RAPE-REVENGE REVISIONS:
CASE STUDIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY FILM GENRE

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Rape-revenge is one of cinema studies' neglected genres, even in spite of the plethora of examples globally over the past decade. This thesis redresses the lack of critical attention with an account of the contemporary genre that analyses the politics, ethics, and affects at play in the filmic construction of rape and its response. Each chapter examines a significant trend or aspect of the contemporary genre through in-depth case studies, expanding the study of rape-revenge from socio-political or psychoanalytic perspectives to also include embodied, phenomenological perspectives and ethical issues. The case studies—including The Last House on the Left (Wes Craven, 1972/Dennis Iliadis, 2009), I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978/Steven R. Monroe, 2010), Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2 (Quentin Tarantino, 2003/2004), Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-Wook, 2005), Teeth (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005), The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor) (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009), Descent (Talia Lugacy, 2007), Katalin Varga (Peter Strickland, 2009), and Twilight Portrait (Portret v sumerkakh) (Angelina Nikonova, 2011)—are framed in terms of rape-revenge’s temporal, cross-media, and cross-cultural shifts, and also placed within the broader cultural myths and media narratives about rape. The contemporary genre reinscribes dominant, conservative cultural myths about rape and the appropriate response (eye for an eye revenge), while at the same time presenting interesting explorations of rape trauma and ethics and self-reflexive challenges to spectating violence. Ambivalence also manifests in these films in that they both attest to the ongoing cultural relevance and popularity of rape-revenge narratives, and yet push the genre’s limits and explore the possibility of responses to rape other than revenge. This research finds the rape-revenge genre to be a flexible format with certain limitations but also great potential for political, affective, and ethical exploration of rape and responses to rape.

Key words: rape; revenge; genre; film theory; ethics; postfeminism.
Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................ i
Abstract .................................................................................................................................................... ii
Contents ....................................................................................................................................................... iii
Copyright Declaration ............................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction:
Reapproaching Rape-Revenge ......................................................................................................................... 1
  Rape-revenge as genre ...................................................................................................................................... 2
  New theoretical angles: politics, ethics, affect and phenomenology ............................................................ 6
  Definitional criteria and contemporary features of the genre: Straightsheads case study ...................... 15
  Circling the canon: chapters overview ........................................................................................................ 21

Chapter One:
  The Last House on the Left .......................................................................................................................... 28
  I Spit on Your Grave ..................................................................................................................................... 45
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................... 55

Chapter Two:
Maternal Transformations and the Postfeminist Dilemma:
Can I Have My Violent Revenge and My Children Too? ............................................................................. 58
  Kill Bill Vol. 1 and 2 .................................................................................................................................. 61
  Lady Vengeance .......................................................................................................................................... 69

Chapter Three:
The Postfeminist Trap of Vagina Dentata for the American Teen Castratrice .......................................... 80
  Teeth ............................................................................................................................................................. 82
  Hard Candy .................................................................................................................................................. 91
  Losing their bite .......................................................................................................................................... 99

Chapter Four:
The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo: Rape, Revenge, and Victimhood in Translation .................................. 102
  The First Rape Scene: Power, Control, Disgust .......................................................................................... 107
  The Second Rape Scene: Trapped in Victimization .................................................................................... 111
  The Man with the Avenger’s Tattoo .......................................................................................................... 117
  Avenger, Vigilante, or Warrior? ................................................................................................................ 120
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 123

Chapter Five:
Rape, Racism, and Descent into the Ethical Quagmire of Revenge ......................................................... 125
  Understanding Oppression ......................................................................................................................... 128
  Spring: Objectification and Descent ......................................................................................................... 134
  Fall: The Eroticization and Futility of Revenge ....................................................................................... 139
  Harmful Myths ......................................................................................................................................... 143
  The Final Look: Shame and Ethical Spectatorship .................................................................................. 149

Conclusion:
Futile Revenge and Future Directions ....................................................................................................... 154
  Katatin Varga ............................................................................................................................................. 156
  Twilight Portrait ......................................................................................................................................... 161
  Futile or Fruitful? The Indeterminate Future of Rape-Revenge .............................................................. 164

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................................. 167

Filmography .................................................................................................................................................. 179
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Introduction: 

Reapproaching Rape-Revenge

At the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009, I chanced upon a screening of a new rape-revenge film, *Katalin Varga* (Peter Strickland, 2009). Its simple narrative was recognizable as that of a rape-revenge film, and yet it was in a completely different package to the more notorious examples of the genre such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) or *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981). I was lulled by the film’s panoramic Romanian landscapes and horse-and-cart pace, but through genre expectation, character identification, and the hints of horror, I still anticipated that the road journey taken by protagonist Katalin (Hilda Péter) would lead to the genre-defining inevitable act of violent revenge against her rapist.

Katalin does kill her rapist’s accomplice, Gergely (Roberto Giacomello), but when she catches up with her rapist, Antal (Tibor Pálffy), she converses with him rather than kills him. More shocking than this, she herself is killed in an act of revenge (by Gergely’s brother-in-law [Sebastian Marina]) at the end of the film. I was stunned by this ending and felt almost a sense of outrage at the protagonist’s brutal punishment. The ending went against character identification, against genre expectation and the genre’s laws of justice (based on *lex talionis*, where retribution restores order following rape), and seemed an affront to my feminist politics. Why did I respond in this way to the ending, feeling swindled somehow? And was this response designed to be positive or productive, leading me to interrogate my own ideas about responses to rape, feminist ethics, and the morality of revenge? Was the ending a cheap twist on the rape-revenge formula, or was it a deeper interrogation of the moral precepts of the genre? Was Strickland’s take on rape-revenge politically problematic and was I right to take exception to it? Is rape-revenge not (or no longer) a feminist genre that provides its spectators with a cathartic sense of justice through retributive violence? These initial questions became broader as I observed that there has been a revival of rape-revenge cinema with many equally fascinating contemporary takes on the genre. Together these films prompted the exploration of the politics, ethics, and affects of the contemporary rape-revenge genre that I present in this thesis.¹

Strickland’s film neither adheres to the rape-revenge genre nor presents a playful homage, rather, it is interested in what the genre can do (here particularly for exploring themes of revenge, redemption, responsibility, and forgiveness). This thesis similarly asks what the

¹ Although it does not feature as a case study here, the Australian film *Acolytes* (Jon Hewitt, 2008), which I saw at the same festival a year earlier, was similarly an inspiration for this project—it was a film which underscored the versatility and contemporary currency of the rape-revenge genre. *Acolytes* comes closer to the genre’s exploitation roots than *Katalin Varga*, but similarly presents interesting variations on the formula as well as a local flavour. *Twilight Portrait* (*Portret v sumerkah*) (Angelina Nikonova, 2011) was another chance rape-revenge viewing (this time at the London Film Festival in 2011) which is presented as a case study alongside *Katalin Varga* in the concluding chapter of this thesis.
Rape-revenge as genre

The first of these reframings is to understand rape-revenge as a genre, as opposed to simply a narrative pattern or a historically specific cycle. Jacinda Read, a key theorist of rape-revenge cinema, argues that it is not a genre (or a horror subgenre, as Clover places it) but ‘a narrative structure which, on meeting second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced a historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films’ (2000, 11). It is easy to see how Read would come to the conclusion that rape-revenge is a ‘historically, rather than generically, specific cycle’ (2000, 23) because of her focus on the genre’s interaction with second-wave feminism. No doubt second-wave feminism’s high cultural profile in the 1970s (tailing into the 1980s) invigorated the genre, and rape-revenge provided a forum for feminist issues and the role of feminism in society to play out.² But while rape-revenge was understandably popular in this period, it is not exclusive to it, and rape-revenge has had another wave of popularity and prolificacy in the decade since Read’s book was published. I believe Read was too hasty in suggesting that ‘with the maternal avenger, the rape-revenge cycle may have run its course...the narrative possibilities the rape-revenge structure offers may have been exhausted’ (Read 2000, 245). For example, the films examined in Chapter Two, Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2 (Quentin

² While the connections that both Jacinda Read and Carol J. Clover draw between the second-wave feminist movement and the rape-revenge genre are both convincing and important, it would be erroneous to describe 1970s Hollywood as the genre’s period and place of origin. It is important to acknowledge earlier examples of the genre—from Hollywood and elsewhere—as Heller-Nicholas does in the introduction to her book (2011, 13-19) with titles such as Rashomon (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), Johnny Belinda (Jean Negulesco, 1948), Safe in Hell (William A. Wellman, 1931), The Virgin Spring (Ingmar Bergman, 1960), Thirteen Women (George Archainbaud, 1932), Outrage (Ida Lupino, 1950), and Something Wild (Jack Garfein, 1961). The earliest example I can think of is another William A. Wellman film, Beggars of Life (1928), but The Birth of a Nation (D.W. Griffith, 1915) is arguably a strong, earlier influence on the genre too.
Tarantino, 2003/2004) and Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-Wook, 2005), find a fresh take on the maternal avenger. These films depict heroines who avenge not their daughters’ rapes but either their own (Kill Bill) or fellow prisoners/friends (Lady Vengeance) and they express and explore the postfeminist emphasis on, and issues surrounding, maternity. The other chapters of this thesis explore further post-2000 variations or subgenres of rape-revenge, illustrating that rape-revenge has not yet run its course, if indeed it is ever going to.

My insistence on the ongoing relevance of rape-revenge is supported by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’ recent study, which provides an updated overview of the genre, including a survey of new titles (2011, 155-87). She points to the ‘recent spike of rape-revenge films’ with a large number of contemporary examples, noting that ‘The current ubiquity of sexual violence and retribution puts an end to any suggestion that rape-revenge is historically or generically specific’ (2011, 155). Against Read’s historically-confining definition of rape revenge, and Clover’s generically-confining definition, Heller-Nicholas sets out to demonstrate the scope of rape-revenge and its diversity across genres, borders, and historical periods. Her emphasis on rape-revenge’s magnitude and variety results in a strong impression that it is far from a cohesive genre, indeed, the main conclusion that can be drawn from her review is that there is ‘no singular or unified treatment of rape across this category when surveyed as a whole’ (2011, 1). Nevertheless, her book helps to begin filling the wide gap in the critical literature by providing a useful resource, synopsizing and commenting upon a broad sample of rape-revenge films and updating the genre’s filmography to include more contemporary and global examples.3 Heller-Nicholas makes the interesting suggestion that ‘if people are confused about what sexual violence “means,” then these films offer a notable contemporary example of why contradictory and often hypocritical attitudes can co-exist more generally’ (2001, 1).

In this thesis, I will be treating the genre not just as a ‘notable example’ of these attitudes, but as a cultural key which can help to reveal and interrogate the meanings of rape and the political, ethical and affective responses to it (on both individual and social levels). The more in-depth case studies I present in this thesis show that there is a cultural need to try to understand what rape is, what impact it has, and how to respond.

The genre’s diversity, and its frequent hybridity with other genres, does not discount that rape-revenge can be considered a genre in its own right. Read supports her argument that rape-revenge ‘is not generically specific’ (Read 2000, 24) by identifying examples in a range of genres (westerns, erotic thriller/neo-noir, detective, melodrama, courtroom drama,

3 Heller-Nicholas’ filmography is comprehensive but certainly not exhaustive. For example, two of my case studies—Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-Wook, 2005) and Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005)—are not listed, and two other fascinating contemporary examples—Monster (Patty Jenkins, 2003) and Acolytes (Jon Hewitt, 2008)—are also omitted.
science-fiction). I agree with Read that rape-revenge should not be considered a subgenre of horror as Clover (1992) and Creed (1993) have positioned it, since rape-revenge indeed appears blended with a range of genres. Rape-revenge seems best conceptualized as a typically hybrid genre, and while that may be generally true of all genres in postmodern times, rape-revenge in particular has produced many interesting mixes with other genres from Westerns to torture porn. Heller-Nicholas' book includes a chapter-long overview of 'The Rape-Revenge Film Across Genres' (2011, 60-102), giving examples of hybrids with Westerns, horror, exploitation/Blaxploitation, TV movies, comedy, supernatural and science-fiction genres. However, Heller-Nicholas similarly shies away from terming rape-revenge a genre, and avoids theorizing what rape-revenge is (whether it is a cycle, narrative pattern, or genre). She defaults to the model established by Read, in which rape-revenge as a narrative pattern is 'mapped onto' more established genres. To describe rape-revenge as a 'narrative structure' is limiting, as although rape-revenge may appear in many guises, it does have its own loose iconography (mud-covered semi-naked rape victims; red lipstick and fetish costumes of the transformed avenger; castration; women with guns), stock characters (young, white, attractive victim turned *femme fatale* avenger; rapists; rednecks), and key themes and conflicts (transformation; rape trauma; ethics of revenge; vigilantism; torture) as well as the standard two-part structure most critics identify (rape followed by revenge). The settings and aesthetics of the genre are often modified by the other genres rape-revenge hybridizes with, but rape-revenge does have discernable characteristics that are becoming further defined as both the critical literature and the genre itself grow.

Genre is a preferable term for rape-revenge because genre studies help us to understand its processes of flux and inter-genre mutation. This labelling is also a political move to validate the rape-revenge genre as being significant and worthy of study, alongside the traditional genres of westerns, *film noir*, and horror most commonly given attention in genre studies (which resulted in the field privileging male protagonists and assumed male audiences). Feminist film theorists have worked to include and legitimate other genres within the genre studies canon, such as musicals, melodrama, and most recently, pornography (like rape-revenge, the latter's long neglect was perhaps due to it being a 'low' cultural form). While rape-revenge is a relatively small, less established, diverse, genre hybridized, and often B-grade set of films, studying them as a genre can contribute to genre studies. Rape-revenge's versatility, durability, cult popularity, its ideological ambiguity or ambivalence, and its chameleon nature, offer interesting issues for the field. Genre studies also has a lot to offer in the understanding of rape-revenge, for instance, in making sense of its waves of popularity (other genres reveal similar patterns, though tied to different historical and ideological circumstances). Read and Heller-Nicholas do employ genre studies when they both compare rape-revenge westerns with Will Wright's structural analysis of the western's 'vengeance
variation’ (Read 2000, 127-39; Heller-Nicholas 2011, 73). It is understandable that Read’s insistence on the historical specificity of rape-revenge, and Heller-Nicholas’ insistence on the broadness and diversity of the category, might lead them away from labelling rape-revenge as a genre, but I believe denying that rape-revenge is a film genre risks closing off the rich insights afforded by the field of genre studies. For instance, for this thesis in particular, I have found that recent research into the ‘torture porn’ genre offers models for grappling with sets of films which seem tied to historically-specific socio-political contexts and which present complex issues of spectatorship, spectacle and graphic violence. The fact that rape-revenge hybridizes with torture porn in several of my case studies—The Last House on the Left (Dennis Iliadis, 2009), I Spit on Your Grave (Steven R. Monroe, 2010), and Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005)—further demonstrates the relevance of utilizing this genre studies research for understanding rape-revenge cinema. This thesis is not a definitive genre study—for instance, the depth of the case studies limits the number able to be included—but it establishes the usefulness of studying rape-revenge as a genre, and explores some of the most interesting issues that the contemporary films raise, such as the phenomenology of rape trauma and the ethics of revenge.

In addition to the strategic reading of rape-revenge as a genre, another key departure I have made from Read’s seminal text and Heller-Nicholas’ recent study is the consideration of rape-revenge films in an international or transnational context. For Read, rape-revenge is a Hollywood genre (or ‘cycle’, to use her term), and her study provides insights into how culture (especially via Hollywood) deals with feminism. Even if this was largely the case previously, the influence of rape-revenge has spread—there are examples from various cultures, numerous transnational remakes, and spectatorship occurs across borders too. In the contemporary context, rape-revenge is not solely by, for and about local (American) feminism. American cinema provides numerous and popular examples and so several are considered in this thesis, both Hollywood and semi-independent productions. However, these films are considered in a more global context (in terms of the influences upon them and the audiences for them) and are productively placed in cross-cultural analysis with international examples from Sweden to South Korea. Further cross-cultural analysis between national cinemas would clearly be an interesting direction to develop this research, for example, comparing the rich and distinct traditions of rape-revenge in Indian and Japanese national cinemas.5 Heller-Nicholas’ chapter on ‘The Rape-Revenge Film Around the World’ (2011,...

4 Read argues that function nine of Wright’s vengeance variation, in which the hero gives up their revenge, ‘is absent in the female rape-revenge western’ (Read 2000, 131). While Read suggests that the cycle had exhausted all possible variations, the reinsertion of function nine into rape-revenge since Read’s time of writing has created another variation on rape-revenge, seen in films such as Kill Bill Vol. 2. This is another example of how attending to research in genre studies can help us understand—and perhaps even predict—shifts in the rape-revenge genre.

5 For an introduction to Indian rape-revenge films see Virdi (1999) and Gopalan (1997), and for an introduction to Japanese rape-revenge films see Balmain (2008).
provides a sample of the range of international manifestations of the genre with ten case studies—Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Spain, and Turkey—and additionally lists some noteworthy examples from Sweden, Italy, Russia, the UK, Brazil, Nigeria, Pakistan, Cambodia, and the Philippines. However, Heller-Nicholas only briefly locates these films in their national contexts, again mainly aiming to demonstrate the scope of rape-revenge with a broad overview rather than explore the films cross-culturally or examine the reasons for the global revival of the genre. Just as Heller-Nicholas demonstrates through her array of examples that rape-revenge is broader and more diverse that Read gave credit, my case studies in this thesis will demonstrate that rape-revenge is more versatile and durable than Read expected. The rape-revenge genre’s persistence across time and over borders has led to my focus on contemporary rape-revenge ‘translations’—the cross-cultural dialogue between Kill Bill and Sympathy for Lady Vengeance; a book to film adaptation (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo [Män som hatar kvinnor] [Niels Arden Oplev, 2009]); postfeminist updates of patriarchal myths (Teeth [Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007] and Hard Candy); and remakes of classic rape-revenge films (The Last House on the Left and I Spit on Your Grave).

New theoretical angles: politics, ethics, affect and phenomenology

The methodology used in this thesis combines in-depth textual analysis of key examples of the genre produced in the last decade—particularly their rape and revenge scenes—with the application of phenomenological and ethical concepts. The aim is to expand and update the study of rape-revenge from socio-political and psychoanalytic perspectives to include embodied, phenomenological perspectives and a treatment of the ethical issues raised. Read has critiqued Clover and Creed’s use of psychoanalysis and their reading of rape-revenge within the horror genre (2000, 28; 43; 53; 247). Read’s classification of rape-revenge as a historically rather than generically specific set of films explains her misgivings about the ‘universal and ahistorical psychoanalytic concepts’, such as castration anxiety, used by feminist film theorists like Creed in analysing horror (2000, 43). Read’s main issue with Clover’s reading of rape-revenge seems to be Clover’s combination of historical contextualisation with psychoanalytically-based arguments about male spectatorial pleasure and identification (2000, 53). Read suggests that, ‘Some of the inconsistencies and ambivalence in Clover’s arguments perhaps stem from this uneasy and never fully resolved alliance between psychoanalytical perspectives and socio-historical perspectives’ (2000, 28). I suggest that such inconsistencies and ambivalence springs from the complexities of the rape-revenge films themselves, and that it is possible (even necessary) to draw on a range of approaches to understand these complex and often contradictory films. Some psychoanalytic concepts are useful in understanding the construction and appeal of rape-revenge, as I demonstrate in the chapter on teen castratrices. Read argues that ‘many films now also
exhibit such a high degree of self-consciousness about the kinds of theoretical paradigms that have been used to analyse them that many of the central tenets of feminist film theory have become obsolete or at least in need of historicizing’ (2000, 246-47), and specifies psychoanalytic concepts such as castration anxiety as particularly redundant. However, I do not think filmmakers’ postmodern pre-emptive moves should force feminist film theorists to lay down their tools, instead it is proof of a productive discourse between filmmakers and theorists. For example, Teeth is very knowing and self-conscious about castration anxiety in its play with the vagina dentata myth but as I demonstrate in Chapter Three, with a combination of ideological and psychoanalytical analysis (as well as contextualization within media and other cultural discourses), the film is still deeply invested in the castration anxiety which underpins the myth—its self-conscious, postfeminist reworking has not changed that central meaning. In contrast to Read, this project focuses explicitly on the ‘never fully resolved alliance’ between contextual and psychoanalytic readings of these films, contending that such tensions are operating at the heart of these films themselves and consequently need further interrogation and an interdisciplinary approach.

My approach is both interdisciplinary and responsive to the questions raised by the texts themselves. For example, my focus on ethics was prompted by the ethical questions thematized within recent rape-revenge films. Clover notes that in the original I Spit on Your Grave, ‘there is no concern whatever, not even at the level of lip service, with moral and ethical issues’ (1992, 119), yet the same could not be said of the contemporary examples under consideration here. The rape-revenge genre is a rich site (or perhaps a minefield!) for contemporary theory, and I propose that the films and theory can inform and enrich each other, particularly in the fields of politics, ethics, affect and phenomenology. In the following section, I outline the significant and innovative approaches in contemporary film theory that I have found fruitful in reappraising the rape-revenge genre and analyzing contemporary films that have outgrown (sometimes self-consciously) the limitations of previous theoretical approaches.

Politics

Of these approaches, political angles have been the most common in the critical literature on rape-revenge to date. Like many of its predecessors, this study presents a feminist perspective on the genre. However, while these previous studies understand the genre as being primarily in discourse with second-wave feminism and shifts in gender politics, this study considers additional and diverse aspects of the socio-political contexts that influence the contemporary genre. For instance, the dominant focus on gender has marginalized critical attention to race, a problematic absence in the genre’s critical literature which I aim to redress in Chapter Five. By drawing on the work of bell hooks (1995; 1996), Kimberlé
Crenshaw (1992) and Sara Ahmed (2007), Chapter Five uses intersections of race theory and phenomenology to provide new insights into the genre’s political potential and limitations. In other chapters, my approach takes cues from the burgeoning work on the ‘torture porn’ genre by authors such as Jason Middleton (2010) and L. Andrew Cooper (2010), who situate their analyses within socio-cultural tensions and the politics of the American ‘war on terror’. Contemporary rape-revenge films are often hybridized with torture porn (as will be discussed in Chapters One and Three), and similarly present spectacles of violence that are connected to—and perhaps help to process—socio-political conflicts and their media representation, particularly around issues of violence, retribution, torture and trauma. Reflections on the post-9/11 cultural context and the impact of 9/11 on cinema by authors such as Judith Butler (2004), E. Ann Kaplan (2005), David Martin-Jones (2006), and Stephen Prince (2009) also open up new perspectives on contemporary rape-revenge, particularly the American films. National and transnational contexts play an important part in shaping rape-revenge, and I pay attention to specificities and differences in this regard, for instance, by noting significant aspects of South Korean culture and cinema in understanding Park Chan-Wook’s transnational dialogue with Quentin Tarantino in Chapter Two, and relevant aspects of Swedish society and culture for the analysis of The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo in Chapter Four. This project continues to scrutinize rape-revenge films through a feminist framework while also being attentive to the range of socio-political conflicts and issues at play, in this way presenting a more comprehensive and current ideological picture of the genre.

While this approach might arguably be described as postfeminist, I reject this label in favour of feminism, in order to assert the dynamism and contemporary relevance of feminism, and also to acknowledge this thesis’ intellectual debt to feminist film theorists, ethicists, and phenomenologists. There is frequent discussion of postfeminism in this thesis—particularly in Chapter Two and Chapter Three—but in line with the prevailing usage by other feminist cultural theorists, it refers to an object of cultural and political analysis as opposed to the theoretical approach itself. This usage is exemplified by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s edited collection, Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture (2007). The editors outline the relationship between feminist scholarship and postfeminist mass media culture in the introduction (2007, 1-25), and the chapters of the collection provide further examples of such critique of postfeminist texts including Bridget Jones’s Diary (Sharon Maguire, 2001) and The Good Girl (Miguel Arteta, 2002). Postfeminism is a slippery term, at its broadest encompassing ‘a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media form, having to do with the “pastness” of feminism’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 1). Postfeminism’s bias towards individualism—and towards the image and concerns of young, white, middle-class women—precludes the expansion of the agenda of second-wave feminism that it critiques, and postfeminism instead often promotes a model of empowerment based on sexuality, maternity, and capital. Postfeminism is associated with
media-savvy popular feminist writers such as Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, and Camille Paglia, who variously denigrate ‘victim feminism’ and display cynicism towards date rape, and whose ideas will be discussed in this thesis as they relate to rape-revenge films. There is no central agenda in postfeminism, but generally speaking, ‘postfeminist debate tends to crystallise around issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility’ (Gamble 2001, 43), issues which notably overlap with themes in contemporary rape-revenge films. Sarah Projansky has noted the co-constitutive relationship between rape narratives and postfeminism (2001, 13; 231) but the rape-revenge genre—and particularly rape-revenge films released since the publication of Projansky’s book—finds even deeper resonances with postfeminism which need to be explored. For instance, the convergence of neoliberal ideology and ‘the individualist, acquisitive, and transformative values of postfeminism’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 7) is echoed in the contemporary genre, as we will see in the example of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo in Chapter Four.

While analysing the construction of feminism in popular cultural texts is a project I am continuing in this thesis (for example, in identifying the postfeminist contradictions in Teeth, and by examining the neoliberal and anti-victimist compromising of feminism in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo), I am also responding to further paradigm shifts in feminist film theory in asking different types of questions. The focus on ethics and affect make this thesis responsive to contemporary film theory which now gives significant attention to these fields of inquiry, as I outline in the following sections. The films also prompt the theoretical questions, for what happens to the feminist film theory frameworks created for understanding rape-revenge when a male is raped or a woman rapes? Read and Clover’s focus on femininity has been influential in shaping our understandings of the rape-revenge genre, but is this really what it is (still) about? As I will show, many of the films are still concerned with how to cope with and control (post)feminism. But perhaps the genre persists because it is really about an unresolved (and more obvious) question: how to define and respond to rape. If, as Clover argues, ‘the center of gravity of these films lies more in the reaction (the revenge) than the act (the rape)’ (1992, 154), then at least equal weight must be given to analysing revenge, both its representation and its connection to rape. In consequence, this project is perhaps less about representation than response, examining revenge as a response to rape in terms of its ethical, affective, and political implications, and also exploring the spectator’s response to rape, revenge, and the relationship between them. I argue that the genre is now very much concerned with the ethics of violence and revenge, which are not exclusively either gendered or feminist questions (although these frameworks are still key ones for shedding light on such issues).
Ethics

Some of the most interesting questions raised by contemporary rape-revenge films are ethical questions, hence ethics is another key theoretical framework in this study. Again this represents a shift in the approach to the genre, since ethics has not been a major concern in the theorization of narrative cinema until relatively recently (Downing and Saxton 2010, 11). It is important to note that this turn to ethics is not a turn away from politics, rather, like Downing and Saxton’s *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, this project recognizes that ethics and politics are ‘mutually implicated and enabling’ and therefore might be similarly described as an ‘ethico-political’ investigation (2010, 11). In many ways, this thesis may be considered a product of, and contribution to, the emerging ‘body of ethically-oriented criticism… which combines philosophical and cultural enquiry with political urgency and personal implication’ (Aaron 2007, 111). Such criticism, including this thesis, often draws on Emmanuel Levinas’ writing on ethics, and the ‘richness of his work for the discussion of contemporary spectatorship’ has been noted by Michele Aaron (2007, 111-13). I have found Levinasian ethics—particularly his central concept of the face-to-face encounter—enlightening in the analysis of the contemporary rape-revenge genre, perhaps because they are both concerned with and interrogate notions of response, responsibility, intersubjectivity, sense of self, and (prohibitions on) violence.

Levinas posits the face-to-face encounter between I and the other as a relation of inescapable obligation of responsibility for each other (Levinas in Robbins 2001, 229). The concept captures the temptation to—and prohibition on—violence: ‘The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill’ (Levinas 1985, 86). This thesis considers the mode of engagement between the rape-revenge genre’s rapist and victim—and often that between protagonist and spectator—as an attempt at a face-to-face ethical encounter. At the micro-level, the face-to-face frequently plays out in these films in a literal manner, in the characters’ exchange of looks, in the shot/reverse shot grammar, and in the direct looks to camera. This presents an entry point to the contemporary genre’s echoes of ethical encounters, but more broadly the ‘face’ in these films—that which ‘offers itself to your compassion and to your obligation’ (Levinas in Robbins 2001, 48) and calls on responsibility—is the conveyance of rape trauma, which is articulated through a range of filmic techniques that will be detailed in the following case studies. Although the face-to-face typically breaks down in rape-revenge films—after all, ‘the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity’ (Levinas 1985, 87)—it is a useful concept for understanding the nature of subjectivity (as fundamentally ethical and rooted in responsibility, constituted through the intervention of the other), and for charting this transitional moment in the genre, its own ‘ethical turn’, wherein many of the contemporary films more deeply consider aspects of response and responsibility in the acts of rape and revenge.
However, while Levinasian ethics resonates with these films and is an important touchstone for this study, the films analysed here do not always (if indeed ever) fully fit within that paradigm. Although the contemporary genre deploys Levinasian notions of responsibility and the face-to-face encounter, these films simultaneously thwart or attenuate this ethical model, typically as a result of their recourse to genre expectation and the genre’s moral precepts. The most fitting ethical model for the rape-revenge genre is the conception of ethics as a negotiation of morality, where morality refers to that of both the socio-political context and the genre’s moral precepts. This distinction between moral stance and ethical reflexivity is central to the aims of this thesis, and in exploring such issues I draw on Michele Aaron’s model of ethical spectatorship, which focuses on notions of response and responsibility and posits ethics as being ‘all about thinking through one’s relationship to morality rather than just adhering to it’ (2007, 109). Key to the distinction of ethics from morality in Aaron’s model is the ‘prioritisation of (ethical) recognition, realisation, reflection—the stuff of agency—over (moral) prescription, proclamation and punishment—the stuff of ideology’ (Aaron 2007, 109). The genre’s moral principles are in conflict with the ethical interrogations that the contemporary films aim to explore; rather than follow through with their ethical encounters they fall back on genre conventions and deliver on genre expectations. The case studies presented here repeatedly reveal that the genre norms and conventions inherent in rape-revenge films mitigates the ethical call in these films. The way these films often import and dilute Levinasian principles is interesting, and provides insight into the interplay between genre and ethics, with ethical contemplation or negotiation also being a process of generic self-reflexivity and boundary delineation.

Ethics are at the heart of the spectator’s engagement with the rape-revenge genre for various reasons, not least because the genre inherently involves a witnessing of (typically graphic) violence, and further, the generic expectations and pleasures include this witnessing of rape and revenge. The contemporary genre is typically self-aware of the ways it positions and challenges its spectators ethically, indeed, the genre’s development is a good example of the way ‘contemporary or postmodern filmmakers increasingly exploit the contractual nature of spectatorship’, and therefore, why ethics is now even more relevant to spectatorship (Aaron 2007, 88-89). In these ways, rape-revenge has much in common with the films of the European new extremism, in which ‘questions of ethics are brought to the fore: by pushing at the limits of the watchable and the tolerable, these films involve and implicate spectators

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6 New extremism refers to a diverse body of contemporary films directed by European auteurs such as Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, Lars von Trier, and Michael Haneke, which feature ‘contentious subject matter’ and an ‘emphasis on shock effects and unpleasurable sensations’ (Horeck and Kendall 2011, 6). Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall note that, ‘Beyond the collective emphasis in these films on explicit and brutal sex, and on graphic or sadistic violence… it is first and foremost the uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator that marks out the specificity of these films’ (2011, 1). The French rape-revenge films Baise-Moi (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) and Irréversible (Gaspar Noé, 2002) are common examples of the new extremism category.
in particularly intensified ways with what is shown on screen, demanding critical interrogation and ethical and affective response’ (Horeck and Kendall 2011, 8).

Contemporary rape-revenge films, some of which also belong to this category of the European new extremism, push at similar limits and call on similar responses, engaging spectators affectively and ethically. Critical work on the new extremism highlights the intertwining of or mutual reliance between affective and ethical impact in contemporary cinema. My thesis extends some of these ideas from the study of arthouse cinema and contemporary European auteurs to genre cinema (and to American and South Korean auteurs in Chapter Two). The contemporary films’ importation of ethical engagement into the rape-revenge genre raises interesting tensions. The ethical engagement of the spectator encouraged in contemporary rape-revenge films often challenges identificatory engagements with the protagonists that are also evoked in the genre. Just as the genre’s moral precepts often win out over the ambivalent deployment of ethical reflection on these precepts, a deep tension between identificatory and ethical engagements underpins the contemporary genre (in certain ways compromising its success and its progressive politics, but in other ways being the very thing that makes the genre so compelling).

Following Creed, Clover, and Lehman, this thesis looks at the genre in terms of identification with the victimized characters. Creed shares with Clover a conception of horror spectatorship as masochistic, arguing that while identification oscillates between victim and monster, the horror film encourages greater identification with the victim position (Creed 1993, 154). Clover suggests that masochism is key to male spectatorship of the genre, but proposes that this masochistic element involves cross-identification with the fear and pain of the female victim-hero (Clover 1992, 5). Clover asserts that ‘to the extent that the revenge fantasy derives its force from some degree of imaginary participation in the act itself, in the victim position, these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal sort’ (1992, 154). However, what is really interesting here is not a gender discrepancy between protagonist and spectator, but the corporeal nature of spectatorship in the genre, and the ethical contemplation of revenge which this positioning gives access to.

This thesis seeks to expand the examination of spectatorship from questions of gender and identification to include the interesting ethical engagements that the films draw the spectator into, which as noted above, are often in tension with identificatory engagements in the contemporary films. For instance, in Chapter Four I apply Murray Smith’s theory of ‘perverse allegiance’ as a mode of character engagement (1999, 221) to The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

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7 In the contemporary genre, masochism in spectatorship arises as an interesting issue in relation to spectacles of vengeful violence against male characters. In reading Hard Candy and Descent (in Chapters Three and Five respectively), the mode of spectatorship in these moments is theorized through David Savran’s theory of contemporary American white masculinity’s ‘reflexive sadomasochism’, a fantasmatic ultimately deployed in the service of conservative ideologies, preserving the coherence and dominance of white masculinity (Savran 1996, 129).
which—alongside my exploration of the idea that the protagonist can act as the spectator’s ethical guide through the difficult spectacles of rape-revenge—helps us to more fully understand the spectator’s relationship to the protagonist, Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace).

This thesis aims to avoid assumptions about the gender of the ideal spectator; rather than address spectatorship in primarily gendered terms, it instead reframes questions about the relationship between spectator and films in line with recent developments in film theory around ethics and affect. The assumption of male spectatorship—indeed the assumption that spectatorship is primarily gendered spectatorship—has become outdated, and it is important to address other positionalities, including those of race and class. For Lehman, rape-revenge *definitionally* involves spectacularized, eroticized, violent punishment against the male body, designed for the enjoyment of the masochistic male spectator. He argues that these films ‘are nearly always made by men and for men’ (Lehman 1993, 106), but as Alexandra Heller-Nichols points out in her recent study, the notion that only men watch and enjoy rape-revenge is a false assumption (2011, 8). While the majority of rape-revenge films are directed by men, this hardly distinguishes the genre since women are underrepresented as directors in cinema generally. The demographics of the genre’s audiences have not yet been the subject of empirical study, and should not be inferred from either the gender of the directors or the films’ content.

**Affect and phenomenology**

At the same time as there has been an ‘ethical turn’ in cultural criticism, there has also been an ‘affective turn’ since the 1990s (La Caze and Lloyd 2011, 2), which again resonates with the contemporary rape-revenge genre. Of the various branches of affect theory, this thesis draws most from phenomenological film theory stemming from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, such as the work of Vivian Sobchack (1992; 2004), Jennifer M. Barker (2009), and Jane Stadler (2008). Julian Hanich outlines the value and method of phenomenology as an approach in film studies, particularly for his project on the experience of pleasurable fear in the horror and thriller genres (2010, 12-16; 38-51). He notes that in recent film theory, ‘The most interesting and prolific work on emotionality, sensuality and carnality comes from three directions: cognitivism, Deleuzian theory and phenomenology’ (Hanich 2010, 12). Hanich favours the latter method for its ‘practicability’ (2010, 15) and because it lends itself to understanding spectatorial experiences: ‘from its inception phenomenology aimed at broadening and deepening our understanding of experience’ (2010, 15). It is likewise applicable as an approach in my project on rape-revenge, since I am similarly examining the experiential characteristics and aesthetics of a genre with seemingly paradoxical emotions—that is, the pleasures of negative affects such as disgust, shame, and rage. There is an emphasis on the immediacy of experience in phenomenology, which correlates with the
efforts of filmmakers in the rape-revenge genre to convey experiences of being a victim (and sometimes a perpetrator) of sexual violence in visceral terms.

The phenomenology of rape and the rape-revenge genre provide insight into each other. My rape-revenge case studies are read in relation to the lived experience of rape trauma and responses to rape. Phenomenological accounts present conceptualizations of rape as a form of torture or terror and locate disgust, anger, and the desire for revenge within a context of embodied response to rape—such insights reflect the way rape is conveyed in the contemporary genre. Two particularly insightful personal accounts of rape and recovery are Nancy Venable Raine’s *After Silence: Rape & My Journey Back* (1999) and Cathy Winkler’s *One Night: Realities of Rape* (2002). The intensity of disgust; experiencing rape as torture and terror; and the unnerving sense of the self dissociating are outlined in Winkler’s account (2002, 11) and Raine similarly writes about the experience of objectification; the dissolution of a sense of self; and affects of rage and shame (1999, 14; 20; 84-85; 131). Their inclusion of other survivors’ accounts and research on rape and rape trauma—on how to define and deal with rape—helps their readers to process and contextualize their own narratives. Similarly, I have drawn on such sources to help understand the protagonists’ experiences; the ways their experiences are conveyed in the genre; and to gain a deeper perspective on moral relevance and the psychology of oppression (particularly in Chapter Five). This approach is also influenced by feminist ethics, where drawing on personal accounts is similarly considered a valuable methodology:

Feminist theorists are increasingly looking to first-person accounts to gain imaginative access to others’ experiences. Such access can facilitate empathy with others, which is valued by many feminist theorists as a method of moral understanding needed to complement more detached analytical reasoning.

(Brison 2002, 25)

Susan J. Brison argues that the field of aesthetics (as well as social, political, and legal philosophy) can benefit from, indeed *requires*, the illumination of victims’ perspectives on sexual violence (2002, 4), but so far phenomenological insights have not been utilized in the study of rape-revenge cinema.

At the same time as personal accounts provide insight into the genre, this thesis demonstrates how contemporary examples of the rape-revenge genre are enlightening for understanding the phenomenology of rape—this is a key aspect of their value and their audience appeal. Rape-revenge is an interesting (and arguably important) genre for its accessible exploration of how rape affects the victim’s orientation towards the world (for example, how for some victims it creates a self-consciousness towards one’s embodied orientation; or how for some it intensifies shame as an orientating state) and how it impacts on their sense of self and mode of being-in-the-world and relating to others. While a political
The analysis of rape-revenge reveals the genre's frequent conservatism and the absolute minefield it presents in terms of feminism and ethics, a phenomenological analysis balances the bleak picture because ‘a phenomenology of film experience emphasizes the radical openness and unfinished nature of both the film medium and the spectator’ (del Río, 2010, 111). While my perspective on the films under discussion is often unfavourable in terms of politics and morality, from a phenomenological angle I am convinced of the genre’s potential for understanding (and helping audiences to understand and feel) the experience and psychology of rape and responses to rape. The radical potential of the genre—albeit reached through a testing of its own limits—will become most apparent in the concluding chapter, which explores the alternative responses to rape presented in Katalin Varga and Twilight Portrait (Portret v smerkakh) (Angelina Nikonova, 2011).

**Definitional criteria and contemporary features of the genre: Straightheads case study**

The new approaches to the genre I have been proposing in this chapter stand in distinction to previous research on rape-revenge films. Despite its rapid cultural proliferation, there is a rather limited amount of critical literature on the rape-revenge genre. Some rape-revenge films, such as The Accused (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988), Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2, Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and Irréversible (Gaspar Noé, 2002), have prompted many studies, but tend to be examined in terms of other issues (such as auteurism or structure) rather than as examples of rape-revenge. Is this because of the genre’s exploitation roots? Or because it is frequently hidden in other genres? Or because, as a broad and diverse set of films, it is difficult to discuss them as a cohesive category? Or perhaps because of a more general cultural silence and confusion around rape? To date, the study of rape-revenge has generally been either an adjunct to the broader study of the representation of rape in popular culture, or embedded within the study of horror cinema. Perhaps prompted by the release of the high-profile mainstream Hollywood articulations of rape-revenge, The Accused and Thelma & Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991), rape-revenge began to be identified and described as a subgenre by film theorists such as Peter Lehman, Carol J. Clover, and Barbara Creed in the early 1990s. These theorists were not centrally concerned with these two films, rather their release provided an opportune moment to revisit and take seriously the exploitation rape-revenge films of the previous two decades, which have since become canonical. Lehman, Clover, and Creed set the agenda for the study of rape-revenge, identifying the genre characteristics and theorizing the appeal, particularly for the male spectator and particularly from a psychoanalytic perspective. For these authors, the canonical texts are I Spit on Your Grave, Ms. 45, and Deliverance (John Boorman, 1972) for the male victim variation. Thelma & Louise and
The Accused are discussed, but tend to be considered weaker examples of the genre than the earlier, classic examples.8

These key texts from the early 1990s have provided a starting point for defining the rape-revenge genre, which I will build upon and update in the following section. Lehman defines the genre through a set of 1970s and 1980s American films in which ‘a beautiful woman hunts down the men who raped her and kills them one by one, frequently reveling in the pleasure of the man’s agony when he realizes who she is and what she is about to do’ (1993, 103). He describes the B-movie cult classics, such as I Spit on Your Grave, Alley Cat (Al Valletta, Victor Ordoñez, Eduardo Palmos, 1982) and Ms. 45 as ‘the quintessential examples’ (1993, 103), but, like Read and Heller-Nicholas, recognizes the structure in a number of genres and argues that it has entered the Hollywood mainstream. Lehman defines the genre by the following characteristics: ‘rape is merely a narrative pretext’ for the spectacle of violent female vengeance; the rapes are almost always perpetrated by a gang or group of friends; the rapists are ‘typically characterized as extremely repulsive’ and draw on stereotypes of class and ethnicity; the women are almost always beautiful; there are no positive images of men; the films involve structures of erotic anticipation; and they are ‘wildly “unrealistic” by current standards of what constitutes plausible narrative development’ (1993, 107-10). This set of definitional criteria is narrow but useful for characterizing American rape-revenge films from the genre’s 1970s and early 1980s heyday, and also for comparing these classics against contemporary examples. In the set of women’s revenge films Creed discusses,

Usually the heroine takes revenge because either she—or a friend—has been raped and/or murdered by a single male or a group of men. In some films, woman takes revenge for causes other than rape: the reason, however, is almost always linked to some form of male exploitation.

(Creed 1993, 123)

This slightly broader definition of rape-revenge than Lehman’s allows for more variations in the genre. In a number of contemporary examples, rape is either visibly absent (for example, Katalin Varga) or replaced by alternative forms of female exploitation (for example, Sympathy for Lady Vengeance), so Creed’s definition allows for the inclusion of these films in the genre.

8 Clover writes of the The Accused: ‘If something gets gained in this most civilized version of the rape-revenge story, something also gets lost. There is a sense in which the third party, the legal system, becomes the hero of the piece’ (1992, 147). She suggests that I Spit on Your Grave is the repressed of The Accused; the two films are ‘in fact, high and low (and pretty and ugly) versions of one and the same story’ (Clover 1992, 150). In Clover’s reading, The Accused comes across as parasitic, in that the film ‘owes its conception, its terms, and much of its success to a lowlife ancestry that has been neatly erased in its migration from the category of horror to the category of courtroom drama’ (1992, 151). Clover considers Thelma & Louise a weak example of the genre (1992, 151n35; 235) and Lehman discounts it as belonging to the genre since ‘it avoids male fantasies of eroticizing female violence against the male body’ (1993, 106).
Many of the features of rape-revenge identified by these authors in earlier texts are displayed in more contemporary examples, but there are additional features that have evolved over the past two decades. In order to update these initial definitions of the rape-revenge genre, the key contemporary characteristics of the genre will be highlighted through the following case study of the British rape-revenge film *Straighthead* (Dan Reed, 2007). *Straighthead* is an interesting contemporary example of the genre for both its repetition and variation of the formula. It can be considered a contemporary counterpart to the original *I Spit on Your Grave*, a film described by Clover as ‘an almost crystalline example of the double-axis revenge plot so popular in modern horror: the revenge of the woman on her rapist, and the revenge of the city on the country’ (1992, 115). *Straighthead*’s formulaicness highlights key conventions of recent rape-revenge cinema—in the same way that *I Spit’s* crudeness or ‘perverse simplicity’ (Clover 1992, 119) lays bare the traits of the classic rape-revenge film—while its contemporary twists mark ways in which the genre has evolved, mutated, and hybridized with other genres.

The victim-avenger protagonist of *Straighthead* faces conflicts typical of the genre’s contemporary heroines. Heading back to London after a party in the country, Alice (Gillian Anderson) is raped by a group of men who also brutally attack her companion Adam (Danny Dyer). Alice becomes vulnerable and ‘not quite sure of who she is and where she fits in’ (Anderson interview, *Straighthead* DVD extras). Tensions grow between her and her new young boyfriend, Adam, who attempts to cope with his trauma through drug use (and eventually through committing acts of aggression and violence). Seeking justice and the resolution of these issues with her emasculated boyfriend, Alice recalls the lessons of her recently deceased father—‘he didn’t believe in turning the other cheek’—and arms herself and Adam with his guns. In the end, Alice achieves eye for an eye justice with a retaliatory rape of Heffer (Anthony Calf) with a rifle, and then takes his daughter to safety, while Adam is finally struck with a vengeful bloodlust and brutally stabs Heffer in the eye and kills the other men involved in his assault.

An ambivalent relationship to revenge is characteristic of the contemporary genre, here playing out between the two victims of the gang’s violence, Alice and Adam. Alice feels she must pursue revenge, while Adam feels defeated and resists her call to arms, not convinced that it will achieve anything (and in this way reflecting the contemporary genre’s common pessimism). When Adam suggests they can’t go around shooting people, Alice claims the necessity of justice through violence: ‘I can’t just walk away. I wish I could.’ In fact, Alice does walk away before killing Heffer (although not before raping him with the rifle) and it ends up being Adam who feels he must go all the way and kill his other assailants. Like rape-revenge heroines before her, Alice’s actions and determination are based on a belief that eye for an eye vengeance restores order or balances the scales of justice. For Alison Young, this rule of
law is genre defining: ‘Rape-revenge stories are primarily about the *lex talionis*, the notion that once rape takes place, the world is out of kilter until vengeance is carried out by the victim’ (2010, 46). Adam’s new thirst for violence threatens to put the world out of kilter again after Alice’s restoration. The cyclical nature of revenge and the forming of rapists is a dominant theme in the contemporary genre, explored here when Adam transforms into an assailant towards the end (with suggestions that he desires to rape both Heffer’s daughter Sophie, and Alice). Also, Heffer uses the excuses of bullying and victimization by the other men, and of trying to protect his daughter from rape, to try to justify his raping of Alice. The portrayal of rapists as also victims (whether prior to the rape or during the revenge upon them) is a common ethical complication of the contemporary genre.

In an ethical compromise typical of the contemporary genre, the revenge scene against Heffer has it both ways, delivering on the generic pleasures and expectations of violent vengeance but drawing a moral line on the level of acceptable retribution. Alice finds closure after raping Heffer, but Adam insists on continuing their assault by stabbing Heffer in the eye and then brutally killing his accomplices, claiming that it is his turn to do the avenging and that he hasn’t had sufficient justice for his lost eye—literally an eye for an eye. As in other revenge films, the viewer is keen for the protagonist to take revenge (here especially in the moment when Alice views Heffer through the rifle’s crosshairs and has a clear shot) but there is a questioning of revenge—and of our complicity in desiring this revenge—at the end when Adam is beating one of the gang to death with the rifle butt and then gives a direct look to camera. The former moment uses a close-up of Alice’s face and builds tension and expectation with the music; whereas we observe Adam’s brutal violence in an extreme long shot (with no music but an intensifying soundtrack of twittering birds), giving the viewer a sense of witnessing an unjustified, gruesome, and unnecessarily vicious act of revenge, which Adam challenges us to accuse him of as he walks up to the camera and stares into it. This documentary aesthetic in the final shot, positioning the spectator as a witness to violence, ostensibly calls on an ethical response, but in fact the film presents a moral stance on the acceptable level of retribution. In the director’s commentary on the DVD, Dan Reed describes the film as a parable or fable about violence—like a parable, the film does have a moral message to convey. Contemporary rape-revenge finds the issue of ‘how far is too far?’ to be a compelling one, as encapsulated in *Descent*’s (Talia Lugacy, 2007) final moments; in Salander’s vigilantism in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; and in the special effects gore in the remakes of *I Spit on Your Grave* and *The Last House on the Left*. Typically the spectator is positioned not to judge the avenger’s own violence too harshly, rather these protagonists become our ethical guide through the narrative and figures of ‘perverse allegiance’.

*Straightheads* displays a degree of homage and self-consciousness towards the rape-revenge genre. Visually this is evident in the post-rape scene when a blood-covered Adam approaches
the quiet black-clad Alice sitting on a tree stump. The mise-en-scène and film stock (or retro digital effects) reminiscent of 1970s exploitation films evoke the genre’s ‘narrative image’ or iconic visuals established in classics such as *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave*. The city versus country trope—an ideological axis key to rape-revenge, according to Clover (1992, 114-37; 160-65)—is also deliberately at play in the early scenes of the film where, as is typical in the genre, the victim-avenger is shown at home in her urban milieu (in this case central London) and then is attacked by rural degenerates when she ventures into the country. This trope is familiar from *I Spit on Your Grave*, as well as *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) and *Deliverance*. Clover’s framework of the interplay between city/country politics and gender politics is useful for analyzing Adam’s emasculated and working-class role in the film (Clover 1992, 160-61). Once a wimpy city boy following the rich city woman’s lead, Adam undergoes a victim-avenger’s transformation through his experiences in the country, becoming masculinized, disobeying Alice’s requests, and shifting from victim to perpetrator (finally living up to the masculine ideal of Alice’s recently deceased father).

Allusions to canonical rape-revenge films help to locate *Straightheads* in the genre, a common technique of contemporary rape-revenge hybrids. Another classic rape-revenge film, the cult Swedish exploitation film *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (*Thriller—en grym film*) (Bo Arne Vibenius, 1974), is referenced through the injury to Adam’s eye and the eye patch he wears. Adam’s injured eye and eye patch also denote his post-assault impotence, which points to the self-conscious use of psychoanalytic tropes and the theme of castration in rape-revenge. This characteristic of the contemporary genre will be explored in Chapter Three through two even more overt examples, *Teeth* and *Hard Candy*. Other allusions include the rape on the car bonnet as a possible reference to *Thelma & Louise*; Alice finding her necklace in the forest post-rape as a possible reference to *The Last House on the Left*; the male witness or participant’s account of the rape replete with graphic flashbacks as a possible reference to or borrowing from *The Accused*; and the final look to camera, which again may be a reference to *Thriller*, but is also an iconographic element of the contemporary genre seen in films such as *Descent*, the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave*, and *Teeth*. This genre characteristic is commonly used as part of an ethical questioning of revenge, and is explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

From the opening credits of *Straightheads* (which intercuts shots of Adam through the surveillance cameras he is installing in Alice’s house), right through to the final look to camera, there is a foregrounding of looking relations, particularly in terms of gender and

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9 One Eye, the victim-avenger of *Thriller*, loses an eye at the hands of her pimp, and her iconic eye patch worn for the rest of the film is also referenced by Elle Driver (Daryl Hannah) in *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003/2004).
ethics. There are more sophisticated explorations of the ethics of looking relations and notions of surveillance and the gaze in Descent and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, as I explore in later chapters, but Straightheads makes the theme obvious by giving Adam the occupation of a surveillance camera installer. Adam’s job similarly highlights a common focus in the contemporary updating of the genre on surveillance culture and technology as both a tool of sexual violence and a tool for its eradication. This theme is prominent in the remake of I Spit on Your Grave, Hard Candy, and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, which I address in Chapters One, Three and Four respectively. The popularization of this motif is partly a demonstration of the genre’s attempt to stay current, but is also due to the way video and surveillance equipment lend themselves thematically and visually to processes of objectification, control, scopophilia, and sexual violence.

Interestingly, director Dan Reed spent fifteen years making documentaries on conflict in places such as Kosovo, Bosnia, and South Africa, prior to directing this first feature film. In the EPK (electronic press kit) on the Straightheads DVD, Reed talks about wanting to explore the themes of where your moral centre is when there is no law, and of the pursuit of justice through violence. Such a career background is appropriate for the rape-revenge genre, a genre that numerous filmmakers have found to be an excellent medium for exploring these broad questions about violence, morality, and justice. Rape-revenge has been revived as a template for exploring retaliatory violence and the nature of violence, terror, and torture in contemporary (particularly post-9/11) socio-political contexts where these issues are topical.10 In the face of ethical questions raised in the contemporary genre, is revenge still an option for the protagonists? If the films themselves raise ethical and political issues with enacting revenge, where does this leave the rape-revenge genre, which depends on the pleasures of revenge in terms of both expectation and affect? This troubling question hangs over all of the films examined in this thesis, but will particularly be addressed in the concluding chapter, which reviews the other options the genre presents for responding to rape. Although the rape-revenge genre is a rich format in which to raise these political and ethical questions, it places certain restrictions, boundaries, and expectations on their examination, which can be narratively, politically, and ethically limiting and often results in conservative resolutions.

Straightheads reflects the genre’s streak of conservative values in terms of its understanding of rape and the solutions it poses to rape. It reflects postfeminist anxieties about unmarried, independent career women, for example, in its suggestion that if Alice had settled down with

10 Rape can be conceptualized as a form of terrorism and torture, as we see in the work of feminist ethicist Claudia Card (1996a, 1996b, 2002, 2010) and in personal accounts such as Cathy Winkler’s (2002) and Nancy Venable Raine’s (1999). This thesis draws on these conceptual frameworks to understand the phenomenon and victim’s experience of rape.
her rich suitor (who is her own age and from her own social class) then she may have escaped her fate, and in the implication that a single woman needs protection because she does not have a husband, boyfriend, or father to protect her. The conservatism of its gender politics is also displayed in its deployment of the *femme fatale* stereotype, constructing Alice as an eroticized woman who is a danger to herself and others. The victim-avenger of rape-revenge has clear affinities with the *femme fatale* of *film noir* (Read 2000, 156), and the implications of this in the contemporary genre will be discussed through *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* and *Descent* in later chapters. The conservatism of these films is often uncomfortably enforced in the films’ resolutions, here with the redemptive power of motherhood (analogous to the ending of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*), which redeems Alice not only from violence but also from her position as a single, childless career woman when she adopts Heffer’s daughter. The film’s conclusion reflects a neoconservative revalorization of motherhood, or the similar postfeminist idea that a woman is not fully a woman until she is a mother (which underpins postfeminist popular culture texts such as *Kill Bill*). In Chapter Two, I explore the postfeminist thread in rape-revenge in which transformation and redemption are achieved via maternity. The features of the contemporary rape-revenge genre identified here through *Straightheads* will be more fully explored in the detailed case studies of subsequent chapters.

**Circling the canon: chapters overview**

Having established that rape-revenge is a film genre (and a current one), and identified key characteristics, how do we then determine which films belong to it and which are most worthy of in-depth study? Genre theorists have long struggled with such questions, and it can be a particularly difficult one for rape-revenge because its members are frequently disguised and hybridized with other genres. Indeed, as we have seen, whether because of the genre’s scope and diversity (Heller-Nicholas 2011), or its supposed historical specificity (Read 2000), theorists of the genre have avoided calling it a genre at all. A useful model for delineating the rape-revenge genre is the prototype model, as outlined by Hanich:

> In reality, historical genres are categorized by way of prototypes. The viewer’s expectations are organized according to a core-periphery schema. A paradigmatic, often cited or discussed ‘core’ film inherits the status of a prototype. These prototypes are automatically recognized as best averages, because they share attributes with most members of the category. The genre prototype is responsible for evoking the viewer’s expectations of iconographic motives, character types, subject matters—or emotions. The ‘peripheral’ films, on the other hand, are grouped around the prototype because they contain less conventional characteristics and are therefore less prototypical. 

*(2010, 31)*

This style of categorization has been deployed in this thesis, with canonical films helping us to identify key genre characteristics, and the hybridized films providing some of the most
interesting examples that demonstrate how the genre is used in contemporary cinema. To gain a fuller picture of the genre, I have examined it from its core (particularly in this introduction and in Chapter One) and also from its periphery (particularly in Chapters Two, Four, and the conclusion). There have been a great deal of fascinating rape-revenge films made over the past decade; however, rather than attempt to canvass the whole genre, I have chosen a case studies approach focusing on a relatively small group of the most important, illustrative examples (those which highlight the most significant trends in the genre; those which illustrate the arguments I am making about the role of affective response and ethical engagement; and a range of countries of production) in order to balance depth with breadth.

The first chapter begins at the core, illustrating the shifts between the classic and contemporary cycles of the genre through comparisons of two canonical rape-revenge films with their recent remakes: *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972/Dennis Iliadis, 2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978/Steven R. Monroe, 2010). As canonical texts with both remakes and enduring cult status, these films attest to the enduring relevance and popularity of the genre, and can be read as a barometer of its continuities and changes. This chapter identifies key generic elements of rape-revenge instituted by these texts and teases out the political and generic implications of their representations. I suggest that these remakes reveal a cultural need to work through post-9/11 ideological questions around torture, vengeance, and their presentation as spectacle, but that the allegorical exploration is thwarted by genre conventions and clear ideological divisions reasserted by the films’ conclusions. The depictions of violence in both rape and revenge scenes are interrogated, and the impact of the slasher and ‘torture porn’ genres in the intervening years are also considered. I seek to explain why the originals became cult films, but more importantly, why they are being remade now.

Moving on from definitive, classical examples of the genre, the second chapter looks at two genre hybrids from different national cinemas which are closer to the periphery than the prototype. The chapter explores how the postfeminist emphasis on maternity affects the rape-revenge narratives of *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2* and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. While the classic rape-revenge narrative transformed the heroine from victim to avenger, these contemporary variations focus on the heroine ‘becoming mother’. This reverse transformation from avenger to mother is presented as a redemptive journey which interrupts and brings into question their revenge missions. This maternal subgenre in rape-revenge is one example of how the contemporary cycle displays ambivalence towards revenge and expresses postfeminist predicaments.

The second chapter partly relies on the feminist film theory veins of ideology, psychoanalysis, and representation, but also allows for the cross-cultural dialogue in the films to spark a
productive comparison within the chapter. The genre hybridity and the auteurist styles of Quentin Tarantino and Park Chan-Wook are key in shaping these texts and so the films are also placed in their genre, auteurist, and national cinema contexts. Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas on the face-to-face encounter are also introduced here to understand the exchange of looks in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, an approach picked up in later chapters to understand the ethical challenges found in many contemporary rape-revenge films, and the way these ethical challenges are often abandoned in the face of the genre’s moral imperative of revenge.

Chapter Three interrogates the use of the *vagina dentata* myth as a framework for the American rape-revenge films *Teeth* and *Hard Candy*. While these Hollywood semi-independent films ostensibly mock or reverse patriarchal myths, a closer analysis reveals the ways that they in fact update such myths for the twenty-first century. Just as the classic cycle of rape-revenge evoked and allayed the threat represented by second-wave feminism, these films demonstrate a similar scramble to allay the threats to American masculinity in post-9/11 and postfeminist culture. The teen *castratrices* are examples of the limited empowerment available to postfeminist heroines. Following on from the first chapter, the third chapter further explores the role of castration in rape-revenge films and contemporary American horror more broadly.

After the exploration of various rape-revenge ‘translations’ in the first three chapters—remakes, cross-cultural dialogue, and updated myths reinforced by media narratives—Chapter Four examines a blockbuster literary adaptation. The Swedish adaptation of Stieg Larsson’s novel, *The Girl With Dragon Tattoo*, provides a case study for examining how graphic violence pushes the spectator towards the advocation of individualist revenge as a response to systemic female victimhood and victimization. The film techniques utilized to solicit affective response are highlighted through comparison with the source novel, and the changes also clarify characteristics of cinema’s rape-revenge genre. Lisbeth Salander’s rape-revenge narrative taps into contemporary ambivalences towards victimhood and revenge as well as the postfeminist rejection of ‘victim feminism’. The rape and revenge scenes draw on models of ethical spectatorship in interesting ways, encouraging empathetic engagement with Salander, while also steering particular responses to the rape scenes through Salander’s example in the post-rape scenes. In this chapter I argue that while the film uses cinematic self-reflexivity to emphasize the theme of responsibility, its capacity to ethically implicate the spectator is restricted by both its adherence to thriller and rape-revenge genre conventions and its postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies.

Like *The Girl With Dragon Tattoo*, the American film *Descent* highlights generic features of contemporary rape-revenge—such as the interrogation of systematic oppression, themes of victimhood and the cyclical nature of violence, the mirroring of rape and revenge scenes, and
the use of anal rape as retaliation—and similarly opens up interesting ethical and political questions. However, *Descent* offers an ‘oppositional gaze’ on the predominantly white genre by casting its protagonist as a woman of colour and pitting her against white supremacism in an American Ivy League setting. Chapter Five brings the criticisms and insights of race theory and phenomenology to bear on the rape-revenge genre through a case study of *Descent*, exploring the film’s understanding of the nature of sexual violence and racial oppression, and the way it conveys the phenomenology of rape trauma. In presenting an important exploration of the impact of rape and racism on Latina subjectivity, but then lapsing into Hollywood’s racial stereotyping and a sadomasochistic, solipsistic crisis of white masculinity in the third act, *Descent* illustrates the way that the rape-revenge genre can make possible, and yet simultaneously limit, the exploration of important topical political, affective, and ethical matters.

The concluding chapter further ruminates on the genre’s ambivalence towards revenge, a dominant characteristic of the new breed of rape-revenge films. The ethical questioning of revenge did not kill the genre but reinvigorated it. However, if women are as capable of rape as men are and violence only breeds more violence (as some of these recent films suggest), will the rape-revenge genre implode? Can filmmakers picture a feminist response to rape that is both satisfying and ethical? The conclusion considers this question by briefly looking at two recent European films which depict alternatives to revenge in responding to rape: *Katalin Varga*, a UK/Romania co-production, and the Russian film *Twilight Portrait*. Looking back at the genre, the final chapter summarizes the effects of rape-revenge’s mainstreaming, its genre hybridity, and the trans-cultural and trans-media translations seen over the past decade or so. This thesis asserts that the genre has not expired, and although it has morphed into new directions and is often hybridized with other genres, it has, and probably will continue to, persist, be popular, and provide insights into the politics, ethics, and affects of rape and revenge.
Chapter One:

In order to illustrate the shifts between the classic and contemporary cycles of the genre, this chapter compares two canonical rape-revenge films with their recent remakes: The Last House on the Left (Wes Craven, 1972/Dennis Iliadis, 2009) and I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978/Steven R. Monroe, 2010). As canonical texts with both contemporary remakes and their own ongoing cult status, these films attest to the enduring relevance and popularity of the rape-revenge genre. This chapter sets out to identify key generic elements of rape-revenge instituted by these texts, and uses the comparison between original and remake as a barometer of the genre’s continuities and changes. In later chapters I will delve into the complexities of the genre—its more marginal, hybrid, and transnational manifestations—but I begin in this first chapter with the proposition that these films are the prototypical, or definitional, texts for the (Western) rape-revenge genre, and as such, can be used to elucidate the central features and issues of the genre.

Remaking crystallizes the process of genre repetition, so remakes are particularly useful as objects of study in the analysis of a genre. While Michael Brashinsky does not recognize Last House 1972 as a rape-revenge film, he notes that most remakes are genre films: ‘The self-conscious, referential culture of the remake, constantly in search of codes, finds a dual code in the genre film to make over: the code of the individual source and the code of its genre’ (1998, 167). Following Constantine Verevis’ approach, remaking can be understood as part of a wider intertextuality (2006, 59), and his points about the original The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) are perhaps even truer of I Spit and Last House:

Viewers who fail to recognise, or know little about, an original text may understand a new version (a remake) through its reinscription of generic elements, taking the genre as a whole (rather than a particular example of it) as the film’s intertextual base. For instance, the producers of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre [Marcus Nispel, 2003] say that the idea of remaking the seminal slasher movie was in part motivated by research showing that 90 per cent of the film’s anticipated core audience (eighteen to twenty-four year old males) knew the title of Tobe Hooper’s original but had never seen it.

(Verevis 2006, 146)

Hereafter abbreviated to Last House 1972, Last House 2009, I Spit 1978, and I Spit 2010. This useful titling convention for remakes has been adopted from Constantine Verevis’ 2006 book, Film Remakes, a key source on remakes, and is also used by Catherine Constable (2009, 23-33). This convention is designed to avoid the original/copy binary and associated hierarchization. While I do continue to also use the terms ‘original’ and ‘remake’ as a shorthand, here I add the caveat that the Last House and I Spit ‘originals’ can also be considered ‘copies’ or ‘remakes’ of other films including The Virgin Spring (Ingmar Bergman, 1960). Meir Zarchi also mentions the influence of Bravados (Henry King, 1958) and Death Wish (Michael Winner, 1974) on I Spit 1978 (DVD extras). In his article on the A Nightmare on Elm Street remake, Adam Lowenstein notes of the horror genre that ‘Most of the 1970s and 80s originals that have been remade in the 2000s were themselves heavily indebted to earlier films’ (2010, 18).
Like *Texas Chainsaw* 1974, *Last House* 1972 and *I Spit* 1978 are exploitation or ‘video nasty’ titles which are mentioned for their notoriety more often than they are actually seen, particularly by younger audiences. This suggests that fidelity is not so important for the target audience; what the remake is recreating is the original’s ‘narrative image’ as opposed to its content (although these remakes do also rather faithfully replicate the narratives). Steve Neale argues that genre is ‘an important ingredient’ in a film’s ‘narrative image’, which is an idea of a film that is widely circulated and promoted in both institutionalized and unofficial public discourse (2000, 39). For many, the ‘narrative image’ of *I Spit* 1978 is the scantily-clad, blood-soaked female avenger made iconic through the poster (which is replicated on the *I Spit* 2010 poster, but appears in neither film). This could be considered rape-revenge’s pre-sold concept, or the reduction of the genre down to a saleable image. *I Spit* 2010 does not require detailed familiarity with the original source text—indeed the spectator may only have this narrative image as a reference point—rather it banks on the cultural memory and reputation of the original for its appeal.12

Are these remakes then—along with other contemporary horror remakes such as *A Nightmare on Elm St* (Samuel Bayer, 2010) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003)—just cynical ‘rebranding exercises’ (Mark Kermode quoted in Verevis 2006, 4), simply remaking a successful narrative image and cashing in on the notoriety of the originals? Commercially, there is undoubtedly a degree of this, but I will suggest that there is more to these remakes, that they involve the re-articulation of a story that needs to be re-told. Leo Braudy’s view of remakes supports this:

> In even the most debased version, it [a remake] is a meditation on the continuing historical relevance (economic, cultural, psychological) of a particular narrative. A remake is thus always concerned with what its makers and (they hope) its audiences consider to be unfinished cultural business, unrefinable and perhaps finally unassimilable material that remains part of the cultural dialogue—not until it is finally given definitive form, but until it is no longer compelling or interesting. (1998, 331)

If it is the case that, ‘When the myth of a genre (the frontier naïveté of the western, or the apocalyptic dread of the disaster film) does not match the myth of the time, the genre fades away’ (Brashinsky 1998, 167), then these contemporary remakes indicate an ongoing relevance of the rape-revenge genre’s underlying myths. Even if the ‘copy’ is deemed inferior to the ‘original’ (as is often the case), remakes are a rich site for exploring the genre, the epoch, and these underlying myths or ‘unfinished cultural business’. So this chapter asks: beyond obvious commercial reasons, why are these films being remade, and why now? Which

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12 This seems an ideal situation for a remake—a marketable product with the artistic freedom to depart from the original without the negative comparison which usually comes with remakes of beloved originals (the wrath faced by Gus Van Sant’s *Psycho* (1998) remake is a case in point, see Verevis 2006, 58).
elements of the genre are specific to the time of their production and which are the enduring elements? How are the remakes in dialogue with their originals, with their political contexts (including war and feminism), and with their genres? In a post-9/11 American context, rape-revenge remakes are adopted as a format for working through ideological issues around revenge, retribution, and family values. The case studies in this chapter demonstrate how the format can be shaped to align with an American political neoconservative trend towards promoting family values and clear ideological divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This ideological timeliness converges with rape-revenge’s generic and aesthetic currency in contemporary cinema to help explain the revival of the genre’s popularity in American cinema.

Between the production of these 1970s classic rape-revenge films and their remakes over thirty years later, rape-revenge had been ‘remade’ many times, reasserting some conventions, reshaping others. The following comparisons of these two more direct, explicit remakings will elucidate the key changes in this period and identify the features that continue to be core. It is important to locate the changes in both socio-political and genre contexts. The originals can be located in terms of 1970s exploitation cinema and ‘video nasties’, while the remakes have strong ties to the torture porn genre, a genre which has emerged in the past decade. How do these genres inflect the meanings of the films, in particular their representations of violence? The revival of rape-revenge in contemporary Hollywood horror might be attributable to the fact that the rape-revenge narrative lends itself well to being overlaid with torture porn gore, in that rape is a form of torture and its eye for an eye vengeance involves other spectacles of violence or body horror. Deeper convergences with this genre can be seen through Adam Lowenstein’s reconceptualization of torture porn as ‘spectacle horror’, defined as ‘the staging of spectacularly explicit horror for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as shock or terror, but without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development or historical allegory’ (2011, 42). In a similar way to how torture porn theorists such as Lowenstein (2011; 2005) and Jason Middleton (2010) outline their respective genre’s capacity and limitation in working through national/historical tensions and traumas allegorically, this chapter examines how contemporary rape-revenge feeds into the working through of American post-9/11 ideological and ethical questions around torture, revenge, and witnessing violence in the ‘war on terror’.

The originals and remakes confront and challenge the spectator in slightly different ways, and in order to understand the pleasures and displeasures offered by the genre, this chapter will undertake a close examination of their violent spectacles in both rape and revenge scenes. Analogous to Lowenstein’s finding that attractions tend to trump identification in the spectatorship mode of ‘spectacle horror’ (2011, 43-44), we find that in these remakes,
spectatorial expectation revolves not so much around the question of how far the victim-avenger will go in taking revenge, but around the more genre-savvy and spectacle-hungry question of how far the filmmakers will go in depicting it. If identification or empathy with the rape victim is not (or no longer) key, what implications does this have for the politics of representing rape? And why is it that we still want to see revenge enacted? At the level of cultural allegory, the remakes’ spectacles of violent vengeance seem recuperative as opposed to critical—celebrating rather than condemning violence, and reassuring the audience rather than implicating them in ethical questions raised by American actions in the ‘war on terror’. These factors related to the particular cultural/political moment are shored up at the level of genre—the imperative for revenge and the spectacle of violence are strong generic demands, which can undermine socio-political critique around issues of sexual violence and (allegorically) around issues of retribution and torture in the ‘war on terror’.

The Last House on the Left

To avoid fainting, keep repeating "It's only a movie...It's only a movie..."  
(tagline for Last House 1972)
If bad people hurt someone you love, how far would you go to hurt them back?  
(tagline for Last House 2009)

The taglines for Last House 1972 and Last House 2009 encapsulate the films’ key sites of difference: their relationships to violence and their relationships to their respective cultural contexts. The famous and frequently imitated tagline for Last House 1972 flags a disparity between the films’ uses of violence and horror: where the original teased potential audiences with the realism of the violence, challenging them to withstand a viewing and to confront its allegorical engagement with historical trauma, the remake makes blatantly obvious that the violence is that of ‘only a movie’ by presenting pleasurable spectacles of cartoonish and gory violence (which contrasts with the news photography aesthetic of Last House 1972). Last House 1972 also begins with a ‘true story’ epigraph, unimaginable in a remake: ‘The events you are about to witness are true. Names and locations have been changed to protect those individuals still living.’

The advertising and the original’s epigraph set up different modes of viewer reception between the two films. From the outset, Last House 1972 signals to the audience that they should expect a challenge and confrontation, and while the remake similarly promises to push viewers’ boundaries, this time it is in terms of the pleasures of a Hollywood patriarchal revenge fantasy and the spectacle of screen violence. While the remake is on the surface a faithful one, a closer look reveals distinct ideological agendas between the two films. The contrasts point to the adaptability of the genre, suggesting one reason for its endurance into the twenty-first century.

13 See Lowenstein (2005, 127) on the purpose and effect of such ‘true story’ title cards in exploitation cinema of the period.
Last House 1972 is a story in two parts, both with climactic, brutal scenes of violence. In the first half, Mari Collingwood (Sandra Cassell) heads to a concert in the city with her friend, Phyllis Stone (Lucy Grantheim), on her seventeenth birthday. Seeking to buy some marijuana in the city, the girls meet Junior, who takes them into an apartment where the Stillo gang trap them and begin their torment. The four gang members—Krug (David A. Hess), Weasel (Fred Lincoln), Sadie (Jeramie Rain) and Junior (Marc Sheffler)—kidnap the girls, then when their car breaks down by the woods near Mari’s home, they continue to intimidate, humiliate, and rape Phyllis and Mari, and finally murder them. In the second half of the film, the gang arrives at the Collingwoods’ house and asks for help as their car has broken down. Dr and Mrs Collingwood (Gaylord St. James and Cynthia Carr) provide them with a meal and beds for the night, but later discover that the gang have murdered their daughter and then proceed to take their violent revenge. Last House 2009 replicates this plot, with a few minor but illuminating changes. Perhaps the most significant of these is that both Mari and Junior (renamed Justin) survive. While Mari is too badly injured to play any role in the revenge and is seen very little in the second half, both her and Justin’s survival (and his switch to the good guys’ side) gives the film a more uplifting and redemptive ending. While Last House 1972 ends on a bleak and bloody freeze-frame of Mari’s parents after they have killed the gang members, Last House 2009 ends with an image of the family—Mom, Dad, Mari, and their new surrogate son Justin—restored and heading to safety on their boat over the lake.

Roger Ebert’s review of Last House 1972 in Film Comment (July-August 1978) was prophetic: ‘It’s a neglected American horror exploitation masterpiece on a par with Night of the Living Dead. As a plastic Hollywood movie, the remake would almost certainly have failed. But its very artlessness, its blunt force, makes it work’ (quoted in Wood 2003b, 108). In certain respects, the 2009 remake is this plastic Hollywood movie. The remake has a blandness and an insularity which disappoints against the impact of the original. The raw power of the violence; the film’s bleak condemnation of violence and implication of the spectator; the complex empathies it evokes; and its engagement with its cultural context (particularly the counterculture and opposition to the Vietnam War) are what distinguished the original film and established its ongoing cult status. The remake tends to lack these qualities with its one-dimensional characters; its bland po-faced cast; its disturbingly unaffecting violence; its lack of socio-political critique (regarding violence, class, the family, or the law); its emphasis on family values; and its neat adherence to Hollywood genre conventions. The contrast might be summed up with a significant icon change in the remake—Mari wears a necklace from her dead brother Ben (inscribed ‘Always Go For Gold Your Big Bro BEN’) rather than the peace symbol necklace she wears in the original. This necklace represents the shift from Mari’s construction as a sexually curious teenager in the original to a mourning sister in the remake, and it also serves as a marker of the remake’s broader depoliticization and return to family values.
The remake is a product of the political and generic changes in the intervening decades traced by Tony Williams:

*Whereas many 1970s horror films exhibit a productive crisis revealing tensions between sociohistorical chaos and bankrupt systems of meaning, their 1980s descendants attempt to assert patriarchal power by stifling the genre’s relationship to its crisis-ridden cultural context. The poverty of meaning contained in many of the prolific slasher/stalker films echoes an era turning away toward conservative ideologies.*

(1996, 211)

The remake displays traces of this 1980s conservative turn in horror, similarly reasserting patriarchal values. Further, there is a return to the moral absolutism of *The Virgin Spring* (Ingmar Bergman, 1960)—the film upon which Craven based his *Last House 1972*—which finds a home in the contemporary American cultural context of the ‘war on terror’ and the prominence of the religious right in public life. In the following section, I will analyze the key scenes of rape and revenge, and the contrasting endings of *Last House 1972* and *Last House 2009*, focusing on their representations of violence and the positioning of the spectator in relation to this violence. Closely comparing the two versions and contextualizing their differences in relation to political, ideological and genre shifts will point to some of the broader changes in rape-revenge and spectatorial engagement with screen violence. As we will see, the aesthetics of violence have changed from brutal realism to gory spectacle, but the rape-revenge narrative continues to horrify, fascinate, and to be a useful format for exploring contemporary gender or military politics and the ethics of revenge.

**Rape Scenes: Realism and Relief vs. Conventions and Cuts**

The British Board of Film Classification’s (BBFC) decisions on both *Last House* films are revealing of changing standards regarding the depiction of sexual violence and the ongoing power of the original film. *Last House 1972* was refused classification up until 2002, when it was classified ‘18’ on the condition that 31 seconds of cuts were made.\(^{14}\) It was not until 2008 that it was classified ‘18’ uncut, when the board recognized that torture porn films such as the *Saw* series had surpassed the violence of the original.\(^{15}\) In contrast to the original’s long battle with the BBFC, the remake was passed ‘18’ ‘for strong bloody violence and strong sexual violence’, uncut because ‘the focus on the girl’s anguish and the lack of sexualised nudity or graphic sexual detail means that the scene did not “eroticise or endorse sexual assault” and

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\(^{14}\) The BBFC commanded: ‘Cuts required to humiliation of woman forced to urinate, violent stabbing assault on woman and removal of her entrails, and woman’s chest carved with a knife.’ The 2002 decision on *Last House 1972* can be found on the BBFC website: http://www.bbfc.co.uk/BVF060117.

\(^{15}\) For a more detailed history of *Last House 1972*’s journey through the classification system, see the case study on the SBBFC website: http://www.sbbfc.co.uk/CaseStudies/The_Last_House_On_The_Left.
therefore did not require intervention beyond the ‘18’ category. While there are many factors in a censorship decision, I would suggest that the use of realism and the breaking away from horror conventions in the depiction of rape is a major factor in the impact of the scene and the consequent controversy surrounding the original.

The rape scene in the woods escalates from humiliation to rape, stabbing, dismemberment, mutilation, more rape, and a final shooting. The depiction of these acts of violence have been variously described as realistic and brutal, raw and unflinching. Joe Tompkins argues that ‘the film’s unrepentant, intensely graphic depictions of torture and rape run directly in the face of traditional stylistic codes for representing screen violence’ (2010, 98), which I suggest significantly contributes to the force of the scene. In his book on Wes Craven, John Kenneth Muir describes the scene’s realism and its consequences:

The controversial rape scene, the centrepiece of this powerful film, was purposely edited not with over-the-top “horror” film lingo (extreme high and low angles, crazy close-ups and Wagnerian music pumping on the soundtrack). Instead it was photographed and cut together from the perspective of an observer watching the events in medium and long shots. The rape was determinedly not stylish and Craven never backed away from the intrinsic horror of the events... Instead of flinching and cutting away to reaction shots or a scene more palatable, Craven let audience members fully experience the events as if they were indeed participants. As a result, the film simultaneously caused feelings of voyeurism, shame and rage in its viewers. (1998, 11-12)

Although Muir describes the camera’s gaze as unflinching, it is not true that the film resists cutting away to more palatable scenes. One of the most interesting aspects of the rape scene is its intratextual acknowledgement of how difficult it is to watch, which self-consciously provides relief for the viewer with music and crosscutting to humorous scenes of the bumbling cops. For example, a melancholy song accompanies the scene in which the girls are commanded to ‘make it with each other’ and Phyllis helps Mari to undress and comforts her as she cries. The torment conveyed in this scene might be unbearable but for this song, which changes the tone and is foregrounded on the soundtrack to remind the viewer ‘it’s only a movie’. The song’s lyrics are about the search for love, finding someone to ‘guide you, protect you, hold you and love you’, which conveys the tragedy of Mari’s experience after talking to Phyllis earlier about how she imagined that ‘making it’ with the members of Bloodlust would be ‘just really soft, like in a whole bunch of cotton... soft and gentle... really sensitive, not wild and gory’. The disjunction between the popular folk songs and the brutal events on screen has a similar effect to the crosscutting between the rape scene and the comedy cop scenes (in

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16 The BBFC’s classification decision on Last House 2009 is available on their website: http://www.bbfc.co.uk/AFF256738.
17 Mark Kermode suggests that Last House 1972’s long struggle with the BBFC is part of the censor’s double standard for American exploitation and European art cinema, where the latter receives greater leniency for graphic depictions of sexual violence (2001, 26). This is a convincing argument but does not explain why the remake faced so little resistance in its application for classification.
which the two ineffectual cops eat cake, play checkers, and attempt to get a lift after their car runs out of gas). These sitcom-parody scenes offer respite between the acts of violence in the woods, and also truncate the violence. For instance, a conversation at the police station is inserted between the scene of the girls undressing and Phyllis’ request for permission to put her clothes back on, in effect censoring seeing the girls ‘make it with each other’. This technique circumvents both the voyeurism and the horror the spectator might have experienced in viewing the full scene, which Muir describes above. However, I suggest that these techniques should not be considered distancing devices which release the spectator from implication or negative affects such as shame; rather, the film thwarts its own nature as an ‘exploitation’ film and increases viewers’ empathy with Mari by underscoring the brutality of rape through the contrasts (music/visuals; rape scene/bumbling cop scene). The music and crosscutting do not undermine or trivialize the impact of the scene’s violence, rather they underscore the impact of it by self-consciously providing temporary relief from the painful scene it is representing. Neither of these techniques are replicated in the remake, which creates significant structural and tonal differences between the two films, and points to a different relationship with the spectator.

Although the remake met the approval of the BBFC, I disagree with their assessment that it does not eroticize sexual assault and positively conveys the girls’ anguish. The remake dispenses with the more ‘tasteless’, extrinsic acts of violence in the rape scene, such as Krug commanding Phyllis to ‘piss your pants’, Sadie handling Phyllis’ internal organs after they stab her to death, and Krug carving his name into Mari’s chest with a knife. The scene is condensed but retains the chase and stabbing of Paige/Phyllis and the rape and shooting of Mari. The camerawork and editing fragment Mari’s body, objectifying her during her rape rather than conveying the experience of her terror. The camera voyeuristically roves up and down her body, lingering on her naked flesh—it seems to be taking cues from pornography conventions as much as horror. The visuals are stylized and rhythmic, and are accompanied by a porn soundtrack: Mari’s cries and a slapping sound and no music. In short, I reacted with greater disgust at the graphic and affecting original, but with greater offence at the sanitized, aestheticized, and sexualized remake. The original’s brutal violence makes it difficult to watch, but the remake’s failure to convey, and thereby acknowledge, the violence of rape in its stylized montage makes it a more distasteful representation. My response is undoubtedly shaped by feminist politics of representation and the purpose of the scenes. *Last House 1972* engages with second-wave feminism, displays its influence, and conveys feminist ideas about rape (even simply the gravity of the act), which is typical of the rape-revenge genre in the 1970s, and indeed this engagement goes some way to explaining the existence of the genre in the 1970s. *Last House 2009*, on the other hand, seems oblivious to the vast feminist film criticism in the interim decades, either unaware or unconcerned that its representation of rape not only fails to convey the gravity of rape or the victim’s experience of rape, but also
treats the female body voyeuristically and fetishistically during rape, both denying the rape victim’s subjectivity and objectifying her. This is in line with Adam Lowenstein’s findings about the renouncing of politics within

the horror remake phenomenon of the 2000s. The new Nightmare and its brethren (particularly the reduxes of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Last House on the Left) often remember the genre-coded sensations of horror generated by the originals, but just as often forget how that horror was embedded in ideas of community that provided the films with a cultural and political urgency.

(2010, 18)

The early scene in the woods with Mari talking to Phyllis about how her breasts filled out over the winter and ‘I feel like a woman for the first time in my life’, which conveys her awareness of her own sexuality and desires, is cut from the remake. This is significant because in the original, 'The moment involves the spectator in an intimate relationship with her that makes objectification impossible’ (Wood 2003b, 113). There is a lack of this development of a spectator-protagonist relationship in the remake. Early scenes retain a little of the family banter but Mari and Paige/Phyllis’ interactions are reduced to a scene in a general store which privileges Justin’s point-of-view over the girls’ point-of-view. Mari hardly speaks in the general store scene, which focuses more on introducing Paige and Justin’s characters. The voyeuristic point-of-view shots of the girls from Justin’s position in the storeroom, and his point-of-view shot of his blood-stained cash, establish his perspective more strongly, and this carries over into the rape scene. The only depth Mari is allowed in the remake is to mourn her dead brother, Ben. Ben’s spectre over the opening scenes—and the lack of banter about Mari’s developing ‘tits’ or her desire to ‘make it’ with the band Bloodlust seen in the original—establish Mari as a mourning sister rather than a teenage girl on the cusp of adult sexuality. Justin/Junior, the junior member of the gang and Krug’s son, is linked to Ben through the face-to-face connection he makes with Mari on the motel bed as she tells Ben’s story, and through his later role as surrogate brother/son in the Collingwood family.18 This linkage shuts down the possibility of Mari being allowed sexual desires for Justin. The remake suppresses Mari’s sexuality; she acquires a replacement brother at the end of the film and the family is restored—neither violence nor her sexuality succeeds in threatening the family unit.

The remake’s failure to establish Mari as anything more than asexual sister/daughter prior to the rape affects the impact of the rape scene. Compare it to the original where:

The rape is not sexy or erotic. Instead, it is heart-wrenching. The audience watches as two lovely girls, well-developed by Craven as sweet people by this time, are tortured.

18 This link between Ben and Justin is signified by Justin wrapping the necklace around his hot chocolate mug, the action which signals to Mrs Collingwood that the gang were involved in her rape and assault and that he wants to redeem himself, switching over from being the son in the ‘bad’ family to the replacement son in the ‘good’ family.
The result? The audience feels sickened by their earlier voyeuristic impulse to see more.

(Muir 1998, 51)

In the remake, conversely, the voyeuristic impulse to see more instead finds a pay-off in the rape scene. Where the original used a news photography aesthetic to achieve its gritty realism, the remake’s aesthetics are closer to pornography, making the rape slick and erotic. Empathy is harder to find because, as one reviewer describes, ‘The performances are generally lacking in bite. Sara Paxton’s Mari is so cool and composed during much of her ordeal that one’s anxiety is frankly diluted’ (Thrower 2009, 69). Conveying the horror of rape is crucial in rape-revenge films because it motivates and attempts to justify the protagonist’s brutal acts of revenge in the later scenes. The failure to either induce or convey the horror of rape is both a generic and feminist political failure.

Reflecting the British censors’ approval of how the remake conveys the girls’ anguish, the American theatrical version retains Mari’s one subjective point-of-view shot during the rape which is omitted from the unrated version. This point-of-view shot shows Paige lying on the ground in the distance and is out of focus around the edges of the frame, perhaps conveying the trauma of Mari’s experience and the potential for losing consciousness during it. Instead of cutting between Mari’s anguished face and her point-of-view shot of Paige, the unrated version cuts between Mari’s anguished face and shots of Francis, Krug, and Sadie watching her. This change is revealing and significant, as it illustrates how an acceptable portrayal of rape is one which conveys the experience from the victim’s perspective, rather than one which structures the victim as object, watched by rapists and spectators alike. However, this one point-of-view shot in the theatrical version is tokenistic, and it is important to note that the primary function of point-of-view shots in Last House (both original and remake) is not to direct the spectator to empathize with the victim. For instance, the original has several shots from Phyllis’ point-of-view: from her position in the boot of the car when Krug opens it and she bites him, and when she is running through the forest to escape the gang (the latter replicated in the remake). However, there is also a point-of-view shot from Sadie’s position when Phyllis hits her with a rock. This suggests that the point-of-view shots are not necessarily used to align the spectator with the victim, but simply to heighten the shock moments of horror by using a more embodied/subjective perspective. There are parallels here with Lowenstein’s reading of Hostel’s severed hand scene, where the director uses multiple point-of-view shots to establish identification with Paxton (a protagonist escaping his torturers) but then ‘abandons identification for attractions’ (2011, 45). This transition from identification to spectacle horror is a challenging aspect of torture porn, and of the

articulation of rape-revenge in this mode. Depicting rape as a carnivalesque attraction goes against the rape-revenge convention of developing the spectator’s identification with, or empathy for, the rape victim—an important step in the rape-revenge narrative for motivating the revenge section of the film. The remake’s rape scene puts the spectator in a position of imagining being forced to witness or participate in a rape, as opposed to the position of empathy with Mari that the original leaned towards in using the melancholy song, for example.20

On the level of cultural allegory, does the remake achieve the same aim that Lowenstein argues of the original, which ‘strives to fulfill the hype of its ad by pushing its viewers “too far”—shocking them into a recognition of their own private complicity in the violence they have projected onto a monstrous public other’ (2005, 123)? The contemporary allegory the remake exploits is the ethical dilemmas in committing or witnessing acts of violence by one’s compatriots in the ‘war on terror’, in particular, the historical trauma or national debates over the American military’s torture of detainees at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. A similar subtext appears in many torture porn films, and in Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005), which is examined in Chapter Three. My concern with this working through of historical/national trauma is that it takes place at the expense of an exploration of rape trauma as a phenomenological experience—which is politically and generically key to contemporary rape-revenge. Consider, for instance, how there is much greater focus on Justin’s response and struggle than Mari’s during the remake’s rape scene. As I have mentioned, the privileging of his perspective is established in the general store scene, and in the rape scene his trauma of witnessing is given at least equal weight to Mari’s traumas of being raped and watching her friend being stabbed to death. For instance, shots of Justin’s innocent and confused face when Krug commands ‘Are you ready to be a man?’ directly precede Mari’s rape, and when Justin is forced to participate, the roving camera takes position in the gang’s circle around Mari’s body. Mari’s fragmentated body is an object which Justin is being forced to touch by Krug’s controlling grip. The spectator is brought closer to Mari’s experience when the camera drops to ground level after Paige’s death, and inserts two shots from Mari’s point-of-view (but only in the theatrical version of the film, as noted above), but facial close-ups of Justin continue to emphasize his perspective and experience. The scene also ends with the gang returning to collect Justin after they’ve killed Mari, and he

20 Last House 1972 does also convey Junior’s position as an ambivalent participant, using his role as a conduit for the spectator’s difficult position as witness. However, Last House 2009 privileges this perspective further, and also gives Justin the transformation narrative usually taken up by the female protagonist in rape-revenge. Initially a victim of Krug’s bullying, and a passive witness to their violence against the girls, Justin shows that he is ‘ready to be a man’ later in the film when he cocks a gun at Krug’s neck, saving Dr Collingwood’s life. This privileging of the innocent male witness, and the focus on his courage to speak up, is also seen in The Accused (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988), for which it is often criticized by feminist writers (Clover 1992, 149-50; Horeck 2004, 100-101; Young 2010, 55-56). Carol Clover considers The Accused a weaker example of the rape-revenge genre because it makes a third party the hero of the piece (1992, 147).
still sits passively by the rock as he did earlier, now crying. Here it seems that, as Lowenstein argues of the original, viewers are encouraged to see themselves as implicated in the historical trauma accessed by the film (2005, 126), and to follow Justin’s redemptive narrative and transformation into the Collingwoods’ replacement son. Although Last House 2009 hints at a possible interesting revision of the privileging of male proxy avengers by keeping Mari alive, she is not given a role in the revenge, instead spending the second half of the film lying wounded on the Collingwoods’ coffee table and then in their boat. Indeed, it seems she is kept alive in the remake purely to continue the spectacle of violence against her body in a gory scene in which Dr Collingwood tends to her bullet wound and drains blood from her lungs—she is an object for ‘spectacle horror’ as opposed to an active victim-avenger with whom the spectator identifies.

Castrate vs. InSinkErate

The contrasting methods of revenge against Weasel/Francis again highlight changes in the genre and in representations of violence between 1970s exploitation and post-2000 torture porn films. There is an amping up of both the comedy and the gore, the latter usefully defined by Isabel Cristina Pinedo as ‘the explicit depiction of dismemberment, evisceration, putrefaction, and myriad other forms of boundary violations with copious amounts of blood’ (1997, 18). In one of the most notorious scenes in Last House 1972, Weasel is lured outside to the lake by Mrs Collingwood, where she castrates him with her teeth while fellating him. Despite having just woken from a nightmare in which his teeth are knocked out with a hammer and chisel by Mrs and Mr Collingwood (clearly a reference to castration), Weasel is so sure of himself that he is not suspicious of Mrs Collingwood’s seduction. His vulnerability increases as Mrs Collingwood ties his hands behind his back and then ‘accidentally’ catches the skin of his ‘poor little fellow’ as she undoes his zipper. The castration is humorous because he has built himself up and is so cocky to think she desires him—‘I could make love to a looker like you with my hands tied behind my back,’ he boasts, ‘I’m so super’—but also because Mrs Collingwood’s behaviour is unexpected of this middle-class mother. Although subtle in terms of what is shown on screen, the moment is shocking, particularly because, ‘Turning the tables of sexual violence on men seldom happened in films at this time’ (Laity 2007, 192). By now it is frequently seen in rape-revenge; protagonists sexually assault and/or castrate their rapists in many films discussed in this thesis including Descent (Talia Lugacy, 2007), Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007), The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor) (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009), Teeth (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), and Hard
**Candy.** However, interestingly, although the castration is a notorious and climactic moment in the original, it is excised from the remake.²¹

Mrs Collingwood’s seduction of Francis/Weasel is retained in the remake, but it is more subtle, ambiguous, and not followed through. It is difficult to tell if they are flirting or threatening each other, and Francis is not the simple, cocky dupe of the original. As Francis walks from the kitchen to the living room he sees Mari lying on the table still alive. There is one close-up shot of Mari’s face looking at him, but the film quickly returns to focus on her parents’ revenge. Mrs Collingwood hits Francis over the head with a bottle of wine, cutting short a potential moment of guilty realisation for Francis when he comes face-to-face with what the gang has done to Mari. She stabs him with a kitchen knife and they struggle, then Dad comes in and re-breaks Francis’ broken nose. This is a funny moment, delicious in its revenge, because it was set up earlier in the film when Dr Collingwood kindly reset Francis’ broken nose after the gang arrived at their house saying they had been in a car accident. The re-breaking of Francis’ nose, shown in close-up, is also a flinch moment—it is pain you can imagine, even empathetically feel. This nose-breaking is a transitional point in the scene—a moment of visceral violence mixed with comedy, it leads into the comic modality of the rest of the scene.

In contemporary Hollywood cinema, the spectacle of violence is often accompanied by ‘distancing frameworks’ such as genre conventions, comedy, or ‘the exaggeration and/or heavily-stylized aestheticization of violence’ to make it palatable or pleasurable (King 2004, 129). The comic modality, and other distancing techniques, ‘can permit the viewer to remain detached, to enjoy the spectacle of violent antics or violent destruction without any feeling of implication’ (King 2004, 130). Such a deployment of screen violence may be at cross-purposes to spectatorial implication in the cultural allegory, instead arriving as a form of relief in the face of ethical questions generated by the allegory and the graphic violence. The revenge scene develops increasingly extreme yet cartoonish violence, becoming a kind of live action version of a Tom and Jerry cartoon, or *The Itchy and Scratchy Show,* or the animated opening scene of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988) (in which Roger Rabbit endures all manner of violent kitchen accidents). Dr and Mrs Collingwood try to drown Francis in dishwasher, creating humour through the incongruence of brutal violence and the homely middle-class domestic sphere. They turn on the InSinkErator and blood fills the

²¹ Despite the fact that the remake represses the castration that the original is (in)famous for, the other various acts of violence enacted against Francis—his broken nose and InSinkErated hand, which I will shortly discuss—symbolically evoke castration. The original represented castration symbolically in Weasel’s dream about his teeth being knocked out, but then explicitly when Mrs Collingwood bites him during fellatio. The original was self-conscious about psychoanalytic ideas, as indicated by the dream, whereas in the remake castration is not acknowledged but repressed and transferred (to nose and hand). Similarly, while Sadie has her throat cut and is drowned by Mrs Collingwood in the original, in the remake she faces the more symbolic death of being shot through the eye.
dishwater as Francis’ hand is churned up. Francis shakes and screams and finally Dr Collingwood ends it by spearing a hammer into the back of his head. This gruesome end to Francis’ torture is so excessive and camp that it prompts the viewer to laugh with both incredulity and relief. This comic modality is used in other rape-revenge films; in Chapter Three I will discuss how comedy eases the castration anxiety aroused in Teeth and Hard Candy. At the end of the scene, covered in blood, Mrs Collingwood holds her hand to her mouth and she and her husband comfort each other. Their half-dead daughter Mari seems to have been completely forgotten by both her parents and the film at this stage. Instead we follow Mum (with her kitchen knife) and Dad (with a poker from the fireplace) to the guesthouse to enjoy the spectacle of revenge on the rest of the gang. The establishment of a comic modality and a style of extreme yet cartoonish violence allows any sense of implication (in either the film’s cultural allegory or the represented rape trauma) to be abandoned for other generic pleasures of vengeance, violence, and spectacle.

The socio-political criticism (ostensibly) behind the violence in the original is not remade—indeed cannot be remade—in the 2009 version. The use of gore as metaphor in the original derived its effectiveness from a particular social and cinematic period, as Craven points out:

> There was an initial stage in horror cinema, during which The Last House on the Left was made, where gore stood for everything that was hidden in society. Guts stood for issues that were being repressed, so the sight of a body being eviscerated was exhilarating to an audience, because they felt, “Thank God, it’s finally out in the open and slopping around on the floor”. But that gets very old very fast...

(Craven quoted in Robb 1998, 24)

Is the ‘war on terror’ to torture porn what the Vietnam War was to late 1960s/early 1970s American horror cinema? Just as ‘Vietnam lurks as an absent factor that structures Last House’s violent excessiveness’ (Williams 1996, 138), the ‘war on terror’ correspondingly lurks as an absent factor that structures the remake’s violent excessiveness, however, I suggest that these contexts structure the spectacles of violence in distinct ways. The difference is that while Craven sought to condemn this violence and confront the audience with it, Iliadis celebrates violence and reassures his audience with it. While the violence in the remake is graphic and gory, it is less confrontational than the original because it lacks realism and the implication of the spectator. The remake’s challenge to the audience is not one of witnessing traumatic violence but one of spectating a gory display of violence. In its allusion to American military retaliation and torture through torture porn conventions, the treatment of violence can be understood to serve a conservative cultural or political function,

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22 The degree to which the original is successful in this has been debated, but nevertheless Craven has stated this as his intention: ‘At the moment it gets violent, I wanted to make it very real, not swerving away, fading to black or dissolving or seeing a shadow do it, but just looking right at people at the moment they did it. That was very subversive and very threatening to people’ (quoted in Robb 1998, 25). Craven saw his film as ‘operating on a very, very intense level of confrontation with the audience’ (quoted in Robb 1998, 26).
affectively making this violence seem both justified and palatable rather than disturbing and ethically problematic. The allegorical violence reassures the audience because it is an entertaining spectacle supported by narrative justification and closure. The torture porn genre does have the capacity for social/national critique in its allusions to the ‘war on terror’—for example, Jason Middleton reads Hostel (Eli Roth, 2005) as ‘a form of cultural problem solving’ (2010, 1)—but ultimately this is not the purpose of the spectacle of excessive violence in Last House 2009. The remake does not follow Craven’s lead in problematising violence, rather, as Sight and Sound’s Stephen Thrower points out:

Iliadis (reflecting a very different US war experience?) goes in the opposite direction here, turning violent retribution into a punch-the-air affirmation of right and virility. His finale’s morally repugnant ‘up’ note owes little to Craven’s original and more to such masturbatory vengeance fantasies as Michael Winner’s Death Wish. (2009, 70)

As Thrower’s review suggests, this contrast between the two versions is further accentuated in their final moments.

The Endings: The Road Leads to Nowhere

The comedy of violence in the middle-class home I described above does echo the parents’ revenge in the original, in that they booby-trapped the house, used excessive weapons (like a chainsaw) and had theatrical showdowns between Mr Collingwood and Krug, and Mrs Collingwood and Sadie. However, the original’s revenge half builds not towards comedy or catharsis but, through the crosscutting of these two battles, towards a bleak condemnation of violence. After Weasel’s castration, it is Mr Collingwood’s turn to take revenge on a gang member, and he has a fist fight with Krug in the living room. During this fight, Junior enters and shoots at his father but misses. Krug bullies his crying and shaking son into turning the gun on himself, yelling repeatedly ‘Blow your brains out!’ until Junior does so. The two remaining gang members face off with the two parents: Mrs Collingwood wrestles with Sadie in the autumn leaves outside and then slashes Sadie’s face, forcing her to sink under the water.

Similar to Middleton, L. Andrew Cooper describes the cultural critique at work in the canonical torture porn series Saw and Hostel (2010, 184-207), noting the hypocrisy in their critiques: “the critique itself is vulnerable to critique: just as some anti-abortion activists use violence to make a point about the violence of abortion, the Saw films use violence to make a point about hypocrites who use violence to make a point about violence. If the films themselves offer a critique about the excesses of moralizers, they also relish those same excesses. If the films preach about hypocritical preachers, they also are hypocritical preachers. This connection allows the films not to convey moral messages, but to reflect on the pervasive moral contradictions in contemporary American politics, from the anti-abortion movement to George W. Bush’s “war on terror,” a war fought against people who kill to spread their values in order to spread the American value of democracy. Saw delivers self-knowledge to American film-goers by making Jigsaw a lens on American politics, or at least on the self-contradictory politics of the American right” (2010, 205). Middleton’s and Cooper’s work on these torture porn films points to the limitations on critiquing torture while simultaneously indulging in the genre’s central pleasure of viewing graphic displays of torture. Likewise for rape-revenge, the condemnation of rape may be undermined by the graphic depiction of rape and the genre’s pleasure in violence.
water of the pool; and Mr Collingwood chases Krug around the living room with a chainsaw. *Last House 1972* crosscuts between these two climactic struggles, and at the moment before the parents kill the gang members those two bumbling cops enter the house and shout to Mr Collingwood, 'Don't! For God's sake, don't!'. The film ends on a freeze frame of the Collingwoods embracing and covered in blood.

The final freeze-frame has been read as encapsulating the film’s condemnation of violence. For example, Muir argues that:

> By freeze-framing on the shattered Collingwoods, the final shot of *The Last House on the Left* reveals the futility of bloodshed and retribution in a way the uplifting finale of *The Virgin Spring* does not... By ending on this downcast note, by freezing on tortured faces, the film serves as an argument against violence and revenge, not an incitement to violence as some blind critics have asserted...

(1998, 49)

The film has delivered the pay-off of vengeful violence against the gang, which the audience thirsted for after the rape scene, and yet,

> ...when Craven finally grants his viewers these murders, there is no joy in the film or in the audience, only a deep-seated sense of shame and anger. Importantly, *The Last House on the Left*’s final moment is not a reaffirmation of faith or even a celebration of violence but an opportunity for grim reflection.

(Muir 1998, 49)

The freeze-frame accentuates this grim reflection, as it evokes news photography, in particular of the Kent State shootings (Lowenstein 2005, 114-18). This event, and the news photography through which it was represented, intensified sentiment against American involvement in the Vietnam War in 1970, and allusions to it in *Last House 1972* suggest a similar condemnation of the brutal, ugly violence of the Vietnam War. The allegorical aspects of *Last House 1972* that Lowenstein points out highlight the film’s critique of violence and its connection to topical socio-political conflicts and their media representation.

This ending has been discussed as a key revision between Craven’s film and the text which it remakes: Ingmar Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring*. Lowenstein argues that Craven ‘brings Bergman to mind in order to present, but then explode, the possibility of recuperating *Last House*’s violence through the redemptive mechanisms present in *The Virgin Spring*’ (2005, 138). The virgin spring of the title appears at the end of Bergman’s film for Dr Tore, the avenging father of the raped and murdered Karin, metaphorically washing the blood from his hands, but in *Last House 1972*, Mari’s parents are not redeemed. As Muir writes, ‘Where *The Virgin Spring* takes Dr Tore and his wife off-the-hook for their violence by allowing God to forgive their violent trespasses, *The Last House on the Left* makes the Collingwoods responsible for their actions’ (1998, 49). In making the avengers responsible for their actions, *Last House 1972* set up a precedent or convention in rape-revenge, although in his
It’s standard practice in these revenge dramas for the revenge to be anti-climactic (not, as critics allege, because the film-makers are more interested in the massacre of innocents than they are in “justice”, but because taking their lead from Wes Craven and ultimately Ingmar Bergman’s THE VIRGIN SPRING, they want to show that two wrongs don’t make a right, that violence liberates nobody and corrupts everybody)...

(1993, 92)

Many recent rape-revenge films, such as Descent and The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo, build on a tradition that started with Last House 1972 by posing complex ethical questions about the nature of revenge, and what it does to those who give into it as a response to rape.

The remake, on the other hand, does not raise these ethical questions. In spite of its fidelity in other respects, it revokes Craven’s condemnation of violence. The remake returns to the moral schematics of the source text, The Virgin Spring. Bergman said of his motivation in making The Virgin Spring: ‘I needed a severe and schematic conception of the world to get away from the formless, the vague and the obscure in which I was stuck. So I turned to the dogmatic Christianity of the Middle Ages with its clear dividing lines between Good and Evil’ (quoted in Laity 2007, 183). The remake replicates these clear dividing lines, which Last House 1972 had made an effort to blur. In the remake there are clear, conservative lines between good and evil, whereas Craven made an effort to show the humanity of the baddies and the ease with which the good guys could slip into violent vengeance. Craven stated that his aim was to throw the ‘whole moral compass... out the window’, or as Laity puts it, ‘He deconstructs the moral absolutism of The Virgin Spring’ (Laity 2007, 189). This moral absolutism returns in Last House 2009, with an ending that reasserts family values and celebrates rather than condemns violence. Again this may be related to the influence of conservative ideologies regarding American military actions that play out in the torture porn genre. Such contrasting ideologies or moral perspectives underpinning the two Last House films points to the flexibility of the rape-revenge template, and its potential to endure beyond specific socio-political contexts or national moods (for example, second-wave feminism or anti-Vietnam War sentiment).

The remake’s revenge sequence takes joy in the spectacle of violence (including semi-naked bodies on display as they struggle for their lives), and the exhibition of contemporary horror special effects. The physical struggle between Mr Collingwood and Krug is analogous to the climactic showdown in a Hollywood action film (similarly often motivated by paternal family
protection or revenge). This fight presents a spectacle of buff men in action and their verbal exchange sums up the essence of this display:

Krug: You want to hear how tight your little homecoming queen was?
Mr Collingwood: No, I want to hear you beg for your fucking life.

The spectator’s pleasure in watching this action is echoed by Mr Collingwood’s one-liner, which points to the spectator’s alignment with the good guys (the parents who defend the honour and chastity of their daughter). In a moment when Krug is about to kill Mr Collingwood, Justin cocks a gun behind Krug’s head. He shoots but the gun does not work and then Krug stabs Justin with a fire poker. This stabbing is less powerful and tragic than the way Krug makes his son kill himself in Last House 1972, and indicates a shift in tone. Junior’s suicide is a bleak, nihilistic moment in the original, whereas in the remake Justin ‘sweetens the conclusion with an act of personal redemption’ (Thrower 2009, 70). In helping Mr Collingwood, Justin secures his position on the side of Good rather than Evil and is admitted into the Collingwood family as their replacement son (as we see at the end of the film with his inclusion in the family boat). Other than Justin’s attempt to kill Krug, redemption has no place in the remake, not because of the lack of religion or the critique of violence as in Last House 1972, but instead because the violence is constructed as necessary and justified. So Bergman redeems the parents with the virgin spring; Craven condemns the parents’ violence and disallows redemptive mechanisms; and Iliadis presents their violence as justifiable in the name of the family, meaning they are not seen to be in need of redemption at all.

In the remake, the parents demonstrate the power of their partnership in overcoming threats to their family. Mom (with a fire extinguisher) and Dad (with a fire poker) work together to kill Krug, just as they did with Francis in the kitchen, and Sadie in the bathroom (when Dad struggled with topless, bloody Sadie and then Mom shot her through the eye). These acts of violence against the gang emphasize the parents’ partnership; their marriage is strengthened by working together for survival. Note that the police do not enter at the end as they do in the original. The only police presence is in the opening scene, when two cops are transporting Krug, and the glimpse of the police car when Paige is banging on the bathroom window trying to escape from the gang. After the opening scene, there is little sense that anyone else wants to capture or take revenge on the gang. The remake is focused on family revenge; it is driven by the desire to protect the family. This cannot be attributed to Craven’s legacy, considering that, ‘In one way or another, the majority of Craven’s films focus on the collapse of the family in modern America’ (Muir 1998, 299). More broadly too, during the 1970s, the institution of

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24 For example, think of the characters played by Bruce Willis in Die Hard 4.0 (Len Wiseman, 2007) and Sin City (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005), Arnold Schwarzenegger in Collateral Damage (Andrew Davis, 2002) and Commando (Mark L. Lester, 1985), Liam Neeson in Rob Roy (Michael Caton-Jones, 1995) and Taken (Pierre Morel, 2008), and John Travolta in The General’s Daughter (Simon West, 1999).
the family underwent assault in Hollywood representations (Williams 1996, 13). The horror genre in particular has dissected and critiqued the family, made it the source of horror. *Last House 2009* does the opposite, making the family the source of safety and survival, an institution to be protected against external threat. This reflects political and generic transitions in the interim period, in which the conservative family values of the Reagan and Bush eras became reflected in horror and thriller films (think *Cape Fear* [Martin Scorsese, 1991], *Fatal Attraction* [Adrian Lyne, 1987], *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* [Curtis Hanson, 1992], for example). In her essay on the stalker film, Vera Dika notes, 'With the Reagan presidency came the finalization of an already ongoing process that tended to reverse the ideals, aspirations, and attitudes of the 1960s. America returned to traditional values—to family, home, and religion' (1987, 98). Into the 1990s, horror made metaphoric connections between American military action and family values, where ‘Homeland protection means defense of the family from violation. The enemy is a demonized “other”’ (Williams 1996, 130).

This legacy has continued in Hollywood cinema into the twenty-first century, particularly revitalized by the impact of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The reinvigoration of Hollywood exploitation of fears about home/homeland security and threats to the family is exampled by *Panic Room* (David Fincher, 2002), which in depicting Meg Altman (Jodie Foster) protecting her daughter and herself against intruders, ‘speaks to post-9/11 social anxieties’ (Markovitz 2004, 220).

In this trajectory, the *Last House* remake can be understood as part of a contemporary neoconservative attempt to reassert clear ideological divisions and family values. For example, in the opening scene of *Last House 2009*, the Stillo gang is established as a threat to the nuclear family when Krug strangles a cop while showing the cop a photo of his two young blonde daughters. The cop’s blood drips onto the photo and Krug tells him that he will never see them again. Note that the horror of this violence does not require sympathy with the victim, since the cops are established as misogynists who also cruelly deny Krug a toilet break. Rather, we are directed from this establishing scene to feel horror at the destruction of family, the separation of a father and his daughters. The emphasis on family values, and its analogy with American politics, also plays out through the character of Emma Collingwood. She is both a model of femininity and a defender of family values, epitomized when she makes hot chocolate for Justin and tells the gang, ‘You’re all safe, you’re together, that’s what counts.’ When the parents discover Mari has been raped and surmise that the gang are the culprits, Mr Collingwood says to his wife, ‘We have to be ready to do anything.’ This position reflects mainstream American ideology in the ‘war on terror’, in which the threat of terrorism to Americans and American values is used to justify preemptive and retaliatory violence.

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25 Another Jodie Foster vehicle set in New York, *The Brave One* (Neil Jordan, 2007), thematically extends this film into issues of familial revenge and vigilantism. This later film further highlights the ideological and narrative links between post-9/11 thrillers and the rape-revenge genre.
towards Others. Such a political dynamic easily maps on to the rape-revenge template, which is also structured around retaliatory violence against Others, although traditionally on gender, class, and country/city axes (as Clover established in her seminal work [1992]). In the remake’s convergence of torture porn and rape-revenge genres, the latter’s imperative for revenge tempers the social/political critique and ethical implication of the spectator. The demand for revenge is an added generic factor to support how a torture porn film such as Hostel recuperates its own political criticism and ultimately ‘reaffirms a (neo)conservative view of the necessity for American aggression in what is represented as a corrupt and dangerous world’ (Middleton 2010, 1). The development of the rape-revenge genre in the years between Last House’s original and remake allows for the original’s political stance to be inverted via the genre’s conventions, with the remake becoming an exploitation film of a different sort—not only ‘exploiting’ the success and marketing power of the original, but also using the rape-revenge narrative, the expectation and delight in revenge, and its gore violence, to more conservative political ends.

The critics who admire Last House 1972 tend to do so for the film’s condemnation of violence, and the implication of the spectator in this violence. Both elements are lacking from the remake, which is highlighted in the film’s finale. The remake adds an epilogue which emphasizes its position on violence, its spectacle of violent revenge and horror SFX, and the lack of viewer implication. The scene occurs after the family have left the house in their boat in the morning light, and in a location we have not seen previously (perhaps the interior of the Collingwoods’ shed), giving it a dislocated feel suggesting it could perhaps be a fantasy or a flashback. Mr Collingwood has paralysed Krug from the neck down, and rested his head in a microwave. He turns on the microwave and Krug’s head starts to fry, then explodes on screen in the film’s climactic gore moment. This ending is the film’s punch line of excess and spectacle. The narrative has already reached closure, so this functions as just one last fun blast to remember the film by. This leaves the spectator in a very different position to the end of the original: ‘People leave The Last House on the Left [1972] shocked and horrified as much by their early complicity in the events as by the traumas that have unfolded on the screen’ (Muir 1998, 52). Tony Williams similarly argues that in the original, ‘the audience’s emotional involvement with violent actions leads not to catharsis but self-disgust and self-awareness… Last House condemns any audience member who complies with excessive violent displays’ (1996, 137). Last House 2009 does not condemn but rewards the audience member who

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26 The contrast between Last House 1972 and Last House 2009 that I am identifying here echoes the contrast between The Virgin Spring and Last House 1972 as Robin Wood sees it: ‘the crucial difference is in the film-spectator relationship, especially with reference to the presentation of violence’ (2003b, 110). Wood argues that empathy has been repressed and disowned in The Virgin Spring, and the detailing of rape and carnage is distasteful ‘because Bergman seems to deny his involvement without annihilating it, and to communicate that position to the spectator’ (2003b, 110). This is another way in which Last House 2009 returns to The Virgin Spring rather than to Craven’s film.
complies with its excessive violent displays; this is a final pay-off of spectacular violence, free of punishment or implication. Indeed, the use of SFX might be understood as securing against spectatorial implication (in the manner of the other distancing frameworks discussed above), again in contrast to the original in which, ‘Craven films the murders graphically and brutally; he allows viewers neither sensory pleasure nor distancing special effects. He depicts the total ugliness and brutality of violence without using the distancing spectacular mechanisms present in most horror films’ (Williams 1996, 140). Krug’s exploding head is cartoon violence impressively created in live action with modern SFX. This spectacular splatter set piece, situated in a dream-like space, provides distancing at the film’s end, even disallowing us the possibility of leaving the cinema contemplating the implications of violence or the ethics of revenge.

**I Spit on Your Grave**

*Last House 1972* can be considered an origin point for the patriarchal/familial proxy vengeance subgenre of rape-revenge, as it does not allow the rape victim to take her own revenge but instead gives her a proxy (typically a family member or boyfriend). Proxy vengeance is in keeping with broader American (masculine) revenge cinema, where the male hero fights and conquers the Other for the protection and honour of family/nation, but rape-revenge is more known for those protagonists who take their own revenge on their rapists. Sarah Projansky views 1970s rape-revenge films as a genre which is divided into these two categories:

> In these films, sometimes the revenge is taken by a man who loses his wife or daughter to a rape/murder, and sometimes the revenge is taken by women who have faced rape themselves. The films in the first category depend on rape to motivate and justify a particularly violent version of masculinity, relegating women to minor ‘props’ in the narrative. The films of the second category, however, can be understood as feminist narratives in which women face rape, recognize that the law will neither protect nor avenge them, and then take the law into their own hands.

(2001, 60)

Both Barbara Creed and Carol J. Clover mention the significance of *Last House* in their accounts of the genre, but *I Spit 1978* is analyzed in depth by both authors, and also by Peter Lehman in his definitional account (1993, 103-109). Although *Last House 1972* has received more critical attention than *I Spit 1978* overall, in rape-revenge literature *I Spit 1978* is given

27 One subset of this rape-revenge subgenre is parental proxy vengeance. Read dedicates a chapter to such maternal avengers in *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (2000, 205-40).

28 *Last House 1972* is the first film discussed by Clover in the rape-revenge section of her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, where she describes it as ‘an example that achieved a certain underground notoriety’ (Clover 1992, 137). Creed cites Kim Newman’s view that *Last House 1972* was the American forerunner of rape-revenge films and notes that the film ‘prompted a series of remakes and imitations—among the latter are a number of films in which the female victims take their own revenge’ (Creed 1993, 123).
more attention, written about as the classic rape-revenge film of the 1970s. *I Spit 1978* is the origin point of the second strand of rape-revenge, when the figure of the rape-avenger comes into her own.

*I Spit 1978* is a key rape-revenge text, not just as an early, canonical example, but also because of the way ‘it reduces the genre to its essence’ (Clover 1992, 115). Like *Last House 1972*, it follows a two-part structure which gives the genre its name: rape-revenge. Jennifer Hills (Camille Keaton), a young writer from New York, rents a lakeside house in the country to write her first novel and is gang-raped by four local boys, Johnny (Eron Tabor), Stanley (Anthony Nichols), Andy (Gunter Kleemann), and Matthew (Richard Pace). The boys fail to kill her, and after regrouping she takes revenge on each of them in an equally—or perhaps excessively—brutal manner. Lehman recognizes similar reasons to Clover for *I Spit 1978*’s importance:

I agree [with reviewers] that *I Spit on Your Grave* is an extremely disturbing movie, but like many disturbing films in disreputable genres... it is so because of the manner in which it foregrounds and intensifies many of the elements that these same reviewers find acceptable in more muted versions of other films in the genre.

(1993, 104; my emphasis)

It is this characteristic of *I Spit 1978* which will help us to identify the key elements and the nature of rape-revenge, and by also examining the remake, we can see how genre characteristics have either endured or shifted over time. In the following section I will first identify the foregrounded elements of the genre in the original, and then I will focus on the remake to see how it has adapted the original and what this reveals about the contemporary genre.

Firstly it is clear how the format both here and in *Last House* provides a series of acts of revenge in the second half as a response to the gang rape (or series of rapes) in the first half. This serves a narrative purpose, as Lehman points out: ‘Rather than wait ninety minutes for a single pay-off... there is a pattern of repetition and variation which builds to a climax’ (1993, 107). Jacinda Read sees the genre as a narrative pattern, emphasizing structure over iconography or other ways of defining genre. Indeed, the structural perspective on the genre is embedded in the name ‘rape-revenge’. It is a deceptively simple structure that underpins rich texts; in the contemporary genre this structure is played with in interesting ways. *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003/2004), examined in the next chapter, is an example of how this workable formula can sustain even a two-volume epic. *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003) riffs on the structure by loosening the tight cause and effect pattern of rape and revenge, making the protagonist’s motivations questionable as she becomes a serial killer whose victims include ‘family men’ who haven’t raped her. *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) similarly strains the neat cause and effect relationship by presenting its scenes in reverse
order, effecting a questioning of the righteousness of *lex talionis* through its structural shake up. *Monster* and *Irréversible* are part of the contemporary set of rape-revenge films that raise complex ethical questions, which I explore throughout this thesis with other examples. *I Spit 1978* stands in distinction to these newer films, as Clover states: ‘If higher forms of the rape-revenge story involve us in a variety of ethical, psychological, legal, and social matters... *I Spit on Your Grave* closes all such windows and leaves us staring at the *lex talionis* or law of retribution for what it is’ (1992, 120).

Clover finds *I Spit 1978*’s ‘almost perverse simplicity’ to be ‘one of the most disturbing things’ about it, including the worrying way that ‘there is no concern whatever, not even at the level of lip service, with moral and ethical issues’ (1992, 119). Although there is not the moral questioning of the protagonist’s actions seen in a number of other rape-revenge films, I disagree with Clover that the film is entirely unconcerned with moral or ethical issues. The moral questioning in *I Spit 1978* is admirably focused on the rapists and their failure to take individual responsibility when brought to account. Indeed, this is what Jennifer takes revenge for as much as for the rapes. She has her revenge prepared (the noose in the tree, the knife under the bathmat), but it is after Matthew and Johnny fail to take any responsibility or show any remorse that she takes her revenge.29 Johnny blames his friend, ‘Look I was conned into this whole thing’ and blames Jennifer, ‘You coax a man into doing it’, and when she questions his lack of a guilty conscience he replies, ‘C’mon, this thing with you was a thing that any man would’ve done’. I describe *I Spit 1978*’s placing of the onus of moral responsibility on the rapists as admirable because one of the problematic aspects of contemporary discourses on rape, mirrored in rape-revenge films, is that responsibility is put on rape victims (to not get raped and/or to avenge their rapes individually). This shifting of responsibility will be demonstrated in the neoliberal, postfeminist, anti-victimist perspectives in *The Girl With Dragon Tattoo*, examined in Chapter Four.

The simplicity of the plot, and Jennifer’s freedom to avenge without moral critique, are factors in *I Spit 1978*’s uniqueness, its controversy, its fascination, and is also perhaps what makes it satisfying. But another of the most fascinating aspects, and one which puts it in line with the rape-revenge genre as a whole, is the protagonist’s lack of subjectivity. Clover comments on how the rapes seem to be committed for the other men’s edification rather than for pleasure and how Jennifer goes about her revenge impassively, and finds it ‘an oddly external film’ (1992, 119). I would argue that this ‘oddly external’ tone is characteristic of the rape-revenge genre, and it relates to the lack of subjectivity endowed to protagonists. Sara

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29 The protagonist in *Katalin Varga* (Peter Strickland, 2009) similarly seeks out her rapist to bring him to account, but their encounter plays out very differently. Katalin’s rapist is apologetic and he is humanized rather than portrayed as an amoral monster who deserves to be avenged. The radical contrast between *I Spit 1978* and *Katalin Varga* points to the diversity and flexibility of the genre, and I will examine this fascinating film in the concluding chapter.
Paxton's cool and composed performance as Mari in *Last House 2009* and her absence from the revenge section of the film (as discussed above) is another example of this lack of subjectivity. *I Spit 1978* and *I Spit 2010* do convey Jennifer's point-of-view and experience, but this is distinct from full subjectivity. For example, in *I Spit 1978* she has a voice-over of her writing as she works from the hammock by the lake, and when the boys come buzzing past on their boat, there are point-of-view shots from her perspective as well as theirs. The spectator is aligned more closely with her experience of this incident, as the loud noise of the boat interrupts and annoys both us and Jennifer, since we are listening to her train of thought in the voice-over. Jennifer’s writing marks both her independence (particularly for a reading of the film as a narrative of second-wave feminism) and her personhood, which is brought under threat when the boys mock her words and tear her pages during the rape scenes. She symbolically tries to stick these pages back together in the post-rape scenes. The spectator also stays with Jennifer’s experience during the suspense leading up to the rape and between her ordeals, but subjectivity becomes further out of reach as she begins to resemble a mythical feminist avenger in the later scenes.

The denial of subjectivity is also related to the way the protagonist is constructed and supported through myth, a common trait of rape-revenge which we will see again, for example, in the loss or denial of subjectivity attributable to the use of the *vagina dentata* myth in *Teeth* and *Hard Candy*. Visually, in particular, Jennifer comes to resemble mythical images of avenging women, such as when she appears in a white dress or when she drives the boat towards the men with her axe held high. Avenging female figures from Greek mythology, such as Maenads, Sirens, Amazons, and Furies, are evoked in this imagery, just as they often were in second-wave feminism’s iconography (which explains why these particular visual motifs do not appear in the remake).

The closer Jennifer moves to myth, the further she moves from our identification: ‘Jennifer becomes not a heroine, but an avenging fury. We do not become closer to her; she moves away’ (Barker 1984, 113). Martin Barker argues that this was common in ‘video nasties’; the absence of heroes and heroines, and breaking the convention of viewing events through their viewpoint, was what distinguished the nasties from mainstream cinema the most (1984, 110). In nasties, ‘We are denied a centre from which to view things’ (Barker 1984, 111), a trait which seems to have carried over to torture porn (where attractions trump identification in Lowenstein’s model of the genre) and the rape-revenge genre.30 It is not particularly easy to identify with the protagonist in both *I Spit 1978* and *I Spit 2010*,

30 This will be explored in *Hard Candy* in Chapter Three, for instance, where Hayley becomes more unknowable by the film’s end. All we learnt about Hayley in the first act is undermined during the thriller’s second act, and in the final showdown there are hints that she is not young girl called Hayley at all but a representative or mythical figure like Jennifer.
particularly during her violent revenge. In the original, this may be due to her construction as mythic, and the impassive and ritualistic nature of her revenge acts. In the remake, this is not due to a mediocre performance, as I suggested of *Last House 2009*, rather the actress, Sarah Butler, deliberately tried to convey 'vacant anger' (interview in *The Revenge of Jennifer Hills: Remaking a Cult Icon*, 2010, *I Spit 2010*’s DVD extras). Like the protagonist of *Last House 2009*, Jennifer disappears for a significant part of the second half of *I Spit 2010*. When she reappears half an hour after her fall from the bridge, we cannot be sure if she is really alive or Matthew is hallucinating, as he has just fallen down the stairs and hit his head. She strangles him with a rope as he says 'I’m sorry' (notably here punishing him despite his remorse). She is part girl, part horror movie monster, like Carrie in *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) or Regan in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973).

This distancing from the protagonist can have positive political effects, as Barker points out: ‘If we had been given a woman to “identify” with—one whose emotions we shared, with filmic devices to prop up our relationship with her—we would not have the distance to reflect on the reality of rape’ (1984, 116). The protagonist’s transformation from victim to avenger, which is central to the genre according to Jacinda Read’s seminal study (2000, 31), is the pivot for the two ways rape-revenge delivers an understanding of rape: first, in an empathetic sharing of a victim’s experience of rape; and secondly, in the distanced way Barker describes during her revenge. If we accept that spectators tend to masochistically align themselves with the victim position in horror (Clover 1992, 229), including rape scenes, then the rape-avenger’s transformation becomes the moment we are cut loose and stand outside this identification. Even though we often celebrate and enjoy the revenge sequences, when this separation is successful it creates a space to simultaneously reflect on the protagonist’s response to rape in terms of the political and ethical questions it raises. *I Spit*’s straightforward two-part structure makes it a clear example of this.31 In the original, Jennifer’s transformation is a realistic montage of her recouping (showering, crying, smoking), which illustrates the last moments of her humanity before she coldly executes her revenge mission. In the remake, her transformation is more stylistically encoded as a full death followed by reincarnation as a violent avenger. The remake cuts to black in the scene when the sheriff anally rapes her, followed by a number of facial close-ups of all the characters, her bleached white point-of-view shots, and subjective, distorted audio of the gang rapists’ dialogue (which reveals that they have all raped her during the film’s ellipses/her loss of consciousness). Transformed by this traumatic experience, Jennifer

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31 Another clear example is one used by Read, that of Selina/Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992). Meek secretary Selina Kyle transforms into the sexy superhero Catwoman after being killed by her boss Max Shreck, and her mission becomes avenging gender violence and capitalist greed. Typical of the genre, the death of the female victim is followed by her rebirth as a strong avenger figure, a transformation from a character we identify with into a mythic figure. For an in-depth analysis of the film see Read 2000, 175-98.
staggers away like a zombie, then as the sheriff cocks his gun to shoot her, she intentionally falls backwards off the bridge and does not resurface. Instead she reappears after half an hour of screen time as a monstrous avenger figure.

The characteristics of rape-revenge epitomized by *I Spit 1978* that I have been discussing so far tend to be reinforced in the remake. But how has the remake changed or expanded the text, and what does this say about the characteristics of the contemporary genre (understood here as roughly post-2000)? Lehman's definitional article notes the excesses characteristic of the genre, including wildly unrealistic narrative development (1993, 108), and these are certainly accentuated in the remake. For instance, Jennifer escapes the boys' terrorisation in the house and finds the sheriff, but when he returns her to the house he joins in with the gang rape and becomes the worst of the lot. This adaptation also accentuates the genre's lack of faith in the law—the police are no longer bumbling, ineffectual, or absent (as in *I Spit 1978*), but completely corrupt and complicit. Ineffectual or corrupt cops are common figures in rape-revenge, which helps to justify the vigilantism in the genre. Other excesses are achieved through the remake's bigger budget, and bigger pool of horror conventions to draw on and horror films to intertextually reference. The remake also trumps the original in terms of its excesses of violence and gore. A key difference between viewing the two films is that where in the original the audience wonders *how far Jennifer will go* in her revenge, in the remake the audience wonders *how far the filmmakers will go* in depicting it. This is in part due to the influence of torture porn, which sets up an expectation for intense graphic body horror, but the latter question is also intensified by the notoriety of the original—will the remake match, surpass, or be a disappointment against the original film and its reputation? I will return to these issues of genre familiarity and its attendant affects in the concluding chapter.

The remake's rape scene marks itself as contemporary through intertextuality, socio-political critique, and an updating of technology. More than *Last House 2009,* *I Spit 2010* can be seen as an intertextual remake, remaking a genre rather than just one film. The film is not just living up to an original source film, but to numerous genre expectations in its position as a genre hybrid of rape-revenge, torture porn, and horror more broadly. Note that such genre hybridity is characteristic of contemporary rape-revenge, seen in most of the films discussed in this thesis. *I Spit 2010* references classics of the genre, such as the infamous ‘squeal like a pig’ line from *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) in the sheriff’s command to Jennifer to whinny like a horse. It also remakes or reinstates aspects of *Last House 1972* which were excised from the latter’s own remake, in particular the humiliation and terrorization inherent to rape, and the socio-political critique (now using torture porn’s allusions to torture

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32 The original also references *Deliverance,* as Clover points out: ‘Like a number of revenge-horror films, it owes a clear debt to *Deliverance* (the retarded country man, the harmonica-playing sequence, and so on)’ (1992, 118).
committed against detainees at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib). The film also contemporizes itself through a technology update, giving one of the gang rapists, Stanley (Daniel Franzese), a camcorder. This prominent addition to the remake inevitably draws on anxieties and ethical questions associated with video as a potential medium of exploitation, just as *Hard Candy* does with online chat and fear of online paedophile predators, as I explore in Chapter Three.

Stanley’s camcorder functions not only as a prop denoting a contemporary setting, but as an intermediary through which a voyeuristic gaze is interrogated and linked to a political context. Shots through the camcorder lens are dotted throughout the film. The first is of Jennifer in her underwear alone in the cabin, which we later discover is Stanley’s voyeuristic point-of-view. When Stanley shows it to his friends Johnny (Jeff Branson), Andy (Rodney Eastman), and Matthew (Chad Lindberg), the spectator sees this shot repeated on the camcorder LCD held in his hands, but also in full screen without the diegetic framing. In the rape scene in Jennifer’s cabin, the voyeuristic point-of-view of the camcorder is edited into the film itself. While we know the camcorder footage is being shot by Stanley, these images have similar framings and angles to the film’s ‘objective’ camera and are only really discernible by a different film stock. Is this technique suturing us into the rapist’s point-of-view? Or is it providing a critique on the voyeuristic nature of the film’s ‘objective’ point-of-view? I don’t think it achieves either of these opposing effects, rather it simply serves to bring the spectator closer to events, just as the point-of-view shots in *Last House 1972* give the viewer a more embodied perspective. The camcorder view brings a sense of presence and intimacy to the events depicted, an amateur documentary feel, which can be used in a horror film to intensify the genre’s fears and thrills (the success of *The Blair Witch Project* [Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, 1999] being a case in point). While this arguably puts us in the sadist’s shoes in the rape scene, it is later decoupled from Stanley’s point-of-view and indeed, turned against him. Jennifer’s revenge against Stanley involves putting fish hooks through his eyelids and holding them open to force him to watch himself being tortured in the camcorder’s LCD screen. Earlier Stanley had placed the camcorder in front of Jennifer with the LCD screen facing her so she was forced to watch herself being raped by the sheriff. In both cases point-of-view is complicated because the object of the voyeur’s gaze—Jennifer during the rape, Stanley during the revenge—also becomes its diegetic viewer. When the viewer is given a full-screen camcorder shot, are we sharing the perspective of victim or perpetrator, Stanley or Jennifer? An ambiguous, flexible, spectatorial position is offered when we are presented with the sadistic voyeur’s view, as seen by its victim. To complete her revenge on Stanley, Jennifer rubs fish guts on him to attract the crows, who peck his eyes out—a fitting finish for the gang’s resident voyeur. This revenge scene contains multiple intertextual allusions, including to the famous scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) in which Alex has his eyes hooked open and is forced to watch on film such ‘ultra-
The remake’s differing nature of violence and the treatment of the body are highlighted by the revenge sequences. A torture porn remake of an exploitation film can be expected to push boundaries in terms of graphicness, so perhaps a greater question is not how far the filmmakers will go with what they will show (in this genre they show everything), but about what the next twisted idea will be. On this score the remake delivers, giving Jennifer creatively shocking methods of revenge befitting the rapists’ crimes. In the original she hangs Matthew; castrates Johnny and lets him bleed to death; kills Andy with an axe and Stanley with a boat propeller. In the remake she strangles Matthew with a rope and finishes him off with a gunshot; amputates Stanley’s foot in a bear trap then lures crows to peck his eyes out; water-tortures Andy then melts his face off with acid; breaks Johnny’s teeth out, makes him fellate a gun, then castrates him and lets him bleed to death; and finally anally rapes and kills the sheriff with a rifle. These are ‘eye for an eye’ acts of revenge. Strangling Matthew, forcing Stanley to watch her torture of him, forcing Johnny to fellate a gun, anally raping the sheriff, and water-torturing Andy, mirrors precisely what each of them did to her, and she also repeats many of their words back to them (‘just like it was your first time’ she instructs Johnny as she forces him to fellate the gun; ‘I thought you were an ass man,’ to the sheriff as she rapes him, then parts with the same last words, ‘It was fun while it lasted’). I Spit 1978 set a precedent in rape-revenge for the rapists’ tools of terrorization (in this case, sex and the motorboat) to be turned against them. The even greater imaginative detail of the revenge in I Spit 2010 brings a higher level of poetic justice and intensity to the second half.

The mirroring between the rape and revenge halves can be linked to Eugenie Brinkema’s argument that since ‘rape, an interior harm, works against horror’s fierce, insistent need to expose its meanings’, it is reconfigured or projected onto the outside of the body (2006, 38-39). Castration of the rapist works as a visible displacement of rape (Brinkema 2006, 39). Another form of visual refiguration of rape is exampled by A Clockwork Orange, where real rapes (such as Alex DeLarge’s rape of Mrs Alexander) are juxtaposed with performed rapes (such as the bludgeoning of a woman with a phallic statue, and the rival gang’s attempted rape of a woman on a theatre stage) (Brinkema 2006, 42). The use of the camcorder in framing and recording the rape in I Spit 2010 similarly taps into this theme of performance and repetition, and what Brinkema calls the ‘real/not real quality of rape’ (2006, 42).

Jennifer’s ritualistic and staged repetitions of what the rapists did to her is a ‘making visible’ of rape, making them and us understand: this is what you’ve done to me; this is what you

33 This might be considered a trait of the torture porn genre, and is a motivational question for the spectator in the many sequels in the Saw series, for instance.
forced me to experience and endure. In this way then, the whole film is about rape—it is a narrative of rape and its articulation as much as a narrative of rape and its revenge. After her rape in the original, Jennifer slowly stumbles to the cabin covered in a shocking amount of blood and mud, which does not make sense from the brevity of the rape scene. This might similarly be explained by its externalizing function: ‘Jennifer has become a physical field for blood and bruises; the violence remaps her body. In this case, displacing the violence of the rape heightens its emotional effect instead of mitigating the horror’ (Brinkema 2006, 41).

Brinkema’s description of Jennifer as a ‘physical field’ for violence points to the way bodies are also treated in the revenge acts. Accentuated by its location in the torture porn genre, the remake treats bodies as meat, or as objects for torture to be enacted upon. The men’s bodies become ‘physical fields’ for Jennifer’s violent revenge, and in line with her purpose of articulating the impact of rape on her, these ‘displaced rapes’ heighten its emotional effect rather than mitigate its horrors.

As in Last House, there is a qualitative difference in the challenge the two I Spit films present to the spectator. Where both originals implicated the spectator and confronted the spectator with what Lowenstein describes as historical trauma (2005, 113), the remakes’ challenges lie primarily in their spectacles of violence and gore. Like Hostel as Middleton reads it, I Spit 2010 is a torture porn film which raises the spectre of American torture but fails to follow through with a critique of it; ‘a form of cultural problem solving’ that in the end supports the (neo)conservative status quo (2010, 1). Reviewer Michael Edwards (2011) sums up the remake’s issues, describing it as:

morally dubious, but not as extreme and controversial as its predecessor, it is gory and violent without really hitting home in a visceral or meaningful way... You could watch it just to be cheer at violence [sic] without feeling bad because you’re cheering for the ‘good’ guy, but that’s the only really redeeming feature I found.

In this assessment of I Spit 2010 there are echoes of Last House 2009’s redemptive ending and its clear division of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. The ideology of moral righteousness displayed in some torture porn films here occurs at an aesthetic level; the film reinforces a lack of empathy and a denial of humanity to the avenged men through the treatment of the body and the aesthetic of violence. The aesthetics are in line with the (traditional Christian and Hollywood) values of an eye for an eye, the bad guys are getting what they deserve—as a revenge film, viewers enjoy this spectacle of punishment, and as a horror film, viewers also enjoy the gory ways in which this punishment is delivered.

34 The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo shares with I Spit 2010 the use of a camcorder for exploring these themes around sexual violence and similarly contains allusion to A Clockwork Orange, which will be explored in Chapter Four.
The torture in the revenge half can be unbearable to watch because of what Julian Hanich terms ‘somatic empathy, a particular carnal response that makes us feel ourselves feeling and thus enables a strong awareness-of-oneself as an embodied viewer’ (2010, 104). Horror and thriller films often prompt this intense sensation with their graphic images of pain (Hanich 2010, 104), and I Spit 2010’s second half is an acme of the genre in these terms. As opposed to fear’s overwhelming quality, painful somatic empathy is often localized. In I Spit 2010, injuries are inflicted to sensitive body parts such as eyes, genitals, teeth, faces, and anus, which intensifies the somatic empathy—here the foregrounding of the lived body is a foregrounding of the most sensitive parts of the lived body. This type of response does not require emotional empathy with the characters or sympathy for their suffering. Indeed we hardly think of the characters as real people, or the wounds inflicted on real bodies, instead they are canvases for spectacular violence and SFX. Like Last House 2009, dismemberment is presented humorously, for example, when Jennifer snips off Johnny’s penis with equine emasculators and stuffs it in his mouth. It seems perverse to describe this act as funny, but the violence is buffered by not being shown on screen; by being clearly a prosthetic penis; and by being so over the top and crazy of Jennifer. As with the mingling of comedy and violence in cartoons and action movies of the 1980s and 1990s, ‘the representation of mayhem as humorous... derealizes it’ and violence can be transfigured ‘from something potentially “real” into something formulaic’ (Charney 2001, 58). Like the Collingwood’s revenge on Francis in Last House 2009, I Spit 2010’s incredulous and comically extreme violence may induce spectatorial squealing, squirming, and laughter. The way that humour can reduce how much the spectator cares for a character and allows them to enjoy the spectacle of violence without feeling implicated will be explored in the discussion of Teeth in Chapter Three. Here it points to the diversion of socio-political critique, allowing the spectator to enjoy torturous revenge without feeling terribly implicated. The revealing of Andy’s acid-melted face is a similar moment of horror excess and humour to rape-revenge’s castrations. The delight in punishment and its spectacle in I Spit 2010 contrasts with other contemporary films examined in this thesis that ethically question acts of revenge, such as Descent and Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-Wook, 2005), which can partly be explained by its genre hybridity with torture porn. However, the diversion or dilution of socio-political critique is common in contemporary rape-revenge, with many of the films being underpinned by a strain of deep conservatism around rape.

35 The confluence of horror and humour in cinema, their ‘relation of affinity’, is dissected in Carroll 1999, 145-60. See also Geoff King’s discussion of mixed modalities in New Hollywood cinema (2004, 126-43).
Conclusion

I have opened my thesis with *Last House 1972, I Spit 1978*, and their remakes because these texts have set a number of conventions of the genre and they attest to its ongoing popularity. Throughout the chapter I have flagged key themes and conventions of contemporary rape-revenge illustrated by these prototypical films. The necessity of reframing questions in the study of rape-revenge—as well as their contemporary relevance—emerges in the comparison of the originary films and their remakes. The study of remakes is illuminating because remakes crystallize the process of generic repetition. The self-conscious and referential nature of remakes makes them a productive site for analysing the genre’s popular and enduring ‘narrative image’ as well as its contemporary modifications. In conclusion, I will recap what these remakes tell us about the contemporary genre and the issues and themes they point to that I will be exploring in the rest of the thesis.

We began with *I Spit 1978’s* iconic ‘narrative image’ of the blood-soaked female avenger, which encapsulates the genre’s promise of (sexual) violence and vengeance. This figure is the genre’s protagonist, and she is a curious one. That she is usually pretty, young, middle-class and white is perhaps unsurprising, particularly for Hollywood films and within mainstream rape discourses which position only certain women as rapeable. Less typical of a Hollywood heroine is that she can be distanced and difficult to identify with, and the narrative often takes her further from our identification with a loss of subjectivity and a descent into violent vengeance.

On one level, the genre can be defined by its basic two-part structure of rape and revenge, *both* of which work to convey rape trauma and define what rape is. The mirroring of the rape in the revenge is another feature of the genre which is accentuated in the contemporary films (where it is more common for the victim-avenger to rape her rapist, for example). There is a reliance on myth and other cultural narratives to compliment this perversely simple plot, with the protagonist often being constructed and supported through myth or media tropes. Rape-revenge is a flexible genre which can allegorically explore various socio-political issues

36 The protagonist in *Descent* is a rare exception, and this film’s fascinating exploration of the intersections between racial and sexual violence will be discussed in Chapter Five. It is in contrast to the offensive stereotyping of an African-American woman in *Last House 1972*, where the bumbling white cops try to catch a ride with a ‘toothless, cackling black woman (the truly other face of “country,” complete with chickens in tow)’ (Lowenstein 2005, 136). This encounter beckons but then immediately shuts down audience engagement with issues of racism and police brutality. Lowenstein writes, ‘In the case of *Last House*, energizing the representation of class conflict, intergenerational tension, and sexual violence demands a minimizing of racial injustice’ (Lowenstein 2005, 136), a problem which plagues the genre. This is not redressed in the remake, which disposes of this black character but replaces her with an equally stereotypical, racist representation of a Latina maid. The racism endemic in American rape-revenge films, and the critical neglect of this aspect, will be treated more fully in Chapter Five.
(including feminism, war, torture), and endures because of its ability to be adapted for contemporary social, political and cultural contexts. It is also flexible in terms of its genre hybridity; here, for example, we have seen how well it lends itself to convergence with torture porn. While the genre has radical potential to convey the negative impact of rape, to represent the unspeakable, to explore the definition and meaning of rape, this potential is often curtailed through myth and politics, resulting in conservative texts.

The genre's repetitions of rape and revenge provide opportunity for excesses of violence and gore, and the spectacle of violence is a major appeal of the genre—a facet only intensified here in the hybridity with torture porn. Conventions for representing rape were (infamously) developed in *Last House 1972* and *I Spit 1978*, and this chapter has interrogated some of these conventions and their effects on the spectator. Castration is another common violence in the genre, one which I will examine further in the *Teeth* and *Hard Candy* chapter. Castration scenes can be ambivalent moments of pleasure, sites of comedy as well as horror. Although an often bleak and violent genre, rape-revenge does offer relief with funny moments and plays with a mixed modality. This was experimented with in *Last House 1972* through the crosscutting between the rape scenes and the bumbling cops, and Mrs Collingwood’s castration of Francis, and also appears in both *Last House 2009* and *I Spit 2010* in visual excesses of violence and delicious moments of poetic justice. The mixed modality seen in many rape-revenge films often functions as a distancing device, allowing the representation of rape and its revenge to become palatable and pleasurable and also protecting the viewer from a sense of implication or from delving too deeply into the ethical questions raised by its spectacles of violence. The mixed modality is key to how the genre negotiates its address to the spectator—balancing the challenges it presents with the pleasures it offers.

Examining the remakes of seminal rape-revenge films in this chapter has opened up a range of questions pivotal to the contemporary genre. These case studies have illustrated the flexibility of the form in terms of how it can lend itself to different cultural allegories in different periods of American history and also how it can be hybridized with other genres. While Clover and Creed’s influential readings of the genre have positioned rape-revenge as a subgenre of horror, I have demonstrated here how the contemporary genre can be revealingly situated as a subgenre of American revenge cinema and also as strongly conducive to revival within or alongside the torture porn genre. The remaking of these two classic rape-revenge texts in recent years suggests a cultural need to work through post-9/11 ideological questions around torture, vengeance, and their presentation as spectacle, and yet, the allegorical exploration in both films ends up displaying a neoconservative attempt to reassert clear ideological divisions and American family values, and inuring spectators to witnessing acts of torture and revenge.
Throughout this thesis it will become evident that conservative resolutions to complex ethical questions raised in rape-revenge films are characteristic of the contemporary genre. In the following chapter, a similar pattern to these recuperative remakes is evident—this time, in the postfeminist redemptive return to maternity in *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2* and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. Although different ideological questions are at play, we will again see how the genre’s impetus towards revenge and its central pleasure of spectacles of violence restrict alternative responses to violence against women and reassert conservative political ideologies (this time regarding motherhood and women’s roles).
Chapter Two:
Maternal Transformations and the Postfeminist Dilemma: Can I Have My Violent Revenge and My Children Too?

The contemporary variation on the rape-revenge theme examined in this chapter is the construction or transformation of the heroine into ‘mother’. This chapter compares two rape-avengers who negotiate their desire for vengeance with their role as mothers: Beatrix (Uma Thurman) in Kill Bill Vol. 1 and Kill Bill Vol. 2 (Quentin Tarantino, 2003 and 2004) and Geumja (Lee Yeong-ae) in Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-wook, 2005). Through an analysis of these films I will explore the reasons for—and consequences of—the maternal redemption narrative in the contemporary rape-revenge genre, suggesting that the return to maternity is one way the contemporary genre challenges the notion of (female) revenge and speaks to contemporary postfeminist culture. Beneath the postmodern play in Kill Bill and Lady Vengeance is a deeper moralizing and an emphasis on motherhood and family values. The contemporary genre’s tendency towards conservative values and resolutions are illustrated in these films by the containment of female revenge through the theme of maternal redemption. In Kill Bill, motherhood appears as a morally righteous release from vengeance and Beatrix’s reunion with her daughter represents a resort to accepted values rather than an ethical negotiation of these values. Lady Vengeance treats motherhood with greater nuance, thematizing the tensions between maternal responsibility and the pursuit of justice via dedicated vigilantism, and yet, like Kill Bill, still tempers and ‘feminizes’ the revenge narrative through the tropes of maternal rediscovery and redemption.

In this chapter I argue that the protection of the mother-child bond and the preservation of the family is not a new aspect of rape-revenge but it has been reinvigorated by the influence of postfeminist culture, a culture which ‘extends and elaborates “backlash” rhetoric’ (Negra 2009, 2). These postfeminist rape-revenge narratives—in which the protagonists’ goals in their revenge mission are in tension with their role as mothers—point to an internalization of what Susan Faludi earlier referred to as the backlash thesis, which was reinforced in 1980s Hollywood: ‘women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood’ (1992, 141). The layering in of a maternal theme may be read as symptomatic of postfeminist culture, both in terms of a patriarchal push back into the home (the backlash element of postfeminism), but also as a consequence of feminism’s renewed interest in motherhood (both of second-wave feminists who later became mothers, and postfeminists who have a strong interest in family). Kill Bill in particular reflects the postfeminist relationship to maternity in recent years, where ‘The postfeminist celebration of mothering reaches heights that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. In a range of films and television programs, in journalism, and in advertising motherhood redeems, it transforms, it enriches, it elevates’ (Negra 2009, 65). Maternity is one route to redemption
and resolution on offer to victim-avengers in the contemporary genre, a genre which (as we see throughout this thesis) frequently raises ethical questions about revenge.

Maternity is used not to justify revenge on rapists in *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance*, in contrast to the earlier maternal (proxy) rape-revenge films Jacinda Read discusses (2000, 205-40), but rather maternity is used to justify (or even demand) an abandonment of revenge. Beatrix and Geum-ja’s main distinction from earlier maternal avengers, such as the heroines of *In My Daughter’s Name* (Jud Taylor, 1992) and *Eye for an Eye* (John Schlesinger, 1996), is that where once she was the mother of a rape victim and took proxy vengeance on her daughter’s rapist(s), now the mother is a victim herself and takes vengeance on her rapists or men who try to separate her from her child. In Read’s examples, the mother of the rape victim undergoes a transformation from mother to aggressor, while the protagonists in *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance* undergo the reverse transformation—from aggressor to mother— which is presented as a redemptive journey. Although *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance* have different narrative arcs or patterns of transformation to the films Read discusses, there is still an attempt to enforce redemption and a return to the home in her examples:

The maternal rape-revenge film... does not deploy the rape-revenge structure in order to articulate and negotiate the various transformations brought about by second-wave feminism. Rather the narrative trajectories of these films is towards reversing these transformations and relocating women as mother in the home.

(Read 2000, 227)

The different strategies between the earlier proxy maternal avengers in an era when cinema engaged with (or perhaps ’dealt with’) second-wave feminism and recent maternal avengers in cinema’s postfeminist mode reflects that within postfeminism there is popular cultural ‘feminist’ support for this idea of a return to the home, and hence the return is not a punishment or constraint but a desired journey. This is perhaps a popular culture echo of a common narrative publicized in the media in the 1990s about redemptive mothers leaving work and having children, such as Penny Hughes, Coca-Cola’s UK President, quitting her lucrative and high-profile career to start a family (Forna 1998, 106). Beatrix’s redemptive embracing of motherhood which brings closure to *Kill Bill* reflects postfeminist culture in that ‘postfeminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by genderpolitics, postmodernism, or institutional critique’ (Negra 2009, 2).

*Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance* speak to contemporary cultural concerns but the postfeminist anxieties they express about the mother-child bond also hark back to the maternal defense thread of the post-World War II rape-revenge film *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948). In *Johnny Belinda*, the heroine shoots the man who raped her when he returns to steal her baby; she takes revenge against him not for raping her but for his attempt to separate her from their child. This film significantly predates the classic rape-revenge cycle in the 1970s and
indicates that the cinematic origins of the maternal avenger may lie in melodrama rather than within rape-revenge or a post-second wave feminism backlash. As my analysis of the genre hybridity in Kill Bill and Lady Vengeance will demonstrate, adoption of the codes of melodrama and film noir shape the narratives to emphasize the punishment of bad mothers and the drive towards redemption over the drive towards revenge. The push towards redemption is in tension with the heroines’ revenge missions, but more significantly, it is also in tension with the contemporary ethical projects of these films—Tarantino’s postmodern citation of genres which avoids generic narratives of morality (Downing 2010, 153) and Park’s construction of Levinasian face-to-face encounters between mother and child/spectator. Maternal redemption calls for the abandonment of Tarantino’s relativizing of generic codes, aesthetics, and narratives of morality in Kill Bill, and it usurps the protagonist’s maternal justification for revenge in Lady Vengeance.

These films are not the purest examples of rape-revenge—being closer to the periphery in the core-periphery model of genre outlined in the introductory chapter—but their very genre hybridity is what makes them interesting to study in this context. These films elucidate the issues raised by the frequent hybridity in contemporary rape-revenge films, for example, both films demonstrate Lisa Coulthard’s point about the problems of pastiche in Kill Bill:

...the generic and stylistic borrowing of already ideologically and politically problematic genres in Kill Bill carries with it the inherent and attendant issues of each referenced mode. The political, cultural, and ideological ramifications of the genres of blaxploitation, teensploitation, and rape revenge films have, for instance, been analyzed as problematic or at least ambivalent objects for progressive feminisms, and the mixing of pastiche does not necessarily neutralize or empty the genres of these issues.

(2007, 161)

Postmodern genre hybridity is one of the contemporary shifts in the rape-revenge genre which affects how rape-revenge narratives and their heroines are read, in particular the questioning of revenge. The maternal avenger’s justification for revenge is undermined by the blurring of genres, inflecting our heroines with characteristics of the femme fatale and the spiritual and domestic crises of melodramatic mothers. Revenge is brought into question in a number of ways, and the push for these maternal heroines to give up their revenge and be redeemed is also aided by the lack of graphic rape scenes characteristic of the genre. In Kill Bill and Lady Vengeance, rape is not the inciting incident or sole motivation for revenge, rather it functions as a reference point for a generic revenge narrative and scenes of spectacular female violence. Alongside the other case studies in this thesis, these films suggest an increasingly tenuous causal relationship between rape and revenge in contemporary rape-revenge films.

The questioning of revenge characteristic of the contemporary genre is not only explicable in terms of genre hybridity and cultural allegory (as we saw in the previous chapter); here it is
also useful to examine Tarantino’s and Park’s authorial personae—and the interplay between their auteurism and respective national cinemas—to evaluate the meanings of revenge and redemption in these films. In *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance* an ethical questioning of revenge is effected by the influence of Tarantino’s and Park’s auteurism (in their vengeful oeuvres they were both ready for redemption and chose maternal protagonists through which to explore this) and also through religious perspectives on revenge and redemption. For these particular films, genealogy and spectatorial expectation are related to the high-profile auteurs as much as the genres they are working within. *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance* can be understood as their respective auteurs’ attempts at ‘feminized’ revenge narratives—explorations of what happens when they insert a female protagonist into a bricolage of ‘masculine’ genres (*Kill Bill*) or create a female variation for the third film in a revenge trilogy (*Lady Vengeance*). In the comparison of these two auteurs’ takes on the maternal redemptive rape-revenge narrative, I will also examine how the films relate to contemporary American and Korean culture and gender politics. This cross-cultural comparison will expose how stereotypes and ideals of motherhood—and the questioning of (feminist) vengeance—spread and solidify in the contemporary global media market, and why the maternal avenger continues to hold such currency.

**Kill Bill Vol. 1 and 2**

Some people have said like there’s not so much story. Well it’s a revenge story. What more do you need, alright? Five people did something bad to this person and now she’s going to just make them pay... Let’s get rid of the crap and let’s just have the confidence to tell a revenge movie.

(Quentin Tarantino, *Kill Bill* director, in *The Making of Kill Bill Vol. 2*)

Tarantino’s anxieties about the sparseness of his revenge narrative are revealing and raise an important question: why indeed could he not make a simple revenge story? The premise of Tarantino’s two volume epic is the revenge by heroine Beatrix on her five former fellow assassins in the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad (DiVAS) for their betrayal, their attempted murder of her, and the murder of her fiancé, friends, and unborn child at her wedding rehearsal. The criticism ‘there’s not so much story’ was taken on-board by the director when he made *Vol. 2* a year after *Vol. 1*. *Kill Bill* became more than an action/samurai/Western flick with a basic revenge plot that Tarantino suggests it is; it became an interesting variation on the rape-revenge flick by layering a maternal transformation narrative into his genre bricolage. Through the course of this two-volume epic, our heroine Beatrix does not ‘just make them pay’, she metamorphoses from warrior to mother.

The richness of the revenge story and the greater character development in *Vol. 2* (particularly in the ‘Last Chapter’ when Bill (David Carradine) and Beatrix are ‘Face to Face’)


are a result of numerous factors. Jacinda Read argues of the proxy sub-genre, where a parent takes revenge for a daughter’s rape, for example, that while

the rape of a loved one is shown to be sufficient justification for male violence to go unexplained and unpunished, in those featuring female violence or revenge, the presence of additional extenuating circumstances or punishment suggests that rape is not seen as sufficient justification for such unnatural behaviour.

(2000, 95)

Beatrix is raped multiple times, shot in the head by Bill, betrayed by her fellow assassins, buried alive, and worst of all, separated from her child (whom she believes to be dead). This plethora of injustices is an example of how ‘maternal revenge continues to be subject to the additional legitimating devices and/or punishment’ (Read 2000, 236). This gender double-standard may partly explain the pressure Tarantino felt from his audience after Vol. 1 to elaborate on the story in Vol. 2 (giving Beatrix a deep maternal motivation in addition to the rapes and murder attempts), but there are further reasons. Another factor is auteur expectations. Tarantino is known for his characters and dialogue and philosophizing banter, so many fans were disappointed that Vol. 1 was an action movie more about swordplay than word play. Hence the verbose conclusion to Vol. 2: ‘maybe he believed that the audience would feel cheated if they didn’t have enough of the requisite “Tarantino dialogue”,’ speculates critic Maximilian Le Cain (2004). Another of Tarantino’s auteurist traits is his postmodern mixing of genres, which is another factor in the complexity of Beatrix’s revenge tale.

Kill Bill is a pastiche of Tarantino’s favourite ‘masculine’ revenge genres and stars, but it is also clear that the film comes off the back of the popularity of female action heroines in the 1990s and displays the effects of postfeminism on popular culture. Tarantino draws on a remarkable range of genres from around the world, including Hong Kong action cinema (particularly kung fu); Japanese samurai, yakuza and anime; Italian spaghetti westerns and giallo (horror/thriller); American blaxploitation and grindhouse. He also names actors Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson, Sonny Chiba, Bruce Lee, and director Brian de Palma as inspirations (The Making of Kill Bill). Is Tarantino simply inserting a female protagonist into his homage to these ‘masculine’ revenge genres as part of a commercial trend towards sexy female action heroines? Kill Bill seems to be a clear example of the Hollywood trend identified by Read:

As the recent coining of critical terms such as Clover’s ‘female victim-hero’ and Tasker’s ‘action heroine’ testify, women are increasingly being positioned as the hero(in)es of traditionally masculine genres. This is perhaps partly due to the way in which, under the increasing influence of post-modern aesthetics, the codes and

conventions of established genres have been subject to hybridization, parody and ironic quotation, thus opening up a space in which the traditional gender identities those genres construct can be revised and negotiated.

(2000, 140)

However, Tarantino does not ‘revise and negotiate’ traditional gender identities so much as fall back on them to feminize the revenge story in his masculine revenge genre flick. He makes Kill Bill a specifically female revenge story by gendering Beatrix’s motivation through rape, motherhood, and romance.

Can this type of action heroine from the 1990s and early 2000s be understood as an expression of postfeminist ‘power feminism’? Naomi Wolf classes contemporary feminism into two approaches: ‘Victim feminism is when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness’ (1994, 147) while “power feminism” sees women as human beings—sexual, individual, no better or worse than their male counterparts—and lays claim to equality simply because women are entitled to it’ (1994, xvi). Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) in Batman Returns (Tim Burton, 1992) is an exemplar of the ‘power-feminist avenger’ (Wolf 1994, 244). Wolf sees the theme ‘springing up throughout women’s culture—of the “perfect” good girl metamorphosing into a seductive, compelling, violent, even demonic “bad girl”’ (1994, 243). This is not the transformation Beatrix undergoes, however. By the time Kill Bill is made (it is perhaps significant that Tarantino and Thurman came up with the idea while making Pulp Fiction [1994], but production was delayed and Kill Bill made ten years later) the bad girl has had a decade of being bad, now she needs a new narrative, and Wolf’s ideal power feminist metamorphosis is quickly outdated. The grand narrative of maternity re-enters, now converging with the postfeminist master narrative of ‘retreatism’, where the postfeminist subject is represented as regaining her lost self by giving up paid working and ‘coming home’ (Negra 2009, 5). In her new story the ‘power-feminist avenger’ is transforming from bad girl warrior into mother. The heroine’s redemptive retreat involves a moralistic abandonment of revenge. Like many of the films examined in this thesis, Kill Bill brings the rape-revenge genre’s moral precepts of eye for an eye vengeance into question, albeit in a tokenistic, tacked-on ending.38

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38 In this sense, Kill Bill contrasts with Tarantino’s later film, Death Proof (2007). Death Proof is Tarantino’s second riff on the rape-revenge theme, a film which depicts female solidarity and friendship as key in responding to sexual violence. The film’s spectatorial pleasures are based on the threat and thrill of sexualized violence towards two successive groups of female friends, but the second group save themselves from the stunt driver out to kill them with his ‘death proof’ car by working together, and then collectively taking revenge upon him. This closure of the film with triumphant violent vengeance (and the film’s distinct two-part structure) echoes the classic rape-revenge cycle more closely than Kill Bill’s final abandonment of vengeful violence, but Death Proof was perhaps less popular in the postfeminist context because it is not recuperative or redemptive, and its loyalties are collective rather than individual or familial.
Beatrix's maternal transformation can be traced through the key scenes of death, resurrection, and Oedipal milestones. Chapter 1 establishes Beatrix as pre-maternal warrior, trashing a domestic space in her fight with redeemed warrior and mother to Nikki (Ambrosia Kelley), Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox). The scene opens with an establishing shot—a wide shot of the external of a suburban house—which is a signature of the American family sitcom (as seen in the credit sequence or opening shot of Roseanne, Growing Pains, The Simpsons, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and Married With Children, for example). Then Tarantino, ‘wilfully, almost gleefully demolishes the image of stable, everyday familial normality’ (Le Cain 2004). With postmodern irony, a primal scene plays out. Vernita is the Mother, penetrated by Beatrix’s knife; Beatrix is the Father, in obvious phallic imagery she withdraws her knife from Vernita’s chest and returns it to the sheath at her hip (emphasized in a close-up); and Nikki (and the spectator) is the child who witnesses this intercourse or act of aggression by the father. For the child/spectator, the opening primal scene has induced sexual arousal, castration anxiety and laid the foundation for an Oedipal drama to play out as the film continues. This scene establishes Beatrix as masculine hero. In the role of the Father, she separates mother and child.

Another significant aspect of this scene is that her name, Beatrix, is bleeped out when she introduces herself. This suggests the muteness of the victim, a convention of rape-revenge stories since Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, in film since Johnny Belinda in 1948, and in the classic rape-revenge cycle since Ms. 45 (Abel Ferrara, 1981). Muting Beatrix’s name (which is only revealed towards the end of the film) suggests that as non-mother, she is non-subject. Before she undergoes her maternal transformation, she is also in a state of pre-subjectivity (reflecting the pre- and postfeminist idea that a woman is not a full woman until she is mother). The ‘maternal sacrifice paradigm’, a staple of Hollywood melodrama since its inception, made a return in the 1980s, according to E. Ann Kaplan, and with it “The underlying definition of woman as “mother” and nothing else slyly returns’ (1992, 196). The drive towards Beatrix’s redemption and her transformation to become ‘Mommy’ gains currency from this cinematic legacy.

Beatrix’s transformation occurs in cycles of death and resurrection, which are patterned on cycles of rape and revenge. In her encounters with the Sheriff, Buck, and Budd, misogynistic monologues over her comatose or paralysed body contribute to her transformation from victim to avenger. For example, when the Sheriff sexualizes her dead body at the wedding chapel, Beatrix spits blood in his face in a reflex reaction. This is the moment the Sheriff and his deputy realise she is not dead—or perhaps the very moment she comes back to life. However, Beatrix wakes fully from her coma in the hospital, where she remembers she was pregnant, checks her belly, and finding herself no longer pregnant, cries and howls. The soundtrack otherwise drops to silence, intensifying this harrowing sound which makes the
viewer empathize with her loss. Beatrix pretends to still be comatose when she hears people approach. Beatrix’s nurse/pimp Buck enters and stands at the foot of her bed talking obscenely and misogynistically about Beatrix’s body with a client who has paid him to rape her lifeless body. Again misogynistic language will motivate her to rise from the dead and take revenge. The camera is positioned beside Beatrix’s head during Buck’s conversation with the client about his rules (such as not leaving any marks on her body), so the spectator witnesses it from a perspective close to her point-of-view. Aligning the spectator with her at this moment increases the motivation to see her take revenge. There is a pattern in Kill Bill of positioning the spectator with Beatrix at her most traumatic moments; the device is again used when she is in the coffin. This interpellative strategy takes us through the transformation with her.

As the client climbs over her body, ready to rape her, Beatrix tears off his bottom lip with her teeth—silencing and killing him. It is important to note that this is an act of self-defence as much as an act of revenge. Most of Beatrix’s killings have these dual motivations (for example, Vernita attempts to shoot her with a gun hidden in a cereal box, and Bill draws his sword before Beatrix delivers the five point palm exploding heart technique), which again demonstrates the gender double-standard of the female avenger needing additional legitimating devices. When Buck returns to her hospital room and finds the client dead on the floor, Beatrix slashes his Achilles tendon and drags him into the doorway where she repeatedly hits his head with the door. Beatrix’s violence against Buck at first seems primarily motivated by her desire to find Bill, as she yells ‘Where’s Bill?!’ between every slam of the door on his head. However, it is when she has a flashback of Buck standing over her hospital bed about to rape her (introducing himself with the words, ‘I’m Buck, and I like to fuck’) that she kills him with one swift slam. Significantly, it is directly after this rape-revenge scene that Beatrix gains her voice; half an hour into the film, as she lies in the back of Buck’s truck that she is stealing, her voice-over begins.

This scene is the most explicit, direct example of rape-revenge, but rape imagery is obvious in her encounter with former DiVAS colleague Budd. Warned by Bill that Beatrix will be

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39 Except perhaps the scene in which Gogo (Chiaki Kuriyama) is introduced with an anecdote about her killing a businessman who responded affirmatively to her question ‘Do you want to screw me?’. Gogo’s swift gutting of the businessman similarly references rape-revenge (in its response of excessive violence to unwelcome sexual attention), but her pre-emptive act is depicted as psychotic and not justified. O-Ren (Lucy Liu) and her sidekicks Gogo and Sophie Fatale (Julie Dreyfus) are contrasted with our heroine Beatrix. They are coded as lesbians, and their revenge outweighs the crime (as does the revenge of lesbian serial killer Aileen Wuornos in her representation in Monster [Patty Jenkins, 2003]). In his analysis of revenge and mercy in Tarantino’s films, David Kyle Johnson offers the caveat that ‘revenge can be morally justified if the inflicted punishment reflects the original crime’, and sees this perspective reflected in Tarantino’s presentation of revenge (2007, 71). For example, in Pulp Fiction (1994), Vincent and Jules discuss at length the rumour that Marsellus Wallace dropped Tony Rocky Horror down four stories into a greenhouse for massaging his wife’s feet, and finally agree that Marsellus went too far because the punishment outweighed the crime.
paying a visit for revenge, Budd surprises her when she arrives at his trailer by shooting rock salt into her chest. This is followed by another moment of ‘penetration’ when he gives her an injection in the buttocks to sedate her. While she is paralysed and mute, Budd says to his friend who has dug her grave, ‘Is she the cutest little blonde pussy you ever saw?’ Budd nails her into the coffin, burying her alive, then Chapter 8 flashes back to the story of her challenging apprenticeship with the martial arts master Pai Mei. After a long kung fu training sequence between Pai Mei and Beatrix we are returned to the coffin. Prior to seeing her tough training regime, the viewer is likely to have greater sympathy for the horrific and impossible situation she is in. Now, having seen Beatrix rise to the challenges of Pai Mei’s ‘cruel tutelage’, the spectator is positioned differently—more hopeful that she will escape, and eager to see how she does it. As Ennio Morricone’s “L’Arena” lays on the hope and glory nice and thick in the soundtrack, she busts out.

After breaking out of the coffin and grave, ‘as blatant a metaphor for death and resurrection as they come’, The Bride ‘can now both wield power and be a woman and a mother, something she previously thought impossible. Because of this transformation, because she realizes and connects to her true nature, she now gains her identity and can be named’ (Conard 2007, 171). This naming is demonstrated in the next scene when Elle finally reveals Black Mamba’s real name: Beatrix. Now she has been through another resurrection, and Budd is dead, she is one step closer to subjectivity. Through Pai Mei’s training, ‘she learns that she doesn’t have to take up the sword—the symbol of masculinity—in order to be empowered. She can have strength and power without denying her true nature; she doesn’t have to reject her femininity, and thus doesn’t have to be psychically deformed’ (Conard 2007, 171). Mark T. Conard’s interpretation quoted here reflects popular postfeminist concepts of femininity circulated (and perhaps constructed) by the media. It is faintly essentialist (‘her true nature’), yet it contains a feminist perspective about the power of the heroine and not having to be masculine to have power. Conard’s reading illustrates how postfeminism has difficulty conceiving of a way for a woman to have a specifically female power or subjectivity except through narrowly defined ‘femininity’ and her true calling of motherhood.

The Last Chapter of Kill Bill contains yet another death and resurrection. Having believed up until this moment that her daughter was dead, Beatrix meets her four-year-old, BB (Perla Haney-Jardine), when she goes to confront Bill. BB pretends to shoot her but Beatrix is too stunned to play along. It is only this (meeting her child) that can finally disarm Beatrix. She has a second chance at ‘becoming mother’. She had been ‘castrated’ but now her child stands before her alive. The motif of castration is iconic in the rape-revenge genre but usually appears as the rapists’ punishment. Here it plays out on the body of the mother. The castration anxiety which arguably underpins the genre (Creed 1993, 122) now takes the form of the mother’s loss of her child. Beatrix does not castrate as revenge, she takes revenge for
castration (the removal of her child from her body). The reunion of mother and child resolves this castration anxiety and takes away her need for revenge.

The importance to Beatrix of ‘becoming mother’ is reinforced in flashback as she recounts to Bill how an assassin came for her and she asked for mercy based on the positive result of a pregnancy test she had just taken. Miraculously, it works (because supposedly all women, including a cold-blooded female assassin, understands why mothers cannot kill or be killed?). She tells Bill that everything changed when the strip turned blue (a positive pregnancy test result); now she is motivated completely by wanting to protect her child. This resorting to an essentialist assumption about all women having a maternal instinct rings false within the world of the film. As Maximilian Le Cain points out in his *Senses of Cinema* article on *Kill Bill*:

> in accordance with the logic of the rest of the movie, one would assume that her reaction would have been to strike out even more ferociously at her assailant to protect her unborn child. For the better part of four hours the audience has been treated to an exhilarating celebration of movie violence—one weak flashback is far from sufficient to convince us suddenly that this image of violence is abhorrent. (Le Cain 2004)

After journeying with Beatrix through multiple deaths and resurrections, sharing in her trauma and her tough training with Pai Mei, and celebrating her triumphant acts of revenge, her sudden and extreme sacrifice in changing her life so completely because ‘the strip turned blue’ is narratively and ethically (and to me, politically) disappointing. What is irritating about this final chapter of *Kill Bill* is that Tarantino ‘arbitrarily appeals to values that he assumes are so strongly present in the audience a priori that he doesn’t have to bother working them into the ethical mechanics of his cinema’ (Le Cain 2004). Lisa Downing similarly argues that the redemptive ending taps into ‘the shared cultural values which laud the maternal ethics of care’, and consequently it negates the film’s own postmodern ethical project of citing from various genres ad infinitum and resisting these genres’ modern narratives of morality (2010, 153). The use of the grand narrative of maternity not only closes off Tarantino’s project of postmodern pastiche, as Downing describes, but also closes off Beatrix’s access to the public sphere. As Lisa Coulthard argues, with Beatrix now enclosed in a private, nonviolent, domestic space, ‘there is no threat of the active, public woman or of collective action but only of reunification and ingenerate wholeness acquired through maternity’ (2007, 166). This resolution of *Kill Bill* highlights one of my overall arguments about the contemporary genre—that despite its interesting interventions or innovations in terms of the politics, ethics, and affects surrounding rape, revenge, and the rape-revenge genre, conservative discourses resurface or reassert themselves in these films (often through recuperative acts towards the end).

These issues with *Kill Bill’s* trajectory may partly be due to that fact that it is not just a revenge story, or even a narrative of resurrection and transformation—Tarantino also seeks
to make it a narrative of redemption. While Coulthard argues that the Bride’s violent revenge acts are posited as redemptive and restorative (2007, 165-66), it is really the giving up of her revenge at the conclusion of the film—her retreatism—that is her greatest act of (maternal) redemption. The problem with Beatrix’ final redemption from a feminist film theory perspective is that it is similar to that of the *femme fatale*’s limited choices in *film noir*. Read suggests that the adoption of the codes and conventions of rape-revenge in 1990s *neo-noirs* produced a postfeminist rape-avenger who is a ‘violent and often erotic female figure... who clearly has affinities with the *femme fatale* of *film noir*’ (2000, 156). *Noir* is ‘often concerned with investigating and establishing the guilt of a woman’ (Read 2000, 221) and she must be either punished or redeemed for her transgressions as a sexual and violent woman and a neglectful mother. It is worth keeping in mind here Mary Ann Doane’s arguments that the *femme fatale* is ‘the antithesis of the maternal’ and not a feminist figure so much as a figure of male fears about feminism (1991, 2). This division or tension between the figures of the *femme fatale* and the mother continues to be at work in these contemporary rape-revenge films, with both archetypes casting a strong shadow.

The redemption narrative can be read as charting a contemporary feminist reclamation of maternity, a metaphor for the way that ‘The feminist movement has itself contributed to the destabilizing of the mother, in turn creating a renewed desire to occupy the mother position’ (Kaplan 1992, 182). At the same time, the redemption narrative can be read as part of a trend of ‘representations returning (1950s fashion) to the idealization of woman in the home, which embodies the patriarchal need to control and restrict woman’ (Kaplan 1992, 215). *Kill Bill* belongs to an American cultural moment of New Traditionalism in its suggestion that motherhood is the only truly satisfying occupation for a woman, and perhaps even defining woman as mother (Beatrix’s becoming ‘mother’ is also becoming ‘woman’ as she abandons masculine violence, weapons, clothing, vengeance, and film genres—for it is arguably a maternal melodrama at its end). Kaplan identifies ‘the late-twentieth-century reification of mothering, now not as a duty (women no longer have to mother), but as in itself fulfilling, [as] something new...’ (Kaplan 1992, 194). It is interesting that this discourse still has currency twenty years later, and that the idea that motherhood is the satisfying activity for a (white, privileged) woman is still being promoted in more recent films.

Beatrix’ rejection of vengeance and violence and her return to maternity is also disappointing because of the open-endedness of the conclusion and the film’s reflection on the cyclical nature of revenge. Despite their happy reunion, Beatrix and her daughter BB are left in a

40 New Traditionalism refers to ‘the popular press’s use of rhetorical appeals to nostalgia and the pastoral. These discourses construct a postfeminist woman as someone who rejects feminist ideology altogether and hearkens back to a time when traditional values were (supposedly) popular’ (Projansky 2001, 72).
position of vulnerability. After seeing her mother Vernita killed by Beatrix, Nikki will likely return to take revenge, breaking the mother-child bond between Beatrix and BB by killing one or both of them. Tarantino has long teased fans about the possibility of a third volume when Nikki grows up, and *Kill Bill Vol. 3* is rumoured to be scheduled for production in 2014. Timothy Dean Roth argues that Tarantino is making a judgement about the morality of Beatrix’s mission by depicting how ‘the act of vengeance perpetuates a never-ending cycle of violence... Tarantino illustrates this cycle through multiple stories-within-stories of orphaned children who seek revenge for their murdered parents’ (2007, 89). Nikki and O-Ren are orphaned in the story and ‘there are subtle indications that the Bride, as well as Bill and his younger brother Budd, are also orphans’ (Roth 2007, 89). BB loses one parent at the end of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, and may be orphaned in a future sequel. Although Beatrix is a righteous avenger, her tale of revenge is murky because ‘the audience is able to see clearly that a vengeance satisfied can only create the need for more violence’ (Redmon 2007, 10). How might we read this attitude towards vengeance from a feminist perspective in terms of the rape-revenge genre? In the classic examples explored in the previous chapter, such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978), there is a greater sense of clean closure and justice served—an eye for an eye, end of story. The murkiness of revenge in *Kill Bill* and other recent rape-revenge films detracts from the (feminist?) satisfaction the spectator gets from the neat delivery of justice in which the rapists get what they deserve. Pleasure in the act of vengeance is undermined when we are invited to judge the heroine’s actions, question whether revenge is the good moral choice, and left to speculate on how the cyclical nature of vengeance may make her the victim again.

**Lady Vengeance**

*Lady Vengeance* (2005) is the final film in director Park Chan-wook’s ‘revenge trilogy’ (following *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* [2002] and *Oldboy* [2003]) but can also be read as a response to, or riff on, *Kill Bill*. Park is frequently compared to Tarantino in reviews, an unsurprising comparison considering their common penchants for genre-blending and screen violence, their slick visual styles, their use of contrapuntal music, and the ways they play with narrative time, for example. The two directors were born in the same year (1963) and are both known as auteurs and B-movie buffs.41 This section will develop the Tarantino/Park comparison to look at their common themes of revenge, (maternal) redemption, and religion. Tarantino and Park are often posed as representative auteurs for

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41 In his monograph on Park, Kim Young-jin introduces the director as ‘the proverbial “guy who’s seen too many movies”’ (2007, x). Although Park seems more restrained than Tarantino in displaying his film buffery (the latter littering his films with intertextual quotations), Park is similarly constructed as ‘a child of the generation of video fanatics, with a voracious appetite to absorb all traces of movie history worthy of respect, from Hollywood genre films to European art films to B movies, and make them his own’ (Kim 2007, 21).
contemporary Hollywood and South Korea respectively, so this comparison is also a cross-cultural analysis of the origins and meanings behind central themes in contemporary rape-revenge: revenge, redemption, and motherhood. How do Park and Tarantino negotiate specific cultural origins and global appeal? Such an analysis reveals the interesting ways in which the directors reach globally in terms of both inspiration and aspiration, and yet their films are also constructed (and read) in personal/auteurist and national terms. The protagonists’ impulses toward revenge, redemption, and atonement—and the ways their daughters intercede in these missions—play out differently in the two films due to the cinematic, political, religious, and philosophical differences between the films, their auteurs, and their national contexts. However, *Lady Vengeance*’s mode of cinematic expression can be considered ‘a hybrid of the Hollywood global with the Korean global’ (Wilson 2007, 119), which produces strong parallels with *Kill Bill* and also points to the cross-cultural exchange at work. Analysing *Lady Vengeance* alongside *Kill Bill* highlights the specificities and differences between the films in this global generic exchange.

When comparisons to *Kill Bill* are made in reviews of *Lady Vengeance*, it is often to demonstrate the latter’s deeper psychological or philosophical reflection on the nature of revenge and its consequences. Robert Cashill’s review of *Lady Vengeance* in *Cineaste* typifies such comparisons:

> What lifts *Lady Vengeance* over standard avenger movies is Geum-ja’s agonizing need for atonement. The Bride, in Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* saga, doesn’t waste time fretting about past crimes as she goes on a rampage that references little besides her creator’s storehouse of movie clichés.

(2006, 58)

Clearly I have read into *Kill Bill* more reflection on revenge and redemption than such reviewers suggest is present, but I agree that where *Lady Vengeance* differs from, or extends on, *Kill Bill* (as well as Park’s previous revenge films) is the heroine’s search for atonement. This was Park’s intention, as he commented in an interview while working on *Lady Vengeance*: ‘The third film in the trilogy will be about a character who longs for salvation and atonement rather than anger, vengeance and violence’ (Cline 2004, 1).

*Lady Vengeance* opens with Geum-ja being released from prison after thirteen years served for the murder of six year-old schoolboy Won-mo, a crime she was framed for by Mr Baek (Choi Min-sik), who threatened to kill her newborn daughter if she did not confess. Upon release she is greeted by a Christian procession headed by a minister (Byeong-ok Kim) who offers her a block of white tofu, a symbol of purity and atonement. Geum-ja rejects the tofu,

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42 Michael Joshua Rowin’s comparison of *Oldboy* and *Kill Bill* in *Reverse Shot* online journal makes similar assessments, arguing that in contrast to *Oldboy*, ‘*Kill Bill* never transcends its own safe remove. There’s never a sense that the slick universe shaped by multiple film stocks, anime, and genre hybrids will be introduced, as in *Oldboy*, to a profound moral conundrum’ (2005).
knocking it to the ground and walking away to pursue the revenge she has been dreaming about. Where Beatrix’s revenge came to an end with her maternal redemption, Geum-ja rejects this redemption on a plate and seeks redemption her own way—via vengeance. Rather than accept the moral values of Christianity (or the responsibilities of motherhood) wholesale, Geum-ja’s revenge mission is also a process of ethical negotiation—both with religious and social values, and with the daughter/spectator in a face-to-face encounter.

Geum-ja prepared for revenge against Mr Baek while in prison, and it is through these flashbacks that her character is constructed. Before the introduction of her daughter Jenny (Yea-young Kwon), there are several ways Geum-ja is constructed as mother. She takes on a maternal role in prison, donating a kidney to one fellow inmate, and poisoning a rapist in a calculated act of proxy vengeance for another inmate. The only actual act of rape-revenge by Geum-ja is against this female rapist in prison, reflecting a postfeminist perspective on rape which asserts that men are not the enemy and that women can rape too. Geum-ja’s gradual poisoning of the rapist is a maternal, benevolent act, saving her fellow inmate from further abuse; her actions are neither impulsive, emotional, nor a selfishly motivated personal vendetta. It is particularly through this act that Geum-ja echoes the 1980s and 1990s proxy maternal avengers discussed by Read in her chapter, ‘From Feminism to Family Values: The Maternal Avenger’ (2000, 205-240). Although there are several scenes of revenge for sexual exploitation (including fellow inmate Kim Yang-hee [Seo Yeong-ju] strangling her pimp, and Mr Baek’s wife poisoning her abusive husband), and the heroine takes proxy vengeance for rape, Geum-ja is not raped nor is rape her main motivation for revenge. For both Beatrix and Geum-ja, vengeance is motivated by betrayal and separation from their daughters. Direct acts of rape-revenge are B-plot scenes, perhaps present just to code the film as rape-revenge without casting any sense of shame or impurity on the mother figure. Read finds an ‘emphasis on the sanctity of motherhood’ in maternal avenger films, and in the rape-revenge cycle as a whole the construction of the mother as sacrosanct ‘is suggested by the infrequency with which mothers are featured as rape victims in these films’ (2000, 233).

While Geum-ja is not personally raped, the marital rape scene (in which Mr Baek rapes his wife on the dinner table) can be read as a displaced rape that further motivates her to take revenge on him while not tainting her sacrosanct motherhood. Mr Baek’s battered wife poisons him in revenge, but Geum-ja and her posse of parents who have lost their children kidnap him and finish the job. When Geum-ja arrives at their home to find Mr Baek unconscious and his wife bound and beaten, she is at first impassive as she pushes him to the ground, then touches Mr Baek’s face with seeming affection, and finally starts cutting at his hair with scissors in an oddly distressed manner. Her reaction at first appears baffling,

43 This postfeminist point is also made by the rape as revenge in Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007) and Descent (Talia Lugacy, 2007), films which I analyse elsewhere in this thesis.
considering she has long dreamed about taking revenge on Mr Baek. However, her behaviour is related to the religious subtext of the film and the drive towards redemption. Her actions reference the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. When Delilah cuts Samson’s hair, she robs him of his strength, so this reference makes the haircutting a form of castrating vengeance. Samson is also a symbol of Christian values, making Geum-ja’s actions (dismembering Mr Baek) also an act of rejecting Christian values, as she did earlier by knocking the white tofu to the ground. After her frenzy of haircutting she looks directly to camera with wild eyes, a technique which, as I outline below, is an ethical challenge to the spectator.

The role of rape is not to function as a key inciting incident (creating a direct relationship between rape and revenge), but to provide a background of sexual exploitation to which Geum-ja can play maternal avenger/redeemer. The feminist advantage of this, against most rape-revenge films which follow one rape victim, is that the range and extent of sexual abuse and exploitation depicted illustrates that it is a systemic problem (one which women suffer for, as most of the victim-avengers end up in jail with Geum-ja). The potential of this set-up is abandoned when Geum-ja is released from prison, as are Geum-ja’s fellow inmates. The feminist backstory and characters disappear and the story focuses on Geum-ja’s spiritual quest, which may partly be attributed to the film’s deployment of melodrama, a mode which ‘dramatizes moral conflicts and spiritual regeneration through rhetorical excess’ (An 2005, 70). The shift in focus also reflects the impact of Christianity on Korean society:

...even though Christianity helped many Korean intellectuals to develop a particular mindscape to imagine social regeneration and nationalist struggle, it simultaneously encouraged the individuals turning away from such socio-political orientations by figuring social crisis in purely religious and spiritual terms. The cause of human suffering was now interpreted as the result of one’s original sin and spiritual alienation.

(An 2005, 73)

In addition to this thematic question about the role and impact of religion in Korean society, Geum-ja’s story is also built upon questions about the place of feminism in society. Coulthard argues that anxieties signalled by the neo-noir heroine are ‘those of feminism and in particular of the public face, collective action, and political engagement of feminism’ (2007, 172). The engagement or encounter between society and feminism is represented in the rallying of the victims’ parents by their feminist facilitator, Geum-ja. In this scene, discussed in detail below, she mobilizes the community to take revenge on Mr Baek, but communal revenge is linked with premeditation and challenged as a valid response through the ethical and spiritual questions raised.

44 Park rejects feminist readings of his film: ‘While making this film, I didn’t focus on the gender issue as much... I wouldn’t say there’s a sisterhood there or a female battalion out to avenge something... I’ve been asked if I consider this a feminist film, and it’s always been hard to answer yes. I don’t believe it is’ (Park interview in Smith 2006).
Aside from these themes of religion and feminism in Korean society, maternity is constructed as the greatest challenge to Geum-ja’s revenge mission. In both *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance*, feminist vengeance is contained by maternal motivations. Once Geum-ja is reunited with her daughter the familial takes precedence over the feminist collective in prison and her angelic acts become more complicated as she becomes ‘torn between her killer and maternal instincts’ (Cashill 2006, 58). Her daughter plays a key role in the redemption narrative, which intersects with and takes over from the revenge narrative. *Lady Vengeance* flirts with a familial solution to female revenge, akin to *Kill Bill*’s conclusion. However, rather than being a tacked-on moral epilogue like Beatrix’s maternal redemption, Geum-ja’s conflicts between maternity and revenge are embedded in the narrative tensions and protagonist’s journey throughout the film. Geum-ja’s revenge mission is simultaneously a search for atonement and an ethical negotiation—her return to maternity does not entail the essentialist and moralistic renouncement of violence that underpins *Kill Bill*’s representation of motherhood.

Like Beatrix, Geum-ja is reunited with her daughter, who was adopted by an Australian couple after Geum-ja’s murder conviction. Geum-ja sought to reconcile with Jenny, not reclaim her, but Jenny insists on returning to Seoul with Geum-ja. While Beatrix’s vengeance mission ended with the mother-daughter reunion, Geum-ja must negotiate how to have her vengeance while being answerable to her daughter, as well as negotiating the practicalities of plotting revenge while trying to look after her. Jenny insists on an apology and explanation for being abandoned, saying she once dreamed of taking revenge and killing her mother but ‘since we’re on better terms now, give me your reasons, at least... You should say sorry at least three times.’ The narrative of atonement plays out through this mother-daughter relationship, while Won-Mo is a ghostly figure to whom Geum-ja is also answerable. Geum-ja was the co-kidnapper of Won-mo, but it was Mr Baek who killed him and then forced Geum-ja to take the rap. Geum-ja wants vengeance against Mr Baek for his betrayal, for killing Won-mo, for separating her from her daughter, but most of all for turning her into a sinner and criminal. She feels guilty for her role in Won-mo’s death, and for making a mistake that led to being separated from Jenny for thirteen years. Her vengeance against Mr Baek does not redeem her, for she is still haunted by the teenage ghost of Won-mo after killing Mr Baek. She demonstrates her continued need for redemption when she plunges her face into a white tofu cake in front of her daughter at the end of the film.

A key turning point occurs in the vengeance narrative when Geum-ja finds Won-mo’s charm hanging from Mr Baek’s mobile phone, along with several other childish charms, indicating that Mr Baek has continued to kill children while she has been in prison. She gathers together the parents of all the victims, shows them video evidence of their children being killed, and conducts a community meeting to decide how to deal with Mr Baek. Geum-ja’s screening of Mr Baek’s snuff films to the parents (and by extension, the audience) is affecting and was
designed to arouse empathy in the viewer; Park said that rage will build in the viewer along with the parents’ rage (DVD interview). This uncomfortable viewing experience raises ethical questions about the spectatorship of violence, and in particular (like several films discussed in this thesis), it explores how video can be a tool of sexual exploitation but also a tool for its eradication—in this case, serving as an affective incitement towards revenge on Mr Baek.

Typical of vengeance cinema, the aggrieved decide they cannot place their faith in the law and choose violent retribution. The black humour of this scene is produced by the rational and democratic consensus decision-making processes by which this comes about. Pragmatically dressed in raincoats, the parents sit in a row and wait their turn, each careful not to go too far and kill Mr Baek until everyone has had a piece of him. After a group photo they hold a birthday celebration for their dead children at Geum-ja’s bakery, which hardly feels like a celebration. This reflects Park’s perspective on vengeance, for while he understands it is a strong human desire and difficult to resist, he states that vengeance can never be justified (DVD interview). Taking the pleasure or satisfaction out of the act of revenge underscores this moral point, questioning the righteousness of their act:

To exact revenge would be not only satisfying, it would be pleasurable, if I had edited and gone right to the killing scene. At the height of their rage, you’ll notice the next scene is them all gathered together having a meeting over a trivial matter. And in a way, it’s sort of ridiculous, because by watching this scene, your rage is already dissipating. So when the actual killing scene comes, there’s really no more pleasure in it. As to the party scene, I wanted to show what pain has come forth unexpectedly from the actual execution. The families felt justified in their act. Afterwards, however, they feel guilt. They started off as victims and turned into aggressors, so that’s why they’ve got a guilty conscience now, and I wanted to show this through the party scene.

(Park interview in Smith 2006)

For Park, the victim to aggressor transformation (the transformation which underpins rape-revenge) produces a sense of guilt, as opposed to a sense of justice, triumph, empowerment, righteousness, or balance restored through an eye for an eye. Park describes all of his protagonists in the revenge trilogy as suffering from a sense of guilt (DVD interview), but it is in this third film with a female protagonist that the theme is more fully explored, and guilt is linked to the heroine’s maternity and femininity.

The guilt attributed to the avengers is exacerbated in Geum-ja’s case by her construction as a mother, reflecting Jacinda Read's analysis of earlier Hollywood maternal avengers: ‘these narratives constantly work to construct the mother not as morally justified but as guilty’ (2000, 226). Read attributes this construction to the deployment of the codes and conventions of classic melodrama and its narrative drive that pushes women back into the domestic sphere of home and family, legitimating a backlash politics (2000, 18). Perhaps the dominance of melodrama in South Korean national cinema has had a similar influence on
Lady Vengeance. Park appears to be drawing on (or playing on) the tradition of South Korean melodramas in which ‘motifs of Christian redemption are mobilized in ambivalent narrations of imperilled and sometimes fallen femininity’ (Abelmann and McHugh 2005, 9). It is difficult to pin down an origin for the construction of Geum-ja as guilty because the cultural archetypes of the ‘madonna’ versus the ‘slut’, the self-sacrificing mother versus the neglectful working mother, and the femme fatale in need of redemption, are so prevalent and film buff Park has clearly drawn on a range of these well-worn images in creating Geum-ja.

The film can be considered as part of what Kim Kyung Hyun calls ‘The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema’ in his 2004 book of the same name. Kim finds that in contemporary Korean films by directors such as Kim Ki-duk, women are still objects ‘predicated on the patented image of mother and whore’ (Kim 2004, 9). The author asks: ‘Could a story ever be conceived in Korean cinema that focuses on a self-centering woman who is freed from her duties as a mother or a wife, without framing her in the convention of a vamp?’ (Kim 2004, 9). Park does not conceive of such a story with Lady Vengeance, in fact the persistent archetypes are supported by Park’s concept of gendered vengeance. He describes the male vengeance in Sympathy for Mr Vengeance and Oldboy as impulsive, messy, and based on emotion, whereas Geum-ja’s vengeance is cold and calculated, based on intellect more than emotion (DVD interview). He wanted to go against stereotypes of women as emotional or acting on emotion (DVD interview), but consequently invokes stereotypes of the cruel mother or beautiful ice queen bitch, which Damon Smith sees evoked ‘in terms of the color palette and the themes of ice—the iciness of the revenge impulse paired with white, snow, and the idea of purity. All of these revolve around the ways women have always been characterized as particularly catty and vengeful’ (2006).

When Geum-ja steps aside at the film’s climax, denying herself the pleasure of revenge to allow the others to take it, she also evokes the image of the self-sacrificing woman/mother. Park says that ‘when Keum-ja [sic] yields the power of revenge over to the grieving families, I felt that was a very feminine characteristic—and a female character fit into that story’ (Park interview in Smith 2006). Park condemns acts of vengeance as ‘idiotic’ (DVD interview) but sees value in Geum-ja’s motivation of redemption (in contrast to the motivations of the male protagonists in the first two films). In the final part of the trilogy, why did Park switch to a female protagonist to tell this story about ‘a character who longs for salvation and atonement rather than anger, vengeance and violence’ (Park in Cline 2004, 1)? Critics often attribute the

45 As Lee Hyangjin notes, ‘Throughout the history of South Korean film, melodrama has been the most abundant in terms of the sheer number of productions, and the most popular genre regardless of the changing circumstances of the film industry’ (Lee 2000, 57). Melodrama is a dominant narrative or ‘structure of feeling’ in South Korean cinema and it is ‘very difficult... to narrate against the collective and historical melodramatic grain’ (Abelmann and Choi 2005, 133).
moral lessons of the film to Park’s developing maturity.\textsuperscript{46} or contrast this aspect with the ‘shallowness’ of Tarantino’s film. However, the avenger’s need for redemption is linked to her gender and role as mother, and her guilt or her success in achieving redemption are measured against the expectations of motherhood.

The spectator is positioned to judge Geum-ja’s success (redemption) or failure (guilt) by alignment with the victims—Geum-ja’s daughter, Jenny, and to a lesser extent, the ghost of Won-mo. Geum-ja feels guilt for her role in Won-mo’s death (and for taking the rap to save her daughter, allowing Mr Baek to kill other children) but the focus within the narrative is the sin of abandoning her daughter. Via the abandoned daughter (the victim) Geum-ja is made to answer for this sin. Jenny tags along as Geum-ja prepares her revenge, playing witness to her choices and actions, as do we the spectators. She confronts her mother in the letter quoted above, and Geum-ja’s reply, read to Jenny in Korean and translated into English by Mr Baek, illustrates the dynamic between mother, daughter, and spectator. This scene is an example of one of techniques used in contemporary rape-revenge films to engage the spectator in the ethical questions posed by revenge: the face-to-face encounter.

As Geum-ja reads her letter, the faces of mother and daughter are brought into relief with a black background, and they are positioned together in the frame in a way that does not reflect the spatial relationship between them in the room. Geum-ja faces Jenny as she reads, while Jenny faces the camera, her eyes scrunched closed as she listens resistantly to Geum-ja’s justifications. When Geum-ja says she will return Jenny to Australia, Jenny recedes into the background and Geum-ja turns to face the camera: ‘My sins are too great and too deep for me to take care of such a sweet child like you… You’re innocent but I made you grow up without a mother.’ No longer able to look into camera, she closes her eyes, ‘That’s also part of my punishment,’ she says and tears roll down her cheeks. She explains to Jenny that if you sin you must atone for it: ‘big atonement for big sins, small atonement for small sins.’ The lesson of atonement she is pressing to Jenny echoes an earlier speech to the inmates about invoking an inner angel through prayer, in which her words were again dually directed to the spectator via the camera’s face-to-face position with her. Geum-ja tells Jenny she is taking revenge on Mr Baek because he turned her into a sinner. Mother and daughter then hug, with their faces pressed together and Geum-ja’s gun, still in her hand, filling the other third of the frame. Far from the reunion with her daughter ending her revenge mission (as in \textit{Kill Bill}), this face-to-face encounter demonstrates that Geum-ja will pursue her revenge mission and continue to try to justify it even at the cost of alienating the child/spectator. However, the face-to-face encounter between Geum-ja and Mr Baek in the following scene, which also

\textsuperscript{46} Lisa Schwarzbaum’s review of \textit{Lady Vengeance} in \textit{Entertainment Weekly} provides one example: ‘the third movie is also suffused with a stirring sadness missing from the other two, as the maturing filmmaker considers the moral toll taken on the avenger’ (2006, 58).
heavily uses looks to camera, depicts Geum-ja unable to bring herself to take her long-awaited vengeance and shoot him. While she is battling out her internal conflict, Mr Baek’s phone rings, leading Geum-ja to find the children’s charms he has collected. This is the turning point in which her personal vendetta ends and she hands over the job of revenge to the aggrieved collective. This pushing away of Jenny/the spectator in Geum-ja’s letter precipitates the need to see her maternal redemption and her self-sacrifice in helping other mourning parents take revenge. While at this point the spectator may still desire to see Mr Baek punished, we are not invested in seeing Geum-ja personally take the pleasure in it, as her maternal transgression posits her as an undeserving avenger. The rescue of a child and restoration of the family unit are common and socially accepted motivations in vengeance cinema, so once Geum-ja rejects Jenny her vengeance loses this social legitimacy.

The spectator’s (ethical) relationship to Geum-ja is fostered through these face-to-face encounters and this engagement is key to the film’s ethically revisionist revenge narrative. In analysing the films of Kim Ki-duk, Steve Choe draws on Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ‘the question of ethics is emblemized by the face-to-face encounter, a moment that discloses to the I the infinite separation between itself and other’ (Choe 2007, 66). This separation is played out visually and narratively in the scene outlined above between Geum-ja and her daughter/spectator, a potentially traumatic separation for the daughter/spectator as it entails an acknowledgement of independence between self and other, mother and child, protagonist and spectator. This moment is also the grounds of an ethical relationship:

the ethical moment is embodied in the face-to-face encounter, whereby the face of the other appears and allows itself to be looked at, exposed and vulnerable... Its vulnerability is the foundation of the ethical prohibition to murder. The other remains vulnerable, as if to challenge us to aggression, but this challenge in turn makes us fully responsible for their well-being.

(Choe 2007, 72-3)

Both of these points are demonstrated in the scenes just discussed, where Jenny/the spectator is invited to make ethical judgment when she comes face-to-face with Geum-ja, and then when Geum-ja is face-to-face with Mr Baek and finds that she cannot kill him. No matter if vengeance is desired so strongly that one dreams about it (as Geum-ja does), its justification is ethically questioned—perhaps ethically impossible—in a face-to-face encounter.

Direct to camera looks are frequent in Lady Vengeance and the other two films in Park Chan-wook’s revenge trilogy, particularly by the protagonists. As in the scene discussed above, this

47 Note that Mr Baek does not undergo any such confrontation with his conscience. Despite that Geum-ja played a lesser role in the death of Won-mo, the film continues the common trope in patriarchy, postfeminism, psychoanalysis, film noir and melodrama, of directing anger and blame towards the mother figure and seeking her redemption for harm that comes to children.
technique invites the spectator into an ethical intersubjective relationship with the protagonist and to engage with themes of revenge and redemption. The face-to-face encounter, which draws the spectator into the action as an observer and ‘passive participant’, is characteristic of Korean art (Gombeaud 2004, 239). In contrast to the traditions of Western painting and cinema in which subjects avoid eye contact with the spectator and a face-to-face connection between them may be read as a ‘violent confrontation’, ‘the subjects in Korean painting never seem to avoid eye contact with the viewer. On the contrary, it seems that they accept their role of represented subject, and an audience must accept their role of viewer. This is true also of cinema’ (Gombeaud 2004, 239). Where *Kill Bill* uses Hollywood film language to encourage the spectator to identify with the protagonist (as outlined above), *Lady Vengeance* uses direct address to align the spectator with the child who is brought face-to-face with Geum-ja in their reunion, and like Jenny, the spectator seeks justification and atonement from Geum-ja. The way that the face is exposed, vulnerable, and challenging in these face-to-face looks unsettles the spectatorial desire for vengeance, making the revenge mission more ethically complex. In so far as the face represents a prohibition on harming the other, the Levinasian face-to-face encounter makes revenge more difficult to champion.

The ethical and spiritual questions explored in *Lady Vengeance* can be understood as specifically Korean. Korean director Kim Ki-duk, in a statement on his film *Address Unknown* (*Suchwiin bulmyeong*) (2001), said, ‘In my view, Korean society in the year 2001 is simmering with rage and cruelty to the point that it’s about to explode. Where did all of this suspicion and tension originate?’ and also stated that what he wanted to emphasize was ‘the lost spirituality of the Korean people, a spirituality that we all fervently desire to recover’ (Choe 2007, 87n12). Ki-duk’s perspective suggests a social context ripe for Park’s revenge trilogy, and particularly for the exploration of redemption and atonement in *Lady Vengeance*. One could also speculate that the ethical and spiritual conflicts in the film are related to the collective *han* in contemporary Korea, the concept of ‘a broad sense of a deeply seeded Korean experience of oppression and unrequited resentment borne of generations of struggle’ (Robinson 2005, 27). A number of Korean film scholars ‘claim that Korean melodrama hinges upon the national sentiment of *han*’ (Chung 2005, 121). Park’s statement that he doesn’t believe *Lady Vengeance* is a feminist film (Park interview in Smith 2006) makes sense in this light, as Geum-ja’s motivations for both vengeance and atonement may be

48 The specificity of this technique to Korean art has prompted reflections on its connection to Korean politics and culture. A speculative comparison may be made between the frequent direct looks to camera and South Korea ‘willing finally to look the rest of the world firmly in the eye’, as Julian Stringer writes: ‘After years of hope and struggle, film-makers and audiences now face the challenges of inhabiting a pluralised society that is able and willing finally to look the rest of the world firmly in the eye. In liberal capitalist centres such as Hong Kong, New York, Paris and elsewhere, that gaze is being recognized and returned... Korean cinema is playing, and will continue to play, a vital role in constructing, mediating and reflecting the nature and allure of an enduringly powerful imaginative concept—Democracy’ (Stringer 2005, 10).
read as coming from a sense of injustice and resentment in her position as Korean rather than in her position as a woman.

Park Chan-wook’s films are exemplars of the successful synthesis of indigenous and Western elements in contemporary Korean cinema:

...by utilising a style that effortlessly mixes indigenous cultural elements with regional and Western influences, recent Korean films respond to the sensibilities of contemporary Koreans. Like their own domestic audiences, young directors have been deeply influenced by foreign, particularly Western, cultures and media, while they are also responsive to contemporary domestic affairs and politics.

(Shin 2005, 57)

As this comparison of Tarantino and Park’s films suggests, there is not a one-way adoption or imitation of foreign culture on either’s part, but a synthesis of personal, local, foreign, and global elements, which contribute to the complexities of the texts and their local and international popularity. Contemporary auteurs such as Tarantino and Park are involved in cinematic dialogical exchanges within a global media market, so it is not surprising to find many similarities between their films. *Lady Vengeance* has been read as a riff on *Kill Bill* by a number of Western film critics (suggesting imitation rather than dialogue) so there is some irony in the dialogue coming full circle with rumours of a Hollywood remake of *Lady Vengeance* starring Charlize Theron and directed by Danny Boyle.

The comparison of *Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance* in this chapter—particularly addressing their postfeminist politics, the cross-fertilization of genres and national cinemas, and the expression of auteurist concerns—have helped to elucidate what’s new with the maternal avenger in the contemporary globalized genre. Various political and ethical compromises and contradictions emerge in contemporary rape-revenge cinema, with these case studies pointing to how the genre can present a moralistic moderation of vengeance couched in its spectacular celebration. The postfeminist valorization of motherhood offers rape-avengers a way out of their revenge missions. Women’s duties in public and private realms are put in tension in these narratives, and the maternal redemption theme resolves these tensions by advancing retreatist solutions and the redeeming power of mother and daughter reunions. Turning now to a younger generation of avengers, we will again see the complications of postfeminist politics and the Levinasian ethics of the face-to-face encounter in the next chapter, when the teen *castratrices* in *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007) and *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005) take their first bites.
Chapter Three:
The Postfeminist Trap of Vagina Dentata for the American Teen Castratrice

The mothers of the previous chapter are one type of victim-avenger protagonists shaped by postfeminist politics, and in this chapter we examine another: the castrating pubescent girl. This younger heroine fights multiple enemies for her postfeminist prerogatives to sexuality and violence, casting off victimhood and becoming her own hero. She does not expect a world free of sexual violence, instead adapting (or even mutating) to the sexual culture she finds herself in. These empowered teenage victims of paedophiles, rapists, lecherous gynaecologists, and incestuous brothers, are gnashing their (vaginal) teeth and sharpening their scalpels, threatening vengeance on their male predators. Two recent American films exemplify this new breed and provide case studies for this chapter: Teeth (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007) and Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005). The pubescent heroines in these films enact their vengeance within frameworks of myth, genre cinema, and contemporary socio-cultural concerns, which, as I will argue, results in problematic and contradictory texts. Although the films purport to revise, and even reverse, patriarchal myths (such as the vagina dentata, Little Red Riding Hood, and stereotypes of rapists and paedophiles), they draw from and re-enact similar fears and anxieties about castration and female sexuality to these longstanding myths, and therefore the radical potential of their re-imaginings is limited.

The precocious Hayley Stark (Ellen Page) in Hard Candy is only fourteen years old, and virginal Dawn O'Keefe (Jess Weixler) in Teeth is perhaps a year or two older. These girls are not just marked as teenagers, they are specifically coded as sitting on an uncomfortable border between the innocence of childhood (protected from the dangers of sexuality, either their own or men’s) and the powerful and dangerous female sexuality developed in adolescence. They are two sides of the same Lolita facing a variety of sexual predators: Dawn negotiates a minefield of sexual imagery, conflicting messages about sexuality, and lustful men, eventually learning to use her ‘gift’ (her vagina) as a weapon against male predators and non-consensual sex; while Hayley is a highly intelligent but possibly psychotic teenager (‘Four out of five doctors agree that I’m actually insane,’ she says), who baits and breaks a paedophile, using torture and interrogation to drive him to suicide. These heroines are given a greater challenge than avenging the crimes of rapists and paedophiles; they negotiate others’ fears, anxieties, manipulations and perverse desires while trying to grow up and develop a healthy sexuality in a hypersexual, postfeminist ‘raunch culture’. ‘Raunch culture’ is a popular postfeminist term coined by Ariel Levy in her 2005 book, Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture. It refers to a hypersexualized culture in which women are encouraged to objectify themselves and other women and in which this behaviour is marketed as empowering. Levy’s critique of the mixed messages American teenage girls are given—that they must be sexy but must not have sex—is a particularly pertinent facet of
postfeminist culture for understanding *Teeth*, as it reflects the conditions in which Dawn struggles to develop her sexuality. The protagonists of these films negotiate their revenge missions in a similar postfeminist cultural environment to that of *Kill Bill*’s Beatrix (discussed in the previous chapter) but their narratives address concerns of a younger postfeminist demographic and tap into topical issues relevant to sexual violence against young women, such as consent and coercion in teenage relationships and safety in online chatrooms and social media.

Although the films address contemporary feminist social issues and appear to attack old myths, their primary concern is to contain the threat to masculine power represented by the teen castratrices, to assert phallocentrism in sexual relations, and to construct contemporary patriarchal cautionary tales. The films draw contemporary interest from issues such as how society should treat paedophiles and the growing risk of online grooming (*Hard Candy*) to the difficulties for young girls growing up in a hypocritical culture of abstinence groups on the one hand and a hypersexualized media culture on the other (*Teeth*). These timely themes provide a context for renewed castration anxiety—a symbol of the threats to, and the vulnerability of, the male body. The blatant and graphic castrations in these films belong to a particular socio-political moment in American history/culture: post-9/11 and postfeminist. The figure of the white male as victim was gaining ascendancy in American culture prior to 9/11 (Savran 1998, 4), but these films further assert this construction of white American masculinity as the new victimhood. Castration, once a tool of revenge in films such as *I Spit On Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), is now reappropriated via masochism to reassert phallic authority.

My analysis of *Teeth* and *Hard Candy* will reveal that while ostensibly mocking or reversing patriarchal myths, these films in fact update such myths for the twenty-first century and scramble to allay the threat to American masculinity in post-9/11 and postfeminist culture (which is still seen to carry a dangerous strain of feminism within it). The films express patriarchal concerns about the dangers of the sexualisation of childhood (how it can make girls sexual too early and tempt men) and the risk of false accusations of rape by vindictive women, more than they express concerns about the dangers of rapists and paedophiles for potential victims. The victimhood of the girls and their motives for revenge are brought into question, and consequently, spectatorial pleasure in their revenge becomes moderated by the issue of whether they are justified in their violent acts. The morality of the girls’ revenge is challenged; the teen castratrices are represented as monsters as much as they are heroines.

As I will argue, the *vagina dentata* myth proves itself to be an unstable ground upon which to base feminist rape-revenge films, particularly in a postfeminist context that sustains the demonization of feminism, and a media context of fears about the sexualization of children and their vulnerability to online predators. The filmmakers’ attempts to modernize and make
‘female empowerment movies’ out of the *vagina dentata* myth or the Little Red Riding Hood story instead results in contradictory and murky postfeminist texts. This chapter explores how the films’ rape politics are shaped by paratextuality, including postfeminist media discourse, film reviews and DVD extras, as well as rape-revenge genre conventions and the *vagina dentata* myth.

**Teeth**

I thought it was interesting that men had obviously invented it… and disturbing that it was so prevalent. I wanted to expose it but, at the same time, I wanted to have fun with it.

*(Teeth* director Michael Lichtenstein quoted in Bunbury 2007)*

Woman’s current advance in society is not a voyage from myth to truth but from myth to new myth.

*(Paglia [1990] 1992, 16)*

*Teeth*, the 2007 debut feature film by writer/director Mitchell Lichtenstein, is a contemporary re-imagining—and, I will argue, a re-inscription—of the *vagina dentata* myth for a postfeminist generation. The *vagina dentata*, or toothed vagina, is a motif found in many cultures’ myths and legends. Postfeminist professor Camille Paglia links *vagina dentata* to female figures such as The Great Mother, Gorgon, and Fury, arguing that ‘vagina dentata literalizes the sexual anxiety of these myths’ ([1990] 1992, 47). In psychoanalytic terms it is ‘the castrating female organ that the male wishes to disavow’ (Creed 1993, 116); a figure of the monstrous-feminine that Barbara Creed argues is ‘central to the horror film’ (1993, 105).

Despite its centrality to the horror genre, *Teeth* is perhaps the first film to literalize and narrativize the myth. It tells the story of Dawn, a virginal American teenager who discovers she has a *vagina dentata* when her boyfriend date-rapes her. Firstly involuntarily, and then intentionally, she uses her ‘gift’ to take revenge on sexual predators, chomping off their penises or fingers when they violate her.

The film names *vagina dentata* as Dawn’s condition, firstly as a self-diagnosis when she Googles her symptoms, and then by the gynaecologist who screams in terror, ‘It’s true! Vagina dentata! Vagina dentata!’ after Dawn amputates his probing fingers. The voice-over of the results of her Google search was written by Paglia (a former professor of Lichtenstein’s) and it is illustrative of the myth as the film understands it:

The myth springs from a primitive masculine dread of the mysteries of women and sexual union, fears of weakness, impotence… it is a nightmare image… annihilation… power and horror… female sexuality… the myth imagines sexual intercourse as an

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49 ‘We can sell it as a horror film, we can sell it as a female empowerment movie, as a cautionary tale, and also on the strength of two terrific lead performances,’ said president of distributor Lions Gate, Tom Ortenberg, of *Hard Candy* in an interview with *The Boston Globe* at Sundance (Burr 2005).
epic journey that every man must make back to the womb... the dark crucible that hatched him...

This overlapping narration defining *vagina dentata* points to the ambiguous, connotative nature of the myth, its ability to evoke fears in an associative rather than a narrative way. The myth is suggestive of castration anxiety, fears of female bodies and sexuality as threatening and devouring, and fears of intercourse as involving injury and a loss of power. Reyhan Harmanci of the *San Francisco Chronicle* writes: ‘It’s fitting that the controversial Paglia was the creative inspiration for Lichtenstein... because the film sits somewhere between feminist fairy tale, bold cultural critique and gory comedy’ (2008). *Teeth* is a complex and contradictory film because it is simultaneously invested in and aims to mock the myth, and because it deploys the myth in a range of generic modes including horror, comedy, and rape-revenge. The myth is centrally about castration anxiety, which is problematic for the film’s feminist politics when deployed in the rape-revenge genre. In rooting its fears in castration anxiety and downplaying the rapes, the film represents male castration as the true horror and violence within the scenes of rape and revenge.

*Teeth* certainly plays on the psychoanalytic meaning of the myth of the *vagina dentata* in its heightened horror/comedy moments, and on a narrative level through Brad’s complex relationship with his stepsister Dawn. In Freud’s interpretation of the myth, men are turned to stone when they gaze upon Medusa because of the ‘terror of castration’ boys feel at their first sight of female genitals (Paglia [1990] 1992, 47). *Teeth*’s primal scene gives a classic example. This opening scene evokes the beginning of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) in its depiction of a perfect, sunny American suburbia with menacing hints of a dark underside, such as the tribal drumbeat in the soundtrack and the ominous smoke stacks of a nuclear plant in the distance. The camera pans down to a suburban front yard, where a young Dawn and her new stepbrother Brad play ‘I'll show you mine if you show me yours’ in a kiddie pool. Brad loses the tip of his finger in the game, a traumatic childhood incident which results in a fear of vaginal penetration and yet also an erotic fascination with his stepsister. Fear and desire for his sister have always been intermingled for Brad; when he sees the Medusa’s head, he becomes ‘stiff with terror’, to use the Freudian double-entendre (Creed 1993, 3).

Just as this primal scene instigates castration anxiety in Brad, so it does for the audience. The abject gash on young Brad’s finger, shown in close-up for the viewer, is the first graphic horror of the film. It is seen again in flashback towards the end of the film in the climactic anxious moment when Brad and the viewer register that Dawn is about to bite his penis with her *vagina dentata* during intercourse. Indeed, the anticipatory pleasures of further horror moments when Tobey and Dawn make out; when Dawn visits the gynaecologist; and when Dawn rushes to her ‘hero’, Ryan, for help—and the squeals or laughter of relief when these
men get bitten—are the film’s central pleasures, as would be expected in the horror, comedy, and rape-revenge genres.

Castration anxiety is expressed and incited by the visual horror of castrated genitals and fingers. The squeamish moments after Dawn bites are achieved through prosthetics and lashings of fake blood. The first is her boyfriend Tobey’s amputated penis, which is revealed after the anticipation built by cutting back and forth between their facial reactions—Tobey yowls in pain and Dawn recoils in fright. Second is the bloody fingerless fist of the creepy gynaecologist, which is revealed after a humorous struggle as he tries to free his hand from the clutches of Dawn’s vaginal teeth. The third is Ryan’s amputated penis, even more graphic than Tobey’s, with a pulsating blood flow and a blue dismembered penis. Finally there is Brad’s, and while little is seen of his wound, his severed penis is dropped onto the bedroom floor and eaten by his dog. These bloody male wounds mirror the female ‘gash’ and incite a terror in the spectator based on castration anxiety as well as on gory, bloody, body horror. Paglia uncritically states, ‘That female genitals do resemble a wound is evident in those slang terms “slash” and “gash”’ ([1990] 1992, 47), and these Paglian politics are reflected in the film, which relies for its horror on the feminine (that is, castrated) bloody wounds that the boy dreads. The film is mocking castration anxiety, particularly as a basis of patriarchal myth, by using the fear as a source of comedy, but it displays an investment in castration anxiety in its use of the bloody wound as a source of horror.

The first rape and castration scene illustrates how rape is downplayed in Teeth, and how the horror of Dawn’s rapes is usurped by the graphic castrations which quickly follow. The rape by her boyfriend Tobey is a clear-cut case of rape, with Dawn repeatedly yelling ’No!’ and Tobey forcing himself on her. However, the representation shies away from showing the impact of the rape or allowing it to be a motivation for Dawn’s revenge. Her bite is reflexive/accidental, and so lacks the agency of revenge. The scene is placed between their romantic first kiss in the Paradisiacal pool and waterfall and the first graphic castration scene. So in this sequence, the rape is located halfway between teenage love story and horror film. It is a frightening and unpleasant experience for Dawn, and the spectator who identifies with her, but the horror of the rape is immediately replaced with the graphic horror of Tobey’s castration. The concern of the characters and the audience is suddenly directed towards this injury rather than the sexual and physical assault on Dawn. When Tobey yelps in

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50 Eugenie Brinkema reads such wounds on rapists in horror films as the visible proof of rape, for example, ‘In Last House on the Left, the rapist has a bloody gash on his face after the assault; this is the vaginal gash, the violence of the rape made visible and projected onto the body of the male’ (2006, 38). Castration of the rapist, visible and horrific, is a common convention in rape-revenge, which Brinkema explains as standing in for the ‘unseeable’ harm of rape: ‘The subsequent castration of the rapist (as typically occurs in a rape-revenge horror film) is a classic example of this type of visual refiguration/displacement’ (2006, 39).
pain, Dawn’s voice is concerned and confused, ‘What? What?’ she yells, and then she recoils in fright at the sight of his wound, shuffling back further into the cave, jaw dropped in terror. For the audience, tension is built with the horror soundtrack and the crosscutting between their reactions before finally revealing the gory sight.\footnote{Here the score really gets into real Bernard Hermann territory’, as Lichtenstein describes it on the DVD commentary.} Later Dawn is haunted by flashbacks of Tobey’s cries and facial expression as she tries to go to sleep—as if the trauma was solely in the revenge she enacted, not in the rape that led to it (and frankly, justified it). This has a deleterious effect on the potential for a feminist representation of rape here, one which takes seriously the negative impact and threat of rape for women, and which rejects misogynistic rape myths that blame victims.

While Teeth itself evokes castration anxieties—and delivers on these fears quite graphically—the DVD extras behind-the-scenes documentary works to soothe them. The competing levels of textuality illustrates how the vagina dentata myth functions by both evoking and soothing castration anxiety, here via the intratextual relationship between the film and behind-the-scenes documentary created in the DVD package. By displaying and explaining the prosthetics, the horrifying sights of castration in the film are disarmed. This works as a distancing device in a similar way to the film’s use of comedy. As we saw in the The Last House on the Left (Dennis Iliadis, 2009) in Chapter One, a comic modality can reduce how much a spectator cares for a character and allows them to remain detached, enjoying a spectacle of violence without feeling too implicated. This is similarly the function of humour in Teeth, a film which also uses the revelation of its special effects (even after the fact in the DVD extras) as a distancing device, mediating and lessening the impact of screen violence. This again has implications for the representation of rape and revenge, for if the impact and the viewers’ implication in the violence is being lessened with these devices, then the sexual violence committed against Dawn may similarly be enjoyed as a spectacle ‘without any feeling of implication, of having to “care” very much about the consequences’ (King 2004, 130). Both Dawn’s rapes and her violent acts of revenge are diluted in this mixed modality and by revealing the mysteries of the prosthetic gashes.

In its downplaying or denial of rape, the film contributes to postfeminist ideas about the ambiguity of rape, such as the common postfeminist cynicism about date rape.\footnote{Feminist campaigning against date rape in the 1970s and 1980s helped to end the trivialization of date rape and make the practice more unacceptable (Bourke 2007, 47). However, from about 1993, the media in the USA paid much attention to postfeminist authors such as Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Katie Roiphe who criticized the concept of date rape and feminist claims about its prevalence.} This occurs even more problematically later in the film when Ryan date rapes Dawn. Ryan’s plying Dawn with drugs and alcohol is not problematized within the film or in reviews or interviews. This
reflects a postfeminist media context in which these types of rapes are not taken seriously and young women are held responsible for being raped while drunk or drugged. Despite her transformation by this point, her shedding of naivety, Dawn does not react negatively to this coercion, even the next day. Her revenge—the almost accidental crunch while they are having sex—occurs when she finds out that he had made a bet with a friend that he could seduce her. The bite is a reflex response to his lack of respect for her earlier ‘sacred vow of abstinence’.

There is a similar problematic erasure in the film’s surrounding press, with a failure to name rapes as rapes. For example, in the DVD extras behind-the-scenes documentary, Lichtenstein says, ‘She winds up in several unfortunate situations’. Nowhere in this half-hour documentary is the word ‘rape’ used by the cast and crew interviewed; it is not at all acknowledged that the ‘unfortunate situations’ are rapes. While there are perhaps sensible commercial reasons not to use the ugly word ‘rape’ in the publicity and promotion of a film, it seems hypocritical to construct this taboo on talking about rape when there is a strong postfeminist critique in the film of the taboo on female genitalia. Certainly the taboo on talking about rape is of even greater consequence to Dawn, who does not identify her own experiences as rape. As Jess Weixler, the actress who plays Dawn, describes in the behind-the-scenes documentary: ‘She deals with them instinctually without even knowing what’s happening yet. So it’s like her body starts to protect her’. In other words, our heroine does not actively avenge rape. By depriving her of agency and of a feminist awareness that her horrific experiences count as rape, the connection between rape and revenge in the film is weakened. Both her motivation (experiencing sexual assault) and her vengeance (active castration of the perpetrators) are downplayed, and hence the strong narrative pattern of rape-revenge is diluted in and through both textual and intertextual devices. The ideological framing of the narrative in the paratextual context supports the rape myths underlying the film itself.

Narratives of transformation are common, perhaps even pivotal, in rape-revenge. As Jacinda Read’s study of rape-revenge films illustrates, ‘the passage from rape to revenge, from victim to aggressor, usually... necessitates some kind of transformation of the female protagonist’ (2000, 226). Dawn has two conflicting transformative possibilities which lead to an ambivalent fate. This is a consequence of Teeth’s genre hybridity, with the rape-revenge pattern transforming its heroine from victim to avenger while the teen film humorously shapes the heroine from a naïve virgin to a sexually active woman. Success as a rape-avenger means embracing her vagina dentata and using it as a castrating weapon, but success in the teen film is about having her teeth conquered by a hero and learning to enjoy sex rather than fear it. These transformations work at cross-purposes and create a problematic contradiction: her acts of vengeance in the rape-revenge mode become acts of fear or regression into uptight virginity in the teen film mode. This contradictory meaning contributes to postfeminism’s blurred boundaries of rape. The above-mentioned scene, in
which Dawn castrates Ryan, is one example. Dawn goes to Ryan seeking a hero to conquer her teeth and enjoys having sex with him. It seems that Dawn has shed her frigidity and that consensual sex does not provoke her reflexive *vagina dentata*. However, the revelation that he made a bet with a friend sets off her trap mid-coitus. ‘Some hero,’ she comments as she walks away, resigning herself to the impossibility of sex without coercion, manipulation, or disrespect. In the film’s economy, where Dawn is constantly victimized and men are always predatory, there is no empowered solution for Dawn. She slides back into being a victim and a virgin, unable to make either transformation. However, once her mother dies due to Brad’s negligence, Dawn is motivated to become both *avenger* and *femme fatale*.

Dawn feels conflicted about her destructive vagina after the encounters with Tobey and the gynaecologist, but by the film’s climactic scene she has harnessed her ‘gift’ and actively uses it for revenge against her incestuous stepbrother, Brad. This scene marks Dawn’s transformation into a *femme fatale*. She enters Brad’s lair wearing a white dress and make-up, an innocent yet seductive costume. She looks like a child playing dress-up in her make-up, and looks very unsophisticated when she tries on the *femme fatale* signature of smoking a cigarette, blinking rapidly from the smoke. She is a farcical incarnation of the *femme fatale* but coded as such to indicate that she is learning to seduce and destroy the dupe who gets involved with her. The audience can predict what will happen; we anticipate the horrific and hilarious climax to the movie that has been rehearsed in her encounters with the other lecherous men. Brad faces his fears and braves intercourse with her. Face-to-face in a direct-to-camera, tight close-up shot/reverse-shot, the viewer is drawn into the building tension and the sexual and ethical dynamics between the siblings. In her role of *femme fatale*, Dawn wears an icy cold stare, but the stare has a glaze of innocence, particularly when it is edited against Brad’s flashback to her young face in the kiddie pool. In this encounter, the siblings are forced to acknowledge the damage Brad has done to Dawn through his incestuous behaviour, life-long harassment, and failure to respond to their dying mother’s cries for help. The exchange also makes them acknowledge the damage she has done and will do in return, gashing his finger in the kiddie pool, and the vengeful bite that follows in the present day. The reverse shot in the flashback shows young Brad with his injured finger. Upon this recollection, the penny drops for older Brad. But it is too late—Dawn thrusts her body up to bite him before he can withdraw. While the scene can be read as addressing the trauma done to both of them in the primal scene, Brad’s flashback to the childhood scene links the climactic scene to his lifelong castration anxiety, and significantly, biases the scene to be about his perspective and experience. Again, castration anxiety usurps the rape-revenge narrative.

Lichtenstein focuses on a coming-of-age transformation more than the rape-revenge transformation because he is making a particular social critique—not about rape but about
repression in contemporary Christian USA. In the teen film mode, the *vagina dentata* myth is about Dawn’s journey from abstinent Christian good girl to sexually liberated *femme fatale*, from a girl out of touch with her mysterious body (who seeks to keep her ‘gift wrapped’) to a woman who has harnessed the powers of her sexuality. Pitched partly as a female empowerment movie, this transformation narrative focuses on sexual liberation, which is in line with a postfeminist conception of liberation. The ‘gift’ of a *vagina dentata* is endowed to a protagonist who, at the beginning of the film, naively follows the doctrine of The Promise, an American-based Christian sexual abstinence group with strong echoes of True Love Waits or Silver Ring Thing. Her mother and stepfather regard her championing of the cause as a strange folly of contemporary teen culture, joking about the more sexually liberated era of their youth: ‘Things were a little different when we were growing up’. Tension arises as puberty hits and Dawn tries to reconcile the gap between her faith in Christian attitudes towards sexuality and her own desires and experience of her body and of men’s behaviour. This dramatic conflict also functions as a social critique of the opposing cultural forces confusing American teenagers, with Christian abstinence groups on the one hand, and a hypersexualized image culture (in advertising, music videos and so on) on the other.\(^{53}\)

Lichtenstein’s particular target is what he sees as the perpetuation of the *vagina dentata* myth—the censoring of sexual education in schools. When Dawn and her classmates are taught the human reproductive system, they find that a sticker has been placed over the diagram of female genitalia in their textbooks. This censorship, which Lichtenstein drew from a real case in Lynchburg, Virginia (Erickson 2000) plays the role in the story of keeping women’s bodies mysterious to themselves and to young men. The film seeks to satirize this American social attitude and suggests that the taboo leads to the subsequent problems for Dawn and her suitors; they are unaware of sexual difference and therefore unprepared for the violence of sexual encounters. This critique is reductive, and problematic for the politics of the representation of rape. It reveals the underpinning belief of the *vagina dentata* myth, that sexual encounters are by their very nature violent and involve a risk of loss and injury. Behind the comedy, the film presents a bleak Bataillean view of the inherent violence and the inevitable dissolution or loss of self that occurs in sex (Bataille [1957] 1987, 16-17). Through Dawn’s transformative journey, the film suggests that coming-of-age means coming to terms with this fact. This perspective is contrary to a feminist politics of rape which seeks to draw a clear line between consensual sex and violent rape. *Teeth* constructs men as predators and women as victims and sees no end to Dawn’s victimization. In Naomi Wolf’s postfeminist terminology, this construction of sexual politics would be labelled ‘victim feminism’, which

\(^{53}\) This conflict is quite blatant in the deleted scene on the DVD extras: ‘The Two Couples Walk Through the Mall Noticing Advertisements’. As they walk past underwear advertisements with images of near-naked men, Dawn, Tobey, and their friends talk about the difficulty for teenagers to remain chaste while being surrounded by sexual imagery.
maintains the position of women as victims and leaves no room for feminist social change (1994, 147).

In addition to maintaining victim feminism, the film also maintains the taboos it sets out to critique. After Dawn has taken her first bite (of date-rapist boyfriend Tobey at the Eden-style pool), she is tempted to look at her vagina, to see what is there, but she cannot face it. Interestingly, neither can the film. Ironically, when asked in an interview why he didn’t show the vagina dentata, the film’s monster, Lichtenstein responded, ‘I sort of wanted to keep Dawn in a bubble of purity—and innocence, even. She never has blood on her. I didn’t want a violent image associated with her directly… I didn’t want an ugly image associated with her or that body part’ (Lichtenstein quoted in Music Blogger 2008). Teeth perpetuates the castration anxiety it critiques by giving the vagina a quality of not-to-be-looked-at-ness; the fetish of the prosthetic stands in for this object of castration anxiety. How is it reversing or debunking the myth, or creating an effective social critique, to similarly keep her vagina (dentata or otherwise) mysterious and taboo?

In these contradictions, Teeth is reminiscent of the classic horror film Carrie (Brian De Palma, 1976). Both deal with pubescent heroines who are also monsters, and Carrie too ‘presents contradictory messages: on the one hand it redeploy ancient blood taboos and misogynistic myths; on the other, it invites sympathy for Carrie as a victim of these prejudices’ (Creed 1993, 83). The blood and gore of Teeth could similarly be read in terms of taboos on menstrual blood and perhaps also childbirth or miscarriage (a feminine castration of the child from the body). Georges Bataille writes that these taboos ‘seem to us to spring from the general horror of violence…’ ([1957] 1987, 53), however, ‘The menstrual discharge is further associated with sexual activity and the accompanying suggestion of degradation: degradation is one of the effects of violence’ ([1957] 1987, 54). The blood covering the ‘gashes’, transferred to the male victims, can be seen as menstrual blood, and the violence and degradation misogynistically associated with it is then another source of horror in these moments.

Another bloody feminine moment the film suggests is that of a broken hymen, particularly as Dawn’s first bites relate to her first sexual experiences. One of the interpretations of the vagina dentata myth is that it is about a girl’s vengeance for defloration. This interpretation again points to the misogynist construction of the myth:

Freud… conclude[s] that woman’s sexuality is ‘immature’ and based on a deep-seated hostility towards men, particularly the one who deflowers her. She may even wish to castrate him. This is particularly true of the virgin who, according to Freud, may wish to take ‘vengeance for her defloration’.

(Creed 1993, 120)
What is problematic about this aspect of the myth as it is manifested in *Teeth* is that Dawn’s sexual awakening comes about through a series of sexual assaults. It is significant that her sexual experiences are not consensual, but this is downplayed in the film and surrounding press. This is yet another way the film dilutes her revenge for rape, by making it a story of revenge for defloration.

Lichtenstein has spoken of wanting to flip the myth, believing that ‘if you go back to the original metaphor of a toothed vagina, then you’re automatically, I think, showing that it says only something about men, and their attitude toward women’ (Lichtenstein quoted in Alex Billington 2008). However, his cultural critique stops short of interrogating the attitudes which perpetuate rape in American society. Indeed by not naming rape as rape and then condemning and punishing it, the film might even be considered to be contributing to these attitudes. The limitations of using the *vagina dentata* myth as a template for either rape prevention or social critique are illustrated by another postfeminist product inspired by the myth—the Rape-aXe anti-rape condom. This device, invented in South Africa, is a latex sheath with razor-sharp barbs, worn inside a woman’s vagina and designed to ‘bite’ a rapist if the wearer is penetrated. Attackers can be identified because the device must be surgically removed from the rapist’s penis if activated, but the device is limited in its ability to prevent rape because its activation may result in retaliatory violence if the woman does not escape quickly, and also because many rapes are gang rapes. Lisa Vetten, from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, likens the device to the chastity belt, and is concerned with this approach to rape prevention: ‘It is a terrifying thought that women are being made to adapt to rape by wearing these devices. We should rather focus our energy on changing men’s mind-sets and behavior toward women’ (Vetten quoted in Chonin 2005). This critique of the Rape-aXe points to problems with *Teeth* positioning the *vagina dentata* as a liberatory tool, in that it is similarly an individual rather than a social solution to the problem of rape. Both also suggest that women must adapt (or in Dawn’s case, mutate for survival like a rattlesnake, as her biology teacher argues), rather than assert the feminist idea that social and cultural attitudes which permit or condone rape must be changed. Like the Rape-aXe, *Teeth*’s incarnation of the myth may work as a cautionary tale against rape, graphically illustrating a connection between the perpetrators’ behaviour and their subsequent injuries in the gory vision of a horror film, but it ultimately works on the same level as the original *vagina dentata* myth, easing castration anxiety against new threats in a contemporary postfeminist context.

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54 The history of the device and an explanation of how it works can be found at <http://www.antirape.co.za/>.
Hard Candy

*Hard Candy* also evokes the *vagina dentata* myth, but more obliquely. The film is a rewriting of the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale, a story that Barbara Creed argues ‘suggests symbolically the *vagina dentata* with its reference to the red riding hood/clitoris and its emphasis on the devouring jaws of the wolf/grandmother’ (1993, 108). The image on the film’s poster and DVD cover of Hayley in her red hoodie as the (jail)bait standing in a circular trap with metal ‘teeth’ connotes this most clearly. The tale has been mapped onto the thriller genre, and modernized so that the ‘big bad wolf’ is an online sexual predator. The radical potential of this premise is ultimately curtailed by the constraints of the myth and thriller conventions. The intertextual and political layering in the film complicates the fairy tale, particularly for a feminist politics of sexual abuse. Is the wolf her seducer, a sexual predator, or (in the postfeminist twist) her prey? This ambiguity is central to the film, creating the tension that makes it ‘a taut, tense two-hander… a powerful, thought-provoking thriller’ (Westbrook 2005). The shifting sympathies and plot twists have the audience continually asking: Does he deserve the revenge she is enacting upon him? Is she going too far? Is he a paedophile or isn’t he?

This retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood story taps into topical cultural fears about paedophiles, ‘stranger danger’, and online sexual predators. As Caroline Metcalf notes, ‘The fear of paedophile crime is arguably at an “all time high”, particularly as the occurrence of Internet sex offending continues to rise’ (2008, 39). The film immediately evokes the issue of children’s security online by opening with the flirtatious instant messaging chat between 14 year-old Hayley and 32 year-old Jeff (Patrick Wilson) in which they arrange to meet. During the film’s first act, Hayley is presented as an object of desire and likely victim for Jeff. Or more accurately, she presents herself as this object of desire and likely victim in order to entrap him in his home, elicit his confession, and enact her revenge. The film’s ending reflects the coda of a Grimms’ version of the Little Red Riding Hood tale (titled ‘Little Red Cap’) in which a savvier Little Red Riding Hood tricks the wolf into falling off the roof. The wolf dies and the story ends, ‘But Little Red Cap went gaily home, and nobody did any harm to her’ (Bettelheim 1989, 177). If Little Red Riding Hood (in the Charles Perrault and other versions) is a cautionary tale for girls about stranger danger, then the Grimms’ coda may be considered the rape-revenge variation, a cautionary tale for sexual predators and a revenge fantasy for victimized girls.

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55 Interestingly, the DVD cover of the uncut edition of *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007), another American rape-revenge film of the period, displays a very similar image: star Rosario Dawson lies curled up naked in a bear trap, looking directly at the spectator.
Hard Candy’s first act plays on the way that ‘anxieties generated by risks to children are rooted in the social construction of childhood at [sic] an age of innocence and vulnerability’ (Metcalf 2008, 40), from the childish way Hayley has chocolate cake smudged on her bottom lip, to her insistence that she should pour her drink herself, to the final moments of her innocence when she dances on the couch in her training bra. After evoking such anxieties and fears for Hayley’s safety, the film’s biggest twist comes when Hayley reveals herself to be the opposite of this, neither innocent nor vulnerable. As Jeff takes photos of Hayley dancing and the drugs she has slipped him kick in, the cinematography reflects his slowing down and disorientation. The thumping techno soundtrack and a-synchronous dialogue similarly build until Jeff—and the screen itself—black out at the end of act one. As Jeff wakes tied to a chair, it is revealed that Hayley has been in control of the game from the start; she is smart, strong and well prepared for her revenge mission. In this fantasy, Hayley can intellectually and physically hold her own with a 32-year old man, which is a key departure the film makes from both the reality and the media representation of child sexual abuse. However, the media discourse on paedophiles displays some of the same trends as the representation here. For instance, the revenge narrative reflects how ‘the public debate is more focused on what punishment should be meted out to abusers, rather than on the measures we need to adopt to protect children’ (Boyle 1997, viii). Hard Candy explores the topical question of the appropriate response to paedophilia, but does not completely reinscribe the media’s common construction of the good versus evil battle between the vulnerable community and the irredeemable paedophile who must be avenged and expelled. While delivering a revenge fantasy made possible by such media constructions, Hard Candy simultaneously blurs the line between good and evil, raising ethical questions about violent, vengeful reactions to paedophilia.

There are contrasting myths of the paedophile in popular culture, and Hard Candy’s Jeff is a distinctly different figure from his filmic contemporaries. The shooting script perfectly describes Hayley’s and the spectator’s first impression of him: ‘JEFF KOHLVER, early 30s passing for late 20s, handsome, hip, a radiant smile. Not the kind of guy you imagine trolling adolescents on the internet: he looks like a walking ad for the Gap’ (Nelson 2004, 3). In

56 A problematic facet of the media coverage, which cinema tends to perpetuate, is that the attention given to ‘stranger danger’ diverts attention from the problem of sexual abuse in the home: ‘Our inability to address this issue reflects our continuing difficulty in accepting that many children are abused, not by strangers, but by those who are supposed to be responsible for their care’ (Boyle 1997, viii). The concept of ‘the paedophile’ is also problematic because it denies that child abuse is systemic: ‘It locates the threat of abuse within the individual (rather than in social, cultural or bureaucratic institutions)’ (Kitzinger 1999, 218).

57 The climax of the film, Hayley pretending to castrate Jeff, also evokes the debates about the use of ‘chemical castration’ in the treatment of sex offenders. ‘Chemical castration’ refers to the administering of testosterone reducing anti-androgen drugs to control sexual desire, which has been adopted in USA, Canada, UK, and other European countries including France, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, Sweden and Italy (Davidson 2008, 156-57).
contemporary cinema, the dominant stereotype of the paedophile is the creepy neighbourhood lurker that audiences can quickly identify by signifiers such as a long raincoat, glasses, pale skin, and big moustache, played to the hilt by Stanley Tucci in *The Lovely Bones* (Peter Jackson, 2009), and by Jackie Earle Haley in both *Little Children* (Todd Field, 2006) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Samuel Bayer, 2010). These representations are not surprising considering the stereotyping and demonization of paedophiles in the media, and they play on these fears inflamed by tabloids. Perhaps in response to one-dimensional portrayals in the media there has recently been, if not sympathetic, at least pitying representations in some recent films. These look more closely at the experiences of sex offenders, particularly their struggles to rehabilitate and reintegrate after release from prison, for example, *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) and its ‘sequel’ *Life During Wartime* (Todd Solondz, 2009), and *The Woodsman* (Nicole Kassell, 2004). Jeff is not (sym)pathetic like the paedophiles of *Little Children* or *The Woodsman* who are trying to rehabilitate and reintegrate. Carol-Ann Hooper and Ann Kaloski describe the latter as a film which ‘attempts to counter that demonization, while not in any sense obscuring the distress and harm that child sexual abuse can cause’ (2006, 150). These other paedophiles are identifiable, either through the stereotype or because they have criminal records, but Jeff is dangerous precisely because he is a wolf in disguise. As in the Little Red Riding Hood story, the moral of the story is that ‘sweetest tongue has sharpest tooth!’ (Cech 2006, 141).

In *Hard Candy*’s articulation of the fable, this moral applies to both the wolf (Jeff) and Little Red Riding Hood (Hayley). Tension is created by the characters’ capacity for violence and their thirst for revenge threatening to break through their convincing performances of innocence, a tension conveyed through their facial expressions. The film uses portraiture heavily, creating a claustrophobic space through its ongoing examination of Hayley’s and Jeff’s faces in tight close-ups and lingering looks. The café scene at the opening of the film is composed primarily with tight close-ups of their faces, which evokes both the danger and intimacy of their first meeting. These close-ups signify that the characters are trying to read each other’s faces, despite the fact that Jeff, as a photographer, knows that ‘people’s faces lie’. The camera (and by extension, Jeff and the spectator) again studies Hayley’s face closely

58 These changing representations of paedophiles perhaps reflect social attitudes, for example, Metcalf takes the new community initiatives assisting sex offenders’ reintegration into society as a sign that, ‘It seems that almost for the first time sex offenders are understood as community members who are complex individuals and who should not necessarily be demonized and who, moreover, do not necessarily pose the imminent threat that the media would have us believe’ (2008, 39).

59 Hooper and Kaloski view *The Woodsman* as a progressive representation of a sex offender and a departure from feminist films (such as *Thelma & Louise* [Ridley Scott, 1991] and *Monster* [Patty Jenkins, 2003]) in which the killing of violent men by women is ‘represented as an understandable response to the women’s own victimization’ (2006, 150). Hooper and Kaloski say they ‘are not of course questioning the value and legitimacy of anger, separation, or violent self-defence (nor at a fantasy level of the kind of retaliatory violence depicted in films such as *Kill Bill* 1 [director: Quentin Tarantino, 2003] and 2 [director: Quentin Tarantino, 2004] as responses to victimization’; however, they clearly admire the compassion and ‘more inclusive vision’ of *The Woodsman* (2006, 154).
when she is in Jeff’s photography studio but does not see past the ‘lie’ of her fresh-faced innocence and flirtatious charm until the second act (when darker colours and shadows emphasize the extent of her rage and her potential for revenge). The studio scene cuts between different close-ups of Hayley, rather than cutting to shots of Jeff during his side of the conversation. This early section of the film is more heavily weighted to Jeff’s perspective and to the question of whether Hayley’s face ‘lies’, whereas later, in the castration scene, the camera stays on close-ups of Jeff’s face, creating empathy with his fear and pain while at the same time examining whether he is lying in his denial of paedophilia and whether he will confess under threat of castration.

This focus on the face can be understood through Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of the ‘face’ as revealing both the temptation and impossibility of murder (1998, 11). The tension between these two characters, the way they both swing between vulnerability and aggression, is maintained through the face-to-face encounter and contributes to the film’s success as a tense thriller. It also puts the spectator in a position of involvement and responsibility for the character’s well-being, the face being a conduit for identification, examination, and ethical judgment. For example, the anxiety for Hayley’s safety that viewers may feel in the first act relies upon the camera’s persistent gaze at her innocent young face. Later, the film offers Jeff’s sweaty face for examination during the castration scene, and as I argue below, this element guides the viewer to empathize with him, even while scrutinizing him to see if he is guilty. *Hard Candy*’s strategic deployment of facial close-ups in moments of vulnerability or duress seems to corroborate Clover’s argument that the horror spectator tends to identify with the victim position (1992, 8). Yet in coming face-to-face with Hayley and Jeff in their victimhood, we are not being asked so much to identify with them as to be responsible for them. The other’s face commands me ‘to be answerable for the life of the other, or else risk becoming the accomplice of that death’ (Levinas 1998, 148).

This ethical engagement is perhaps even more affective and effective than an identificatory engagement. In certain ways, spectatorial identification or empathy with the victim-avenger must be carried to the end of the film if the spectator is to take pleasure in the revenge as a righteous act which brings justice and closure. But often in the contemporary genre, as discussed in relation to *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) in Chapter One, the moment of transformation from victim to avenger is the moment the spectator is cut loose from a relationship of identification, which opens up a space for political and ethical reflection on rape and the appropriate response to rape. In the shift from one mode of spectatorship to the other, the demands of identificatory and ethical engagements are in tension, for instance, when the spectator strongly desires and yet questions revenge. Perhaps to ease this tension, contemporary rape-revenge films import and yet dilute notions of response and responsibility central to Levinasian ethics. As a consequence, the films present
a compromised or even contradictory version of the Levinasian face-to-face encounter, evoking the prohibition on harming the other but simultaneously disobeying it. This deployment will again become evident in the next chapter in the analysis of *The Girl With Dragon Tattoo* (*Män som hatar kvinnor*) (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009).

*Hard Candy’s* reliance on the spectator’s ethical, rather than identificatory, engagement also points to the film’s allegorical exploration of contemporary political and ethical issues surrounding America’s post-9/11 ‘war on terror’. Like the films of the ‘torture porn’ cycle, *Hard Candy* taps into fears and anxieties related to post-9/11 politics (Middleton 2010, 2). In Jason Middleton’s reading, the ‘torture porn’ film *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) is a cultural working through of such issues that is to some degree critical of American imperialism, but ultimately its ‘legitimizing of the surviving character’s final act of vengeful brutality resonates with neoconservative perspective on the justness and necessity of American aggression within a dangerous world’ (2010, 5). *Hard Candy* has strong parallels with *Hostel*, including legitimizing the Final Girl’s acts of violence, and evoking the contemporary American debate on the torture of terror suspects. This is instantly coded after the first act turning point; when Jeff regains consciousness he is tied to a chair with his jacket thrown over his head like a hood. Hayley plays his interrogator, revealing that she has had him under surveillance, confronting him with accusations, and making threats (for example, when he screams for help she sprays a chemical in his mouth and says, ‘Shut up or next time it’s going to be bleach’). Through this allusion to an interrogation room, Jeff is positioned as a terrorist and the film sets in motion its key question about whether Hayley goes too far in her methods to get the truth out of him and in punishing/torturing him for his alleged crimes. Ethical encounters based on face-to-face looks temper the promotion of revenge as a response to fear and anxiety in a number of contemporary rape-revenge and ‘torture porn’ films, even if ultimately these films cannot maintain the face’s prohibition: ‘Thou Shalt not Kill’.

Ethical questions about retribution are heightened through the horror and comedy of the controversial castration scene. The scene is a good example of the way that not showing

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60 *Life During Wartime* satirizes this connection between the figures of the terrorist and the paedophile in American culture when Timmy (Dylan Riley Snyder) asks his mother, Trish (Allison Janney), whether paedophiles (including his father) are terrorists. Timmy’s confusion about how to identify paedophilic behaviour and protect himself leads to tragicomic results which comment on the contemporary panic and hysteria surrounding these Othered figures. The film also focuses on the theme of forgiveness as characters try to work out whether they can, or should, forgive and forget the wrongs done to them. Again this taps into contemporary American political and ethical debates.

61 The face-to-face encounter is not used as heavily in *Teeth*, but it is relied upon in the climactic confrontation between Dawn and Brad. As discussed, the tight close-ups of Brad and Dawn’s faces construct an exchange which builds to an acknowledgement of their mutual vulnerability and the trauma caused to one another. However, the face does not succeed in prohibiting violence, with Dawn breaking the ethical contract of the face-to-face encounter in the subsequent moment when she bites Brad.
something onscreen can have more affective power. Hayley’s home surgery remains off-screen, disallowing the relief of squeals and laughter audiences commonly experienced in the gore scenes in Teeth. Hayley talks Jeff through the procedure, saying she is removing one testicle and then the other, while the camera spends most of this lengthy difficult-to-watch scene on his sweaty, panicked face. The soundtrack includes a melancholy song (with the minor chords denoting loss) and exaggerated surgical sound effects. Identification and sympathies oscillate between Hayley and Jeff throughout Hard Candy, and these choices in cinematography and sound lead the audience to empathize with Jeff in this scene. For this reason, Hayley’s post-castration jokes seem funny but in poor taste. She takes things too far suggesting he could keep his testicles as souvenirs, or she could see how far they bounce, or sew them back in, or grind them up in the garbage disposal, which she then pretends to do. She talks about shame, mocking him that he will never be able to have sex or go to the doctor, and that it will be difficult to prevent people from finding out. When the satirical teenager takes the joke too far, she loses the avenger’s ethical advantage.

In contrast to humour that reduces how much the audience cares about the consequences (as in Teeth), Hayley’s sardonic post-castration commentary does make us care about the impact and long-term consequences for Jeff. The jokes are not so much for relief, rather they fuel Jeff’s desire for counter-revenge and swing audience sympathies from Hayley to Jeff. The combination of Hayley’s twisted humour, the did-he-or-didn’t-he element (with Jeff’s confession only occurring at the end of the film), and Jeff being a charming guy who breaks with the stereotypical image of the paedophile, means that, as reviewer Caroline Westbrook puts it, ‘it’s all too easy to end up feeling sorry for him in spite of his alleged crimes’ (2005).

On top of this, the affective power of the castration scene is so great that you begin to wonder whether anyone deserves such an ordeal. Earlier in the film the camera does not look at Jeff’s face nearly as often as Hayley’s—even in shot/reverse-shot conversations, reverse shots of Jeff speaking are skipped and the camera maintains the look at Hayley—but here Jeff’s face under duress is contemplated at length. Add to this his harrowing howls and his begging for release and it is difficult not to feel empathy at an affective level, even though the question of Jeff’s guilt and deserved punishment is yet to be resolved.

62 Hayley’s descriptive dialogue of what is happening offscreen, triggering the viewer’s imagination, is an example of the effective horror film technique that Julian Hanich terms teichoscopy (2010, 117).
63 Unlike the spectator, Jeff is given a view of his surgery as Hayley sets up a purported live video feed (which Jeff later discovers is a VHS recording of castration procedures). The inclusion of video ‘playback’ to the victim is designed to add to his torment and to present ‘evidence’ to him that it is actually taking place. The use of a camcorder to explore issues of video as a tool of violence and exploitation, or video as an instrument of justice, features in numerous contemporary rape-revenge films, explored in Chapter One through I Spit on Your Grave (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) and in Chapter Four through The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor) (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009).
Sympathetic identification with Jeff is created by the affective power of the castration scene—the way it makes the viewer squirm, or cross their legs—but also because there is no balancing rape scene. Revenge involves an eye for an eye, a restoration of equilibrium and equality between parties, so the inclusion of a rape scene in rape-revenge provides visible proof that a revenge-worthy crime has been committed, giving the protagonist a valid motivation for violent retaliation. The absence of a rape scene to help the audience understand what triggers and motivates Hayley’s violence makes it more difficult to see her revenge as justified. Hayley hints that she is avenging the possible rape and murder of missing schoolgirl Donna Mauer, but for most of the film it is not clear whether Donna was a friend of hers, or that Donna definitely was raped and murdered, or whether Jeff is guilty. The absence of a rape scene in *Hard Candy* has a similar problematic effect to the downplaying of rape in *Teeth*—Dawn’s revenge is passive, while Hayley’s is not personal, and neither seems fully justified.

In the absence of a rape scene there are two replacements for its functions within the rape-revenge narrative. Firstly, as I have discussed, the film enters a contemporary cultural space in which there is a strong media discourse on paedophilia. The fear and hysteria this discourse has whipped up stands in for the rape scene’s usual function of motivating the viewer to seek revenge on the rapist/paedophile. By tapping into this topical cultural fear, the film can evoke the outrage associated with the issue so that the visible proof of a rape scene is unnecessary—the film’s reference to and dependence upon the media discourse is sufficient to make viewers seek and enjoy Jeff’s destruction. Secondly, the castration scene can be understood as standing in for the rape scene in terms of portraying how violation, victimhood, and the threat to bodily integrity feel. At the first act turning point, Hayley reveals her refusal to be another one of his victims and sets about making Jeff feel like a victim. She ties him to a chair and keeps him tied up during her interrogation and castration of him; she searches his house, violating his personal space while he helplessly looks on; she reads his personal letters and writes a message from his email address to his former girlfriend; she yells at him and mocks him; and she persists in these activities no matter how much he verbally and physically resists. Her idea of revenge is doing what she knows he would have done, and making him not only understand but feel what damage he has done to others. Victimization and traumatization are key to Hayley’s technique of what she calls ‘preventative maintenance’. It is not physical disability that will prevent Jeff from harming women after this experience (indeed, Hayley does not harm him physically during the castration scene), but an emotional and ethical inability to do so now that he has personally experienced intense fear, vulnerability, and shame, akin to a rape victim’s trauma.

In a sense, Hayley is giving Jeff a lesson in the rape politics of feminist philosopher Claudia Card, her acts echoing Card’s conception of ‘rape terrorism’: ‘Acts of forcible rape, like other
instances of torture, communicate dominance by removing our control over what enters or impinges on our bodies’ (1996a, 7). Card describes rape as a weapon that ‘breaks the spirit, humiliates, tames, produces a docile, deferential, obedient soul’ (1996a, 6). The likening of the purpose and effects of rape with the purpose and effects of terrorism and torture in Card’s writing is played out in the horror/thriller genre in Hard Candy. In performing the castration on Jeff, the physical act of the surgery is beside the point. Hayley’s revenge is more concerned with putting him in a victim position, a position of fear and vulnerability, by threatening his bodily integrity. The fact that she does not actually castrate him, but only pretends to, underscores this purpose. The affective intensity of the scene results in an analogous experience for the viewer. Despite any real physical trauma, the viewer is made to understand through affect what ‘rape terrorism’ feels like. A similar technique is seen in the number of contemporary rape-revenge films in which rape is used as revenge. The victim-avengers of The Girl With Dragon Tattoo, Descent (Talia Lugacy, 2007), and Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007) rape their rapists, making the rapists (and to a lesser degree, the spectator) not only understand but actually feel what the pain, humiliation, and degradation of rape feels like.

Hard Candy’s manipulation of media tropes about terrorists and paedophiles in order to narratively and affectively explore the impact of rape terrorism is a potentially radical project. However, this is abandoned near the second act turning point as the thriller genre’s demands take over and the Levinasian prohibition fails. Hayley’s performance of castration gives Jeff (and to a lesser extent, the spectator) an experience analogous to rape terrorism, bringing him to the same tears and shaky relief of one who has survived a rape ordeal. After managing to free himself while Hayley is out of the room, he removes a bulldog clip from his genitals and realises, ‘I’m all here, I’m all here’. The viewer makes the realisation at the same time, so it can be a skin-tingling moment sharing his sense of relief and return to wholeness, freedom, and safety. However, Jeff has not learnt the lesson intended by Hayley’s performance of castration, and the face-to-face ethical encounter that makes up the first two thirds of the film is not a sufficient prohibition to violence for Jeff. The shift is quick, marked by a sequence of five shots: a close-up of Jeff’s mobile phone as he dials 911; a shot of his sweaty face looking in the direction of the kitchen; his point-of-view shot, pulling focus to show the two bloody cups which supposedly held his castrated testicles, then moving across to show the garbage disposal switch; another shot of his sweaty, angry face; then he flips his phone closed, having changed his mind about involving the police. He picks up the scalpel Hayley pretended to use earlier and goes to find her. In the bathroom, she tasers him and an intense struggle ensues under the shower. The Levinasian prohibition on harming the other has evidently failed; they are clearly trying to harm, even kill, each other in this scene. Hayley’s clever act of revenge has been futile because Jeff is irredeemable: ‘Which do you want to fuck first, me or the knife?’ he says as he approaches her on the roof in the final scene.
In the film’s third act, thriller genre expectations take priority over the ethical imperative and the political potential that was set up in the first two thirds of the film. Both characters abandon their performances of innocence and non-violence. As befitting a thriller, the characters seek each other’s destruction and the film seeks to keep the viewer on the edge of their seat.

**Losing their bite**

Many of *Teeth* and *Hard Candy*’s reviewers write of being ultimately disappointed by the films, for example, Winda Benedetti warns that *Hard Candy* ‘may leave viewers feeling detached and a bit deflated at the end’ (2006). While reviews of *Hard Candy* are generally positive, titles such as 'Edgy *Hard Candy* loses its way' (Crust 2006) and 'Psychological thriller *Hard Candy* begins to dissolve after a solid start' (Benedetti 2006) hint at its main flaw. Repetition and a lacklustre ending are similarly identified as the weaknesses of *Teeth*, which is described by Stephanie Zacharek in *Salon.com* as 'unfocused and indistinct; there's a noncommittal quality to the filmmaking. "Teeth" hinges on one strong idea but doesn’t know quite where to take it, wobbling awkwardly between going for laughs and making its semi-delineated points…' (2008). In part, this is due to the confused and disappointing feminist politics, as Steven Shaviro writes of *Teeth*:

> It’s not a narrative of liberation, exactly, since at the end of the film Dawn still finds herself in a patriarchal world where her options as a teenage girl are limited, and where she is still forced to put on the masquerade of femininity in order to do anything or get anywhere. In this sense, the vagina dentata is still a symptom of female dependency and unliberation. In a non-gender-biased world, one more open and tender to the multifarious metamorphoses of sexual desire, it wouldn’t be necessary. But, reactive as it is, the vagina dentata offers Dawn the only sort of freedom that is accessible to her.

(Shaviro 2008)

In addition to *Teeth*’s diluted conception of feminist liberation, the dissatisfying nature of the endings of both films can also be attributed to the characters’ loss of subjectivity—their castrations—throughout the narratives. Card’s reading of rape as terrorism is again enlightening, as she draws on Bat-Ami Bar On to suggest that rape culture, like terrorism, produces an erosion of self and ‘a sense of self-betrayal’ (Card 1996b, 116). Cathy Winkler, who repeatedly uses the words torture and terror to describe her own experience of rape, similarly argues that ‘rape is an attempt to murder our identity’(2002, 36). While the male characters of *Teeth* and *Hard Candy* face mythical threats to bodily integrity which culminate in horror/thriller spectacles of genital castrations, the female characters face rape terrorism, a threat to bodily integrity which ends in symbolic castration or a loss of identity, resonating with the reality of rape trauma syndrome. The graphic spectacles of male genital castration distract from the female protagonists’ symbolic castrations—their loss of subjectivity—that occurs throughout the films. In terms of the protagonists’ developing sexualities, *Teeth* and
Hard Candy might be regarded as coming-of-age films, and yet their narratives concurrently chart the loss of a sense of self. Since the castration in the girls’ character arcs is less explicit than the men’s genital castrations, let me outline what becomes of Dawn and Hayley.

After the credit sequence, Teeth opens with a shot of Dawn, smiling, confident, speaking to a room full of young people about the importance of keeping their ‘gift wrapped’ until marriage. As a public speaker, and when she talks to her parents in the following scene, Dawn is strong in her convictions. Dawn’s crimes destabilize her sense of self but she gradually finds a new sense of self as an avenger. However, she accepts this role as an inevitability rather than choosing or creating it for herself, demonstrated in the way that her body still bites reflexively with Ryan and how she has no other option than to use her teeth on the lecherous man who locks her in his car when she hitchhikes out of town. Her direct-to-camera smile in the final shot is perhaps designed as a humorous moment of dramatic irony (the audience knows the man’s wagging tongue will be bitten off), but it also marks a resignation to her situation and to the necessity of using her teeth to protect or avenge herself. Learning to harness her teeth is small compensation for all the loss and injury Dawn suffers throughout the film, including multiple sexual assaults, the deaths of her boyfriend and mother, losing the community she found in The Promise club, becoming disillusioned with celibacy, giving up on her convictions and idealism, and leaving her home and family. Dawn has almost everything taken away except for the power of her sexuality (the ultimate postfeminist power), so rather than being a triumphant or empowering ending, it is one of defeat.

There is similarly an erosion of Hayley’s subjectivity in Hard Candy, which undermines audience identification and gives a flat feeling to her final moments onscreen too. The acquainting period at the start of the film (in which Hayley shares her tastes in books and music and information about her family and her studies) is undermined by the first twist when she reveals she has deceived and entrapped Jeff. Later Jeff attempts some amateur psychoanalysis, asking Hayley if perhaps she is angry with her father and whether he reminds her of her father. It seems he has hit a nerve and made a connection with her, but then Hayley breaks her performance and laughs in his face, continuing to be inscrutable. Up on the roof in their final confrontation, Jeff yells ‘Who the hell are you?!’ to which Hayley replies, ‘I am every little girl you ever watched, touched, hurt, screwed, killed.’ In the shooting script, cut from the final film, Hayley continues, ‘And we’re all back now to cut you off. Snip snip.’ (Nelson 2004, 98). Rather than being the fourteen year-old potential victim we worried for early in the film, Hayley is now perhaps not a person at all but a representative figure, a feminist everygirl, a Fury, a ghost, or even perhaps Jeff’s conscience. This strongly reflects the trajectory of Jennifer in I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978/Steven R. Monroe, 2010), as discussed in Chapter One, where her subjectivity (and spectatorial identification) becomes
gradually out of reach as she resembles a mythical feminist avenger in later scenes, and it also reflects the loss or denial of protagonists’ subjectivity in the genre more generally. Hayley’s identity, her motivations, and her emotions are ambiguous, right through to the final frames. The film ends with Hayley walking away in her little red riding hoodie, the expression on her face difficult to read. Despite the camera closely studying her face for much of the film, her face is blank yet complex—is she triumphant, relieved, or simply exhausted? And in the ongoing face-to-face ethical encounter, how should the viewer respond now? The conclusion’s ambivalence is further reflected in the music and lyrics of Blonde Redhead’s ‘Elephant Woman’, which plays over the final credits. The track oscillates between mournfulness and hope, an expression of pain and a plea for empathy:

Angel I can see myself in your eyes
Angel won’t you feel for me from your heart
Do return my heart to me
No don’t insist I’m already hurt...

While fantasies of male genital castration can have their horrific and masochistic pleasures, the symbolic castrations of the protagonists, gradual throughout the films, leave the viewer (who perhaps identified with her, at least some of the time) with a flat, empty feeling. Like so many contemporary examples of the rape-revenge genre, Teeth and Hard Candy deploy the rape-revenge dynamic ambivalently, contradictorily, and with ideological confusion. Pleasurable but problematic, these articulations of rape-revenge myths give their protagonists far from a triumphant, or even simply satisfying, fate. Reflecting the media discourses to which they intertextually refer, Teeth and Hard Candy express a postfeminist politics of rape (when they acknowledge rape at all) and an ethical questioning of revenge. The films mobilize revenge fantasies through reference to media discourses and moral panics, negotiating and arguably diluting feminist rape politics by bowing to these constructions and the demands of horror, thriller, and rape-revenge genres.
Chapter Four:  
*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo: Rape, Revenge, and Victimhood in Translation*

Towards the end of the Swedish film adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor)* (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009), Harriet Vanger is reunited with her great-uncle Henrik and the loose threads of her mysterious disappearance forty years earlier are tied up. She tells the story of how her father and brother raped her from the age of fourteen, and how one day she knocked her drunken father into the water with an oar and held him under until he drowned. This classic rape-revenge scene is presented in an overexposed slow motion flashback. Teenage Harriet flees from the cabin with blood on her face and bruises on her arms, chased by her topless, lumbering father down to the jetty. A close-up shot of the swinging oar anticipates the vengeful act of violence Harriet now confesses to. As she holds Gottfried under the water with the oar, the reverse shot shows her distressed yet determined expression and her wild blonde hair backlit by the sun. This flashback is the text's originary scene in two ways: narratively, as the event which initiates the primary mystery of Harriet's disappearance; and generically, in terms of locating it within cinema's rape-revenge genre. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* pays retro tribute to the genre with Harriet's backstory, but also presents a contemporary alternative to this rape-avenger figure with Lisbeth Salander—Stieg Larsson's vision of the ultimate victim/avenger in a corrupt welfare state.

Larsson's Millennium Trilogy brings into focus some of the tensions surrounding the cultural politics of the place of the victim in postfeminist, neoliberal rape-revenge narratives, particularly through this figure of Salander. The Swedish film adaptation of the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, further highlights these tensions through its medium-specific exploration of affective experience and ethical spectatorship. This chapter explores how the film works to create a series of contradictory experiences for spectators—we are invited to ethical reflection, but also encouraged to develop 'perverse allegiances' with the avenging protagonist. The film calls for a re-thinking of the relation between affect, ethics, and moral action in the rape-revenge genre. Oplev's adaptation is particularly interesting for contemporary film theory debates around ethics, affect, and embodiment, because it points to how genre/art cinema hybrids negotiate these tensions, and also to how theory can—and must—move beyond examples from the narrow sets of experimental and arthouse films typically used to discuss questions of materiality, affect, and ethics.64 I will primarily be

exploring these fields through a close examination of the film’s rape and revenge scenes. Although the two rapes committed by Salander’s new guardian, Advokat Nils Erik Bjurman, and Salander’s violent revenge on him take up only a small mid-section of the first novel (Larsson [2005] 2009, 241-288) and approximately thirteen minutes of screen time, they are significant in constructing Salander’s character and conveying key themes of the trilogy including victimhood, individualism, and responsibility. Before I delve into the ambivalent ethics, affects, and politics of these scenes, I will give a brief overview of three main contexts—theoretical, generic, and political—into which the film can be placed to reveal its workings: contemporary film theory discourses on ethical spectatorship; its location as a genre/art cinema hybrid (which tempers the deployment of rape-revenge and the ambiguous uses of intense affective or sensory experiences); and finally, contemporary anti-victimist discourse, a discourse linked to the individualism promoted by postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies.

The rape and revenge scenes draw on models of ethical spectatorship in interesting ways, encouraging empathetic engagement with Salander, while also steering particular responses to the rape scenes through Salander’s example in the post-rape scenes. In this chapter I suggest that although empathy with Salander is encouraged, ethical spectatorship is limited because the moral and political meanings of rape and revenge are tightly controlled and kept within particular ideological and generic strictures. In other words, we are not challenged to reflect on or question moral frameworks that inform the text—such as the vigilantism of the rape-revenge genre—which Michele Aaron suggests is a requirement of ethical spectatorship (2007, 114). There is a tension between the moral and ethical responses to rape and revenge in the film, with Salander’s rape calling on an ethical engagement, while Bjurman’s rape by Salander calls on a particular moral response, one which is in line with neoliberal individualism (which here seeks a heroic overthrowing of the corrupt welfare state, represented by the guardianship system) and the demands of the rape-revenge genre (aligned with the moral precept of ‘eye for an eye’). Reading the rape scenes against the revenge scene helps to articulate the contrast between ethics and morality in spectatorship, with the latter scene providing moral reassurance against the difficult ethical questions and uncomfortable spectatorial positioning of the former. While the rape scenes display trappings of ethical spectatorship—such as those developed by new extremism films—ultimately The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo cannot follow through with this to confront or implicate the spectator as the more controversial new extremism films do. Rather, it uses these trappings

65 The affective yet graphically restrained portrayal of rape in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is distinct from the ‘unwatchable’ approach taken by some contemporary European new extremism films. The rape-revenge film Irréversible (Gaspar Noé, 2002) is one of the more ‘punishing examples’ of such films which assault their audiences and negates scopophilic pleasure to ‘compel us to rethink the
only to the degree that they fit within, and contribute to, the moral framework, genre conventions, and mainstream audiences of the text.

These tensions may be partly symptomatic of the film’s ‘medium-concept’ position. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* can be located within what Andrew Nestingen conceptualizes as Nordic ‘medium-concept’ cinema, a marriage of genre narratives and art-film aesthetics which inflects crime narratives with ‘philosophical and cultural-political questions and demands’ (2008, 48). The film adaptation of the Millennium Trilogy marks the culmination of the development in Swedish cinema Nestingen traces, where the increasing number of adaptations of Scandinavian police procedurals and spy novels in the 1990s produced a prevalent form ‘with the aim of merging popular cinema and social critique, even when the latter is confined to a few gestures required by the genre’ (2008, 49). *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* epitomizes the way that ‘these films use genre form and its conduciveness to marketing to raise political questions and instigate debate and attract large audiences’ (Nestingen 2008, 49). Oplev’s film uses the rape-revenge genre to explore questions of response and responsibility around issues of rape and victimization. The rape-revenge genre is an suitable template for the tensions in the text, with its conventions used to synthesize the contradictions between the film’s ethical call (to acknowledge the serious negative impact of rape on the victim, for example), its rejection of victimhood, and its advocation of violent response. Individualism is a key site of debate in medium-concept crime films (Nestingen 2008, 97), a concept that I argue similarly permeates the politics of rape and revenge in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The use of Hollywoodesque goal-oriented protagonists to represent social struggles means such issues play out in the realm of ‘individualism and the personal resolution of complex socio-economic and moral problems’ (Nestingen 2008, 15). *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* follows this pattern, using the individualist attitudes and actions of its heroine to explore rape and the appropriate responses to it.

In the Millennium Trilogy, Larsson goes further than suggesting that revenge is the desirable and justifiable response to rape, as many prior rape-revenge texts have done. He advocates the idea of revenge as the responsibility of the rape-victim, a notion that resonates with the threads of anti-victimism and individualism in postfeminist and neoliberal cultures. The two rape scenes I will discuss are just two examples of the constant victimization of Salander. Repeat victimization is key to her character, and the repeat descriptions of it emphasize her

notions of spectatorship, desire and ethics’ (Grønstad 2011, 193). Asbjørn Grønstad describes these films as ‘Uncompromising and anti-voyeuristic, they enact a reversal of the relation between film and spectator that historically has defined the cinematic situation—these films compel us to look away’ (Grønstad 2011, 194). *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*’s constructions of rape scenes do curtail voyeurism, but not in the assaultive way that the films of the new extremism—which confront and implicate the spectator to explore ethical spectatorship—may be said to do. It uses a different mode of spectatorship, one that is ethical only to the degree that it does not undermine the revenge narrative, and one that primarily adheres to genre conventions to be both ‘watchable’ and thrilling.
victimhood. For example, in the trilogy’s third book, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, Salander’s second rape is again described as she recounts it in her report, now adding a nipple piercing, a list of Bjurman’s torture implements, and his attempt to strangle her with her t-shirt (Larsson [2007] 2009, 374). The epic trilogy has the space to keep returning to and elaborating on the rapes. The novels are pulpy and salacious, and the expanded details of Salander’s victimization seem exploitative and gratuitous. Salander’s victimization reaches absurd proportions by the end of the second novel, when she is shot in the head and buried alive:

> For the first time in her life—at least since she had been a little girl—Salander was unable to take command of her situation. Over the years she had been mixed up in fights, subjected to abuse, been the object of both official and private injustices. She had taken many more punches to both body and soul than anyone should ever have to endure… A broken nose she could live with. But she could not live with a hole in her skull.  

*(Larsson [2006] 2009, 564)*

However, like Beatrix Kiddo in *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2004), Salander manages to dig her way out of her grave and take revenge. Both Beatrix and Salander are memorable victim-avengers because they undergo cycles of great suffering and victimization followed by inflicting great suffering in their violent revenge acts. Larsson describes how Salander suffers under and is created by systematic injustices (including domestic violence and the guardianship system) and sexual assault, which by definition makes her a victim, and yet there is a strong rejection of the label:

> Even though she was well aware of what a women's crisis centre was for, it never occurred to her to turn to one herself. Crisis centres existed, in her eyes, for victims, and she had never regarded herself as a victim. Consequently, her only remaining option was to do what she had always done—take matters in her own hands and solve her problems on her own.  

*(Larsson [2005] 2009, 260)*

Alyson M. Cole argues that the linguistic disavowal of victimhood is ‘the best evidence of the success of the crusade to shame victims’ (2007, 2). Cole identifies an ‘anti-victimism’ discourse in contemporary American culture and politics, and argues that anti-victimists have constructed a notion of ‘true victimhood’ in opposition to ‘victimism’ (2007, 5). Salander reflects the figure of the True Victim, particularly the characteristics of responsibility (commanding her fate and rejecting the victim label) and individuality (not engaging in ‘victim politics’ or being a victim by affiliation) (Cole 2007, 5). Larsson distances

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66 Although Cole’s case studies are American, this is arguably a broader Western phenomenon. Echoing Cole’s argument for the European context, Fatima Naqvi’s book, *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood: Western Europe, 1970-2005*, explores ‘why many authors, filmmakers, artists, and philosophers in Europe share Baudrillard’s sense that we have become a “société victimale.” More to the point, it is about how their cultural anxiety expresses itself; about how such rhetoric sometimes criticizes itself; and, above all, how victim talk perpetuates itself in the very moment that the ground seems to be pulled from beneath it’ (2007, 2).
Salander from ‘victim feminism’, a label used by postfeminist authors in the 1990s and related to the broader anti-victimism campaign. Rape statistics and antirape literature are particularly contested terrain for postfeminist authors such as Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, and Christine Hoff Sommers, who promote the idea that ‘Victims in fact owe their victimization not to the experience of rape but to a feminist propaganda that has brainwashed women into thinking of themselves as victims’ (Mardorossian 2002, 748). Salander is also distanced from the Nordic concept of ‘state feminism’, a label given to the 1970s women’s movements which were collective, consensus-based, and cooperated with the state (Stenport and Alm 2009, 169). As Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm and Anna Westerstahl Stenport argue, ‘The Salander character is part of what scholars are calling the postfeminist paradigm by which popular culture driven by capitalism and prevailing patriarchal norms draws on the individual woman as a figure to set society right’ (2009, 170). Emphasis on individualism, independence, and responsibility also connect anti-victimism and postfeminism to neoliberalism. Perhaps like The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo itself, ‘Anti-victimism should be understood as both an extension of neo-liberalism as well as an attempt to come to terms with its consequences’ (Cole 2007, 46). The text’s promotion of the idea of the responsibility of the rape victim reflects anti-victimist rhetoric, and both are informed by postfeminist and neoliberal discourses.

The rape-revenge narrative, characters, attitude and aesthetic in this film strongly reflect an anti-victimism perspective. For anti-victims, ‘blaming, whining, complaining, and other public displays of weakness are considered aesthetically repulsive and socially harmful’ (Cole 2007, 130-31). Salander’s attitude to the commonplace nature of her and other girls she knew being forced to perform sexual acts is that ‘There was no point whimpering about it’ (Larsson [2005] 2009, 249). Her attitude towards Harriet’s story is fiercely anti-victimist, bordering on victim blaming, as she demonstrates in a conversation with Blomkvist:

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67 Cole discusses the work of postfeminist authors including Rene Denefeld, Christine Hoff Sommers, Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf (2007, 47-78). This group display ‘antipathy toward contemporary feminism’s association with the welfare state, with ideas of social justice and other causes that many feminists commonly embrace’ (Cole 2007, 54). Naomi Wolf in particular defines and disavows ‘victim feminism’: ‘There is something wrong with the way some feminist attitudes approach the persona of the victim… There is nothing wrong with identifying one’s victimization. The act is critical. There is a lot wrong with moulding it into an identity’ (Wolf 1994, 148).

68 Cecilia Ovesdotter Alm and Anna Westerstahl Stenport explore the neoliberal politics of Larsson’s trilogy in their 2009 article: “Corporations, Crime, and Gender Construction in Stieg Larsson’s The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: Exploring Twenty-First Century Neoliberalism in Swedish Culture.” Scandinavian Studies 81(2): 157-78. They argue that the novel must be viewed ‘as a paragon for how twenty-first century Swedish culture construes itself in a global paradigm… The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo reflects—implicitly and explicitly—gaps between rhetoric and practice in Swedish policy and public discourse about complex relations between welfare state retrenchment, neoliberal corporate and economic practices, and politicized gender construction. The novel, in fact, endorses a pragmatic acceptance of a neoliberal world order that is delocalized, dehumanized, and misogynistic’ (2009, 157).
During the drive he told her Harriet Vanger’s story. Salander sat in silence for half an hour before she opened her mouth.
“Bitch,” she said.
“Who?”
“Harriet Fucking Vanger. If she had done something in 1966, Martin Vanger couldn’t have kept killing and raping for thirty-seven years.”
“Harriet knew about her father murdering women, but she had no idea that Martin had anything to do with it. She fled from a brother who raped her and then threatened to reveal that she had drowned her father if she didn’t do what he said.”
“Bullshit.”
After that they sat in silence all the way to Hedestad.

(Larsson [2005] 2009, 544)

Salander’s attitude supports Melanie Newman’s argument that the ass-kicking babes in crime novels by authors such as James Patterson, Stieg Larsson, and Dean Koontz reveal misogynistic beliefs such as ‘if only females would stop acting as ‘victims’ and discover their own capacity for violence, the aggression visited on them by men would disappear’ (2009). The rape-revenge genre functions well as a vehicle for this belief, in that it most commonly depicts an individual heroine avenging her rape(s) by violent means. In the anti-victim view, as in the rape-revenge genre, ‘Victimhood is a transitory state from which the victimized are expected to ascend’ (Cole 2007, 138). Salander does this through avenging her own rape, and becoming a vigilante against other injustices. The affective drive I will now outline in the analysis of the rape scenes is underpinned by—and at the service of—anti-victimist politics, and the pay-off for both these affective and political motivators is the brutal revenge which matches her brutal victimization.

The First Rape Scene: Power, Control, Disgust

There is a strong fidelity between novel and film in the adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, as might be expected due to the popularity of the source novel. However, in the translation between mediums there are subtle yet significant shifts in the tone, graphicness, and structure of the rape scenes. These small schisms created in translation illuminate the meaning attributed to rape, and how rape and its responses are constructed in fiction/film representations. One key difference is how, in the novel, Bjurman’s two rapes of Salander are interspersed with short scenes of investigative journalist Mikael Blomkvist’s new affair with Cecilia Vanger. This alternation serves many functions, including keeping up a narrative pace, providing romantic relief between scenes of sexual violence, and contrasting ‘good sex’ (consensual; pleasurable) against ‘bad sex’ (non-consensual; violent; motivated by power, punishment and control). Larsson uses this good sex/bad sex contrast in an almost educational manner, constructing his ideal of liberated, consensual, contemporary sexual relationships in Blomkvist and Cecilia’s affair, and opposing this to the consequences of the failed welfare state when Salander’s guardian, Bjurman, exploits his power over Salander. This crosscutting structure is inherently cinematic, and would have been easily adaptable to the film version, but was excised (along with all of Blomkvist’s relationships and affairs
except for his romance with Salander later in the story). In their article about the alterations in gender representation in the adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Karen Klitgaard Povlsen and Anne Marit Waade suggest that this elimination of other romantic and sexual relationships in the film allows for Blomkvist and Salander’s relationship to ‘stand out so clearly and unambiguously in the film as a traditional love story that presents typical gender relations’ (2009). The film’s paring down of the novel’s sexual entanglements highlights the problematic trajectory in which wild young bisexual Salander is tamed by romance with the mature older man. The film’s heteronormative love story is a clear example of the source material being shaped for genre cinema—the story and the characters’ complex sex lives are simplified (and arguably, depoliticized) to fit a genre pattern and a feature-film length.69

Beyond the use of this good sex/bad sex contrast, Larsson explicitly outlines the exploitative and illegal nature of what occurs between Bjurman and Salander:

> The initial sexual assault—which in legal terms would be defined as sexual molestation and the exploitation of an individual in a position of dependence, and could in theory get Bjurman up to two years in prison—lasted only a few seconds. But it was enough to irrevocably cross a boundary. For Salander it was a display of strength by an enemy force—an indication that aside from their carefully defined legal relationship, she was at the mercy of his discretion and defenceless.  
> (Larsson [2005] 2009, 241-2)

The action of the scene, a ten minute ordeal in which Salander is forced to perform oral sex on Bjurman, is described in just a few sentences, about the same number of words given to her cleaning her face, mouth, and sweater in the bathroom in the following paragraph (Larsson [2005] 2009, 243). There is no doubt as to what goes on, but neither does Larsson elaborate more than necessary here. This representation of the action of the rape is closely mirrored in the film, but there are elements of the scene in the novel which are absent in the film. Larsson includes a few of Bjurman’s thoughts in italics (‘*This is better than a whore. She gets paid with her own money.*’ [244]), and Salander’s thought processes and perspective are included with even more description, such as when she weighs up the consequences of using the letter opener as a weapon. Larsson takes on a legalistic, educational tone in the account of the first rape (as shown in the above-quoted passage), and makes clear-cut what can be defined as rape and what evidence could be used in this case to prove it:

> The bruises on her neck, as well as the DNA signature of his semen staining her body and clothing, would have nailed him. Even if the lawyer had claimed that *she wanted to do it or she seduced me* or any other excuse that rapists routinely used, he would

69 Perhaps predictably, David Fincher’s 2011 adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* further undertakes this process that Povlsen and Waade see in Oplev’s film. Fincher’s film ‘Hollywoodizes’ the relationship between Blomkvist and Salander, filtering the romantic entanglements through heteronormative values that were somewhat challenged in Larsson’s original novel.
have been guilty of so many breaches of the guardianship regulations that he would instantly have been stripped of his control over her. ([2005] 2009, 245)

Larsson continues in an educational tone as he elaborates on the welfare system in Sweden, the differences between a trustee and guardianship, and makes clear his position that the guardianship system is a great infringement of democracy ([2005] 2009, 246). Larsson’s narration explores the affective and fantasy responses to misogyny through Salander’s character while also adding political commentary about appropriate real world responses to sexual violence and other injustices. His political and educational commentary, and the insights into the thoughts of Salander and Bjurman during the rape scene, are more difficult to convey in narrative film, and are further limited by genre conventions. The film adaptation is faithful to the action of the scene, but uses a specific film grammar to construct the meaning of rape and its impact on Salander and the viewer. The film emphasizes not the legalities or the institutionally oppressed position Salander is in, but the more affective elements such as power, control and disgust.

The dynamics between the two characters and the significance of what occurs between them are expressed through film grammar, particularly camera angles; the breakdown of the shot/reverse-shot exchange; and the contrasting of a clinical wide shot with close-ups that emphasize unpleasant sensory experiences. The scene occurs 38 minutes into the film and is just three minutes in length. It opens like a continuation of Bjurman and Salander’s earlier conversation in his office; they are seated in the same positions either side of his desk and the film conventionally shot/reverse-shots between them as he again asks prurient personal questions. She does not wear her goth-style costume seen earlier, but casual blue jeans and a hoodie. It is an everyday, generic costume which dilutes Salander’s alienation from the generic spectator, encouraging empathic engagement with her experience in the following minutes. Bjurman closes the blinds and moves around to her side of his desk. He slaps her and threatens her—a more violent beginning to this incident than described in the novel, and one which helps establish alignment with Salander because we experience the cinematic shock as she experiences the physical shock. The violence of the scene and powerlessness of Salander’s position cannot be commented on by Larsson’s narration in the film, so this slap functions as a shortcut. It also marks a power shift in the scene; now the camera is held level, square on, in the shots of her, and at a slight low angle in the shots of him, indicating he is increasingly asserting his power. The alternating shots of them are no longer shot/reverse-shots, which emphasizes the different experiences of the characters, their disconnect.

Bjurman and Salander are not meeting in a Levinasian face-to-face encounter, which would

70 This is a limitation of the medium, as Brian McFarlane points out in his theory of film adaptation: ‘There is, in film, no such instantly apparent, instantly available commentary on the action unfolding as the novel’s narrating prose habitually offers’ (1996, 18).
create an ethical relationship preventing harm against the other. In the face-to-face encounter, the other is exposed and vulnerable, calling on our responsibility for their wellbeing (Levinas 1985, 89). Once Bjurman irrevocably crosses a boundary (as Larsson describes it), the two characters lose their prohibition to harm one another, and it becomes the spectator who is engaged in a face-to-face with Salander. Salander directs several ‘expressionless’ glances direct to camera while Bjurman threatens her and gropes her breasts. These glances seem to say directly to the spectator, ‘Look what’s happening to me’ (even perhaps a ‘Help me’), seeking to draw us into a response to the rape scenes which acknowledges the fear and harm experienced by Salander. The spectatorial relationship becomes one of empathy and responsibility, characteristic of the face-to-face as Levinas describes it: ‘if you encounter the face, responsibility arises in the strangeness of the other and in his misery. The face offers itself to your compassion and to your obligation’ (Levinas in Robbins 2001, 48).

A further power shift, an amping up, is indicated by a shot of Salander looking up at him when he turns her around to face him, her face filling the frame. Then the rape is depicted mainly between two alternating shots: a wide shot of the whole office from behind Bjurman, his body blocking Salander; and a close-up shot of the back of Salander’s head with Bjurman’s hand gripping her hair and controlling her. This pairing shows the action and gives it (feminist) meaning—it removes any doubt as to what is happening (by documenting it in a wide shot) while also removing the sexual nature of oral sex in this instance, indicating through the close-up that it is forced, that it is about power and control. Both shots block the spectator’s view of the ‘action’, minimizing the scene’s potential to be exploitative or sexy. A low-angle shot of Bjurman’s sweaty face (aligned with Salander’s position, although not from her point-of-view), and his dialogue, ‘If you’re nice to me, I’ll always be nice to you,’ adds disgust to the scene. Disgust is a useful rhetorical device in vengeance narratives; physical and sociomoral disgust are wedded and exaggerated to justify the execution of the criminal (Plantinga 2009, 213). The use of disgust here points to the way the film increasingly falls back on a moral rather than an ethical approach to what occurs between Salander and Bjurman. In particular, the spectator’s ethical face-to-face engagement—and its attendant prohibition on harm—is a privilege bestowed only on Salander, not Bjurman. This is one of the compromises made to genre, in that the revenge drive directed at the ‘bad guy’ Bjurman undercuts the honouring of a Levinasian ethical encounter with him. Watching Bjurman take pleasure in this act of abuse while being affectively aligned with Salander may swell the spectator’s desire to see Salander take revenge upon him.

The scene then cuts abruptly to a close-up of Salander in the bathroom vigorously scrubbing her mouth out with three fingers, as if to make herself vomit. Truncating Salander’s ten-minute ordeal and omitting Bjurman’s climax curtails the potential spectatorial enjoyment,
exploitation, and porno-graphicness of the scene. Depicting vigorous washing rather than the dirty act itself directs a particular response to the rape scene; it mirrors, prompts, or encourages feeling dirty or disgusted. This construction forecloses a variety of responses which the rape scene (if left longer, or shot differently) may have evoked, responses which are opposed to Salander’s response and the text’s politics. Again disgust is being used to direct a more normative moral response as opposed to an ethical response. Salander’s action of washing the evidence away points to her individualist approach, which is condoned in the text through Harriet and Salander’s private ways of dealing with their rapists, and the covering up of Gottfried and Martin’s rapes and murders at the end. Affectively and ethically, the response to rape is channelled into the desire and imperative for individual revenge outside of the law.

The post-rape bathroom sequence is made up of three shots: the first vigorous scrubbing in close-up, jump cut to a second scrubbing with more soap in a wider shot, then jump cut to another close-up of her face as she pauses before returning to the office. The looks in relation to the camera are interesting in this final shot—again her face is ‘expressionless’ as she looks in the mirror then stares into space for a moment (not quite into the camera but her eyeline just misses it), and then her eyes move across camera to look into the direction of the office where Bjurman waits. Salander’s actions and looks develop the face-to-face and affective bond between herself and the spectator. In constructing an intense experience of rape for spectators, inviting us to share the affects it produces (such as disgust and rage), the film implicates us through embodiment. By incorporating the spectator in this way, the film is able to advise the spectator on how to react to the difficult spectacles of violence it is presenting. The use of the videotape after the second rape plays a similar role in guiding spectatorial response.

**The Second Rape Scene: Trapped in Victimization**

The second rape scene uses similar filmic techniques to the first, emphasizing Salander’s victimization through repetition and increasing the affective motivation to see revenge against Bjurman. In a three minute scene set in Bjurman’s bedroom, Bjurman strikes Salander, handcuffs her to the bed, gags her, hits her again, ties her feet to the end of the bed, pulls down her underwear and his own, and then rapes her. The cinematographic grammar, numerous close-ups, the use of sound, and the replaying of Salander’s videotape are techniques which affectively underscore the repeat victimization of Salander. The film is driven by a rejection of victimhood but it relies on an affective presentation of the constant victimization of its protagonist to highlight its cinematic thrills and its story of individual heroic triumph against misogyny and the corrupt welfare state.
The scene packs an immediate affective punch, but is not as graphic as in the novel, in the sense of not including—or returning to—the salacious aspects such as the details of Bjurman’s weapons and the nipple piercing (Larsson [2007] 2009, 374). The difference in the reading and viewing experience is not in the representation’s graphicness, understood as representational explicitness (as they are both very graphic, the book even more so perhaps), but in its affectiveness, understood as the ability to move the spectator using ‘visceral forces’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1), which is achieved through certain film techniques such as slow motion, distorted sound, and colour. Graphicness alone can be exploitative and/or unaffecting, but affectiveness makes the spectator feel the trauma of rape and creates a space for affective and reflective engagement. The relative restraint in terms of graphicness (in contrast to many new extremism and exploitation films, for example, and also in contrast to the detail described in the book) does not detract from conveying the violence or trauma of rape. Indeed the film grammar used here limits the potential for exploitation or voyeurism inherent in a rape scene. Salander’s body is not sexualized in this rape scene—she is fully clothed for most of it, with only brief shots of both Bjurman and Salander’s naked buttocks. Spatially, there is no intimate, involved perspective—the two-shot economy positions the spectator at either an uncomfortable distance from the action in a long shot, or an uncomfortable proximity to Salander’s experience in the facial close-ups, as I will detail further below. In The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’s rape scenes, the affect derives from the effect of rape, its aftermath, rather than on film techniques that merely sensationalize the act itself. This approach may be considered part of the film’s ethical address, in that it leaves the spectator wondering how to dispense of those affective charges. In other words, how does affect convert into (moral) action? The easiest answer, for both film and spectator, is to allow genre formula to step in, converting anger and disgust into revenge through the rape-revenge narrative.

The repetition and escalation of violence between Bjurman and Salander is shown by connecting the first three scenes between them (initial conversation, first rape, second rape) through visual mirroring. For example, the wide shot of the office from behind Bjurman during the first rape matches the wide shot of Bjurman on the bed raping Salander again in

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71 The affective charge of a violent film is not created by the inclusion of more violence, as Marco Abel points out, ‘Affect is not simply a matter of “more” in the purely quantitative sense of the word; rather, it is a matter of more or less in the sense of intensity’ (2008, 41).
72 For criminologist Alison Young, the affective, ethical, and political impact of rape scenes on the spectator are closely intertwined, and consequently she strongly argues for not representing rape on screen at all (2010, 70). Young rejects claims of pedagogic benefit (since depicting rape in a film such as The Accused [Jonathan Kaplan, 1988] ‘perpetuate[s] the notion that rape must be seen before it can be condemned’) and makes the convincing point that the absence of a graphic rape scene can be equally, or even more, affective and effective (2010, 70). Young admires the rape-revenge sequence in Kill Bill (Quentin Tarantino, 2003/2004) for similar restraint, arguing that ‘The omission of any explicit depiction of sexual violence makes this scene no less effective in showing that repeated rape of a comatose woman is reprehensible, and it arguably heightens its affective impact’ (2010, 70).
terms of framing, distance, and the positioning of characters. In both scenes, the wide shot alternates with a 180-degree reverse close-up shot of Salander. This contrast depicts the dichotomies of power/powerlessness, control/loss of control; the meaning of rape is constructed as being about this switch and emphasizing the contrast makes the spectator feel Salander’s loss of power and control. As in the first rape scene, the film grammar changes with the power shift when the rape begins. After a conventional shot/reverse-shot construction during their conversation when Salander arrives, the commencement of violence is marked by a new two-shot construction: a close-up of Salander’s face in the foreground (with a shallow depth of field leaving Bjurman’s face out of focus in the background), which ends as she turns around and is surprised by a punch to the face from Bjurman; followed by a match-on-action edit to a wide shot, which shows her falling onto the bed from the force of the punch. A surprise blow to the face denotes the beginning of physical violence against Salander in both rape scenes. Such repetition emphasizes the ongoing victimization of Salander. Like the slap in the first scene, this punch also functions as a ‘cinematic shock’ to the spectator. Julian Hanich argues that ‘Cinematic shocks depend on one of two formal elements: a) an abrupt and rapid visual change, and b) a sudden and stabbing increase of loudness. One of these elements must occur’ (2010, 133). Both of these occur with Bjurman’s blows, a shift in the film grammar away from the shot/reverse-shot construction and the loud sound of the slap or punch. This cinematic technique snaps us into affective alignment with Salander, both experiencing a shock to the senses and being violently put in our place by Bjurman.

Affective alignment with Salander is also forcefully achieved in the film adaptation through close-ups of Salander’s face. Her pained, frightened, and panicked facial expressions are deeply affecting, particularly her final harrowing silent scream as it most emphasizes these affects by using film techniques such as camera distance and angle (close-up, level with the bed), distorted sound, and slow motion. Salander’s close-ups reflect Carl Plantinga’s argument that ‘facial expressions in film not only communicate emotion, but also elicit, clarify, and strengthen affective response—especially empathetic response’ (1999, 240). The climactic silent scream close-up marks the scene as an example of what Plantinga terms a ‘scene of empathy’, where narrative pace slows and attention becomes focused on a character’s emotional experience (1999, 239). Since the most powerful scenes of empathy are reserved for ‘a kind of emotional and cognitive summation of the ideological project of the film’ (1999, 253), Salander’s scream can be understood as a summation of the film’s cycles of victimization and vengeance.
Intertextual associations also help to make sense of the role and impact of the close-up shot of Salander screaming.\footnote{The silent scream evokes filmic intertextual reference to Don't Look Now (Nicolas Roeg, 1973) and Sophie's Choice (Alan J. Pakula, 1982). In both of these films the silent scream belongs to a parent who loses a child, suggesting themes of death, trauma, and loss of innocence.} It evokes Francis Bacon’s scream paintings, particularly because the film speed is slowed and the sound of the scream is drained from the scene (and blurred with traffic noise in a sound bridge to the next scene). Gilles Deleuze argues that in Bacon’s painting, 'the horror is multiplied because it is inferred from the scream, and not the reverse' ([1981] 2005, 38). Just as ‘Bacon is more interested in painting an affect that sustains the intensity of violence than the cause (the horror) that produced the effect (the scream)’ (Abel 2008, 5), Oplev’s film focuses on the affect that sustains the intensity of rape trauma, more than the cause (the rape) that produced the effect (the scream). As in Bacon’s work, Salander’s scream relies upon the violence of sensation rather than the violence of the represented (‘the sensational’) (Deleuze [1981] 2005, 39). Yet in its two-shot grammar, the scene also provides us with the violence of the represented in the long shots, which present the whole room, making the act clear in a shocking tableau. When alternating between these two types of shots, the film presents both sensation and the sensational, becoming powerfully affective. This aspect is a key difference between the novel and the film and it highlights the tools of the medium at the adaptation’s disposal.

The silent scream points to how sound is used extremely effectively to convey the horror and trauma of this rape, and works as perhaps the most affective element in the scene.\footnote{The use of music is more conventional than other aspects of the soundtrack. The theme song plays during parts of the rape and post-rape playback scenes, guiding spectatorial emotion and linking the scene to themes in the film as a whole. Again, a mainstream genre convention is working to the detriment of the more modernist aspects of the scene which call on an ethical spectatorship.} Classical music is playing in Bjurman’s apartment when Salander enters, then non-diegetic high-pitched strings take over to build the tension leading up to the shock of Bjurman’s first blow. The soundscape quickly becomes dominated by Salander’s pained cries and muffled screams, a harrowing addition to the relatively restrained visual representation. There is a jump cut in a close-up of Salander as the sound distorts with a kind of crackle, followed by another shot of her face straight on as the gag comes out of her mouth. She screams as he pulls her head back, and the spectator infers that he is penetrating her at that moment. The scream becomes distortedly distant, perhaps representing Salander going into shock or dissociating to cope with the traumatic experience. Finally her scream blends into the sound of the city as the visuals cut to Salander limping home across a bridge over railway lines in Stockholm in the early morning hours. Sound continues to be an important tool in expressing the impact and aftermath of rape when Salander arrives home in the following scene. She cries out in pain when she tries to sit down. Then she takes the hidden video camera out of her bag and plays back the tape while smoking a cigarette. There is no shot of the video footage, instead we see
close-ups of her shaking hands and her bloody face as we listen to the audio of the rape along with her. Salander listening to her rape via video, outside of the experience itself, mirrors our experience while watching the previous scene.

This pair of scenes (rape and playback) takes us through an affect to emotion transition, developing our immediate sensory response into reflections upon these responses and emotions such as anger and disgust. This transition is key to the rape-revenge connection, preparing the viewer to become ready and keen for Salander’s response of revenge (which the tape plays a key role in enacting). We initially experience the rape scene affectively, perhaps ourselves needing to cover our eyes, turn down the sound, have a cigarette, feel shaky or sick, because of the powerful visuals and sound. Then Salander experiences it as a spectator and her post-traumatic and affective reaction takes the film’s spectators to another level of processing the event. Immediately after the rape scene, the film directs the spectator to respond in a certain way by depicting how Salander herself responds to it. The spectator is affectively and narratively led to support Salander’s individualist and violent revenge on Bjurman and her covering up of his and her crimes, even if this conflicts with the spectator’s political or ethical views on how to respond to sexual violence. Hence, a more complex or challenging ethical engagement may be abandoned because the film reassuringly offers a guide to responding in ways that are in keeping with its standard moral and genre frameworks.

Salander’s post-rape playback in the film is a kind of response correction, analogous to the way that Larsson tightly controls the meaning of what happens to Lisbeth in the novel. For example, the chapter after the second rape begins:

Salander spent the week in bed with pain in her abdomen, bleeding from her rectum, and less visible wounds that would take longer to heal. What she had gone through was very different from the first rape in his office; it was no longer a matter of coercion and degradation. This was systematic brutality.

(Larsson [2005] 2009, 276)

These opening sentences highlight the different tools available to book and film in conveying the physical and other traumas Salander experiences (with the film using sound to represent the pain of these internal wounds that Larsson can more explicitly identify), but it also highlights how Larsson foregrounds his own interpretation. Larsson tells the reader that the rape is a case of punishment, coercion, degradation, and systematic brutality, whereas the film encourages the viewer to discover the meaning of the act (and the imperative for revenge) through the direction of response led by Salander’s demonstration. For the film, particularly as a rape-revenge film, affectively responding in the ‘correct’ way is important to lead the spectator into the revenge scenes. Like Strange Days (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) and other heavily self-reflexive mainstream films discussed by Aaron, The Girl with the Dragon
Tattoo incorporates the spectator and the spectator’s response in order to present ‘very clear (moral) guidelines of how to react to these difficult spectacles’ (2007, 96). However, while Aaron’s examples implicate their spectators by simultaneously ‘heavily restricting the reassurances on offer’ (2007, 93), The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo eases the spectator’s sense of ethical responsibility and implication by offering reassurances, such as meeting genre expectations and pleasures when Salander becomes a vigilante in the revenge scenes.

Salander’s videotape plays a similar role to the ‘playback’ of Iris’ rape in Strange Days. The sci-fi concept of ‘playback’ is about simulating stimuli; it involves the recording and replaying of someone’s direct experience through a SQUID device (which records events directly from the cerebral cortex onto disc). Strange Days uses a pattern of depicting a thrilling sensory experience (via the playback point-of-view shot), and then cutting to (or intercutting) the diegetic spectator’s response. As in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, this diegetic spectator is usually the protagonist, and their reaction guides our own. The protagonist, Lenny, and the spectator view the playback of Iris’ rape at the same time, and when the disc ends, the film cuts to Lenny’s response—spilling out of the car and vomiting on the curb. The arc in the post-playback conversation with his friends, Mace and Max, illustrates the transition from sensory experience to ethical response. Lenny’s dialogue shifts from exposition and interpretation of what has happened to Iris, to the question of what to do with the tape, how to respond ethically to this playback. Note that in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, this process is intensified because it is not the male protagonist who guides our response, but the rape victim herself. Both Salander’s videotape and the playback of Iris’ rape give us the affective experience and then hold it at a remove for us to reflect on it, a technique which highlights our ethical responsibility as viewers. How should our ability to share in someone’s traumatic experience be handled? What ought the viewer do with that tape, with that knowledge, with that experience? The protagonist is our guide in facing the challenges posed by the video surveillance or SQUID technology, and we follow their transformations in stepping up to their ethical responsibility. In The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, this responsibility is defined as the victim herself preventing the rapist from raping again, and exacting violent revenge upon him. The third film, The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest (Luftslottet som sprängdes) (Daniel Alfredson, 2009), like Strange Days, depicts video as a powerful tool in bringing the corrupt and criminal to justice—Salander’s video functions as a reliable witness in court, providing the visible proof of her credibility and simultaneously discrediting the evil psychiatrist Dr Teleborian.

Salander’s playback scene ends with another close-up of her face. Shaking and smoking, with a busted lip, she looks through the camera; as opposed to a direct look to camera, her blank

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75 For an interesting discussion of the spectatorship issues raised by Strange Days’ ‘self-reflexive “post-feminist” portrayal of rape’ (Horeck 2004, 92), see Horeck 2004, 105-10.
gaze hits deeper than a look at the lens. The frequent references to Salander's eyes in the book take on a new meaning in the film. In the book, her eyes are described to give insight into how she feels. The film goes further—eye contact makes a connection with how she feels, and by looking directly at the spectator she calls on the spectator for a response. This is most notably used in the post-rape scenes in which Salander guides spectatorial response: the bathroom scene after the oral rape, and this playback scene after the second rape. Eye contact is associated with empathy, moral conscience, and sharing an experience, and as such, it can be understood as key in implicating the spectator in ethical responsibility. Here the eye-to-eye encounter functions as an intensification of a Levinasian face-to-face encounter. As Levinas argues of the face-to-face, eye contact similarly expresses vulnerability and calls on responsibility. In the novel, Larsson's agenda comes across in his labelling of and commentary on events, but in the film, the more explicit demand is made on the spectator via Salander in her replaying of the video and her flickered looks directly into the camera.

**The Man with the Avenger's Tattoo**

Salander chooses to respond to her rape with an act of revenge which mirrors the second rape. She returns to Bjurman's apartment, tases him in order to tie him up, anally rapes him with the same dildo he used on her, then forces him to watch the videotape of him raping her. She threatens to release the video to the media and police if he does not give her back control of her money and arrange the termination of her guardianship. She then tattoos 'I am a sadistic pig and a rapist' on his abdomen. The duration, setting, action, and cinematography all mirror the rape scene: there are distanced high-angle shots taking in the whole scene, including Bjurman tied up naked on his bedroom floor; there are level close-ups of his frightened face with a gagged mouth; and a low-angle shot showing Salander above him, shoving the dildo in his anus, then kicking his kidneys twice. After raping him, Salander puts on the DVD of her rape and leaves the room. Bjurman is left to this uncomfortable audiovisual experience alone, while the spectator keeps Salander company outside of the room as she smokes and waits for it to finish. We are face-to-face with Salander in a close-up as she smokes, again with her gaze just off camera as though her eyes could flicker to look directly at you at any moment. This facial close-up, the act of smoking, and the close-up of her hand as she butts out a cigarette, echo the post-rape playback scene. This works to remind the viewer of Salander's (and their own) embodied response to the event, and keeps us aligned with the perspective of the traumatized victim hungry for revenge, even in the face of her ethically dubious choice to respond with a rape for a rape.

Salander's revenge is effective, yet ethically problematic, precisely because it mirrors her own rape. Naomi Wolf writes that 'Rape activists have found that one of the most effective—and punishing—therapies for convicted rapists is to have victims of rape tell them in person...
the damage the assault did to them' (1994, 118). The existence of the DVD keeps Bjurman under control, preventing him from committing further violence because its release would ruin him, but its replaying is also about forcing him to relive the rape from the victim’s perspective (which he is now in a position to empathize with since he is tied up, raped, and still vulnerable). Tattooing Bjurman is another method of making him understand the damage he did to her and of enacting retributive justice. The tattoo is a metaphor for rape which can be graphically portrayed—the tattoo represents injury, bodily trauma, penetration, and resultant bleeding, and its depiction in close-up makes it the most graphic, climactic act of violence between them. There is more build-up than there was to the rape as she sets up her kit, then there are close-ups of the tattooing and a slow motion close-up of Bjurman raising his head to look at her, his eyes wild and rage-filled and his nostrils flaring. The slow motion technique suggests that Bjurman is experiencing the same pain that Salander did at the moment of her slow motion scream in the second rape scene. Slow motion is an effective technique for conveying pain, as Jane Stadler writes, ’As a cinematic technique, slow motion can enunciate the experience of being in a situation of extreme stress when every second and every moment through space holds magnified significance’ (2008, 166n10). Does this effect similarly create empathy for Bjurman? To the contrary, it seems to be working here as a reminder of her pain when she was raped. Since Salander is constantly victimized and the spectator is led to empathize with her and stay with her in the post-rape scenes, we can only see her as a victim—she remains the True Victim despite her brutality against him here. In the revenge scene, when the ethical face-to-face relationship has fully disintegrated, we can stay on Salander’s side, even as a perpetrator of rape and disfigurement. Spectatorial alignment is subtly manipulated through point-of-view conventions, with the earlier part of the scene presenting Bjurman’s point-of-view of Salander (such as the out-of-focus shot of her entering the room) but not vice versa, whereas the later part of the scene, after we have joined Salander outside for a cigarette, shifts to presenting more of Salander’s point-of-view shots of Bjurman’s face. The novel describes how ‘His eyes were burning with hatred’ (Larsson [2005] 2009, 286), which mirrors the end of the second rape scene when Bjurman ‘almost recoiled when he met her eyes. Never in his life had he seen such naked, smouldering hatred’ (Larsson [2005] 2009, 275). The role reversal between rapist and rape victim is common in contemporary rape-revenge films, for example, the way the prey becomes predator in Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005), and how rape is used as revenge upon a rapist in Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007) and Descent (Talia Lugacy, 2007). Violently rejecting the role of victim, these protagonists regain control and satisfy their need for revenge, albeit at the price of landing in an ethically problematic position. The repetition and role reversal bring up questions about the ethics and effectiveness of vengeance, and

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76 According to Stephen Prince, slow motion was instituted as a stylistic convention of screen violence in Hollywood cinema by Sam Peckinpah, a director who observed the principle that ‘slow motion is especially powerful when it correlates with a character’s loss of physical volition’ (1998, 59).
narrativize the issue of victims becoming perpetrators. However, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* does not problematize Salander’s revenge to the degree of these other films, instead allowing the spectator more morally righteous satisfaction in her eye for an eye revenge. The trilogy also increasingly presents Salander’s brand of justice as both clever and justified, potentially excusing the unethical nature of some of her actions.

Despite the fact that the revenge scene mirrors the rape scene quite closely, we do not have the same empathy and ethical engagement with the victim (Bjurman) in the revenge scene, nor are we positioned to morally judge or be disgusted by Salander’s violence as we were by Bjurman’s. How can this double standard of ethics be accounted for? Drawing on cognitive theory of character identification, I suggest that our engagement with Salander (and other rape-avenger protagonists in the genre) is one of what Murray Smith calls ‘perverse allegiance’ (1999, 221). In Smith’s account, allegiance is often based on traits that we desire to possess, ones which may be socially or morally proscribed, and ‘indeed, the desire, and the pleasure arising from an imaginary experience of fulfilling it, may arise as a resistance to such social and moral constraints’ (1999, 221). These desirous characteristics may include various transgressive aspects of Salander’s character—from her goth/punk appearance, to her rude behaviour with Milton Security clients, to her computer hacking abilities—but as a revenge film, her trait of taking justice into her own hands is the one we experience vicariously.

Significantly, revenge happens to be the example Smith uses to illustrate his concept: ‘one might enjoy imagining some form of physical revenge, not merely in and of itself, but precisely because it violates the precepts of (New Testament) Christian morality’ (1999, 221-22). Genre films, including rape-revenge, may particularly lend themselves to such perverse allegiances, as Rick Altman argues that a committed genre film spectator must be ‘sufficiently committed to generic values to tolerate and even enjoy in genre films capricious, violent, or licentious behaviour which they might disapprove of in “real life”’ (1996, 279). We turn away from the face-to-face ethical encounter with Bjurman, the film’s monster but also its current victim, in order to enjoy the pleasures of the genre, including the violent spectacle of revenge.

While the revenge scene conveys Bjurman’s pain and offers some degree of a face-to-face ethical encounter (in the slow motion moment, for example), it is not sufficient to override the strong perverse allegiance that the spectator has with Salander throughout the trilogy. The moral structure of character allegiance takes precedence over the more challenging ethical engagement the spectator can be invited to make when the roles of victim and perpetrator are reversed. Since ethical questioning can bring moral frameworks into doubt, ethical spectatorship may be experienced as uncomfortable spectatorship. By keeping clearer distinctions between victim and perpetrator, good guys and bad guys, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*...
*Dragon Tattoo* allows the spectator to remain in a more comfortable realm of morality, where answers are provided and required actions are clear.\(^78\) We do not question our avenging protagonist or sympathize with her rape victim too much because perverse allegiance with Salander is supported by the text as a whole, and even the genre as a whole, and also the moral codes upon which both draw.\(^79\) This type of engagement becomes more about the pursuit of pleasure rather than ethics; it is the pleasure of reassuring moral law being exacted. Such pleasures, typical of genre films from Westerns to action films, contrast with the displeasures of what Nikolaj Lübecker terms the ‘feel-bad’ film, in which the spectator is denied catharsis or punished for it (2011, 165-67).

**Avenger, Vigilante, or Warrior?**

The rape-revenge aspect of the text, and Salander’s role as a vigilante, continues into the second and third parts of the trilogy. She does not transform into a feminist warrior, as Larsson suggests with his epigraphs about the Amazons and Fon’s army in *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*, rather, she continues to be an individual avenger.\(^80\) The film continues to *personalize* Salander’s revenge—the rape-revenge genre limits the meaning of her actions to acts of personal revenge. Again this suggests a tension between *narrative/genre* and *sensation*. The film contains moments where our affective response is intensified and directed against the pull of cliché; but ultimately, the film puts them back into place. For example, from the book to the film, the meaning of Martin Vanger’s death changes from an accident, or possible suicide, to an intentional act of revenge on Salander’s part.\(^81\)

\(^78\) As we saw in Chapter One in the comparison of the original and remake of *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972/Dennis Iliadis, 2009), clear moral schematics and moral guidance can be comforting for the spectator. The ethical questions raised by the reversal of victim and perpetrator roles are delved into more fully in other contemporary rape-revenge films such as *Straightheads* and *Descent*, addressed in other chapters.

\(^79\) *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003) is a great example of perverse allegiance in the rape-revenge genre, outlined in all its complexities in Abella & Zilkha 2004. Like *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Dogville* seduces the spectator into collusion with the perverse protagonist, participating in her revenge despite condemning similar behaviour by the townspeople earlier in the film: ‘owing to the unbearable nature of what we have had to endure while watching the film, we are caught up like Grace in participating emotionally in the final vengeance, experiencing—consciously, unconsciously, openly or covertly—a feeling of relief at the violent destruction of the village which allows us to evade the necessity of thinking. We collude in Grace’s perverse destructivity. ’The beast’ is lurking in us, too. Lars Von Trier has awakened it’ (Abella & Zilkha 2004, 1525).

\(^80\) The four epigraphs in *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest* give factual information about the history of different female warrior groups, including the Amazons of Libya and Fon’s female army (Larsson [2007] 2009, 3, 159, 311, 447). These tokenistically locate Salander in this tradition, but in the narrative she operates as an individual, mainly forming political or activist alliances with the male characters Blomkvist and Plague. Salander does have relationships with her lover Mimmi and female friends in the band Evil Fingers (albeit in the novels more than in the book), and also has a moment of sisterhood in helping Berger to take revenge, but even when she helps others, she acts as a lone vigilante more than a collective warrior.

\(^81\) The description of their highway chase in the book suggests suicide: ‘She saw the headlights of a truck approaching. Martin Vanger did too. He increased his speed again and drove straight into the oncoming lane. Salander saw the truck swerve and flash its lights, but the collision was unavoidable’ (Larsson [2005] 2009, 500). She is also less implicated in his death in the book than she is in the film.
Martin has a car accident, tumbling down a ravine and becoming trapped. Salander stands beside the car as Martin pleads to her for help. The camera zooms in on Salander’s eyes, then the film cuts to a flashback in which the young Salander sets her abusive father Alexander Zalachenko alight. A close-up of her eyes as she watched Zalachenko burn is followed by a matching close-up of her adult eyes watching Martin burn. Salander walks away as the car bursts into flames and Martin burns to death. There is an explicit paralleling of the two incidents here which does not occur in the book. What was an accident, which she probably could not have saved him from if she had tried, looks like an intentional act of revenge because of this flashback paralleling. This is emphasized in the film’s subsequent conversation between Salander and Blomkvist in which she confesses she could have saved Martin but let him die. Blomkvist’s personalizing (and patronizing) response to Salander is, ‘I would never have done that, Lisbeth. But I understand why you did it. I don’t know what you’ve been through...’. This relates her actions to her past trauma, suggesting she acted not in revenge against Martin, or on behalf of his victims, but because of her prior experiences. Blomkvist suggests she has made an unethical choice in letting him die, despite what Martin had done, because she was acting in response to the violence she has suffered at the hands of other men. The film positions Martin’s death as Salander’s revenge by inserting the flashback, but then detracts from this revenge by constructing it as being motivated by her own previous personal traumas. The personalizing of Salander’s revenge is also in line with the individualism characteristic of the politics in the novels, the medium-concept crime film, and the rape-revenge genre. Again, the film is flirting with ethics by questioning Salander’s moral framework and actions through Blomkvist’s dialogue, but personalizing her potentially unethical revenge (and fuelling the motivation for revenge through flashbacks) helps to maintain our perverse allegiance with the avenging heroine.

The film’s visual mirroring does not just connect Salander’s rapes with her revenge on Bjurman, it also links this core rape-revenge thread with Salander’s other acts of revenge. For example, when Salander enters Martin’s dungeon to save Blomkvist, we see her approach in a low-angle, out of focus point-of-view shot, which is strongly reminiscent of the shot from Bjurman’s point-of-view when Salander enters his bedroom to commence her rape and tattoo revenge on him. Salander’s revenge on Per-Åke Sandström for his involvement in sex trafficking in The Girl who Played with Fire (Flickan som lekte med elden) (Daniel Alfredson, 2009) combines elements from the other scenes of revenge and violence, such as the hanging (mirroring Martin beginning to hang Blomkvist), the threats and her control of the rules (mirroring the rules she outlines to Bjurman before she tattoos him), and her dialogue ‘You are a sadistic pig and a rapist. Isn’t that so?’ (of course repeating the words she tattoos on Bjurman). This is part of the adaptation’s move to personalize and individualize Salander’s

because she sees the scene from a distance and there are already two cars stopped and a man putting out the flames with a fire extinguisher (Larsson [2005] 2009, 501).
revenge, shaping the text to fit within rape-revenge and medium-concept cinema, and the political and moral frameworks which support them.

The slippage or ambiguity in Salander’s motivation for violent vengeance is strikingly marked with a filmic intertextual reference to *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) in the third film, *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*. Salander arrives at court for her trial dressed up in a costume which parodies the media’s construction of her. She wears all black clothing, spiky jewellery, a tall black Mohawk, and imitates the distinctive eye make-up of Alex DeLarge, the ringleader of the ultra-violent droogs in *A Clockwork Orange*. The evocation of this iconic image is indicative of how the film adaptation is very aware of issues around spectatorship and violence. *A Clockwork Orange* explores the role of violent films in either creating or curbing violent behaviour, for example, in the attempt to reform Alex with an experimental treatment combining violent film clips with a feeling of revulsion caused by drugs. This ‘Ludovico technique’ trains a response to violence, one analogous to the response Salander tries to create in the repeated screenings of her rape tape (to the spectator in the post-rape scene; to Bjurman in the revenge scene; and later to the court). In terms of both results and ethics, the effects of this technique are portrayed as dubious in *A Clockwork Orange*. This raises the question in the Millennium Trilogy adaptation of whether using filmic techniques to affect the spectator in scenes of violence will (and should be used to) make spectators averse to violence and bring about justice. The allusion to *A Clockwork Orange* also hints that the character of Salander is very self-aware and that her acts of violence are performative.82 Linking Salander and Alex further points to how much of an ethically ambiguous figure and a difficult protagonist she is. Murray Smith’s insight into *A Clockwork Orange* is revealing for the spectator’s relationship with Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*:

*A Clockwork Orange*... does not solicit perverse allegiance, for the film asks us to sympathize with Alex not because he rapes and murders—acts that are represented in a suitably horrific fashion—but rather because of the violence, humiliation, and degradation that are subsequently inflicted upon him by the state. (1999, 283n16)

The reason Salander does solicit perverse allegiance is that although empathy is similarly created by her constant victimization by the state (and others), affectively and narratively justified *revenge* is at least an equal motivation for our sympathy with Salander in this genre and we take pleasure in its violent enactment. As spectators, we do not question our pleasure in her revenge, and are not made too uncomfortable by it, which is in contrast to models of ethical spectatorship in new extremism films, for example, in which the spectator is often implicated in the viewing of violence.

82 In both films the ultra-violent protagonists give direct looks to camera—recall the opening shot of *A Clockwork Orange*—which can be read as presenting an ethical challenge to the spectator.
Questions of reform and responsibility are raised in the trilogy's final violent spectacle. Salander softens her view of ‘Harriet Fucking Vanger’ as selfish and irresponsible at the end of the third novel, *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*. While holding a nailgun to her half-brother’s head, Salander finally revises her hard-line anti-victimism stance, but this change of heart is not depicted in the film. This omission suggests that the film is an ‘unethical’ adaptation, in the sense of not questioning the given moral framework or representing the protagonist’s own ethical moment—in the novels, this is the key moment when Salander questions her own moral framework as an individualist or lone vigilante and an anti-victimist. Again, this shift may be related to the way genre shapes the adaptation. In rape-revenge there is a focus on the transformation from victim to avenger, which here necessitates a playing down of Salander’s later transformation from vigilante to citizen (post-trial, in the third novel, Salander realizes that now she is no longer under guardianship, she has the full rights and responsibilities of a Swedish citizen). The book outlines Salander’s thought processes as she has a vigilante’s dilemma, weighing up whether the satisfaction of killing her half-brother Ronald Niedermann is worth the consequences, and then she recalls how she blamed Harriet for allowing Martin to go on murdering women for years:

> And now she was standing in exactly the same position in which Harriet Vanger had found herself. How many more women would Niedermann kill if she let him go? She had the legal right of a citizen and was socially responsible for her actions. How many years of her life did she want to sacrifice? How many years had Harriet Vanger been willing to sacrifice?

*(Larsson [2007] 2009, 595)*

These thoughts are not conveyed at the corresponding moment in the film. At the end of the final showdown between Salander and Niedermann, she nailguns his feet to the ground then holds the gun to the back of his neck, but now she does not deliberate for long before lowering it. ‘You deserve to die, you fucking freak,’ she says to him, and then immediately calls the vengeful Svavelsjö M.C. members and gives them Niedermann’s location. The vigilante’s dilemma she has in the book is absent. Instead, her actions become simply a clever way of taking revenge and getting him killed (and the motorcycle gang members arrested) without dirtying her hands. The slight questioning of revenge at the end of the third novel, and the suggestion that ethical responsibility may involve something different to the individual revenge promoted by the text earlier, are missing from the film. Limitations are placed on the Levinasian ethical spectatorship at work in the film because the moral and political codes—as well as the genre expectations for a revenge film—demand that individual responsibility and righteous, violent vengeance are enacted.

**Conclusion**

As a case study, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* points to the many and complex influences shaping representations of rape and the response to rape, from socio-political contexts to
various genre conventions and moral codes. This chapter has explored the politics, ethics and affects in the filmic construction of rape and its revenge in a popular crossmedia text. The Swedish medium-concept adaptation is a rich site for exploring these fields because it negotiates various tensions and captures slippages between the source novel and film adaptation. These tensions play out around the key themes of victimhood and individualism, and particularly through the character of Salander in her rape-revenge narrative.

In both the novel and its Swedish adaptation, personal revenge is positioned as a political and ethical imperative, with the rape and revenge of Lisbeth Salander highlighting the Millennium Trilogy's advocacy of individualist revenge as a response to social injustice. In line with postfeminist anti-victimist rhetoric, the text constructs an idea of revenge as responsibility, particularly for the erasure of female victimhood and victimization. Revenge becomes an aesthetic and moral imperative in the face of systematic injustice, and Salander becomes an exemplar of the victim-avenger figure for the novel’s politics and cinema's rape-revenge genre. The novel presents a collective oppression solvable by individual responsibility, while the film concentrates this individualism by crystallizing cycles of victimization and vengeance in a goal-oriented protagonist who resonates with audiences affectively and generically.

The film draws on models of ethical spectatorship, but the revenge narrative and the demands of the genre cause this to be abandoned, or at least overridden by our ‘perverse allegiance’ with Salander as she pursues her righteous vengeance. This is a consequence of frictions in the medium-concept marriage of genre narratives and art-film aesthetics; the scenes of rape and revenge point to the contradictions and dilutions that medium-concept crime films are susceptible to. This compromise—the abandoning of the ethical for the sake of revenge—is one reason the film is both satisfying and popular. It embroils the spectator in an affecting, compelling ethical engagement, but steers away from implication, letting the spectator off the hook with the reassurance of moral hard lines in the revenge scenes. The rape-revenge of Lisbeth Salander treads a fine line to avoid being voyeuristic and exploitative, yet contradictorily, aims to be thoroughly ‘watchable’ and thrilling. By detailing the rape, post-rape, and revenge scenes, I have sought to show how ethical spectatorship is both constructed and compromised through tensions with political, affective and generic drives.
Chapter Five:
Rape, Racism, and Descent into the Ethical Quagmire of Revenge

The victim-avengers of the rape-revenge genre in American cinema are almost exclusively white women. This is very rarely problematized in critical literature on the genre, which reinscribes the genre’s exclusion of women of colour, even in the almost two decades since Kirsten Marthe Lentz insisted, ‘We need to be critical of rape revenge narratives which privilege the horror of white female victimization over (and to the exclusion of) the horrible victimization of women of color’ (1993, 398). Rape-revenge's canon formation replicates a racist hierarchy—common in cinema and media discourses, as well as in law—in which the aggravated rape of white women by strangers is considered ‘real’ rape, the type of rape that gains attention, is taken seriously, and is viewed as deserving of punishment (or in rape-revenge, as deserving of revenge). One example of this structural absence in rape-revenge is the disregard of Foxy Brown (Jack Hill, 1974), which tends not to be recognized as a canonical rape-revenge film despite being a popular early example which instituted some of the key conventions (such as the comic presentation of castration as a climactic revenge act). In certain ways, common criticisms made against white second-wave feminism—for ignoring the experiences of women of colour while prioritizing and universalizing the experiences of white women; for not recognizing interlocking oppressions or fighting racism equally and alongside the fight against sexism—can be brought against the genre and its critical literature which, as Jacinda Read argues, reflects the influence of this white women’s movement.

It is not only through canon formation, but also through the theories used to analyze these films—particularly the dominance of psychoanalysis and (white) feminist film theory—that women of colour are written out of the genre. This issue is flagged in a footnote in Stephane Dunn’s 'Baad Bitches’ & Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films (2008), but is yet to be redressed in the literature on American rape-revenge cinema:

Mainstream feminist criticism regarding this cycle of films has largely ignored Coffy [Jack Hill, 1973] and Foxy Brown and by extension the politics of race in

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83 Susan Estrich argues that the atypical case of ‘the black man jumping the white woman’ is ‘the stereotype that may explain in part the seriousness with which a white male criminal justice system has addressed “stranger” rape’ (1995, 183). This points to the way that white feminist gains around the issue of rape in America have historically been made at racist costs.

84 Although Foxy Brown ought to be recognized in the rape-revenge canon, attention must also be brought to the film’s issues in terms of its representation of black women and rape. Foxy (Pam Grier) is captured by white drug lords, taken to Haiti and raped for days: ‘Foxy escapes this situation and does not appear to have “sustained any damage” nor feel anger as a result of it. In fact, the rape is treated as an inconsequential nuisance, an occupational hazard. And Foxy’s “revenge” has nothing to do with the way she’s been brutalized at all. The implication of the incidental treatment of the rape of Black women is clear: their sexualities are decidedly “impure,” even “wild” so as to justify their victimization (as well as their placement in “wild action” films)’ (Lentz 1993, 401-402n22). Descent’s serious treatment of white on black rape contrasts with the flippant, racist treatment in blaxploitation, as well as the structural absence of women of colour in rape-revenge.
representations of rape revenge. Jacinda Read critiques Carol J. Clover's psychoanalytic model of the rape and revenge genre, arguing that Clover's work does not effectively address the impact of historical change on the cycle of rape and revenge films. Yet, in her intriguing work, she too fails to examine adequately the issue of race, discussing rape only within the confines of white female rape, briefly touching on the myth of the black male rapist, and omitting critical attention to the black female rape victim historically and the few avenging black women film representations.

(2008, 147-48n43)

What has been true of horror scholarship is perhaps even more true of rape-revenge scholarship: ‘Up until recently the most influential critical approaches to horror have tended to focus exclusively or mainly on questions relating to sexual difference... and this has led to other forms of social difference being marginalised or overlooked’ (Hutchings 2004, 106). Recognizing the narrow profile of the victim-avenger as consistently white demands an approach to the genre that takes race into account. How might a consideration of race alter or reframe questions of politics, ethics, and affect in the contemporary genre? This chapter will bring both the criticisms and insights of race theory to bear on the rape-revenge genre, in particular, using phenomenologies of racial oppression to provide perspicacity into the ways it represents the nature of rape trauma and the loss of subjectivity, specifically for women of colour rape victims.

*Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007) confronts the genre's exclusion of women of colour and coding of the sympathetic victim as always and necessarily white, and in this chapter the film provides a case study for similarly interrogating the race politics of the genre. *Descent* may be neither the most well-known nor canonical rape-revenge film, but it is an important intervention in the genre and a privileged example here for the way it treats racially motivated rape, and date rape, as serious, revenge-worthy crimes. It also displays an interesting negotiation between deploying (white) conventions of rape-revenge and conveying non-white phenomenological experiences of rape trauma. Like many of the films studied in this thesis, rape trauma is explored through affective and aesthetic means in both the rape and revenge sections of the film. However, unlike those examples examined so far which are hybridized with torture porn or comedy, *Descent* devotes more screen time to the psychological aftermath of rape and the process of the Latina protagonist's transformation from victim to avenger. As I have explored throughout this thesis, a key function of contemporary rape-revenge is to convey rape trauma and its impact on subjectivity. *Descent* is a striking example of a rape-revenge film which explores the psychological consequences of rape. These consequences often transverse race, class, and sex boundaries, but *Descent* is also a fascinating and significant text for the way it ties these consequences to the impact of racism and specifically racial-sexual oppression or the use of rape in political oppression. *Descent* is one of the few rape-revenge films directed by a woman, Talia Lugacy, although it should also be noted that a co-writer, numerous producers, the editor, and the cinematographers are male. However, regardless of the race or gender of production crew,
here I am more concerned about the shaping of the text by genre, and the broader ways in which the film delivers on cultural needs/desires/expectations; finds resonances with audiences; and explores the phenomenological experiences of rape victims, especially college-age women of colour.

In contrast to the simple two-part structure typically used in rape-revenge films, *Descent* is structured around three seasons, which serves the film in both its variation on the genre and its character study focus. The first section of the film introduces Maya (Rosario Dawson), a quiet, sophisticated, but somewhat melancholy college student. She meets Jared (Chad Faust), a white footballer jock, at a college party, who charms her into a drink on the porch, and later, into the fateful date. After dinner at a restaurant and some romantic stargazing, Maya goes back to Jared’s place, where seduction turns to rape and Jared shows his monstrous side as a violent white supremacist. From the shocking rape scene, the film cuts to spring, when a hollowed-out Maya is working in a clothes shop by day and ‘descending’ into a world of drugs, sex, and dancing at night. Here she meets Adrian (Marcus Patrick), a Latino DJ working in the nightclub, who becomes her mentor guiding her towards assertiveness and then revenge. In the third section, Jared re-enters the film (and Maya’s life) when he takes a university module for which Maya is a teaching assistant. Foolish enough to believe Maya wants to date him again, Jared becomes entrapped in Maya’s revenge plot. Mirroring their earlier date, Maya seduces Jared then restrains him, rapes him and humiliates him. Then Maya’s ally Adrian enters and also rapes Jared while using homophobic epithets. The film ends on an ambivalent note with a powerful look to camera by Maya. This chapter will explore the film’s themes and its contribution to the rape-revenge genre through a closer look at each of these three sections: the understanding of the nature of both sexual violence and racial oppression in the first section; the phenomenology of rape trauma and the loss of identity in the second section; and the ethics and effectiveness of violent revenge, and the generic manipulation into a refocus on white masculinity, in the third section.

*Descent’s* three-part structure, and its greater focus on the psychological impact of rape, results in a less cathartic ending than many earlier rape-revenge films. The ending instead underlines the futility of revenge in the process of healing. Maya’s powerful final look to camera highlights this theme, demonstrating the ethical point that revenge does not restore the balance and quell the pain of rape, but rather, repeating rape as revenge perpetuates pain, shame, and psychological damage. This final look can also be read as emblematic of the way the film as a whole presents a critical ‘oppositional gaze’ on the rape-revenge genre. Bell hooks’ concept of the ‘oppositional gaze’ of black female spectatorship maintains that ‘Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see’ (1996, 199). An important concept for spectatorship theory, I am here using the oppositional gaze as an analogy for the position
of *Descent* within the genre. I suggest that *Descent* sets a critical, disruptive gaze on the exclusively white genre in a similar manner to hooks’ account of black female spectators’ deconstructive, ambivalent gaze at the construction of white womanhood in Hollywood, at least during the earlier parts of the film. However, while the film’s first two sections inject race politics into the genre and present an admirable exploration of the phenomenology of rape trauma for women of colour, there is a ‘descent’ in the film in the revenge third, where this project is abandoned and the film conforms to genre expectations. The film loses sight of its oppositional gaze as a solipsistic crisis of white masculinity takes over in the sadomasochistic encounter between Adrian and Jared. Analogous to the way the Hollywood ‘new brutality’ films discussed by Paul Gormley are ‘dependent on using blackness as a potentially affective disruption to the certainties of white cultural identity’ (Gormley 2005, 35), the racialization of Maya and Adrian in *Descent* is usurped for the horrors and pleasures of white masculinity. The pay-off of the final revenge comes at a high cost, with the film offensively recasting rape as a masochistic pleasure for the male victim and underpinning its horrors with racism and homophobia. *Descent* is an exemplar of the ways that the rape-revenge format has great potential, and yet great limitations, for exploring the ethics, affects, and race politics of rape and revenge in contemporary cinema.

**Understanding Oppression**

The opening section of the film establishes Maya’s character and introduces the realm of the predominantly white, Ivy League institution in which her studies and social life are based, and which provides the social and psychological context for the racist date rape she experiences at the end of this section. The more explicit or heavy-handed scenes confronting college racism were cut from the final film, but they provide an insight into the way the filmmakers were trying to convey the often unspoken, but deeply ingrained, racism in American colleges, of which Jared’s racist rape is only one instance (albeit the most explicit and extreme). In one deleted scene, a conversation between Maya and some white female acquaintances in the college cafeteria highlights the race and class differences between her and her peers, particularly in contrast with Alison (Rachael Leigh Cook), who name-drops expensive hotels and restaurants in Rome and treats the cafeteria staff as her servants. Another deleted scene makes these conflicts in the college environment more explicit, as Maya confronts a counsellor (Francie Swift) over her blindness to her own racism within her liberal middle-class attitudes as the counsellor lectures to freshmen about tolerance. These scenes may have been deleted to avoid heavy-handedness or didacticism with the theme of racism, or to avoid alienating white spectators who might feel personally confronted by the scenes’ more explicit challenges to white supremacist attitudes. Such motivations would amount to a problematic political (self-)censorship, but the upside to these cuts is that it puts the onus on the spectator to recognize and understand racism and its effects through
empathetic and ethical engagement. Hence it is not necessarily a case of political dilution, rather, the final edit relies on a different form of rhetoric—a phenomenological one. The racism conveyed and confronted in the deleted scenes still appears in subtle ways, such as the cliquey exclusion of Maya at university and at work. This less explicit exploration of race politics in the final version is more effective in representing the psychology of oppression, as it allows for greater focus on the impact of insidious forms of racism on Maya’s being-in-the-world. Maya’s movements, expressions, and manners display a discomfort, which may be explained by the institutional whiteness of the college environment. Sara Ahmed gives insight into the experience of the non-white body in such a space in her essay, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’:

When we describe institutions as ‘being’ white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces. When I walk into university meetings that is just what I encounter... Someone says: ‘it is like walking into a sea of whiteness’. This phrase comes up, and it hangs in the air. The speech act becomes an object, which gathers us around.

(2007, 157)

Ahmed’s account finds resonance in Descent, such as when the white girls notice Maya’s arrival at the party, and when Maya rocks the boat in the sea of whiteness in the deleted counsellor scene. Maya brings attention to the way ‘Spaces are orientated “around” whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen... The effect of this “around whiteness” is the institutionalization of a certain “likeness”, which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space’ (Ahmed 2007, 157). This is Maya’s phenomenological experience not only in the white-orientated college environment, it also reflects her position as a protagonist in the white-orientated genre of rape-revenge.

Before turning to the rape scene—the most explicit depiction of racism in the film—it is important to note Maya’s ambiguous racial coding. In the deleted counsellor scene, Maya makes reference to herself as Latina, but in the final film she makes no reference to her racial identity. The racist names Jared calls her while raping her (‘nigger’, ‘savage’, baboon’) are typically used against African-Americans rather than Hispanics. The community she seeks out in the nightclub in the second section of the film is both Hispanic and African-American. Overall, she seems racialized generically as a woman of colour, not given a specific identity as Latina. Mixed-race actresses are often cast in roles which seem to be a mix but are effectively ‘colorless, with no one strongly defined racial/cultural identity’ (Bogle 1994, 291). Rosario Dawson’s star image echoes those of Hollywood stars Rae Dawn Chong and Jennifer Beals who played such ‘exotics’ in the 1980s (Bogle 1994, 291). The racist stereotyping of bi-racial women in American cinema inflects Rosario Dawson’s casting in this role, as bell hooks writes, ‘Throughout the history of white supremacy in the United States, racist white men have regarded the bi-racial white and black female as a sexual ideal’ and the bi-racial woman
is 'stereotypically portrayed as embodying a passionate sensual eroticism as well as a subordinate feminine nature' (1995, 127). *Descent* seems to buy into this construction of the bi-racial woman in casting mixed-race Rosario Dawson, her higher ranking in the racist colour caste system giving her a place as lead in a film promoted (misleadingly) as an erotic thriller.\(^85\) While this lack of racial specificity in Maya’s character—this generic Othering against the white male antagonist (and against white victim-avengers across the genre)—can certainly be seen as problematic, we may also read it more optimistically as an attempt to convey common experiences for women of colour, whether Latina, African-American, or other non-white women. Linda Martín Alcoff views being mixed race as a privileged position for understanding the role of race in certain experiences: ‘Mixed race persons probably notice more than others the extent to which “race” is a social construction, ontologically dependent on a host of contextual factors’ (2006, 269). Maya’s racializing is emblematic of problems in *Descent* as a whole, where there is an effort to convey and understand the raced specificities of experience (as an Ivy League student or as a rape victim), but concessions are made to genre demands and expectations which compromise this goal.

**Rape Scene Aspect #1: Rape as Racial Terrorism**

While referring to the meaning of rape as enshrined in law, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s argument equally applies to rape-revenge and its critical literature:

> The singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror. When Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically.

\[(1989, 158)\]

This latter point is graphically illustrated in *Descent’s* rape scene, which constructs the rape as an act of political terrorism against a woman of colour. After their date, Jared and Maya return to his place and open a bottle of wine. There is a shift in the scene when Maya and Jared go downstairs, marked by Jared’s final dialogue before they begin to kiss:

Jared: So ‘fess up, where are you from?
Maya: Baltimore.
Jared: That’s not what I mean.

\(^85\) The trailer for *Descent* may be part of the phenomenon in which ‘The strong branding of the erotic thriller is thus used to sell adjacent or tangentially-related genres, perhaps to subsequently disappointed customers’ (Williams 2005, 10). There are echoes of rape-revenge in Linda Ruth Williams’ definition of the erotic thriller: ‘Danger and sex combine in a format which is both thriller and skin-flick, often figuring a female protagonist who herself straddles the roles of sexual interest, enraged victim and vigilante survivor’ (2005, 2). However, although the two genres have similarities in iconography, characters, and the history of their development (for instance, their ‘mainstreamization’), they are distinctly different in terms of tone and emotion. See Linda Ruth Williams’ book, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (2005).
For some spectators, this dialogue may seem innocent, just part of Jared’s banter or trying to get to know her on their first date. For other spectators, this will be a hint to Jared’s racial objectification of Maya, a subtle but worrying sign of his real attitudes towards her, which soon surface explicitly in the highly offensive white supremacist names he calls her during the rape. Jared kisses her, and as romantic music plays, they lie down and continue kissing, but the overly warm, reddish lighting gives a sense of warning and anxiety. The camera frames their faces in tight close-up, and soon Maya becomes uncomfortable and shakes her head. She then verbally expresses several times that she wants him to stop, and a struggle ensues. The rape scene proceeds mainly focused on Maya’s distressed face in close-up, often along with Jared’s face also in frame. There are a couple of wide shots showing the action (Jared on top of Maya raping her), which functions as the visible proof, appearing clinical more than shocking. This construction of the rape scene is similar to the one in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor) (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009), which, as discussed in the previous chapter, alternated wide shots of the whole room with close-ups of Salander’s face to convey her experience, together showing the action and giving it meaning.

Not only is it made very clear that this is rape (by Maya telling him to stop and physically struggling), it is also made very clear that the harm and degradation of this rape is related to and exacerbated by racism. The derogatory language Jared uses is the most shocking and affecting aspect of the scene, along with the sound of Maya screaming through her gag. He calls her ‘savage’, ‘maggot’, ‘nigger’, ‘nigger with attitude’, ‘baboon bitch’. This aspect of the scene resonates with the experiences of many black victims of sex crimes, and points to the merging of racist and sexist myths and stereotypes in such cases:

Black female plaintiffs tell stories of insults and slurs that often go to the core of black women’s sexual construction. While black women share with white women the experience of being objectified as ‘cunts,’ ‘beavers,’ or ‘pieces,’ for them those insults are many times prefaced with ‘black’ or ‘nigger’ or ‘jungle’.

(Crenshaw 1992, 412)

The horrific language directed at Maya adds another layer of offensiveness and degradation to the typically white representation of rape in rape-revenge which is constructed as racially neutral. Jared’s words suggest that the processes of dehumanization, objectification, and

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86 The hurtful and unsettling impact of this revelation of a date’s real attitudes is reflected in Alcoff’s personal account: ‘When I was much younger, I remember finding out with a shock that a white lover, my first serious relationship, had pursued me because I was Latina, which no doubt stimulated his vision of exoticism… our first dates, which I had naively believed were dominated by a powerful emotional and intellectual connection, were experienced by him as a fascinating crossing over to the forbidden, to the Other in that reified, racializing sense. I felt incredulity, and then humiliation, trying to imagine myself as he saw me, replaying my gestures and actions, reflecting back even on the clothes I wore, all in an attempt to discern the signs he may have picked up, to see myself as he must have seen me. I felt caught in that moment, finding myself occupying a position already occupied and fashioned elsewhere, incapable of mutual interaction’ (2006, 193-94). For spectators unfamiliar with this experience, Alcoff’s account provides phenomenological insight (from a Latina perspective) into Maya’s experiences with Jared.
humiliation involved in rape are underpinned by both sexist and racist myths and attitudes. The rape scene graphically demonstrates to audiences that ‘Black women experience much of the sexual aggression that the feminist movement has articulated but in a form that represents simultaneously their subordinate racial status’ (Crenshaw 1992, 414). Crenshaw’s fundamental point has been a common blind spot for white feminisms and the predominantly white rape-revenge genre, so its graphic illustration in Descent has particular force and amounts to a political act in these contexts. The psychological consequences of this sexist and racist violence will be discussed presently in relation to the film’s second section, which charts the rape’s aftermath for Maya.

Rape Scene Aspect #2: Date Rape

Descent also gives the genre one of its few representations of date rape. In rape-revenge, as in cinema and television more broadly, rapes are usually committed by strangers. This is perhaps because on screen, ‘date and acquaintance rape will never lend themselves to the moral clarity of violent stranger rape... Stranger rape is clearly non-consensual; date and acquaintance rape are more ambiguous, especially if weapons and physical violence are not involved’ (Cuklanz 2000, 37). However, Descent does not present Jared’s rape of Maya as an ambiguous instance of rape. Maya clearly expresses several times in the scene that she does not consent to sex, saying, ‘Enough, Jared, I mean it’, then struggling, telling him to let go, and finally screaming. In contrast to the dismissal of date rape as not ‘real rape’, which is commonly seen in both media discourse and popular postfeminist writing, Descent is both sympathetic and takes seriously Maya’s experience of date rape. In Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’ overview of the genre, Descent is admired for this aspect:

Lugacy confidently demonstrates the terrifying ease with which a scene of consensual romance can ‘tip’ into rape, as the soft music and candlelight that set the romantic tone earlier in the scene before Maya asks Jared to stop far too easily and quickly becomes vicious and ironic when his attempted seduction becomes violent, forced and ugly. The strength of the film is this ability to depict the simple process of how rape ‘happens’ in this context.

(2011, 160)

As in other rape discourses (in film, media, and the law), sympathy and justice for the victim still rely upon her being established as innocent—that is, not drunk, not promiscuous, not

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87 Handgun (Tony Garnett, 1982) is another rare example of date rape in the genre. Date rape has been represented more often on television than in cinema’s rape-revenge genre, as Lisa M. Cuklanz’ study of rape on prime time between 1976-1990 demonstrated that in the latter years of this period, ‘The increasing ambiguity of the genre emerged as rape plots became more complex and began to include depictions of date and acquaintance rape along with the more familiar image of brutal stranger rape’ (2000, 25).

88 Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe are two prominent postfeminist figures notorious for baulking at and dismissing date rape. For an example of this damaging discourse popularized in the 1990s, see Katie Roiphe’s 1994 book The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism.
careless. Note also that here, as in the genre more broadly, spectatorial sympathy relies upon the spectacle of rape for visible proof—witnessing the rape scene increases both our empathy and our trust of the victim’s account. This theme is explicitly explored in The Accused (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988), with the film problematically resolving distrust of the protagonist by including a flashback from the male witness’ perspective to validate the female protagonist’s story. In Descent, the shocking brutality of Jared’s actions, and the rapidness with which the romance turns to rape, maintains the ‘moral clarity’ of the scene that Lisa M. Cuklanz suggests is difficult in a date rape scenario. There is no ambiguity that the perpetrator is responsible for the rape, which maintains the spectator’s moral allegiance with the protagonist and prepares spectatorial investment in the revenge punishment that follows.

Just as the racist degradation displayed in the rape scene reflects the experiences of African-American victims (cited by Crenshaw above), the aspect of date rape also reflects a reality for the young, college student demographic of victims. One survey of over 6000 American college students found that over a quarter of the women had been a victim of rape or attempted rape, and fifty-seven percent of the assaults had been date rapes (Raine 1999, 215). In another famous study from the early 1980s, twenty-six percent of surveyed college men admitted to making a forceful attempt at sexual intercourse that caused observable distress to the woman (Bourke 2007, 45). Such statistics on the pervasiveness and moral acceptability of date rape are shocking, and point to the need for representations which insist on the seriousness and negative impact of the crime, against the flippancy with which it is treated not only by the surveyed college men, but pervasively within postfeminist culture. Descent is one such representation, which redresses a balance in the rape-revenge genre that has put a highly non-representative emphasis on stranger rape over the more prevalent incidence of acquaintance and date rape. Although it departs from the ubiquitous rape narrative of the white woman being raped by a stranger, Descent’s rape scene does maintain the key functions of a rape in a rape-revenge narrative by victimizing the protagonist and gaining spectatorial sympathy for her while affectively inciting rage against the rapist to set up the revenge section of the film. Before giving Maya her revenge, the film again departs from the rape-revenge template once more, inserting a middle section which explores the psychological impact of the rape on Maya.

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89 This issue with The Accused has been raised by a number of feminist critics including Sarah Projansky (2001, 112), Tanya Horeck (2004, 100-101), Carol J. Clover (1992, 150), and Alison Young (2010, 55).
Spring: Objectification and Descent

Prior to exploring the physical, violent response of revenge, the film presents an interesting exploration of the victim’s response to rape in relation to the self. As Heller-Nicholas points out, ‘Maya does not withdraw because she is plotting revenge for rape, she withdraws because she is traumatized by rape’ (2011, 160-61). By highlighting this element of Descent within her overview of the genre, Heller-Nicholas indicates that emphasis placed on the psychology of the traumatized victim is unconventional in rape-revenge. Descent devotes the second of its three acts to this theme, which is typically omitted in the genre’s two-part narrative pattern of rape and revenge. Descent offers insights into the impact of rape and the psychology of oppression, which I will delve into here through the convergence of phenomenology and critical race theories.

The film’s exploration of the psychology of oppression is not confined to the second act, for example, hints of a fractured subjectivity are evident from the opening. The establishing scenes present a montage of Maya’s daily life, through which she moves alone—at the supermarket, swimming, sitting in a university lecture, then talking on the phone to her mother about how she is not dating anyone (while simultaneously flicking through a university text titled ‘Modern Psychology’, a prop which foregrounds the film’s focus). There are interesting long overlaps of sound between these scenes, such as the conversation between Maya and her mother beginning well before the visuals of the lecture ends, which perhaps points to the loss of subjectivity that is more fully induced by the rape. While the film seeks to show the negative psychological impact of rape, it also seeks to account for certain victims’ greater vulnerability to its damage. Director Talia Lugacy points out that:

One of the themes of the film is that there are things that happen that cannot be articulated. This manipulation of words continues throughout the film in that her sense of herself is based on what other people say about her. So the “descent” starts even before the rape happens because she has self doubt.

(Lugacy quoted in Dykstra 2006)

Of course, the most harmful words in the film are the names Jared calls Maya during the rape, which links this ostensibly individual psychology to racial oppression. Maya’s psychology resonates with W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of ‘double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (Du Bois 1897). For bell hooks, Maya’s greater vulnerability to ‘descent’ might also be related to her class position:

Recently, I was giving a talk at Harvard University about black rage at white supremacy. I was saddened by the number of black female graduate students in the audience who spoke at great length about the terrible hardships they faced. Acutely aware of the myriad ways racial victimization articulates itself, they expressed a victim-focused identity. Yet their sense of victimization seemed to be totally out of proportion to a larger reality. They saw themselves as victims because they had
imagined they would be treated as equals and when this did not happen they lacked the inner resources to confront and cope effectively. (1995, 60)

Although relatively privileged in terms of class, Maya is in a position of 'double jeopardy' as a woman of colour in an American college, suffering from both the sexism and racism in the education sector which produces a 'diminished sense of self in girls and women' (Bartky 1990, 90-93). Sandra Lee Bartky outlines the types of 'demeaning treatment' visited upon women in education and argues that 'These behaviours, considered in toto, cannot fail to diminish women, to communicate to them the insignificance and lack of seriousness of their classroom personae' (1990, 92). Again, the deleted scenes are the most obvious examples of this, but spectators sensitive to such forms of racism may see examples of it in Maya’s interactions with white college students, and in Maya having to wait until the following year before gaining any teaching assistant work from her older white male professor. While rape is marked as the defining destructive act which brings about Maya’s ‘descent’ (particularly by being placed as the shocking first act turning point), this broader context contributes to the destabilizing of her sense of self—it is a framework for her response to rape. The more covert, insidious, or subtle forms of racism and sexism depicted in the film have a cumulative effect on Maya, but may be overlooked by some spectators as the climactic moments of brutal rape and its brutal revenge overshadow the less explicit (but not necessarily less harmful) behaviours and modes of oppression. Such insidious, everyday forms are corrosive and difficult to overcome because women take away 'a feeling of inferiority or a sense of inadequacy' (Bartky 1990, 94). Since these are difficult to convey or pinpoint, Descent uses the rape as the apotheosis of these forms of racial oppression which impact on the psychology of women of colour.

Bartky makes a case for the idea that the psychological effects of sexist oppression are similar to those of racism and colonialism (1990, 22). She describes this common nature of psychological oppression as a process of dehumanizing and depersonalizing, which is also conceptualized in feminist and race theories as objectification. Intrigued by Frantz Fanon describing all forms of racism as objectification, Richard Schmitt explicates the concept (1996, 35-50). Schmitt explains that 'Objectification is not turning people into things—that cannot be done—but pretending that they are things and, more importantly, forcing them to accept that pretense, at least in relations to the oppressor' (1996, 39). In her personal account of rape and recovery, Nancy Venable Raine describes the experience of rape as an ‘encounter with my reduction’, which continued to sit at the centre of her being (1999, 14). She describes it as also involving, ‘the sensation of becoming the object of another human being's inexplicable hatred’ (Raine 1999, 20). Raine’s account demonstrates that objectification can be a consequence of sexist as well as racist oppression. Rape is an intense metaphor for processes of objectification, one which lends itself to horrific cinematic
representation. Jared’s rape of Maya is a marked example of her objectification, a specific incident which accounts for her shift in perspective and orientation towards the world in the second act.

While the first act sets up a phenomenological orientation for understanding racist and sexist objectification, the more dramatic transformations in Maya brought about by the rape are signified at the start of act two with classic rape-revenge iconography—a dramatic haircut, and muteness. The short haircut signifies the damage to self-image and sexuality, a convention used post-rape in numerous films such as The Accused, Handgun (Tony Garnett, 1982), Sleeping with the Enemy (Joseph Ruben, 1991), and The Stendhal Syndrome (Dario Argento, 1996). After a university graduation scene—in which Maya is revealed to be an usher and not a graduate—Maya starts a retail job at a clothing store. On her first day she is silent while her talkative white boss (Alexie Gilmore) rambles about her philosophy of retail, the art of folding shirts, and her ex-boyfriend, all the while oblivious or unconcerned by Maya’s numb disinterest. The boss’ over-the-top performance amplifies her irritating monologue and a pull focus highlights Maya staring into space—both techniques direct the spectator to focus on Maya’s experience. Again heavy-handed with the signifiers, the following scene puts a shop mannequin centre frame, its empty gaze representing Maya’s feeling of emptiness, while Maya herself moves around the mannequin steam ironing various outfits in a time lapse sequence conveying the monotony of the task and Maya passing her time in a dead-end job. Maya’s withdrawal is also emphasized in a third shop scene, as four co-workers gossip about their mysterious new colleague, with one of them describing her as a bitch, and others speculating that she is a ‘dyke’.

The shop sequence is followed by Maya’s entry into the underworld. It begins with a tracking shot through a dark nightclub, visually similar to the scene in The Rectum nightclub in Irréversible (Gaspar Noé, 2002), and similarly marking a build-up to male-on-male proxy vengeful violence in a dungeon-type space. It is in this club that Maya meets Adrian, who is her guide in the underworld and her accomplice in the revenge she takes on Jared in the third

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90 The epitome of muteness as a rape-revenge convention is found in Ms. 45 (Abel Ferrara, 1980). In this film, the protagonist’s muteness ‘makes literal the taboo unspeakability of rape and personifies the inability to articulate the sheer scope of female oppression’ (Heller-Nicholas 2011, 43).

91 This is not coincidental, for both films trade on the horror of anal sex between men within the heterosexual male cultural imagination. See Leo Bersani’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (2009 [1987], 3-30) and the deployment of Bersani’s work in Wlodarz (2001) and Brinkema (2005). I discuss Descent’s homophobia later in this chapter; on Irréversible’s homophobia see Wood (2003a). Tracking shots through dark, ominous tunnels are also used in the American rape-revenge film Sleepers (Barry Levinson, 1996), about which Wlodarz comments ‘this technique also suggests the camera’s (and, by extension, the cinema’s) perilous descent to the visualization of an act that has traditionally been unrepresentable’ (2001, 70). We might then read the ‘descent’ of Descent as being based on a homophobic horror of anal sex, a frightful journey into metaphoric tunnels of anality, just as Irréversible’s reverse structure is a recuperative move out of these tunnels and into the light of heterosexuality and procreation.
act. While the drug-taking and sexual encounters Maya is shown to embark on under Adrian’s influence is ostensibly part of her ‘descent’, the last three scenes of the section suggest that her hedonism is equally part of her healing process. She wakes up after a big night, looks in a bathroom mirror, and practices her dominant or assertive attitude taught by Adrian, repeating, ‘yeah you are’. This ambiguous dialogue, directed at her own reflection, on one level functions as a reassertion of her own subjecthood. However, her assertiveness seems only a mask that hides her damaged self, or a performance of strength and recovery, when her nose suddenly bleeds. The shot of Maya is framed in the mirror, but there is also a seemingly unnecessary (too similar) reverse shot of her, which again suggests a fractured subjectivity.92

The following scene shows Maya dancing in the nightclub amongst men and women of colour, enjoying herself and being lost to the music. Unlike in the deleted cafeteria scene, here she is clearly among people she is comfortable with. Again this can be related to Ahmed’s account of the phenomenology of whiteness, with the discomfort Maya displayed in the white university spaces in the first section now being contrasted with the comfort of being in the black-orientated space. ‘You sink,’ is how Ahmed characterizes this feeling of comfort (2007, 163). This suggests that Maya’s ‘descent’ might be considered less of a negative process, and more of a healing and safe process of becoming at home in the world. Before Maya confronts Jared in the revenge section, she finds a place of comfort and renewed sexuality on the nightclub dance floor. Her state of pleasure and peace is highlighted with a spotlight on her smiling face. But again, as with the nosebleed, the film undercuts Maya’s pleasure, empowerment, and process of restoration, this time tonally by overlaying the dancing with a mournful Jeff Buckley song on the non-diegetic soundtrack. This is followed by the final scene of the section, which cuts between Maya folding clothes in the shop and her flashbacks of various sex scenarios in the nightclub. This montage illustrates her sexuality and her smile returning, along with an inner strength promoted by Adrian’s voiceover. There is an oscillation in the second act between restoration/hope/healing, and nihilism/hopelessness/descent. The film leans towards the latter in the third act, with the pull of climactic revenge also being a pull towards the nihilism of the rape-revenge genre. Nihilism permeates the genre, foreshadowed in Safe in Hell (William A. Wellman, 1931) and epitomized in The Last House on the Left (Wes Craven, 1972) (Heller-Nicholas 2011, 16). The emphasis on the elements of nihilism and emptiness in Descent also links it to the noir genre.

The contributions of the film’s second section to the rape-revenge genre and to an understanding of the psychology of racial and sexual oppression can be understood through

92 The technical reason for the insertion of this reverse shot may have been the difficulty the crew had in making her nose bleed on cue (DVD extras), nevertheless, the inserted reverse shot still has the effect of emphasizing Maya’s fragmented subjectivity and the rape’s impact on her self-image.
comparison with Dan Flory’s reading of the black noir genre (2002; 2008). Like the recent black noir films Flory discusses, Descent prompts viewers’ philosophical engagement with issues of race. Flory argues that black noir films display—and ‘urge their audiences to contemplate’—perspectives consistent with those of critical race theorists, encouraging ‘a reconsideration and redirection of aesthetic perception as well as moral thinking’ (Flory 2008, 4). These films provide imaginative access and empathetic engagement with experiences and ways of being in the world which can alter attitudes and beliefs including, in Descent’s case, challenging rape myths and racist myths. Through the elicitation of affects related to the impact of rape, as well as empathy with Maya, Descent’s spectators are put in a position of ethical reflection on their own and society’s moral frameworks which are too often dismissive of the impact of both date rape and of racist behaviours and language on its victims. Flory sees great potential in black noir’s uses of the noir genre, arguing that ‘black noirs and their aesthetic progeny challenge audiences to think carefully and intensely about the relations between race, morality, and justice’ (Flory 2008, 38). The noir elements deployed in Descent (such as melancholy, bleakness, loss of innocence, alienation, moral corruption, sense of injustice, violence and brutality, the femme fatale figure, an unredemptive ending, pessimism) and the film’s use of the rape-revenge genre in the same critical manner as black noir films use the noir genre—i.e., directing the genre conventions ‘toward critical examination of knowledge’ (Flory 2008, 24)—result in an productive exploration of philosophical and political questions around race, rape, morality, and revenge.

Descent’s innovations in relation to genre and affect are apparent in the way it deploys the moods common to rape-revenge and noir. Emptiness is the affect or mood particularly underpinning the second act, epitomized by the shop scenes I have analysed. Drawing on Greg M. Smith’s ‘mood cue’ approach (1999, 113-17), emptiness can be understood as the ‘orientating state’ being developed to cue particular emotional responses through stylistic techniques. The spectator understands the futility and ambivalence towards revenge at the end of the film due to this orientating state of emptiness, a mood developed in disconnects between sound and visuals (for example, the melancholy non-diegetic music which covers Maya dancing in the nightclub, and the overlapping sounds between scenes in the montage of Maya’s daily life), and also through Maya’s hollow gaze and silent, numb, lost being-in-the-world. The bleak nihilism characteristic of the rape-revenge genre is constructed in this film more specifically through the effect of emptiness. As well as conveying the way that rape can erase a victim’s conscious sense of place in the world, emptiness as a mood also directs a particular spectatorial response—both an empathetic understanding of Maya’s experience, and a lack of catharsis (though not a lack of pleasure) in the revenge. The denial of catharsis through revenge—a trait of the contemporary genre shared by the case studies in the next chapter—helps to present the ethical (and generic) challenge to the pursuit and pleasure in revenge following rape. In doing this, the film also captures a gloomy truth for rape victims,
expressed by survivor Nancy Venable Raine: ‘The rapist had stolen something at the center of what I had known as myself... how could this missing self be retrieved? The rapist himself might be caught, but he could never produce the woman who had not been raped’ (1999, 26). This futility of revenge will now be explored through an analysis of the film’s third act.

Fall: The Eroticization and Futility of Revenge

The third section, titled ‘Fall’, reintroduces Jared. A tracking shot follows him through the college halls to a lecture theatre, evoking the tracking shots of Gus van Sant’s Elephant (2003) (another independent film portrait of white American male youth criminality and brutal lack of humanity in an education setting). Maya is at the front of the lecture theatre, being introduced as one of the new teaching assistants. The camera focuses on her red-eyed, pale face when she notices Jared. Later, as she invigilates the mid-term exam in this lecture theatre, sound distortion brings up the volume on a ticking clock, which reminds us of the ticking time-bomb of revenge after the diversion of the second act. It is at the end of this scene, after Maya has caught him cheating, that she says she wants to see him again, setting in motion the revenge sequence. As in many contemporary rape-revenge films, this revenge sequence is constructed to mirror the rape scene, and displays an ambivalence and lack of catharsis in its enactment.

Maya’s costume on their ‘date’ in which she will take her revenge is typical of the transformed victim-avenger—she is dressed in the same seductive black dress from their first date, but this time with striking red lipstick and different attitudes (flirtatious, more assertive, and in control). This aspect is a key genre characteristic of rape-revenge, and also ties the film to the noir genre: ‘women have always had a privileged relation to dressing-up and, therefore, to both seduction and identity transformation. Indeed, image-manipulation is a key narrative motif... of the film noir and rape-revenge cycles’ (Read 2000, 167). The scene proceeds with a combination of erotic anticipation and genre anticipation of violence, a problematic genre trait which I will explore more fully below. The use of seduction in revenge is another characteristic of the genre, established by classics such as I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978), Sudden Impact (Clint Eastwood, 1983), Ms. 45 (Abel Ferrara, 1981), and Dirty Weekend (Michael Winner, 1993). Maya tells Jared to strip and he plays along with her new dominant style of foreplay. He undresses fully, becoming more awkward as he becomes more exposed. His nudity is displayed in a full body shot—contrasting with the way Maya’s body was not put on display during the rape scene—and the reverse shot is a close-up of her face watching him. We are put in her position as a dominant voyeur, deliberately objectifying him through the aligned gaze of Maya/the camera/the viewer, and thereby beginning to avenge the racial and sexual objectification of Maya that Jared effected through his actions and words in the rape scene. Likewise, this independent rape-revenge film is also
constructing a cinematic revenge upon the traditional representation of women in Hollywood cinema by inverting the male gaze in which woman is object and man is bearer of the look. Jared is not suspicious of Maya’s intentions, and indeed seems aroused as much as awkward. However, as spectators we have been aligned with Maya throughout her ordeal and aftermath, so we are more aware of the possibility that she has serious punishment on her mind. An expectation of revenge is particularly likely for spectators even minimally familiar with rape-revenge conventions.

Following Jared’s strip, the eroticization of Maya’s revenge continues throughout the scene, as Maya leads Jared towards a dungeon-type space, handcuffs him to a rack, paints words on his torso as she talks to him, and variously uses props of sadomasochistic erotic play such as a gag and blindfold. The eroticization of the revenge section is a characteristic of the rape-revenge genre which has been noted as problematic by a number of feminist critics (for example, see Barbara Creed’s analysis of I Spit on Your Grave [1993, 129-30]). Clover sees a masculinization of the victim-avenger in the genre, whereas Jacinda Read argues that Clover represses the fact that ‘the avenging woman is frequently eroticized rather than masculinized’ (Read 2000, 35). The transformation in vampire and rape-revenge films frequently involves the eroticization of the previously chaste or dowdy female victim. Eroticization is one of the key signifiers of the threat to patriarchy the female vampire/avenger represents. Firstly, it represents the liberation of female sexuality, a liberation that is threatening because it is no longer confined to providing sexual pleasure for the male. Rather, female sexuality becomes either a lure to trap and destroy the unsuspecting male or, because it has been liberated from its association with marriage and heterosexual romance, exclusive or self-sufficient. (Read 2000, 181)

Maya undergoes a sexual awakening and liberation in her ‘descent’ of the second section, which adds to the eroticization of the subsequent revenge section. As we saw in Chapter Two, the convergence of rape-revenge and neo-noirs in the 1990s produced a ‘violent and often erotic female figure... who clearly has affinities with the femme fatale of film noir’ (Read 2000, 156). Maya is an exemplar of this figure, drawing on the archetypes from both genres. Normally this figure must be punished or redeemed, but in Descent’s contemporary conclusion there is a refusal of these narrow options.

Just as Jared’s question, ‘Where are you from?’, signaled a warning in the rape scene, Maya’s dialogue similarly points to a violent shift in the scene: ‘I thought you were crazy but you opened my eyes, made me realize we’re not so different.’ But before she rapes him in retaliation, and after being mute for much of the film, Maya delivers an engrossing monologue to Jared, recounting a dream that conveys her thoughts and feelings about the rape. In her dream, an audience is witness to her shame and humiliation as her romantic notions about her budding relationship with Jared are shattered by the brutally dehumanizing rape. This monologue is testament to the affect of shame, which as we will see
in Maya's final look, she attempts to defiantly reject. Her narrative of romance and betrayal, while possibly risking trivializing the rape as a kind of rejection or ill-treatment by a former lover, does point to the particular hurt experienced in date or acquaintance rape with the added shock and betrayal caused by being harmed by a known person. Maya's monologue, delivered as she paints words on Jared's torso, is focused on the power of words. 'Funny how words create ideas,' she says, 'Ideas are hard to shake, it turns out,' Jared's words are turned back upon him, literally, as she labels him 'baboon cunt' in red paint on his torso. Note, however, that these words appear on screen for only a split second, perhaps because it is the act of speaking—of being a subject who does the talking, of no longer being a silenced victim—rather than what is said that is most important in Maya's revenge.93 When Maya finishes recounting the dream and begins to cry, Jared repeats, 'It's OK,' bringing Maya (and the spectator) back to the awareness of his presence. This reminder angers Maya: 'Shut up, no one wants to hear from you,' she says. She gags him and rapes him with a dildo, and as he screams through the gag she taunts, 'I can't hear you.' As she rapes him, she degrades and objectifies him through language as he did to her, calling him 'bitch,' 'maggot' and 'nothing'.

The mirroring of rape and revenge scenarios is a trait of the genre—the remake of I Spit on Your Grave (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) discussed in Chapter One serving as an exemplar. Clover raises and dismisses the idea that the revenge acts in the original I Spit on Your Grave can be considered symbolic rapes: 'the film itself draws the equation only vaguely if at all. Nor do other rape-revenge films play up the potential analogy. It is an available meaning, but the fact that it is not particularly exploited suggests that it is not particularly central' (1992, 161). Rape as revenge is very much exploited in the contemporary genre—not only symbolically but quite literally—which is a key difference in the genre since Clover's time of writing. Rape as revenge in the contemporary genre produces interesting reflections on causality and the phenomenological and ethical facets of rape.

Maya's vengeful actions and words perform a reversal and re-enactment that illustrates the making of rapists. The psychology of rape suggests many rapists are themselves victims of sexual abuse and in becoming rapists they are 'engaging in projective identification and re-enactment', transferring negative feelings such as 'helplessness, humiliation, pain, rage, guilt, and terror onto his victim, who then becomes the container for them, just as he has been made a container by his own abuser' (Raine 1999, 255). This cyclical process (another common rape-revenge theme we have seen in Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2 [Quentin Tarantino, 2003/2004] and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo) is also hinted at earlier in the film when Jared is bullied in the football locker room; it suggests that Jared's own need to terrorize and

93 Also, the effect of the words' brief appearance, and of focusing on the action of painting his body rather than the dehumanizing that these words represent, is to amp up the sexual aspects and play down the revenge. The spectator, like Jared himself, is unaware of the particular words within the scene (unless swift with the pause button while watching it on DVD).
humiliate others is related to experiences of victimization. Fantasies of revenge can be healing for rape victims for these reasons Raine outlines; they are an imaginary ‘container’ into which these ‘unbearable feelings’ can be placed. In dealing with her own rape, Raine fantasized about her rapist being burnt alive as she burnt the underwear she’d been wearing on the day of the rape:

Until this moment, I had not allowed myself to feel my hatred. Now my body felt huge and powerful. It felt good to be a monster, very good. My mind—all thoughts and feelings—seemed to vanish into the pleasure of the pain I gave him. His pain, my pleasure made a perfect desolation. I relished it.  

(Raine 1999, 84)

This account resonates with Maya’s rape of Jared, as she pours those emotions expressed in her monologue into the violent assault against him. In Raine’s account we see that descent, emptiness, and rage, do play a part in post-rape processing for survivors, but depending on how they are handled, such affects do entail risks:

I had no inkling that the bizarre and hideous rites I had just performed were a version of the rapist’s story or that the hatred I’d felt for him would slowly infect my spirit. That hatred did not disappear, but it never presented itself again in such a pure form. Rather, it submerged and began to mutate in ways that made it impossible for me to recognize it for many years.  

(Raine 1999, 84-85)

Correspondingly, these emotions have both functions and risks for victims of racial oppression—teetering between what black poet and essayist Audre Lorde promotes as the ‘uses of anger’ (1984, 133), essential for strength and survival, and a futile, destructive vengeance. Maya’s violent revenge on Jared leans towards the latter, becoming a revelation of Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy of violence, a similar picture of violence and cruelty’s futility and ‘stupidity’:

[Violence] is not quite intentional and exceeds any concern with results. It denatures, wrecks, and massacres that which it assaults. Violence does not transform what it assaults; rather, it takes away its form and meaning. It makes it into nothing other than a sign of its own rage, an assaulted or violated thing or being: a thing or being whose very essence now consists in its having been assaulted or violated.  

(2005, 16)

Nancy’s philosophy of violence captures the nihilism of rape-revenge, and the futile solution to Maya’s (and the spectator’s) emptiness that violent vengeance offers. Maya has turned away from emptiness and towards what Nancy describes as cruelty: ‘[She] who is cruel wants to appropriate death: not by gazing into the emptiness of the depths, but, on the contrary, by filling [her] eyes with red (by “seeing red”) and with the clots in which life suffers and dies’ (Nancy 2005, 24-25). Maya’s final look to camera, which I will further contemplate momentarily, might be read as expressing the bleakness and futility of this turn to cruelty. However, it has deeper political and ethical implications, which I will flesh out towards the end of this chapter. Jared’s trauma journey begins at this point—as we can see in his eyes—
and it is prolonged by Adrian’s subsequent raping of him. But these acts do not end Maya’s trauma journey; even this very brutal revenge has not been the catharsis of her hatred, nor will it be empowering or healing in any sustaining way.

Harmful Myths

A number of cultural myths emerge in the third act of the film in particular, which have negative implications in terms of the politics of representation. The eroticization of violent vengeance in the genre is further problematized by racial stereotypes and homophobia. For instance, the eroticization of the victim-avenger discussed above becomes more questionable as it converges with the Jezebel stereotype of African-American women (which Hollywood also applies to Latina characters). The Jezebel stereotype shares traits with the femme fatale of noir and the avenging woman of rape-revenge, all being seductive and predatory women. The Jezebel stereotype has a long history in Hollywood cinema—and other cultural products—and was refreshed in blaxploitation. Like the femme fatale, Jezebel can be ‘the source of destruction of herself and the men who become involved with her’ (Anderson 1997, 88). In drawing on this myth—whether consciously or not—Descent falls into the same problematic territory we saw in Teeth (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), reinscribing old myths in postfeminist guises.

Jezebel’s image is like that of the black widow spider that kills the male when she has finished mating with him, or the vagina dentata that consumes the male after sex. The animal metaphors resurface; the jezebel is represented as a tiger, a puma, a panther, or other large, sleek cat who slinks up and pounces on her prey. She is a frightening apparition in the white imagination; she has been frequently represented thus in American culture.

(Anderson 1997, 88-89)

If part of the terror in Descent is the threat represented by Jezebel, then the film is effectively using one of the few representations of women of colour in the rape-revenge genre to reinscribe Hollywood’s racial stereotypes. Maya’s character also draws on the Latina stereotype of the ‘dark lady’, which we see from the opening scenes, particularly in comparison to the white women at the college party.

The female Latin lover is virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic— and erotically appealing precisely because of these characteristics. Her cool distance is what makes her fascinating to Anglo males. In comparison with the Anglo woman, she is circumspect and aloof where her Anglo sister is direct and forthright, reserved where the Anglo female is boisterous, opaque where the Anglo woman is transparent.

(Berg 2002, 76)

Descent fails to resist the way that, ‘According to Hollywood... beneath every Latino is a savage, a Latin lover, or both, and at heart every Latina is a Jezebel’ (Berg 2002, 77). In the representation of Adrian, the film falls back on the twin stereotype to the ‘dark lady’, the ‘Latin lover’, a figure characterized by ‘eroticism, exoticism, tenderness tinged with violence
and danger, all adding up to the romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control’ (Berg 2002, 76). Adrian has elements characteristic of the representation of black men in blaxploitation, black noir and ‘new brutality’ films. Adrian’s role in the film echoes the blaxploitation formula, ‘which generally consisted of a black hero out of the ghetto underworld, violently challenging “the Man” and triumphing over a corrupt, racist system’ (Guerrero 2001, 214). Reflected in the blaxploitation genre was ‘the cultural moment’s call for a reclamation of black manhood in the most violent, masculinist terms’ (Guerrero 2001, 214), an aspect echoed in Adrian’s rape of Jared. Adrian’s construction similarly reflects masculinity in black noirs, particularly in his expression of what Manthia Diawara labels ‘black rage’:

> a set of violent and uncontrollable relations in black communities induced by a sense of frustration, confinement and white racism. This rage often takes the form of an eroticized violence by men against women and homosexuals, a savage explosion on the part of some characters against others whom they seek to control, and a perverse mimicry of the status quo through recourse to disfigurement, mutilation, and a grotesque positioning of weaker characters by stronger ones. (1993, 266)

Both when Adrian is introduced and when he rapes Jared, his buff body is on display for the spectator. Scenarios and camera set-ups allow maximum opportunity for the spectator to admire his muscular back and abs, such as when he opens the door to Maya the morning after meeting her and then lies in bed and smokes while talking to her. Again the racial implications of this cannot be ignored. Jacquie Jones argues that ‘While the on-screen presence of White men has always been peculiarly modest, Black men have traditionally been on display, depicted as overly developed and animal forms’ (1993, 249). Jones finds that the racial inconsistencies in the display of the male body in cinema is linked to ‘the inherent dehumanization of the Black man in the society’ (1993, 249). Descent offers an interesting and effective reversal of racial and sexual objectification by putting Jared’s body on display, but at the same time, racial-sexual objectification is still present in the spectacle of Adrian’s body.

Racist ideologies underpin both anticipation and affect in the revenge section of Descent. Within the context of contemporary mainstream American cinema, the display of full frontal male nudity is an unusual spectacle, which here contributes to the building of combined anticipation of sex and violence—Jared’s naked white body is a ‘perfect specimen’ (in Maya’s words), vulnerable to defilement by impending anal sex, physical injury, and/or sexual violence at the hands of Hispanic characters. Jared’s white body contrasts with Adrian’s Latino body, which is similarly buff and eroticized but put on display for a different purpose. Like Hollywood’s ‘new brutality’ films discussed by Paul Gormley, Descent uses ‘images of blackness to reanimate the visceral affective power of the cinematic experience’ (2005, 179).
'New brutality’ films point to the masochistic spectatorial desire for physical shocks and affect characteristic of the contemporary white cultural imagination (Gormley 2005, 178).

[Judith] Butler suggests—through the work of Franz Fanon—that images of the masculine black body in contemporary America activate a kind of immediate and affective response from audiences—and particularly white audiences. The Rodney King episode is symptomatic of the way that images of black male bodies tend to provoke a response which is couched in an immediate fear, anxiety and paranoia around the imagined primitivism, violence and authenticity of the masculine black body.

(Gormley 2005, 28)

This suggests that the horrors and pleasures of the revenge on Jared rely on the white cultural imagination, with Adrian cast as this anxiety-producing, primitive, violent and eroticized black male body. In this way, Descent falls into problematic territory not uncommon in American cinema, as Judith Mayne notes: ‘One of the most efficient ways to evoke and deny race simultaneously is to make a black character a projection of white anxieties about race’ (1993, 148). Little more than a two-dimensional character, Adrian functions as a cipher for Maya’s ‘black rage’ and as a monster in Jared’s comeuppance and in the white spectator’s cultural imagination.

The rape-revenge genre’s environment in which all men are (potential) rapists becomes very problematic in the representation of black men, since it reinscribes old racist myths. There are different political consequences to the genre’s picture of pervasive sexual threat when race is taken into account. The eroticization of Maya and the racial-sexual objectification in Adrian’s body on display are problematic in similar ways: ‘In all Hollywood film portrayals of blacks, I am arguing here, the political is never far from the sexual, for it is both as a political and as a sexual threat that the black skin appears on screen’ (Snead 1997, 30). Part of the bleakness and claustrophobia in the viewing experience for those receptive to black people’s perspectives on American culture may be related to this trap of historical representation, that even this independent film ultimately falls back on the language of Hollywood stereotypes to convey black women’s and men’s responses to rape as sexual and political threat. This is another way Maya’s final implicating look to the audience can be read—she not only wants a way out of the cycle of violence depicted, but also in bringing awareness to her status as film character by breaking the fourth wall, she is asking for a way out of the cycle of damaging stereotyped representation. I am not suggesting this was the filmmakers’ intention; it is a moment of excess rather than a self-reflexive device, with the film unwittingly acknowledging its own oppressive structures in representing people of colour on screen and within the strictures of the rape-revenge genre.

Other problematic aspects of the revenge section relate to how homophobia is deployed as revenge, and how the revenge props up the structures of homophobia by contributing to myths about male homosexuality and rape. Joe Wlodarz’s insightful chapter on 1990s male
rape-revenge films demonstrates how within this subgenre of rape-revenge, ‘male rape becomes symbolically coded as homosexuality despite occasional narrative attempts to avoid this dangerous collapse of meanings’ (2001, 68). The spectre of gay men ‘haunts these scenarios in ways that blatantly reveal both straight male anxieties and psychic fantasies about anal sex between men’ (Wlodarz 2001, 68). Wlodarz perceives this as unique to the male rape-revenge subgenre:

Actual revenge rapes are also noticeably absent in the female rape revenge genre which only seems to emphasize the overwhelming significance of (and anxieties surrounding) the anal penetration of a man. As far as the low-budget female rape revenge films are willing to go in terms of an assault on the male body, they never come close to anything even resembling anal penetration. While castration is commonplace in these films, the taboos surrounding male penetration persist. (2001, 79)

While the taboo itself has not been broken, I would argue that in the last decade numerous female rape-revenge films trade on the taboo by including revenge anal rape with a dildo as the climactic moment of horror, for example in Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007), The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, and the remake of I Spit on Your Grave. In Descent, Maya’s anal rape of Jared with a dildo is followed by Adrian’s anal rape of Jared with his penis. This sequence of events in the revenge scene trades first on the taboo surrounding male penetration, and then amps up the horror by then trading more specifically on the taboo of male anal penetration by a male. The tag team style of revenge by a male-female coupling in Descent is reminiscent of Straightheads, where (as discussed in the opening chapter) the male’s subsequent revenge is presented as excessive and is deployed to offer the film’s ethical negotiation of the limits of justifiable revenge.

With this shift to anal rape as revenge in the contemporary genre, Wlodarz’s ideas can be applied to these new films. His theory helps to recognize that in Descent, it is not only the white cultural imagination controlling the fantasies and fears in the revenge scenario, but in particular a heterosexual male white cultural imagination.

These films cannot be reduced to narratives about sadism or the trauma of rape in general because it is clearly the overdetermined anal violation and its associations with emasculation and homosexuality that is set apart by the films as the most damaging and avengeable trauma of all. (Wlodarz 2001, 68)

If this is similarly the case in Descent, it suggests that the horrors, anxieties, and even more problematically, the pleasures expressed in the male-on-male rape undermine the admirable exploration of rape and rape trauma in the first two thirds of the film. In Adrian’s rape of Jared, sexual victimization again takes on a white-centric focus, as seen in the genre more broadly: ‘with the sole exception of Pulp Fiction, the men and boys who are raped in all of
these films are invariably white, and it is specifically white masculinity that is placed under assault’ (Wlodarz 2001, 71).

Descent goes one step further than the problematic male rape films Wlodarz discusses by not simply coding the rape as homosexual, but also suggesting a dynamic of pleasure between perpetrator and victim. As he rapes Jared, Adrian says, ‘You like raping smart girls, huh? Make them feel small and stupid, huh? Stupid fuck. Who’s stretching whose cunt now, huh? Yeah, you love it.’ In adding the insults ‘puta’ and ‘fairycake’, he similarly degrades Jared as Maya did, but also links Jared’s cowardice to homophobic descriptors. Maya masturbates Jared while Adrian anally rapes him, until Adrian mocks Jared for the involuntary result: ‘Look at that, she made a mess all over herself. You love it huh? Fairy bitch.’ Throughout the rape, Adrian’s words combine misogyny and homophobia, a use of language that should be equally condemnable to the disgusting use of racist epithets in the rape scene, but since revenge against Jared is portrayed as justified (at least until the final moments), the film is at risk of promoting homophobic insults as a way of avenging and degrading an oppressor.

Wlodarz’s ideas resonate with David Savran’s theory of contemporary American white masculinity’s ‘reflexive sadomasochism’, in which the white male subject splits into a ‘feminized positionality’ of the victim and a ‘hypermasculinized heroism’ in the service of conservative ideologies which preserve the coherence of white masculinity and reassert phallic power (Savran 1996, 129). Jared is this split figure with Adrian: ‘the fractured hero, making a spectacle of himself, driven to distraction, and pleasurably tortured by his multiple selves’ (Savran 1996, 130). In playing out this split, performing a spectacle of ‘torturing himself to prove his masculinity’ (Savran 1996, 129), Jared and Adrian’s sadomasochistic engagement turns Descent into a solipsistic crisis of white masculinity—a far cry from the earlier project of exploring the impact of rape and racism on black female subjectivity. Savran also notes that this white male fantasmatic, which simultaneously claims victimhood and displays aggressive masculinity, is related to white supremacy and homophobia (Savran 1996, 127-28; 135-38), a linkage we see evidenced in Descent through the racial stereotyping and homophobia in the revenge third. We might read Maya’s defeated posture and disengagement from her own revenge on Jared towards the end of the scene meta-filmlically as a comment on Descent’s failure to critique the larger structures of patriarchy and masculinity which support the existence of rape—rape and its revenge become a battle

94 Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) is another good example of the anxieties of white masculinity expressed in American cinema in the 1990s and has been heavily criticized for its race politics and homophobia, particularly in the rape-revenge sequence. For example, bell hooks describes the rape scene as ‘overtly gay-bashing’ (1996, 49) and Sharon Willis argues that ‘we need to entertain the possibility that Pulp Fiction might re-secure racialized representations for a racist imaginary, even as it tries to work them loose from it’ (2000, 292). In both respects, Descent shares a similar ideological outlook. For more on Tarantino’s films in terms of these issues, see Guerrero (2001), Onderdonk (2004) and Tierney (2011).
between men, while Maya on the edge of the bed is on the edge of the battlefield, not able to gain justice for the harm done to her or to protect other from the harm of rape.

As well as being homophobic, equating male rape with homosexuality (or using its portrayal to construct a white male reflexive sadomasochism) is also deeply problematic because this myth constructs a shaming of male rape victims by suggesting they take pleasure in rape, and therefore perpetuates the silence around rape. The specific shame of male rape victims is explored in the British rape-revenge film, *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead* (Mike Hodges, 2003), in which a male rape victim commits suicide and then his brother seeks to understand and avenge the crime. Heavily informed by feminist ideas about rape, *I’ll Sleep* explores the psychologies of rapists and victims (explicitly through the explanations of medical professionals) and illustrates basic feminist lessons about rape (such as its intrinsic relationship to patriarchy and the emphasis on breaking silence around rape and victims’ shame). *I’ll Sleep* promotes a feminist message about the clear distinction between consensual sex and rape, such as when the coroner explains to the brother that the victim’s physical signs of arousal occurred involuntarily—they cannot be taken as signs that the victim found pleasure in being raped. The shame and the emotionally confusing nature of this aspect of rape contributed to the victim’s suicide in *I’ll Sleep*. Raine also explores this aspect for rape victims generally within her personal account:

A psychiatrist once pointed out to me that it is terribly confusing for a person to be ‘forced by someone to do something.’ It raises deeply disturbing questions of how much choice a person actually had in the situation. To be ‘forced’ to engage in ‘sexual’ behaviour—to ‘moan’ with ‘pleasure,’ for example, as I was forced to do—is, she observed, ‘one of the ways that the rapist makes the victim feel profoundly ashamed. It is taking over, coopting, and twisting the sexual functions of the victim.’

(1999, 224)

This is a fascinating aspect of the psychology of rape and its impact on subjectivity, but *Descent* undermines a nuanced exploration of this process by being invested in making the revenge on Jared ‘erotic’. Jared’s moans, particularly while the camera is on Adrian, can be interpreted as sounds of pleasure. This part of the scene focuses on the exchange of looks between Adrian and Jared, and with Maya out of the picture, it veers away from being about avenging the crime committed against her. Further, there is a disturbing moment when Adrian asks, ‘Puta, you like that? You want me to help you out down there?’ while the camera is fixed on Jared’s face. It is difficult to read his facial expression because of the gag, but he nods in response to Adrian’s question.

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95 Shaming and silence particularly affect male victims in a contemporary setting. For example, little has been done to stop the high incidence of rape of men in prisons (most frequently treated as a joke rather than as institutionalized terror), and there are tragic consequences of shame and the conspiracy of silence for male victims of rape in warfare (Storr 2011).
Why did the filmmakers eroticize the revenge rape and include the suggestion of Jared’s sexual enjoyment? Through the insights of Wlodarz, Savran, and Leo Bersani, we can see how it is a recuperative act for the white male heterosexual cultural imagination. The scene capitalizes on ‘the terrifying appeal of a loss of the ego, of a self-debasement’ associated with anal sex in the cultural imagination Bersani speaks of (2009 [1987], 27). Descent again represents rape as a destruction of self and subjectivity, but this time relies on a homophobic (and misogynistic) notion that being penetrated involves both an abdication of power and a ‘radical disintegration and humiliation of the self’ (Bersani 2009 [1987], 24). This is not the destructive shattering of subjectivity caused by rape (or other forms of torture) portrayed in the film’s first two acts, rather, Jared’s rape is constructed as an experience of jouissance or a Bataillian self-shattering or an ecstatic masochism. Rape is placed into the realm of sex rather than violence, blurring the clear distinctions feminists have struggled to make in defining rape. The film offensively recasts rape as a masochistic pleasure. Male homosexuality is invoked for this reason, since ‘Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents jouissance as a mode of ascesis’ (Bersani 2009 [1987], 30). The switching of roles between rape victim and rapist in the revenge scene can be manipulated into a pleasurable switch for the white heterosexual male. This works to undermine the revenge, since if Jared is given the power to change the violent act of rape into a pleasurable masochistic sex act, are Maya and Adrian really gaining the upper hand over Jared’s claims to white supremacist power? Masochistic pleasures are available to the spectator too, similar to those on offer in the eroticized revenge scenes against the rapists in I Spit on Your Grave according to Barbara Creed (1993, 130), and here emphasized through props of sadomasochism such as the gag, rack, and restraints. We might conclude about this aspect of Descent similarly to Wlodarz on the male rape-revenge subgenre: ‘while these films may indeed provide an opportunity for straight male spectators to experience the thrills of getting “fucked,” it is gay men who end up more directly violated by this system of representation’ (2001, 78), and add that both male and female victims of rape, and those oppressed by patriarchy and white supremacist ideology more generally, are also violated—or betrayed—by this problematic representation in the final act.

The Final Look: Shame and Ethical Spectatorship

Towards the end of Jared’s rape, there is a shift in the soundtrack which marks a shift in the film’s affective and ethical attitudes around the revenge act. Melancholy electronic music covers the other sounds of the scene, and Jared’s eyes take on a vacant look. Due to the focus on Maya’s vacant gaze for much of the film as she deals with her post-rape ‘descent’, which develops empathy and ethical and political allegiance with her character, it is difficult to ignore the implications of a similar gaze in Jared’s eyes as he too begins to suffer rape trauma
and its long-term psychological impact. Also mirrored from Maya’s rape is the cut between a facial close-up of the rape victim and a long shot of the action of the rape scene. Here the cut to a distant long shot of Adrian raping Jared is jarring; seeing Jared become limp, giving up the fight, affectively conveys the way that rape can be experienced as analogous to death.

In the cut back to Adrian’s face from the death-denoting long shot, there is a kind of violence in the audio which strikes the spectator with its sudden realism. When the music cuts out and naturalistic sound effects of the apparatus squeaking and Adrian panting cut back in, we know the mood in the room—particularly Maya’s perspective of events—has changed. Adrian asks Maya for water and says, ‘Everything’s OK now right?’ The film then cuts to its lengthy final shot, a close-up of Maya’s face turning to look directly to camera, with tears in her eyes, still wounded, no happier or stronger. On the soundtrack, the music re-enters and quietly dialogue from earlier in the film is repeated, ‘I need to get over it, I know it. And I will.’ Again, words are used problematically not only by the characters but by the film itself, here tying the need to recover from rape with words previous used in reference to getting over a heartbreak by an old boyfriend (just as Maya’s monologue earlier evoked a spurned lover trope). As Maya turns away from the camera once more, there is a brief re-entry of Adrian’s panting on the soundtrack then it drops to silence for the beginning of the credits.

This long look can be considered an ethical call on or encounter with the spectator, in which Maya silently poses questions and assertions such as ‘how do you feel?’, ‘this has not made things any better’, ‘look at what rape does’, ‘revenge is not the answer but what is the answer?’. For Heller-Nicholas, this implicating look sums up the film’s contribution to the genre:

> What is significant in this last scene... is that final, fourth wall-crumbling glare that Maya gives the camera. This is a telling moment, as her look actively implicates the viewer in the spectacle of both her rape and her revenge. That stare confirms that Maya knows we are there, and suggests she is aware that the preceding action—not only her rape, but Jared’s as well—was a show performed for an audience. It is in this context that the sad, accusing nature of her look addresses the viewer directly, and her tears silently answer Adrian’s earlier question: “No, everything is not OK now.” While stronger in some places than in others, Descent’s powerful final shot demands we reflect upon our complicity as viewers in the actions just witnessed.

(2011, 161)

Such final implication is not unique to Descent, in fact the protagonist’s direct-to-camera stare at the end of the film is a convention of the genre, seen in Thriller: A Cruel Picture ([Thriller—en grym film](#)) (Bo Arne Vibienius, 1974) and in a number of contemporary films including Teeth and Straightheads. Heller-Nicholas explains this look as an ethical engagement with the audience, where at the end of Descent and Straightheads respectively, ‘Maya and Adam both give looks that not only acknowledge the presence of the audience, but also ultimately accuse us of wanting ethically simple solutions that the reality of rape and its associated trauma
simply cannot provide’ (2011, 163). These final looks do have this powerful effect of an ethical confrontation with the audience’s complicity, but there other facets of this complex look in *Descent*. I have discussed how the look highlights the theme of the futility of revenge in stopping rape or healing from its consequences, and also how it can be interpreted as a moment of excess in which the film confronts its own inability to escape stereotyped representation and genre limitations. Here I will suggest a further reason for the power and significance of the final look—it is an act of defiant resistance against the shaming of female rape victims and against the objectification of black women.

The affective process of shaming is common in rape: ‘Shame is what the rapist, not the victim, should feel. Yet his shame is transferred to the victim, and her shame renders her mute’ (Raine 1999, 131). We see this in Maya’s case, until she overcomes such shame and silence in the third act when she returns the gaze and finds her voice. The ‘downcast eyes’ of shame⁹⁶ are lifted by Maya in the final moment—the look to camera is a refusal of shame, and related to this, a rejection of the pressure to return to moral commitment (such as the moral principles of non-violence or the moral law against revenge rape).⁹⁷ Shame may have a moral purpose, marking a recommitment to moral principles, but only for a privileged agent who escapes the types of psychological oppression instituted by hierarchies of race, class, and gender (Bartky 1990, 97). From a feminist perspective, shame has less positive benefits for those who are systematically oppressed and it must be resisted: ‘Under conditions of oppression, the oppressed must struggle not only against more visible disadvantages but against guilt and shame as well’ (Bartky 1990, 97). Bartky’s interpretation of the role of shame in the consciousness of the oppressed contrasts with much of moral psychology, and demonstrates why accounts which take gender, race, and politics into account are so important to ‘tear the veil of universality’ and individualism in moral psychology and to produce a more accurate understanding of shame for different groups (1990, 97). Her approach—‘a political phenomenology of the emotions’ (Bartky 1990, 98)—lends itself well

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⁹⁶ Such downcast eyes are seen in *Morvern Callar* (Lynne Ramsay, 2002) and theorized in Liza Johnson’s “Perverse Angle: Feminist Film, Queer Film, Shame” (2004, 1361-84). Johnson links the looking relations of *Morvern Callar* to the phenomenology of shame and promotes the potential of this affect for feminist filmmaking: ‘shame can be understood as a type of enabling knowledge by which to see and feel desires and attachments… with a kind of singularity that demands neither identification nor repulsion, that functions, perhaps, more like empathy’ (2004, 1383). Similar to the filmic and spectatorial processes Johnson describes, I seek to demonstrate in this chapter how spectatorial empathy with Maya is developed through affects such as shame and emptiness, which enable understanding of the psychology of oppression and the impact of rape trauma.

⁹⁷ In terms of ambiguity and the refusal of shame, *Descent’s* final shot has strong parallels with the final shot of *À Ma Soeur! (Fat Girl)* (Catherine Breillat, 2001). As Tanya Horeck writes, ‘The final shot of Anaïs’s face may not be that of a victim, but it is not the face of a triumphant heroine, either… If, throughout the film, we have been invited to look at what Anaïs sees from a position of shame, in the film’s final, frozen image we are not privy to what she sees. Instead, we look at the medium close-up of the isolated Anaïs, watching her look at something beyond our gaze. Bringing our focus onto Anaïs again in this way, through close-up, the film is inviting us to consider her metamorphosis’ (2010, 208).
to film theory, and particularly here for understanding the politics, ethics, and affects of rape-revenge.

Bartky's contention that individual moral experience cannot be neatly divorced from its political roots similarly underpins my interpretation of the rape-revenge genre; as this thesis has demonstrated throughout, politics and morality are heavily (and often problematically) intertwined. Shame has a very different role for the oppressed, it is 'a pervasive affective attunement, a mode of Being-in-the-world wherein their inferiority is disclosed to inferiorized subjects', and as such, 'shame is profoundly disempowering' (Bartky 1990, 97). Does this mean that the oppressed cannot be held to the same moral principles? Such a philosophical question is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but certainly affectively, we do not respond to Maya's raping of Jared in the same way as Jared's original act of rape against her, nor do we judge Maya's revenge rape with the same harshness, even despite the mirroring of actions, words, and cinematography in the two scenes. This is not only because Maya's act is an act of revenge, or because Jared is an unsympathetic character, or because revenge is an expectation and pleasure of the genre; it is also because throughout the film we have reached a greater understanding of the psychology of the oppressed. This may be true for white spectators in particular, who need to challenge their own racist beliefs and acquire a better sense of moral relevance (Flory 2002, 186). One negative aspect of shame is that it 'may generate a rage whose expression is unconstructive, even self-destructive' (Bartky 1990, 97), but at least in Descent, the shamed woman is able to direct such rage at a deserving oppressor, a positive step away from her own self-destructive 'descent'. Depending on one's political and moral perspectives, and understanding or experience of the psychology of the oppressed, the 'descent' referred to in the title and the final look can be interpreted quite differently, although they both find added complexity through the affective presentation of Maya's phenomenological experience.

Descent is a harrowing depiction of victimization and its consequences. What can we take away from the consciousness of the psychology of oppression that it offers us through empathy with Maya and the mood of emptiness or the affect of shame? Bartky’s phenomenology of feminist consciousness provides some insight into the potential and limitations of such an awareness. She argues that although 'feminist consciousness is both consciousness of weakness and consciousness of strength', this contradiction is positive since 'it leads to the search both for ways of overcoming those weaknesses in ourselves which support the system and for direct forms of struggle against the system itself' (Bartky 1990, 16). Descent's visceral portrayal of the consciousness of victimization seems to offer less of a consciousness of strength, ending before it can lead us to positive models or inspiration for overcoming weaknesses and struggling against sexism and racism beyond the ambiguous defeated/defiant look to camera in the final shot. Bartky suggests that, 'To develop feminist
consciousness is to live a part of one's life in the sort of *ambiguous ethical situation* which existentialist writers have been most adept as describing' (1990, 20). This resonates with the ambiguous note on which *Descent* ends, a space of nihilistic existential crisis, a feature perhaps borrowed from *noir*. There may be strength and defiance in Maya's stare at the end, but there also seems to be continued fear, emptiness, and ethical ambiguity. As Maya turns away from the camera/spectator in the last seconds, the film seems lost for political ways to move past the bleak futility of revenge and the 'stupidity' of cruelty. *Descent* leaves us with a pessimistic picture, characteristic of feminist consciousness as described by Bartky:

> In sum, feminist consciousness is the consciousness of a being radically alienated from her world and often divided against herself, a being who sees herself as victim and whose victimization determines her being-in-the-world as resistance, wariness, and suspicion. Raw and exposed much of the time, she suffers from both ethical and ontological shock. Lacking a fully formed moral paradigm, sometimes unable to make sense of her own reactions and emotions, she is immersed in a social reality which exhibits to her an aspect of malevolent ambiguity. (1990, 21)

The bleakness of this must be put into perspective: ‘the acquiring of a “raised” consciousness, in spite of its disturbing aspects, is an immeasurable advance over that false consciousness which it replaces’, and it makes change possible (Bartky 1990, 21). Although *Descent* does not achieve visions for change after this point of coming to consciousness (with the enactment of revenge being a dissatisfying dead end for Maya), the contemporary genre is creating examples which do. The contradiction here is that in moving beyond revenge and the loss of self, rape-revenge pushes at its own genre boundaries, coming to politically defy central, defining conventions of the genre and the meanings and responses the genre has heretofore attributed to rape. It is these marginal, genre-challenging texts which I turn to explore now in the final chapter.
Conclusion:

Futile Revenge and Future Directions

Negotiating a sudden and unprecedented vulnerability—what are the options? What are the long-term strategies? Women know this question well, have known it in nearly all times... There is the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself. Nothing about being socially constituted as women restrains us from simply becoming violent ourselves. And then there is the other age-old option, the possibility of wishing for death or becoming dead, as a vain effort to preempt or deflect the next blow. But perhaps there is some other way to live such that one becomes neither affectively dead nor mimetically violent, a way out of the circle of violence altogether...

(Butler 2004, 42)

After surveying a sample of key films in the contemporary genre, this final chapter now turns back to those difficult questions posed in the introduction: If the films themselves raise ethical and political issues with enacting revenge, can revenge continue to be an option for the protagonists? If not, where does this leave the rape-revenge genre, which depends on the pleasures of revenge in terms of both expectation and affect? In questioning the morality and effectiveness of revenge as a response to rape, the genre tests its own boundaries, its own assumptions, and the spectatorial pleasures it has traditionally offered. What are the alternatives to violent revenge as a response to sexual violence currently presented by the genre, and how do these alternatives confound generic conventions and expectations? Two recent case studies present opportunities for exploring these potentially genre-destabilizing enquiries: Katalin Varga (Peter Strickland, 2009) and Twilight Portrait (Portret v sumerkakh) (Angelina Nikonova, 2011). These films ask similar questions to Judith Butler’s ethical reflections quoted above, as they follow through on the implications of the contemporary genre's features identified in the introduction, particularly the cyclical nature of revenge and the sympathetic portrayal of rapists as victims in their own right. These films suggest that if revenge does not break the cycle of violence, it is a futile response to rape.

First person accounts cited in this thesis, such as those by Cathy Winkler (2002) and Nancy Venable Raine (1999), suggest the usefulness of violent revenge as a post-rape fantasy in the process of healing. Winkler describes her own approach to therapy, in which she nightly fantasized about torturing and killing her rapist (2002, 117). This continued for the six months after her rape until the perpetrator was caught and the detectives found evidence to convict him. She also recounts her response to viewing the rape-revenge film Lipstick (Lamont Johnson, 1976): ‘My reactions startled me. As she shot the rapist again and again, I yelled: “Don’t stop shooting until there is nothing left of him.” My body arched as if I had the gun in my hands, and I acted out that scene’ (Winkler 2002, 117). Winkler’s account highlights the potentially therapeutic function of revenge fantasies for survivors—as well as the strong affective and embodied responses rape-revenge films can evoke—however, more recent films in the genre suggest the cultural, political, and ethical limitations of this
response. Narratives of rape recovery often suggest that for individuals, there is a point at which they must move beyond anger and murderous fantasies before it consumes them (Raine 1999, 84-85). Are there parallels to these therapeutic discourses in the cultural and sexual politics of cinema, as charted in the trajectory of the rape-revenge genre? Within the boundaries of the rape-revenge genre, is it possible or desirable to move beyond revenge and explore other options for responding to rape?

Katalin Varga (a UK/Romania/Hungary co-production) and Twilight Portrait (an independent Russian film) test these questions through the subversive deployment of the genre in the context of European arthouse cinema. The filmmakers use genre in a similar manner to the French ‘cinema of sensation’ as outlined by Martine Beugnet: ‘Though the filmmakers whose work is explored in these pages often draw on and subvert generic elements, the end result is neither predefined nor determined by the narrative or discursive operations of genre’ (2007, 125). For instance, Katalin Varga’s director Peter Strickland consciously deploys the genre in a way that plays with audiences’ genre familiarity to explore and trouble the nexus between rape and revenge:

The story itself is nothing new, but it’s something I still have a great interest in. What’s exciting about working with something that’s been done before (the rape-revenge genre) is that you can really surprise an audience within the framework of something they’re familiar with. Audiences usually associate the rape-revenge genre with exploitation films. I wanted to take this genre and take away the two obvious main elements and just have this very intense ‘middle’ between rape and revenge. And then there was the idea to slow everything down and put the film in a ballad context.

(Strickland interviewed in Nándor 2009)

Strickland’s reflections highlight a self-conscious, even manipulative, deployment of the rape-revenge genre. This chapter suggests that what is shocking, subversive, and innovative about these two films is the way they play with spectators’ familiarity with rape-revenge conventions. These two films break with ideas of causality, necessity, and justification between rape and revenge acts, which the pleasures of the genre rely upon, and hence they are subversive in their departures. The fundamental premise or moral precept of the genre, ‘that rape deserves full-scale revenge’ (Clover 1992, 138), is called into question in these revisionist films.

So far this thesis has considered the affects commonly evoked in rape-revenge spectatorship, such as shame, disgust, rage, and emptiness. These affects are specific to the rape-revenge genre, but this concluding chapter will now step back to look at the affective power of genre familiarity. Torben Grodal flags up this facet of emotional response in genre cinema:

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98 Rape memoirs often structure their narratives of recovery into ‘neat phases of denial, anger, and integration’ (Brison 2002, 146n8).
One aspect of emotional response which is outside the scope of the present typology is ‘familiarity’... A given set of elements of fiction will therefore have an affective value for the viewer connected with the number of times the viewer has been exposed to a set of features (in fiction or in ordinary life).

(Grodal 1997, 163)

The way these films are able to play with expectations to convey their messages about the futility of vengeance points to the dominance of the rape-revenge model in exploring both issues of sexual violence and revenge in the cinema. It points to broad audience familiarity with the genre—not only amongst exploitation or cult film fans, but also amongst European arthouse audiences. The shock effect of these films’ interventions gives further evidence to the conventions of the genre, delineating the genre’s limits as it tests them.

The alternatives to revenge presented in these films address a long crisis in the genre. Alison Young identifies this turning point way back with The Accused (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988):

As a rape-revenge film, The Accused marks a moment in which the certainties of the genre—that sexual assault merits a lethal response; that the rape victim bears responsibility for obtaining justice through revenge—start to become eroded. In many respects, The Accused is imbued with ambivalence about revenge... In succeeding years, a number of films have intensified this ambivalence, simultaneously evoking the genre of rape-revenge while refusing to incorporate many of its essential features. The result has been the attenuation of the equation between restoration and revenge.

(2009, 56)

Part of the ambivalence towards revenge in The Accused surely relates to its location in a subgenre of rape-revenge where justice is sought through the law, diminishing the greater cynicism towards the law—and the celebration of vigilantism—predominant elsewhere in the genre. However, I agree with Young’s observation about the intensification of this ambivalence in recent years. Indeed, a weakening of the belief that revenge can achieve restoration may account for the sense of pessimism permeating the contemporary genre. This trajectory suggests that alternatives to revenge are needed—both as a viable response to sexual violence, and in order to sustain a genre that has become disillusioned with revenge.

Katalin Varga

Like Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007), which provided an emblematic example of the contemporary genre in the opening chapter, Katalin Varga uses the rape-revenge format to present a broadly applicable fable of violence. Katalin Varga’s central themes of revenge, redemption, and forgiveness are not intrinsically feminist concerns, even though they play out against a narrative of a fallen woman banished by her husband, a backstory of rape, and a mother/son relationship. Katalin Varga may be read as a feminist story—for centralizing a female protagonist’s journey, and for highlighting the condemnation and stigmatizing of
victims of sexual violence in patriarchal societies—but Strickland did not intend for his film to be a feminist one: ‘The main character happens to be a woman and she does what she does, that’s all. I don’t see the film in gender terms’ (Strickland 2009).99 This explicit distancing from feminism, and engaging with issues of revenge as a broader question, marks Strickland’s film as a movement in the genre away from Clover’s notion that rape-revenge films ‘repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist politics’ (1992, 151). Strickland wanted to avoid locating the story in a contemporary setting in order to focus the film on the themes of revenge and redemption, arguing that making it contemporary would make it political (in terms of gender and ethnicity), whereas he wanted to style it as a fairy tale (DVD director’s commentary).

This major shift in focus in the way rape-revenge is deployed has encouraged the different approaches to the genre in this thesis. Strickland very clearly outlines his use and development of the rape-revenge genre when he speaks of having aimed

> to take something very trashy, this genre, and put it in a very different atmosphere and really just go in there and forget the rape, forget the classical notion of revenge and actually think about it if you put yourself in that position. That’s what’s very vital about that genre, that all of us can put ourselves in that position of wanting revenge, if we’re pushed enough, but what about the consequences?

(Strickland interview by Ian Hadden Smith, Katalin Varga DVD extras, Artificial Eye 2009)

Strickland’s aim to explore the consequences, repercussions, and emotions surrounding revenge (DVD director’s commentary) marks a newer, ethical moment in the genre, which is reflected in a concurrent ethical turn in film theory. These ethical discourses in cinema and theory provide a mirror to one another, a mirror framed by—and finding potential in—rape-revenge conventions. Katalin Varga plays out like a microcosm of genre repetition and variation, with the first section locating the film in the genre through the use of rape-revenge conventions, and the second half of the film crushing generic expectations when, rather than killing him, Katalin (Hilda Péter) dialogues with her rapist Antal (Tibor Pálffy) and then is herself killed by avengers at the end of the film.

In the first shot of Katalin, the camera is positioned behind her, following her as she walks down the road greeting fellow villagers who ignore her. This immediately positions her as our guide in the film—like other films discussed in this thesis, particularly The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor) (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009), we are aligned ethically and empathically with the victim-avenger protagonist. Katalin is ostracized from her

99 Strickland’s statement here echoes director Park Chan-Wook’s disclaimer about Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (2005): ‘I’ve been asked if I consider this a feminist film, and it’s always been hard to answer yes. I don’t believe it is’ (Park interview in Smith 2006). Despite the directors’ efforts to distance their films from feminism, both films invite feminist readings.
community and banished by her husband when they find out she was raped ten years previously. She embarks on a journey with her son Orbán (Norbert Tankó) (who was fathered by the rapist) with the intention of finding and wreaking her vengeance upon her rapist, Antal, and his accomplice, Gergely (Roberto Giacomello). She finds, seduces, and murders the unredeemed Gergely. As Strickland himself notes in his commentary: ‘up until the murder it plays out like a genre film’. The climactic moment of vengeful violence is delivered half an hour into the film, when Katalin strikes Gergely while having sex with him. Their struggle is dimly backlit by fire, shot handheld in frenzied close-ups, with realistic sounds of struggle adding to the visceral nature of the scene. Gergely claims he did nothing, and Katalin says that is exactly the problem—he witnessed his friend Antal rape her and just stood by and laughed (revisiting the theme of the complicity of witnessing, popularized in The Accused). Once Katalin finds out the name of the town Antal is now living in, she delivers the final deathblow and the scene cuts to black.

The film hence makes what Strickland describes as ‘concessions to genre’ in this early section. These concessions include a scene where Katalin is warned to turn back and not venture to the village (an allusion to Dracula and knowing nod to the Transylvanian setting); shots of the forest that are set to eerie horror music; a tension-building lead-up to Gergely’s murder that shows him in grotesque close-ups in red fireside light; and, of course, Katalin seduces him in order to kill him. Genre expectations are being met in this first section of the film, in a sense reversing Descent’s (Talia Lugacy, 2007) problematic transition from an interesting political and ethical exploration to its fallback on genre in the third act. It is the second half of Katalin Varga that works to subvert genre expectations, playing with the conventions in an ethical exploration of issues around revenge, redemption, and forgiveness. The highlight scene of the film is the ‘rape scene’ in the boat where, in lieu of the graphic rape scene typical of the genre, Katalin details her experience of being raped by Antal and Gergely to Antal and his wife Etelka (Melinda Kántor). Interestingly, this is the scene Strickland had to fight to keep in the film. As he explains in the DVD commentary, the crew pressured him to add music and flashbacks but he wanted the scene to remain austere. Critics of this scene at script and production stages were concerned that the ‘talking heads’ would be dull; however, Katalin’s performance, her story, and the dynamics between characters make it a powerful scene (as well as a novel way to include the rape in the film without depicting it). The scene is also emblematic of the face-to-face ethical encounters deployed in the contemporary genre, an aspect explored in earlier chapters in relation to Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-Wook, 2005) and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Descent found resonances in phenomenological first-person accounts of rape. This scene in Katalin Varga might be understood as going a step further, directly presenting a phenomenological first-person account of rape. The focus in this
portrayal of rape is on Katalin’s perspective and experience (in contrast to the objectifying which occurs in the graphic rape scene in *The Last House on the Left* [Dennis Iliadis, 2009]), and a close-up of her face expresses the emotions of her experience as she remembers it and as it continues to affect her. The way she tells the story evocatively conveys her experience, for example, in details such as counting the stones around her while being raped (as a coping strategy to distract or remove herself from the situation) and her feeling afterwards that she ‘was overcome by sickness and wished that they would bury me’. Here we have a (quite literal) face-to-face ethical encounter between perpetrator and victim. The scene is composed primarily of close-ups of Katalin and Antal’s faces (mostly of Katalin, but there is also a striking extreme close-up of Antal’s eyes as he absorbs Katalin’s recounting of her experience and realizes that she is talking about him). Antal rows the boat in circles, creating a psychedelic effect and a strong separation between background (which is out of focus and spinning) and subject (Katalin in focus, centre frame). This adds to the idea of the film as a fairy tale, increasing its mythical quality just as Katalin’s story adds a kind of magic realist twist when she says that birds and animals covered her shamed body after she was raped and left in the forest by Antal and Gergely, who walked away singing merrily.

Recall the quote from Naomi Wolf in Chapter Four: ‘Rape activists have found that one of the most effective—and punishing—therapies for convicted rapists is to have victims of rape tell them in person the damage the assault did to them’ (1994, 118). Katalin’s opportunity to tell her story from her perspective to Antal makes the need for revenge redundant. The film reflects this formally in its departure from genre conventions—for instance, the ominous horror film music has disappeared by this stage. After the boat scene and a quiet family dinner, the face-to-face between Antal and Katalin continues over a drink. Antal asks how she found him, whether she will kill him, and says ‘Forgive me’ repeatedly. He says he feels that he deserves to be killed by her. Katalin tells Antal she will leave in the morning and Antal’s wife can continue believing that he is a great man. The conversation ends with a self-reflexive comment on the genre expectation-defying nature of the scene when Katalin says: ‘My God, this is so different from what I imagined. I used to lie awake at night and dream about how jubilant and bloody my vengeance would be. And look at me now, just sitting here, drinking with you. What a disappointment.’ Although Katalin lets go of her revenge mission against Antal, he is nevertheless punished: his wife commits suicide after overhearing their conversation. This is a melodramatic twist, where the good wife suffers and a happy marriage is destroyed by Katalin’s disruptive return. Etelka’s suicide is an excessively sacrificial act in Strickland’s moral tale, and it also preempts Katalin’s death at the end of the film. In the patriarchal world of the film, women suffer most for men’s crimes and the option of revenge is either thwarted or punishable.
The genre conventions are further (and more shockingly) undermined at the end of the film, when Gergely’s brother-in-law (Sebastian Marina) catches up with Katalin and takes his own revenge. He kills Katalin with a blow to the head in a scene mirroring her murder of Gergely. Killing off the victim-avenger protagonist brutally underlines the cyclical nature of revenge and the subjective nature of justice. By betraying the expectations of rape-revenge audiences, space to explore these broader implications of the genre is opened up. The assault on Katalin is simultaneously an assault on the genre-familiar spectator for their expectation and desire for revenge. Strickland was aware of the gamble he was playing with genre:

> Working within an existing genre allows you to instantly set-up expectations, so in that sense you already have a head-start in terms of how you can manipulate an audience. Any viewer expecting a rape-revenge will not get their money’s worth, but hopefully that initial surprise or disappointment can prove enriching. (Strickland 2009)

In terms of the rape-revenge genre, *Katalin Varga* does disappoint (as both Katalin and Strickland suggest in the above quotes) but whether this disappointment prompts either a negative or positive response from the viewer, this affect leads to a challenging of the generic positioning of revenge as necessary or justified, or as closure. In order to present a strong variation—or deviation—from other rape-revenge films, and to follow through on the consequences of revenge, Strickland whisks away the potential for viewers’ sense of righteous satisfaction in revenge. Strickland found that, ‘Some people were offended by the ending in *Katalin Varga*’ (Strickland quoted in A Sound Awareness 2011). This was my initial response—which was only somewhat diluted by later reflection—as it seemed shocking that a female character who has suffered so much would be punished by death in the denouement, just as we see in many a conservative moral tale or melodrama, and hence it becomes more clear why Strickland’s film is indeed not a feminist film. In classic iterations of the genre, the victim-avenger suffers as an excuse for the audience to take pleasure in her violent revenge, which typically exceeds the violence of the rape scene. A rape scene generates the affects that find pay-off in the revenge scene(s); equilibrium is restored by the heroine’s revenge. Many contemporary rape-revenge films challenge the construction of vengeance as pleasurably righteous and justified, but rarely to the death. Although she may be irrevocably changed in negative ways, there is a strong audience expectation that the victim-avenger, with whom the audience is typically empathically and ethically aligned, will be victorious. Two years later, Angelina Nikonova’s film *Twilight Portrait* similarly scuppers genre conventions with an eye on ethical solutions to breaking cycles of violence, but this time with a more political perspective and an alternative, controversial notion of victory.
In a similar manner to *Katalin Varga*, *Twilight Portrait* locates itself first within, and then against, the rape-revenge genre. The opening rape scene in which three policemen rape a sex worker is characteristic of the genre in numerous ways: it is located within the narrative as an inciting incident (which typically provokes and justifies revenge); the setting of the woods; gang rape; elements of humiliation and degradation; and its arousal of negative affects ranging from discomfort to rage. In the film’s first twist on the genre, this victim of rape does not become the victim-avenger. Rather, this first rape is a prelude to the introduction of our heroine Marina (Olga Dihovichnaya), who is later raped by the same trio of policemen once she is established as the film’s protagonist. The first rape scene then functions as a shortcut to locating the film in the genre; it also introduces the police characters, including the main character Andrei (Sergei Borisov); and it sets up the themes of repetition and cycles of violence. Casting the rapists as policemen fits with the genre’s fundamental lack of faith in the law. While this aspect may be used in other films to justify vigilantism, here it is also part of the fabric of the film’s realism, reflecting a socio-political issue of police corruption in Russia (which as the director pointed out during a Q&A after the London Film Festival screening [BFI Southbank, 25 October 2011], is an issue common to many places around the world).

After being raped, Marina showers and picks debris out from under her nails (ruining evidence that is usually collected in a rape kit), using another common motif of the genre to further indicate that there is no possibility of justice via the law. These readily identifiable characteristics of the genre establish viewer expectations that Marina will take revenge.

The contemporary genre is typically self-aware of the ways it positions and challenges its spectators ethically. As in *Katalin Varga*, *Twilight Portrait* manipulates generic expectations and conventions to achieve this ethical positioning in which the spectator is asked to reconsider the ethics and effectiveness of revenge. The scene in which Marina follows Andrei home with the intent of revenge epitomizes this sophisticated manipulation of the audience, pushing the viewer to a sudden self-awareness about their expectation of—and desire for—revenge. Outside Andrei’s apartment building, Marina breaks a glass bottle and then follows him into the lift with it. There is a long, tense moment in the lift where Marina stands behind Andrei—will she take revenge? She has a weapon and a perfect opportunity to do it in this moment, and as the moment draws on, the viewer is torn between wanting her to seize that opportunity and hesitating in the same way that Marina does. We know that her attempt at revenge now might be dangerous or have other negative consequences for her, and it contravenes Marina’s occupation as a social worker. We may begin to realize that revenge will not break the cycle of brutality that has led to Marina’s deep disillusionment as a social worker. When Marina stops the lift, the viewer is taken to the edge of their expectation—This is the moment! She’s going to do it!—but then she unzips Andrei’s fly and performs oral sex.
This is a bewildering development that raises a rush of questions against the expectations set up so far: What is she doing?! Is this part of a revenge plan on Marina’s part? For a moment, I thought perhaps Marina would use castration as revenge, in the manner of Mrs Collingwood in *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972). Implausible as castration may be in the context of social realism, grasping at such straws in the viewing experience illustrates the strength of the generic expectation and the baffling nature of Marina’s actions. The scene includes a shot of Marina dropping the broken glass bottle behind her, but even with its emphasis in close-up, this indication of Marina giving up violent revenge can be difficult to accept against genre expectation. Marina restarts the lift, then when the doors open she rushes out and down the stairs, leaving both Andrei and the viewer perplexed.

With the classical formula of the rape-revenge genre as our map to viewing the film, this twist disorients us. Resistant to giving up the expectation and desire for revenge, and unclear on the direction of Marina’s ambiguous actions, the rape-revenge spectator continues to wonder how she will take her revenge. As reviewer Moritz Pfeifer puts it, ‘She is also not turning into an aggressive avenger, identifying with the methods of those that harmed her. And yet, the feeling that there actually is some kind of revenge going on persists until the end of the film’ (2011). This persistence occurs even though the film is radically subverting revenge scripts, which points to the powerful affective drives behind rape-revenge that sustain these desires and expectations. The film tests and manipulates definitional characteristics of the genre that Peter Lehman identified: rape as a narrative pretext for the spectacle of violent female vengeance; and the structures of erotic anticipation (1993, 107-10). Marina’s behaviour exploits and confronts the way that seduction is often part of the revenge act in rape-revenge, taking it to an extreme and positing it as an ethical solution to breaking the cycle of violence. In feminist critical literature the seduction element of the revenge act is typically seen as a very problematic aspect of the genre—defying this critique and troubling traditional feminist responses to rape are also part of the film’s ethical challenge. Marina’s response to rape is a radical and clever twist on the genre, where seduction and the redemptive power of love are used to seduce Andrei—and the viewer—out of the cycle of violence.

Whisking away the payoff of a violent spectacle, the film replaces this generic response with an ambiguous sexual relationship between Marina and Andrei. Marina returns to Andrei’s flat and stays with him, embarking on a sexual relationship and repeatedly telling him, ‘I love you’. These words enrage him every time, but although he repeatedly hits her, she is not deterred from staying and repeating ‘I love you’. Lying in bed after sex, Marina is very affectionate with Andrei, which makes him cry and then become angry with her—clearly her love is affecting him. Still, it can be difficult to see the design or the radical ethics behind Marina’s subversive behaviour. At times we wonder: Is she so emotionally disturbed that she has fallen in love with her rapist? Will she eventually reveal herself to be a *femme fatale*, her
strange behaviour part of a bigger revenge plan? Marina is quite inscrutable, and it is difficult to understand what she is trying to do, or whether it is even intentional, until it achieves something. Carmen Gray’s interview with director Angelina Nikonova brings her to a similar reading of the film:

Enigmatic in her motivations, Marina can seem wilfully self-destructive, even grotesquely masochistic. But her relationship with Andrei is ultimately portrayed not as adoration but as radical, fearless social work. Against his emotional resistance and brutality she pits her declarations of love, in a kind of pseudo-Christian exercise in healing.

“I really think that masochism has very little to do with this; quite the opposite,” Nikonova explains. “Marina understands that Andrei is just another kid from a troubled family who has grown up into this beast. When she confronts him with her feelings, she’s basically taking charge.”

(Gray 2011)

Marina takes charge not just to cure or redeem Andrei; she is also seeking self-restoration. While her behaviour may appear masochistic or self-sacrificing—an interpretation Nikonova is keen to preempt in the above quote—her actions are also guided by the fact that she herself needs care, and needs to restore her faith in humanity when in her personal and work life she also sees people harming each other repeatedly in both small and big ways. In the Q&A after the London Film Festival screening, Nikonova picked up on the wording of an audience question and affirmed that ‘reaching for people’ is a key phrase. She pointed out that Marina is in an ‘emotional vacuum’—no one around her, including her husband or friends, cares for each other. Twilight Portrait’s response to sexual violence reflects Susan J. Brison’s approach in her book, Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self. Brison aims to ‘develop and defend a view of the self as fundamentally relational—capable of being undone by violence, but also of being remade in connection with others’ (Brison 2002, xi). In a similar vein, the film’s proposed solution to breaking the cycle of violence, and to curing Marina’s bourgeois disillusionment, lies in a radical face-to-face ethical connection.

Should Twilight Portrait be considered a feminist film? Robert Bell notes that the ‘challenging and frequently unsettling Twilight Portrait becomes both problematic and intriguing when considered from a feminist and psychological standpoint’ (2011). Early audience reactions reflected this, according to the review in Variety by Leslie Felperin:

Pic sharply divided auds and crix when it premiered at the Kinotavr Open Russian Film Festival in Sochi… Some felt the film offered a daring, psychologically complex but still-credible portrait of a woman’s unexpected reaction to sexual violence; others, especially Russian and older viewers, felt the pic violated core feminist tenets, or simply considered it too unpleasant or implausible. Offshore, it’s likely to provoke similarly polarized reactions.

(Felperin 2011)

There are parallels here with the way some viewers were ‘offended’ by the ending of Katalin Varga. Unpleasantness or implausibility aside, Twilight Portrait offers a radical alternative to
the typical responses to sexual violence both in cinema and society. At times baffled by her behaviour, at the end the spectator is positioned, like Andrei, to follow Marina’s ethical lead as she gives up revenge and pursues her idealistic, restorative route. At the film’s conclusion, Andrei observes Marina at the airport after dropping her off, and seeing her not return to her husband and old life, he quits his job as a policeman (leaving his gun and uniform with his colleague) and follows her down the road into the sunset as the film’s credits roll. Although through much of the film the audience does not know where Marina is going with her plans or what will happen next—and perhaps neither Marina nor Andrei know either—the ending presents a vague sense of hope in its ethically reconsidered and relatively happy (albeit indeterminate) resolution for both characters.

**Futile or Fruitful? The Indeterminate Future of Rape-Revenge**

*Twilight Portrait* is an apt film to close this thesis with, since its final indeterminacy points to a broader indeterminacy in the genre.

The film, ending on this note of indeterminacy about future [sic], is an opportunity for the viewer to reflect on the uncertain course of contemporary Russian culture. Rather than offering a familiar generic resolution, *Twilight Portrait* is predominantly an investigative text, presenting a subtle cinematic portrait attentive to questions of cinematic style and reigning discourses about uncivil society.

(Landy 2011)

This film helps us to reflect not only on the culture in which it was produced (and in a different forum, its critiques of Russian culture and middle-class mores ought to be further explored) but also helps us to reflect on the trajectory of the rape-revenge genre. The mood of indeterminacy is an appropriate note on which to leave my reconsideration and reassessment of the rape-revenge genre. We have seen ambivalence in the contemporary genre where on the one hand it is demonstrating the ongoing relevance (and perhaps a need for) rape-revenge, while on the other, it presents a testing of the limits of the genre and the possibility of responses to rape other than revenge. In certain ways, the genre is reinscribing dominant, conservative cultural myths about rape and the appropriate response (such as eye for an eye revenge), while at the same time initiating complex, ambivalent explorations of rape trauma and of ethics, as well as a level of experimentation in the medium and self-reflexive challenges to spectating violence (particularly rape and other forms of torture). It seems clear that the ethical questioning of revenge has not killed the genre but reinvigorated it, and I hope that the genre’s critical literature will be similarly reinvigorated by this theoretical engagement with the genre’s ethics, politics, and affects.

Contemporary rape-revenge films hold great critical value for opening up questions about various social, political, and ethical attitudes towards rape, representation, and response. Throughout this thesis I have shown how the genre’s specific affects—disgust, rage, shame,
emptiness—are used at various points for political and ethical ends as well as simply for evoking spectatorial pleasures of the genre. This concluding chapter has highlighted the role of familiarity in the affective experiences of watching rape-revenge films. Katalin Varga and Twilight Portrait have demonstrated that playing with familiarity, or subverting genre conventions, is one way the genre has been sustained for over a decade since Jacinda Read suggested it had run its course (2000, 245). Against the notion that rape-revenge is a historically specific cycle as opposed to a genre (as discussed in the introductory chapter), this thesis has asserted and demonstrated that the genre has not expired but rather diversified. Although it has morphed into new directions and is often hybridized with other genres, rape-revenge has, and probably will continue to, persist and be popular. These final two case studies point to the versatility and durability of the rape-revenge genre, and its key role in exploring understandings of rape and possible responses to it. From the Hollywood remakes of canonical films in Chapter One, to these European independent films (both self-funded by the filmmakers), the genre is being taken up and taken in different directions by various contemporary filmmakers.

In limiting the scope of this thesis I have not been able to fully encompass peripheral subgenres (such as legal and proxy vengeance), and although I have touched on some of the issues raised by male victim-avengers in my discussions of Straightheads, Descent, and I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead (Mike Hodges, 2003), I have not centrally addressed films which feature male victim-avenger protagonists. There are a much smaller number of films with male victim-avengers, but they raise interesting questions for feminist film theory and spectatorship and certainly merit examination in follow-up studies. Also, as discussed in the introduction, there are strong traditions of rape-revenge in Indian and Japanese national cinemas—there has been some critical attention given to these traditions, but further work on cross-cultural comparison would be interesting. The diversity of the genre is emphasized in Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’ overview (2011), but this is at the expense of deeper analysis of the genre. While I concur with Heller-Nicholas that the genre is broad and diverse, I have chosen to focus on generic coherence (reading the genre as a genre) and deeper insight into its ethical, political, and phenomenological facets. The post-2000 case studies in this thesis, analysed through contemporary film theory, have updated and reassessed the study of rape-revenge and provided insights into contemporary cultural understandings of sexual violence and revenge.

Films featuring male victim-avengers include Mystic River (Clint Eastwood, 2003), Sleepers (Barry Levinson, 1996), and the Australian films Acolytes (Jon Hewitt, 2008) and The Book of Revelation (Ana Kokkinos, 2006). The Skin I Live In (La piel que habito) (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011) also merits analysis for the ways it further challenges the gendered roles of rape-revenge with its queer convolutions.
The new approaches to rape-revenge taken in this thesis have wider applicability for genre studies and could be developed for application to other genres, particularly less traditional genres which may confound earlier definitions and approaches. As rape-revenge is not purely a historical genre, but a current one with frequent releases of fascinating examples, this research also has potential for influencing new articulations of the genre. As we have seen in earlier chapters, there is a productive discourse between theorists and this self-reflexive genre (for example, in the demonstrable influence of Camille Paglia and Barbara Creed's ideas in *Teeth* [Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007]) so critical work and interrogation of the genre can contribute to shaping it in innovative ways. Creating and reflecting upon the rape-revenge genre in a dialectical manner may result in a productive cultural address to the critical political and ethical issues surrounding sexual violence and revenge, deepening understanding and posing new directions.

Reaching the end of my study of contemporary rape-revenge cinema, my views on the genre reflect those of director Peter Strickland: 'There's also this feeling that so much has been done on this subject yet we still have so far to go in terms of what we can communicate about it' (Strickland 2009). Since the plethora of post-2000 rape-revenge films has confuted any assumptions that the genre ran its course in the late twentieth century, I am reluctant to make any hasty predictions about the future trends or existence of the rape-revenge genre. Suffice it to say that the current moment of the genre is a prolific and rich one, and that this research has produced a faith in the genre's potential to thrive, adapt, and continue to provoke political and ethical debate around questions of sexual violence and its aftermath.
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