Caucasian Girls and Samurai Swords: Dualism in *Kill Bill*

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Dualism is observed in the world regularly, whether it be in the concepts of yin and yang, black and white, good and evil, or life and death; it is so commonplace that many people may fail to acknowledge or notice its impact on society. Dualism can be defined as, “a state in which something has two distinct parts or aspects, which are often opposites (“dualism” def.1). Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill is a two-part, cult action film that was released between 2003 and 2004, which relied heavily on the idea of dualism. The film paid homage to both the classic cinematic styles of spaghetti westerns, as well as kung fu movies of the sixties and seventies, bringing together stereotypical eastern and western aesthetics in a single work (Smelik, 187). In addition, Kill Bill features a female hero, known throughout the majority of the story as, simply, “the bride,” due to the fact that when her ex-lover, Bill, shot her, she was pregnant and wearing her wedding dress. Ironically, it is the bride who comes out on top; she survives the gunshot wound, awakes from a coma, and kills Bill, along with everyone who assisted in her attempted murder and the presumed murder of her unborn child. The bride, or Beatrix, as she is later revealed, goes on a “roaring rampage of revenge,” never wavering in her mission; however, she is displayed on multiple occasions as showing mercy to her enemies, revealing the truth that she is not simply the callous, cold-blooded killer she seems to be. Though Beatrix may show mercy to some, that does not stop her from being efficient at her job; she is able to kill an entire gang, or at least wound them beyond mobility, and escape from the grave where she was buried alive. There must be something about the bride that is outstanding enough to encourage people to view her as a hero, in spite of the fact that she is described by Bill as a “natural born killer.” I argue that in Kill Bill, the protagonist, Beatrix Kiddo, defies the various types of dualities portrayed in the film, breaking common cinematic stereotypes and furthering her role as a unique pop culture hero and icon. I will explore the dichotomies of east vs. west, male vs. female, and hero/killer vs. mother as they relate to Beatrix in context of the rest of the film. Her inability to fit into any one binary ultimately suggests she is a mold-breaking character that can be looked upon by all as an inspiration, specifically, in her steadfast ability to stay true to herself, despite all odds.

The film genres of American gangster, spaghetti western, Japanese samurai, and Chinese kung fu, are all cited as influences in Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill. Each of these genres can be categorized into either eastern or western in origin; they are shown clashing aesthetically and ideologically with one another throughout the film. This forms a cultural binary, which is illustrated in the character of O-Ren Ishii; she cuts off a man’s head after he voiced his displeasure in her heritage, calling O-Ren a “Chinese Jap-American half-breed bitch.” The cultural binary, or duality, is not the only categorization present in Kill Bill. Marc O’Day defines stereotypical male gender traits as: hardness, strength, activity, rationality, decisiveness, and power. In contrast, he defines femininity as: softness, weakness, passivity, intuition, indecisiveness, and powerlessness (203). In the film, few, if any, of the female characters can be described by the traditional feminine traits, but rather, are accurately described with the male traits; many of the
women in *Kill Bill* are skilled assassins, which hardly calls to mind the characteristics of weakness and powerlessness. In addition to the female characters’ attempt to step out of their stereotypical roles, or pre-determined categories, the main conflict within *Kill Bill* arises when a man inflicts harm upon a woman. Sarah Nicholson notes that, traditionally, men take on an active role, or are “doers,” while women are passive or have things done to them (190). In the movie, the female’s active role of revenge upon the male is emphasized, instead of the male’s initial attack upon the female. This complex male/female dynamic creates a gender binary, or dichotomy. In *Kill Bill*, a woman is presented as the hero; both categories of “hero” and “mother” are known as archetypes, or universal symbols that have been identified in various myths and stories of different cultures (Chen 100). Orrin Klapp states that a hero is considered to be someone who possesses super-human qualities and is admired for his or her impressive achievements and merits (57). A mother, on the other hand, is gentler and less active, associated with comfort, nourishment, and protection (Nicholson 189). These two archetypes are made to oppose one another, forming a dualism in *Kill Bill*, due to Beatrix Kiddo and Vernita Green’s seeming inability to remain assassins and become mothers simultaneously.

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*Kill Bill* contains a multitude of eastern influences, which can be observed most clearly in the characters of Hatori Hanzo, Pai Mei, and O-Ren Ishii. David Brown notes that two of these characters are played by the renowned Sonny Ciba and Gordon Lu; Sonny Chiba was a famous kung fu film star of the nineteen-seventies and Lu was an up-and-coming kung fu film star at the time of *Kill Bill*’s production (100, 102). Brown remarks upon the martial arts films of Chiba’s time, stating that, in general, they were shot poorly and were not dubbed very well (102). Chiba’s character, Hatori Hanzo, is a respected sword maker who later made a vow to never again make “instruments of death.” Lu’s character, Pai Mei, is presented as the martial arts master; he trains Beatrix and teaches her all the skills needed to complete her quest. The scenes that feature Pai Mei are shot in low quality and include a great deal of camera zoom-ins’, as well as unrealistic sound effects. Both Hanzo and Pai Mei are presented as masters of their stereotypically Asian crafts: the art of the samurai sword and the art of kung fu. The fact that Chiba and Lu were appointed these roles, shows that these two characters could not possibly be portrayed by anyone other than experienced oriental actors in the kung fu film industry. The sub-par film quality and use of cheesy sound effects in the Pai Mei sequences are similar to the cinematic stylings of classic kung fu pictures; this gives *Kill Bill* the same vibe as is generated in the culturally eastern movies of the nineteen-seventies. One famous film series of this time period is *Lone Wolf and Cub*; it tells the story of a man traversing the snowy countryside of Japan with his son, seeking to avenge the death of his wife (Brown, 104). The film’s setting can be described as “serene,” yet once the man is forced to battle his foes, it becomes “bloody, brutal, and shocking” (Brown, 104). The third iconic oriental character in *Kill Bill*, O-Ren Ishii, is described as “queen of the Tokyo underworld.” Because of her powerful position, she is able to send an entire gang of masked swordfighters, “the crazy 88,” to attack the bride. Beatrix ends up brutally slaughtering the majority of them in a bloody rampage; this scene serves as a sharp contrast to Beatrix’s duel with O-Ren, herself. The battle Beatrix has with O-Ren takes place in a quiet and snowy Japanese garden, just the two of them being present. Both the crazy 88 and the O-Ren battle scenes are likened to *Lone Wolf and Cub*; the snowy and serene atmosphere in the *Lone Wolf and Cub* is vastly similar.
to the bride’s clash with O-Ren. Similarly, the crazy 88’s annihilation is likened to the fighting scenes in *Lone Wolf and Cub*, in that both contain elements of flying limbs and blood spraying, as David Brown states, “in huge arterial geyers” (104). Thus, Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* depicts eastern aesthetic through character traits as well as cinematography.

In addition to the film’s eastern influences, *Kill Bill* draws upon western film tradition, mostly its sub-genre, the spaghetti western. The creators of the spaghetti western, or Italian imitation of the American western genre, are director Sergio Leone and composer Ennio Moricone (Weisser, ix). J. Hoberman describes the majority of the settings in Leone’s movies as, “frontier towns with the look of decaying movie sets nestled in landscapes of Martian desolation” (38). In addition, Leone’s aesthetic is known for exaggerated spectacle; Hoberman states that “each drop of sweat” becomes a “visual event” (38). The spaghetti western genre is different from its American counterpart in the fact that it is bloodier and does not contain the patriotic self-glorification so common in American westerns (Hoberman 38). It is typical in Italian westerns for most characters to be “lone-wolves” (Hoberman 39). Though many settings in *Kill Bill* are eastern, some other settings include: El Paso, a strip club, Pasadena, a wedding chapel, and a trailer/camper in the Texas desert. It is inside this camper that a filthy, dirt-covered Beatrix battles her foe, Elle Driver. The two women use various items around the camper (a guitar, lamp, bucket of tobacco spit, and a toilet) as make-shift weapons until they are able to find swords. As the scene draws to a close, “A Silhouette of Doom,” a piece composed by Ennio Moricone, plays, while Beatrix and Elle cease fighting; they share an intense exchange of dialogue, each exchange bringing the camera closer to their sweat and dirt-covered faces. It is at this point that the bride makes her decision to gauge out Elle’s remaining eye, rather than kill her, as originally planned. Beatrix leaves Elle, blind, on the camper floor while she goes out into the desert on her own, smiling. Tarantino’s use of vacuous desert settings is similar to Leone’s traditional film aesthetic. His choice to use a music piece actually present in a spaghetti western film, let alone a piece produced by the most famous composer of the spaghetti western film genre, also strengthens the western influence in *Kill Bill*. The bride has no visual remorse in ripping out Elle’s eye; she even steps on the eyeball before leaving. Beatrix’s remorseless action corresponds to the lack of morality in Italian westerns, as well as the strong presence of bloodshed and gore. Beatrix works alone, as do her foes, all except O-Ren and her gang, who are eastern.

Though many characters in *Kill Bill* can be categorized into either east or west, the protagonist, Beatrix Kiddo, cannot, despite the fact that she is an American woman. Her inability to belong is showcased in the perception traditionally oriental characters, Hatori Hanzo, Pai Mei, and O-Ren Ishii, have of her. When Hanzo meets Beatrix, he believes her to be an ordinary tourist, that is, until she asks him to craft a sword for her. After much conversing, in Japanese, rather than English, Hanzo allows the bride to examine his sword collection. He throws a baseball at her after saying, “Funny, you like samurai swords, I like baseball.” Beatrix successfully slices the baseball in half and Hatori Hanzo agrees to break his vow of twenty years in order to make a sword for her. When the sword is complete, Hanzo commands the “yellow-haired warrior” to go. Bill says that Pai Mei “hates Caucasians, despises Americans, and has nothing but contempt for women.” It is clear that this is true, for Pai Mei is shown ridiculing the bride in their first meeting, but as the story continues, he appears to soften. Beatrix uses the kung fu move titled, “the five point palm exploding heart technique,” to kill Bill; it is this move, as stated by Bill, that Pai Mei teaches to no one. O-Ren is able to wound the bride during their face-off; it is at this time that she teases Beatrix with the remark: “silly Caucasian girl likes to play with samurai swords.” She apologizes for this comment later in the fight, before being scalped. In the cases of the three stereotypical eastern characters, each one treats Beatrix with varying levels contempt; however, all of them come to respect the bride for her sufficiency in traditionally eastern practices. Because Beatrix acts both like an easterner and westerner, and because she is treated as both, she does not fit into either category definitely.

In addition to the east vs. west dynamic, the film also contains a male vs. female dynamic, which is exemplified in the female characters of O-Ren Ishii and Elle Driver. Historically, in Hollywood films, if a female
character is caught "acting like a man," in displaying masculine gender traits, she is punished, sometimes by death (Devas 49). It is also true that in myth, women are presented either as beautiful goddesses that serve as a guide for the male hero, or evil temptresses that bring men harm (Nicholson 189). Mostly, females are, stereotypically, passive, while males are active. When O-Ren Ishii was nine years old, she witnessed the murder of her parents at the hands of a Japanese crime boss. Having survived, she plotted revenge; two years after her mother and father’s death, O-Ren succeeded in seducing, and later in killing, the crime boss. She went on to become one of the world's top female assassins and to join the “Deadly Viper Assassination Squad.” Elle Driver is also a member of this group, as is Bill's brother, Budd. After Budd tells Elle that he buried Beatrix alive and took her Hanzo sword, the two decide to make a trade; Elle agrees to give Budd a large sum of money in exchange for the sword, however, she hides a poisonous snake, known as a Black Mamba, in the case containing the money. The snake kills Budd, and Elle nearly gets away with the money, sword, and credit for killing Beatrix. Neither Elle nor O-Ren are shown assisting a male hero, nor are they shown distracting one. Both women “act like men” in the fact that they do not portray conventional feminine traits, but pursue active roles to achieve their desired goals; it is Elle and O-Ren who are active and their male victims who are passive. Though this might suggest the two can be classified as men, this is not the case; Elle and O-Ren killed men in sneaky and deceitful ways, which corresponds to the stereotype of an evil female bringing harm upon an unsuspecting male. The two fit under the category of female, just less strictly than most.

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Elle and O-Ren fit, for the most part, into the male vs. female dynamic; however, Beatrix Kiddo does not. In addition to showcasing women as weak, dependant, and passive, classic Hollywood films objectify the female body. This objectification occurs through what is known as the “voyeuristic gaze.” The voyeuristic gaze is used in film when a male character is shown studying a woman’s body and the camera follows his gaze; the presence of the voyeuristic gaze forces the audience to adopt the man's position in looking at the woman. In the opening scene of *Kill Bill*, the bride is presented as pregnant, bloody, and in her wedding dress; in other words, she is presented as the typical female victim. Despite this, she seeks revenge in killing or maiming everyone responsible for her victimization. After defeating her first opponent, O-Ren, Beatrix captures the former assassin's lawyer and best friend, Sofie Fatale; the bride forces information from Sofie, by removing a number of her limbs, and tells her why she has let her live: “I want you to tell him all the information you just told me. I want him to know I want him to know. And I want them all to know they'll all soon be as dead as O-Ren.” When she says “him,” Beatrix refers to Bill, and the “them” refers to everyone else present the moment she was shot. Just like Elle and O-Ren, Beatrix 'acts like a man' in physically fighting those who caused her pain. Added to this, the bride is not sexually objectified by the voyeuristic gaze, in fact, the only thing that is in *Kill Bill* is the Hanzo sword (Smelik, 189). Unlike her female counterparts, Beatrix gives Bill, her soon-to-be victim, fair warning before she comes after him. Because she does not fit any of the stereotypical female roles and because she is not a man, Beatrix cannot be classified under either category of the male vs. female dualism.

The third dichotomy presented in *Kill Bill* is hero/killer vs. mother, in which Beatrix cannot be placed into because she is both hero and mother simultaneously. The reason hero and mother are presented as a dualism is that, in the film, the impossibility of being both an assassin and a mother is consistently mentioned by a number of characters, including Beatrix herself.

A hero is thought of as one who is above the average human and who is admired for their ability to stand out by proving themselves with exceptional acts; it is said that heroism goes to the extremes. In contrast, Huang-Ming Chang notes words that apply to the maternal archetype are: wisdom, sympathy, instinct, and protector.
(106-107). In the film, the bride eludes death on multiple occasions; she survives a gunshot wound to the head, defeats an entire sword-fighting gang single-handedly, and escapes from a grave, among other acts. Despite murdering a multitude of people, there are times when she has spared lives; while battling former assassin, Vernita Green, Beatrix tells her that in order to “get even” with her, she would have to kill her husband and daughter, as well. The bride does not do this, in fact, she has the intention of killing Vernita only when her daughter is not present; she is genuinely upset when she realizes the young girl witnessed her mother’s death, saying to the girl, “It was not my intention to do this in front of you. For that, I’m sorry. But you can take my word for it, your mother had it coming.”

The next young girl Beatrix encounters is seventeen-year-old Gogo Yubari at the House of Blue Leaves. The girl turns out to be O-Ren’s sadistic personal bodyguard and the bride begs Gogo to walk away, but she does not; Beatrix is forced to battle and kill the girl. It is also as the House of Blue Leaves that the bride faces a young and incredibly frightened member of the crazy 88; he is the last one standing after her rampage. She proceeds to spank him with her new samurai sword, telling him, “This - is what - you get - for fucking - around - with Yakuza! Go home to your mother!” Once the bride is reunited with her daughter at the end of the film, her ruthless facade cracks; she exposes her emotional side, crying upon the first sight of her child. Beatrix is shown in Kill Bill as portraying the invincible qualities of hero in the fact that she is able to persist in her quest in the midst of seemingly eminent death. She also displays the qualities of mother in that she does not wish harm upon children or young adults; she shows sympathy towards Vernita’s daughter, is unwilling to kill Gogo, and chastises the young sword-fighter for being involved in the Tokyo crime scene. It is important to note that the cause for Beatrix’s revenge, in part, is that she thought her daughter was dead; the entire story can be looked at as a mother avenging the death of her child, exemplified in the teary reunion of mother with daughter. Since the bride is both hero and mother, she breaks the dichotomy.

The character, Beatrix Kiddo, is shown to fit into both categories of the east vs. west, male vs. female, and hero vs. mother dichotomies; she is both respectful and remorseless, powerful and weak, ruthless and merciful, good and evil, unfeeling and emotional, and selfish and selfless. In the film, Bill compares the bride to Superman, in that both she and Superman are exceptional, yet they attempt to fit into a society full of average human beings, Superman by disguising himself as Clark Kent, and Beatrix by creating the alias, Arlene Plympton. Bill says to the bride: “You would've worn the costume of Arlene Plympton. But you were born Beatrix Kiddo. And every morning when you woke up, you’d still be Beatrix Kiddo.” He goes on to tell her, “I’m calling you a killer. A natural born killer. You always have been, and you always will be... and no matter how much beer you drank or barbecue you ate or how fat your ass got, nothing in the world would ever change that.” It is in Bill’s conversation with the bride that director, Quentin Tarantino, reveals the reason for the public’s admiration of Beatrix, despite her seemingly questionable morality. Even though the bride is shown making questionable moral decisions, such as in her choice to maim the entire crazy 88, she is an effective role model due to her determination and resolve to stay true to herself as a “natural born killer.” She purposely does not fit into any socially-constructed dualities and is, therefore, a hero in her own right; she does not act in the way filmatic heroes traditionally do, rather, she acts in a way that seems right to her. Though the chances of a former female assassin going on a bloody rampage to avenge the death of her daughter seem slim to none, Beatrix effectively illustrates a realistic hero; her quest is driven by an incredibly real love for her child and she executes her mission in a way that suits herself, not caring if her way is accepted by society or not. Ultimately, Kill Bill’s protagonist, Beatrix Kiddo acts as a powerful role model and icon because she stays true to herself, overcoming socially-constructed ideals and categories, inspiring others to do the same.

Brown's short article illustrates the various ways eastern culture, most notably 70’s kung fu films, have influenced and impacted *Kill Bill*. Brown lists a great deal of specific kung fu films, explaining their unique correlation to Tarantino’s film, while also pointing out less obvious evidence of eastern integration, including the presence of renowned kung fu stars Sonny Chiba, David Carradine, and Gordon Lu as Hatori Hanzo, Bill, and Pei Mei, respectively (100). Brown points out the stylistic similarities between *Kill Bill* and traditional kung fu films, going on to state that Tarantino does more than simply replicate these classic martial arts films, but actually modernizes the genre and pays it tribute in an artistic and original manner (104). I could not find any information on David Brown, however, the article was published in Metro, which is published by the Australian Teachers of Media Incorporated (ATOM) and is a peer-reviewed journal. I will use this article to show the eastern influences present in *Kill Bill*, which contrast with the western influences.


Chang shows that there exists a connection between archetypes and mythology. He goes on to argue that these archetypes are still present in our world today as a result of the “collective unconsciousness” that humans share (100, 101). He goes on to define and explain the various archetypes of: Anima, Animus, Mentor, Mother, and Shadow (104-107). Huang-Ming Chang is a professor at the University of Catalonia and Eindhoven University of Technology. I will use the description of the mother archetype, as well as, the information that supports the fact that mythical concepts are still present in films and books today. I will use this in order to be able to compare mythical stereotypes that are discussed in other articles, with the characters of *Kill Bill*.


Devas explores the role of hero in *The 39 Steps* and states that the white, male hero is capable of doing as he pleases, as a result of his gender and race, showcasing a sense of dominance and imperialism (46). She makes it clear that where women attempt to “act like men” in the film, they are punished and where they stick to their pre-determined role, they are still at the mercy of men (49). She does this by examining the hero’s two contrasting female love interests. Angela Devas is a lecturer in film and media studies at Thames Valley University. I will use this article to show Beatrix’s uniqueness in the fact that she does “act like a man” and is not punished, but is, in fact, rewarded.


Hoberman describes the basics of the “spaghetti western” film genre, a genre formed by the Italian take on the American western (38). He gives a great deal of information on the genre’s impact as a whole, and notes a variety of important films, directors, and composers. I will use Hoberman’s writing to affirm that *Kill Bill* is influenced by these spaghetti westerns, in comparing scenes of spaghetti westerns to the scenes of *Kill Bill*. The author, J. Hoberman, is an experienced critic and the source, itself, is a magazine article. Despite this, I think it is safe for me to use since I will not be using the opinions or arguments made by the author, to support my claims.

Klapp defines and analyzes stereotypical heroes, villains, and fools as they are depicted in popular culture. He also looks at the psychological aspects of these characters as well as how they are perceived by their audience. Although this article is older than the other sources I will be using, the information is still relevant and the stereotypes discussed within the article have changed very little, if at all. The author, Orrin Klapp, was considered to be one of San Diego State College’s top sociological researchers and professors. Klapp received his Doctorate from the University of Chicago in Sociology. I will be looking at the differences between hero and villain in order to prove that Beatrix is neither a stereotypical hero, nor a stereotypical villain. I will also use this article to explain why, despite this, she is still considered a hero, rather than a villain.


Nicholson explains, in detail, Joseph Campbell’s idea of the “heroic journey” and shows the ways men and women are portrayed in myth. She argues that Campbell’s “monomyth” leaves no room for the possibility of woman as hero (190). She defines mythic concepts and explains the various ways myths can be read, going on to provide examples that illustrate the role of woman to be predominantly passive, even in the case she is considered “hero,” making her less than her male counterpart (192-193). Sarah Nicholson is a professor of religion and gender studies, literature and academic writing practice in Sydney, Australia. I will be looking at Nicholson’s comparison of male and female, as well as hero and villain in mythology to show that Beatrix contains qualities of multiple stereotypes.


O’Day examines the various aspects of action films that utilize a female protagonists; he refers to this genre of film as “contemporary action babe cinema (202).” He makes the argument that “action babe cinema” does more than simply burdening young women, expecting them to act like “real men” and look like “real women.” He states, rather, that these films contribute to a change in gender representation, as well as, relationships, in a way that is appealing to both men and women, alike (216). O’Day does this by focusing on gender binaries, the importance of fitness, and the common structure shared among films of the genre. He provides a multitude of examples, including, but not limited to, *Tomb Raider, X-Men, Charlie’s Angels,* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.* Marc O’Day is an associate dean of Humanities at Suffolk College and he has other published works under the subjects of fiction, film, and television. For my paper, I will, mainly be looking at O’Day’s section on gender in “action babe cinema,” however, I will look at other portions in less depth.
In this book chapter, Smelik discusses classic feminist film theory, with the help of film heroines, Lara Croft and Beatrix Kiddo, ultimately affirming that Beatrix a far more complex and empowering character (179, 191). She discusses the traditional film concepts of “voyeuristic gaze,” “narcissistic gaze,” and the “Oedipus” framework, while using Lara Croft as an example. She then compares and contrasts Beatrix with Lara and shows that traditional film concepts are not present in *Kill Bill*. Anneke Smelik is a professor in Visual Culture at the Department of Cultural Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen and has publications on cultural memory, human and machine, authenticity in fashion, and visual literacy. I will be using the information on traditional feminist film study and Beatrix’s difference from other female film heroes to show that she does not fit fully into the stereotypical male vs. female dualism.

**Notes**


2 Smelik 180.