for the Israelites by killing their oppressor. Through committing the killing she has gained the reputation for being both a strong woman and a woman who employs her sexual nature in dangerous ways.

created and distributed, and by whom, plays a crucial role in understanding what is the goal of that narrative and how it is producing knowledge. In the case of gendered representations, it is important to keep in mind the way in which the two genders, male and female, are being socialized to view themselves and the opposite gender. Thinking about socialized gendered binaries is important when analyzing narratives that depict female violence precisely because it is important to see if they are perpetuated and how.

In the films that I have chosen to analyze, both the men and women portray their characters as strong and independent in their environment, driven by the desire to change the situations in which they are in. However, what I have observed in the case of the films that I have chosen is that the desire of the main heroines comes from different needs. For example, in both *Ex-machina* and *Gone Girl* the main heroines fight to drastically change their life circumstances which hold them captive in a space, be it physical or emotional, that they do not want to be in. Ava (*Ex-machina*) is trapped in a glass box, and Amy (*Gone Girl*) is trapped in a marriage that she wants to restore but cannot, unless she becomes violent. Ava and Amy are not in similar situations physically, but they do seem to be similar in their approach to gain their power. For both, the liberation they are looking for, be it a liberation from their confinement and to experience the world, or the liberation from a life of doing all the work to sustain a marriage that promised her to have everything she strived for, is achieved through violence that is turned towards very specific male individuals that have a very immediate effect on the heroines. This is not to say that in the other two films the heroines were not subjected to immediate abuse. In *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman* both heroines have had their behaviour and current quests shaped by male and female individuals that perpetuate patriarchal systems of beliefs. But the depiction of their behaviour goes beyond their immediate surroundings and experiences. Both are on a quest to hold a mirror towards the abusers and the abusive behaviours perpetuated systemically. If Ava and Amy are reaching personal goals, the personal goals of Elaine (*The Love Witch*) and Cassie (*Promising Young Woman*) go beyond that. They are not only looking to fulfil their personal desires, but they have the goal to be moralistic in a more global way compared to Ava and Amy. Both are thinking conceptually on how to fulfil their desires but show to their society how they and their kin have been oppressed and violently dismissed in their world.

What is interesting to observe in the case of all the four characters is that all of them rise against the negative circumstances they are in and find violent solutions that show that they do not think of themselves as victims of their circumstances. It is also interesting to observe how

they choose to think less about the consequences of their actions and focus on the main goal of their violent behaviours. What I found to have some differences are the narrative approaches employed by the directors. In the case of the male directors, the female perpetrators looked more calculated and colder. Of course, Ava is a humanoid, so she can't be any other way than calculating⁵⁹, but because she has the physical attributes of a woman, her ruthlessness evokes a response of abruptness, an almost rupture of representation. Her soft features and her aspiration to look more and more feminine disrupt the thought of her being a robotic prototype of a *nasty woman*⁶⁰. Her presenting herself as child-like and innocent initially diverts Caleb and the viewers from the fact that she is calculating and manipulative. The same, although in a slightly different approach, can be said of Amy in *Gone Girl*. She is shown to be an extremely meticulous planner who has thought through an elaborate scenario that she put into action over a longer period. She has always been like this, but these traits become more prevalent when she gets determined to seek revenge. She becomes as dangerous as Ava and shows traits that are considered by her husband to be inhumane. Thus, both characters, in my interpretation have similar aspects that make them interesting to observe as a tandem. Ava is a robot that is built to emulate human emotions, Amy is a human who was socialized to reach an almost robotic perfection that makes her appear as a woman lacking empathy. The narratives of *Ex-machina* and of *Gone Girl* focus on the ruthlessness of the female characters but show the masculine point of view when presenting them. In both films, men play a big part in the story, and they are shown to have their own point of view about the heroines' characters which adds to the plot and to how the viewer perceives them. The fact that both films depict men who seem to be afraid of these women in their lives, creates an interesting aspect of looking at their behaviour as anxious and restless when they envision what these women are capable of. However, what is interesting to notice is that both narratives represent the empowerment of those women with aspects that I see as a desensitization towards violence. What I mean by this is that in the other two films, *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman* both characters seem to show more empathetic traits. The violence they are capable of comes from personal aspects that have their emotions engaged in their acts as a fuel for their revenge. The narrative of these films is constructed to show their humane side and portray them as violent women who are also human beings. Their actions are not commented on by the men who are immediately involved in their

⁵⁹ Even though the film suggests the possibility of a humanoid to feel emotions or to rationalize a way in which they can understand how they can manifest emotion.

⁶⁰ This can also be thought of in terms of the film reaching its goal to trick even viewers to develop more empathy towards Ava as she becomes more human. But this only shows how her depiction brings up gendered expectations.

lives. This leads away from the assumption that these women evoke anxious feelings of loss or represent an attack on masculinity. Instead, they target ways of thinking and the way in which women and men are either socialized to perceive situations in a different way, or one gender gets prioritized over the other systemically.

Narratively speaking, the last two films have a structure that allows a better understanding of the point of view of the heroine without the involvement of an influential male voice. These women do what they think they must do in order to reach their goals and they are kept away from the perspective of a man. The most important narrative elements of both four films are the exaggeration of the women's retaliation. In two cases, *Gone Girl* and *The Love Witch*, the main characters are psychopaths. The choice in this is interesting if we look at the films not from a perspective of them being thrillers but from the perspective of seeing films with *nasty women* in the main role whose purpose is to retaliate and bring forward anxious feelings about the state of masculinity in patriarchy. The films can be looked at from the perspective of revenge-phantasy. Although just one of them is a rape-revenge. *Ex-machina* and *Gone Girl* depict a revenge that is analysed from the masculine point of view that fears the loss of power and serves as a way of analysing aspects of patriarchal thinking that affects men in a different, but still a violent way, just as it does affect women. Conversely, *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman* present revenge phantasies that come to target ideas, systems, and modes of understanding the experience of women in media that objectify, deny and disregard their experiences. In both films, the male point of view is made unimportant because they, as individuals are not part of the bigger picture of the violence of the heroines. Elaine and Cassie target specific men, but at the same time, they target them for what they perpetuate. In the case of Cassie, it is very clear that she wants her violent actions against the abuser of her friend to become symbolic for the other people that are part of the same social group he is in. She is targeting the abuser that is part of a social and academic elite she is not a part of and has never been. This is just one aspect of her violence, the most global one. The second is her emotionally attacking men who present false qualities about themselves. The nice guys she is on a hunt for, represents an idea of specific predatory behaviour masked under layers of niceness. Cassie tricks those men just to show them how deceitful they are with themselves and with the world around them. Targeting the idea of the nice guy works at a global scale as a way for the narrative to show that niceness may, in some cases, conceal hidden agendas. It is what Emerald Fennell does in her film. She shows the dangers that women face and questions the image of the nice

guy⁶¹. On the other hand, Elaine holds a mirror to the men she is with that shows them how much they can feel. In a universe in which she meets men who love, but not to the extent that a woman might want them to, Elaine comes in to punish their lack of emotional involvement. Anna Biller mentions this in one interview⁶²

[...] The big question is what would happen if men loved women as strongly as women want them to; the way women crave to be loved by men. Men are known for being much less emotional than women, but, in my experience, they're much more emotional. And that's why they won't, or can't, open that gate – it would destroy them. And that's what kills all the men in my movie – having to experience their own feelings. (Biller, 2017)

This is the interesting shift that takes place in Anna Biller's film. She takes a woman that is on a desperate quest to find love, and makes her feel pity for the men that she seduces when they show her the amount of love they are capable of. On one hand, she wants men to fulfil the traditional masculine role that she is attracted to. On the other hand, she looks for the type of love that reflects an overflow of emotions that she doesn't see as masculine or attractive enough anymore. This ambiguity of her intentions shows that she targets men not just to fulfil her selfish needs, but to also show them what kind of emotions they are capable of. She is avenging the myth of love that she was brought up with. She is looking for revenge because she keeps proving to herself repeatedly that what she believes in cannot be found. This makes her seek revenge for the phantasy that she and other women have been brought up with. By becoming the phantasy and by killing the men who get seduced by that image, she becomes a revenge phantasy on her own.

Both Elaine and Cassie play important roles in the narratives making the men they interact with be looked at as secondary. This is what is important to assess when analysing how they can produce new knowledge and add to the debate about neo femmes fatales and *nasty women*. It is important to see the kind of agency that these heroines possess compared to the other characters. All four women are presented as powerful and capable of reaching their goals. But as I have observed in *Ex-machina* and in *Gone Girl*, they are still subjected to male characters that take part in the construction of the narrative and can influence the way in which the spectator understands them. In *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman*, the male

⁶¹ This is not to say that Emerald Fennell is attacking the idea of nice guys to the extent of trying to induce negative emotions regarding all nice behaviours exposed by men. What she is trying to do is raise awareness to the fact that predatory behaviour can be masked with niceness, and it might also come to the fact that even the men who are exposing those kinds of behaviors are not aware of their predatory actions. Which makes it relevant for them to have a heroine like Cassie who shows them the actual extent of their actions and holds them accountable ruthlessly.

⁶² <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography>

characters are important for fulfilling the goal of the main characters. The centrality of the woman and her experience is noteworthy in this conversation. She shapes the way in which the spectator sees her and her actions. And thus, she gains more agency in the narrative, and we can have more insight in understanding the ambiguity of her emotions and what she is going through emotionally. Which makes her more available to us as a human being than a woman who is extremely calculated and cold and shows no signs of empathy. If we go back to understanding narratives and seeing how they shape meaning, it is important to reiterate the fact that women's violence and the repetition of representing that violence from a perspective that gives the viewer the opportunity to understand the inner life of the female aggressor just as much as it has been done with male villains, creates a space that allows a shift in the perspective on female behaviours. Allowing women to be villains and to represent them in a way that shows the complexity that male villains and anti-heroes have been represented with, means allowing for a space that shifts how we view women and their experience in a very complex world that makes them react with a range of emotions that is vast and that is not the only drive of their behaviour. Women villains can be calculating and cold just as much as they can be in touch with their emotions and commit crimes in the name of honour. Positioning them in a central role that allows this complexity to be explored, makes for a heroine that shows how her nastiness can be used to understand her even better. As Helen Hanson notes, "The centrality of the heroine as protagonist means that unfolding of story events are understood in relation to her, and what the audience understands about her," (Hanson, 2007).

Conclusion

In the introduction to *Hollywood Abroad. Audiences and Cultural Exchange*, Richard Maltby discusses the effects of American cinema on the cultural global market. He analyses the term *Americanisation* from the perspective of immigrant assimilation and cultural export. Although the term has different meanings depending on the historical era it is attributed to, when it comes to the film industry and Hollywood, *Americanisation* is discussed from the perspective of cultural institutions and regulators. As a historically dominating cultural space, Hollywood has created a

[...] free-floating signifier of American-ness (...) Americanisation took place through the distribution system constructed from 1916, which secured 80 per cent of the world's screens for the profit of American distribution companies, (Maltby, 2001).

The export of American culture through cinema, contributed to Hollywood establishing a place on the cultural market that gave it the power to set trends and create cinematic standards that would be recognized all over the world. However, as Richard Maltby discusses, the export of Hollywood films, did not come without “the processes of decontextualization and reinterpretation,” (ibid.). American culture, packaged as stories and moving images, became accessible to analyze from a global viewer’s perspective and reinterpreted accordingly⁶³. Hollywood films distributed globally had the power of creating and exporting stories that brought in a flux of immigrants looking for the American dream. It became an important asset for disseminating American narratives and points of view. As Richard Maltby mentions:

[...] In 1926, a US State Department official observed that without the legislation restricting immigration passed in 1921 and 1924, American movies would be bringing ‘a flood of immigrants’ to the United States. Instead, he suggested, ‘the longing to emigrate is changed into a desire to immigrate.’ Two years later, a film industry representative declared that motion pictures ‘are demonstrably the greatest single factors in the Americanisation of the world and such fairly may be called the most important and significant of America’s exported products’”, (ibid.).

Reflecting on the export of American culture, Richard Maltby mentions the effects Hollywood had on his understanding of societal dynamics, while being raised outside of the US. He writes:

[...] In describing the Americanisation of my imagination, I am also describing the terms in which, as a child, I came to understand and then emulate the distinction between right and wrong, the proper activity of gender roles, the ideal of heroism,” (ibid.).

This is precisely what is interesting to note about Hollywood films and why I chose to analyse four of them for this thesis. The influence that Hollywood has on cinema culture worldwide is significant for understanding the political and cultural dynamics it exports. The dream to immigrate to the US, which became widespread because of the film industry, can be alternated to other mainstream ideas about ways of living and seeing the world. This is important when assess the power that Hollywood has established and continues to have. Especially in countries that rely on buying, rather than producing films. Hollywood is still ranked as the biggest film industry with revenues coming from box offices all around the globe. Which makes the export of American culture – universal. This makes it an influential industry which asserts power over cultural, political, and social trends as well as attitudes towards gender and sexuality globally. Having access to such a film market means having the power to create and export narratives.

⁶³ This opened discussions around what is culturally accessible and what can a public that does not have the experience of living in the United States can really understand and relate to.

Thus, if a cultural industry of this size has the power to influence how people are familiarized with political and social trends, an analysis of its films is important for understanding how the message is created and who gets to benefit from it. When speaking about the general image of femininity created and perpetuated by this powerful industry, choosing to analyse Hollywood films seemed like the logical step to take. Moreover, for understanding how the normalization of portraying antagonist women is taking place on a global/American scale. And what do these women do.

Thus, choosing films that have the potential to reach audiences globally was a conscious step that I took in order to analyse the normalization of presenting *nasty women*. These are stories about female characters that arguably are allowed to show the same qualities as male anti-heroes and successfully reach their goals. This, as I argued in chapter 1, may be considered as a countermovement that goes against the industry tradition of portraying women. And having the possibility to portray globally such a subversive image of behaviour means offering a different perspective other than the already established mythology around the female figure that was so extensively promoted. The right for these heroines to exist on such a big scale, means that they have the opportunity to show the diversity of feelings women have. And the hyperbolization of their behaviour allows to understand how much we still need to explore female anger unironically and give it more attention. An export of such an image on a global scale, with a rich story that elaborates on why the woman is becoming violent and an antagonist may influence the exploration of this topic by smaller film industries. Thus, a normalization of interpreting female behaviour outside of the image of femininity, might create space for rethinking female violence. And to analyze it from the perspective of solving problems rather than antagonize unhappiness and negative responses. Understanding these characters and making them more sympathetic because of their strength, may create a space for embracing the intersectional needs of women and men alike.

If we look at Hollywood and the film industry as an apparatus that displays political interests and ideologies that shift over time, we can discern how much power it has over other film industries worldwide. It can be deducted that adopting those standards and the current issues that are being portrayed in film can work towards normalizing the way in which some behaviours are adopted or discussed collectively. In return, this can create a shift in the analysis of those behaviours. Thus, for this thesis, resorting to Hollywood films was a matter of exploring themes that can be exported worldwide and may prove to be important for questioning previous portrayals of such female characters.

The portrayal of the *nasty woman* from two gendered perspectives was important in order to assess the ways in which they coexist in the universe of the *nasty woman*. This representation can be integrated in a countermovement that shows how both these genders navigate systemic inequalities and how they are affected. As previously mentioned, all four films present strong female characters that start either on or off screen as deeply wounded and flawed. The intentional hyperbolization of their behaviour in *Gone Girl* or in *The Love Witch* shows the need for exaggeration in order to seriously assess the identity problems these characters face. And to tackle their disappointment with not getting the happiness they were promised to receive when looking for love and entering heteronormative relationships.

As my analysis showed, the films surface various kinds of anxieties, but touch a middle ground. *Gone Girl* presents the abuse that a man (Nick) faces from a woman (Amy) who is a psychopath. A woman who has moulded herself into the standards of a culture that puts appearance and perfection on the forefront. At the same time, the film shows how Amy evolved into the woman she is at the moment of her wrongdoings. Amy shifted into a villain who uses the same tools that the traditional patriarchal system gave to her, in order to destroy. She is framed as a manipulator that can put in danger all the men in her life. This danger is explored through Nick, who acts as a mirroring character. Without him, Amy would not exist as a character. And without Amy we would not understand in depth the struggles of a woman educated to evolve into the image of perfection. An image which was not expected from her husband in the same way. This antithesis shows the triggers of Amy's actions while also pointing at the vulnerability of her male counterpart. Amy presents danger to Nick's freedom. She embodies a calculated and destructive force that can use any tools to punish her wrongdoers. She is a woman that needs to be punished for her actions although we, the viewers, understand her reasoning.

In *Ex-Machina*, Ava shows the same character strength. She is powerful enough to overthrow the men who are controlling her environment. In particular the one who has created her. Both female characters, Ava, and Kyoko, were shaped to attain perfection and perform according to their creator's wish. When they overthrow expectations and gain more autonomy, which becomes very violent, they expose the main fears of the male characters: the fear of being destroyed, losing agency, their sense of autonomy and even their life. Therefore, the woman who has moulded herself based on societal expectations for her husband, and the humanoid who was modelled to be and perform as a woman, both show the real anxieties in the face of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. The unhinged woman is a danger to the men in her life and

the system that is oppressing her. She is a danger to herself, even, but she is willing to go on a path of self-destruction. But the main anxieties the directors of both *Gone Girl* and *Ex-Machina* present are in clear relation to the authority and autonomy of the men who are primarily in the lives of these characters.

An important note to this conclusion is that I refrain from classifying the films as feminist or not. My analysis does not overlook the shift in power between the male and female characters. But showing male characters struggling with a loss of agency does not make, in my interpretation, a film to be more feminist. Nor showing the woman to possess extraordinary qualities that surpass the qualities of her male counterparts. These women need to win in order to show that their nastiness is real, that it can create real damage and change. We need these characters in order to question what nasty behaviour is. Is it a woman asking for her space to be more political, or is it a woman deciding to kill when her patience runs out? It important to observe after the analysis of these films, how some of these characters engage in what can be traditionally labelled as anti-feminist behaviour in order to achieve their goals.

What is interesting to see is that the women directors of the films that I have chosen, portray these anti-feminist behaviours more than the male directors do. To exemplify, in both *The Love Witch* and in *Promising Young Woman*, the characters put other women in danger and create scenarios that benefit only them with disregard to other women's feelings. Cassie (*Promising Young Woman*) gets one of her former (female) classmates drunk. Then she frames a potential sexual abuse by hiring a man to take her to a hotel room and leave her there thinking she was assaulted. She does this so her classmate is scared enough in order to understand how her friend Nina felt when she was abused and neglected. She is ruthless with the (female) dean of her former study programme who doesn't even remember Nina's case. By framing the kidnapping of her daughter, she teaches her a lesson in loss of control. Samantha (*The Love Witch*), seduces her friend's husband. Her reasoning for this is to give him the fantasy he was looking for and fulfil her need for male approval. She seduces men for her own benefit. Shows them how deeply they can feel love and attraction, then leaves them with their own feelings. Afterwards, they either kill themselves, because of how overwhelming it is for them to feel, or she murders them because they don't accept their feelings as they are supposed to. Based on this, one might argue that these two characters are as feminist as they are anti-feminist. On one hand, they seem to have clear intentions that come to disrupt systemic abuse and being subjected to unrealistic expectations. And on the other hand, they become abusive with both men and women and, in Samantha's case, portray patriarchal ideals of femininity and, as a result,

reinforce unrealistic expectations even on other women. This shows that the female directors explore themes of patriarchal thinking integrated and perpetuated by women as well. These films expose anxieties around trust and systems that may promote preferential treatment based on gender. Even though the female characters are powerful, they are still not powerful enough when they stand alone. We are presented with two characters that were let down either by a system that does not help victims when they need it, or by mythological ideas about femininity. This is combined with searching for an ultimate love fantasy, as in the case of Samantha. She has to face the hard truths of a world that sexualized her and that punishes her further for adopting the mythology of womanhood that was expected of her.

Thus, the films directed by women show a more controversial look on what is widely considered feminist behaviour. At the same time, they discuss the ambiguity of being a woman. Especially of women who face a world that creates fairy tales and ends in disrupting them as soon as the characters mature. Not just that, but they frame sexuality in the realm of systemic discrimination and abuse. They are allowed to be sexual as long as the system is not held responsible for its own failures. They are also expected to participate in a culture of oversexualizing themselves, even if they might not want to, in order to get the man or the love they are searching for. Both *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman* analyze the complexity of what is like to be a woman who is wronged and does wrong. At the same time, ask what it means to fail or betray other women. The characters in these two films start already damaged. It is as if life before the events of the film doesn't need to be recollected in too much detail. It might be that we are all too familiar with the narratives of abuse that women go through and why they became abusive themselves.

On the other hand, the male directed films present women as both abused and abusers that direct their anger towards specific men. These women are calculated and rely on their emotions only when it fits their plan. Of course, their plan starts from their emotional state or, in case of the humanoid Ava (*Ex-Machina*), from her understanding of her condition. It continues in a cold and detached manner that is driven by the goal to punish the men in their lives and the authority figures that undermine their experience. In *Gone Girl* and *Ex-Machina*, the female point of view gets balanced with the male point of view of the situation or doesn't exist for narrative purposes. In *The Love Witch* and *Promising Young Woman*, however, we see the characters' unfiltered emotions that make us understand their own point of view. We do not have to agree with how the character acts or reacts, but through a deeper analysis we can understand where their behaviour comes from. What is important to note is that, in the end, all

the characters fight against their own oppression. One key-aspect of these films is that they show how deeply rooted systems of beliefs affect both men and women in the way in which they exercise their freedom of action. *Ex-Machina* is one of the most prominent examples of that. The dynamic between the male characters shows a clear pattern of domination and control. This benefits neither, but it exemplifies how systemic inequalities do not affect just women, but men too, although in different ways.

This is where I found the middle ground between the films. Although not all films present this clearly, there can be sensed the demarcation that the directors make between permitted male and female behaviour. The films directed by men show more prominently the effects of the systemic inequalities on men. *Ex-Machina* shows abusive dynamics between men and *Gone Girl* portrays the public deterioration of the image of the main male character when accused of a crime he did not commit. It also shows the scrutiny of the male character in the media before any clear evidence was presented. Conversely, *Promising Young Woman* and *The Love Witch* emphasize the contrast between male and female experience of the world and of the system they live in. This has been stated previously by Anna Biller when she said that she wanted to show the differences when it comes to love emotions and modern relationships. *Promising Young Woman* shows the privilege some men can have in university spaces compared to women. Emerald Fennel also stated that she created this film because most of the revenge films she has watched were, in her interpretation, a man's journey in a dress. This explains why she chose to focus on the difference of experiences. She does show many flawed male characters while also portraying a male figure (the lawyer) that understands the extent of his actions and his participation in perpetuating systemic abuse.

Focusing on differences is an important key-aspect in the female directed films. The male directors are keen on representing women who are as powerful, or even more powerful than men, and therefore, can overthrow them. The female directors show extremely vulnerable women, either emotionally or physically, who are very different from the men in their lives. As a middle ground, all these characters can present fantasies. They work as a window into imagining what it would be like to unleash anger at this magnitude and to live through their triumph. The symbolic image of these characters allows the viewer a sort of alleviation that is not permitted in real life.

To conclude, the main takeaway of this research is that both men and women directors are exploring the condition of both men and women within the current system. As I have stated,

the films directed by men tend to focus on more individualistic approaches. The *nasty woman* fights for herself against a man or a few men who symbolize her oppression. At the same time, these men are experiencing themselves the system in ways that does not benefit them and that creates an imbalance of power. The films directed by women explore the vulnerable condition of women in a more global way. They fight against specific individuals, but they are oriented to attack the system from within. They explore more in depth the difference of the experience between men and women and show the volatility of the empowerment women receive. Which creates a case for an expansion of *nasty women* who come to humanize even further the female experience. And for criticizing their methods and seeing them as flawed individuals and coexisting in the same space as men. This also expands the discussion on assessing female violent behaviour from various perspectives while leaving room for a critical analysis. As we can observe more and more narratives that move away from the idea that women's violent actions come from irrational and overly emotional behaviours, we can begin to understand the logic behind their violence and create space for looking at them not just as victims of circumstances, but as humans with agency who are able to stand their ground and, at the same time be held accountable.

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