

Verbal, Emotional and Psychological Violence as an Expression of Hegemonic Masculinity

Cinematic Representations of Its Cultural Roots and Communicative Actions

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Abstract

Gender-based violence could be analyzed as strictly connected to hegemonic masculinity because it originates from a power inequality between the genders advanced and legitimated by patriarchal cultural systems based on male dominance and female subjugation. Moreover, the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representations. The perception of gender differences and the related constructs of violence that can result from them are not only reflected but also shaped by audiovisual representations. Starting from this framework, to investigate the relationship between media and cultural roots of gender-based violence within heterosexual couples, we analyze eleven international films and show how verbal, emotional and psychological violence is thematized and conveyed as an expression of hegemonic masculinity. In particular, we focus on work devaluation, gaslighting, and body control, highlighting their socio-cultural foundations and the communicative actions men implement in order to assert their hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: Gender-based violence; hegemonic masculinity; audiovisual representations; gaslighting; work devaluation; body control.

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1. Introduction

The increasing attention to *Intimate Partner Violence* (IPV) is motivated by several international statistics and reports that identify mistreatments within the couple as the most prevalent form of male violence against women

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and gender-based violence. For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report¹ notes that nearly 18 percent of women aged 15-49, and in a relationship, have experienced physical or sexual violence by their partner in the previous 12 months. The figure rises to 30 percent when considering violence by a partner during women's lifetimes. Moreover, more than one-third of female homicide victims are intentionally killed by a current or former partner: in 2022, approximately 48,800 women and girls worldwide were killed by their intimate partners or other family members (including fathers, mothers, uncles, and brothers)².

With gender-based violence, we refer to a very heterogeneous set of forms of violence, within intimate relationships but not only there, mainly enacted by men against women, *because they are women* and belong to the female gender³: sexual violence, beatings and physical abuse, verbal violence and psychological abuse, gaslighting, economic violence, stalking, homicide, etc. Moreover, within couples, gender-based violence is often like a continuum: it can take different forms within a cycle of violence⁴ and sometimes end with a *femicide*. Domestic violence is a complex phenomenon⁵, which can also affect men, children, same-sex couples, bisexual, non-binary and trans individuals, with different and interlaced causes (cultural, psychological, economic, historical, etc.). According to Gender Studies and feminist approaches, and recently confirmed by the Council of Europe 'Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' (2011) and the EU Directive 2024/1385, gender-based violence in heterosexual couples originates mostly from a power inequality between men and women and heteronormativity, historically created, still reproduced and legitimated by patriarchal cultural systems based on male dominance and female subjugation⁶. This hierarchical relationship is learned in the process of socialization and perpetrated on a social and cultural basis, according to a social construction of differences in which hegemonic masculinity is charac-

¹ United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*, New York: United Nations, 2019.

² UNODC & UN Women, *Gender-related Killings of Women and Girls (Femicide/Femicide)*, UNODC Research, 2023.

³ D.E.H. Russell, *The Politics of Rape: The Victim's Perspective*, New York: Stein and Day, 1974; D.E.H. Russell, R.A. Harnes, *Femicide in Global Perspective*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

⁴ L.E. Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome*, New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

⁵ T.K. Schackelford, *The SAGE Handbook of Domestic Violence*, London: Sage Publications, 2020.

⁶ F. Héritier, *Masculin-féminin II. Dissoudre la hiérarchie*, Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 2002; J. Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1994.

terized by expectations of self-control, rationality, autonomy, assertiveness, aggressiveness, force, virility, and power in public space⁷. However, gender dichotomy and hierarchy can also be negotiated and deconstructed by individuals in social practices, *done and undone* in interactions, problematizing also the distinction between biological sexes and socially constructed genders, and the theories of biological determinism too⁸. Moreover, the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representations⁹: in this sense, for instance, the perception of gender differences, and the related constructs of violence that can result from them, are not only *reflected* but also *shaped* by audiovisual representations.

In order to investigate the relationship between media and cultural roots of gender-based violence, the aim of this paper is to observe whether and how, in the audiovisual representations of gender violence in intimate communication, male violence on women is thematized as an expression of the hegemonic masculinity model described above. To achieve this goal, we analyze some films that depict IPV, specifically verbal, emotional and psychological violence, and observe whether mistreatments perpetrated by men are indeed significant tools for asserting their own dominance if women do not conform to certain gender roles, and in which ways this pattern is expressed and carried out in husband-wife interactions. In the first section, we present the recent debate on hegemonic masculinity, conceived mainly as a product of the social construction of gender differences and hierarchies enhanced by patriarchy; then, we shed light on the problematization of this masculinity model and on the possibilities of its negotiation in social practices. On these (de)constructionist premises, the second section deals with the connections between gender-based violence and hegemonic masculinity: in particular, we explore ways in which IPV *does* this kind of masculinity and becomes a possible form of performing it, in order to maintain or (re)gain power. In the third section, we turn to a reflection on how gender differences, roles and violence are reflected, but also shaped, by audiovisual representations. The fourth section is a description of the objectives and methods of our study, which examines media representations of the cultural roots of hegemonic

⁷ R. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995; M. Kimmel, ed., *The Politics of Manhood*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

⁸ J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York-London: Routledge, 2004; R. Connell, *Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009; J. Lorber, *Breaking the Bowls. Degendering and Feminist Change*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005; C. West, D.H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender", *Gender and Society*, 1, 2 (1987): 125-151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>.

⁹ T. de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989.

masculinity and focuses on eleven films that depict verbal, emotional, and psychological violence perpetrated by men against women. In the fifth section, we explain that we chose to examine this kind of violence because recent international statistics highlight its increasing importance, alongside physical and sexual violence. The next three sections present a detailed analysis of the selected films, particularly focused on three dimensions IPV: work devaluation, mental manipulation, and body control of their partner. In the last section, we attempt to draw some conclusions by connecting the result of our analysis with the theoretical background previously illustrated.

2. On hegemonic masculinity

Assuming that gender-based violence reflects the asymmetry of power perpetrated by differentiated gender roles, it is possible to detect a connection between male violence on women and the expression of hegemonic masculinity.

As de Beauvoir argued¹⁰, *women are not born, however they become*: similarly, *men are not born, however they become* by following invisible social expectations that dictate how a man, in order to be recognized as such, should move, speak, dress, and act in a public space. Specifically, rationality, self-control, aggressiveness, force, virility, heterosexuality, honor, and respectability are the main features of the hegemonic masculinity enhanced and reproduced by the patriarchal gender order¹¹. The heterosexual regime can contribute to the formation of hegemonic masculinities, which reinforce each other, especially in homosocial environments, in which expectations with respect to masculine behaviors are manifested¹². However, studies of masculinity demonstrate a crisis in the imposition of the hegemonic masculinity model, which is currently visible across digital spaces too¹³. As is well known, a reflection on the gender roles imposed on men became structured between the 1970s and the 1980s, and became outlined in the 1990s. While a detailed reconstruction of the path to conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity is systematized in Messerschmidt¹⁴, Men's Studies highlight how

¹⁰ S. de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949.

¹¹ Connell, *Masculinities*.

¹² V. Fidolini, *Fai l'uomo! Come l'eterosessualità produce le maschilità*, Milan: Melt-emi, 2019.

¹³ A. Capalbi, a cura di, *Rileggere Raewyn Connell. Le costruzioni culturali del maschile nel mondo digitale*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2024.

¹⁴ J.W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation and Am-*

masculine identities can be multiple¹⁵ and how masculinities are practices that are *realized* in social action¹⁶. Specifically, ever since it was formulated, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been the subject of discussion; by rejecting its essentialist¹⁷ and heteronormative¹⁸ dimensions, focusing on the role of the body in the processes of masculinity construction¹⁹, the concept has been reframed²⁰ by configuring masculinities as practices that are realized in social action, thus recognizing the historicity of masculine gender²¹. This is why masculinity and femininity become gender projects, and hegemonic masculinity constitutes for many the ideal and normative model, always negotiated through social praxis. At the same time, even men who do not openly adhere to hegemonic masculinity can earn a patriarchal dividend from this model. Likewise, normative masculinity, as a socially established standard, turns out to be the criterion for establishing the deviance and/or normality of practices performed by men²². Since it is taken for granted, hegemonic masculinity is often normalized and perceived as neutral, objective, and universal. Stepping out of the androcentric bias becomes crucial for better understanding the constructs of gender-based violence and its connections with hegemonic masculinity.

3. Gender-based violence and hegemonic masculinity

Kimmel²³ argues that hegemonic masculinity is rooted in a gender culture that constructs women as a men's property and male violence as a right, accomplished to assert men's power when it is perceived as threatened.

plification, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

¹⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*.

¹⁶ R. Connell, J.W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender and Society*, 19, 6 (2005): 829-859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

¹⁷ A. Peterson, *Unmasking the Masculine: "Men" and "Identity" in a Sceptical Age*, London: Sage, 1998; A. Peterson, "Research on Men and Masculinities: Some Implications of Recent Theory for Future Work", *Men and Masculinities*, 6, 1 (2003): 54-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X022508>;

¹⁸ M. Hawkesworth, "Confounding Gender", *Signs*, 22, 3 (1997): 649-685. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495188>.

¹⁹ M.A. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*, Boston: Beacon, 1992.

²⁰ Connell, Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept".

²¹ D.Z. Demetriou, "Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique", *Theory and Society*, 30, 3 (2001): 337-361. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017596718715>.

²² M. Kimmel, ed., *The Politics of Manhood*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

²³ M. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Violence can be an active means of *making* masculinity in a context where there is a twisting of the traditional gender order due to migration, change, or women's struggles²⁴. In this sense, the central core of violence in the sphere of intimate relationships originates in the structural inequality between men and women, in the hierarchy of values between male and female, and in heteronormativity, understood as the set of cultural constraints that shape individual identity. Moreover, the roots of violence are linked to expectations about male and female behavior in couple relationships, but according to Connell²⁵, hegemonic masculinity is constructed also in relation with various subordinate masculinities.

Therefore, we can interpret gender-based violence as a way of reproducing and normalizing the hierarchical gender order by performing forms of hegemonic masculinity. Hence, male violence in couple relationships could be linkable to an expression of hegemonic masculinity when aimed at maintaining the dominant gender order. This is why male violence on women is structured according to what Kaufman²⁶ calls *the seven P's* that characterize the behavior of perpetrators: Patriarchal Power, The Sense of Entitlement to Privilege, Permission, the Paradox of Men's Power, the male Psychic armor of Manhood, Masculinity as a Psychic Pressure Cooker, Past experiences. The seven P's identified by Kaufman explicitly emphasize the connection between gender violence and the social construction of hegemonic masculinity.

4. Representing gender-based violence

While this article adopts a distinctly (de)constructivist approach in analyzing the cinematic representation of gender-based violence, it is useful to underline the existence of other theoretical frameworks. Evolutionary perspectives, for instance, interpret aggression and partner control as outcomes of adaptive strategies or dynamics of sexual selection²⁷. Likewise, moral philosophy examines gendered violence as a violation of fundamental ethical principles, foregrounding questions of responsibility, dignity, and personal

²⁴ R. Connell, *Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

²⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*.

²⁶ This article is available in many languages at www.michaelkaufman.com.

²⁷ D.M. Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999; R. Thornhill, C.T. Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*, MIT Press, 2000.

autonomy²⁸. Finally, several sociological traditions not oriented toward deconstructivist inquiry – such as structural-functionalist and criminological approaches – situate violence within broader social frameworks, from family role dynamics to empirical ecological models²⁹.

Based on a deconstructivist approach, according to Kimmel³⁰, gender is rarely thematized in the frame of media discourse related to men's violence, because of the supposed neutrality and naturality of the hegemonic masculinity model. Referring to gender in the analysis of constructs of violence becomes crucial to understanding that violence sometimes can be a tool for reproducing the traditional gender order and perpetuating the resulting asymmetry of power. Assuming that the construction of gender is both *the product* and *the process* of its representations³¹, the perception of gender differences, and the constructs of violence that can originate from them, as already introduced are not only reflected but also shaped by audiovisual representations. Gender, too, both as representation and self-representation, is the product of several technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life. Furthermore, the circuit of visual representation not only delivers cultural meanings recognized very differently by the users of a specific visual product, but is also part of the process of building those meanings. According to Floch³², images are never neutral and they have the power to immediately (re)enforce cultural meanings. Indeed, in a context characterized by an increasing use of images, our thinking begins to be visually influenced. Therefore, we are also the images we see and audiovisual representations play an important role in the process of socially constructing meaning, narratives, and identities of gender, ethnicity, generation, and social class³³.

This is why audiovisual representations can be a research object for identifying connections between the social construction of gender roles and violence³⁴. The issue of the representation of gender-based violence appears

²⁸ M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, 2001; T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

²⁹ R.F. Bales, T. Parsons, *Family: Socialization and Interaction Process*, London: Routledge, 1956; L.L. Heise, "Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework", *Violence Against Women*, 4, 3 (1998): 262-290.

³⁰ M. Kimmel, "Invisible Masculinity", *Society*, 30, 6 (1993): 28-35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02700272>.

³¹ de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*.

³² J.-M. Floch, *Identités visuelles*, Paris: PUF, 1995.

³³ A.L. Tota, *Genere e media. Verso un immaginario sostenibile*, Milan: Meltemi, 2008.

³⁴ E. Giomi, S. Magaraggia, *Male and Female Violence in Popular Media*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2022.

to be very present in the international debate: it has been for a long time³⁵ especially with reference to the media sphere in general³⁶, less so in the cinematic sphere³⁷. Assuming that gender and violence *do each other*, that is they are mutually constitutive, it is interesting to observe how gendered forms of violence are represented³⁸, considering also the potential impact on the audience in terms of identity construction, attitude and behavior.

5. Objectives and methods

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to examine whether in media representations of violent behavior in heterosexual couples, male violence can be considered as an expression of the hegemonic masculinity model. Specifically, the aim of the paper is to analyze a selection of films that represent IPV and to observe whether and how acts of verbal, emotional and psychological violence perpetrated by men turn out to be a means for asserting their own gender dominance, especially when women do not conform to gender expectations. To achieve this goal, we selected the following eleven films for analysis (in order by year of production): *Gaslight* (G. Cukor, 1944), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (J. Ruben, 1991), *Enough* (M. Apted, 2002), *Primo amore* (M. Garrone, 2004), *Big Eyes* (T. Burton, 2014), *L'amore rubato* (I. Braschi, 2016), *The Girl on the Train* (T. Taylor, 2016), *The Wife* (B. Runge, 2017),

³⁵ F. Alexander, K. Throsby, *Gender and Interpersonal Violence: Language, Action and Representation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; P.R. Gilbert, "Discourses of Female Violence and Societal Gender Stereotypes", *Violence against Women*, 8, 11 (2002): 1271-1300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780102762478019>; L.J. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories*, New York, Routledge, 2012.; D. Shoos, "Representing Domestic Violence: Ambivalence and Difference in 'What's Love Got to Do with It'", *NWSA Journal*, 15, 2 (2003): 57-77. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2003.0070>.

³⁶ N. Berns, *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media and Social Problem*, New York: Aldine Transaction, 2004; K. Boyle, *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates*, London: Sage, 2005; K.E. Carlyle, M.D. Slater, J.L. Chakroff, "Newspaper Coverage of Intimate Partner Violence: Skewing Representations of Risk", *Journal of Communication*, 58 (2008): 168-186. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00379.x>; P. Eastal, K. Holland, A. McCormack, K. Pirkis, G. Sutherland, C. Vaughan, "Media Representations of Violence Against Women and Their Children: State of Knowledge Paper", *ANROWS Landscapes*, 15 (2015): 1-57; C.M. Liebler, A. Hatef, G. Munno, "Domestic Violence as Entertainment: Gender, Role Congruity and Reality Television", *Media Report to Women*, 44, 1 (2016): 6-20.

³⁷ A. Burfoot, S. Lord, eds., *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006; D. Clarke, *Women and Death in Film, Television and New: Dead but Not Gone*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; D. Shoos, *Domestic Violence in Hollywood Film*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

³⁸ Boyle, *Media and Violence*; Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*.

Jusqu'à la garde (X. Legrand, 2017), *Colette* (W. Westmoreland, 2018), and *The Invisible Man* (L. Whannell, 2020). These include one French film, two Italian films, and eight from the Anglo-American area, produced between 1944 and 2020. These movies can be considered representative of films that narrate the specific phenomenon investigated in this article; they are not representative of all movies that show male violence against women in or outside the couple. We considered these films as particularly significant because, although they belong to different contexts and historical eras, they present some common traits in their representation of verbal, psychological and emotional violence. These traits turn out to be connected to the patriarchal substratum that permeates all the representations examined, which highlights great pervasiveness. Although they are related to different contexts of production, distribution and fruition, at the same time these movies are related to a wide cultural area, which is the Western one. While this may represent a limitation in the analysis, as it does not investigate cinematic representations linked to other cultural areas, it is nevertheless interesting to note that these films thematise and convey certain dynamics in a similar way, even though they adopt different forms of representation. The selected sample thus confirms the pervasiveness, transversality and rigidity of certain patriarchal structures in the Western culture, which inform the representations examined, after being selected for this reason as the object of our research.

In regard to the representation of socio-cultural factors that produce and sometimes openly legitimize violence, our analysis intends to highlight how some dynamics of violence are rooted in a patriarchal socio-cultural system. Specifically, assuming that the construction of gender differences starts from a power asymmetry between men and women, we intend to observe what characteristics are culturally assigned in an *oppositional sense* to men and women³⁹. Moreover, we will highlight how the resulting power inequality between the genders produces situations of violence, which turns out to be a form of expression of the hegemonic masculinity model enacted by male protagonists. In order to do so, we will follow primarily the seven P's theorized by Kaufman, but also studies on *monologue* as the opposite of dialogue⁴⁰. The main features of a monologic communication are control, insensitivity and negative judgments towards the interlocutor: therefore, in

³⁹ R. Wilk, *Economies and Cultures. Foundations of Economic Anthropology*, Cambridge: Taylor & Francis, 1996.

⁴⁰ D. Bohm, *On Dialogue*, London: Routledge, 2004; K.J. Gergen, S. McNamee, F.J. Barrett, "Towards Transformative Dialogue", *International Journal of Public Administration*, 24, 7/8 (2001): 697-707. <https://doi.org/10.1081/PAD-100104770>; R. Johannesen, *Ethics in Human Communication*, Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1996; S.W. Littlejohn, "The

a monologue your priority is not listening to other's perspective (viewpoint, feeling, narratives), but rather imposing your own vision as better and true.

6. What kind of violence in the examined films?

In recent times, increasing attention is being paid to physical and sexual violence, especially within the couple, but not only therein. Conversely, verbal, emotional and psychological violence within intimate relationships appears to be perceived and explored less, although it has been recognized as important as sexual and physical violence by the UN since 1993 and has been considered a crime since the previously mentioned Istanbul Convention on gender-based violence, domestic violence and its prevention in 2011. In this regard, we can mention the work edited by Roland Maiuro⁴¹ and certainly that of Marie-France Hirigoyen⁴². Overall, various studies attempt to emphasize the most common manifestations of verbal, emotional, and psychological violence in couples, starting from emotional abuse through verbal humiliation, and moving through mental manipulation or *gaslighting*, to control, isolation, and economic violence, resulting in intimidation and threats, or even in physical or sexual violence, escalating finally to femicide. The relatively low perception of the phenomenon in society is connected with the apparent invisibility of the dynamics of violence, which do not leave clear marks on the body. For this reason, this kind of violence is less reported by victims, due to the fear of not being believed; furthermore, it is less represented in the media, legitimizing the idea that it does not exist or that it is less important than physical violence. On the contrary, international and national statistics⁴³ highlight the incidence of psychological forms of violence against women in intimate communication, carried out by the current partner or a former partner. For this reason, in this article we chose to focus specifically on cinematic

Transcendent Communication Project: Searching for a Practice of Dialogue", *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 21, 3 (2004): 337- 359. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.66>.

⁴¹ R.D. Maiuro, ed., *Perspectives on Verbal and Psychological Abuse*, New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2015.

⁴² M.-F. Hirigoyen, *Le harcèlement moral. La violence perverse au quotidien*, Paris: La Découverte, 1998.

⁴³ M.J. Breiding, J. Chen, M.C. Black, *Intimate Partner Violence in the United States (2010)*, Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Eurostat, FRA, EIGE, *EU Gender-Based Violence Survey. Key Results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024; FRA, *Violence against Women: An EU-Wide Survey*, Wien: FRA, 2014; ISTAT, *Violenza contro le donne: Principali risultati sulle diverse forme di violenza dentro e fuori la famiglia*, Rome: ISTAT, 2014.

representations of verbal, emotional and psychological violence in the couple. We will focus on three specific forms of this violence adopted by men against women: 1) *work devaluation*, 2) *mental manipulation*, 3) *control* of body, actions and agency. We will analyze how these forms of violence are represented and whether and in which ways they express a hegemonic masculinity model, in particular towards female protagonists who do not conform to the prescribed gender roles. We acknowledge that verbal, emotional or psychological abuse can occur in multiple directions within the context of domestic violence, even though structural and systemic phenomenon disproportionately affects women and is perpetrated by men, as mentioned above.

6.1. Work devaluation

Differences between genders, which are constructed on a socio-cultural and patriarchal basis, and the resulting *power nexuses*, constitute the cultural matrix of the forms of violence depicted in the films examined. These films portray situations in which female characters for some reason challenge the traditional gender order. According to Wilk⁴⁴, the differences between genders are structured in a binomial sense, partly due to socio-economic factors. Indeed, until the industrial revolution, in Western culture women were still connected with all those aspects of administration related to the domestic world. With the total outsourcing of all economic activities outside the home and the assignment of them mainly to men, a construction of *gendered oppositional poles* based on inside/outside was immediate. A necessary consequence of this sexual division of work was the attribution to the activities performed outside the home (by men) of characteristics related to logical-rational reasoning and mental lucidity. Accordingly, all the activities performed in the home (by women), deprived of their economic functions, were related to the private, caring and emotional sphere. Against this backdrop, Wilk⁴⁵ lays out a series of oppositional characteristics that are socially constructed around the following man/woman poles: public/private; economic/family; rational/emotional; mind/body; historical/natural; objective/subjective; science/humanity; economic/sociological science; competitive/educational; independent/dependent. Moving logically from the idea that social organization has transposed this dualism, male labor has been conceived as more connected to the concept of *production* (outside) and female labor

⁴⁴ Wilk, *Economies and Cultures*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

as more connected to the concept of *reproduction* (inside). In this sense, men are the breadwinner, while women are the care-giver. This social construction can be observed in three of the films selected for our examination, specifically in the representation of work devaluation by men over women: *The Wife*, *Colette*, and *Big Eyes*.

In *The Wife*, the protagonist Joan dreams of becoming a writer from the very beginning of the film and ends up becoming the *ghostwriter* of the man she falls in love with, Joe. In fact, Joe is her writing professor and he is a Nobel Prize nominee thanks to his wife's writings, because he himself is not very talented. This disparity in talent turns into *devaluation* in the form of verbal, emotional and psychological violence when Joe becomes aware that Joan is a more gifted writer than he is. Since it cannot be based on the expected structure of gender roles, the couple risks shattering. Above all, Joan's talent risks undermining the model of masculinity that Joe is supposed to embody. "You're going to be a successful writer and I'm going to stay home and correct papers and cook roast potatoes!" (00.01:04), thunders Joe when he threatens to leave Joan: unable to accept her talent and future success, Joe resorts to emotional blackmail in order to put Joan *in her place*. This statement contains the entire patriarchal cultural matrix of job devaluation that will later be portrayed in the film: Joe is unable to accept that gender expectations are not fulfilled in his relationship but, indeed, they are even reversed; so, he asserts his hegemonic masculinity by carrying out monologic actions⁴⁶ against Joan, such as accusations, threats, and rejections. Moreover, in Joe's reaction we can identify some of the 7 P's that, according to Kaufman, characterize the expression of hegemonic masculinity in the behaviors adopted by the perpetrators. Firstly, Joe bases his actions on the privilege due to his masculinity, which gives him permission and the patriarchal power to claim that he must be the successful writer of the couple, the breadwinner. Secondly, in order to save the relationship, Joan agrees to pretend that *he* is the writer and accepts the gender expectations that oblige her to be a mother and wife, but not a writer.

This same pattern is taken up in *Colette*, a film with a French setting in the Belle Époque period that narrates the real-life story of Colette, who was deprived of her literary merits by her husband, Willy. Here, too, the expropriation of talent rests on a socio-cultural construction that seems to legitimize

⁴⁶ E. Rossi, *La violenza verbale, emotiva e psicologica contro le donne nelle relazioni intime. Breve analisi del film Ti do i miei occhi*, in F. Farina, B. Mura, R. Sarti, a cura di, *Guardiamola in faccia. I mille volti della violenza di genere*, Urbino University Press, 2020: 89-101.

it: at several points, the film emphasizes that the fact that Colette is the real author is hardly credible. This is why it is much easier to entrust her with the role of the muse that inspires the main character in the novels (ostensibly) written by her husband. Several passages in the film exemplify the emotional violence Colette suffers, paradoxically presented as an opportunity by her husband. In order, Willy segregates Colette in the house to force her to write for him, convinces her to assume the features of his character, and appropriates the authorship of the work: “Is this it (flipping through the notebook)? Your total output for all these weeks? [...] Are you out of your mind? Do you realize how rare this moment is? When people are begging for more? Here, come with me (taking her by the hand). What would the headmaster do if Claudine had not done her homework?” (00:43.00). In Willy’s behavior, too, we can detect certain aspects that according to Kaufman characterize the behavior of perpetrators. Once again basing his actions on privilege due, permission, and patriarchal power, Willy usurps Colette’s talent in a violent and manipulative manner: in fact, he produces accusations, threats, and rejections, as well as negative judgments, intimidations and orders, as monologic actions aimed at confirming and reinforcing his hegemonic masculinity.

Similar forms of verbal, emotional and psychological violence can be found in *Big Eyes*, which reproduces the same pattern in the pictorial realm: a husband without any talent, Walter, appropriates that of his wife, Margaret, starting a process of psychological violence rooted in a cultural basis. Within the film, the binomial structuring proposed by Wilk⁴⁷ is well represented. Although Margaret deals with the substantial part of the artistic work, she always moves in interior environments; on the other hand, her husband is always represented in contexts outside the domestic one, since he is engaged in promoting the works, which are shown as his own. So, even if Margaret is the artist in charge of the production of the paintings, she is relegated to the domestic context, according to the culturally-based work devaluation that sees women more at ease in domestic settings. This is evidenced by the fact that Margaret is persuaded to collaborate in the lie constructed by Walter because *women’s art does not sell*, reproducing in this way the patriarchal privilege and power identified by Kaufman as underlying certain violent behavior. Moreover, when Margaret refuses to follow her prescribed gender role, Walter performs a series of violent verbal actions (denigrations, humiliations, and death threats) and then sets fire to their house and segregates his wife inside it. Just to give an example, when Margaret threatens to reveal their secret to everyone, Walter reacts with death threats: “If you

⁴⁷ Wilk, *Economies and Cultures*.

tell anyone, I'll have you taken out!" (00:01:02). And before setting fire to their house, he speaks to Margaret using violent words, throwing matches at her, which is why she hides in a room in the house with her daughter: "But I can't sue you, can I? You are the ultimate betrayal! You failed me with that painting! You cross over from sentimentality to kitsch! You like making me look bad! You enjoy people laughing at me? Open up! Open up! (beating at the door)" (00:01:13). This reaction exemplifies well both monologic actions and a few elements underlying perpetrators' behaviors, such as the psychic pressure cooker and psychic armor of manhood mentioned by Kaufman. Walter cannot accept that he is the least talented of the couple. At the same time, because of the patriarchal power and the privilege owed to him as a male, he believes that he deserves artistic success and that he is allowed to act in this way.

To sum up, the labor devaluation suffered by the female protagonists of these three films examined is strictly connected with their segregation, both physical and symbolic, in the dimension of the "inside". This fact is clearly represented in visual terms, too. The female protagonists of the three films are most often represented in domestic contexts. Instead, the male protagonists, though they do not have an active role in the process of artistic production, are systematically depicted in external contexts: *vernissages*, book presentations, theatres. Through this segregation, the female protagonists, although gifted in different fields, end up relegated to the dimension of the inside so as not to compromise their so-called *essential* function, the domestic and reproductive one, and do not undermine the public role of their husbands. Verbal, emotional and psychological violence perpetrated by male partners turn out to be a form of *control* of female partners, in order to prevent their deviation from the prescribed gender roles. Male protagonists act as perpetrators (7 P's), following the gender expectations arising from the hegemonic masculinity model and expressed in husband-wife interactions by the following monologic actions: accusations, threats, and rejections; negative judgments, intimidations, and orders; denigrations, humiliations, and even death threats.

6.2. Mental manipulation

As previously mentioned, a further consequence of the structuring of roles based on the dichotomy between inside and outside has been to associate men with the logical-rational sphere and, conversely, women with feeling, emotionality, and ultimately, instability. This social construction, based stereotypically on the sexual and biological differences between men and

women, has generated a series of very popular and common characterizations⁴⁸. Just to give one example, for a long-time hysteria was thought to be a typically female disease and the word itself derives from the ancient Greek *hystère* meaning “uterus”. According to Wilk⁴⁹, the binomial construction of the characteristics attributed to men and women associates the dimension of mind with men and the dimension of instability, emotionality and body with women. The common conception, built on a socio-cultural basis, that women more often have characteristics related to emotionality, feeling and instability, explains some of the dynamics of violence perpetrated within the couple through a process of psychological manipulation. We can highlight this kind of violence by examining the following films: *Gaslight*, *The Girl on the Train*, *The Invisible Man*. Their analysis also allows us to observe the representation of the phenomenon in a diachronic sense. We start from a very explicit representation of psychological manipulation in *Gaslight*. Indeed, the title of the film has been used to name the practice of *gaslighting*, which consists of questioning a woman’s perceptions to the point of making her completely unsure of what she observes, thinks, remembers, says, etc. In *The Girl on the Train*, the representation of the phenomenon turns out to be more tortuous, since the construction of the narrative leads the viewer away from recognizing the psychological operation being conducted against the female protagonist. The representation of the phenomenon in *The Invisible Man*, the most recent of the three films analyzed on this topic, reflects the historical period of its production: it shows a process of manipulation carried out through advanced technological tools.

Specifically, in *Gaslight* the gaslighting strategies enacted by Gregory towards Paula are depicted in detail. He convinces her wife that she is not in possession of her full mental faculties because, for example, she forgets where she has put a very important piece of jewelry, does not remember the position of some objects in the house, and has the perception that the gas lights are losing their intensity. These are all ploys intentionally implemented by Gregory to make Paula doubt her mental soundness in order to steal her jewelry. In the interactions represented, Paula is often reluctant to believe that she is losing her mind. For this reason, Gregory at the end berates her as hysterical; he generates humiliations and accusations as monologic actions in order to control Paula’s friendships and movements, and finally to pathologize her: “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that...I know,

⁴⁸ Hérietier, *Masculin-féminin II*.

⁴⁹ Wilk, *Economies and Cultures*.

yes I know you don't lie, I believe you...you don't lie, it's much worse, you forgot...forgot how you forget everything. Paula, maybe I'm wrong, I'm not the one who should take care of this, people who are experts in this field should take care of this. Paula, soon we will have guests, very soon" (00:01:50).

In *The Girl on the Train*, Tom is manipulative toward his partners and specifically toward his ex-wife, Rachel, who is reduced to imagining the lives of others through a train window. "You, women, are mad" (00:01:32), he thunders in a scene characterized by dynamics of verbal, emotional and psychological violence based on humiliations and accusations: "you're like a dog ... one of those dogs that nobody wants ... those beaten dogs ... the ones you kick and they keep coming back to you ... thinking that if they behave better [...] in a way you killed her" (00:01:39). This scene ends with Tom's accusation against Rachel whose madness, which is not real but constructed by him, is deemed contagious (00:01:40): "I'm like this because I married you, you're the one who drove me mad!" It is easy to observe from the interactions depicted that Tom's manipulation rests on a socio-cultural conception that mental stability is not typical of women.

We can underline the same dynamics in *The Invisible Man*. Adrian manipulates Cecilia through technical-scientific tools, but again it represents Adrian's clear purpose of driving Cecilia to madness through precise strategies. As the protagonist herself explains (00:01:41), "He moves like this and makes me feel like I'm the crazy one. That's what he does". And when Adrian (literally) reappears in Cecilia's life, he keeps trying to convince her that she imagined everything, because of her mental instability: "I know sometimes you feel like you're going crazy, but I'm the only one who can help you, remember? Because I know you better than anyone else in the world" (00:01:41).

The perpetrators depicted in these three films seem to want to undermine their partners' autonomy of thinking, causing them to doubt their own mental steadfastness in order to control them, by virtue of due privilege and patriarchal power closely linked to the hegemonic masculinity model, following Kaufman. Indeed, in order to manipulate their partners and confirm their power, they reproduce the gender stereotype that sees women as inferior depositories of rationality, demonstrating once again how hegemonic masculinity, self-control and rationality feed each other⁵⁰. The men depicted in these three films induce their partners to doubt their mental stability, usually enacting their hegemonic masculinity through monologic actions such as

⁵⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*; Kimmel, "Invisible Masculinity".

humiliations and accusations, within a frame of verbal, emotional and psychological violence.

6.3. Body control

As Wilk⁵¹ argued, the body constitutes a female sphere: in a professional sense reproductive work is considered a female universe and productive work a male universe. The body is also the terrain of male dominance enacted according to certain dynamics of violence⁵², well represented in films that depict the dimension of control. This control can be perpetrated through the possession of the partner in a physical sense (*Sleeping with the Enemy*, *Enough*, *L'amore rubato*), through her children (*Jusqu'à la garde*) or literally through bodily appropriation (*Primo amore*). Within these movies, we can observe the dynamics of violence – mainly psychological, but also physical – corresponding to the typical cycle of violence⁵³.

Specifically, the film *Primo amore* represents Vittorio's obsession with female bodies, which results in the concrete manipulation of the body of Sonia, his partner. Vittorio controls Sonia's eating habits. Moreover, the *appropriation* of Sonia's body becomes the appropriation of her identity. She is reduced to an artifact to be perfected and improved: the goldsmith Vittorio works on her as if she was his jewel, displaying monologic actions such as inquiring questions, directives, and intimidations. "Yes or no? Yes, you ate it. You just said it, didn't you? (Sonia nods). So do you see that I'm forced to act like this?... Do you think I like it?... it's a matter of principle Sonia, it's not so much eating one or ten understand?... it's not the quantity... it's that if you do it once later you do it a second time later you do it a third time... and it becomes a habit... and it doesn't have to become a habit or does it? Tell me if I'm wrong" (00:44:00).

The verbal, emotional and psychological violence perpetrated here starts with an appropriation of the female body: these same dynamics can be seen in *Sleeping with the Enemy*, in which in the very first scenes Patrick chooses which dress Sara should wear. We can also highlight this kind of control in the obsessive jealousy expressed through intimidations and accusations represented in some scenes of *L'amore rubato*: "Where are you going? (pinning her to the wall of the entrance) Where are you going? Hmm? [...] no, I know

⁵¹ Wilk, *Economies and Cultures*.

⁵² Hérietier, *Masculin-féminin II*.

⁵³ Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome*.

what you are thinking (angry). You want to leave to forget about me, to forget about us!” (00:09:00).

In *Enough*, when Slim reacts impatiently to her husband’s betrayal, the first act of physical violence occurs, which is followed by Mitch saying, “Well, can’t I hit you? [...] Do you want to fight? I’m a man, honey, there’s no contest. You have to understand that, Slim. In fact, I thought you understood. I bring the money and so I make the rules: my rules. Do you follow me? [...] Today is the price you pay for the life you make” (00:20:00). With these words, Mitch clearly expresses that by virtue of his male dominance and breadwinner role he deserves Slim’s total submission: for this reason, he takes away Slim’s car keys and driver’s license to prevent her from running away, thus physically segregating her.

Finally, in *Jusqu’à la garde*, we can highlight this kind of appropriation by a man of the female body through what are culturally considered its appendages: their children. In order to find out his ex-wife’s new address, Antoine addresses his son Julien with intimidation, shouting and threats: “You have become a liar like your mother, yet you are no less intelligent than before. Look at me when I speak to you! [...] Your mother has a bomb in her hands, which will blow up in her face! Because everything she did, she had no right to do! [...] And she will pay dearly! She’s going to pay dearly if she keeps making fun of me! I’m your father, I have a right to know where you live! And look at me when I talk to you, got it? Look at me!” (00:43:00). As can be seen, through violent monologic actions, Antoine directs insults and threats as much to his son as, directly and indirectly, to his ex-wife Miriam, because he is unable to accept her estrangement.

Although the films are distinct productions and separated from a spatial-temporal point of view, we constantly find a visual focus on the physicality of the female protagonists through close-ups of their bodies, the terrain of appropriation by the male characters. We see the fragile body of Sonia up close, tormented by the slimming imposed by Vittorio in the film *Primo amore*. We can also see a close-up of the body paralyzed by fear of Sara, on whom Patrick imposes the choice of which dress to wear in some scenes of the film *Sleeping with the Enemy*. Through specific close-ups, we also get a detailed view of the body of Slim, the protagonist of *Enough*, who manages to escape her attacker precisely by training and fortifying her body, preventing its appropriation. Violated and disfigured bodies are also visually central in *L’amore rubato* and *Jusqu’à la garde*, which more closely stage situations of pure physical violence suffered by the protagonists, however always within a frame of verbal, emotional and psychological violence.

To sum up, the dynamics of violence depicted within this strand of films

once again rest on a patriarchal and binomial cultural substratum that legitimizes and endorses the dynamics of *possession*, framing the female dimension as that of the body, controlled, violated and perceived as the male partner's right. These movies represent the 7 P's that, according to Kaufman, characterize the perpetrators' behaviors; by virtue of their belief in the due privilege and patriarchal power derived from being male, they believe they are allowed to control and possess their partners. They act violently in out-of-control reactions (psychic pressure cooker) dictated by their inability to serenely express their own frailties (psychic armor of masculinity). This is strictly connected with the hegemonic model of masculinity and power that consider men as both distant from the emotional sphere, but paradoxically characterized by emotional weakness. A hegemonic masculinity that is produced and reasserted by using monologic actions such as inquiring questions, directives, intimidations, and accusations, sometimes followed by physical mistreatments, thereby also representing the existence of a cycle of violence.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to investigate the relationship between media and the cultural roots of gender-based violence. In order to achieve this goal, we observed whether and how, in the audiovisual representations of IPV depicted in eleven international films, male violence on women turns out to be an expression of the hegemonic masculinity model. Specifically, we chose to analyze verbal, emotional and psychological violence, because it is increasingly widespread in heterosexual couples and very often alternates with physical and sexual violence.

Our analysis leads to the following conclusions. Firstly, there is a strong connection between the representation of verbal, emotional and psychological violence and its patriarchal roots: the work devaluation, mental manipulation and body control enacted by men against their wives display a stereotyped and asymmetrical construction of gender differences. Secondly, mistreatments perpetrated by men are significant tools for performing their own masculinity and asserting their own dominance, especially when women do not conform to gender roles and expectations. Thirdly, the selected films represent the *doing* of this hegemonic masculinity, which is linked primarily to male privilege and patriarchal power; at times the male protagonists act violently with out-of-control reactions (psychic pressure cooker) that originate in the inability to serenely express their own frailties (psychic armor of masculinity). Finally, hegemonic masculinity finds expression in

the representation of verbal, emotional and psychological violence carried out through monologic actions. In films concerning work devaluation, they take the form of accusations, (death) threats, rejections, negative judgments, intimidations, orders, denigrations, and humiliations. In films regarding gas-lighting, we observe mostly humiliations and accusations. When the focus is on body control, the monologic actions are mainly inquiring questions, directives, insults, accusations, and intimidations. Our analysis seems to confirm that in the selected films the violence portrayed is closely related to the power asymmetry constructed historically and culturally between men and women; and, more importantly, it is a way of creating and asserting the hegemonic masculinity of the perpetrators. Moreover, the analysis confirms that the reproduction of this model involves not only physical mistreatments, but also a more subtle and apparently invisible violence, carried out using aggressive and manipulative words with significant effects at the emotional and psychological level. Assuming that these audiovisual representations could influence the perpetuation of gender-based violence within heterosexual couples, it would be interesting to explore three aspects in future research: films representing men who choose to challenge the traditional gender order and accept their wives' agency, films representing violence in homosexual couples, and films representing female violence on male partners.