Media and domestic violence: a qualitative analysis of movie synopses

Eleonora Bordon[1], Agnese Pietrobon[2]

Summary *Most contemporary scholars recognize the importance of media for our society: media, in fact, not only affect users' perceptions of social reality and the way societal norms and values are created (Gunter, 1988), but at the same time their content is mediated by how society perceives itself. Analyzing movie and TV contents can therefore allow an insight into common representations of social problems.*

Our research takes into consideration the concept of domestic violence to see how it is conveyed through movies and how the audience perceives it. A qualitative analysis using SPAD was applied to 100 synopses of movies that the Internet Movie Database lists with the tag "domestic violence". The 100 movies were chosen using a popularity criterium based on users votes.

The results shows that movie synopses depict domestic violence in a stereotypical way: a recurring domestic environment and familiar figures are always involved. Instead, no emotional elements are added to the plot nor are explicit descriptions of violent acts. Cinematographic narrations, then, seem to adopt and express representations that are mostly based on common sense.

Keywords: domestic abuse, movies, media

Introduction

Most contemporary scholars recognize the importance of media for our society. Many studies highlight their influence on emotions and behaviours –

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[1] Ph. D in Sociology and Social Research Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education & Applied Psychology (FISPPA), Section of Applied Psychology Fellow at the Department of Applied Psychology of Padua 8 Venezia street, 35131 Padua, Italy. Tel.: +39 049 82 76 665. E-mail: eleonora.bordon@unipd.it.

[2] Master in Psychology, University of Padua (Italy). E-mail: agnese.pietrobon@gmail.com.

see for example the analyses of their effects on adolescents' aggressive behavior or on political opinions – but media also affect users' perceptions of the social reality and the way societal norms and values are created (Gunter, 1988). Media inform, but at the same time they direct the attention of the audience to certain topics (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), form certain representations of society (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1982) and allow spectators to experience unknown situations vicariously (Livolsi, 2000).

At the same time, audience members do not just passively consume media content: they are active users and so the emerging meanings also depend on their previous experiences and motivations. In other words there is not a one-way relationship between media and media users, as the first theories seemed to believe. Rather there is reciprocal modelling. Consequently, it must be kept in mind that even if it is certainly important to understand the effects media have got on society, it is also important to read media content as a mirror of how society perceives itself and how its members live.

That being stated, certainly one of the most interesting means is television and indeed most studies address it, especially in consideration of its power to attract larger audiences (Mininni, 2007). In addition, television can do running commentaries and it can present events in real time, something that a means like cinema, for example, cannot do, since the production of a movie requires a longer time. At this regard, studying television can help to better understand how opinions and impressions are formed; at the same time, however, cinema and its narrations of facts and events from the past (even when a recent one) touch opinions that are already settled in the mind of audience members: while sometimes talking about unfamiliar realities, often to denounce them, most of the time its aim is to re-open a discussion on already known facts and situations, that may not have received the necessary attention and need to be brought to public attention once more.

For example, an important role has always been assigned to the institution of family by cinema and TV. Indeed, family frequently is the focus of these narrations and important scenes involving main characters revolve around it. Writers, producers and directors often present a family in their works and it is presumable that they do so because this is an institution we all have a knowledge about: it is therefore more easily represented but it is also as easily recognizable by audience members.

As Gregorio (2011) states, some representations are re-presentation of a reality that is so close to the real one, almost like a documentary on it, that it is possible to talk about mirroring; in other cases the representation is unlike the original version and it can therefore be read as an expression of it. The author presents only a part of the reality, focusing on those aspects that they consider

important and neglecting others. In addition, it must be pointed out that family representations belong to those social representations of value systems, ideas, practices that put order to reality and enable members of the society to understand and have some control over their own material and social reality and to communicate with others through the common codes and conventions so created.

Moving from these premises, our research takes a closer look at how cinema depicts a topic that's related to the institution of family and, for its frequent appearances on newspapers and TV programs, can still be considered a dramatic problem of nowadays: domestic violence. Statistics show that in 2006, in Italy, 2.938.000 women between 16 and 70 years old were victim of abuse from their current or ex-partner (ISTAT, 2006) and these data do not take into consideration those cases in which the victim was a man. This last problem, that in the past has often being neglected, has now reached the public attention as associations like PARITY Equal Rights for UK Men and Women (www.parity-uk.org) or projects like the DYN (www.dynwales.org) show. For example, the Home Office Statistics, analyzing data 2009/2010 from BCS (once known as British Crime Survey, now Crime Survey for England and Wales) reveal that while women are most often victims of domestic abuse (29% of survey respondents), a good percentage of men is also present (16%) (Graph. 1)
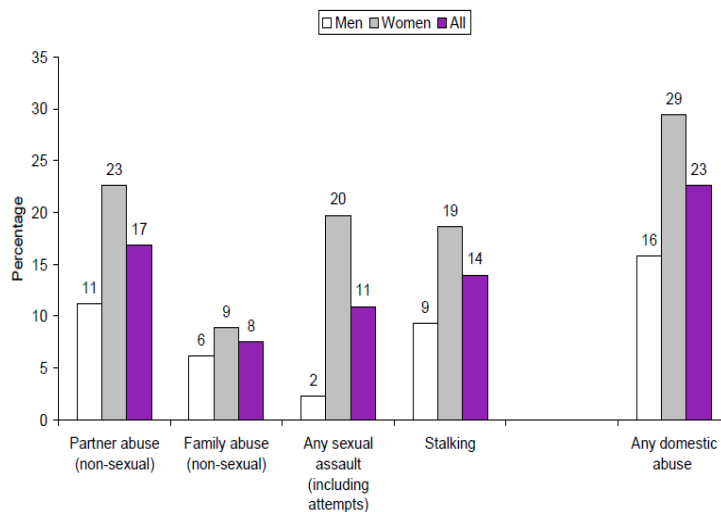

Graph. 1: Prevalence of intimate violence experienced since the age of 16, by sex, 2009/10, England and Wales
Source: Home Office Statistics (2011) and BCS

Italian studies, as said, are mostly about abused women. Not only data about physical violence are worrisome, but data on psychological abuse as well: 21,1% of women with a partner – 3.477.000 women – are or have been victims of some form of psychological abuse and this number reaches the 7.134.000 units (43,2%) when considering women who are subjected to psychological abuse only *once in a while*.

These Italian statistics show, then, that the topic of domestic violence is one that needs to be addressed carefully, especially in consideration of some facts: only 18,2% of victims of domestic abuse consider it a crime; 45,2% of female victims of domestic abuse don't talk about it with anyone; almost the totality of female victims of abuse (93%) refuses to denounce these facts to authorities. These women justify this worrisome behavior with their refusal to consider the abuse serious enough to ask for a complaint (64,3% of women who suffered a violent behavior during their lives and 66% of women who suffered it in the last 12 months) (Graph. 2)
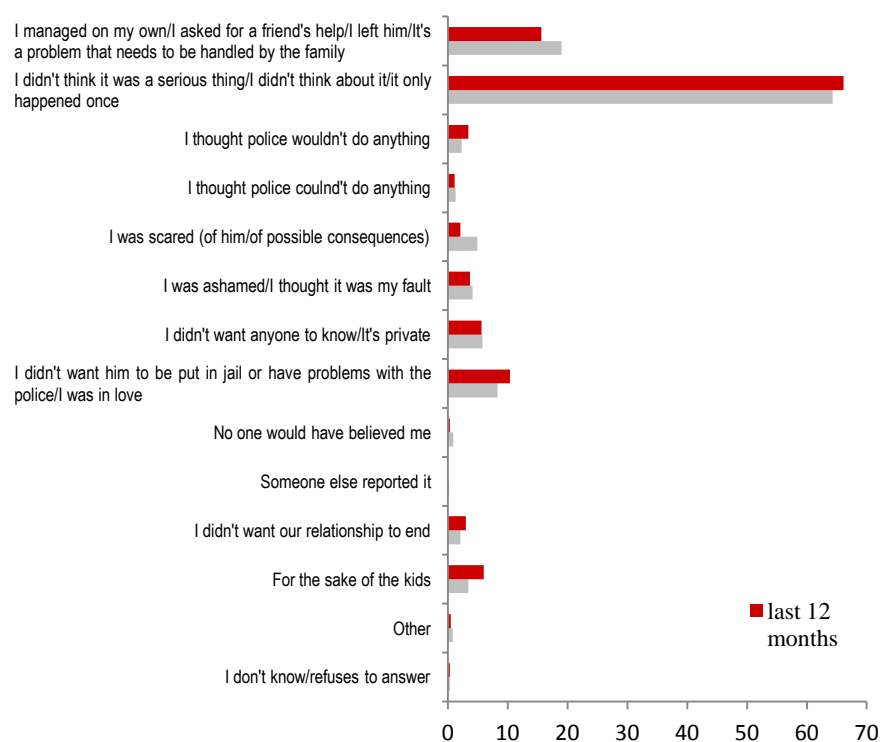
Graph. 2: Reasons for not reporting the domestic abuse - women between 16 and 70 years old who suffered it (2006) *for one hundred victims with the same characteristics*
Source: ISTAT

It is clear, then, that the interpretation the person gives of the situation and of other people's motivations is fundamental. In the specific case of domestic abuse the wrong interpretation the victim gives to the abusing behavior is particularly serious, since it can have tragic consequences, sometimes even fatal ones. It is thereby necessary to diffuse a common understanding of what is considered domestic violence so that even victims and potential victims of it can be aware of what it entails. That is why many media campaign on consciousness raising reach our TV and networks; an example is the Women's Aid campaign against domestic violence, in which a famous actress as Keira Knightly plays an important role.

This necessity to raise awareness on a problem that is still greatly affecting our society is what motivated our research, whose main aim is to highlight how the social transformations of the concept of violence in an everyday environment are conveyed and shared through cinematographic narrations.

The study analyzed 100 synopses of movies about domestic violence with a qualitative analysis applied to their contents.

Method
Step 1: movie selection

The first important step was the selection of movies for the analysis. Cinematography on relevant social topics as domestic violence is extensive, and frequently constituted by independent movies and art films. However, this kind of cinematography is often relegated to the circuit of movie festivals and essai cinema and so the larger audience does not have direct access to them. In order to understand movies and society's reciprocal influences is therefore more useful to analyze movies with a better visibility, that were more probably watched and therefore could have had a role in modelling opinions and representations.

Movie popularity was then one of the criteria used to create the list of movie to analyze.

Specifically the movie list came from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). "The world's most popular and authoritative source for movie, TV and celebrity content", this website offers "a searchable database of more than 100 million data items including more than 2 million movies, TV and entertainment programs and more than 4 million cast and crew members" (source: www.imdb.com).

The searchable database provides almost 500 hundred movies, when using the keyword "domestic violence". From this list we kept out TV programs

(serials and reality shows, among the others) and documentaries and then proceeded to select only dramatic movies or at least movies in which drama was one of the main genres indicated (often these movies are categorized not only as dramatic movies, but also as thriller or biographical movies, for example). While comedies often speak about social problems, too, and they effectively expose social evils through irony (Ferro, 2006), in this specific case we chose to ignore this genre in order to standardize as much as possible the products analyzed.

This first selection was made up of a list of 248 movie titles and we selected the 100 most voted. IMDb allows users to vote on movies they have seen and movies are categorized for number of votes and viewing ratings, too. Our analysis took into consideration most voted movies but not necessarily highest rated movies: what mattered, in fact, was the fact that a movie had been watched (related to the number of votes) and not if viewers had liked it or not. Tab. 1 lists the 100 movies analyzed: years of production and votes are included, too.

Tab. 1: Movies analyzed

n.	Title	Year	Users votes	n.	Title	Year	Users votes
1	the godfather	1972	583,176	51	sleeping with the enemy	1991	20,55
2	american beauty	1999	427,265	52	he got game	1998	20,503
3	the departed	2006	405,395	53	this boy's life	1993	18,119
4	Titanic	1997	389,844	54	dolores claiborne	1995	17,961
5	the godfather - part 2	1974	369,893	55	gridiron gang	2006	17,532
6	goodfellas	1990	350,283	56	tideland	2005	17,428
7	Leon	1994	332,185	57	the human stain	2003	17,403
8	Shining	1980	278,33	58	enough	2002	17,383
9	city of god	2002	260,688	59	once were warriors	1994	17,173
10	l. a. confidential	1997	231,715	60	suicide kings	1997	16,096
11	into the wild	2007	185,484	61	all good things	2010	15,587
12	american gangster	2007	178,367	62	oliver twist	2005	15,303
13	magnolia	1999	161,108	63	frankie and johnny	1991	14,065
14	Rocky	1976	160,295	64	sid and nancy	1986	13,481
15	the aviator	2004	136,888	65	bugsy	1991	13,457
16	the deer hunter	1978	127,46	66	oliver	1968	13,245
17	raging bull	1980	127,066	67	down in the valley	2005	12,632
18	donnie brasco	1997	115,894	68	body double	1984	12,043
19	chinatown	1974	113,772	69	tillsammans	2000	11,747
20	chocolat	2000	85,991	70	mad dog and glory	1993	11,577

21	across the universe	2007	61,01	71	the secret life of bees	2008	11,009
22	blue valentine	2010	58,019	72	reds	1981	10,581
23	the bodyguard	1992	49,812	73	the wrong man	1956	10,554
24	barton fink	1991	49,118	74	east is east	1999	10,49
25	the skeleton key	2005	48,98	75	adam's rib	1949	10,43
26	a streetcar named desire	1951	47,881	76	nobody's fool	1994	10,256
27	water for elephants	2011	44,721	77	tyrannosaur	2011	9,018
28	Thirteen	2003	26,082	78	så som i himmelen	2004	8,506
29	the doors	1991	41,409	79	affliction	1997	8,408
30	secretary	2002	40,759	80	the prince of tides	1991	8,258
31	house of sand and fog	2003	39,637	81	udaan	2010	8,082
32	the color purple	1985	36,274	82	purple rain	1984	7,668
33	the night of the hunter	1955	35,495	83	what's love got to do with it	1993	7,605
34	the gift	2000	34,91	84	a woman under the influence	1974	7,239
35	mississippi burning	1988	34,278	85	der blaue engel	1930	6,66
36	the outsiders	1983	32,102	86	urban cowboy	1980	6,434
37	fried green tomatoes	1991	31,256	87	ride the high country	1962	6,331
38	fatal attraction	1987	30,908	88	the notorious bettie page	2005	6,265
39	who's afraid of virginia woolf	1966	29,661	89	total eclipse	1995	6,034
40	out of time	2003	28,2	90	baby boy	2001	5,799
41	freedom writers	2007	27,879	91	not without my daughter	1991	5,772
42	friday night lights	2004	27,471	92	blood and wine	1996	5,557
43	waitress	2007	26,082	93	she's so lovely	1997	5,352
44	the rainmaker	1997	26,015	94	brat	1997	5,241
45	la dolce vita	1960	25,813	95	possession	1981	5,201
46	far from heaven	2002	25,588	96	turks fruit	1973	4,882
47	transamerica	2005	25,476	97	born yesterday	1950	4,812
48	Narc	2002	24,314	98	poetic justice	1993	4,717
49	bin-jip	2004	22,579	99	one false move	1992	4,712
50	after hours	1985	22,311	100	nil by mouth	1997	4,644

Step 2: SPAD

In the next step, 100 official IMDb synopses about most popular movies related to domestic violence were analyzed using the content analysis software SPAD. This software is particularly useful when applying a quali-quanti analysis to written documents because it generates statistical-mathematical outputs that allow an interpretation of the discursive processes in the subtext. Certainly these data do not represent the whole context but they offer a scientific insight in the elements the researcher is analyzing. SPAD was created in France in 1985 and it still is a very helpful instrument to whoever needs to conduct an analysis on large texts. This software performs multiple operations on data: it creates a matrix of the textual results and it builds a text vocabulary that can be expressed in graphic forms and segments; in particular, it allows the identification of characteristic segments, generates lexical tables and analyzes correspondences.

The synopses were written by different users with a methodology similar to the one used in Wikipedia and in the perspective of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006): in IMDb, different users can update a text in case it needs corrections or more content details and so documents are often the result of the collaboration between several members of the website. Therefore, plots can be longer or shorter, and certainly their styles usually differ. However, these differences, rather than compromising the text analysis, offer an insight to different users' perceptions of the relevance of domestic violence in movie plots: elements worth of being mentions can freely emerge and therefore it is possible to better understand users' reception of the concept "domestic abuse".

Results

First, text vocabulary and words frequencies were analyzed with SPAD. A preliminary vocabulary standardization made possible to identify 8.367 different graphic forms, 4.150 of which appear only once in the text. About 50% of the text is characterized by lexical richness, then. However, this element is relevant only in part: the texts analyzed are movie synopses and so they often contain different elements and very specific contents for themselves.

Corpus analysis reveals a recurrence of concepts that often characterize common sense about violence too. These representations use words from everyday life: *home*, *man*, *woman*, *brother*, *family* and

friends are the most frequently used ones (tab. 2). Therefore, a social dimension and close interpersonal relationships are important elements that identify the active and passive actors in abusive situations; violence is often expressed in a domestic environment and from or against a relative and/or a friend. Furthermore text analysis highlights specific social contexts other than family, as references to institutions as School and Police show. In these narrations, then, the social dimension is conveyed mostly through references to different institutions, specifically family, law and school.

Tab. 2: Text corpus: most frequently used lexemes

Mot/Segment	Fréquence	Mot/Segment	Fréquence
Home	207	Mother	63
Man	201	Like	62
Woman	115	Day	60
Father	103	Money	60
Family	100	Car	57
Friends	95	Old	55
Job	89	Young	54
Oaks	89	Love	51
Time	89	School	51
Life	86	Town	51
Room	84	Door	50
Wife	83	White	50
Night	79	Fight	49
Professor	78	Brother	47
Police	77	Gun	44
Kill	75	Help	43
Apartment	73	Head	42
Years	70	Son	41

Lexical correspondence analysis, through the graphic representation of most frequently used lexemes and their spatial reference on a Cartesian coordinate system in two-dimensions, reveals four clusters of

meaning (Graph. 3), homogeneously located in the four quadrant graphic.

Cluster A identifies words related to a generic context, such as *mother*, *son*, *town*, *white* and *black*. Examples from the text are: "the mother takes Ciccio hostage at knifepoint", "[…] visits her children, but cannot bear to leave them", "[…] of a black man who drives the car mentioned in the lead", "[…] and White's fate will be the same. White attacks Exley but is held back. At that moment a report is issued that the three black men have escaped from the precinct". This cluster frames the specific environments and the actors involved in the violent situation and so it makes possible to define and limit the general representation of the concept.

Cluster B is related to scene descriptions, specific events and peculiarities. The main words are *time*, *group*, *door*. Examples from the text include "Wendy waste no time escaping", "he coldly closes the door in her face", "[…] where the anti war group's actions escalate to increasing violence, leading to police".

Cluster C describes school images; it's a separated cluster which includes only two lexemes: *professor* and *students*, two fundamental elements of this institution and the two elements that mostly identify its core: few words that help the narrator to direct the observer's attention and the observer to stay focused on the main plot. The narration is lexically poor but it appears more functional to capture the interlocutor's attention. Sentences from the texts are: "[…] is a straight a student who writes poetry. But Tracy longs to be popular and well respected at her Los Angeles middle school", "[…] her students start to behave with respect and learn more. A transformation is especially visible in one of her students", "[…] certain professor, believing him to be his father. The student…", "[…] the professor chooses a student to recite some of Hamlet". Emphasis is on the professor-student relationship that is characterized by typical scholastic dynamics.

Finally, Cluster D identifies typical elements of crime movies, such as *department*, *police*, *case*, *gun*. Justice is identified as an institutional element conveyed through law enforcement agencies and lined to social problems such as drug usage. It is possible to identify the following sentences in the text: "their men are running drugs behind their back", "after Henry's drug arrest", "[…] with a gun as he wakes up. As soon as

she lowers the gun…", "[…] of the state police by Siu's captain Oliver Queenan and staff sergeant Sean Dignam", "[…] within the police force. In another state police training program…", "[…] the L.A. police department. Cohen, however, is arrested on income tax evasion and sent to prison on Macneil Island in Washington State".
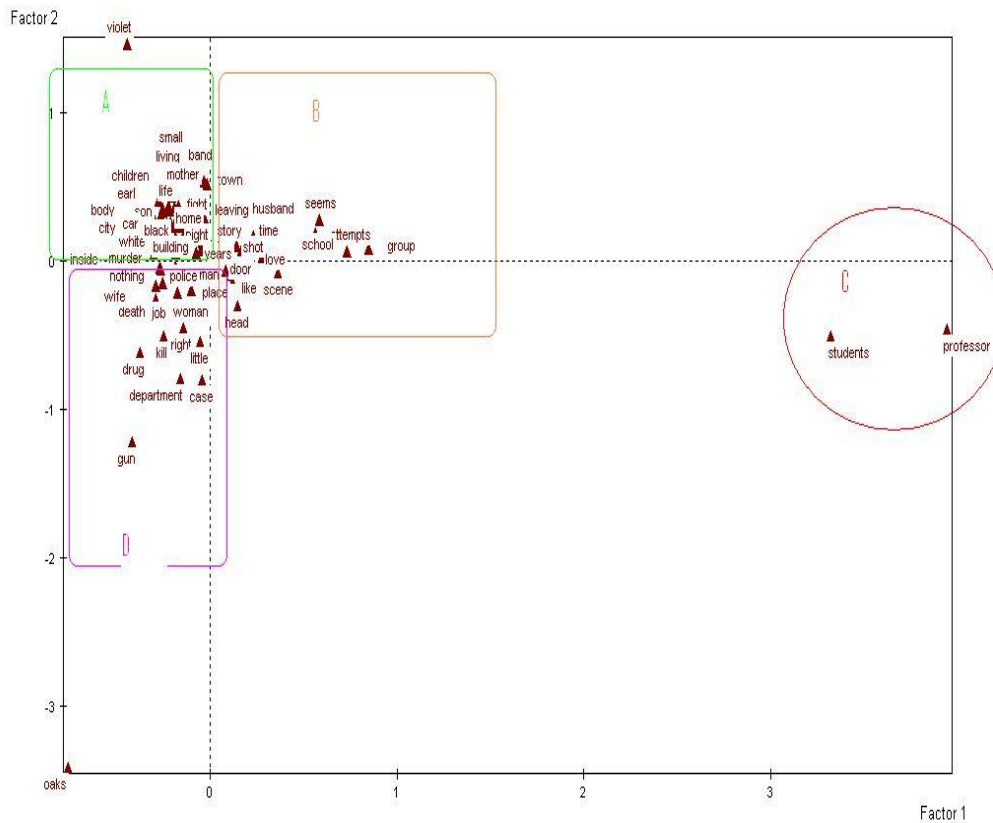
Graph. 3: Lexical correspondence analysis

Conclusions

Information always needs an interpretation. The same happens to any representation, even when literal, cinematographic or fictional. An interpretation in itself is like "putting into practice" a part of everyday life and it creates a space in which social concepts can be formed and shared.

Data regarding violence against women reflect the idea that to be protected from violence is a natural right, that gender violence is diffused in domestic environments everywhere, even in modern countries, and that men are usually the aggressors (Bimbi, 2011). These concepts are recent ones, however, since before the Sixties women were considered responsible for any abuse they were subjected to and when they weren't, those responsible were people from outside their everyday life.

Bimbi states that social communication offers convergence but also conflict between different messages (for example, on the importance of women subjectivity in the public sphere, on women's possible decisions about their sexuality, on reproduction and on their bodies). Fiction shows all these aspects and so it can raise consciousness about abuse both in those who are its victims and in those who perpetrate it.

In our research about movie synopses, cluster and lexical correspondence analyses highlight the use of stereotypical images to convey the concept of domestic violence, in accordance to the typical way American cinema often presents social problems. References to police force, domestic roles of familiar figures (mums, brothers, kids), locations related to the everyday lives of the main characters (town, home, job) convey the main contexts in which the violent acts are perpetrated.

No elements related to emotional responses of the main characters emerge from the synopses, nor do detailed references to explicit scenes in which abuse, violent deaths and acts of physical violence happen: this last aspect seems to be intrinsic to the kind of data the study took into consideration (movie synopses). While it is known that synopses often avoid movie spoilers, it must also be emphasized that clearly plots do not use the elements of explicit violence to encourage potential audience's interest for a specific movie.

Furthermore, it must be noted that in these specific narrations violence is conveyed through the lack of the emotional aspect. No other characteristic elements of plot-developing emerge from this analysis, not even when taking into considerations the year of production. It seems this kind of narration maintains a certain homogeneity in time, then: this continuity is not much about violence and its dynamic. Rather this immutable way of narrating seems naturally connected to social interaction.

These results reveal analogies to other scientific researches. In fact, if documents about women's rights are all about conflicts and ambiguity, as Bortolo highlights (2011), fictions always offer a more immediate and emotional involvement. Not even CE and Council of Europe documents specifically analyze what lies behind European policy for women. There is always a generic condemnation of violence on women and an awareness that

every context can potentially hide abuse. This ambivalence is reflected in the recognition of reiterated male supremacy mechanisms and in the way violence against women is seen as a consequence of individual deviances and anomie (Bimbi, 2011).

Therefore symbolic violence is mostly about power asymmetry and this asymmetry is hardly recognizable from an insider's point of view[3].

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Internet Movie Database
www.imdb.com

PARITY Equal Rights for UK Men and Women
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The DYN Project
www.dynwales.org

Women's Aid
www.womensaid.org.uk

Women's Aid CUT Movie

www.womensaid.org.uk/page.asp?section=0001000100100012&sectionTitle=
CUT+movie