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Violence against women in contemporary Finnish audio-visual fiction: The decision-making process

ABSTRACT
Violence against women (VAW) in Finnish audio-visual fiction had a significant peak in 2018. The article examines the financiers’ and filmmakers’ decision-making processes that resulted in scenes containing brutal VAW in Finnish TV series and films. Were the decisions rational or emotional, and were these different decision modes separable? The article draws from a study based on two sets of data: first, sequences from Finnish films and TV series that portray VAW, and second, interviews and questionnaire responses from the makers of these scenes covering various stages in the film and TV productions. The results provide insights into the themes of identification, empathy and the normalization of filmic violence, pose a question about the demand for brutalization in AV productions and give suggestions for future research in audio-visual decision-making.

KEYWORDS
social sustainability
ethical filmmaking
emotion
representation
empathy
othering
silencing
gendered violence

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A young woman’s half-naked body wrapped in plastic is found on the seashore.

This plot device, far past its saturation point, is the beginning of a widely popular Finnish TV series, Karppi (Deadwind) (2018–present), but would also apply with minor changes to the American series Twin Peaks (1990–91, 2017), to another internationally acclaimed Finnish TV series, Sorjonen (Bordertown) (2016–present) and the Danish series Forbrydelsen (The Killing) (2007–13).

In 2018, violence against women (VAW) was difficult to ignore in Finnish TV series. Crime series such as Deadwind, Bordertown, Bullets (2018), Ivalo (Arctic Circle) (2018–present), Ratamo (2018–present) and Keisari Aarnio (‘Emperor Aarnio’) (2018) showed increasingly brutal violence that was oftentimes gendered. Can the 2018 intense rise of the crime genre in Finnish streaming services be seen as the industry’s greed for profit, or should blame be placed on the screenwriters? According to Smitha Radhakrishnan, society is reflected in movies, and in turn, movies influence societies by changing representations, challenging the beliefs and moral standards of the audience and altering viewers’ opinions (2010: 461). TV series and films are platforms that are far from an objective lens; they not only reflect but also negotiate and develop our view of society (Welsh et al. 2011: 471). The perpetuating of VAW in Finnish audio-visual fiction cannot be explained by the claim that it reflects society particularly closely. According to the National Council for Crime Prevention report, the most prevalent group involved with violence in Finland is young men, both as victims and as perpetrators. There are very few young female victims in the statistics (2018: n.pag.). According to the Finnish Criminal Review 2020, 802 people, 555 men (69 per cent) and 247 women (31 per cent) were killed during the review period 2010–18. The mortality rate was highest in men aged 40–49 (Lehti 2020: n.pag.).

Film is a means of conveying emotion. Generating an emotional response in the viewer is a fundamental tool of the filmmaker. The importance of emotion in the decision-making process for audio-visual fiction is vital at every stage of production, but particularly in its initial planning phase. Filmmakers and investors are fascinated by some topics and yet express no interest in others. As a screenwriter, I want to assume that the motives of Finnish filmmakers are not primarily financial. The question, therefore, that I want to pursue in this context is to what degree the dramaturgical and other artistic and content-related solutions are compatible with those that have been explored by financiers, broadcasters, screenwriters, directors, producers, cinematographers, editors and actors.

The purpose of the article is to present an analysis of the decision-making processes of Finnish fiction film professionals to find out what kind of emotions emerge during the making of violent scenes and to shed light upon whether or not the filmmakers’ own emotions act as determining factors in the dramaturgical and other production-related choices. In the following, I introduce the research design and the two types of data used. In the discussion, I suggest inferences from the collected data in a quest for a broader meaning of the research findings, covering such themes as Othering, silencing, understanding the perpetrator and the dead girl trope. The themes are contextualized in relation to research on violence and feminist studies.

The theoretical framework consists of studies in decision-making processes in business administration, psychology and social sciences. In addition to physical and emotional violence, I present the theory of violence as symbolic. I also suggest that the renewing of permissive thought patterns that
prevail in society reproduces the meanings of fictional violence. The theories
draw on research in literature, contemporary culture and media as well as on
gender, sexuality and intersectionality. My perspective is thus gender-aware.

Although in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, many eyes have been
opened, the results of my study highlight the ever-present phenomenon of
gendered violence in film and television. The call for violent content generates
more violence in audio-visual fiction. I return to this notion later in the article.

METHOD AND PROCESS

Two types of material were used in my research. The first consisted of dram-
aturgical analyses (following Talvio 2018: n.pag.) of eight completed scenes
or sequences in Finnish audio-visual fiction, three TV series and one feature
film. Respondents were each assigned two scenes from productions they had
been involved in. The second set of data consisted of interviews I conducted
and questionnaire answers I analysed from screenwriters, financiers, produc-
ers, directors, cinematographers, costume and set designers, actors and other
decision-makers involved in the making of scenes.

My study material was focused on scenes depicting ongoing or previously
committed VAW. In the scenes, a group of men or a single man raped a woman
or a female minor. The scenes involved women who had died or were on the
verge of dying as victims of homicide. Some of the women were attacked by
an unknown male perpetrator, while others were killed by a man they knew.
The data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured inter-
views. The invitation stated that the aim of the study was ‘to explore the role
of emotions in decision-making in film and TV production’ and that the study
material focuses on scenes dealing with VAW. The respondents were free to
choose whether to reply in writing or in interviews. It was also explained that
the results of the study would be anonymized to protect the identity of the
respondents.

DECLINED INVITATIONS

When it became clear at the beginning of the study that answers were diffi-
cult to obtain and that the sample would remain limited, it was decided to
anonymize the actual fictional material used in the study. For this reason,
the film and TV series used as research material are not specified or named.
The respondents selected for the study constituted a so-called discretionary
sample of qualitative research, in which the pre-chosen fictional material had
delimited and defined the respondents invited to participate in the survey
and interview. Raising delicate or suppressed issues in a study can become
quite uncomfortable, especially if there is only one interview session. If the
scenes in question have not been identified beforehand, the interview may
become ‘locked’. To avoid this, a questionnaire was sent in advance to all the
invitees, including the interviewees. Two respondents criticized the research
design, wondering why I did not ask straight out why the violent scenes were
written, produced and filmed. However, ‘why’ questions are to be avoided in
ethnographic research, since such questions tend to sound judgemental and
assume that the person knows the answer. Thus, the research questionnaire
concentrated on the emotional and thematic content of the decision-making
process.

Thirty-six professionals, including members of the production crew
involved in the making of the pre-chosen fictional scenes, were sent an
interview invitation and a questionnaire. Sixteen of them were contacted in advance by telephone and nine people gave permission to send the questionnaire to them via e-mail. Ten invitees stated that they could not reply in either way, orally or in writing. For the remaining respondents, an enquiry invitation was sent via e-mail without the initial contact via telephone.

Four weeks after the initial invitation, a reminder e-mail was sent to 21 recipients. Finally, four responses to the written questionnaire were received and five semi-structured oral interviews were conducted. The questions in the questionnaire were reviewed during the interview, discussing them thematically, as applicable to each interviewee. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Among the respondents, five were men and four were women. In the group of all invitees, the financiers and producers \( (n = 7) \) generally stated that the invitation was interesting and that the subject of the study was relevant and essential. The research was felt to be valuable, and according to the financiers and producers, it was important to review the issues mentioned. However, it was remarkably common for the invited financiers and producers to refuse to participate in the study itself \( (n = 5) \). According to the answers provided, they did not feel the questions were relevant to their roles in the production process, for instance because financiers did not act as production executives \( (n = 2) \) and did not participate in the approval of script drafts or other artistic decisions.

One financier did not address the content of the production, which made it impossible to answer the questions in the questionnaire. According to that respondent, creative control is always in the hands of the production crew. Other financiers \( (n = 2) \) had an external pool or panel that evaluates the content of the project and at times could be anonymous. For them, film and television fiction might therefore be purely a financial investment. A financier could also be prohibited from responding, as discussions related to the project were confidential and the production could not be analysed, even anonymously. A producer, on the other hand, could refuse because of suspicion that the study would present the production in a bad light. However, several financiers \( (n = 5) \) indicated that they were interested in learning the results of the research.

There were other rejections as well. Many would have liked to be helpful to the study but could not remember much about the scenes in question or the making of them. Years later, it was almost impossible for them to recall the thoughts, feelings and discussions associated with the scenes. Another reason for refusing to participate was adjustments to the original script or screenplay. A writer claimed not to be in a position to comment on or analyse scenes in the research material because they had been edited so much by others during the course of the production.

DEMANDS FOR BRUTALIZATION

Within the crime and Nordic noir genres, imagery of mutilated beautiful women is common. During the study, respondents \( (n = 2) \) suggested that there is a growing demand from large, especially international production and streaming companies for more violent scenes. In the words of one interviewee: ‘but probably as a whole, we are going more and more to bringing a director to a ready set […] We have a genre, we have a degree of brutality, here we go’ (Respondent 5). The observation was reinforced in 2022 by a statement from a financier in a Finnish gender equality seminar, which I will return to in the conclusion. The demand for more violence causes filmmakers, either
consciously or unconsciously, to respond by writing, producing and screening an increasing number of brutally violent scenes. In the words of the same interviewee: ‘all effects at maximum, that’s the rule. What I’m interested in is how far can you go?’ (Respondent 5).

The competition for attention has intensified, and thus the stakes are higher. In crime series, this may lead to a continuous escalation in violence. At its worst, the crime genre could be evolving in the direction of a kind of ‘clickbait dramaturgy’, designed to gather clicks on the search engine result. Demand for more violence is a direct continuum from the market earlier created around the dead girl trope, and since the demand is economic, the debate on the justification of the content must also encompass an economic point of view.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

As stated earlier, all nine respondents had two pre-chosen scenes to analyse. Hence, there can be more than nine answers to each question in the questionnaire. The first question concerned the significance of the scene for the plot and the character. In the answers, the respondents emphasized the concepts of a plot device ($n=3$), revelation ($n=3$) and resolution ($n=2$). Asked about the thematic significance of the scene, the answers ($n=10$) focused on loss, grief, the fragility of life, trauma and the erasure of childhood. The themes of parenthood and guilt, unwarranted death, the experience of inequality, the violent deprivation of life, deception and flirting with death were also mentioned. The third question asked whether an alternative to this scene had been considered at some point in the production. If so, what were the alternative solutions? How did the respondent feel about the options?

In the light of the answers given, alternative scenes were not considered ($n=9$). Respondents stated that they did not remember any options for the scene or did not recall the crew talking about options. One respondent did not contemplate an alternative to the crime story scene. One was not involved in the discussions and another did not take part in the decision-making process. According to one answer, it was obvious that they were not involved in the discussions. One respondent stated that there was no discussion, while another answered that the question was a bit difficult to understand, since early on it was clear that this was the crime under investigation in the show. Asked what led to the abandonment of alternative solutions, respondents stated that they did not remember talking about options or that nothing was abandoned ($n=2$). When asked whose perspective there was in the scene in question, the answers were that it was the criminal investigator’s ($n=4$), the victim’s ($n=6$), the perpetrator’s ($n=3$) and the viewer’s ($n=1$). It was striking that concerning the same scene, a female screenwriter identified the perspective as the victim’s, while a male screenwriter answered that the perspective was the perpetrator’s.

Unless they were the screenwriter, the respondents were asked to describe how they felt when reading the scene from the script. What emotions did they notice in themselves, and what emotions surfaced during the reading? The respondents ($n=4$) felt fury, surprise, disbelief; the scenes were distressing and disturbing, humiliating and horrible. The respondents were shocked and the reading had brought horrendous images to mind. At the same time, the scenes aroused curiosity in one respondent. One respondent was unwilling or perhaps unable to read dramaturgically and use emotion as a tool in...
assessing the quality of the script during the first reading, stating instead that it was important to make a rational decision in evaluating the events in the scene to make sure they fit within the storyline. However, most respondents (\(n = 5\)) read the script from a technical point of view. It was crucial to pinpoint the production schedule and cost-related problems from the get-go, and for this reason, identification or an emotional response to the script was uncommon at the first reading.

The data show that respondents aimed to arouse grief (\(n = 3\)) and empathy in the viewer to evoke identification both with the victim (\(n = 3\)) and in some way with the perpetrator (\(n = 2\)). The respondents also wanted the viewer to feel the same emotions as the perspective character, i.e. the forensic investigator (\(n = 3\)). The respondents were asked to describe the feelings and thoughts that writing, directing or the shooting the scene evoked in them. One screenwriter identified with the protagonist while writing, while another writer felt empathy for the victim but understood the scene from the perpetrator’s perspective as well.

On a film set, strong identification with the fate of the victim was also observed (\(n = 1\)). The director also felt compassion for the actor playing the perpetrator, since he perhaps needed to explore his own dark side to portray the character convincingly (\(n = 1\)). Doing a scene could also arouse positive emotions such as gratitude and relief, or even situational comedy when dissecting a scene into smaller parts (\(n = 2\)). According to the interviews, the director’s feelings were often shaped by interacting with the actor (\(n = 3\)). The directors knew the take was good when their feelings took over (\(n = 3\)). On the other hand, the director sometimes had to support the emotions of the entire crew to maintain the mood when moving to another location or scheduled time (\(n = 2\)). At other times, building a scene was solely a technical task, so shots of the victim did not evoke feelings at all (\(n = 5\)). Scenes where the victim was dead did not require as much emotional effort. Surprisingly, many (\(n = 6\)) of the answers, written or oral, prompted a sense of participating in a laboratory experiment where an interesting phenomenon was being described from the outside. The filmmakers did not express emotion, but rather their attention shifted to the implementation of technical details.

In a professional setting, film scenes involving violence should be carefully coordinated to ensure that actors and other crew members are safe, physically and emotionally. However, the discussion of intimacy coordination on film sets did not begin in Finland until 2018, when Saara Kotkaniemi conducted a survey on the topic, which then led to an instruction manual on the same matter (Kotkaniemi 2020). Before 2018, attention to the safety of the film crew was highly dependent on the wakefulness of the director and producer. As my interviews established, responsibility for intimacy coordination has sometimes been in the hands of the costume designer or make-up artist (\(n = 2\)).

Filming a violent scene may be a distressing situation for the entire crew (\(n = 1\)). Actors must focus intensely to perform the scene and sometimes experienced stress, as one actor explained:

I had never in my life felt anxiety after doing any scenes – I don’t normally carry my character’s burden – but after this scene, I was anxious afterward. I remember somehow I didn’t sleep well, and I had a shaky feeling long after.

(Respondent 1)
One crew member stated that as a rule, the set is closed when violence or rape scenes are being filmed. During such takes, crew members nevertheless tended to gravitate towards the set or the monitor out of sheer curiosity, but due to the delicate nature of violent scenes, those not directly involved were always cleared off the set. The crew member recalled: ‘and then the director shouts: “Feeling, feeling, feeling, feeling! Close-ups and strong emotions!”’ (Respondent 2). According to two respondents, often the primary task of the head of department (HOD) is to support the feelings of other crew members. Intuitive sensitivity is required although the decisions may be purely technical.

Asked if their dramaturgical or content-related decisions about the scene were based on their emotions, the majority of writers answered that decisions were based on the joint writing process \((n = 6)\). One response emphasized the world-view of the writer. The director is faithful to the script and decisions are based on it \((n = 2)\) or on discussions with the actors and the producer \((n = 2)\). Improvisation was also used on the set for decision-making \((n = 1)\). Aptly, a sound designer based decisions purely on emotion. One actor had not taken part in decision-making at all. A producer’s decisions always mirrored the ethical standards of the production company but could not do so before the raw-cut stage. A financier explained that decisions are in the hands of the production companies.

EMOTIONS AND IDENTIFICATION

According to Jennifer Lerner et al., emotions are the most important driving factors in decision-making when arriving at important conclusions. Decisions are made in part based on what the decision-maker thinks about the object, but are also heavily based on what the object makes them feel (2015: 801). Emotions operate on both a conscious and an unconscious level and can be used, as philosopher David Hume argued, as useful signposts (see Schmitter 2021). As a counterargument, it can be said that emotions also obscure decision-making, for example in a person who is afraid of flying. However, emotions move from one situation to another and affect new situations that in fact are not related to the original one. Such feelings are usually unconscious and can influence attitudes, for example, prejudices (Lerner et al. 2015: 803).

Research has confirmed that emotional events are remembered more accurately, clearly and for longer time periods than are neutral events (e.g. Kensinger 2009). Controlling and suppressing emotions quickly turns against itself: it makes a repressed emotion even more intense. Attempts to avoid a particular emotion certainly reduce and curb outwardly visible emotional expression, but have no effect on the subjective experience of that emotion. As Lerner et al. argue, suppression of emotions is especially detrimental cognitively, as it cripples memory and prevents a detailed recollection of the event that triggered the emotion (2015: 812).

It is impossible to determine, based on the data, whether the emotions of respondents in my study were conscious or subconscious and why they were somewhat superficially reported. Given the significance of emotional response established in previous research and the extraordinarily brutal violence in my research material, it was remarkable that a large subset of respondents answered that they did not remember what they felt or thought while making the scenes. In the words of one participant: ‘It is impossible for me to recall any thoughts, feelings or discussions about the scene and how it was executed’ (Respondent 3).
Although other respondents did feel strongly distressed about the violent fictional material, the majority did not base their decisions on emotions but instead took a technical approach to the written material. Several respondents reported identification with either the protagonist, the victim or the perpetrator, but the scenes in which the victim was dead often did not evoke feelings at all. On the set, emotions such as compassion, gratitude and amusement were also reported. It nevertheless seems that the majority of the respondents answered the enquiry about their emotions from the rear-view mirror perspective. They did not refer to their initial emotions, but rather analysed the emotions that were aroused after the writing or filming of the scene.

Based on my data, women and men have somewhat different ways of looking at and identifying with the characters in scenes of violence. According to one respondent, different sexes have different objects of identification in violent scenes. Being subjected to violence with sexual overtones is not a real fear for most men, so the representation of such violence does not trigger a man to identify with a female victim. Another interviewee stated that at some point in her life, every woman is afraid of being physically abused or raped. Therefore, a woman does not have to look very far to be able to identify with a fictional victim. A third interviewee wondered why many men do not realize that the victim is more than just an image – that she represents an actual victim. This phenomenon of non-identification is reminiscent of many theories and theorists of Otherness and reproduction, from Plato, Levinas, Hegel, Heidegger, de Beauvoir and Sartre to Lacan and later theorists (see Pelt 2000; Kovacs 2017).

My study’s source material presents thematically challenging but important issues that can be examined from a socio-moral point of view. These include sexual exploitation of children, human trafficking and other crimes. The respondents addressed these themes from a heterogeneous, Othering perspective. In the interviews, Othering is linked to a lack of empathy. It emerges in particular if characters are children; if there is no empathy even for abused minors, it is unlikely to be expressed for adult women. A male respondent identified with a male character in one fictional scene as well as a little boy in another. A violent, sexually explicit act committed on the boy in that scene triggered immense anxiety, while an equally brutal sexual offense against a minor girl did not evoke any feelings in the same respondent. Another male respondent stated that he might have been experiencing cognitive dissonance, a kind of mental ‘airbag’, while discussing a gendered violent scene with other decision-makers; he might not have seen the brutality of the violence at that time.

According to the respondents, the inclusion of acts of violence was never questioned, in part because they were perceived as motivated by the plot or story. Several respondents stated that violence can be justified even when the scene displays acts of humiliation and cruelty towards the victim. However, the justification of violent scenes sparked discussion on several occasions during the interviews. Only in recent years has VAW in audio-visual fiction or the process of making it been a topic of public debate in Finland. Only now have many respondents taken note of it. A female respondent nevertheless believed that accusations and conflict when discussing the issue were not productive:

I too have experienced this in the past, I’m sure we have all grown up with it and got used to it along the way and considered it normal. Yet I believe that now men’s eyes are just as open as women’s. But now they
are afraid that they’ll be crucified, and I do not think that’s the best way forward.

(Respondent 4)

This respondent believed she was also a part of the problem by supporting structures that subjugate women, and that neither sex has examined or recognized these structures. Changing the culture of VAW is only just beginning. Yet, according to another respondent, even women consider VAW in fiction the norm. Ultimately one can only change one’s own views, not those of others. The interviewee had never questioned violent scenes in the past but now sees them from a different perspective: ‘it’s really sick what is being done to us all the time and what is considered normal and how this is normalized for the viewer’ (Respondent 1).

One of the most significant results of the study was that, based on the response data, no alternative narrative solutions were ever considered for scenes containing violence. In the answers, none of the respondents addressed this question; they either did not remember, skipped the question or did not understand it. None of the respondents questioned or wondered why the battered or dead young woman was part of the story. No one remembered or reported whose initiative it was. Only one respondent cited the world-view of the writer. According to the answers, the financiers or producers did not make the dramatic decisions either. Their role was not to address the drama content, make artistic decisions or approve drafts of the script, since according to the data, creative control is always in the hands of the production crew. The decision-making was externalized to a pool or a panel that in turn could be anonymous.

Another important question was the extent to which each professional group has decision-making power in substantive matters. A significant finding was that the respondents’ choices almost always were determined by some previously set constraint. Drama scripts take on a life of their own, evolve significantly throughout the production cycle and are oftentimes treated as raw material. Screenwriters may not be able to recall how much of the material they produced was included in the final script, filmed and eventually screened and how much of it was removed from the script or ended up on the cutting room floor. As a result, the individual(s) who made crucial decisions on the storyline, the themes and the genre is nowhere to be found.

At the beginning of the study, when it became clear that there would be relatively few responses to the invitation and many rejections, it became necessary to consider the importance of the researcher’s emotional reactions in the research process. During the interviews, the discretion of the interviewees, their obvious detachment and in some cases, their exaggerated formality were palpable. In the form of a question, I presented a hypothesis to an interviewee as to why there were so many screenwriters, directors and financiers who had declined the interview invitation. Is it possible that this could be because they did not see the legitimacy of discussing the material at hand? The interviewee answered that he believed fear motivated the rejections, the fear of being held accountable. Divulging such information might lead to accusations of wrongdoing. As a result of many polite but unequivocal rejections, I myself developed a visceral, unexplained fear, perhaps of violence or possibly professional suicide. I had a strong feeling that I was in danger. The feeling was by no means diminished by weeks of viewing brutal fictional material. The horrendous scenes appeared in my dreams and clearly influenced my waking mood. In each scene, the prevalent decision to crop and fade out the identity
of the rapist(s) or perpetrator(s) into a faceless or anonymous character did not reduce the sense of danger I experienced during the process.

Developing a sense of fear was also influenced by each respondent’s state of mind: some were themselves fearful, some were contemptuous, some even aggressive. In the words of my research mentor Taru Mäkelä: ‘Here we are, briskly marching on the minefield of emotions.’ Many respondents did not have a say in finding solutions or creating themes for a single scene. Nonetheless, the most crippling effect from a research perspective was that the key decision-makers generally did not respond to the survey or interview invitation whatsoever. Their silence was deafening.

THE DEAD GIRL TROPE

As the research progressed, I began to contemplate if the sacrifice of a young woman could function on a mythical level. I posed the questions: why isn’t a young man interesting as a victim, and why is the victimization of men different from that of women? Could there be a biological cause, a psychological strategy for the survival of the human species? One interviewee responded to my reflection: ‘You mean beyond the erotic? Well, I’d put a lot of weight on the erotic aspect. This may sound cynical, but as long as those half-naked or naked bodies of young women can be scattered everywhere [...]’ (Respondent 5).

In her master’s thesis, Siiri Raja-Aho examines three TV series in which a female detective investigates crimes motivated by misogyny. She explores how representations of femininity appear in patriarchal conventions that put women in a secondary position and maintain traditional gender roles in the media. Raja-Aho introduces the dead girl trope, of which one famous example in television history is Laura Palmer in Twin Peaks (1990–91). According to Raja-Aho, understanding death is always a cultural construction and can only be exhibited through representation (2017: 7). Citing Karl S. Guthke, who has studied representations of death, she points out that although such depictions historically have included both men and women, female representations have become significantly more common from the nineteenth century onward (2017: 5–6). Graphic, sometimes eroticized descriptions of murdered female bodies were often exploited for financial gain in the penny press and were also found in early crime reports used as evidence (2017: 7). The dead girl trope thus has a long history in both fiction and non-fiction texts.

Raja-Aho notes that the representation of the death of a woman brings different meanings to fiction than the death of a man, which is seldom aestheticized (2017: 42). There are two common motives for a woman’s demise: it is the inevitable fate of a fallen woman – the wages of sin – or alternatively, the exalted culmination of virtue – the victim is too good for this world (2017a: 4). Violence against a woman is therefore often justified on completely different grounds than violence against a man. The dead girl trope thus represents a very common and traditional theme not only in Finland, but in the western culture of portraying death as entertainment. Moreover, the death of a beautiful woman often functions as a poetic structure in fiction, in which case it can be a starting point for the story (Raja-Aho 2017: 4).

UNDERSTANDING THE PERPETRATOR

As a rule, the respondents wanted to evoke grief and pity for the victim, but also for the perpetrator. This phenomenon is also seen as a kind of distancing, using cinematographic techniques and editing. For example, rapists are shown...
in several scenes only from the waist or chest down, i.e. their faces cannot be
seen. Because the perpetrator seems anonymous, his individual responsibility
for the violent act is reduced. Perhaps filmmakers do not want to personify
evil, but this practice can also be interpreted as a form of Othering. Many of
the respondents’ answers sought to link the themes in the material to a tradi-
tional mode of understanding. An understanding, even justification of acts of
violence is promoted by connecting them to something that happened to the
perpetrator in the past, perhaps in childhood. This is the neutralization strat-
egy coined by Anna Pitkämäki, who examines how the meaning of violence
in films reproduces thought patterns that belittle and tolerate violence (2017a:
28). Pitkämäki sheds light on how a culture of violence in Finland is a legacy
of war that now collides with the values of consumerism, and how this deter-
mines what and by whom violence is perceived as a social problem. Culture
determines what kind of violence can be talked about and what kind of

Established practices and institutions in Finland are dominated by a mind-
set that seeks to understand the perpetrator. The mindset rationalizes violence
and ignores the victim’s perspective. According to Pitkämäki, vulnerability
and weakness are a source of shame in Finnish culture and colour atti-
dudes towards victims of violence. Television entertainment programmes and
tabl oid newspapers reinforce this attitude with their ‘survivor’ reality shows
and humiliating headlines (2017a: 32). Identifying and understanding vulner-
abilities are not a priority in Finnish culture, and thus there is more focus on
self-protection than on developing empathy or a willingness to help victims.
Instead of holding the perpetrator accountable or forcing him to cease his acts
of violence, Finnish culture transfers the responsibility for ending violence to
the victim. Consequently, the responsibility for safety also falls to the victim
(Pitkämäki 2017a: 32). On the other hand, according to Anu Koivunen et al.,
vulnerability can also be a troubling concept. There is always a risk associ-
ated with highlighting the vulnerability of women, since this can reinforce the
perception that women lack agency. The discussion of vulnerability can thus
support misogynist and paternalistic agendas (Koivunen et al. 2018: 5).

Pitkämäki suggests that shifting the responsibility to the victim also affects
our attitude towards the perpetrator. There are two approaches: in the first, the
perpetrator is pathologized and condemned to his violent fate. Perpetrators
have personality disorders or are marginalized individuals for whom noth-
ing can be done beyond isolating them from others. Pitkämäki calls this a
marginalization strategy (2017a: 32–33). Another strategy is to normalize acts
of violence and interpret them as part of ordinary human interaction. In this
case, engaging in violence can be possible for anyone. Violence is then a misun-
derstanding, an overreaction or just a coincidence. The strategy discards both
the perpetrator’s agency and his connection to the deed, and thus he escapes
responsibility. Pitkämäki calls this the neutralization strategy (2017a: 32–33).
One course of action is to blame the victim. Since the early twentieth century,
viole n towards women in film has often been seen as punishment for their
blameworthy, usually sexual behaviour. These strategies create a picture of
violence as a normal interaction between people (2017a: 50–51).

CONCLUSION

Representing fictional violence normalizes real-life violence. The imagery
we present greatly influences what people think and feel about themselves
and the world. In an article about gendered violence in selected Nordic films, Pitkämäki draws on Teresa de Lauretis’s idea of film as a medium that shapes the viewer’s way of perceiving themselves. Film can also be considered a social technology that influences a person’s perception of others and social relationships among people in general (Pitkämäki 2017b: 28). According to Arto Jokinen, although the harmful effects of violent entertainment are a topic of discussion, it has not yet been suggested that it is about violence directed at viewers by television and film production or distribution companies with the aim of economic gain. Perhaps in the future, makers and distributors of violent material will be held liable in the same way as tobacco companies and be required to compensate the state for the economic benefits they receive from spreading violence, as Jokinen suggests (2000: 18).

Timo Argillander, the managing partner and co-founder of IPR.VC, a private equity investor in the Finnish AV industry, stated in a Finnish gender equality seminar held by Aalto University in 2022 that in the Nordic countries, ethical and socially sustainable AV productions are bit by bit making headway. The problem lies in the big AV production buyers and streaming companies in international markets. The buyers and streaming companies are not interested in more gender-equal content. As Argillander emphasized, the buyers are ‘mainly old-school men’. Nonetheless, in his talk, Argillander challenges the buyers to make more gender-neutral decisions (2022: n.pag.).

There is still a need to critically examine and bring into discussion, especially from a gendered perspective, the impact of television and film narratives on viewers and how fiction may have a devastating effect on the social climate and societal debate. Is it possible to make AV fiction without VAW, without rape, without a dead, naked woman lying on the seashore? In the light of my interview material, the decision-making process concerning the subject matter, theme and plot in AV fiction productions cannot be pinpointed. Further research is needed on how content-related decision-making actually takes place and if there really is a growing demand from production and streaming companies, as well as buyers, for more violent scenes.

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