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Visual Representations of Violent Women

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ABSTRACT

Visual representations of violent women provoke a range of gender issues in contemporary consumer culture. The present study offers a critical visual analysis of violent women. Specifically, we examine the French Connection United Kingdom (FCUK) ad *Fashion versus Style*, the Quentin Tarantino film *Kill Bill*, and one of the Sisley ads. We discuss how violent women have been portrayed historically and how contemporary images are expressed in an art historical framework. Violent women in popular culture are often glamorized, trivialized, and sanitized. Their violence is desensitized and disinhibited, and it creates empowering images of women. It is argued, however, images of violent women are constructed to signify an artificially masculinized female predator and a superficial marker of power transformation.

Key words: violent women, media violence, critical visual analysis, cultural media, representation, gender

Visual Representations of Violent Women

Visual representations of violent women provoke a range of gender issues in contemporary consumer culture. Such images defy traditional expectations that women be passive and non-aggressive. Indeed, such images can have a dual purpose in that they may also rely on the exoticization or erotization of women alongside other representations. One definition of violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (World Health Organization 2010). Studies have shown that males are more likely to be victims of violent crimes than women. In domestic spheres, women’s use of intimate partner violence against men is widespread, and women are more likely to use physical aggression than men (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010). The rise of liberal feminism focused on individual responsibility for liberation and assumed that men and women are the same and thus should be permitted to engage in the same behaviours. In turn, this gave rise in the 1990s to what was referred to as "Laddette culture," whereby young females aped young men in terms of alcohol consumption, brawling, sexual excesses, and general licentiousness. This masculinization of girls, including the rise (and expectation) of female violence and delinquency, was reinforced by an unrelenting media hype showcasing violent women (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008). In the US, visual representation of female U.S. soldiers who physically tortured naked Iraqi men in Abu Ghraib prison is shocking and disturbs the eye with its gruesome reversal of our taken-for-granted assumptions about women’s passivity and nurturing qualities. However, if we perceive gender as a learned response to our environment, perhaps we should not expect female soldiers to behave any differently from male soldiers when placed in a particular environment. While the photographic image has become part of our visual vocabulary, the overrepresentation and sensationalisation of women as perpetrators of torture and violence in the media is problematic, reflecting the adoption of masculine values by women and challenging the binary system which underlies cultural norms, expectations, and tolerances (Humphries 2009; McKelvey 2007).

In this paper, we adopt a critical visual analysis method to explore and problematize representations of violent women in contemporary media such as film and advertising. Specifically, this mode of analysis involves visual genealogy to better understand how contemporary representations draw on images from the past, not only exposing the contextual and historical nature of representations of violent women, but also the complexities that surround the use of such images in today’s media. In particular, our analysis reveals how current images that appear empowering to women are still dependent on the male gaze, and are, consequently, less liberatory for women than they may seem to be initially. Furthermore, our surprise at such representations demonstrates the ideological force of such gendered assumptions in society. First we will discuss in more depth the portrayal of violent women in advertising, before going on to look at images of violent women throughout history, as well as in modern cinema. Then we will detail the visual method used to investigate the different cases we selected from advertising and film before presenting a detailed analysis of each case, namely: French Connection UK’s advertisement, *Fashion versus Style*; the Quentin Tarantino film, *Kill Bill*; and a Sisley advertisement depicting a young woman mounted on a man’s back.

**Representations of Violent Women in Advertising**

Violence is abundant in cultural media and easily accessible through web sites (Rifon, Royne, and Carlson 2010). The average consumer in the United States watches television approximately four hours a day, 70 percent of which contains violent content (Ashworth, Pyle, and Pancer 2010). Comedic violence is popular. Ads that combine humor and higher levels of violence intensity with more severe consequences seem to elicit greater involvement with the ad message without adversely affecting the audience’s attitudes toward the advertised brand (Brown and Roop 2010). Kia’s televised advertisement for Forte, “Hotbot,” during the Super Bowl in 2013 is an example. The appeal of violent media, however, is not in violence per se, but rather in its ability to satisfy the consumer’s other needs, such as the domination of one party over another, often characterized by forceful suppression and submission (Ashworth et al. 2010). For example, prior studies reported that an exposure to media violence, and physical dominance in particular, encourages children to engage in aggressive thoughts and behaviour and desensitizes them to violent acts (Ashworth et al. 2010; Brocato, Gentile, Laczniak, Maier, and Ji-Song 2010).

Advertising is a (distorted) mirror of society, and thus violence and gender in marketing communication usually entail hegemonic semiotic coding (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). Women have traditionally been portrayed, in popular culture, as submissive, demure, and naturally caring and nurturing, and any deviance from this cultural ideal was to be abhorred. Based on the assumption that women were ‘naturally’ closer to nature, the body, and animality (Warner 2000; Paglia 1992), they were to be carefully groomed and schooled in the art of good, self-sacrificing behaviour, as befitted their mothering, relational role (Chodorow 1989; Gilligan 1993). This conditioning set out how women should behave in society, normatively limiting conceptions of femininity and gender roles and carefully controlling women’s options (Goffman 1979). Nevertheless, underlying this agenda was a fear of women long documented in Western religious texts by theologians such as St Thomas Aquinus and St Augustine. Women had a propensity to fall into forbidden ways, witness Eve’s fall for the serpent’s suggestion in the Garden of Eden, and thus, men must subjugate women to prevent themselves from being destroyed by women’s base, animal natures. Women were body, nature, impulse, and as such could best be understood (and controlled) if they were perceived in terms of their physicality and treated as bound by their bodies to behave in certain ways. For early Christian theologians, intent on crushing the power and respect for the feminine in many societies, women were best understood as necessary evils, objects of desire, and essential for reproduction purposes. Often, this necessitated representing them in visual discourse as both sex objects and as objects of passion and, indeed, violence (Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). In pornography, the objectification is explicit, and women are portrayed as “violated.” In marketing communications, such as advertising, the aggression against women may take a form of “play.” Such images are also often eroticized for the viewer, as befits the close associations between violence and sex. Despite a void of apparent physical assaults, such visual images symbolize male dominance over women, and furthermore, women’s willing, and even masochistic, pleasure in such violence. The images of victimized women in the media may thus not only disseminate, but also promote, false idealization of female passivity and compliance (Bordo 1997 in Schroeder and Borgerson 1998).

The body has been revalued in cultural studies, and this revalidation of the body bodes well for women, given women’s identification with the body, but the body as a constituent of identity is still, along with gender and sexuality, a complex and troubling issue in postmodern consumer society (Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Davis 1997). In contrast to depictions of the female body in advertising, which has traditionally shown it in a compliant, passive mode, representations of masculine identity are more likely to draw on visual depictions of men as strong, powerful, and muscular men of action, and such depictions of desirable masculinity have increasingly been eroticized in advertising, as the male body also becomes an object of desire (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). But these representations have tended to be athleticized rather than sexualized, agentic rather than compliant.

Gulas et al. (2010) find that, in general, both offenders and victims of violence are more often men than women. In humorous advertisements, however, women are not portrayed as “victimized” in the same way as men are, because of a common perception that violence against women is "real," and thus not amusing, but problematic. In humorous ads, women can be the offender of physical violence, the humour deriving, in all likelihood, from the fact that women are typically weaker and smaller than men and thus unlikely to win in a fair fight. Or, they may exercise denigration, using their greater powers of communication to subject men to psychological violence and mockery, whilst men may be represented as monstrous, childish, incompetent, ignorant, or lazy. Being targeted toward men themselves, such comedic violence is effective, since the violence in the advertisement is supposed to be “just a joke” (Gulas et al. 2010) and shows a carnivalesque reversal of the norms (Bakhtin 1984). At the same time, the increasing popularity of ads with men as the target of violence (i.e. women being violent towards men) may be an indication of the shift in the meaning of gender relationships in contemporary consumer culture, whereby there is now a widespread acceptance that men and women may fundamentally be the same and thus engage in common behaviours, and that the disbanding of binary oppositions along gender lines facilitates this gender blending (Devor and Devor 1989).

**Images of Violent Women: A Historical Odyssey**

Images of violent women have a long pedigree. In fact, throughout history, images of violent women were visually consumed in a variety of contexts. Mythological personae, such as the Amazons and Medea, and legendary heroines, such as Judith and Salome, were created by men, and their images were visually consumed by men for moral lessons (Damisch 1992; Lefkowitz 1986; Umezu 1995). The concept of violent virtuous women, such as Yael and Judith, was transformed from noble to evil in fifteenth century Germany, notably by Heinrich Kramer and James Spenger’s *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) and Lucas van Leyden’s *Power of Women* series (1516-19). The spatiotemporal ubiquity of the phenomenon manifests itself in the contemporary media of the global marketplace; the mythological character Medea, heroine of Euripidean tragedy, was not only historicized, but lives on in various media formats, such as works of art in museums (e.g., Delacroix 1838), films (e.g., Rossellini and Pasolini 1969), and theater. The historical omnipresence of violent women is global. The woman warrior Hua Mulan in ancient China is portrayed not only in a contemporary TV series in Taiwan, but also in the Disney animation film *Mulan* (Coats, Bancroft, and Cook 1998) in the United States.

Moreover, the myth of violent women may be contemporarily conceived and quickly becomes legendary in contemporary popular culture. For example, the fictional *manga* character Saki in *Delinquent Girl Detective* (Wada 1976) was created in the 1970’s in Japan, and more recently became a protagonist of the film *Yo-Yo Girl Cop* (Kunimatsu and Fukasaku 2006), which was released in the United States in 2007. Images of female aggressors permeate American films as well, from the glorified murderer Bonnie, in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Beatty and Penn 1967), to the vengeful “Bride” in *Kill Bill* (Bender and Tarantino 2003, 2004). In contemporary art, the portrait of a woman, *Seeking Martyrdom* by Shirin Neshat (1995), shows that representation of woman’s violence intersects with political, feminist, and racial perspectives. Such images are in stark contrast to feminist portraits of victimized women, such as *Nan One Month after Being Battered* by Nan Goldin (1984).

**The Method**

The current study employs the method of critical visual analysis (Schroeder 2006): an interdisciplinary approach to comprehending and contextualizing images according to culture. With this method, we analyze images of violent women in combat and women with weaponry selected from works of art and from the cultural media, such as advertising and films. Although film and advertising are frequently passed over in fine art canons and considerations, their theories share a mutual concern for visual representation with art history (Schroeder 2002, 140). At the same time, as cultural media, they communicate consumer ideology and serve as a socializing agent (Hirschman and Stern 1994). The analytical concepts of particular relevance to images of violent women are representation and gaze. Representation is the act of depicting or symbolizing something; according to Schroeder (2002), representation produces meaning and has broader social and political consequences. Gaze describes acts of looking, sometimes depicted by a character within the image itself, but usually from the point of view of the image producer or audience (Sturken and Carwright 2001). Gaze is motivated by desire for something or someone, and can be affected by power relations, such as those between men and women.

Following the formal analysis conventionally outlined in art history (Barnet 2000; Schroeder 2006), we discuss the subject matter, style/form, medium, genre, and the different actors and objects they portray. With constant reference to the secondary literature, multilayered visual symbols and their meanings are interpreted within the Western cultural context. Thus, the research explains in detail the image content and deeper messages of paintings and other works which were supposed to feed the gaze of men—in reality or in the imagination of women.

Our data consists of images of physically violent women in contemporary advertising and films, as well as paintings and relief in works of art. We scrutinized the images for different ways in which physical violence was represented. Then, the advertisements and artworks were selected based on how rich they were in exemplifying different cases of women’s violence. Such purposive sampling – to exemplify rather than to represent all – is common in qualitative studies. Specifically, we examine the French Connection United Kingdom (FCUK) ad *Fashion versus Style*, the Quentin Tarantino film *Kill Bill* and a Sisley ad. We provide a detailed analysis by separating parts in order to understand the whole. Since images are a form of visual rhetoric, “visual elements must be capable of representing concepts, abstractions, actions, metaphors, and modifiers, such that they can be used in the invention of a complex argument” (Scott 1994, 253). By contrast, images of violent women in art historical traditions, in particular the *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* by Lucas Cranach the elder and *Aristotle Ridden by Phyllis* by Lucas van Leyden, are examined. We provide an analysis within visual genealogy (Schroeder and Zwick 2004) by examining how violent women were portrayed historically and how contemporary images are expressed in an art historical framework.

Two limitations of the visual analysis are acknowledged. First, it is based on a relatively small number of advertisements and artworks mostly from Europe. The images of physically violent women in art are not common aside from depictions of certain biblical and mythological personae. In advertising, women’s serious, rather than humorous, physical violence tends to quickly become a target of criticisms, and the ad can be speedily withdrawn, as in the case of FCUK. As such, they are also uncommon. Second, the cultural difference behind the conception of artworks from different time period and countries – the marble relief from the ancient Rome and the oil painting from sixteenth century Germany –creates a possible problematic for naïve comparison of images of violent women in contemporary advertising. Third, we cannot be absolutely certain that our contemporary interpretations of the artworks correspond to the meanings taken in by consumers in times of antiquity or the Renaissance.

**Critical Visual Analyses of Violent Women**

*Style vs. Fashion*: Woman-on-Woman Assaults

Framed in a baroque diagonal, the two women in *Fashion versus Style* engage in a glamorized lethal combat. Their bodies are dramatically illuminated in a dark lair as in an abyss. The tension is created by the asymmetry and imbalance of the composition. The woman with dark hair, who is clad in striped underwear on the right, gets the upper hand. She steps forward and grabs the throat of her opponent in her right hand, while stroking her left fist; she is in control and about to triumph. On the other hand, the woman with blond hair on the left is adorned in a silky two-piece, with a shiny green skirt that swirls in the air. Her face twists in a grimace. She holds the opponent’s right hand to prevent suffocation. Both women wear high-heel shoes even at the fist fight, showing they share the same basic principle. The Caravaggio-esque romanticism manifests in this photorealistic depiction of anger and suffering in the women’s countenances, as well as their swirling hair in the air that reflects their fury.

This is an advertisement of FCUK 2006 Spring & Summer Collection, titled *Fashion versus Style*. With its dramatic execution, the FCUK ad represents an allegory of style and fashion. Allegory is a visual image (or a story) with a second meaning hidden behind its visible meaning. In advertising, allegory is useful in three ways (Stern 1990, 15): “it conveys textual meaning economically (doubleness), offers dramatic enactment of conflict (personification and opposition of forces), and entertains an audience (people enjoy ‘getting’ the meaning).” The main technique of allegory is personification, where abstract ideas or qualities are given human identity. Titian’s *Sacred Love and Profane Love* is a tour de force of such personification. In the FCUK advertisement, the woman on the left personifies “Fashion” and the one on the right, “Style.” An allegory may use a metaphor by conceiving the analogy of one idea to another with an imagery identity, and may extend into a structured system (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The metaphor here is that Style and Fashion – eternity and vanity – are adversaries.

Based on the fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent’s quote, “fashion fades, style is eternal,” FCUK through this ad questions: “Are you fashion? Are you style? Are you both? Is there even difference?” (French Connection USA 2011). The adversarial relationship is more prominent in the 90-second TV commercial which shows the women’s fist fight – kicks, punches, and elbows – as acrobatic as Kung Fu and with special effects. As adversaries, they attack, hurt, and destroy each other. But Style seems to have, always, the upper hand, and in one scene even makes a gesture inviting Fashion to attack her. The combat ends with Style’s sudden, sexually-charged kiss – the symbolic union of the two – and head butt over Fashion. The ad shows that spiritual experience is intensely physical, and that such experience leads to ecstasy, as in the Bernini sculptural works.

Founded in 1972, the UK based French Connection offers fashion-forward clothing with eccentric spin off design, and aims to imbue a true sense of style. The company aspires to build a strong brand identity: Sexy, stylish, and with attitude. With their controversial ad campaigns “fcuk fashion,” they have built the brand personality of French Connection as bold, witty and unconventional/subversive. The *History of Advertising* published on the company’s website (http://fcuk.com) indicates the gendering of fashion and the reinforcement of conventional gender portrayals. For example, their 2010 Collections were titled *The Man & The Woman*. The copies of ads for the Collection say: “Two specimens - both archetypal examples of their gender were found; the man is rugged, hairy, adventurous and outspoken. Other men can learn much from him. The woman’s description is briefer because little is known about her. She is beautiful, enchanting, capricious and mystifying.” Such descriptions conform to gender stereotypes, showing men as agentic and women as mysterious. As such, female models are thus portrayed as vulnerable, while male counterparts are illustrated as dominating. This further suggests that the intention of FCUK is not to honor, but to trivialize women’s violence.

Entrapment: Performing Anomaly for Male Gaze

How can we then interpret the meaning of violence in *Fashion versus Style*? The ads for the 2010 Collections emphasize gender stereotypes that can be interpreted as derogatory for those they are representing. Thus, they could possibly lead to “bad faith” for the corporation in appearing to endorse such stereotypical representations (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). Although violent women are not a stereotypical portrayal, they can still promote violent behaviours and thought in the audience, as well as the idea that women are animalistic, and that they may share the qualities of violent men, such as psychological immaturity, a need for physical aggression, and the desire for domination; violence thus signifies cultural regression regardless of gender. The images of women in both *Fashion versus Style* and *The Man & The Woman* are especially problematic, as they are the historically subordinate group and their representations are created by the dominant group, male authors and directors of the ads. Thus the intention of the creators—whether violence is meant for consequential, aestheticized atrocity or inconsequential trivial incident—is ambiguous. Such polysemy for encoding the message may be on purpose in order to strategically target multiple target audiences (e.g., men and women) (Puntoni, Schroeder, and Ritson 2010).

An examination of another version of the FCUK *Fashion versus Style* ad—four images, a variation on the theme of TV and print ads—unfolds the deeper meaning of the visual representation of violent women in the advertisement. On the bottom, Fashion and Style in the center are surrounded by spectators: four men in proximity and two women in the distance. Three on the left are fashionably dressed while the three on the right are in plain attire as if they are part of a cheering squad supporting the fight of their team. The group identity is visually expressed in the symmetric organization of spectators and their appearances. Male spectators’ bodily expressions hint at their disdain in observing a supposedly sacred warfare of Fashion and Style now reduced to a cat-fight of two scantily clad violent women. Two female spectators’ body language convey, not sympathy for the same-gender comrades, but their anger at the mirrored image of their objectified contemptuous selves.

The violent women are represented as performing anomaly for male gaze. They are objects of male liminoid experience: a break from the mundane by observing something abnormal, bizarre, or even atrocious, including cockfights and catfights. Women as spectacle and men as spectators are banal tropes in advertisements (Bardo 1997). But here, women are not represented as typical feminine sex objects: they are in violent action. Violent images are like a dose of stimulants. They are “the *most real* images because they provoke the strongest emotional response: they simultaneously give [the viewer] a sense of being alive and of having control over others” (Arnold 2001, 32). Thus, the two women are performing a battle of ferocious exotic animals, to make the men feel “alive” and to please them with such a hedonic visual experience. Women may be generally considered “commercialized commodities, taught from childhood to groom themselves to obtain men’s approval, in older to become quite literally the objects of male desire” (Hirschman and Stern 1994, 580). The image of Fashion versus Style, placed in the middle left of the picture, parodies the women’s desire to be the object of males’ visual consumption. The performance is adjourned abruptly, and two women look at their audience, posing carefully choreographed violence.

What does visual genealogy reveal? Historically, visual representation of fictitious or real female fighters, such as Amazons and female gladiators, were created by men as a reflection of male fascination and curiosity. A relief sculpture of female gladiators named Amazonia and Achillia dating from the second century is an example of their popularity (Figure 1). Some women were made to fight in the arena by emperors, such as Nero and Domitian (Wiedemann 1992), while other women, including those from senatorial class, chose to be the self-designated déclassé and the transgressor of gender norms, and became the target of male denigration as satirized by Juvenal (Meijer 2003). Male fascination to control such rebellious women (Lefkowitz 1986) may be considered part of human desire to observe violence and ensure their capability to manage their fear and to control the mayhem (Zillman 1998).

*Kill Bill*: Women’s Vengeance

In Quentin Tarantino’s film *Kill Bill* (2003), Uma Thurman’s protagonist character “the Bride,” also known as “Beatrix Kiddo” and “Black Mamba,” represents defamiliarization and affirmation of women’s entitlement to violence through the visualization of excessive vengeance (Tapia 2011). An ex-assassin and defector, the Bride is shot by her former boss and lover Bill and fellow assassins of the assassination squad, on her wedding day. After five years of being in a coma, she wakes up and finds out that her unborn baby did not survive the massacre, and that a hospital worker has raped her and offered her to his “customers” for rape. The film recounts Bride’s journey of bloody rampage and vengeance: The rapists, female assassins and their guards, and Bill are killed one by one in graphic Kung Fu combats and highly stylized sword fighting. The vividness of violence is stylized with brutal decapitation, ruthless mutilation of body parts, and spurts of streaming blood. Woman-on-woman violence precedes the killing of Bill. The gender-subversive context of violent vengeance parodies the gender inversion with sprinkles of feminine moments such as female assassins’ desire for domesticity and motherhood. An androgynous nouvelle femme (and enfant terrible), the Bride is portrayed having both masculine and feminine qualities, which manifests in her masculine consumption and feminine non-consumption, like *Thelma and Louise* “who cross over the line” (Hirschman 1993).

In a still picture, the Bride holds up a Japanese sword ready for an imminent showdown. This is a portrait of the woman in a three quarter profile. Anxieties surrounding violence pervade the mood of this work; the Bride is in fierce rage at the moment of danger. Contorted, her wide-open blue eyes are filled with a mixture of fury and fear. The untidy blond hair glows translucent in the light. Her mouth is slightly open, showing bared teeth; she might have just shouted something in a masculine mode of Japanese to her opponent. The spotless skin of her face hints at her lack of experience in the battle field. In this spatially compressed composition, the woman retaliator is dressed in a plain, tiger-colored track suit with a black strip—a homage to Bruce Lee in his last film *The Game of Death*, and appropriate for the acrobatic sword fencing, ready to mutilate body parts and to slice the head of her foe in the serene Japanese garden covered in snow. Innocent eroticism is suggested in the fact that the zip of her jacket is opened to expose her white chest, as well as the image of the bare-breasted, female warrior archetype. Unlike idealized portraits of dignitaries, this portrait appears to be a glamorized expression of the base ferociousness of the violent woman. It appears a monument to the woman fighter’s faux masculine-self, rather than as a tribute to her feminine physical appearance. How can we compare the image of the Bride with works of art in history?

A comparison with the 16th century oil painting *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* by Lucas Cranach the Elder (Figure 2) reveals certain similarities in composition and subject matter. In order to save her country from the enemy general Holofernes, a Jewish heroine Judith—who dressed beautifully “to attract the attention of any man who saw her” (De Lange 1978, 118)—went to his camp in disguise, pretending to be a prostitute. He fell for her scheme and became intoxicated in his attempt to seduce her. She was then able to kill him by decapitating him, thereby saving her people. In Cranach’s spatially compressed composition, nearly identical to that of the violent Bride in *Kill Bill*, the heroine rests her arm elegantly on the severed head of Holofernes. Modeled after a lady of Saxon court, she is adorned in heavily beaded and brocaded velvet—unfit for the repulsive task—a departure from the humble “true Judith” (Reid 1969), a young widow from Bethulia. Yet, this is an expression of puritan fortitude and work of civilization, not barbarism. Oblivious to the gruesome object on the table, Judith rests in perfect composure. Her enigmatic smile captivates the viewer’s attention. Supposedly a chaste woman according to the apocryphal text, Judith became a source of sexual stimulation in Northern European art after the late fifteenth century (Wolfthal 1999).

Ambivalence and Anxieties in Postfeminist Consumer Culture

 The meaning of violent women in *Kill Bill* and *Judith* diverts from that of *Fashion versus Style*. The retributive violence is vindicated for a righteous reason. The iconic image of female violence is represented as celebration of female power in visual representation. Such visual images may appeal to women who desire to explosively experience emotional purging and empowerment. The attraction of violent spectacle may result from the viewer’s identification with the successful aggressor and a state of euphoria the viewer experiences by observing the sufferings of hateful victims (Zillman 1998). In terms of *Kill Bill*, with the advent of third-wave and postfeminism, Coulthard (2007, 154) proclaims, “the concerns of violence, gender, and representation have shifted in favor of the latter critical framework as a new emphasis on ‘postvictim’ feminism has transferred attention toward debates about the presence of violent women in cinema and popular culture and away from women as victimized subject *to* violence.” Postfeminist consumer culture embraces female agency, celebrates women’s powers of consumption, and addresses issues resulting from women’s economic independence, including men’s loss of power.

 Can women’s lethal enactments ever be considered as true emancipation from dominant patriarchal ideology? In *Kill Bill*, the annihilation of patriarchy ultimately results in the termination of violence and threat. Women’s violence is structured as temporary, anomalous, and salutary. In capitalist consumer society, an increase in the number of visual images of violent women in the media appears to be a strategic device to expand the target market and include females. The frequency of exposure is not as important as the context of the violent content (Potter 2003). Violent women and their violence in popular culture are often glamorized, trivialized, and sanitized; they are given a high profile and the status of aesthetic spectacle, and sometimes, indeed titillation. As a result, the violence is desensitized and disinhibited. Thus, in the seeming celebration of female empowerment as aspirational referents, violent women are constructed and circulated to signify a crisis of artificially masculinized, benign female predators and a superficial marker of power transformation in an intricate web of gendered tropes. The violent women in *Kill Bill* are the commodification of men’s misogynic jeer, postfeminist superficiality, postmodern spectacle, and anxieties constructed with artificially empowered women (Coulthard 2007).

 What can we learn from the works of art in history? Returning to the image of *Judith*, we realize that visual images of violent women, especially heroines, have historical precedents. Also, they both are the products of males: Lucas Cranach the Elder for *Judith* and Quentin Tarantino for *Kill Bill*. What sparks male fascinations to conceive high-profile and extremely violent assassins who intrude into men’s space to brutally mutilate them? In the fifteenth and sixteenth century Netherlandish and German Justice Paintings, visual representations of violent women are known to have served for moralizing purposes. Images of retaliated or assaulted men –rapists or falsely charged rapists—in *Tomyris with the Head of Cyrus* (Pencz 1539) and *Yael Killing Sisera* (van Leyden 1513) were used to convey a warning with misogynist nuance in both public art (e.g., tapestries in the town hall) and private collections (Wolfthal 1999). Cranach created works also based on biblical themes, such as *Judith* and *Samson and Delilah*, as well as those on Greek mythology *The Judgment of Paris* (Umezu 1995). The artist was a close friend of Martin Luther, and a proponent of the Reformation. As such, he might have felt compelled to impart the work with an allegoric moral warning against earthly temptations. Here *Holofernes* in the *Judith* suggests the spiritual and physical vulnerability of men, and “Weibermacht,” the power of women over men. It signifies that the sexual pleasure that a *femme fatale* could offer is captivating and poisonous, leading even wise and strong men, such as Holofernes, Samson, Aristotle, and Hercules, into danger, subjugation, and death (Damisch 1992). Perhaps this fear of women found its most dramatic expression in the widespread “witch craze” that spread throughout Europe in the 1600s and 1700s (Roper 1991), fanned by the theological belief that women were the devil’s gateway, and the aforementioned book *Malleus Maleficarum* which primarily focused on women witches, their sabbats with the devil, and their demonic possession of men, and advice on how to detect and eradicate them from society. The audience sees the man’s pain, his doomed struggle to abstain, and the women’s power that brings men to destruction (Wolfthal 1999).

Bestializing Men: Female Domination, or Zoophile

 The advertisement of the fashion clothing company Sisley shows another type of violent woman in visual representation. In front of a wall of wooden panels, or a stable, a young woman mounts on the back of a half nude male on all fours with a saddle. Under the disheveled black hair, she raises her eyes for a sinister gaze at the audience. Her plum lips are apart, making a subtle smile at the corner of her mouth. She seems pleased and slightly aroused and looks content and superior. Adorned in a classic white, silky, sleeveless equestrian blouse with a casually knotted stock tie ready for showing and dressage, her crocheted lacy lingerie hangs from her shoulder and enhances her unconventional allure. Instead of jodhpurs, she wears a pin-striped black short skirt that is turned up to fully expose her bare thigh. She holds a lock of the man’s hair in her right hand while holding the saddle with her left hand. The man in profile carries his mistress obediently. Subjugated, he looks afar, and his gaze does not meet the audience. The ad evokes a somewhat intense female domination scenario, involving hair pulling and whipping: The woman exercises domination and humiliates the man in the dominance-submission (part of BDSM) play.

 Founded in 1968, the advertiser of the fashion brand Sisley offers young men’s and women’s collections that capture the trendiest fashion of all-occasion wears and dresses, from sporty to formal and elegant. The brand originally started as a Denim collection in Paris and became part of Benetton Group in 1974. Unlike Benetton, which uses a controversial campaign to convey social criticism and moral message, Sisley emphasizes a unique image and lifestyle of individuals that differentiate it from the crowd. It strives to create a possible reality, within a fictional world of dream, in which a consumer can identify and recognize the self (Sisley 2012). The firm’s marketing strategy capitalizes on the social spirit of the Sisley community, characterized by interactions and independent thinking on the part of consumers. Sharing of photos, video clips, and music enhances the interactions, while their radio station is used to promote independent, innovative thinking of artists and musicians. While promoting independence, defined as “free from outside control, not subject to another’s authority,” they have nevertheless portrayed gender objectification in the advertising campaign.

 The visual language of the Sisley ad echoes that of *Aristotle and Phyllis*, one of the popular motifs of the Power of Women theme in the Middle Ages, a legend that might have been originated in a Indian fable (Jacobowitz and Stepanek 1983) or an Arabian source with no historical evidence (Hutchison 1966). Aristotle once reproached his pupil, the young emperor Alexander the Great, that he was excessively devoting his time to his wife Phyllis and attempted to alienate them. Phyllis took revenge by seducing Aristotle and captivating him to beg her for sexual favor. She agreed under the condition that he would crawl like a horse and give the mistress a piggy-back ride. In the following matins, Phyllis made arrangements for the spectacle of her triumphant ride and Aristotle’s humiliation to be seen by Alexander. The thirteenth-century exemplum *Sermones feriale et communes* by Jacques de Vitry and the twelfth-century poem *Lai d’Aristote* by Henri d’Andely are considered two most influential literary works. The artist might have been equally inspired by the fifteenth-century German *Fastnachtspiel*, or the carnival play, *Ain Spil von Maister Aristotiles* (Smith 1995; Stewart 1979), albeit the absence of spectators as the witnesses of Aristotle’s folly described in the play. The popularity of the theme of the wise man blinded by love and made to appear foolish continued among northern European printmakers in the sixteenth century (Hutchison 1966). In Lucas van Leyden’s woodcut print dating from circa 1515 (Figure 3), the Greek philosopher Aristotle crawls on all four carrying the mistress or wife of his pupil, Alexander the Great. Aristotle is harnessed and forced into giving Phyllis a horseback ride in exchange for the favor. In the barren landscape with very little narrative details, a monumentally posed Phyllis, dressed in Oriental attire, rides side-saddle, holding a riding crop in her right hand and controlling in her left hand a tight rein attached to the philosopher. This is a dramatic expression, a powerful declaration of woman’s domination over man. Unlike Judith or Yael, Phyllis subjugates, punishes, flagellates, and humiliates the wise man alive.

 The primary target audiences of *Aristotle and Phyllis* and *Judith* *with the Head of Holofernes* were men. On the one hand, the work was to teach men that, although some women were honest and faithful, others were deceitful and lewd, and false accusers against men of rape, and dishonest to tell the truth, like Potiphar’s Wife in the Bible; it was the sexual behaviour of women, not of men, that was the real threat to society (Smith 1979; Wolfthal 1999). This view reflected the hierarchy of the Old Testament that placed man next to God, and then women, and finally animals. Self-substitution theory postulates that spectators of suspense are attracted to spectacles as they identify themselves with the objectified agent(s); they foster empathy by locating themselves in verisimilitudes (Zillman 1998). In other words, the male audience of the cultural media and works of art seem challenged to imagine having sex with the violent woman, which would involve their own eroticized violence or sadomasochism. Women are codified as independent, empowered, and not passively objectified by the dominant male gaze, and they are malicious, dangerous, and violent. Men’s fascination seems borne out of dilemma: their desire to annihilate the character of these attractive violent women by sexually violating them, in conjunction with their desire to be tortured in the hands of the violent women, a conundrum that is played out to full effect in the work of the Marquis de Sade (Carter 1979). Although the attires of heroines in *Judith* and *Kill Bill* have little resemblance to that of the contemporary dominatrix (except that Judith is tightly corseted), fetishism is often a male province, and the violent women’s imageries are evocative of fetish objects and fantasy that stir erotic desire in the male audience (Schroeder 2002). In *Aristotle and Phyllis*, fetishism is apparent; the wise man is given a task for reward, and the task itself becomes the reward.

**Discussion**

The present study offers a critical visual analysis of violent women. Specifically, we have examined the French Connection United Kingdom (FCUK) ad *Fashion versus Style*, the Quentin Tarantino film *Kill Bill*, and one of the Sisley ads. We have discussed how violent women were portrayed historically, and how contemporary images are expressed in an art historical framework. To elucidate, images of violent women in art historical traditions, and in particular the Lucas Cranach artwork *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* and the Lucas van Leyden woodcut print *Aristotle and Phyllis* are discussed. The study shows that violent women as iconography are persistent throughout history.

This critical visual analysis helps us problematize contemporary representations that are assumed to be liberatory and empowering images of women. It also highlights a tension between second and third wave feminist perspectives. Whereas second wave feminism countered the sexual objectification of women, the third wave feminist perspectives that emerged in the 1990s were characterized by a celebration of the body and a woman’s right to express herself through her sexual behaviour. The FCUK and Sisley advertisements, as well as the film *Kill Bill*, appear to express this third wave celebratory position, incorporating violence as a form of “raunch culture” (Levy 2005) that is about girl power and strength. Others argue (i.e., Walter 2010; Gill 2003), however, that this hypersexualization of women’s bodies and mainstreaming of sexualised behaviour is actually restricting choices for women, rather than increasing options and empowering them. Indeed, Gill (2003) refers to this process as sexual subjectification, whereby women are complicit in their own objectification (“doing it for themselves”, as it were). It seems to us that our critical visual analysis exposes the male gaze inherent in current media imagery which, on the face of it, is about discourses of female empowerment and agency. This gives further support to Gill’s arguments by enabling us to unpack the hidden assumptions in these processes of sexual subjectification, whereby the perception of women as violent and predatory has less to do with empowerment, and simply repeats a consistent cultural strand that is as ancient as it is persistent.

Thus in the visual images discussed in this paper, women’s violence is appropriated. Lavin (2010, 107) discusses aggression as “an essential ingredient in effecting messy but constructive change. It’s also key to representing and exploring sexuality, to forcefully asserting the self within social spaces, and to re-creating in adult lateral relationships those healthy sibling rituals of mutual and highly complex recognition.” Violence, on the contrary, spoils the positive quality of aggression, as it utilizes destruction and annihilation for its own sake. The positive aspect of the visual representation of violent women may be, as Halberstam (1993, 191) contends, that they suggest “we allow ourselves to imagine the possibilities of fighting violence with violence.” Such images may instill unrealistic fear in potential aggressors that their victims are dangerous. The representation of visual images in cultural media has a powerful effect on women's—and men's—images of themselves: what and who we are. The images of violent women discussed in the present paper seem fetishized rather than feared by the male audience. It is only hoped that visually representing female violence would ultimately quell violence, as violence, regardless the gender of the aggressor, is cultural regression rather than empowerment.

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