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Contemporary Interpretations of the Concept of Race

Abstract

In my paper, I examine the changes that have taken place in different approaches to race through an analysis of race-related concepts in the international literature. I therefore set out to describe the definitions of race that have emerged in the academic world and the debate surrounding the concept. A deeper study of this problem is essential if we are to understand what motivates the persistence of race, that is, what is at stake in the application and use of the concept. The growing sociological and anthropological literature on the geneticisation and molecularisation of race indicates that a kind of biological realism or essentialism is being revived. This is why I think it is important to explain, through a few examples, the arguments of contemporary European constructivist critical race theorists who take an anti-essentialist stance and maintain a contextualised understanding of race.

Keywords: race, racism, biological essentialism, constructivism, critical race theory

Introduction

When Ann Morning conducted research on the nature of race, many of the scientists interviewed said, "Everyone knows race is a social construct!"[1] These researchers also expressed disbelief that Morning would find any diversity regarding the definition of race in the scientific community. But the idea that the definition of race, and how we think about it, is very divisive and fraught with tension among scholars is a good starting point:[2] as there is no consensus among researchers on what constitutes a race.[3] Some scholars believe that there is a disciplinary divide between social scientists, who share a more constructivist view, and biologists and physical anthropologists, who largely maintain an essentialist approach.[4] These differences however are not only between disciplines, but also within disciplines.[5]

In the field of science studies, a discipline that uses social science methods and concepts to analyze the issues and problems of *science,* many scholars examine "the changes in fundamental cultural categories that have occurred as nature has become increasingly manufactured, commodified, digitized, and, in general, socially shaped by new research

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[1] Morning 2011, 7.
[2] Cartmill 1999, 651–660.
[3] Cooper 2003, 23–25; Ossorio - Duster 2005, 115–128; Sankar - Cho 2002, 1337–1338; Wadman 2004, 1026
[4] Cartmill 1999, 651–660; Duster 2003, 258–277; Keita - Kittles 1997, 534–544; Krieger - Bassett 1993, 161–169; Lee -Mountain - Koenig 2001, 33–75; Odocha 2000, 96–97.
[5] Morning 2011, 1–22.

fields and associated technologies."[6] Science studies scholars also research and monitor changes in the way scientists and the man in the street conceptualize the human body, the determinants of health, the emergence of racism, and the new biological essentialism.[7]

In my paper, I examine the changes that have taken place in different approaches to race, through an analysis of race-related concepts in the literature. I will therefore attempt to describe the definitions of race that have emerged in academia. In order to describe the debate surrounding the concept of race, a deeper exploration of this issue is essential if we are to understand the stakes involved in its application and use. The literature review shows that there is still no agreement, even within a given discipline, on how the concept of race should be interpreted. It is true that the growing sociological and anthropological literature on the geneticisation[8] and molecularisation of race indicates that a kind of biological realism or essentialism is being revived.[9] This is why it is important in this article to explain, through a few examples, the arguments along which contemporary European constructivist critical race theorists take an anti-essentialist stance.

Race: social construct or biological reality?

According to Leonard Lieberman, essentialists are those researchers who think the human race is inherently divided into races.[10] Constructivists are scientists who do not believe in the racial division of the human race. However, this rigid and definite essentialist-constructivist dichotomy is perhaps a picture that is too simplistic to describe satisfactorily our ideas about our differences, yet it provides an appropriate framework for the international debate about the concept of race.

An essentialist approach

The central idea of the essentialists is that members of a given group share one or more defining qualities that are inherent, essential and innate, or otherwise fixed, to the group.[11] In defining race, the essentialist position implies an inherited, permanent physical or psychological difference between different racial groups, which are thought to be natural

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[6] Hess 2007, 463.
[7] Martin 1998, 22–44.
[8] Lippmann 1993, 64–79.
[9] Fausto - Sterling 2004, 1-37; Fullwiley 2007, 221–237; Outram–Ellison 2006, 157–179; Pálsson 2007, 257–272.
[10] Lieberman 1968, 127–141.
[11] Morning 2011, 22–66.

kinds.[12] In many cases race (Mayr defines it even more narrowly as geographic race) and sub-species are treated as synonymous, where race means "an aggregate of phenotypically similar population of a species inhabiting a geographic subdivision of the range of that species and differing taxonomically from other populations of that species."[13]

Race as a definition and category, as well as the essentialist conception of race, was born before and outside the advent of modern science.[14] The beginnings of '*race science*' can be traced back to 18th century Europe, where the forerunners of today's biologists and anthropologists sought to name, catalogue and describe the races of the world. Linné (1707-78) is perhaps the best known of the early taxonomists. It was he who initially established four categories within the human race: American, Asiatic, African and European. These were defined first by place of origin and later by skin colour. In addition to him, several other scientists developed human classification schemes, such as Francios Bernier, George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.[15] In addition to the various taxonomies, European scientists developed the first anthropometric measures of race-based differences. Petrus Camper worked on *facial angles*, Anders Retzius introduced the cranial index and Paul Broca invented various instruments to measure the skull and other human body parts.[16] Race played a prominent role in the theoretical and methodological development of the human sciences during this period. These essentialist ideas became intertwined with social hierarchies based on skin colour during this period, mostly under the influence of European colonisation in the Americas, Africa and Asia.[17] The end product was an essentialist and hierarchical concept of "black," "white," "yellow," and "red" race, created by Linne and other taxonomists.[18]

This approach flourished in the 19th century. Empirical evidence was found by researchers of the time, such as Samuel Morton, Josiah Nott, George Gliddon and Louis Agassiz, that different races existed. Differences between races were thought to be found in skeletal structure, muscles, genitals, brain size, sweat, speech and intelligence.[19] These have been analyzed and studied in disciplines such as anthropology, craniometry and anthropometry.

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[12] Tate–Audette 2001, 495–520.
[13] Mayr 2002, 90.
[14] Smedley–Smedley 2007, 11–35.
[15] Smedley–Smedley 2007, 227-251; Smith 2015, 252–267.
[16] Hannaford 1996, 235–274.
[17] Hannaford 1996, 235–274.
[18] Morning 2011, 22–66.
[19] Smedley–Smedley 2007, 227–251.

The late 19th and early years of the 20th century signaled that a new scientific definition was on the horizon.[20] The science of eugenics and its results had an impact on the evolution and change of the concept of race. According to the eugenic interpretation of Darwinian evolutionary theory, races are in constant competition with each other, meaning that the fittest survive (*survival of the fittest*) and the weakest are doomed to extinction.[21]

The eugenic discourse of the interwar period and the events of the Second World War contributed to the rejection of the concept of race that dominated in the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the most striking examples of this is the UNESCO resolution of 1950, in which, in an essay by Ashley Montague and other social scientists[22] the essentialist concept of race and the exclusionary, destructive racism based on it are condemned. By the mid-20th century, therefore, a kind of academic consensus had emerged against the harmful effects of the essentialist model.[23] A rethinking of the conceptual approach to race became necessary, most notably as scientists began to deny its scientific nature. We can sum up the essentialist position as follows:

> "Race theory is the recurrently encountered folk belief that humans can be partitioned into distinct types on the basis of their concrete, observable constitution. The notion of observable constitution captures the following features of racial thinking: racial differences are thought to be embodied, natural, and enduring, and are thought to encompass nonobvious or inner qualities (including moral and mental ones) as well as outward physical ones."[24]

In addition, scientific research has emerged that has used contemporary technology to demonstrate the biological impossibility of race. A classically cited example of this is Richard Lewontin's research, who published an article in 1972 demonstrating through the tools of genetics that races cannot be distinguished genetically.[25] Despite this scientific result essentialist thinking has not disappeared. According to essentialists, biological races exist as a taxonomic unit of a subspecies, differing from a population only in a few gene frequencies. A good example of this approach is the work of Neven Sesardić, who believes that the differences in gene frequencies capture the biological reality of race.[26]

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[20] Morning 2011, 22–66.
[21] Spencer 2006.
[22] Montague 1950.
[23] Smedley–Smedley 2007, 269–288.
[24] Hirschfeld 1996, 42.
[25] Feldman–Lewontin 2008.
[26] Sesardić 2010.

A constructivist approach

If essentialists argue that race categories simply reflect natural, stable differences between human groups, then constructivists argue that such categories are "man-made" or in other words artificial "social constructs."[27] Many critics see constructivism as a denial and rejection of important truths of biological "reality." But it is also interpreted as an epistemological approach that undermines valuable scientific (basic) principles such as objectivity and positivism.[28] But constructivists do not see social groups as less real simply because they are not rooted in biology. Constructivists believe that race is the result of an ideology that emerged in the 18th century as part of European experimentation to comprehend other ethnic groups.[29]

As a result of the "events" discussed in the essentialist approach, the early years of the 20th century already indicated that a new scientific definition of race was on the horizon. And in the 1950s a new anti-essentialist view emerged, which Lieberman summarizes as (i) human biological differences cannot be neatly divided into separate categories, (ii) race-based traits are not inherited together, (iii) populations have always been mixed, so the emergence of different races is impossible, (iv) the boundaries of races are arbitrarily drawn by those who do the classifying.[30] This idea is a radical departure from the previous understanding, since it aims to directly refute the biological claims of the essentialists. Matt Cartmill's research shows that the use of the concept of race in scientific articles in the field of physical anthropology showed a downward trend between the 1960s and the 1990s.[31] Similar to the anti-essentialist position, most constructivists see race as "a definition that expresses and symbolizes social conflicts, interests and concerns about different types of human bodies."[32] Racial classification is thus a tool of power, designed to create social hierarchies and to elevate people – economically, socially and politically – at the expense of others.[33] Since, according to the constructivist view, race is a 'social invention', individuals do not carry their race with them, it is merely a label that is attached to them depending on the society they belong to.[34] Racial categorization is an intellectual product of cultural

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[27] Fausto–Sterling 2004, 1–37; Fullwiley 2007, 221–237; Outram–Ellison 2006, 157–179; Pálsson 2007, 257–272; Barkan 1992, 13–66; Nobles 2000, 1–25; Reardon 2004, 38–65; Morning 2011, 1–22.
[28] Gergen 1998, 33–48; Sarich–Miele 2004, 59–103.
[29] Morning 2011, 22–66.
[30] Lieberman 1968, 127–141.
[31] Cartmill 1999, 651–660.
[32] Omi–Winant 1994, 55.
[33] Morning 2008, 106–137.
[34] Morning 2011, 18.

power, position and attitude, which continues to have an impact today.[35] The relationship between constructivists and essentialists can be summarized as follows:

> "Specifically, I submit that race is a system for classifying human beings that is grounded in the belief that they embody inherited and fixed biological characteristics that identify them as members of racial groups. Where essentialists and constructionists would differ is on whether the belief in biological racial difference is accurate."[36]

Contemporary definitions of race

There is no consensus on the concept of race across disciplines or within disciplines, and the scientific definition of race is constantly changing. Despite well-established critiques in the social and natural sciences since the mid-20th century, the biological approach to race seems to be widely used by scholars working in various disciplines by peeling away ambiguous, and suspect meanings.[37] Below I will show how thinking about race has changed and explore the question of whether contemporary theories do indeed incorporate a biological model of race.

Contemporary views on the definition of race are rewritten by the concept of DNA.[38] Troy Duster argues that DNA's prominent role in defining race suggests that there is continuity between contemporary scientific understandings of race and the essentialism of the past. He posits that earlier notions of race are simply 'buried alive' in contemporary scientific thought and practice.[39] However, research on the human genome has led some scientists to conclude that different categories of race do not significantly reflect biological differences.[40] The finding that 99.9% of human DNA is shared by groups of what we call races, and there are 85% differences in DNA variation within groups are widely argued to be reasons for a rethinking of racial categories.[41] The discovery through genetic research of one's descent from multiple racial groups can be interpreted as a blow to the traditional biological notion of race. Other researchers, however, are of the opinion that human genetics and its research results can be interpreted as evidence for the existence of natural

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[35] Omi–Winant 1994, 9–48; Hirschfeld 1996, 135–159; Morning 2011, 1–22.
[36] Morning 2011, 21.
[37] Fausto-Sterling 2004, 1–37; Fullwiley 2007, 221–237; Outram–Ellison 2006, 157–179; Pálsson 2007, 257–272.
[38] Abu El-Haj 2007.
[39] Duster 2003, 258–277.
[40] Marks 1995; Graves 2000, 155–173.
[41] Lewontin 1972, 381–398.

races within the human species.[42] They argue, for example, that clustering algorithms applied to human DNA data objectively generate clusters that can be understood as races.[43] Furthermore, the "genetic family tree." i. e., the racial heritage of an individual, can be unraveled from DNA analysis.[44] The aforementioned concept is also of great importance in medicine, as it can provide a basis for understanding differences in health conditions.[45] Many proponents of the essentialist model believe that it would be a shame to deny what members of historically oppressed minority groups, see as an important biological reality in their everyday life.[46] They believe that race-based identification contains information that can help more accurately identify health needs.[47]

It can be seen, however, that the geneticisation and molecularisation of race and the results of DNA analysis are used by both essentialists and constructivists to reinforce their views in the debate on the definition of race. Geneticists Morris W. Foster and Richard R. Sharp argue that "although a simplistic biological understanding of race and ethnicity, linked to the eugenics movement, may be dead, a more nuanced assumption, namely that race and ethnicity do capture 'some' meaningful biological differences, is alive and well."[48] Evolutionary biologist Joseph Graves, on the other hand, finds that "[m]ost geneticists, evolutionary biologists and anthropologists agree that there are no biological races within the human species."[49] Furthermore, several philosophers, biologists and social scientists have reached the same conclusion.[50] To get a more nuanced picture of the contemporary debate on the nature of race, it is important to note the work of Lundy Braun, who has examined the biologists' views on race. [51]

> "Multiple, frequently conflicting, and generally implicit understandings of the concepts of race and ethnicity circulate in biomedical circles, with some researchers proposing that race has no genetic meaning, others arguing that the estimated 5 to 6 percent genetic difference is sufficiently meaningful biologically to justify an intensive research program, and still others arguing that the whole controversy can be circumvented by substituting ethnicity for race."[52]

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[42] Mayr 2002, 89–94.
[43] Risch et al. 2002, 1–12.
[44] Bolnick et al. 2007, 399–400.
[45] Lee–Mountain–Koenig 2000, 33–75.
[46] Morning 2011, 219–249.
[47] Satel 2002, 56–58; Burchard et al. 2003, 1170–75.
[48] Foster–Sharp 2002, 844.
[49] Graves 2001, 5.
[50] Barkan 1992, 13–66; Marks 1995; Nobles 2000, 1–25; Reardon 2004, 38–65.
[51] Braun 2002, 159–174.
[52] Braun 2002, 165.

However, if the meaning does not change – i. e., ethnicity is used in the same sense as race – this does not mean that the same issues and problems will not arise in the future as with race.

Like Braun, Alan H. Goodman was curious about how members of the scientific community use the concept of race. He proposes to divide the scholars according to which type of epistemological approach do they subscribe to: at one end of his typology are the true believers, such as the psychologist Philippe J. Rushton, who believes in three categories of race (Mongoloid, Negroid and Caucasian).[53] He classified them according to intelligence and reproductive ability.[54] The other camp can be divided into two groups: both groups believe that race is just a myth, but they come to different conclusions. The politically conservative group argues that if race does not exist, socio-political decisions should not be based on race.[55] In the social constructivists' view, the way in which individuals experience their own race does not correspond to the way in which different disciplines biologize the concept.[56] Goodman calls the in-between group the "confused"[57]one. He includes in this group some people who do not understand why *race biology* is wrong, yet avoid its occurrence in any way in order to maintain the appearance of political correctness. Others use the concept of race as a quasi-biological, quasi-genetic category and do not understand what is wrong with the concept or the way it is used. Still others believe that the stance against race biology is political rather than scientific. The camp of those who fall in between is huge. It includes almost all public health professionals and doctors, biologists and most physical anthropologists.

Braun and Goodman's research suggests that it is far from clear, even in academia, how different disciplines think about race and how they interpret or define it. It can also be seen that thinking about race involves a great many social institutions, which makes it important to consider a social critical approach that aims to show the social embeddedness of the concept on a constructivist basis. In other words, it is worth examining how critical social science reflects on the structuring power of the concept.

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[53] Goodman 1997, 20–25.
[54] Rushton–Jensen 2005, 235–294.
[55] Hannaford 1996, 369–396.
[56] Smedley–Smedley 2007, 289-307; Marks 1995; Reardon 2004, 38–65.
[57] Goodman 1997, 23.

Critical race theory and its European interpretations:
the case of Roma racialization

Critical race theory as an academic approach originated in the legal field in the United States of America. Researchers wanted to address the problem that, despite the fact that the classical biological concept of race was challenged by the second half of the 20th century, both the scientific discourse and people's everyday lives were still influenced by essentialist race-based thinking. This has made it necessary to develop a theoretical approach that can take account of biological (material) differences without denying the social construction of race. Researchers placed emphasis on three main ideas: (1) on being able to talk about the everyday reality of racism and (2) to be able to represent the perspectives of citizens who have experienced or are experiencing racism, and (3) to capture the changing process of racism in different social contexts.[58] These essentially legal-theoretical works serve as the foundation for scholars who then built upon these ideas working from very different social science fields. Their aim in addition to redefining race is to address the problem of institutionalized racism.

Although there have been many changes in the scientific discourse on race, along with the availability of exhaustive literature on the negative effects of racism both in a local and global context, we cannot talk about equal societies in the third decade of the 21st century. It is from this critical framework that Howard Winant draws attention to the need for researchers to focus on the articulation of race.[59] He argues that if we are to be serious about combating racism in our globalizing, multicultural world, we need a theory that can capture the typification and social structuration that race brings. According to Winant, there are three important elements to this: (1) a comparative/historical aspect; (2) the ability to link the structuring effects and identity-marking function of racialization within society at the micro and macro levels; (3) a rethinking of political discourse in the light of the ways in which the concept of race, race-based thinking, inhibits the achievement of social equality.

Following the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany and the UNESCO declarations after the Second World War, the concept of race was replaced in Europe (unlike in Britain and Ireland) by the category of ethnic identity. According to Mathias Möschel, the main argument against its use was based on the fact that, since there is no biological sense of race, the use of the concept of race would implicitly contribute to its legitimization and provide a breeding ground for racism.[60] However, the problem is that the concept of race

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[58] Delgado–Stefancic 2000; 2001; Haney–López 2010.
[59] Winant 2000.
[60] Möschel 2011.

is in use, racism has not disappeared, and the narrow interpretation of continental scientific discourse does not allow for a grasp of the everyday reality of race and racism. To illustrate this, Möschel cites the French practice, where the dominant approach to racial equality is of colorblindness. In this example, the author discusses the need for statisticians to use the category of racial identity, without which they are unable to detect racism in society. Möschel places particular emphasis on institutions – prisons, police – where racial discrimination is well documented from a social science perspective, although there is no formal racial categorization of citizens. For these reasons, Möschel also argues that critical race theory (hereafter: CRT) provides a useful perspective in the European context, because similarly to the American, the European discourse is not capable of sensitively grasping how race functions in various social contexts. CRT's critical principles allow researchers to reflect on how race functions in different interactions, to grasp the structuring power of race, the everydayness of racism, and to point out the performativity of race.

Racial discrimination affects minority communities in Europe, and Roma communities are among the larger ethnic groups, and for this reason, there is a substantial scholarship (within the field of Critical Romani Studies) that deals with discrimination against these communities.[61] It is argued, that the inability to collect accurate data on the Roma population and thus the lack of accurate data about the negative discrimination they face in the workplace, housing, education, in healthcare or legal areas act as barriers in combating discrimination and hinder any solution to these inequalities. Ronnie Fay and Lynsey Kavanaugh for example, argue for statistical visibility of Roma communities in Ireland.[62] Fay and Kavanaugh argue for the need to capture ethnic identity in census data collection in order to produce effective evidence-based policy interventions to prevent discrimination. Similar problems are seen with the Sinti and Roma community in Germany by researchers Anja Reuss and Jonathan Mack.[63] The difference between Reuss and Mack's approach to that of Fay and Kavanaugh is that the former take the position that different forms of discrimination should be recorded without registering ethnic data. They argue that it is possible to combat racial discrimination without quantitative data collection by the state, but in order to make sense of the everyday reality of racism, it is important to have qualitative research where these experiences can be explored and linked to ethnic identity. All of this must be done in strict compliance with the ethical rules of scientific research, so that sensitive ethnic data cannot be linked to individuals and made public, thus preventing ethnic identity from being the basis for any misuse later on.

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[61] Ryder–Cemlyn–Acton 2014; Cortés Gómez–End 2019; Van Baar–Kóczé 2020.
[62] Fay–Kavanaugh 2019.
[63] Reuss–Mack 2019.

Lázár argues for the application of critical race theory in Hungarian legal theory, and in his review, he emphasizes how the tools proposed by CRT could help reform the legal system, for example by taking into account the everyday experiences of victims of racial discrimination.[64] In this way, the notion of race in the legal framework would also make sense on the basis of local needs and experiences. Szamosi also draws attention to the application of critical race theory in the Hungarian health context.[65] In his work, he argues that in a society where ethnic inequalities have long determined the life quality of citizens, the use of ethnic identity can enable more equal access to health care. The health marginalization of Roma people and both the scientific documentation of this process and the incorporation of their experiences concerning ethnic discrimination into the reform of medical practice, can enable the improvement of health standards for Roma communities. However, he also considers it important that race and ethnic identity must be contextually defined and applied. There is a need for concepts to inform medical decision-making, and the use of identity categories makes health disparities statistically visible, but it must be recognized that the essentialist interpretations of these concepts can negatively impact equal access to health care.

Conclusion

Views and definitions of race are constantly changing. We cannot therefore talk about a fixed, stable concept, which is timeless, the same in every age and in every discipline. There are ongoing debates about the nature of race, focusing on whether we can talk about a biologically based classification of race, or whether it is a category that is more socially understood and created in order to make it easier to classify and understand other ethnic groups. There is a debate between different disciplines and within disciplines about the definition of race. However, both constructivists and essentialists agree that race is a system for classifying people based on the assumption that they have permanent biological characteristics. The difference between the essentialist and constructivist conceptions is rooted in the question of whether race-based differences in biological terms can be accurately captured.[66] It can also be seen that, in the case of contemporary definitions, the geneticisation and molecularisation of race, as well as the results from DNA analysis, are used by both essentialists and constructivists to reinforce their views in the debate on the

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[64] Lázár 2016.
[65] Szamosi 2013; 2019; 2022.
[66] Morning 2011, 219–249.

definition of race. However, these approaches are not sensitive enough as to how race is created in everyday experience. Critical race theory, building on the constructivist approach, proposes a concept of race that takes into account the material differences associated with the concept itself, while at the same time capturing the cultural embeddedness of race, thereby pointing to the variability of the concept's meanings, both historically, socially and geographically.

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Fanni Antalóczy

Abused Men: Representing Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence and/or Sexual Abuse in *Law and Order: SVU*

Abstract

The paper focuses on visual representations of intimate partner violence (IPV) and female perpetrated sexual assault (FPSA) in a cis-hetero context. Although research suggests that male the number of male victims is closer to female victims than believed by the general public, representation of such scenarios is still scarce. The paper analyses six episodes of the American police procedural, *Law and Order: SVU* depicting female perpetrated intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault; and concentrates on the representational attitudes of the series regarding the crime itself, the depiction of victims, the portrayal of perpetrators and the main characters' reactions during the investigations; and argues that the series depicts the existing myths, stereotypes and attitudes surrounding these male victims, but often questions them as well, and provides education for the audience about female perpetrated IPV and sexual abuse.

Key words: sexual assault, intimate partner violence, male victims, police procedural

Introduction – Special Victims Unit

Law and Order: SVU or Special Victims Unit is the first spin-off of the American police procedural, *Law and Order* created by Dick Wolf, which, since its first release in 1990 has become a franchise with six different shows, including *SVU*.[1] *Special Victims Unit* was launched in 1999 and currently is at its 25th season, with more than 500 episodes all together. What sets *SVU* apart from the other police procedurals of the franchise is that – as the title suggests – this group of detectives specialise on a specific type of crime, namely offenses related to sexuality. Every *SVU* episode opens with the following quote, emphasizing the importance of this unit: "In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories."[2] As indicated by these opening lines, *SVU* centres around sexually based offenses – different forms sexual abuse, assault, rape, however, they also deal with other special types of offenses and victims, for instance child abuse, domestic violence, cases involving non-heterosexual victims or sex workers, even when there is no apparent sexual component of the crime.

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[1] The spin off shows are the following: *Law and Order: SVU*, *Organized Crime*, *Criminal Intent*, *London*, *LA* and *Trial by Jury*.
[2] Dick Wolf, *Law and Order: SVU* (1999-; NBC).

Arguably SVU has achieved a lot in normalising public discourse and educating about sexually based offenses, as the episodes provide realistic scenarios, showcase different perspectives and attitudes about sex-related crimes through the main characters, voice contrasting opinions, impart a set of vocabulary to describe these offenses, traumas and experiences and also offer points of identification, empathy and sympathy. The majority of the episodes focus on cases of more widespread, typical (or even stereotypical) setups of male perpetrators and female victims. However, this analysis focuses on the small minority of the episodes that depict incidents of intimate partner violence (IPV) and/or sexual abuse in a cis-hetero, but female on male context; in other words, situations in which IPV or different forms of sexual assault occur with an adult male victim and an adult female perpetrator.

Among the more than five hundred episodes there are only six that openly deal with adult male victims of IPV and/or sexual abuse. There are further episodes with male victims and female perpetrators, for instance statutory rape committed by an adult woman, financial abuse (for example when female sex-workers trick their client out of their money by feeding them drugs), or women killing or castrating the man who raped them; however, these are excluded from this analysis for the sake of coherence. Out of the six episodes three deal with intimate partner violence ("Asunder", "December Solstice" and "What Can Happen in the Dark") and there are also three episodes which feature sexual assault committed by a woman who is not an intimate partner of the male victim ("Ridicule", "Design" and "Parole Violations"). The following analyses focus on how the series approaches the representation of the crime itself, how it depicts the victims, portrays the perpetrators, and how the main characters react during these investigations.

Male victims

Before the in-depth analyses of the episodes, the theoretical, sociological and psychological backgrounds of IPV, sexual abuse and especially male victim experiences need to be established. According to the World Health Organisation, IPV, or intimate partner violence "refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship."[3] Scott-Storey et al suggest that this definition

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[3] Ronja Lindstrøm. "Intimate Partner Violence against Men. A Systematic Review of How Definition, Study Characteristics and Quality Affects Prevalence. Master's Thesis, Project in Criminology, Malmö University, Faculty of Health and Society, Institution of Criminology, Malmö, Sweden (2018): 3. pp. 1–25.

should be further extended and completed with considering any behaviors that have the *potential* to cause harm[4] (858) as well.

When it comes to sex offenses – given that *Special Victims Unit* takes place in New York and the detectives are bound by the regulations of the state – definitions of the New York Penal Law regarding IPV and sexually based offenses should be introduced as well. Excluding the sections on underage victims, NY Penal Law Article 130 differentiates four different types of sexual offenses: rape, criminal sexual act, sexual abuse and aggravated sexual abuse. Rape is defined as sexual intercourse without consent; criminal sexual act is described as oral or anal sexual conduct without consent; sexual abuse is sexual contact without consent; and aggravated sexual abuse means insertion of a foreign object or finger in the vagina, urethra, penis, rectum or anus of another.[5]

Intimate partner violence is often associated with physical and sexual abuse; however, it should be stated that various forms of intimate partner abuse do not include any physical or sexual component. Tillbrook, Allan and Dear delineate five more types of abuse apart from physical and sexual violence in intimate partner relations. These are the following: psychological abuse including emotional and cognitive abuse, which aim to undermine the victim's sense of logic and their self-worth respectively; verbal abuse that is defined as "behaviour that involves that use of language which is designed to humiliate, degrade, demean, intimidate, or subjugate"; financial or economical abuse occurs when the victim is deprived of basic necessities and their income or assets are seized; social abuse is "the imposition of isolation through the control of social activity, deprivation of liberty, or the deliberate creation of unreasonable dependence"; and spiritual abused is defined as the impairment of the victim's spiritual life, identity or well-being.[6]

Even though WHO's definition of IPV and NY Penal Law seem to be gender neutral in their terminology, there are still deep-rooted gender biases when it comes to IPV and sexual offenses. Such prejudice has long historical roots, given that in the seventeenth century for instance, men who suffered physical abuse at the hands of their wives, were often punished for forsaking masculinity.[7] As Ronja Lindstrøm also emphasizes, IPV has

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[4] Kelly Scott-Storey, Sue O'Donnel, Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, Colleen Varcoe, Nadine Wathen, Jeannie Malcolm and Charlene Vincent. "What About the Men? A Critical Review of Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 24, no. 2. (2023): 858.

[5] New York Penal Law. 130. Sex offenses (§§ 130.00-130.96). https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/PEN

[6] Emily Tilbrook, Alfred Allan, and Greg Dear. *Intimate Partner Abuse of Men* (Perth: Men's Advisory Network, 2010), 4–5.

[7] Amandine Dziewa and Fabienne Glowacz. "Getting out from Intimate Partner Violence: Dynamics and Processes. A Qualitative Analysis of Female and Male Victims' Narratives." *Journal of Family Violence* 37, no. 4 (2022): 644

for long been considered a female issue – even the WHO definition is given within the context of violence against women: "[h]istorically speaking, intimate partner violence has been considered a female victim issue (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005) and the concept of female victims is much more recognized in the general population than the concept of male victims."[8] Furthermore, it is still difficult to fathom a male victim of intimate partner violence, both in public discourse and often for academia as well: "up to 1980 the pronoun 'she' was used almost exclusively in research on sexual abuse survivors"[9], even if increasing results show that the number of male victims is closer to that of female victims than ever thought: "several studies on IPV found equivalent rates of assault perpetrated by men and women."[10]

Regarding sexual offenses, there are some prevalent myths as well which make it more difficult to conceptualize a heterosexual male victim of sexual assault perpetrated by a female. According to Coxell and King these are the following:

- The presence of erection or ejaculation implies consent on behalf of the survivor.
- A male cannot be forced to have sex against his will.
- Males are less affected by sexual assaults than females.[11]

Although these myths have been proven false – for instance erection and ejaculation are described as automatic and involuntary bodily functions, and male victims of sexual assaults do experience serious physiological and psychological harm – in public discourse and imagination unfortunately they are still widespread.

Most researchers agree that the majority of victims in sexually based crimes are women – although there is no such consensus when it comes to IPV –, however, that does not mean that the number of male victims is zero. As Carlyle et al point out, "[a]ccording to the results of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), approximately 28.5% of men and 35.6% of women have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime; 13.8% of men and 24.3% of women have experienced severe physical IPV (Black et al., 2011)."[12] Tsui uses numbers to express the same figures, which might make the male victims' experience more relatable "1.5 million women and 834.700 men annually are physically violated or raped

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[8] Lindstrøm. "Intimate Partner Violence against Men," 3.

[9] Adrian W. Coxell, and Michael B. King. "Male victims of rape and sexual abuse." *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 11, no. 3 (1996): 298.

[10] Rute Carmo, Ana Grams and Teresa Magalhaes. "Men as Victims of Intimate Partner Violence." *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 18, no. 8 (2011): 356.

[11] Coxell and King. "Male victims of rape and sexual abuse," 298–9.

[12] Kellie Carlyle, Jennifer A. Scarduzio, and Michael D. Slater. "Media Portrayals of Female Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29, no. 13, (2014): 2395.

by their intimate partners in the United States."[13] Although there is a significant difference between the numbers of male and female victims, the number of male victims is far from zero, and these victimized men deserve to be heard, seen and represented.

Intimate partner violence in *SVU*

The first episode of *Special Victims Unit* to deal with the notion of a female perpetrator in IPV appeared very early in the series (already in Season 2), however, for fourteen seasons the series seemed to abandon the issue, and female perpetrated IPV returned to be discussed in more explicit representations in Season 16 and 22. Although some ambiguity – especially in the verdicts – remain in the later episodes too, they more and more openly depict clear-cut female perpetrators and male victims; furthermore the two later episodes female perpetrated sexual abuse is portrayed as an integral part of intimate partner violence.

Asunder

Season 2 episode 7, titled "Asunder" is the very first episode in SVU where a possible male victim of intimate partner violence appears. The episode portrays an ambiguous IPV situation with implied bilateral abuse. It is the woman who attacks first – she throws a heavy pan towards her husband, hitting his head – however, in response the husband grabs her and drags her into the house. In the very next scene we can see Detective Munch taking the woman's statement, accusing her husband of rape, implying that she uses the rape allegation as a distraction from her being the abuser.

When it comes to representational strategies around the IPV, the episode employs indirect representation: apart from the early scene of the altercation it rather implies than shows anything. For instance, the opening frames of the story display a TV screen with the show titled "Wild Weddings" and when it is turned off, we can hear the main couple fighting in the background. Furthermore, the alleged rape takes place off screen, and other instances of abuse are not visible either, only their aftermath. It is also mentioned several times that the husband (who is a police officer) made their previous domestic violence/dispute cases go away to protect his wife, because she is the abuser. However, these instances remain off-screen, and in terms of visual representation the episode does

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not take a clear stance at depicting a female abuser and a male victim. The episode never openly takes a stand in the question of who is the abuser and who is the victim. Neither of them is found guilty at the end, however, the husband's defence lawyer states: "she is the batterer Mr. Andrews, why are you protecting her?"[14]

In representing the two characters – the husband and wife – the episode also implies, but does not state that she is the abuser and he is the victim. The woman is depicted as a hostile, frustrated, aggressive person (often described as crazy); she even blows smoke in Detective Munch's face when he warns her that smoking is not allowed in government buildings. So the representation of the woman implies that she is the abuser, however, the husband's depiction does not clearly re-enforce his possible victimhood. He is often portrayed in a really masculine environment (playing basketball with his colleagues for instance), he remains collected in difficult situations and does not visibly display symptoms characteristic of IPV trauma. However, in accordance with patterns of behaviour in victims of abuse, he often blames himself for the problems (he cheated on his wife);[15] furthermore, towards the end of the episode he states that he "just want[s] some peace," [16] indicating that he in fact is the victim of IPV.

The main characters vary greatly in their reactions. Detective Benson immediately believes the woman's allegation of rape (Benson's character is designed as the most supportive of female victims, and spousal rape committed by husbands against wives was and unfortunately still is a serious issue with a similarly long history of biases, prejudice and myths such as indicated by IAB's comments below); Detective Stabler, who – at this point of the series is still closer to the hard-boiled, masculine detective prototype but will achieve serious character growth later in the series – starts telling funny comments about marriage, Detective Munch emphasises the importance of following procedure, but it is implied that he does not believe the woman's rape allegations. Officers from the IAB (Internal Affairs Bureau) have a quite misogynistic reaction to the whole situation: "We marry them to keep it [sex] available, so tell me, how do you rape a wife?" (09:10). The husband's fellow officers act in quite a hostile manner towards the SVU squad, given that in their investigation their colleague is the alleged perpetrator. However, it is their conviction

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[14] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 2, episode 7, "Asunder," directed by David Platt, aired December 1, 2000, NBC, 35:03.

[15] See for instance Reginaldo Espinoza Chase and Debra Warner. "Where do we go from here?: Examining intimate partner violence by bringing male victims, female perpetrators, and psychological sciences into the fold." *Journal of Family Violence*, 31, no. 8, (2016), 961: "Portrayals of female-perpetrated violence against males frequently represent the men as unfaithful or abusive."

[16] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 2, episode 7, "Asunder," directed by David Platt, aired December 1, 2000, NBC, 36:20.

that he is the victim. In terms of legal consequences, the husband is found not guilty on the charge of rape, and even though the woman is arrested at one point for assault, it is the husband that bails her out – showcasing the recurring situation in IPV cases that the victim is incapable of breaking out of the violent situation.

December Solstice

The next episode dealing with a male victim of intimate partner violence comes much later in the series, in season 16, titled "December Solstice." Similarly to "Asunder" this one also depicts the ambiguous domestic situation of an elderly writer and his younger wife. It is the man's daughters (from a previous marriage) who report the alleged abuse: they come to Detective Benson's office and state that their father was raped, describing how Charmainne, the wife, gives their father erectile dysfunction drugs without his knowledge or consent – which is endangering his health given his heart condition. They argue that he is incapable of consent because of his progressing dementia. Furthermore, after he dies of heart-failure, the wife orders a procedure called post-mortem rectal probe electro ejaculation so that she could have a child with her late husband.

Most of the detectives take the case seriously, but rather focus on the physical mistreatment (endangering his health) instead of the sexual component. However, Detective Amanda Rollins first reacts with an attitude that is a common stereotype and misconception about male victims of sexual abuse, namely that men can find enjoyment in being sexually assaulted. As Smith, Pine and Hawley state: "[t]he passivity and loss of control over the sexual interaction that occurs in sexual assault of men by women is so inconsistent with stereotypical beliefs concerning male sexual motivation and behavior that male victims are viewed as more likely to have encouraged the act and to have derived pleasure from it."[17] The Detective comments: "is that a crime or an old man's dream?",[18] implying that he must enjoy the regular intercourse with his wife. Furthermore, the medical examiner comments on the electro-ejaculation in a joking manner: "it looks she pulled something else out of him too"[19], another common attitude especially among representations of male victims – making a joke out of the sexual abuse.[20]

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[17] Ronald E. Smith, Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. "Social cognitions about adult male victims of female sexual assault." *Journal of Sex Research* 24, no. 1, (1988): 111.

[18] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 16, "December Solstice," directed by Sharat Raju, aired 25 February, 2015, NBC, 06:53.

[19] Ibid. 21:55.

[20] Chase and Warner. "Where do we go from here?," 962.

With reference to the representation of the spouses, it should be highlighted that the wife is played by Marcia Cross, who, in 2014 when season 16 of SVU first aired, had already been known for her character in *Desperate Housewives* as Bree van de Kamp, who is associated with killing a husband (even though she did not). Here she is depicted as uptight, strict, posh, but at the same time she also seems to care for her husband.

Walter Briggs, the elderly husband, has quite conservative notions of femininity and masculinity. He believes that spousal sex is a man's duty, according to him he had six wives and hundreds of lovers, and as he says "I penetrated their bodies and I penetrated their minds."[21] He is quite troubled that now he is taken care of by women (his wife, daughters, nurses and he even mentions the female judge presiding over his case). Most probably the idea that a woman can rape a man is inconceivable for him. As Scott-Storey et al emphasize, it is often difficult for men to perceive of their own victimhood, since the experience is highly in contrast with gendered notions and expectations of masculinity: "[i]t is theorized that in the context of IPV, pressure to fit with and adhere to dominant gender ideals not only influences men's sense of self, but also their own and others' appraisal and identification of the violence they experience."[22]

Once again, the episode shies away from explicitly depicting a female perpetrator of IPV and sexual violence, since the case is played down to a family feud: a 3 year-old video message resurfaces after his death in which he talks about how their mother turned his two daughters against Charmainne, and one of his daughters just wants to take revenge because her father hated the adaptation she wrote from one of his novels. The case is solved with a plea deal, and the IPV situation and sexual abuse are not resolved.

What Can Happen in the Dark

The first episode in SVU that openly deals with female perpetrated intimate partner and sexual violence came quite late, in season 22, aired in 2021. The episode takes place during the COVID lockdown, and portrays the victimization of a husband by his wife in many ways related to IPV situations: physical, verbal, sexual and even custodial abuse is part of the episode. The crime itself is not represented, as usual, only the consequences. The starting point of the events is when the husband collapses at home and we can see a bloodstain on his jeans around his bottom, indicating anal trauma. When the case comes to trial, he

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[21] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 16, "Asunder," directed by Sharat Raju, aired 25 February, 2015, NBC, 18:45.
[22] Kelly Scott-Storey et al. "What About the Men?," 860.

testifies that his wife yells at him, throws objects at him, even broke a bottle on his head, and demands sexual acts which make him uncomfortable.

The husband is represented in this episode as an unambiguous IPV victim. He is described by their nanny as gentle, sweet and too nice. He shows clear signs of trauma and victimisation: at the hospital he tells the doctor that he fell down the stairs and that is how he obtained his injuries (minimizing the seriousness of his trauma)[23], he leans away from his wife and does not want to pursue the case. He is clearly terrified and wants to conceal the truth, however he slips up and reveals that his attacker is a woman. In connection with the IPV situation he is embarrassed, ashamed, says that it will not happen again, and that he is afraid that no one will believe him – notions that are very familiar from IPV situations with a female victim. It is also clear that his abuser has taken away his self-worth and ability to get out of the situation: when his wife tries to frame him as the abuser in the family he simply accepts it: "I did it. Whatever she said, I did it."[24]. During his testimony at court, when he is asked to share his memories about the sexual violence, he avoids certain words, and uses euphemisms to describe his experience: "I asked her to stop, but she just kept forcing that thing into me."[25]

The wife in this episode is depicted as a clear-cut perpetrator. In terms of gender roles, she is bestowed with traditionally masculine features, as if a female perpetrator is only imaginable if she is a masculinized woman: she is the breadwinner of the family and she makes the decisions. When the investigation closes in on her, she tries to frame her husband as the attacker: she cuts her own neck, however, their son later reveals that she did it to herself. She also blames the victim: she implies that her husband might have caused the anal trauma himself during masturbation. It turns out that she threatens him with taking away his custodial rights, and she even tries to intimidate him during the trial via text messages: "You stupid bitch, I warned you. You're nothing. A loser. A zero. By the time I'm through with you, you'll never see Charlie [their son] again."[26] In her representation, the show employs psychological and behavioral patterns that are usually associated with male abusers, however, as Chase and Warner point out, are also often characteristic of female perpetrators:

> Psychological characteristics found in male batterers, including emotional dysregulation, jealousy, anxious and insecure attachment styles, controlling behaviors, impulsivity, antisocial behavior,

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[23] Philip W. Cook. *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence.* 2nd ed. Westport: Praeger (2009): 11.

[24] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 22, episode 15, "What Can Happen in the Dark," directed by Jean de Segonzac, aired 27 May, 2021, NBC, 17:54.

[25] Ibid 31:29.

[26] Ibid 37:45.

and poor self-control, are also found in female batterers (Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart 2011; Moffitt et al. 2001). Psychopathologies including mood disorders, posttraumatic stress, anger mismanagement, personality disorder or disturbance, and substance use disorders can impede the emotional and behavioral control of romantic partners and are among the most frequently cited issues among female perpetrators of IPV (Melander, Noel, & Tyler 2010; Dowd & Leisring 2008; Stuart et al. 2006; Simmons, Lehmann, Cobb, & Fowler 2005; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt 2004).[27]

The treatment of the case is also quite revealing about male victims of intimate partner violence. When the identity of the perpetrator is unknown, the police officers are very friendly with the wife, however, if the genders were reversed and they were dealing with a female victim presenting with anal trauma, the first person of interest would be the husband. During the trial the wife's lawyer exhibits outdated attitudes around intimate partner violence, which have been – fortunately – superseded in terms of female victims: "it's a private matter, it's not a criminal one"[28] as if the gender of the victim acted as a time machine in terms of attitudes. He also brings up a common stereotype around male victims, namely the difference of strength: "Why didn't you just push her off you or off the bed?"[29] – even though researchers have widely refuted the validity of this argument. [30]

In the end the case is yet again resolved with a plea deal, the wife pleads guilty to misdemeanor assault and has to register as a sex offender, but there is no incarceration included. It is implied that the public is not yet ready to deal with male victims of IPV, so the jury's decision should be avoided with such a disappointing plea deal.

Episodes on sexual assault outside of intimate relationships

The episodes of *Special Victims Unit* that pertain to sexual assault committed by female perpetrators against male victims outside of intimate partnership show a similarly sporadic pattern of appearance as those centered on intimate partner violence. Furthermore,

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[27] Chase and Warner. "Where do we go from here?," 962.

[28] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 22, episode 15, "What Can Happen in the Dark," directed by Jean de Segonzac, aired 27 May, 2021, NBC, 23:09.

[29] Ibid 33:37.

[30] See Ronald E. Smith, Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. "Social cognitions about adult male victims of female sexual assault." *Journal of Sex Research* 24, no. 1, (1988): 101–112 or Cat Munroe and Martha Shumway. "Female-Perpetrated Sexual Violence: A Survey of Survivors of Female-Perpetrated Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Assault." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 9-10 (2020): 1–21.

stereotypes and common misconception regarding female perpetrated sexual assault (FPSA) – such as erection means consent, ejaculation equals enjoyment or the difference in physical strength makes it impossible for a man to be raped by a woman – are voiced and often questioned in these episodes.

Ridicule

The first episode that deals with a male victim of rape committed by a non-intimate partner came in season 3, titled "Ridicule" – referring to how the police officers (not the SVU squad) reacted to the victim's first report. According to him three women raped him at a bachelorette party where he worked as an escort:[31] they lured him into an empty bedroom, attacked him and cuffed him to the bed, then turned on loud music so no one would hear his screams. Since one of the women was found dead in her bedroom bound and asphyxiated, he becomes the primary suspect in the investigation.

Regarding the reactions of the SVU detectives, Stabler and Tutuola's responses demonstrate common myths surrounding female perpetrated rape. Stabler believes that since the escort had an erection, it means consent, he brings up the victim's physical strength and fitness and cannot understand why he did not fight back; furthermore he tries to find any circumstances that could have a mitigating effect such as the victim being drugged. His response is quite telling: "Should I have been? Do you need a reason why this happened to me? Why I wasn't man enough to protect myself? Would that make you feel better?"[32] Detective Tutuola in his response – "Three women at the same time, most guys would call that lucky"[33] – combines two common attitudes around male rape victims. On the one hand his comment is meant to be funny, and as Chase and Warner point out, "[d]epictions of female-perpetrated IPV in heterosexual relationships, as well as real-life occurrences, are often recognized as humorous, including by males."[34] On the other hand it implies that men are sexually driven beings and would never say no to sex – another common stereotype.

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[31] Sex workers often have difficulties being heard as victims of sexual assault in the socially more believed context of male perpetrated sexual assault, whereas male sex workers are in an even more precarious position given that male sex work is more tabooed by society. On this topic see for instance Michelle Davies. "Male sexual assault victims: a selective review of the literature and implications for support services." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 7, no. 3, (2002): 203–214 or Jenice Du Mont, Sheila Macdonald, Meghan White and Linda Turner. "Male Victims of Adult Sexual Assault: A Descriptive Study of Survivors' Use of Sexual Assault Treatment Services." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28, no. 13 (2013): 2676–2694.

[32] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 3, episode 10, "Ridicule," directed by Constantine Makris, aired 14 December, 2001, NBC, 17:20.

[33] Ibid, 19:33.

[34] Chase and Warner. "Where do we go from here?," 961.

Their outdated and stereotypical responses are mitigated by Dr. Huang's explanations (he is a psychiatrist character and a permanent consultant for SVU). He practically teaches the two hard-boiled, macho-masculine detectives – and the audience – that men are taught not to be violent with women, to walk away from possibly aggressive situations including women, which deep-seated childhood lessons simply prevented the victim from physically trying to protect himself against his female assailants no matter the difference in bodily strength and fitness. It is not physical superiority that the rapist women employ against him, but psychological manipulation, which is often a characteristic of female perpetrated violence by women against men both in sexual assault and IPV situations. As Lindstrøm argues "men are more often victims of psychological violence than physical violence."[35] Similar arguments and counter-arguments are employed during the trial, which is included in the episode in great detail, however, in the end the perpetrators are found guilty only on the charge of assault and not rape.

The victim is visibly traumatized both by the attack and the cops' reaction when he first tried to report the assault, which is a widespread experience of victims of female perpetrated sexual assault: "FPSA victims report high levels of lifetime trauma, revictimization, and adverse mental health outcomes."[36] He states that he cannot work as an escort any more, and when he is asked about the rape, he can only talk about it with his back to the detectives. He internalizes the myth that erection means consent, and clearly lacks the vocabulary to express female perpetrated rape. He is confused and ashamed that he had an erection, as he says: "I didn't want to, but my body … I can't explain it."[37]

Design

The next episode that features adult male victims of sexual assault is "Design" from season 7, where a young woman drugs rich and successful men with rohypnol, and while they are unconscious, she collects their sperm with rectal probe electro ejaculation in order to deliver it to her delusional father's sperm bank, whose goal is to save humankind with "genius" sperm. Her actions constitute aggravated sexual assault given that rohypnol takes away the victims' ability to consent.

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[35] Lindstrøm. "Intimate Partner Violence against Men," 1.

[36] Cat Munroe and Martha Shumway. "Female-Perpetrated Sexual Violence: A Survey of Survivors of Female-Perpetrated Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Assault." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 9–10 (2020): 16.

[37] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 3, episode 10, "Ridicule," directed by Constantine Makris, aired 14 December, 2001, NBC, 18:28.

All together she had 34 victims, however, only a handful of them appear in the episode. Furthermore, since they cannot remember anything as a result of the drug, the case cannot be prosecuted, which can be interpreted as a comment on the blank spots of legislation and how difficult it is to create laws up-to-date with the abuse of ever developing technologies. The episode refrains from taking a stance in the ambiguous and difficult to prosecute case, and focuses more on the representation of the perpetrator and less on the victims and their experiences.

In terms of representing the female perpetrator, the episode does not take a clear-cut stance on her status either. She is introduced as a self-proclaimed victim of rape, who wants to commit suicide, because her assault resulted in pregnancy. However, it is revealed that she is manipulative, a compulsive liar, and believes that the rules of society do not apply to her. It is also hinted at that she might be a sociopath. However, the episode tries to soften this by her claims that her current mental status and behavior are consequences of her abusive childhood, because her mother consciously brought her up in a way so that she would not have empathy (for example she was not allowed to go to school to ensure that she does not "learn" empathy from other kids). Therefore her position as a perpetrator is questioned and it is implied that she is also a victim.

Parole Violations

The episode titled "Parole Violations" in season 16 centers around a female parole officer raping a male parolee at gunpoint. As opposed to the previous two episodes, here the offense takes place in the present of the episode. Furthermore, the beginning of the attack is depicted: the parole officer forces the parolee to do a urine test in front of her and threatens him with being sent back to prison upon refusal. There is absolutely no ambiguity in representing the offence, it is not questioned (at least not by the structure and representational strategies of the episode) that he is actually raped.

The victim is the fiancé of Detective Carisi's sister, depicted as a big, clumsy guy with a problematic past – he is a parolee after all. Before going to his PO, he is visibly nervous, fearful even. After the attack he shows signs of severe trauma, relapses into alcohol and is arrested at a bar fight. He is afraid that no one would believe him, but remains consistent that he did not want to have sex with his parole officer: "She made me do her."[38] In his description of the attack he expresses the forceful nature of the events, but uses the phrase

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[38] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, "Parole Violations," directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 04:40.

"do her" to describe the sexual experience, which implies his active position and does not necessarily indicate rape. Lacking the vocabulary and trouble identifying himself as passive and a rape victim is a recurring experience of victims of FPSA: "[b]eyond difficulties in identifying experiences as IPV, when men do identify as victims, gender socialization may lead to a tendency for some men to minimize or trivialize experiences of IPV."[39]

During the investigation it turns out that the parole officer had another victim as well, another parolee, who is a drug addict, and is under constant threat of being sent back to prison. He describes what happened to him as follows: "It's like free sex I guess. I should feel lucky, right?"[40] However, his appearance makes it unambiguous that he does not feel lucky – he is rattled and on the verge of crying.

The perpetrator, a female parole officer, is depicted as a strong, bulky woman who is clearly in a position of power that she aggressively abuses. She is represented as quite masculine in her demeanor, as if it would not be imaginable that an average, feminine woman can commit rape. She tries to minimize the assault, stating that it was initiated by him: "He was ready, willing and able. Do you think a man could respond like that under duress?"[41], invoking the usual stereotype that erection means consent:

> It is commonly believed that men are incapable of functioning sexually unless they are sexually aroused. This assumption has been repeatedly cited in judicial decisions exonerating female defendants on the grounds that unless he were a willing participant, the male victim would have been incapable of engaging in sexual intercourse (Groth, quoted in Orman, 1985; Petrucelli, 1982). This assumption is called into question by evidence that men are capable of functioning sexually in a variety of intense emotional states, including fear and anger (Bancroft, 1980; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), just as female victims sometimes report vaginal lubrication and orgasmic responses while being traumatically raped (Sarrel & Masters, 1982).[42]

In their reaction, the characters vary greatly. Detective Carisi at first reacts violently saying that he cheated on his pregnant sister, and believes that if he had an erection, he must have had at least some interest in the intercourse. He only comes around when the PO plants drugs in the victim's apartment and upon finding them takes him back to prison. Towards the end of the episode he completely changes his initial skepticism and states: "[i]t

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[39] Kelly Scott-Storey et al. "What About the Men?," 860.

[40] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, "Parole Violations," directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 23:59.

[41] Ibid, 21:20.

[42] Ronald E. Smith, Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. "Social cognitions," 103.

took a real man to get up in court and tell the truth like Tommy did"[43] emphasizing that the victim did not lose his masculinity as a result of female perpetrated sexual assault. Detective Rollins is quite skeptical as well, but Detective Amaro is sympathetic from the beginning. Detective Benson emphasizes that the reversed genders cannot take away the severity of the crime: "[w]e take this case as seriously as if it was a woman accusing a male PO."[44] It is the victim's fiancée who reacts the most negatively. She feels that she was cheated on, shares the attitude that erection means consent and even considers terminating her pregnancy.

Although the episode makes it clear that the crime is handled and viewed as an unambiguous rape case, in terms of a verdict there is no such clear-cut stance. In the end the case is handled with a plea deal, the parole officer gets 5 years of probation, has to register as a sex offender, but there is no jail time involved.

Conclusion

Even though research suggests that female perpetrated IPV and sexual abuse outside of intimate relationships is fare more frequent than the general public believes, it is an under-researched, often silenced and definitely underrepresented issue, made even more problematic by a lack of strict and gender neutral/inclusive legislation. As Turchik, Hebenstreit and Judson point out:

> Although gender-inclusive sexual assault laws—laws where both men and women can be the potential victim and/or perpetrator—have recently been adopted by many countries and U.S. states (Rumney, 2008), there still exists a number of ways in which male victims and victims of same-gender violence are not protected. For instance, the rape of men is often not defined by law under the same terminology or degree of offense as the rape of women, may have different legal consequences, or may not be acknowledged as a prosecutable type of sexual aggression.[45]

As we could see, *Law and Order: SVU* provides some visibility to male victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence in cis-hetero contexts, even though these

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[43] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, "Parole Violations," directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 40:45.

[44] *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, "Parole Violations," directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 10:47.

[45] Jessica A. Turchik, Claire L. Hebenstreit and Stephanie S. Judson. "An Examination of the Gender Inclusiveness of Current Theories of Sexual Violence in Adulthood: Recognizing Male Victims, Female Perpetrators, and Same-Sex Violence." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 17, no. 2 (2015): 134.

episodes constitute a tiny minority among the more than 500 different sex offenses depicted during the seasons. *SVU* not only depicts the existing myths, stereotypes and attitudes surrounding these male victims, but often questions them as well, and provides education for the audience about female perpetrated IPV and sexual abuse.

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FRUZSINA PAPP

Abusing Silence: Dehumanization through Silencing
in Martin Koolhoven's *Brimstone*

Abstract

Although Koolhoven's *Brimstone* (2016) predates the #MeToo movement, just as the discourse of women's vocality, the film already seems to be articulating the same criticism against the culture of silence as the movement, and as previous feminist movements as well, by positioning itself as a feminist parable embedded in historical context. Also incorporating religion as a focal point in the narrative, the film explores various forms of gender-based abuse, oppression, and the different methods of dehumanization, mostly through different instances of silencing, for example the usage of scold's bridle, (self-)mutilation, or controlling one's use of language. This paper examines silencing as an act of oppression, and a conscious denial of one's agency, and offers an overarching interpretation of it in Brimstone, while also positioning the film as a modern parable, a feminist stance against the culture of silence embedded in historical and cultural contexts.

Keywords: gender studies, *Brimstone*, revisionist Western, silencing, abuse

Since *Brimstone* spent several years in the pre-production phase,[1] with the producers and the director, Martin Koolhoven, writing, rewriting, casting, recasting, and trying to get funding for the project, it would have been impossible to predict the cultural milieu the film would be released into. No way to anticipate that the topics *Brimstone* (2016) discusses, namely silencing, domestic violence, or even the systematic oppression of women would get into the limelight of social discourse due to the #MeToo movement a year after the film first premiered. However, it must be noted that the questions of vocality and silencing were also central topics in previous feminist waves and discourses, but the MeToo and the fourth wave of feminism once again highlighted these issues. As a result of the 2017 harassment and rape accusations against Harvey Weinstein and the subsequent scandal, not only society, but the films produced also started to focus more on the representation of women, specifically on the misogynistic practices in Hollywood, and on issues that had been the focal point of books, articles, and generally women's lives before.

As Koolhoven's *Brimstone* represents various cases of gender-based abuse and silencing, this study discusses the critique of masculinity and religion as depicted through the methods of humiliation and oppression directed at the young, female protagonist, named Joanna. The film focuses on the numerous ways Joanna resists and takes agency over the course

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[1] "*Brimstone* (2016) – Trivia," *IMDb*, www.imdb.to/2SqP7am. Accessed August 4, 2023.

of her own life, as the daughter of a Dutch immigrant preacher in the Wild West during the 1870s. Joanna is expected to and often forced to be obedient, which also aligns with the way decent women were represented in traditional Western films, if at all. However, as a revisionist Western, *Brimstone* takes a different approach to women and their role in the Wild West, depicting not only the different methods of humiliation and oppression in the household, but also the systemic misogyny of the Wild West, reflecting on classical Westerns in general as well, by rethinking the concepts and traditions glorified in the past. In this paper, I examine the various forms of gender-based abuse and oppression, with a heavy focus on patriarchal silencing and women's use of silence as a form of resistance, with special attention to the role of Christian symbolism and the overall critique the film articulates.

Violence, resistance, and incest are all recurring motifs[2] throughout *Brimstone*, as these themes are embedded in the foundational myth of American culture: the frontier myth.[3] These motifs are not only heavily intertwined but also center around women's (self-)silencing and vocality. Both Heike Paul and Susan Kollin point out the connection between gender, oppression, and religion, and their significance in frontier culture, due to the patriarchal conventions based on the teachings of the Bible. Kollin argues that speech and language in Westerns function as a means to control narrative and perspective,[4] which supports the relevance of my inquiry into silencing. Citing Catherine A. Mackinnon, Deborah Bird Rose explains that silencing practices "work double damage: not only suppressing people's audible voices, but reconfiguring the meaning of their silences as well. […] The quality of silence expresses power relations; it is, of course, gendered".[5] Furthermore, Mackinnon discusses the gendered differences of vocality, and explains that:

> when you are powerless, you don't speak differently. […] Your speech is not just differently articulated, it is silenced. […] Not being heard is not just a function of lack of recognition, not just that no one knows how to listen to you, although it is that; it is also silence of the deep kind, the silence of being prevented from having anything to say.[6]

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[2] Although incest is only shown once, the movie implies that the Reverend's actions suggest cyclicality, implying that once Joanna's daughter, the Reverend's granddaughter comes of age, he would take her as a wife as well.

[3] Paul, Heike, "Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West," *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Transcript Verlag, (2014): 342.

[4] Kollin, Susan, *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*. (U of Nebraska P, 2015), 164.

[5] Rose, Deborah Bird, "The Silence and Power of Women," in *Words and Silences*, ed: Peggy Brock (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 92.

[6] Mackinnon, Catherine A, *Feminism Unmodified*. (Harvard U P, 1987), 39.

Later on, Mackinnon adds that if one half of the dialogue is silenced, the other half seems to be the only side,[7] thus highlighting the narrative-dominating qualities of silence. Feminist movements have been articulating the gendered nature of silencing and related power inequalities for decades; furthermore, Michele Foucault also theorized the connection between language, or discourse and power. However, Mackinnon's text summarizes the issue in a manner that is most adequate when it comes to understanding *Brimstone*.

Historian Nancy Woloch describes women's status in *Women and the American Experience* as having "secondary status in the family, where she served her husband, cared for her children, and worked in the household. (…) In church, as at home, her role was limited",[8] which also correlates with Paul's teachings in the Bible:

> But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor
> to usurp authority over the man,
> but to be in silence.[9]

The Bible served as the foundation for Western society, and therefore, women's position was defined by Apostle Paul's words and their rather conservative reading, both within the family and the community as well. In *Brimstone*, this misogynistic approach is mostly embodied by the Reverend (played by Guy Pearce), who not only abuses, both verbally and physically his wife and daughter, but rapes them, and also chases Joanna across the country, with the same intentions, leaving a trace of bloodbath behind. The reverend relies on the Bible to justify his actions, and on the implication that as a preacher, he knows the teachings of the Bible, and is, therefore, right to do whatever he is doing; as though his status would give him the right to be abusive and violent, while the same sacred text refused the right of resistance to women.

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[7] Ibid, 46.
[8] Woloch, Nancy, *Women and the American Experience*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 18.
[9] *Bible* (1 Timothy 2.12)

Women in the Wild West

As a revisionist Western[10], *Brimstone* relies on and subverts the tropes and traditions of traditional Westerns. Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan originate the traditional Western literature from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, pointing out that the so-called "dime novels" appeared twenty-five years after Cooper's novel, and contributed to first "stage productions and traveling circuslike shows featuring staged reenactments of famous battles and other events", after which "[m]ovies wasted no time getting into the act".[11] According to them, the Western, as a landscape-attached genre, heavily incorporates the untameable wilderness that men (cowboys, outlaws, and lawmen) regularly attempt to subdue; thus, civilization and wilderness are confronted with each other in stories traditionally written for "young men and semiliterates".[12] Through taming nature, the taming of women is intrinsically part of the genre, which is in an intriguing contrast with women's striking lack of presence in classical Westerns. Westerns tend to represent Americans as rugged, self-sufficient people, who have a chance to tame the wilderness that is the Wild West, creating a myth and a genre in which "certain aspects of the history of the American West have been amplified and modified to serve a collective cultural need".[13] That collective need is the foundation that the American identity is built on, the myth of the self-reliant man, and of the chosen nation that can and would roam the Wild West, tame it, and reign over it.

Considering that nature and land are traditionally viewed and associated with femininity (as both are defined as something to be tamed by men), it does not come as a surprise that Westerns are "typically preoccupied with notions of masculinity," or that these narratives are dominated by the ever-present authority of male figures.[14] Machoism and masculinity are not only present in the nature/culture dichotomy but also in the way these stories are usually told, through the eyes of cowboys, and outlaws, not sparing violence and gunfights. In *Brimstone*, Joanna's perspective underlines this image of a traditionally masculine milieu into which she does not and cannot fit. The film utilizes a Western protagonist rarely seen

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[10] A case could be made for the reading of *Brimstone* through its Gothic elements, as the genre has its own history with women's writing and agency. However, the in-depth analysis of these elements and their usage is outside the scope of this paper, as I read it as a revisionist Western subverting the conventions of classical Westerns.

[11] Richard Meran Barsam and Dave Monahan. *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film.* (New York: Norton, 2010), 95.

[12] Ibid, 95.

[13] Ibid, 96.

[14] Bandy, Mary Lea and Kevin Stoehr. *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western.* (Berkley: U of California P, 2012), 40.

before: a woman who is not weak and passive and does not fit the traditional role of a prostitute, a housewife, or a damsel in distress.[15]

Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr in *Ride, Boldly Ride* explain this in detail, adding that viewers' dissatisfaction with familiar themes on screen is among the reasons why the Western, as a genre, needed to be transformed.[16] Native Americans' role, for instance, changed entirely, from villains or noble savages to valorized heroes.[17] In classical Westerns, women rarely appeared, and more often than not, they were degraded into a secondary position, and mostly reduced to represent one of the major archetypes: a prostitute, or a (still-to-be) housewife, who needs to be protected,[18] regardless of whether she wants help or not. This degradation of women in Westerns stemmed from traditional gender roles, which allowed men to control women in both the public and private spheres. This jurisdiction men held over their entire family was described by Woloch as the following:

> "In colonies, (…) lines of authority and submission within the family were drawn […] [men] wielded authority over wife and children, supervised finances, made family decisions, served as intermediary between family and community, and in more pious circles, provided the conduit through which God's blessing flowed".[19]

I argue, therefore, that women were historically erased from Westerns, relegated to being only the "helpmates", simply based on the social system that subjugated women to men to the extent where men were in charge of their children, not women whose assumed role in the family was always to nurture them.[20]

The representation of women in Westerns (regardless of the archetype they were placed into), inevitably became a question during the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movements, including the Women's Rights movement, became a social issue as well. The mode of representation shifted from the rather banal, simplistic one to a more prominent, more complex style. This altered, reimagined version of the genre became known as revisionist Westerns, about which Richard Slotkin argues that "Hollywood attempted the revision of a genre what had become too predictable" at least "four times since 1970",[21] pointing out

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[15] All of these are archetypical female figures present in Westerns (Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride*, 38–39; 97).
[16] Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride,* 227.
[17] Barsam and Monahan, *Looking at Movies,* 81.
[18] Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride,* 38–39.
[19] Woloch, *Women*, 20-21.
[20] Walsh, Margaret, "Women's Place on the American Frontier," *Journal of American Studies*, 29, no. 2, (1995): 241.
[21] Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America.* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1993), 628.

that the shift from traditional to revisionist Westerns was not a direct and easy process. Bryan W. Rommel-Ruiz connects this shift to Hollywood challenging "the United States' mythic past, especially in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate",[22] as well. However, audiences started demanding narratives that were "more realistic and less myth-governed",[23] meaning that indigenous peoples' and women's representation became a focal point in the new narratives.

Brett Westbrook argues that women were not "erased" from Westerns, they simply did not belong in those stories, as they did not belong to the Wild West in the first place.[24] As this point of view is clearly embedded in a rather classical standpoint, it also fails to take into consideration that women played a significant role in the society of the Wild West. Settlers to the Wild West needed women to start families with and someone to take care of the household and the domestic duties; this need consequently contributed to the idea that women were not and should not have been agentic subjects, but rather bio-props in the background, a mere "helpmate".[25] But more importantly, research shows that many prostitutes (as it is also subtly touched upon in *Brimstone*) contributed to the economic growth of the frontier as "savvy entrepreneurs".[26] All this comes down to the very simple conclusion that women played significant roles in the Wild West. Therefore, their erasure in the classical Western was based merely on patriarchal traditions, rather than reality, validating the need for revisionist Westerns, such as *Brimstone*.

However, it needs to be noted that Joanna does appear in all three of these archetypes. She is a lady in distress throughout the entire film, as she is constantly looking for people to help her or save her, only to realize that even if they try, she ends up facing the Reverend alone again. She does become both a prostitute at one point and later a housewife. This transition could also stand for the modern view on coming of age; leaving behind the child she once was, she becomes a prostitute, which seems like a rite-of-passage rebellion, only to settle down as a mother, a wife, and a midwife, a respectable figure in her community. However, in her case, these are only attempts at finding a safe place. Taking on these roles, however, is not simply for Joanna to assimilate into traditional feminine roles and communities, but rather to hide in them. First as a prostitute, then as a housewife, Joanna hides in plain

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[22] Rommel-Ruiz, W. Bryan. *American History Goes to the Movies.* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 106.

[23] Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride,* 227.

[24] Westbrook, Brett, "Feminism and the Limits of Genre in A Fistful of Dollars and The Outlaw Josey Wales," *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*, U of Utah P, (2007): 27.

[25] Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 130.

[26] Erin Blakemore, "What Red Light Ladies Reveal About the American West", *JSTOR Daily*, May 5, 2016, https://daily.jstor.org/red-light-ladies-in-the-american-west/.

sight, using these archetypal roles as a means of resistance against the Reverend. Thus, by living her life in a way she decides to, she resists not only the Reverend's wishes and demands, but also the control he tried to impose on her. This mode of representation also goes against the classical Western tradition of relegating women to the role of supporting character, rather than being the focus of the stories themselves.

Disrupted narrative as a tool for symbolism and criticism

Koolhoven's *Brimstone* utilizes narrative techniques, genre conventions, and plot devices to critique religion, patriarchy, and gender-based oppression. With religious meanings woven into the disrupted order of chapters and the obviously domesticized instances of abuse, harassment, coercion, and humiliation, the film highlights extreme instances of radical patriarchal norms, gender norms and expectations. In the following analysis, I not only offer an overarching interpretation of the film but also position it as a modern parable, a feminist stance against the culture of silence embedded in historical and cultural contexts.

Navigating the narrative of the film, however, can be quite confusing, and at first, it might seem to raise more questions than it answers. Upon closer inspection, it becomes abundantly clear that the narrative structure is a means to add a layer of meaning to Joanna's personal story. The voice-over narration in the prologue and an epilogue, first gives the impression it is Joanna telling her own story, maybe recounting it to her daughter. By the epilogue, however, it becomes clear that Joanna is dead and never had the opportunity to tell it, and instead, her daughter, Sam is narrating her mother's life, almost turning it into a parable, even though in the main body of the film, the focalizer is Joanna herself. This mediated tone also contributes to the overall theme of the silencing and (denied) voice, which I will come back to later.

The main body of the film is divided into chapters, all titled after a corresponding section of the Bible, reinforcing pious misogyny as the primary topic the film sets out to criticize. These chapters, however, do not follow Joanna's life story in chronological order (for the order of the chapters, see the table below). The "Chapter 1: Revelation" and "Chapter 4: Retribution" follow the story of Joanna, now under the pseudonym Liz, as a mother struggling to stay alive and keep her family safe, after the Reverend's reappearance in her life after years of being seemingly free. The second ("Chapter 2: Exodus") and the third ("Chapter 3: Genesis") dive deeper into the background of the events, telling the story of Joanna as a (pre)pubescent child, teenager, and young adult. While this disrupted narrative may be perceived as a means to keep the audience tense and confused, it also serves a purpose: up until "Chapter 3: Genesis", the story is told backwards, implying a

connection between the Book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, where the story of humanity and the original sin comes from, and the chronologically earliest point in Joanna's story, where this parable started. In Joanna's domestic life, her childhood is the foundation of the plot. The film peels back the chapters, layer by layer, along with the religious and patriarchal criticism it builds on the foundations of the third chapter, where all the background information about Joanna's childhood is revealed, including what happened to her mother, who was also abused and forced into committing suicide by the Reverend. The chapter also reveals how Joanna escaped from this household.

	TITLES	CHARACTERS	EVENTS
III	Genesis	- Joanna (thirteen-year-old) - Anna (mother) - The Reverend (father)	-Joanna's first period -Usage of scold's bridle -Anna commits suicide -Joanna is raped and escapes
II	Exodus	- Joanna (teenager/young adult) - The Reverend - Frank (employer) - Elizabeth (prostitute)	-Joanna is a prostitute -Elizabeth's tongue is cut out -Joanna steals the identity of her friend, Elizabeth -Joanna silences herself
I	Revelation	-Joanna /named Liz (married woman) -The Reverend -Sam (Joanna's daughter)	-Joanna is fleeing from the Reverend to save Sam -Joanna struggles for the survival of the kids and herself
IV	Retribution	-Joanna /named Liz (married woman) -The Reverend -Sam	-Joanna kills The Reverend -Joanna is arrested for murder, and commits suicide

Table 1. Summary of the relevant characters and events of each chapter in chronological order.

Table 1 clarifies the chronology and events of the film, with the second column, which contains the main characters and events that are relevant to the scope of this paper (table 1). The chapters are not only short re-interpretations of the Biblical titles, but they also take place in different seasons. Genesis takes place in spring, Exodus in the summer, Revelation is set in autumn, and Retribution is in the winter, and with this, the story suggests cyclicality. It creates the illusion of a full circle, also emphasized by the presence of the upcoming generation (by the presence of Sam, Joanna's daughter), and by the recurring motifs of the film, such as abuse, oppression, and silencing, the never-ending re-appearance of the Reverend in Joanna's life. Furthermore, each stage the audience witnesses is set in different years[27], suggesting that the Reverend's anger and the abuse followed her, her entire life, which aligns with Shlain's argument that as Eve is blamed in the Bible for the original sin, women "are to serve a lifetime of subjugation".[28] The Reverend is implied to count on that lifetime of servitude from the women in his life, as he abuses Anna until she hangs herself, and keeps reappearing in Joanna's life.

Abuse, silencing and other forms of violence

The third chapter establishes Joanna and her mother, Anna, as victims, living under the abusive oppression of the Reverend, who justifies his actions by quoting the Bible at every given chance. He argues that the entire congregation moved to the New World for the promised religious freedom, while simultaneously holding rigorous rule over the said congregation, into which Anna and Joanna had to integrate in order to maintain the image that the Reverend expected: that of the perfect wife and daughter. Once again, this expectation is based on the teachings of the Bible,[29] proclaiming that women should "occupy a place secondary to man", which would mean that no equality in the household is sustainable or rational because the "husband should rule over the wife".[30] For Anna and Joanna, this means constant abuse: the film showcases belting; it is implied that the Reverend usually forces Anna to have sex, and although only a bloodstain on the bedsheet is shown, it is heavily implied that the Reverend rapes Joanna after the forced wedding.

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[27] Chapters one and four are in the same year, are in different years than chapters two and three.
[28] Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, (London: Penguin, 1998), 114.
[29] This hierarchical dynamics between the sexes can be traced back to the Book of Genesis, as God created Adam first and then Eve only as a help-mate (Harris, *Sex, Ideology and Religion*, 40).
[30] Kevin Harris, *Sex, Ideology and Religion: The Representation of Women in the Bible*. (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 39–40.

Figure 1. The Reverend attempts to marry Joanna, who is forced to wear a scold's bridle. Screenshot: *Brimstone* (01:52:14).

Religious humiliation can also be regarded as a method of silencing, as Anna is constantly and repeatedly shamed before the members of the church and her inadequacy that the Reverend sees as a challenge to his authority. One of the most prominent instances in Brimstone, is not the verbal, almost theatrical shaming the Reverend imposes on Anna, but forcing her to wear the scold's bridle, even during sermon, in front of the members of the congregation. The device was designed, besides public degradation, to prevent the wearer from speaking, drinking, or eating. While the Reverend seemingly does it to prove the power he holds over his family, not only Anna, but also Joanna is ashamed of it: she tells Anna that she would rather die than to live like this. As a result, while the Reverend is preaching about the original sin, highlighting that women should be subordinated to men, Anna hangs herself during the service, thus taking back control over her own fate, even if it is only in her death. This is not the only occasion when the bridle is used, as later Joanna is also forced to wear it, after she refuses to serve the Reverend as he would see fit, for example by becoming his second wife after Anna's death, as seen in figure 1.

Brimstone includes numerous ways of domestic abuse, whether it is the "traditional" type or it takes place in the context of the brothel, as the first layer of silencing, in which several different methods are embedded, including rape, control over the use of language. The previously mentioned scold's bridle, designed specifically for both abusing and silencing functions, is a device looking back on centuries-long history. Its usage in the film evokes historical roots as the scold's bridle was invented in the sixteenth century; it furthermore dehumanizes the one forced to wear it. As the device is "mostly associated with horses",[31]

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[31] Kaleena Farga, "Scold's Bridle, The Torture Device Used to Silence Women in The Middle Ages," *All That's Interesting*, April 22, 2023, https://allthatsinteresting.com/scolds-bridle.

while resembling the pieces historically used on slaves as well. The one specifically included in *Brimstone* has a gag, pushing the tongue down, thus denying the ability to eat, or drink, inciting pain and discomfort upon the wearer, further dehumanizing the women wearing it. Kaleena Fraga explains that device was historically applied upon a decision made by "local entities like town councils and judges", and by taking upon himself to apply it to the women in his life, the Reverend appropriates these roles.[32] Despite being a reverend, he holds a position of authority; however, it does not necessarily infer that he possesses additional authority to determine such a sentence.

Lynda E. Boose explains this tradition in "Scolding Bridles and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member:" the scold's bridle was "devised primarily as [a] shaming [device]" and it "was turned into a carnival experience, one that placed the woman's body at the centre of a mocking parade".[33] It not only was shameful, because of the connotations, or because of the bodily restrictions, but also because it was considered to be part of a public shaming process, and the bridles oftentimes featured parts that made them even more embarrassing for the wearer.

The scolds, the women who gossiped, the women with "loose morals",[34] or the women who somehow challenged men in the Wild West were "seen as threats to male authority",[35] and therefore needed to be punished, silenced, and tamed, much like the wilderness of the frontier itself, while the same kind of humiliating factor never played into punishing male outlaws.[36] Punishing women, however, allowed for the "public body to expel recognition of its own violence by projecting it onto and inflicting it upon the private body of a marginal member of the community".[37] Therefore, the body of the woman ceased to remain private, even though she was argued to belong to the private, the domestic; a predicament that Joanna's narrative seems to be symptomatic of, as she flees from the home to the margins of the public, to the home again, trying to escape from abuse.

The film depicts several forms of violence, but none of them can be highlighted as more frequent, or more significant in Joanna's narrative than domestic abuse, and hence I find it important highlight the complexity of this broad term. In *Brimstone*, domestic abuse appears in two distinct ways: firstly, the traditional, "classic" interpretation, as several sequences depict how Joanna and her mother suffer physical and emotional oppression by

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[32] Farga, "Scold's Bridle".
[33] Lynda E Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42, no. 2, (1991): 189.
[34] Farga, "Scold's Bridle".
[35] Boose, "Scolding Brides", 190.
[36] Ibid, 190.
[37] Ibid, 190.

the Reverend. Abuse is shown as a normalized, ordinary part of everyday life, meant to keep both Joanna and Anna obedient, well-mannered, and under the control of the Reverend.

Violence had always been a part of Joanna's life, for which the chronologically earliest scenes in "Genesis" serve as a testament. At this point Joanna is about thirteen, visibly confused as she is trying to figure out the family dynamics and her own very much changing body at the same time, all while being thrust into a culture that is not her own. Amid all these changes, as she starts her first period, she is also subjected to the dehumanizing humiliation the Reverend puts her through as he shames Joanna for her alleged impurity. In this twisted coming-of-age narrative, Joanna's first period serves as an opportunity for the Reverend to imply that she has just become somehow dirty, as he tells Anna to "wash [her] daughter. She is unclean",[38] which aligns with how Mary Douglas writes about the conceptualization of dirt in patriarchal societies, as it is seen as "essentially disorder," and that it "offends against order";[39] dirt is therefore "matter out of place"[40] defying the system. In Joanna's case, this system is the misogynistic traditions enforced by the Reverend, and by becoming "disorder", she offends the order that the Reverend is trying to uphold in the house, where everything is in his control. Starting her period is only the first step out of line, and after that, Joanna revolts against everything the Reverend seems to stand for.

Joanna also witnesses the Reverend beating her mother with a belt as a form of punishment, for having "humiliated him" in church when she admitted that she was the only one in the congregation not to "receive the calling"[41] from God. Seeing it as a challenge and offense to his stance as the figure of authority in the community, the Reverend reestablishes his position of power also within the domestic sphere by punishing Anna. The Reverend sees danger in his wife: danger to his position as the head of the household; by not obeying him (not speaking exclusively English, instead of Dutch), withholding sex from him, and danger to him being the head of the congregation as well. Being "mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating, and murder",[42] therefore Anna does not seem to be able to escape these punishments, and she also realizes that she cannot even save her daughter when she finds the Reverend lurking around Joanna while she is in the bath.

Domestic abuse culminates in the Reverend forcing Joanna into a (illegitimate) marriage after Anna's death. In a study discussing sexual misconduct victims in the late nineteenth century, Linda Gordon points out that incest is "essentially a male crime," as the majority

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[38] *Brimstone*, 01:28:47–01:28:51.

[39] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 2.

[40] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

[41] *Brimstone*, 01:21:04.

[42] Marilyn Frye, "Oppression." *Women in Culture: A Women's Studies Anthology*, Blackwell Publications, (1998): 46.

of cases took place between a male relative, mostly the father and the daughter.[43] Gordon calls the cases where the girls were forced to be the second wives "domestic incest",[44] which not only evokes the term "domestic abuse" but also establishes that by marrying the girls, the incest becomes domesticized in an attempt to normalize the practice. In these cases, just like the Reverend, the fathers were "committed to and even dependent upon his family yet rigid in his refusal to do the work of family maintenance and his expectation of being served".[45] In other words: the Reverend refuses to be challenged again and is trying to arrange a marriage that would be more convenient, with a wife who, allegedly, would be obeying him, so that he does not have to change his ways.

Gordon also points out that the girls who escaped the household where they were subjected to domestic incest, were often further victimized, resulting in a tendency of becoming sexual delinquents.[46] Joanna not only becomes a representative of this tendency, after she is sold to a brothel; but the film also makes a subtle connection between the domesticity of the home and the faux family-like hierarchy of the brothel. The owner, Frank, acts as the head of the "house": he makes the rules and the decisions, and he punishes those he sees fit. As these women live under the same roof, under the rule of one man (their employer), and had the household chores to take care of, the brothel could count as a household. The brothel, named Inferno, is represented a symbolic manifestation of hell, not just in its name, but also as a venue of rape, torture, death and persecution. Joanna quickly learns that the prostitutes have to obey the requests of the clients, whatever they may be.

Frank decides to cut out Elizabeth's tongue, taking away her ability to speak. Later on, when the Reverend appears again, and kills Elizabeth, Joanna is presented with the opportunity to hide in the silence and use that silence as a way to resist the Reverend. She takes Elizabeth's name, thus completely changing her identity, and leaving the brothel, she starts a new life as a wife, stepmother, and later mother of a child. To fully take Elizabeth's identity and place in the pre-arranged marriage, Joanna, for lack of a better option, cuts out her own tongue. This act of self-silencing can be read as a desperate way not just to adapt to being Elizabeth, but to silence herself and her past. Thus, she reclaims her previously forcefully silenced body, and her agency, by choosing to remain silent on her own volition. By silencing herself, she refutes the possibility of others doing the same thing to her; her tongue cannot be cut out, like Elizabeth's, and her voice cannot be taken

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[43] Linda Gordon, "Incest and Resistance: Patterns of Father-Daughter Incest, 1880-1930," *Social Problems*, 33, no. 4, (1986): 253–254.

[44] Gordon, "Incest and Resistance," 254.

[45] Ibid, 255.

[46] Ibid, 254.

away, since it is already non-existent. This camouflage enabled her to hide in the domestic sphere, as a member of a decent community, and as a wife of a respectable man. From the marginalized, socially often ignored position of a prostitute, Joanna flees to being an active, well-known, participating member of the small town, as a midwife, a needed, central figure of the community. Cutting her tongue out is not temporary, like other ways of silencing: it defined the rest of her life, as she sacrificed her ability to easily communicate, to verbally express her concerns, fears, and traumas, and her own vocality. She has taken from herself the only way women traditionally could fight back, the means of hostile harangue.[47]

Conclusion

Graphic violence, taboo topics, shocking experiences, and the cruel frontier conventions of the 1880s summarize Koolhoven's *Brimstone*, while the film also balances between genre conventions, stereotypes, expectations, and gender norms. It seems to be an unconventionally gruesome coming-of-age narrative for Joanna, which involves rape, abuse, silencing, killing her own father, and losing her family. By the end of the film, she manages to break the cycle of abuse and create a new life for her daughter[48] before she is arrested and commits suicide, thus taking back her agency for the last time, and claiming autonomy over her fate and her body. To avoid being incarcerated, and having her life, agency, and autonomy being ripped from her once again, she purposefully falls into the water, drowning herself, while the sheriff shoots at her in the water. Thus, she once again decides to self-silence, and control her own death, instead of letting others do it for her. The Reverend's narrative ends in a climactic, and spectacular death when he is not only set on fire but also shot through the window, causing him to fall out from the first story of the house. When killing the Reverend, Joanna uses the name of Elizabeth, therefore she takes revenge for both herself and also symbolically for the friend the Reverend killed earlier.

    Brimstone is critical of Christian dogma and pious conventions and conveys its stance through a series of loose reinterpretations of Bible verses to ground the religious connections and its criticism in this tradition. The Reverend stands as a representation of the devil, using and abusing the teachings of the foundation of Christianity itself to silence all voices

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[47] Woloch, *Women*, 22.

[48] Although it is never confirmed on the level of plot, but the film does maintain the tension at the end, with a slight implication that the Reverend might still be out in the woods, lurking around them. Joanna stares in the distance, but the audience is not shown whatever she sees or suspects to notice. The moment can be taken as a subtle reminder that the abuse and torment is never truly over, and she always needs to be careful.

that would challenge his status in the household and the community as well. However, the Reverend also finds his authority to be challenged by his own family, and therefore he justifies rape, abuse, and humiliation, and uses them to silence Anna and Joanna physically and mentally as well. All forms of silencing, the use of the scold's bridle, denying the right to speak in their own native language, and physical mutilation are utilized to dehumanize the women to a point where they would not oppose the authority of the Reverend. Every instance of taking back control results in all female supporting characters being killed, and both Anna and Joanna facing serious pain; later they both commit suicide as they see death as the only thing in their lives they can control. While critiquing conventional gender roles and representing the multifaceted nature of (domestic) abuse and silencing, the film inevitably links the notion of voice to agency, and silence to the lack of agency, and therefore silencing to the deprivation of autonomy.

The film guides the audience through the story retrospectively to convey the illusion that the cause of the events lies in "Genesis," which is not only the third chapter, after which the audience re-enters the original storyline, but also the first book of the Bible. Koolhoven explains the conventional oppression of women that the teachings of the Bible established in Western societies. The film amplifies this effect by integrating a cyclicality into the chapters, by setting each chapter in different seasons, or by representing three generations of women facing the same abuse, which characterizes the gender relations that were considered the norm in nineteenth-century America.

Thus, the film serves as a parable about women who have to actively and consciously resist patriarchal oppression, otherwise, they will be silenced, and *Brimstone* allows for the parable reading through highlighting women's issues and problems through positioning vocality at the center of social discourse, and highlighting the history of oppression women have faced. Although the film itself predates the #MeToo movement itself, it can be considered a precursor, standing as a testament to the fact that the movement came at a time when these topics were already central, and significant, yet still underrepresented, which also aligns with claims of the fourth wave of feminism.

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Rabeb Touihri

The US–Mexico Cinematic Border:
Screening the Southbound Movement

Abstract

The dynamic field of borderlands studies, spanning disciplines such as geography, political science, history, economy, demography, and sociology, explores the evolving nature of global borders. This paper contributes to the discourse by focusing on the US–Mexico border, explicitly examining cinematic representations of the southward movement across its expanse. Unlike previous research, which has touched on various aspects of the border, this study delves into the American film industry's portrayal, unraveling its evolution and impact on the perceptions of the border's role in US security and national identity. Methodologically, it employs a cinematic analysis to explore representations from western industrialized Tijuana, California, to agricultural southeast Texas. By doing so, this research bridges a gap in the current literature. It sheds light on the transformation of the US–Mexico border from an open boundary to a highly militarized one, offering unique insights into this shift's geopolitical dynamics and sociocultural implications.

Keywords: Cinematic Border, Film, Southbound Movement, US–Mexico Border

Introduction

The cinematic portrayal of the US–Mexico border remains an underexplored terrain in the broader context of border narratives. While scholars like Kathleen Staudt have delved into the cultural production of the borderlands through films produced in both Mexico and the US, a focused examination of the American cinematic perspective is warranted. Staudt, for example, contends that cinematic depictions from both sides "bring(s) out the worst in a country."[1] In contrast to her approach, this study exclusively examines American movies, addressing the US–Mexico border as a geographical line. It specifically explores the representations of the southward movement across this border in various genres and regions, ranging from the western industrialized Tijuana, California, to agricultural Southeast Texas. The unique contribution of this research lies in its exclusive focus on American movies, offering a detailed analysis of the cinematic border within the US context. By narrowing the scope, this study aims to uncover nuanced representations of the southward movement, focusing on the intricacies often overlooked in broader analyses.

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[1] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 465.

To contextualize this exploration, the evolving meaning of geographical boundaries is considered. Professor Joachim K. Blatter contends that geographical boundaries were not merely lines demarcating spheres of authority in the earlier stages of human history. Rather, they are demarcations of the basic entities of the social system. With the evolution of the modern political system, this perception underwent a dramatic shift: sovereignty, politics, nationalism, and territoriality emerged as cornerstones, empowering sovereign states to wield control over defined territories.[2] In his border theory, he explains the term border by distinguishing between four different dimensions: in the first dimension, he differentiates between perceptions of borders as zones and as lines, whereas in the second dimension, he discerns between conceptions of borders that focus on flexibility and those that stress stability. Moreover, he explains the third dimension as the importance of borders "for the contained entities," in other words, for the different territorial states. Meanwhile, "the fourth aspect differentiates symmetric boundary conceptions in which there is no basic recognition of the 'other' as a similar kind."[3]

Border scholars have relied on Benedict Anderson's ideas of nationalism: he defines the nation as an "imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[4] That is, the imagined alliance between people from the same imagined nation has a sense of strength to protect their nation, and sharing the same citizenship prompts them to imagine the boundaries of their nation even though the boundaries themselves may not physically exist. Anderson emphasizes territoriality as limited beyond which other nations have finite boundaries. In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, he delineates the invention of the concept of the nation "to be imagined, and once imagined, modeled, adapted and transformed." He also argues that nationalism is based on fear and hatred of the Other.[5] Drawing on Joachim K. Blatter's border theory and Benedict Anderson's ideas of nationalism, this paper grounds itself in a theoretical framework that connects sovereignty, politics, nationalism, and territory to the concept of borders.

Employing a qualitative research method to analyze a selection of movies, this study acknowledges its limitations, including the personal choice of films based on availability and narrative uniqueness. The cinematic border concept, despite being understudied, is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the southern US border. Building on works by Staudt and Elene Dell' Agnese, this research aims to unveil the various representations and

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[2] Blatter, "Border Theory," 48.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.
[5] Anderson, 141.

misrepresentations in the American film industry within the multiple US–Mexico borderlands, shedding light on regions that may be underrepresented in current cinematic discourse.

Screening the Southbound Movement across the Border from California to Baja California

Throughout history, southward migration predates the formal delineation of borders between the neighboring countries. Since Mexico won its independence from Spain and claimed Texas as part of its territory, the Mexican government needed to increase the number of inhabitants in Texas to ensure control over the Amerindians in the region. The flow of Americans toward the South kept growing during the time of the abolition of slavery in Mexico in 1829. Most Americans were Protestants and found it challenging to embrace the religion of the country, Catholicism. As Tim Marshall put it: "[…] Mexico tried to limit immigration, but Americans kept coming illegally, and by 1834 outnumbered Mexican settlers by nearly ten to one."[6] The main reason for immigration during that time was to escape slavery, where the border was unmarked and undefined. However, after the Mexican-American War ended in 1848, "Mexico lost about a third of its territory in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, including nearly all of present-day New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and California." Furthermore, during the same period, a six-year effort was made to establish the borderlines between the two neighboring countries, "but initially only fifty-two boundary markers designated the two-thousand-mile border, and the line was, by and large, only casually observed."[7] Marshall gives a historical background of the evolution of the US borders in relation to various events that resulted in the demarcation of US boundaries. Given the importance of the border, the cinematic production of North America's borderlands dates to the beginning of the American film industry in Hollywood. Although the cinema industry started as a means of entertainment, it managed to bring the border theme into the spotlight. The representations of the US–Mexico border region functioned as a prototype of the evolving relationships of the two neighbors. Borderland films reveal the ways Americans perceive their neighbors through their mythologies, regional fiction, and historical events.

The southbound movement across the border may be less visualized in motion pictures as frequently as the movement from Mexico to the United States. However, the

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[6] Marshall, *The Age of Walls*, 47.
[7] Marshall, 48.

viewer may sketch some aspects of the border through specific scenes: in *Borderland Films: American Cinema, Mexico, and Canada during the Progressive Era*, Dominique Brégent-Heald deals with the cinematic production of borderland movies about the US borders. She argues that "borderland settings could convey the complex processes revolving around the creation and maintenance of boundaries, demarcations, and divisions between the land and its people. Borderland locations in the US–Mexico border could convey a wide range of utopic and dystopic possibilities."[8] Although most of the locations of the motion pictures that this research deals with are at or near the border, the stories of violence might be distorted. While the cinematic representations of the border can be related to both real and imaginary narratives, one may recall Anderson's idea of "imagined communities." This concept explores how communities are formed not just by physical borders but also by shared beliefs, cultures, and collective imagination. In this sense, cinematic productions play a significant part in shaping the collective imagination of a given nation.

Border scholars think that "imagined communities" have become constructed through the production of censuses, maps, and museums.[9] As the introduction mentions, Anderson defines nationalism as an imagined community where individuals relate to the territory as part of their 'nation-ness.' In this perspective, motion pictures may be a way to imagine territoriality and communities where most people attach themselves to a particular geographical space but have never visited it. Nationalists, like Anderson, territorialize identity and argue that attachment to the nation creates "'others' who occupy different spaces and exhibit different cultures, with positive or negative portrayals of people and places. Staudt also agrees with Anderson's ideas and argues that 'in the context of unequal and asymmetrical borderlands, concepts about stereotyping offer insight, especially to what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls 'The Other Question.'"[10] Film analyst Juan Alonzo studies the process of otherness in relation to his research of the border. He claims that although the relationship between the US and Mexico is not defined in terms of the colonizer and the colonized in the colonial discourse, the stereotype of otherness is a critical concept in understanding power relations.[11]

The physical borderlands stretch across "coastal, desert, and tropical climatic terrains of varying altitudes."[12] These geographical differences have added to the nature of border construction. Although only 700 miles of 2,000 have fencing in place, the Sonora Desert is

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[8] Brégent-Heald, *Borderlands Films*, 2015, 3.

[9] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163–185.

[10] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 466.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Correa-Cabrera and Staudt, "An Introduction to the Multiple US–Mexico Borders," 385.

a natural barrier, and there is no concrete fence or wall; however, the nature of the border that separates Tijuana and San Diego is different:

> There is a high double fencing to deter people from crossing illegally. Part of the fence goes right through the beach and continues into a section of the Pacific Ocean. Further east, in Texas, there is often no fencing at all. The Rio Grande and the rugged terrain around the river serve as a natural barrier. In between, there is an assortment of fences with different shapes, sizes, and materials. These fences do not all connect to form one continuous line. Some areas have no fencing at all.[13]

Different types of physical borders are shown in movies depending on the shooting sites and the year of release since fencing has been a long process and continues to this day. The unilateral relationship between the US and Mexico has been reflected in the cinematic productions concerning the southern border. Characteristics of the physical border have been visualized differently depending on the geographical differences and the recurring themes in each region. For example, motion pictures produced in the San Diego–Tijuana area are numerous: *Blue Streak* (1999) tells the story of a jewel thief, Miles Logan, who steals a vast diamond, but when everything goes wrong, he hides it in a construction site before getting caught by the police. After spending two years in jail, he returns to the same building to take the diamond and is shocked that the construction site has become a police station. He changes his identity and pretends to be a Los Angeles Police detective to regain the diamond. After a long struggle with an old friend who turns out to be the villain in the movie, Logan chases the villain to get back his diamond. They cross the US–Mexico border, and Logan kills him in self-defense. He crosses, again, to the US side of the border after taking the diamond, continuing his disguise as a police officer. However, this time, he claims he is a "federale" working for his country, Mexico. He fools police officers while his two colleagues, who work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), figure out his true identity. Luckily for Logan, he has crossed the border, and his colleagues are not able to cross the borderline as FBI agents.[14]

Although this is an action-comedy film, the border scene informs the audience how serious the FBI is about international borders. According to fbi.gov, "On foreign soil, FBI special agents generally do not have authority to make arrests except in certain cases where, with the host country's consent, Congress has granted the FBI extraterritorial jurisdiction."

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[13] Almond, "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like."
[14] *Blue Streak* (1999), 01:19:00–01:26:30.

The moment Logan crosses the borderline, the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) cannot cross it because they represent US jurisdiction; therefore, they cannot pursue suspects on international territories, which marks the separation and differences in their sovereignty.[15] The reason behind the analysis of this short scene is the perception of the border as a dividing line between two sovereign states, the US and Mexico. This reflects the jurisdiction given to the FBI around the time of production and release of the movie.

Another case in point would be a more contemporary movie, *Miss Bala* (2019), directed by Catherine Hardwicke, distributed by Sony Pictures, and produced by the US and Mexico. It is based on the Spanish language film *Miss Bala,* released in 2011. This action movie narrates the story of a Mexican–American woman, Gloria, who crosses the border to visit her friend Suzi, where she gets involved in drug-related murders and is forced to do as told in order to save her friend. *Miss Bala* (2019) fixates the audience's attention on the physical border separating San Diego and Tijuana. At the movie's beginning, the camera sketches the border checkpoint and the regulations for US citizens crossing to the Mexican side, which are easy and fast. The border patrol agent at the inspection needs to check her passport. At the same time, the camera's circular movement showing the fencing's surroundings along the border checkpoint is clear and thorough: the camera is moving from left to right, that is, from the US side of the border towards the Mexican side.[16] From an analytical perspective, the camera movement serves a specific purpose, which goes hand in hand with the overall narrative of the movie. It simulates the regular legal crossing through one of the border checkpoints. A second southbound movement can be found in this movie when Gloria smuggles guns from the US across the border.[17] In this scene, the camera lens shows the border fence between San Diego and Tijuana stretching into the Pacific Ocean from above. Hence, the film accurately visualizes the physical border through long shots showing the fence from a distance and emphasizing the location.[18]

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[15] *Blue Streak* (1999), 01:26:30–01:30:14.
[16] *Miss Bala* (2019), 00:02:57–00:03:16.
[17] *Miss Bala* (2019), 00:49:25–38.
[18] *Miss Bala* (2019), 00:39:33. (fig. 1).

Figure 1. The Tijuana–San Diego dividing line from the movie Miss Bala. Performance by Gina Rodriguez, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2019.

A similar realistic photograph John Moore took shows the representation's resemblance and accuracy.[19]

Another physical portrayal of the border fence can be seen in the movie *Born in East LA* (1987), which tells the story of a Mexican–American-born citizen, Rudy, who goes to a factory in Los Angeles to pick up his newly arriving cousin from Arizona, Xavier. However, he is mistakenly deported to Mexico when an immigration authority raid busts the factory. Because he did not have his papers on him at the time of the incident, the immigration officers did not believe him even though he spoke English fluently, albeit with a heavy Spanish accent and a small amount of Spanglish. However, he is deported to Tijuana because of his Hispanic looks, with the rest of the undocumented immigrants caught in the factory. The film shows the deportation process during the 1990s. Rudy is deported to Mexico, although he has never been there before. The bus stops at the border, and border patrolmen guide all the undocumented immigrants through the border entry point. The latter is visualized as a rusty old fence with a revolving door and very little security. In the 1990s, there was no imprisonment for illegal immigrants. At that time, illegal crossing of

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[19] *Almond,* "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like," (Figure 2).

the US–Mexico border was not yet criminalized: during the deportation, a Mexican illegal immigrant tells Rudy that they will try again to cross the border on Monday without fear of criminal prosecution. Kelly Lytle Hernandez explains that prosecutions for unlawful crossings remained low until 2005, with few exceptions. "The George W. Bush administration directed the US attorneys to adopt an 'enforcement with consequences' strategy"[20] as part of the war on terror.

The border fence separating San Diego from Tijuana, Mexico, extends into the Pacific Ocean in May 2017. Moore said the area is heavily surveilled from the American side, with tower-mounted cameras and frequent helicopter patrols. "Occasionally someone tries to swim around the fence, but often they have to get rescued or they are quickly taken into custody by Border Patrol agents," he said. "It's one of the most secure spots of the entire US-Mexico border."
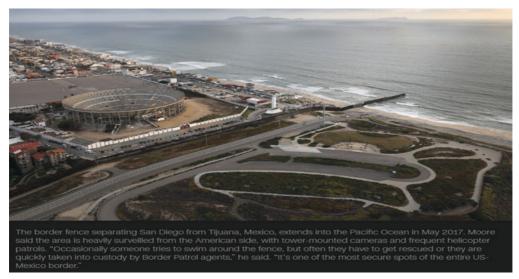
Figure 2. The border fence separating San Diego from Tijuana, Mexico, extends into the Pacific Ocean taken by John Moore from Almond, Kyle. "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like." CNN Politics, March 2013, edition.cnn. com/interactive/2018/12/politics/border-wall-cnnphotos/.

In the 21st century, the border management paradigm shifted from guarding and policing towards cooperation with Mexico to secure the border. As Matthew Longo highlighted, "You cannot successfully manage the border just from one side."[21]

To understand the shift along the US–Mexico border, one should revisit the US–Mexican relationship after the 9/11 terrorist attacks: it is essential to know that borders during the 21st century are no longer a mark of division but rather a space of joint maintenance. Co-bordering began with the cooperation of the US and Canada through information sharing and border patrol officers. The latter was implemented afterward on

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[20] Hernandez, "How Crossing the US–Mexico Border Became a Crime."
[21] Longo, *The Politics of Borders. Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11*, 87.

the US–Mexico border through "the Merinda Agreement, announced in October 2007, which centered on the US providing funding and training to the Mexican government to counter drug trafficking."[22] In *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11,* Longo gives the reader a detailed account of the bilateral agreements between the US–Canada and US–Mexico, which resulted in enhanced co-bordering strategies and, therefore, more secure borderlands.

The Arizona–Sonora Border Region

The Sonora Desert covers large parts of the southern border in both the US and Mexico territories. It was established due to the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, and it stretches from the western Chihuahuan Desert to the west of Nogales. James S. Griffith comments on this border in the following way: "Belonging truly to neither nation, it serves as a kind of cultural buffer zone for both cultivating its own culture and traditions. Like other borders, it both attracts and repels. Like them, it is both a barrier and a filter. It is, above all, a stimulating cultural environment."[23]

The western part of the Sonora Desert earned the name "El Camino del Diablo" (The Devil's Highway), for it is mainly uninhabited. The border stretches between five paired towns from east to west:

> Douglas/Agua Prieta, Naco/Naco, Nogales/Nogales, Sasabe/Sasabe, Lukeville/Sonoyta, and San Luis Rio Colorado, which has no corresponding town on the Arizona side. Between these towns stretches the border, for the most part, marked by a three-strand, barbed-wire fence, and a series of monuments. The latter are spaced to make each one visible from its counterpart to the east and the west. The fence penetrates valleys, mountains, lush thickets, and sparse desert shrubbery.[24]

The American film industry has produced many movies in the Sonora Desert, dealing with various topics. However, there aren't American films available focusing on the southbound movement across the Arizona–Sonora border region. Most of the movies produced are either independent or Mexican, whereas American-made movies focus on the northbound movement across this region, especially dealing with topics like

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[22] Longo, 86.
[23] Griffith, "The Arizona-Sonora Border."
[24] Ibid.

illegal immigration and drug dealers. On the other hand, many documentaries have been showing life across the Arizona-Sonora region, and they are worth checking for facts. Historically speaking, there have been instances of southbound movements that are worth mentioning. During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), some Mexican Americans and Mexican workers moved south of the border due to the political and social upheavals in their home country. These movements were often influenced by personal and family ties. Another instance of southbound movement across this region was during the Great Depression. Marshall states that "with serious economic problems throughout the USA, the issue of immigrants taking American jobs became key, and Mexicans were targeted in particular—during the Mexican Repartition, somewhere between five hundred thousand and 2 million people were deported to Mexico, many of whom were US-born citizens."[25] During President Hoover's term, he ordered the massive deportation of Mexicans and the closure of the border. The number of deported Mexicans during his presidency was huge: "The US deported a million of its own citizens to Mexico during the Great Depression. Up to 1.8 million people of Mexican descent—most of them American-born—were rounded up in informal raids and deported in an effort to reserve jobs for white people."[26] President Hoover ordered the mass deportation of Mexicans during the 1930s in order to preserve jobs for white Americans during the economic crisis. The slogan used by his administration at that time was "American jobs for real Americans," which implicitly connotes racism.

Additionally, this border region has witnessed various demographic shifts and movements over the years, reflecting the intertwined histories of both neighboring countries. This section of the border is considered a natural barrier; however, with the border militarization efforts, especially in the wake of the 9/11 events, sections of the border 'wall' were built during the Trump administration. "The administration has used the REAL ID waivers to push hundreds of miles of border wall construction, rumbling through whatever patch of sacred Native American sites, private property, or federally protected land and gets in its way. With 66 miles completed thus far, the president is nowhere near the 500 miles of border wall he promised for his first term."[27]

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[25] Marshall, *The Age of Walls: How Barriers between Nations Are Changing Our World*, 48.
[26] Little, "The US Deported a Million of Its Own Citizens to Mexico during the Great Depression."
[27] Rayan Devereaux, 2019.

El Paso–Ciudad Juárez Border Region

The central borderlands have become an iconic region where many filmmakers have constructed various narratives. This section is devoted to the movies covering the changing representations of the central geographical borderlands through time in the American film industry.

Babel (2006) is a multi-plot film directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu in four countries: the USA, Mexico, Japan, and Morocco. Regarding the narrative in the USA and Mexico, the film draws attention to this heavily studied part of the central US–Mexico border through the eyes of Amelia, her nephew Santiago, and two American children, Debbie and Mike. At the same time, their parents, Richard and Susan, embark on a tourist adventure to Morocco. Amelia, the housekeeper, takes care of their children. She receives a phone call from Richard to cancel her son's wedding, and he promises her to pay for a better wedding ceremony, but Amelia tells him that everything is ready and that they cannot cancel the wedding. She asks him if someone else can come and take care of the kids, but he is angry, and no one else can replace her.[28] Amelia tries very hard to find a replacement for one day but in vain. As a final solution, she decides to take them to Mexico instead of leaving them alone or with a stranger. The children are excited to see her house, which she says is not so far, which denotes that she lives in a city near the border.

Crossing the border southward is accompanied by traditional Mexican music. The scene opens with a Mexican male looking towards the American side at the top of the border fence. The camera's focus shifts to show the compositions of the physical edge of the border from the Mexican side, where a US Border Patrol vehicle lies in the background. From the camera movements, the director wants to compare the checkpoints in both directions. On the one hand, the camera lens displays how rigid and well-controlled the crossing from Mexico to the US is when a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent checks vehicles accompanied by a dog searching for drugs while vehicles are lining up at the checkpoint entries.

On the other hand, the southbound movement across the border is effortless and uncontrolled: the audience can notice the absence of the simplest form of checking.[29] After crossing the checkpoint without being checked, Santiago tells the children, "Do you see how easy it is to reach paradise?" Debby answers with a question: "Is this Mexico?" and then her brother continues, "Mom and Dad told us that Mexico is very dangerous,"

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[28] *Babel* (2006), 00:12:30–00:14:25.
[29] *Babel* (2006), 00:31:51–25.

and Santiago starts laughing.[30] Both Debby and Mike acquired knowledge about how dangerous Mexico is from their parents. Their general perception of the Other has been developed through emotions of fear and ignorance because they are children, and they do not have a clear perception of the world around them yet.

On the eve of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon building just outside Washington, DC, the vision of a border-free North America was one of the first to meet its end. In policy practice, US borders have been re-designed as part of the 'war on terror.' The immediate response to the terrorist attacks in 2001 was that the US tightened its borders' inspections and controlled the flow of immigrants more than ever. Borders became a matter of national security, and border policies had to change to cope with new threats. Peter Andreas, in his article "A Tale of Two Borders: The US–Mexico and US–Canada Lines After 9-11," argues that "terrorism has predictably heightened the American public's awareness of and fears about porous borders. According to a Zogby public opinion survey a few weeks after the terrorist attacks, 72 percent of those polled said better border controls and stricter enforcement of immigration laws would help prevent terrorism."[31]

The portrayal of the southbound movement across the border manifests through the film *Sicario* (2015). It is a borderland movie directed by Denis Villeneuve. The narrative starts with FBI agent Kate Macer leading an operation near Chandler, Phoenix, Arizona, to find hostages. Afterward, she is recruited to work with a special operations team led by the CIA agent Matt Graver. The US government gave him a particular assignment, which was to eradicate drug cartel leaders Manuel *Díaz,* his brother Guillermo, and a drug lord named Fausto *Alarcón.* Matt recruits Kate because the mission needs someone with knowledge of tactical procedures. Kate accepts the assignment because she wants to stop drug cartels. Meanwhile, he introduces her to Alejandro, who is part of the team but seems mysterious, and Kate needs to understand his role in the mission entirely. After arriving in El Paso, Kate learns that the team members have different backgrounds and that some served in the Afghanistan War. During their mission, she gets confused about the team's ways of handling situations, which, for her, does not seem legal. The whole mission revolves around understanding the end goal of the mission while she also tries to understand why she is recruited.

The title, *Sicario* (2015), is a Spanish word for 'assassin' or hitman. The film portrays modern border policing at the southern border. Several scenes in this movie visualize the

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[30] *Babel* (2006), 00:31:22–43.
[31] Andreas, "A Tale of Two Borders," 2003, 2.

physical borderland and the border crossings to Mexico. In the first crossing to Mexico, the circular movement of the camera lens from above is essential to cover the physical border fences fully. The different fragments of the border fence built in the region of El Paso–Juárez infiltrating the desert were captured by the camera:[32]

Figure 3. A long shot taken from above the physical border in the El Paso–Juárez region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from Sicario. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performance by Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin, and Benicio Del Toro, Lionsgate, 2015. Netflix.

The first border fence penetrates the desert,[33] the second fence separates the inhabited cities of El Paso and Juárez, and the third is a continuation of the second.[34] The central borderlands previously were described as having "an assortment of fences with different shapes, sizes, and materials."[35] The comparison between what Almond describes and shows in his article about the different shapes and sizes of the physical border is authentically visualized in Villeneuve's movie.

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[32] Figure 3. Long shot taken from above of the physical border in El Paso–Juárez region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from *Sicario* (2015).

[33] Figure 4. A part of the physical border fence in El–Juárez Region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from *Sicario* (2015).

[34] *Sicario* (2015), (00:24:35–00:27:05).

[35] Almond, "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like."

Figure 4. A part of the physical border fence in El–Juárez Region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from Sicario. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performance by Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin, and Benicio Del Toro, Lionsgate. 2015. Netflix.

Staudt argues that "the borderlands became the gateway for international criminal organizations in gun and drug trafficking, ongoing immigration, and the violence associated therewith."[36] In *Sicario*, while Matt and his team are driving across the Mexican border from El Paso to Juárez through the Bridge of the Americas port of entry, naked bodies hang from one of the bridges, displaying torture and violence through disfigured and missing body parts like heads, legs, or arms. The scene is accompanied by threatening music, and the camera moves from the moment they cross the border until they return, connoting the danger surrounding Ciudad Juárez. The "[…] pounding beat recalls a war drum. The sound alone is enough to induce sweaty palms."[37] Johann Johannsson was nominated for BAFTA's Best Original Music Award in the film *Sicario*; the score's originality adds relentless suspense to the border narrative. It also reflects Kate's anxiety, fear, and shock from the start: the violent and dangerous situations she finds herself in are shocking, and they affect her life. She has many questions unanswered regarding Matt and Alejandro and their way of solving things while they give her little information to grasp.

Moreover, Villeneuve's movie occupies a spectrum between thought-provoking and mind-bending scenes: one of the elements that made the film special is Matt's exceptional team, which is composed of recently returned soldiers from Afghanistan who are recruited to patrol the southern border. Indeed, this element reflects the post-9/11 border policies

[36] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 472.
[37] Merry, "'Sicario' Takes a Jarring Thrill Ride South of the Border."

in positioning soldiers returning from Afghanistan at the border securitization plan. This film displays the border not only as a passage for drugs and human trafficking but also transforms it into a war zone. The scene of the interrogation in the movie connotes the post-9/11 US methods of torture. One may bring into light rendition, which, according to Britannica, refers to an extrajudicial practice carried out by US government agencies of transferring a person from one country to another to circumvent the former country's laws on interrogation, detention, and torture. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US resorted to new ways of interrogation, among them rendition. The latter was also used in the second movie of the sequel *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018), directed by Stephano Sollima.

The Eastern Borderlands from Del Rio–*Acuña* to Brownsville–Matamoros

This part of the southern border stretching from Del Rio–*Acuña* to Brownsville–Matamoros is somehow under-represented in American films. Parts of this region in Texas are emphasized; however, the more one goes east, the less representation there is in cinema and the academic field.

An example that illustrates this observation is the motion picture *No Country for Old Men* (2007), directed by Ethan Coen. It tells the story of Llewelyn Moss, who discovers a massive amount of money at a crime scene in the West Texas borderlands of 1980 (desert), where several drug dealers lie dead. However, he is chased by a psychopath criminal, Anton Chigurh, who is seeking to get the money. Crossing the border checkpoint at Del Rio represents the solution for Llewelyn Moss to hide the cash.[38] The Mexican side represents a refuge for the outlawed. The storyline takes place in Eagle Pass, Texas, during the 1980s. Eagle Pass is visualized as a lawless border town thriving with crimes and drug trafficking. After being shot, Llewelyn crosses the border to the Mexican side to escape Chigurh and to hide the two million dollars he stole. He was shot on the US side of the border, so he gets medical care in Mexico because if he goes to an American hospital, he will be caught by the police. Border crossing is easy for Llewelyn because it is at night, and the border patrolman is asleep. The film visualizes the everyday crossing for border towns' inhabitants when Llewelyn encounters three youths drinking alcohol while they are returning from the Mexican side on foot. They are not worried about crossing the border because they are American citizens.

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[38] *No Country for Old Men* (2007), 01:05:10–38.

With the absence of Kate Macer from *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018), who represented Americans' anxieties, fears, and confusion, the second movie in the *Sicario* sequel deals with the drug wars on the US–Mexico border, which has escalated after the cartels started to trafficking terrorists across the border, which led to the categorization of cartels as terrorist organizations, therefore, a new way of dealing with new threats. This film narrates a new level of danger, and henceforth, it shows the US borderlands as a global border where the US tries to eliminate all dangers. The film director, Stefano Sollima, uses the same multi-plot technique as González Iñárritu in *Babel* (2006). He used two narratives that overlap at a certain point: the first is based on starting a war between drug cartel leaders through kidnapping Isabel Reyes, while the second is built on Miguel, the schoolboy who lives in McAllen, Texas, a border town and gets involved in human trafficking.

Matt's new mission is to find the people responsible for the terrorist attacks in different places in the US. The aim of crossing the border is to implement the new mission by kidnapping Isabel, the daughter of a cartel leader in Mexico, as a strategy to create chaos and turn cartels against each other. Southbound movement across the southern border aims to take Isabel Reyes home to Mexico. Matt prepares his team for this mission with the appropriate weapons and surveillance plane going from the US Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, Texas, to Mexico with the help of seven Mexican police vehicles who take orders from Graver during his mission on the Mexican part of the border. Moreover, the southbound movement across the border is embodied by displaying images of the border landscape from an airplane through a horizontal camera movement. It moves from the US side of the borderline to the Mexican one. It shows the physical border as a line and the landscape as primarily a desert.[39]

After a few minutes of driving into the Mexican part of the desert, they infiltrate the soil road and use special thermal goggles to see through the storm. These thermal goggles do not work in such a climate, which makes Matt nervous. Like *Sicario* (2015), a piece of threatening music accompanies the process of the crossing, telling of the imminent danger ahead of them, which becomes real when the Mexican Federal police, who are supposed to cooperate with the convoy, turn against them.

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[39] *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018), 00:50:42–00:58:28.

Conclusion

The aim of this research is to examine the various representations of the US–Mexico borderlands in American films. From analyzing various movie genres that deal with the US–Mexico borders, I can say that the American film industry produced and reproduced the cinematic border primarily as a dividing line rather than a zone of contact and encounter between two different cultures, languages, sovereign states, and economic systems.

Dividing the border into four regions, Tijuana–San Diego, Sonora Desert–Arizona, El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, and Del Rio–Acuña, helped understand the differences and similarities between multiple US–Mexico borders. Besides, a multiple borderlands approach is considered crucial in understanding the US–Mexico and border relations regarding economics, cultures, and border policies. From this perspective, I had the chance to depict a variety of themes and issues related to each region, like drug trafficking in the Arizona–San Diego region, alcohol smuggling in the Sonora-Arizona borderland, violence and lawlessness in the central borderlands, and human trafficking in the eastern borderlands.

The southbound movement across the border emphasized separation rather than hybridity by visualizing the physical border as a division line. Noticeably, the movies analyzed here convey the differences more than the similarities. Screening the southbound movement across the US–Mexico border in various film genres has shown the negative portrayal of Mexico in the American film industry in multiple borderlands and different periods. All movies that are mentioned in this study show that although crossing the border is easy and fast, Mexico represents danger, crime, lawlessness, poverty, and death. One exception that may manifest as a positive portrayal of the journey to Mexico is through Mexican-American characters who cross the border to visit family members or friends, like Gloria in *Miss Bala* (2019) and Amelia in *Babel* (2006). Both southbound movements are accompanied by happy music. Noticeably, as mentioned earlier, all the cinematic crossings were legal through border checkpoints. Most of these films display the southern border crossing in both directions to compare the processes. Ironically, film directors hardly ever focus on the regular life pattern at the border; instead, they mostly fixate the audience's attention on more exciting and shocking topics like crime and violence.

This research further supports the recent studies conducted by both Staudt and Dell 'Agnese about the cinematic border, indicating that "it is films about the border, not the border itself, that bring out the worst in the borderlands of countries, at least in the multiple borders of the US–Mexico border region."[40] However, we should not ignore that most

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[40] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 475.

of the above-mentioned films offer realistic representations of the physical border at one level. However, they also lack multi-layered portrayals of the border—with few exceptions. This study has provided more insight into borderland studies by analyzing new movies that have not yet been explored in the academic field. Meanwhile, the scope of this research was limited by the unavailability of essential movies online.

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Eszter Krakkó

Vránková, Kamila. Metamorphoses of the sublime: From Ballads and Gothic Novels to Contemporary Anglo-American Children's Literature.

In her book, Kamila Vránková provides an ample description of how the notion of the sublime has transformed through the various eras while retaining its characteristics as a transgressive category one finds in several fields of the arts, let them be narrative (literature), visual (the fine arts), or theoretical (philosophy) in their nature. The volume reconstructs the narrative of the term "from scratch," first offering a definition of the sublime as an aesthetic category, then providing the historical framework necessary to understand the various associations and connotations the notion of the sublime evokes. In this dense narrative of how the sublime evolved from the Antiquity (Longinus) through the 18th (Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant) and the 19th centuries (Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau), and how it has been elaborated on by some of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century, British, continental and American aesthetes and philosophers included, the author also mentions literary texts that were produced in the respective periods, as if to prove the transgressive nature of the sublime. Then, the close reading of literary texts of a great diversity follows.

The interrelatedness of philosophy and literature already present in the theoretical chapter is further exemplified in the chapters to follow, as in these analyses Vránková heavily relies on the philosophy and the aesthetics of the sublime, combining ideas and phenomena introduced by thinkers as diverse as Immanuel Kant, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida, among others, to demonstrate the manifold ways the sublime manifests in the works discussed. Furthermore, she employs references to analytical and continental philosophies alike while analyzing literary works of great diversity: works of American and of British authors written in various eras and texts addressing adults and children are also included, representing various genres. Accordingly, in these chapters, the author proves that the sublime appears in and is connected to several fields (6). Therefore, one can say that the volume definitely represents more than "a brief draft of the possibilities of interpretation" (9), as it is able to inspire readers to seek new ways of understanding and interpreting the motif of sublimity both in theory and in literature.

In the first in-depth literary analysis provided, Vránková draws on more and less well-known ballads of the European literary heritage to illustrate how the rites-of-passage theory introduced by Arnold van Gennep can be used while analyzing "one specific type of the revenant tradition, the demon-lover ballad" (7). As she points out, the destruction represented by the character of the revenant is closely connected to the subversive (and also transgressive) power of the sublime, that is, to the lover's "ambiguous desire to reach unity with the other and remain separated […] at the same time" (49). Drawing on examples from Bulgarian, Albanian, Slovakian, as well as English literature, the author provides a detailed overview of the sub-genre from the Medieval until the Romantic period, arguing that the sublime nature of the rites of passage present in these works can be best described as "a disturbing and self-threatening transition towards a better understanding of one's position in the universe" (53).

Disturbing features are not uncommon in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* either, which forms the central theme of the next chapter and concerning which Vránková focuses on "the Gothic sublime and the tradition of haunting and persecution in the image of the monster" (7). In this analysis, yet another feature of the sublime takes center stage: that "of otherness and the split self" (7). Yet again, the author calls into action several philosophies (and philosophers) while providing a Gothic sublime-based interpretation of the Romantic text: after mentioning several possible (literary) origins as for the image of the Monster, she connects Fred Botting's idea of the Monster as the manifestation of the inarticulate in literature to more character (counter-)development-based analyses of both Frankenstein's and the Monster's figures. Furthermore, calling the Monster "a symbol of modern science," (60) she introduces an impressive list of those literary and cinematic works for which Shelley's text (might have) worked as a literary predecessor, thus finding intertextual references to this technological aspect of monstrosity in works as diverse as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. She concludes her analysis with pointing out the uniqueness of Shelley's novel in the sense that it introduces "the ethical concept of the sublime as a recognition of the individual boundaries" (61).

Conversely, the next chapter reflects on the ambiguous nature of the sublime by providing a detailed examination of yet another iconic text of 19th-century English literature, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Here, Vránková aims "to develop the analysis of monstrosity and otherness with respect to [the] idea of the Romantic sublime as a loss of unity in the relationship between the subject and the object" (7). As for this version of the sublime, the author finds its essence "in the feeling of uncertainty, which surrounds all events and permeates the […] utterances of both the narrators and the protagonists" (62) while employing theories of Edmund Burke and Tzvetan Todorov to prove that in this text, both the natural background of the landscape (let it be imaginary or real) and the notions of "time and space are experienced as dreamy and boundless" (68) and thus, ambiguous.

Turning her attention to "the American Gothic tradition" (8) and focusing on the interconnection that exists between the "American Puritan experience," (8) the Romantic imagination and mythological references, in the next chapter, Vránková provides an insightful analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's works written both for children and for adults: a compilation of imaginative retellings of various Greek myths, *Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, its sequel, *Tanglewood Tales*, and the novel entitled *The Marble Faun*. As the author points out, in these texts "mythical patterns are employed to dramatize the characters' inner conflicts as life-transforming, initiation experiences" (73), and she uses both Gennep's interpretation of the rites of passage and Burke's theory of the sublime to explain how Hawthorne's narratives turn one's "attention to the uncertainty of the human position in the incomprehensible world permeated with hostile and destructive forces"

(74). Therefore, with focusing on the transgressive element always already present in the notion of the sublime, she effectively argues that in these works, "the Gothic sublime permeates through the traditional rites-of-passage plots […] at the point when transition transforms into transgression" (93).

The next chapter is unique in the sense that it provides a comparative analysis of yet another iconic Brontë text: this time of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which is discussed parallel with its "prequel," Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Here, Vránková discusses various interpretations of otherness present in the novels, while also comparing the attitude of "Victorian and modernist literature" (8) to this concept. In examining Rhys's narrative, the author points out that this "story of alienation is centred on two crucial metaphors: the sea and the island" (95). Therefore, it seems natural to use Paul de Man's theory about "the importance of metaphors" (94), which the author employs effectively to prove that it is through these powerful metaphors that Rhys's text is able "to revive the disturbing potential of particular themes and motifs" (94) present in its 19th-century antecedent. As one of these themes is, obviously, otherness, the author's analysis concludes with the well-articulated argument that although "the experience of the sublime" might lead "to monstrosity" (as in *Jane Eyre*), but, on a more optimistic note, "also to the recognition of otherness as an inseparable part of individual identity" (8), as Rhys's narrative aptly demonstrates.

Further analyses of the other and otherness follow in the last four chapters of the book, which seem to divert from the previous chapters in the sense that their thematic focus lies "in children's literature" (8) or, to be more specific, in "the role of the sublime in Anglo-American fantasy fiction for young readers" (8). However, this diversion proves to be superficial not only in the sense that these analyses are supported by the extensive use of a similarly complex web of theoretical texts, but also because contemporary fantasy fiction is (at least) as much rooted in the Gothic tradition as the classics discussed in the first part of the volume are. This common origin becomes evident already in the analysis of Gothic features, such as "imagination, otherness and fear" (8–9) present in 18th- and 19th-century representatives of children's literature, which is then followed by the investigation of "the time-travel motif" (9). The last two chapters similarly have a thematic focus: after an inquiry into "the theme of the passage in […] secondary, other worlds," (9) the volume concludes with the analysis of "Gothic motifs in the stories of […] contemporary Anglo-American authors," (9) discussing "the experience of otherness, the loss of identity and the possibility of renewal" (9) in these works.

Taking into consideration the impressive number of theoretical interpretations and the great cultural, generic, and thematic variety of the literary texts covered, one finds that the author's aim of attempting "to further theoretical discussion by suggesting various possibilities of the employment of the sublime" (6) is definitely achieved. The only

shortcoming of the text (if any) might be that despite its accessible but scholarly language, one still finds occasional lapses in terms of grammatical accuracy (for instance the overuse of the definite article), which mistakes could easily have been avoided by a more meticulous editing work. This minute thing not considered, the work aptly fulfils its role in becoming a point of reference both for established scholars and those having a non-scholarly interest in the dynamic transitions of the sublime experience.