

Ariela Szwarc

Professor Millard

Film in Modernity, Modernity in Film

13 December 2018

Revenge and Violence Depiction in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and *Kill Bill*

Revenge is that of a turbulent sea; if not careful, one may lose control and steer from their intended course. While revenge can be a form of closure, it is ultimately a hostile cycle of retaliation an individual can quickly become lost in. Notably, Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* and Martin McDonagh's *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* use scenes of intense violence paired with the story of revenge to create a lasting audience impact. However, it also raises questions about humanity's ethics and how far one will go to satisfy their rage. While *Kill Bill* offers a more sensationalized violence within a heavily theatrical world, the moral ambiguity and consequences of violence are exemplified in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* where violence is equally as brutal as it is realistic, both portraying the female anti hero's journey and a chase for vengeance through the use of sound, performance, and other film techniques. *Kill Bill* follows the story of Beatrix Kiddo, a former assassin codenamed "Black Mamba," who experiences the death of her unborn child and wedding party following an attack by the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad (the DiVAS). After awakening from a four-year coma induced by being shot in the head by their leader and Beatrix's former lover, Bill, she swears revenge. Formulating a hit list, Beatrix sets off to kill every person who was involved in the wrongdoing.

centered around Mildred Hayes. Seeking justice for the vicious rape and murder of her daughter, Mildred rents three billboards near a roadside reading “RAPED WHILE DYING,” “AND STILL NO ARRESTS?,” and “HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?” to spark controversy and action in protest of the police’s handling of the case. This challenges the town and local authority, especially an aggressive and racist deputy named Jason Dixon. Soon, Mildred finds herself in a battle that is only exacerbated with every instance of hate and anger.

In both films, grief is the underlying catalyst for the main character’s retribution; specifically, grief caused by the loss of a child. As a result, Beatrix and Mildred adopt vengeful coping mechanisms fueled by extremity and rage. In “The Psychohistory of Vengeance,” David Lotto explains how seeking revenge “can be used to avoid or lessen the painful aspects of mourning” (Lotto 48). Rather than endure their pain in silence, Beatrix and Mildred are set on quests intended to inflict pain on others. They are frequently unbothered by the consequences of their actions on the collective good. This underlines the moral ambiguity present in both films. On the one hand, a strong female figure sets out to right a wrong. On the other, their thirst for vengeance causes them to hurt an array of people and become threatening and unpredictable. For instance, Beatrix murders former DiVA, Vernita, in front of her daughter and threatens her on the way out, leaving her alone with her mother’s corpse. However, she later decides to spare the life of a young and frightened member of O-Ren’s yakuza army. Mildred sets fire to a police station and kicks teenagers in a high school parking lot, but she also tries to look after her depressed son. Both women exhibit empathic qualities, but they are also broken, unhinged, and monstrous

to certain degrees. The themes of revenge and morality are strongly embedded in *Kill*

Szwarc 3

Bill and *Three Billboards*, but their depictions of violence uniquely shape these themes in different ways.

Setting plays a tremendous role in establishing perspective and stakes. Whereas *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* roots itself in a singular and realistic location, *Kill Bill* constantly shifts within an unrealistic and stylized world, either to a different region or across the globe. This, along with frequent jump cuts and “sharp changes in film style” (Dawson 125) ranging from animated, black and white, to color make *Kill Bill* a “film within a film,” or, as Tarantino calls it, a “movie-movie” (Dawson 126). The audience is constantly reminded they are experiencing a film, so the framework of reality is overlooked. Anything can happen. This fantasy realm creates a world of “innocent blameless victims and evil demonized perpetrators” (Lotto 48). Although being an ex-assassin herself, Beatrix is the victim of the ruthless DiVAS and Bill, so viewers side with her and cheer with each victory. The film is produced in an environment where Beatrix cannot safely live while the evil who harmed her still roams, making violence necessary for survival. Once deemed necessary, it simply becomes a part of the plot and “legitimizes feelings of delight at the bloodshed,” (Dawson 127) overpowering any suggestions of “ethical ambiguity” that may be present (Dawson 126). Primarily, setting in *Kill Bill* excuses violence and is built around it.

In *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, “elements of American regionalism” are utilized to illustrate the questionable ethics of the violence at play (Jones and Friedman 61). Set in a small town in present-day Missouri, the film is far from the hyperbolized and fantasy-like

realm of *Kill Bill* where laws and pertinent societal issues are either ignored or do not exist.

Police brutality and racism are combined with other violence in a town mirroring many others

Szwarc 4

across America, making it relatable to the audience and drawing close attention to the corruption and aggression in real life. In real life, there is no quintessential good or evil. There is no yakuza army or ex-assassin patiently at wait ready to attack Mildred. The main characters and the rest of the town's denizens behave as normal humans do, allowing their emotions to get the best of them and putting the blame on others when faced with violence rather than addressing the horror of violence itself. Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* states, "To those who are sure that right is on one side, oppression and injustice on the other, and that the fighting must go on, what matters is precisely who is killed and by whom" (Sontag 9-10). The film's obscure morality and "nihilism" where all systems "are woefully inadequate or downright corrupt" exemplify the perception that violence is senseless and unnecessary (Jones and Friedman 61). Feelings of hopelessness and stagnation within the realistic setting of *Three Billboards* causes violence to stand out, but not in the alluring and exciting manner in which it is presented in *Kill Bill*.

Aside from where they take place, performance highlights the dominating presence and varying degrees of violence in both films. Characters in *Kill Bill* are "over-the-top," archetypal, and cartoonish (Dawson 125). Therefore, fight sequences are displayed in a "theatrical, operatic" manner, using "samurai framework" and an "intertextual choreography of martial arts action and anime" in place of simplified brawls (Dawson 126). Blood spews volcanically from wounded bodies in DiVAS member O-Ren's flashback. Beatrix uses an impossible Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique to finish off Bill in a climactic moment. Audiences enjoy and

anticipate the violence presented to them, for it is overly exaggerated and made to be engaging.

This “aestheticized” violence causes a disconnect from morals (Dawson 126). Greater emphasis

Szwarc 5

is placed on the build-up, dynamics, and showcasing of a fight in *Kill Bill* rather than the abhorrence of the fight itself.

In *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, violence reflects pain and suffering from lifelike action. As average citizens in a modern day environment, the characters are relatable. In the extremely fictionalized *Kill Bill*, it is difficult to relate to anyone. As a result, the characters’ violent behaviors are more palpable and unsettling. For instance, blood in *Three Billboards* seems to represent something entirely different from blood in *Kill Bill*. In *Kill Bill*, blood dominates the majority of scenes. It is worn as a badge, and it is embedded in the film’s action. When blood is spilled in *Three Billboards*, it is a tremendous loss and accentuates how violence comes with a cost; a person’s life. In a scene between Chief Willoughby and Mildred at the police station, Willoughby coughs and splatters blood on Mildred’s face, exposing his worsening health from pancreatic cancer. It is a defining moment of vulnerability and leaves the audience in a state of horror and shock. Essentially, the performance in *Three Billboards* makes the violence blunt and messy. When Dixon throws Red Welby out of a third-story window and beats him in the midst of a heated rage, it is not exciting or appealing. It is scarring and leaves a sour taste in viewers’ mouths. Performance shows the varying degrees of violence and its impact in *Kill Bill* and *Three Billboards*.

Sound effectively sets the mood and exemplifies certain material presented in both films. Sharp and amplified sound effects used in fight scenes and other plot points emphasize *Kill Bill*’s

unreality. The film's soundtrack contains tunes that remind one of kung-fu and invigorating action movies. For example, the "Ironside Siren Sound" that plays when Beatrix confronts each member of the DiVAS as well as Bernard Herrmann's iconic "Twisted Nerve" draws the

Szwarc 6

audience's attention away from the unethical side of violence. It is a form of mindless escapism. Moreover, the dialogue is inflated with dramatized interactions, calculated threats, and soliloquies to constantly "foreground the film's fictive" (Dawson 125). The loud beeping noise used to avoid the mentioning of Beatrix's name in *Kill Bill: Volume 1* indicates this idea by breaking the fourth wall and reaffirming its movie within a movie quality. Overall, sound in *Kill Bill* gives its violence artistic and entertaining implications.

While music and sound effects dictate the world of *Kill Bill*, dialogue is mainly depended on in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* to emphasize its realism and the power of language. Instead of a heroic soundtrack, the film's music is "imbued with a Celtic melancholy," and there are no hyperbolized sound effects (Jones and Friedman 59). Pauses, silences, and tranquil folk songs playing over contrasting scenes of violence remind viewers of the film's realistic backdrop and how its violence sticks out like a sore thumb. Furthermore, *Three Billboards* highlights not just the barbarity of physical violence, but verbal violence as well. With its "profanities, witticisms," and Mildred's offensiveness, the language is not stimulating or reliant on Tarantino's slew of curse words viewers may recognize as a stylistic choice (Jones and Friedman 60). While curse words are frequent in *Three Billboards*, the film's most violent and impactful scenes do not include them. It is when Mildred tells Chief Willoughby she put the billboards up knowing he has cancer because they "wouldn't be as effective after you croak." It is when a flashback of

Mildred and her daughter ends with Mildred's angry voice shouting, "I hope you get raped on the way, too." It is especially evident when Mildred is confronted in her store by a hostile stranger who tells her he did not rape her daughter, but he "would have liked

Szwarc 7

to." Sound, particularly dialogue, makes violence in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* antagonistic and disturbing.

Aside from film techniques, a significant source of separation between the films' use of violence lies in their endings. In *Kill Bill*, viewers discover Beatrix's daughter was alive all along. She defeats Bill, regains custody of her child, and can start anew. As the closing credits assure, "The lioness has been reunited with her cub, and all is right in the jungle." This "protagonist's ability to win against the odds" alters the pattern of the typical revenge tragedy where the revenger subsequently "dies as the consequence of her vendetta" (Dawson 122). As a result, Beatrix's restored relationship with her daughter acts as "a literal enactment of what is normally a fantasy in the mind of the revenger" (Dawson 122). This reunion seemingly justifies previous violence, for the goal is met, and the revenger is satisfied. Thus, the audience is satisfied and believes the violence is a necessary aspect of the story. The questionable deeds and decisions made by characters that have brought them to this point are now nothing but a distant memory.

However, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* leaves audiences with an underlying feeling of uncertainty. There is no satisfying discovery and punishment of the murderer of Mildred's daughter. Instead, Mildred and Dixon unexpectedly unite with the intention to track down and kill another suspect of rape. "As a murder mystery there is no resolution," and

viewers and are forced to revisit past scenes of discomfort and intense violence (Jones and Friedman 61). They are left to question the characters' actions which have earned them no progress in their lives and have instead soiled them further. Rather than having the slate wiped clean as seen in *Kill Bill*, the slate is still stained and noticeable in *Three Billboards*. Past

Szwarc 8

cruelties are not excused, and they are difficult to overcome. Notably, the ending scene of both films takes place during a car ride. In *Kill Bill*, it signifies the end of a successful redemption while in *Three Billboards*, it marks the continuation of revenge and an ever-looming presence of violence under the guise of compromise and healing. Dixon places a rifle inside the trunk of the car before the pair drives off, symbolic of said violence. The calmness pervading the end of the film acts as a refreshing contrast from its predominantly dark and brutal scenes. Nonetheless, subtle awkwardness between Mildred and Dixon and their hesitation to pursue their new quest heightens its uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Essentially, the end of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* shows the ugly and flawed aftermath of revenge and violence.

By analyzing specific film techniques, *Kill Bill* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* employ unique representations of violence revolving around a revenge-driven plot. *Kill Bill*'s fictitious and glorified violence causes audiences to focus on its action and expect brutality compared to *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* where the violence is very realistic and human, making its discussion of questionable morality much more prominent. Ultimately, violence lays the foundation of both films to express the deepest pitfalls of human emotion and experience.

Szwarc 9

Work Cited

Dawson, Lesel. "Revenge and the Family Romance in Tarantino's Kill Bill." *Mosaic : a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47.2 (2014): 121-34. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Nov. 2018.

Jones, Therese, and Les Friedman. "Grief Observed: Manchester By the Sea and Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri." *Alphaomegaalpha.org*,
alphaomegaalpha.org/pharos/2018/Spring/2018-2-Medicine.pdf.

Lotto, David. "The Psychohistory of Vengeance." *The Journal of Psychohistory* 34.1 (2006): 43-59. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Nov. 2018.

McDonagh, Martin, director. *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, pp. 9-10.

Tarantino, Quentin, director. *Kill Bill: Volume 2*. Miramax, 2004.

Tarantino, Quentin, director. *Kill Bill: Volume 1*. Miramax, 2003.