

# Revenge is »Beautiful«

## Links between Female Violence, *colombianidad*, *narcocultura*, and the Revenge Theme

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### 1. Introduction

Olivier Megaton's *Colombiana* (2011) movie poster, titled »Revenge is beautiful«, shows an armed tough-looking woman in front of a diminished urban setting, which is hardly recognizable in midst of the explosions and flames consuming it. Upon further studying, we get a more accurate summary on the films' plot: It is in fact a »scandalous blend of sex, action and violence« and the reasoning behind this blends »scandalousness« – I dare to claim – is the protagonist's gender. Although filmic conventions have changed and violent female heroines have become more representable characters over the last few decades (cf. Heldman et al. 2016: 2), most protagonists are still male. Also, certain conditions must be met to even show a sexually active and violent female protagonist on screen. Apart from a few exceptions, protagonists correspond to stereotyped visions of violent women. In this paper, I want to draw attention to the similarities and differences between three feature films showing Colombian heroines and their struggle in taking revenge: *Rosario Tijeras*, Colombia's biggest box office success of the year 2005, written by Marcelo Figueras and directed by Emilio Maillé; the already mentioned *Colombiana* (2011), which was based on a script from Luc Besson and should have initially been the sequel to *Leon: The Professional* (1994); and *Matar a Jesús* (2018) written and directed by Laura Mora. This analysis discloses how the protagonists' nationality – in connection with the revenge theme – are used to justify their then violent nature. Additionally, this paper will deliver insights on implied ideas about gender and the Colombian reality.

#### 1.1 Revenge, a Useful Explanation

This chapter points out the similarities between the above mentioned movies and analyzes how each narration sheds light on its revenge motive. It starts with pro-

motional material: all three movie posters present a subtitle referring to vengeance: *Rosario Tijeras*: »Mi justicia es mi venganza« (My justice is my vengeance); *Colombiana*: »Revenge is beautiful« and *Matar a Jesús*: »¿Hasta dónde llegarías por venganza?« (How far would you go for revenge?). In explicitly linking the protagonists' violence to revenge, their actions become readable as mere reactions, caused by prior actions of men. This tendency of presenting a woman's violent behaviour as a reaction to having been a victim in the first place has tradition (cf. Lord/Burfoot xiii) and helps in maintaining the conventional binary gender opposition of mainstream cinema:

The images of fierce heroines on television reflect the fact that women are defying the male monopoly on power and aggression, a shift that has significant ramifications for how gender is constructed. Such a transformation of gender roles is somewhat mitigated in stories involving revenge, for a desire to retaliate to some degree explains – if not justifies – the acts typically attributable to men. (Pobutsky 2020: 204)

In all three movies the scene outlining the revenge and the heroine's incorporated violence, is shown – at least – to a certain extent. This lets the spectator relate to them, as well as understand their motives; and facilitates feeling sympathy towards them despite of their wrongdoings. Clover's term of the »monstrous female victim-hero« fits our heroines perfectly: all of them are victims, but at the same time occupy an active role in the movie as heroines that eventually fight back in their monstrous quest for revenge<sup>1</sup> (cf. Clover 2015: 4).

In *Rosario Tijeras* we see Rosario as a child and her supposed stepfather, who insinuates having sex with her: as he sensuously touches his fried egg and then gently pops it open inserting his fingers in it, while she quietly continues to eat. The melancholic music extenuates the disturbing scene. The rape itself is not shown but affirmed in a later scene when Rosario talks to her mother. Furthermore, Rosario mentions having been raped a second time at the age of 11, which led to her seducing the rapist some years later and cutting off his testicles with a pair of scissors – hence her name. Through this, the movie aligns itself with the traditional Rape-Revenge genre.<sup>2</sup> One might not agree with Clover to call rape »the most quintessentially feminine of experiences« (Clover 2015: 145), nevertheless, rape and even more so, the Rape-Revenge-theme has a clearly feminine connotation within popular cinema, which makes it even more avengeable:

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1 Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* focusses on horror movies, nonetheless, many of her statements also apply to other genres.

2 Rape-Revenge movies might have started to appear in the 70s, but are by no means specific to this time or to any filmic genre, but might rather be describable as a genre for itself given their numerous and ongoing occurrence (cf. Henry 2014: 1–4).

For revenge fantasies to work, there must be something worth avenging [...] In the case of rape-revenge films, that something has to do not only with rape, but with the power dynamic between men and women that makes rape happen in the first place and, in the second, that makes it so eminently avengeable. (Clover 2015: 144)

Even though rape is already »a clean ticket for revenge« (Clover 2015: 154), the film offers an additional revenge motive: the death of a loved one. Rosario is repeatedly shown as a victim in reference to her brother's death, to whom she refers to as »the love of her life, the only one who loved her« (59:03–59:07) and the one who had been replacing her father. This makes her loss even more hurtful. The whole narrative construction of Rosario's identity is based on her decision to take revenge (cf. Skar 2007: 119).

Just like Rosario, *Colombiana's* protagonist Cataleya is still a little girl when she is first confronted with violence: As both her parents try to shoot the attackers before being shot themselves, Cataleya sits perfectly still at the table, paralyzed and trembling. The scene shows certain similarities to the one between Rosario and her stepdad. Both girls sit at the kitchen tables of their homes and both scenes are shown in a yellowish light, which is either interpretable as a hint to the setting of the scene in the past or means to underline the coziness of the home, which is disturbed by the intruders. To put more emphasis on Cataleya's innocence she is dressed in her school uniform, her homework and a glass of milk are placed in front of her. The close-up of the actress, who is looking directly in the camera with tears in her eyes, as well as the extra-diegetic music augment the drama of the scene. Later in the movie, as if the writers had feared the memory of the first murder could have faded, Cataleya's uncle and aunt are killed. Again, they are »the last piece of her« as the protagonist points out herself (01:23:42).

In *Matar a Jesus*, Paula also witnesses the murder of her father. He is – just like in both above mentioned movies – Paula's most loved family member. Right before the shooting, she is joking around with her father, which contrasts with the tragic event that follows: The unsteady camera, abrupt cuts and disappearing sounds reflect Paula's emotional state and force the viewer not only to relate, but to identify with her.

In comparison to the other two heroines, Paula is rather old when the incident happens, although she herself can barely be called an adult. The young ages at which the protagonists experience these horrific acts, are a helpful detail to augment sympathy; as being a child correlates to being innocent and in need of protection to most spectators. The fact, that their innocence is taken away and, the persons, who might have kept them safe (in all three movies the most important person to be killed is a male in control, to whom the protagonist looks up to), are killed, increases the cruelty of shown acts and makes the heroines' sufferance and anger relatable.

## 1.2 Colombia, a Violent Nation?

Another key element of the movies is the Colombian context, which, in the selected narrations is directly linked to violence and, therefore, helps in justifying the heroine's violent behaviour. Taking into account that in the last century millions of people have been forced to move, hundreds of thousands have been killed, threatened, kid-napped, ›disappeared‹ or forcefully recruited in armed forces (Ospina Pizano 2019: 20), it is hardly surprising that many movies establish a connection between Colombia and violence. Nevertheless, most movies that put emphasis on Colombia, especially foreign productions,<sup>3</sup> make it out to be a rather simplistic country. Both Colombia and Mexico share the problem of this one-sided representation:

[...] the preeminence of violence – mainly but not exclusively related to drug trafficking organizations – brings Colombia and Mexico together in the global imagination. Local, international, and transnational cultural production plays an important role in this process. Violence has become both the primary lens through which the two countries are seen by the international community, and what audiences most want to see about them. (Martínez/Aristizábal 2019: 10)

This valid equation between violence and Colombia might partially hold true and, even within the Colombian population, it is not rare to interpret violence as part of the national identity (cf. Ospina Pizano 2019: 34–35).<sup>4</sup> However, this way of ›naturalizing‹ Colombia's violence is problematic, not only because it permits to ignore its reasons, but also because it shifts attention from consequences and possible solutions and only allows it to be a mere observation of existence.

However violence might be conceived, it forms a recurrent theme in Colombian narratives (cf. Suárez 2010: 13). One specific form of narrative linked to violence and Colombia, which corresponds to the narrative style of the discussed movies, can be described as ›narco-narrative‹.<sup>5</sup> Zavala defines ›narco-narratives‹ as a »dispersed

3 Whereas *Colombiana* indisputably offers a foreign perspective on the country and *Matar a Jesús* might be described as a view from within, *Rosario Tijeras* is a combination of the two, as the book, on which the film is based on was written by Jorge Franco, but the script differs from the book in many crucial points.

4 Elevating violence to a feature of national identity, nevertheless, seems to be a phenomenon linked to a certain class, as some parts of the population, such as the one living in urban popular sectors, consider violence rather to be a product of personal confrontations with violent individuals (cf. Jimeno 1998: 44).

5 *Matar a Jesús* does not as clearly correspond to that term, but as there exists a strong connection between sicarixs and the ›narcoculture‹ and the *sicario* Jesus is a main character in the movie, the following statements can be attributed to the logic of its narration even if the focus of the film is not set on drug trafficking. ›Sicario‹ is the Spanish word for hitmen but has additional meaning in the Colombian context: »[...] in the 1980s a new generation of assass-

but interrelated corpus of texts, films, music and conceptual art focusing on drug trade« (Zavala 2014: 341).

The global trend of narrating this specific type of violence is hardly ever describable as ›authentic‹ or informative, but rather seeks to entertain. Especially in global market mass culture, violence linked to the margins of society is almost always turned into a fetish; by being represented as either monstrous or erotic (cf. Kantaris 2008: 457). Needless to say, the ›monstrous‹ part is mostly male gendered, whereas the ›erotic‹ part is more associated with the female gender. This fetishization could also be described through the term ›porno-miseria‹, coined by Carlos Mayolo y Luis Ospina in 1978, originally referring to a new kind of documentary that had transformed Colombia's misery into an internationally sellable product (cf. Ospina/Mayolo 1978). ›Porno-miseria‹ is to be understood as a reaffirmation of the Western colonial gaze; illustrating racialized populations as perennially monstrous, dirty and ungovernable, designed for extermination and cultural contempt (cf. Valencia/Herrera Sánchez 2020: 9).

›Narcoculture‹ not only is – in certain cases – describable as racist, but also has a misogynous structure as the established hierarchy within puts people that best correspond to hegemonic masculinity at the top of the power pyramid, incorporated by the *capo* and women in the lowest position (cf. Jiménez Valdez 2014: 108–09). This is hardly surprising as the ›narco-world‹ is directly linked to violence, which is still considered to be »a fundamental signifier of masculinity« (Neroni 2005: 42). Discriminated and marginalized, women are forced into passive roles (cf. Ovalle/Giacomello 2006: 301) and are conventionally defined by male agents. Being a woman inherently means to be linked to the *narco/sicario* through family relations, to be objectified (›trophy women‹), to be exploited (working for narcos), to be arrested (mostly for minor crimes, functioning as scapegoats) or to be abused/harmed/killed (victim of violence) (cf. Ovalle/Giacomello 2006: 317).

Rosario embodies several of these conventional roles: being a trophy woman, getting exploited by working as a prostitute, being abused several times, arrested, and finally killed. Cataleya corresponds only to the first and the last category while Paula can simply be described as a victim of violence. Nevertheless, all three heroines arm themselves at some point in the movie and fight back. In all three movies, the gun plays a crucial role: It reinforces androcentrism, as it continues to function as a

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sins appeared. These were young men, coming from the shantytowns of Colombia's big cities, who were identified as the motorcycle assassins – like the ones who had killed Lara Bonilla [Minister of Justice, who was assassinated by orders of Pablo Escobar] – and whose actions were linked to the emergence of the traffic of illegal drugs. [...] the word *sicario* was seldom used until the mid-1980s; it began to circulate widely once paid assassins were associated with the narcos« (Polit Dueñas 2013: 112–13). More on the Colombian sicariato in: Salazar's *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990).

»cultural symbol of manliness« (Cox 2007: 152),<sup>6</sup> but also challenges this by handing the gun to female characters. Nonetheless, in all three narrations, the protagonists are implicitly or explicitly taught to shoot by a male character. Also, the movies lack female characters in comparison to male ones – once again accentuating the male-ness of represented reality and narrations.

Curiously, it is precisely the fixed gender norms within the *narco*/violence context, which make its analysis and the corresponding narrations all more appealing for feminist studies:

[T]he ›narco-world‹, as it constitutes a context that exposes the women who develop in it to a constant crisis, is presented as the ideal scenario to observe with particular clarity the spaces of struggle and resignification of the female subject. (Ovalle/Giacomello 2006: 314, translated by SM)

The representation of Colombia as a violent region, where only drugs and the loudest gun rule, therefore is many things at a time. There lies a hurtful truth in it, especially in retrospective on the country's past; a lot of mystification, such as the identity discourse, which established violence as a national identity trait, and of course, it is an internationally sellable story. Characterizing Colombia as a type of no-man's-land, without education, justice, functioning police and/or legal system within collective international memory, is not only a profitable simplified idea of the country, but also a brilliant way to legitimize violent women on screen.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it seems logical that the movies tend to present violence like something ordinary within the Colombian context.

Under this aspect, the director's decision to set *Rosario Tijeras* in 1989 Medellín does not seem to be arbitrary. The place and time are explicitly shown to us in the opening sequence and refer to an especially bloody chapter in the country's history: In 1989 Pablo Escobar declared his war against the Colombian State, causing many civil victims, especially in his territorial base, Medellín (cf. Bello Albarracín 2013: 101–102). To make the ›Colombian setting‹ clearer – even for spectators unaware of the country's history – the movie normalizes drug use and violence within the first few minutes.

In *Colombiana*, the equation of Colombia and violence is particularly pronounced. The first few minutes of the movie, which ›show‹ Colombia, set the right mood, altering between footage of a city, that claims to be Medellín as well as drug or violence related photographs. Furthermore, almost every violent act shown on

6 Cox' article focusses on the USA, but I suggest that assuming the gun as a symbol for manliness holds true for Occidental culture in general.

7 One might draw a parallel between this hypothesis and Clover's observations on the rural setting of horror movies (cf. Clover 2015: pp. 124–37).

screen is carried out by ›Colombians‹ (ironically, not one of the actors is Colombian) despite the movie being set in the US. The normalization of violence within Colombian context reaches an almost caricatural level, when nine-year-old Cataleya decides to become a killer and her uncle not only accepts her career choice, but even trains her. The title itself seems to confirm the connection between Cataleya's nationality and her violent behaviour, but the movie's trailer makes it even clearer replaying her father's voice repeatedly telling her not to forget where she came from while showing her fighting, shooting, and killing. The name ›Cataleya‹ is also a reference to Colombia, as it describes a flower from the Amazon region.

*Matar a Jesús* shows a more subtle version of Colombia's violence, which makes it appear more authentic than in the first two examples. The impotence and corruption of the police is more explicit than in *Colombiana* and *Rosario Tijeras* as Paula is the only protagonist, who even bothers to try resolving her ›victim situation‹ through the police, whereas in the other two movies the law enforcement units are presented as enemies of the heroines. Paula visits the police headquarters twice. The first time Paula visits the police station, the themes of incompetence and corruption appear, as the watch of her killed father seems to be missing and we hear a person in the corridor complaining about the police's inefficiency. Eventually – following Paula's second visit – the doubt is solidified when the responsible inspector denies having ever heard of a missing watch and admits to nothing new having been investigated. He also points out that each day five to ten homicides are reported: putting emphasis on the daily occurrence of violence and legitimizing its over-burdening. The interrelation between the incompetent police and the protagonist's violent behaviour is again highlighted when showing how the inactivity of the police raises Paula's anger, as she starts cursing, throwing documents on the floor, and attacking the officer.

## 2. Gender in the Context of Colombian Revenge Heroines

A narration that places a female protagonist into *narco* context and provides her with a fire arm has great potential for offering new social imaginaries concerning gender norms. Nevertheless, the films present the violent acts as mere reactions and draw on certain strategies legitimizing the heroines' violent behaviour. Two strategies have already been discussed, but each film offers specific approaches and, thereby, implicates different views on gender.

### 2.1 Rosario, the Victimized Masculine *femme fatale*

*Rosario Tijeras* tells the story of a homonymous heroine and attractive young woman of lower class, who is involved in the *sicario* subculture and makes her living through prostituting herself and killing people. Still, the main part of the story is shown from

Antonio's perspective, a spoiled kid within Colombia's upper class, who throughout the story grows ›to be a man‹, whereas Rosario – in the beginning – corresponds more to male stereotypes but in the course of the film loses her ›masculinity‹<sup>8</sup>.

As explained, the violent setting of *narcoculture* rarely allows active female characters, nevertheless *Rosario Tijeras* recurs to the tradition of the *femme fatale* to make the protagonist more acceptable. In fact, Rosario embodies the perfect representation of this type:

Intelligent, witty, able to role-play and perform, deceptive, enraged, frustrated, mercenary, seductive, overtly sexual, fearless and tough as nails, physically self-confident with a striking appearance [...] The figure is commonly understood as a beautiful woman who seduces a male protagonist into criminality and a web of deceit, causing his demise and, when film-industry production codes required, her own death too. (Grossman 2021: 1)

Rosario is presented as an independent, sexually active and, therefore – seen from a patriarchal perspective – problematic character. The trouble the protagonist brings with her is anticipated by both Antonio, when he points out that the people surrounding Rosario will kill Emilio for dating her, and outlined by the deteriorating state of Emilio and Antonio throughout the movie. The relationship between the two – supposedly inseparable – best friends also changes because of Rosario, as Antonio betrays his friend by sleeping with her and towards the end of the movie the two men hardly ever see each other anymore. Her embodiment as *femme fatale* begins in the very first scene (01:36–02:12); she dances with one of her victims, leans in for a kiss and then, her trademark, shoots him while intertwined. The scene focusses on her physical appearance, fragmenting her body in short extreme close-ups, which are finally replaced by a red screen at the sound of the shot. The fast cuts between the images of her body-parts reinforce the (sexual) tension of the scene and, in Mulvey's words, produce ›the ultimate fetish‹ presenting the woman as ›a perfect product‹ (Mulvey 1999: 65). Mulvey's theory on the male gaze has been widely discussed, declined, reaccepted, and modified over the years, but her observation on using fragmented close-ups to present women on screen in a fetishizing way holds true for *Rosario Tijeras* and so does her theory on the punishment of ›harmful‹ women, as will be elaborated later on. The scene additionally evokes the mystery the *femme fatale* figure implicates by omitting to show her face. The abrupt visual change from the scene to the red screen and the music being interrupted by the gunshot, underline the character's mercilessness.

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8 I realize that the unspecified use of the terms ›masculinity‹ and ›femininity‹ reinforce a conventional, binary way of thinking genders; nonetheless, and as I will show, the movie itself suggests those readings of manliness and womanhood.

In the following, Rosario is portrayed as sexy, unapproachable, and bossy, especially in scenes involving Emilio and Antonio. When they first see her, dancing yet again, the voyeurism is made even more explicit. Almost one whole minute (07:37–08:29) the camera switches between Rosario dancing in a short red dress with her eyes closed and mouth open, and the gazing Emilio and Antonio. Rosario's first few spoken lines also go hand in hand with her *femme fatale* image. She is repeatedly shown, but never speaks, guarding her secrets. When she speaks, she does it in imperatives. When Emilio tells Antonio about the steamy sexual encounter with Rosario, which of course is shown (12:40–13:18), he makes the mystery about Rosario even more explicit by telling his friend that he doesn't know anything about her (15:10–15:20). Almost perfectly, he describes the characteristics of a *femme fatale*, pointing out her mystery, but also her active role in the narration when answering Antonio's question about what he does with her (he would rather have to ask *her* what she does to *him*). Rosario's secrets are being kept from Emilio, nevertheless the spectators and eventually Antonio get background information on her, offering a different reading of her character.

As discussed earlier, the film shows Rosario's past, portraying her as a victim, which makes her violence relatable and lets her character appear more likeable despite its aggressiveness. The scenes showing her as a victim rather than as a hero increase in frequency and intensity throughout the movie. This is also shown through changes to her physical appearance. The best example for illustrating these changes might be the scene after her brother is killed, which is meaningfully placed almost in the exact middle of the movie. Whereas before, she tends to be dressed in rather »sexy« clothes, wears make up and has her hair straightened, in this scene we see a crying woman with messy hair and no make-up, who in her pink shirt almost appears like a little girl (58:06–59:33). If »femmes fatales perform roles in order to survive« (cf. Grossman 2021: 6), then Rosario fails to »perform« in this scene and we discover her true nature. The contrast between her appearance and the gun in her hand states the obvious: it should not be this way. Only when Antonio arrives is she free to let go and become what the narration needs her to be: a weeping woman in the arms of a male hero. The increasing focus on her role as a victim, rather than as a violent agent leads to a simple conclusion: Even if Rosario is initially portrayed as an independent woman who does not belong to anybody, as she herself makes clear while killing off the friend of her ex-partner (34:50–34:55), she still needs a hero to save her.

Antonio, nevertheless, fails to be hero-material, being shown as a rather »unmanly male«. Right from the beginning, it is clear that her salvation and the narration of the movie lie in his hands as he carries her bleeding body through the hospital doors (03:03–03:41). Unfortunately, he is not up to the task, which the first few scenes implicate, showing him as the least manly of all male figures. Especially in comparison with Emilio, Antonio comes across as rather juvenile, sensitive, and shy.

In the first scene, when both characters appear (05:11–07:00), the camera follows Emilio, not Antonio: through a POV-shot we see how every woman he passes, looks at him. Emilio is taller than Antonio, dressed in a much more adult way and the movie portrays him as a charming, flirty guy who is surrounded and admired by a lot of women. On the other hand, Maria, the girl Antonio dates, does not call him back. Later in the same scene, the two characters discover Rosario. The positioning of the camera suggests that the three characters form a perfect triangle, but while Rosario and Emilio are directly facing the camera, Antonio's body is pointing sideways and he only turns to the camera after Rosario shifts her view from Emilio to him. Furthermore, he carries his and Emilio's glasses and, therefore, »has his hands full« and stands still when Rosario leaves the dance floor, whereas Emilio immediately goes after her. Both Emilio and Antonio follow one of the typical narratives proposed by Mulvey, which is »investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery« (cf. Mulvey 1999: 65), but it is not in their hands to punish nor save her. Antonio succeeds in investigating her mysteries, but as he is not »man enough« to possess her, Rosario *must* die. His lacking maleness is implicated by the fact that throughout the main part of the movie he is presented as rather fearful and is frequently shown crying and/or suffering. Even if Rosario seems to admire his empathy and sensitivity, she also points out, that »good ones« like Antonio »always suffer« (01:15:35–01:15:40), which quite adequately describes the whole narration. In a *narcoculture*, as which Colombia here is clearly presented; there is only space for manly men and feminine women. Interestingly enough Rosario seems to incorporate both of those roles; she is a cliché manly man in a stereotypically feminine body.

Not only is Rosario linked to violence and her gun (both markers for masculinity) and has a more demanding and aggressive way of speaking, but also Antonio mentions rumours about her being a man. Also, Rosario is repeatedly presented as »incapable of love«: when Antonio asks her if she has even fallen in love, she dodges the question, whenever Emilio tries to get to know her, she interrupts the conversation with sex and, as already stated, she makes it more than clear, that she cannot be possessed when killing Ferney's friend. The focus on sex and denial of love represents stereotypical male behaviour, that contradicts feminine stereotypes.

As mentioned before, the blurry gender boundaries, where Rosario is more of a man than Antonio will ever be, loosen up throughout the movie, until, finally, he carries the half dead Rosario into the hospital, where, of course, she cannot be saved. It is as if the movie tells us that even if Rosario decides to align with the predetermined gender patterns, she is already too far off and must be punished for the lines she has crossed. Her past haunts her and brings her to an early death, as the films ending leads us to understand. Different to the novel, it is Ferney, her ex-boyfriend, who kills her, and the scene is set in the exact same disco playing the exact same song we saw her dancing to in the first scene when she was the murderess.

## 2.2 Cataleya, the Violent Unreal Other

The story of *Colombiana's* (2011) heroine shows similarities to Rosario's. As the daughter of a Colombian mafia boss, she is already confronted with violence at a young age. Her parents are killed in front of her eyes and she decides to avenge their death by killing everyone involved in it. As to gender norms, the heroine is similarly ›masculinized‹ and sexualized as in *Rosario Tijeras*, nevertheless the narrations judgement on her crossed gender boundaries is different as Cataleya does not get objectified as much nor is she as clearly punished as Rosario. The title of the movie might be the only Colombian thing about it, and it seems as if the focal point to making the protagonist Colombian, is to make her violent character explainable.

The preference for Latina protagonists in Hollywood action movies has been an ongoing trend since the late 1990s (cf. Beltrán 2004: 186–187), but Zoe Saldana represents an even more specific group of actresses which became popular in US cinema about one decade later:

Mixed race actresses exist on the margins of whiteness and the margins of racial Other. They are just ethnic enough to bring to their roles a suggestion of different characteristics – in sexuality, physical skills, and temperament – but white enough to make these racially problematic traits palatable. Physically mixed race performers like Zoe Saldana, Maggie Q, and Jessica Alba are presented as traditionally beautiful with just enough of an exotic look to enhance their desirability. (Brown 2015: 113)

Both the actress's appearance and the characters nationality serve as an excuse to explain shown violence as a logical consequence of being the ›Other‹. ›Otherness‹, in this case, just as the science fiction or superhero genre, is the exception to the rule, as it is, »a space in which female physical power is permitted, but in a fantastical [othered] setting that (with or without comedy) underlines its real-world impossibilities« (Purse 2022: 81). Cataleya's otherness helps to »contain the threat embodied by the presence of the physically powerful woman« (ibid.).

Especially when comparing Cataleya to the other female characters present in the movie, her otherness becomes evident: the exaggeratedly stupid giggling bikini girls surrounding the drug lord, Cataleya takes out, form a clear counterpart to her smart, serious, and violent character. Even the friendly woman working in the police department is portrayed as rather simple-minded and unaware of her own actions.<sup>9</sup> Cataleya is different, as her name states, she is an exotic rare flower, which

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9 It might not be a coincidence that the person, who inserts the photo of Cataleya into the police database and thereby reveals Cataleya's identity to the FBI, is a woman. Though the picture was taken by her lover and forwarded by his friend, in the end it is the woman who bears the guilt.

only grows in the Amazonian region. Following the narrations logic, the dangerous violent woman exists, but only in ›a faraway land‹.

The movies ending might not evoke associations of any fairy tale, but it surely reminds of a stereotypical Western, yet again making clear that despite its urban surroundings, this narration is to be seen as a fictional construct set in the ›Wild West‹. The heroine hangs up the phone, on which she just bid farewell to her love, sheds a single tear, puts on her cowboy hat and sunglasses (because, of course, it is sunset) and walks off as the lone wolf she is. Only for a moment, she shows emotions, but then the close-up switches to a long shot from behind and Cataleya bravely walks away while Johnny Cash's *Hurt* sets the right mood.<sup>10</sup>

The portrayal of violent women as ›unrealistic characters‹ often goes hand in hand with illustrating them as almost immune to the physical consequences of their fights and reframing their toughness according to their gender by fighting with ›fluid, flowing, more ›feminine‹ movements« and with ›grace and dignity; perfect hair and make-up« (Purse 2022: 81–82). Cataleya corresponds perfectly to those claims, she is a ›catlike killer for hire« (Brown 2015: 91). Even after the final battle (01:33:30–01:36:24), where she fights and kills several men (one of them being the right hand of the capo, Marco, whom she fights with her bare hands and – an almost caricatural choice of weapons – a towel and a toothbrush), apart from a little blood, she shows no signs of the fight (01:37:35). Her make-up and hair seem perfect and, in contrast to all the men she just killed, there is not one drop of sweat on her face and her breathing is perfectly calm. Preserving the female action heroines from bodily consequences, reinforces their ›dual status as both active subjects and sexualized objects« (Purse 2022: 81). Cataleya's clothing during most of the fight scenes fulfils the same purpose – be it a skin-tight bodysuit, a swimsuit, or a pyjama.

Ironically, several scenes parody the limits for the female gender the movie itself implicates (at least for all women not corresponding to the ›other‹). The special agent of the case refuses to follow the lead on Cataleya, because he is ›not looking for a woman«, regarding it as simply ›not possible« that a woman could be behind the series of brutal murders he investigates (1:02:25–1:02:29). In the beginning of the movie, Cataleya herself indirectly makes use of these perceived gender limits, when crushing a police car and pretending to be drunk to be put in a cell, from which she accesses another cell and kills one of her nemeses (26:12–37:38). Sexily dressed and apparently not even able to walk by herself, nobody suspects the ›crazy stupid bitch« (26:58) to have anything to do with the murder.

10 Not offering a ›romantic union« is a typical way of reinforcing ›the traumatic nature of the violent woman« in contemporary Hollywood action films featuring violent women (Neroni 2005: 93).

## 2.3 Paula, the »Real« Heroine?

*Matar a Jesús* (2018) also shows a young woman on her quest for revenge, as her father is killed by a *sicario*, whom she then befriends to find out more about the murder and avenge him. The movie is set in the same city as in *Rosario Tijeras*, Medellín, but in ›post-conflict‹ times and differs (regarding both the narrative construction and the production) from the other two movies. *Matar a Jesús* was written and directed by Laura Mora and therefore, unlike the other two films, offers both a ›female<sup>11</sup> and a ›Colombian<sup>12</sup> insight on gender and national problematics, which might explain the rather different viewing points the film offers – both on gender norms and on the topic of ›Colombian violence‹.

Contrary to the other protagonists, Paula is not sexualized, and her toughness is not describable as masculine, but rather as an individual trait of the heroine. She is shown as an independent character, which is highlighted by the cinematic decision of focussing the whole narration on her, not showing any scene without her, and using a lot of subjective camera and sound effects, which gives viewers even more chance to identify with her character. Especially in the first few scenes, Paula gives off the impression that she has everything under control and predominantly leads the narration. In each scene, she is the one to decide and the camera often follows her from behind, as if it had difficulties to follow her. In general, Paula is hardly ever shown from a frontal perspective; only in moments of confrontation, which are mostly linked to Jesús. Her violent acts are not as numerous and are always directly linked to the loss of her father, however when she finally faces Jesús with the gun in her hands, she kicks him and screams at him, but does not pull the trigger. Nevertheless, the decision of not shooting Jesús does not seem to be ascribable to her gender.

Even though the movie's violence is mostly male gendered, there is another violent female included in the narrative. The person from whom Paula tries to buy a weapon, is not only connected to the gun, but also kicks her in the stomach after stealing her camera. In the following scene, in contrast to the woman, Jesús is offering his immediate help and his friend borrows him his gun, no questions asked. As the narrative suggests, neither violence nor solidarity are questions of gender, but more so the circumstances you are confronted with.

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11 The existence of a specific ›feminine way‹ of filmmaking is controversial, nevertheless, especially in comparison to the other two movies, it is noticeable that the portrayal of the protagonist is freed from what Mulvey described as ›male gaze‹.

12 Not only did the director grow up in Medellín, but the movie's plot is also partly autobiographical. Additionally, Mora sees her own work as social realism, which might not say anything about the authentic quality of the film, but at least evidences an intention, that the other two directors lack.

The biggest difference to the other two movies however is the characterization of the movie's ›bad guy‹. Jesús is not a simply ruthless, malicious man, whose actions are explained by being ›bad‹; throughout the movie we gain more and more background information on him, get to know his family and in the final scene he even raises an interesting question: »Do you think I live a happy life?« (1:32:30–1:33:33, translated by SM). The narration explains that Jesús is not the one to blame, he just does »what people tell him to do« (49:55–49:57, translated by SM). Killing him would not change anything, he merely functions as a scapegoat, just as his name suggests. This translates violence into a non-gender specific problem, that might be linked to powerful people, but mostly manifests its consequences within a less privileged social class.<sup>13</sup> Other scenes suggest similarities between Jesús and Paula; especially the comparisons between the gun and the camera are numerous, which is underlined by the slang of the *sicario* subculture, »where living fast is ›vivir a lo pel[í]cula‹, killing becomes ›tomar fotograf[í]a‹, ›montar videos: stands for inventing stories« (Pobutsky 2005: 23). At the same time, the parallels between the two characters clarify their differences: Paula, who represents the middle-class, can take pictures, whereas Jesús, representing the lower class, is forced to take up arms. This more empathetic view of the *sicario*, coincidences with a more realistic way of understanding the *sicariato*; not portraying its violence as a cause of itself, but rather as »the result of a mixture of a strong social exclusion experienced by the youth of the urban ghettos and the growth of a powerful globalized criminal industry« (Kantaris 2008: 457, translated by SM). Furthermore, there is yet another crucial difference between *Matar a Jesús* and the other mentioned productions.

In the first two movies, the protagonist herself is the *sicario* which therefore leads the spectatorship to identify with them and to a certain degree makes them out to be on ›the good side of the story‹; in *Matar a Jesús*, the *sicario* is placed on the opposite side, but the story's opposition between good and bad gets blurrier throughout the narration, and finally puts the spectators in a position to decide for themselves. This more complex narrative structure not only offers a more authentic insight on the *sicario*-phenomenon, but also fights the process of production of *narco* and *sicario* themed books, movies, and TV shows over the last few decades:

In its passage through cinema, literature and the consequent trivialization by the mass media, a symptom of the seriousness of Colombian violence, such as the *sicariato*, becomes a kind of trend in youth cultures, thus smoothing out all the burden of conflicts it carries with it. (Walde 2001: 28, translated by SM)

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13 In all three movies, there is a certain connection between poverty and violence, but whereas in *Rosario Tijeras* and in *Colombiana* there is no explanation to that connection, *Matar a Jesús* clarifies that it is the circumstances that force people to act violently.

Contrary to other films, the sicariato is not glorified in any way and there is no fetishization of violence in *Matar a Jesús*. This is of great importance, especially, if we agree on the relation that sociologist Salazar establishes between the Colombian *sicarixs* and cinematic productions:

Like the older generations of *sicarios*, the newer ones seem to share what Salazar summed up as the myth »of war, of spectacular action and super-heroes that many of these youths have adopted as their ideal« (J. Salazar, *Born to Die* 120). Salazar attributed this attitude to the impact of global visual culture and particularly to Hollywood cinema, which provided the gullible dispossessed with make-believe combat imagery. It does not matter how soon you die; what matters is that you instill fear and become a legend. (Pobutsky 2020: 201)

*Matar a Jesús* clearly goes a different way by showing that Jesús cannot live with his own family out of fear that they might pay for his crimes, is threatened by death various times, and does not even live a luxurious life in exchange. His choice to be a *sicario* is not so much a decision as a situation he is forced into. Paula, on the other hand, can choose to shoot or not to shoot and when she throws the gun away in the final scene, it can be interpreted both as a metaphor for putting an end to violence, but also as a privilege.

### 3. Conclusion: Subversive Gender Crossings – Potentials and Limits

In conclusion, even though all three movies share their subversive potential – handing out guns to their protagonists and including several suffering male characters – they use different strategies to restrain their potentially radical gender crossings. Let alone through the mere revenge genre, and the specific focus these films put on male actions in need of vengeful female reactions, the active role of the heroines is restricted and rooted within patriarchal patterns of reasoning. The recurrence to certain discursive and generic traditions, which are linked to patriarchy, such as the global imaginary equation of Colombia and violence, the *narco*-world, and the (rape)-revenge theme, helps to justify the portrayed female violence. *Rosario Tijeras* and *Colombiana* explicitly show shooting women but punish them with death and/or loneliness and both movies highlight their fictitious status via recurrence to the *femme fatale* figure and exoticization mechanisms. *Matar a Jesús*, on the other hand, offers a more complex visualization of violence and gender in the Colombian context, which might imply a more authentic portrayal of female violence, but at the same time makes it impossible for the heroine to pull the trigger due to reasons of class affiliation.

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