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The Rape-Revenge Genre in the Digital Age of Heightened
Visibility: The Rise of Female Storytellers and Fourth-Wave
Feminism

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film Studies

May 2023

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April 2023

The Rape-Revenge Genre in the Digital Age of Heightened Visibility:
The Rise of Female Filmmakers and Fourth-Wave Feminism

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by Marynell C. Dethero

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ABSTRACT

The Rape-Revenge Genre in the Digital Age of Heightened Visibility: The Rise of Female

Filmmakers and Fourth-Wave Feminism

by Marynell C. Dethero

The rape-revenge cinema genre has continued to evolve since its initial emergence in the 1970s. Many of the most popular films belonging to the genre produced in the 1970s, like Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) or Wes Craven's directorial debut *The Last House on the Left* (1972), have been criticized heavily by film critics and scholars for their exploitative tropes. However, I argue that regardless of the production value of the films, the rape-revenge genre is inherently feminist because sexual violence is and always has been an inherent issue to the feminist movement and because the genre primarily comprises two major plot trajectories: the sexually abused survivor (usually female) and retribution violence. A lasting trope throughout the decades as the genre continues to evolve is that the films seek to criticize or critique the patriarchal order. Additionally, the genre is intrinsically connected to feminism. As feminism evolved over the decades, and the main priorities of the movement changed during each respective wave, the rape-revenge genre developed to reflect those changing attitudes. Today, contemporary rape-revenge films made in the past decade are written and directed by women in more significant numbers than ever before. The observed modifications to the genre in the last ten years can be directly related to sentiments specific to fourth-wave feminism. Social media has played a significant role in bringing heightened awareness to issues of concern to the feminist movement and the formation of various movements through online activism. In this

thesis, I analyze two contemporary rape-revenge films directed by women: *The Nightingale* (Jennifer Kent, 2018) and *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2017), to showcase how the rape-revenge genre interacts with changing feminist sentiments and how female storytellers are filtering in more progressive female subjectivity into the genre which has, in part, led to the genre re-entering mainstream cinema. Rape-revenge films are incredibly important as they force audiences to view and grapple with a very real and somewhat taboo societal issue.

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1. Introduction

In 2016 Academy Award-winning actress Jodie Foster told *Variety*, "One of her biggest pet peeves as an actor, she said, is that male writers would "go to rape" to provide motivation for women" (Cavassuto). The 1988 film *The Accused*, directed by Jonathan Kaplan and starring Jodie Foster, features her character, Sarah Tobias, being brutally raped by multiple men in a bar as others watch and encourage the attack, then seeking "revenge" in a sense through the legal system. Given the copycat nature of Hollywood, it is likely that Foster received many screenplays featuring rape or sexual assault, as Foster won the Oscar for Best Actress for her performance in Kaplan's film. Moreover, Kiera Knightley told *Variety* in 2018, "I don't really do films set in the modern day because the female characters nearly always get raped" (Lang). As famous actors Foster and Knightley have openly expressed, sexual violence against women is a common trope in Hollywood cinema. In addition to the complaint of commonness, Foster criticizes and claims male writers in Hollywood are not interested in engaging with the complexity of female characters and instead often resort to sexual assault as a valid reason for female character motivation or character development, such as a change in behavior. However, the visibility of women's lived experiences, including violence against them, compels our society to grapple with a very real-world social ill. Sexual or gendered violence is an inherent issue of concern to the feminist movement, and depictions of rape should be treated as such. In other words, rape should not be a "convenient" narrative device for female characters. While many films mistreat or portray sexual violence against women in potentially damaging ways,

the rape-revenge genre directly engages with the complexity of the female experience and sexual violence within patriarchal misogyny.

Contemporary rape-revenge films (2013-present) have a unique ability to be labeled feminist, not only by popular media outlets but by scholars as well. Recently, a significant amount of female filmmakers have engaged with the rape-revenge genre and moved the genre back into the mainstream to tell stories reflective of issues of concern specific to the current feminist landscape in the so-called “fourth-wave” we are currently experiencing. This thesis is concerned with the evolution of the rape-revenge genre and focuses explicitly on the relationship between fourth-wave feminism and the ways in which the genre has morphed in the digital age in comparison to the initial cycle that emerged in the 1970s. By surveying films from the last decade, one can observe fourth-wave feminism’s influence on the genre from its exploitative origins as a horror sub-genre to one of displacement and heightened visibility. Today, rape-revenge cinema is less concerned with the depiction of rape as an inciting incident in generic horror than it is with the exposure of patriarchal violence.

In the introduction, I demonstrate how rape-revenge cinema has continued to evolve since its emergence in the early 1970s and has always been intrinsically linked with feminism. I found it critical to explore why and how the rape-revenge genre came to be to illustrate why the films continue to appear and evolve today. I first map out the genre’s trajectory by identifying notions and themes of sexual violence found in films from the pre-code era (1929-1934) of Hollywood

cinema, then discuss the rise of sexploitation cinema and schlock horror in the 1950s as the production code weakened, and finally claim that the rape-revenge genre formed through the marriage of these two types of filmmaking, gaining success through the combination of sex and violence as spectacle. I then establish the genre's ongoing relationship with feminism, particularly using a chapter from Carol Clover's book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, published in 1992, as an aid to my arguments, as I account for the various ways the genre manifested during the movement's second, third, and finally, fourth wave. As feminism changed, so did the genre, and I support this claim with various film examples produced during each respective wave. Finally, I focus on fourth-wave feminism and its particular implementation of social media to highlight how the heightened visibility of feminist discourse online has led to hashtag activism and the formation of various movements like #MeToo to expose abusers and bring greater awareness to the issue of sexual assault. To support my arguments about fourth-wave feminism, I use Sarah Banet-Weiser's book *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Her notions about "popular feminism" and heightened visibility in the digital age help articulate and highlight the specific shifts in priorities in the fourth wave and aid my claims about why there has been a resurgence of rape-revenge films made by female filmmakers in the past decade, how they differ from their predecessors, and why they are essential. Using textual analysis, I examine two contemporary rape-revenge films, Jennifer Kent's 2018 film *The Nightingale* and Coralie Fargeat's 2017 film *Revenge*, as case studies as they both represent and correlate to concerns specific to fourth-wave feminism and highlight how the genre has moved into the mainstream.

With Foster's and Knightley's critiques duly noted, men's sexual violence against women has been a Hollywood storytelling mainstay for decades. The "woman-in-peril" trope was prevalent and popular in many genres during the classical Hollywood period. Among stories of sexual threat are narratives of women who have fought back or sought revenge for their attacks. Stories of women in sexual peril who then seek revenge against assailants can be traced back to Hollywood's Pre-Code era (1929-1934). Alfred Hitchcock's first sound film, *Blackmail* (1929), follows Alice White, who kills a man in self-defense after he attempts to force himself on her when her detective boyfriend discovers Alice is the culprit of the murder, he tries to help her. *The Story of Temple Drake* (Stephen Hopkins, 1931), starring pre-code Hollywood star Miriam Hopkins, directly suggests rape through ellipses. *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), starring Marlene Dietrich and Anna May Wong, depicts Wong's character murdering her rapist at the film's end. *Wild Boys of the Road* (William A. Wellman, 1933), a road teen movie where a group of teens ride trains to find work, features one of the girls in the group being raped by a train conductor and a subsequent revenge scene where the boys in their group avenge her by attacking him.

The horror genre formed during the early 1930s when monster films garnered the major Hollywood studios immense success. Screenings of films like *Dracula* (Tod Browning 1931), *Frankenstein* (James Whale 1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Robert Mamoulian 1931), *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Robert Florey 1932), *King Kong* (Merien Cooper 1933), *The Mummy* (Karl Freund 1932), *The Island of Lost Souls* (Erie C. Kenton 1931), and

Freaks (Tod Browning 1932) were extremely successful and popular. While insinuations of sexual harm were variously nuanced in this period, the “monsters” of the 1930s horror films are substantially portrayed as being sexually threatening to women and often insinuate rape. These films frequently dabbled with other taboo subjects like incest, necrophilia, bestiality, fetishism, and sado-masochism. For example, Fatima Tobing Rony writes in *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and the Ethnographic Spectacle* regarding *King Kong* (1933), “The forbidden, what ‘no white man has seen,’ is above all the interracial, interspecies intercourse of Ann and Kong. This titillation propels the narrative forward” (Rony 181). This interracial/interspecies “threat” towards white womanhood is also present in *The Island of Lost Souls*, and the makeup design of Hyde in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is glaringly uncivilized and animal-like. Moreover, in Mamoulian’s *Dr. Jekyll*, Hyde is obsessed with Ivy Pearson (Miriam Hopkins), constantly threatens her, and desires complete control over her. Ivy is deathly afraid of Hyde and showcases various signs of trauma throughout the film that can arguably be correlated to trauma showcased by survivors of sexual abuse. In reference to the mad scientist, another popular horror archetype during this era, Harry Benschoff writes, “Just as surely as do vampires and werewolves and most other Gothic villains, the mad scientist attempts to rape and despoil—in whatever displaced form—his victim’s (usually female) body” (Benschoff 222). While the implementation of the Production Code in 1934 somewhat interrupted the horror genre’s momentum, as 1940s horror was campy and borderline comedic, filled with ludicrous sequels like *Son of Dracula* (Robert Siodmak, 1943) and *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (Roy William Neill, 1943), the threat of sexual victimization continued to appear in abundance within the genre,

particularly when the Code began to weaken in the mid-late 1950s.

The decision following the 1948 *U.S. vs. Paramount Pictures* case, or the Paramount Decree, drastically affected how the major Hollywood studios produced, distributed, and exhibited their films. This decision is largely regarded as the moment the classic Hollywood studio system era ended, as the decree prohibited studios from the practice of block-booking and vertical integration. Because the studios could no longer count on automatic exhibition, they relied on edgier content and independent producers to compete with television and foreign imports. Kevin Heffernan writes that theaters “frantically scrambled for product, and by the mid-1950s, many had shifted their programming policy to specialize in youth movies, exploitation films, features from abroad, and horror films” (Heffernan 112). The unstable distribution and exhibition practices coupled with foreign content and television in the 1950s played a significant role in the increase of graphic violence and experimentation in horror films. Independent production companies like American International Pictures appeared during the 1950s, which were known for producing low-budget horror films and, as Rick Worland articulates, “genre quickies about hot rods, juvenile delinquents, the Korean War, and monsters from outer space” (283) marketed toward the teen demographic that now made up the majority of theater patrons. Additionally, the drive-in theater experience gained significant popularity with the younger audience during the mid-late 1950s; AIP and other independent companies quickly took advantage of this, as Eric Schaefer asserts in his book *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, audiences “were encouraged to look on their attendance at an exploitation film as an experience with multiple dimensions,

one that would arouse, thrill, entertain, and educate” (Schaefer 110). These films were primarily focused on spectacle rather than narrative or high production value.

While major studios continued to make horror films like *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* (Universal, 1954) and *House of Wax* (Warner Bros., 1953), exploitation films such as AIP’s *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler Jr., 1957) and the British import *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957) (distributed by Warner Bros.) showed how “horror’s revival began in 1957 with [these] two hit movies” (Worland 274). These films demonstrated both the generic appeal of schlock horror and the economic power of the emerging teenage demographic. Simultaneously, 1950s burlesque and sexploitation films gave rise to cheaply and quickly produced movies full of titillation. As Eric Schaefer explores and explains in his article “The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films,” burlesque films were incredibly popular during the post-war era. He writes, “These movies were not sanitized Hollywood representations of “burley” shows but were instead recordings of authentic performances complete with striptease dances captured on film for the exploitation movie mark” (41). Schaefer illustrates how films that dealt with somewhat “taboo” subject matter, like burlesque films, regardless of popularity, are often disregarded or ignored in film studies scholarship. However, the popularity of these films warrants further examination as it sheds light on how and why genres like rape-revenge or even pornography came to be incredibly successful and long-lasting.

These two forms of exploitation filmmaking, schlock horror and sexploitation, would

converge into the rape-revenge genre during the 1970s and 80s. Aided by the simultaneous mainstreaming of cheaply produced and theatrically distributed pornographic movies, rape-revenge films found their success in how they popularized the combination of sex and violence as spectacle. The horror genre erupted in the 1970s, with various sub-genres forming during the decade that are familiar and popular today. Some examples include supernatural horror: *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976); surrealist horror: *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977); slasher horror: *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974); body horror: David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1976), *Rabid* (1977), and *The Brood* (1979). However, while scholars like Carol Clover, Linda Williams, and Barbara Creed have analyzed the villainy or threats in these films as sexually motivated, the rape-revenge film explicitly asserts this notion. In comparison to the masked psychopaths of slasher films and the unknown threats in supernatural horror and body horror, the fear that rape-revenge films induce in viewers is rooted in a very real societal issue. Introduced to audiences and solidified as a genre in the 1970s, rape-revenge films arrived during a tumultuous time politically, culturally, and industrially.

2. The Rape-Revenge Genre Characterized

The rape-revenge film or genre has notoriously been difficult to define. Some scholars claim it is a historically-specific cycle of films from the 1970s derived from exploitation and horror cinema (Read 24); others claim it is neither historically specific nor generically specific (Heller-Nicholas 155). In contrast, Carol Clover claims that any film where a woman avenges her rapist(s) can qualify (115). Expounding upon Clover's claims, I believe the rape-revenge film displays an enactment of justice on one's accord (whether this be the victim or someone else) for the crime of sexual assault because the state fails to intervene. Moreover, seminal film scholar on the subject Carol Clover, argues in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* that there are stark differences in the rape-revenge films of the early 1970s in comparison to the late, and further, between low-budget exploitation films and mainstream films like *Lipstick* (Johnson, 1976), *The Accused* (Kaplan, 1988), or *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpaw, 1971). Clover frequently refers to the early 1970s films as "old-style rape films" and asserts that "the rape is construed as itself an act of revenge on the part of a male who has suffered at the hands of the woman in question (to have been sexually teased or to have a smaller paycheck or lesser job, is to suffer)" in addition to spectators being placed in the perspective of the rapist through cinematic conventions (139). Throughout the chapter she uses criticism and textual analysis of these "old-style" rape-revenge films to emphasize the various shifts that occurred in the genre during these decades and to argue against the slew of criticism against "low" rape-revenge films, most notably Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). While acknowledging the unflinching

depictions of violence and disturbing elements of the film, Clover claims that the low-budget exploitation rape-revenge films from the late seventies and early eighties feature more progressive depictions of sexual violence against women. For example, when analyzing *The Accused*, she showcases that even though the film is based on a true story, it has been refined by Hollywood with a happy ending that paints the judicial system as sympathetic to rape victims when this is extremely rare in reality. Additionally, she demonstrates how *The Accused* causes viewers to “lose sight of what the lower forms of the rape-revenge drama unfailingly keep at center stage: the raped woman herself” (148), emphasizing this notion by pointing out how the court decision comes down to a male witness’ testimony, and that the only time we see the assault is through this witness’ eyes in flashback (instead of the victim’s).

The female victim, as the sole avenger, is also an observed modification from the late 1970s films. A common theme in earlier films like Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972), which pays homage to Ingmar Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring* (1960), was the subsequent murder of the female rape victim, which sparks a desire for revenge from family members or friends. It is also important to note that Meir Zarchi’s *I Spit on Your Grave* has been reportedly inspired by an encounter Zarchi had with a woman who had been gang-raped in a park and left for dead. After taking her to the police station, he was shocked and angered by the lack of sympathy shown by the officers as they immediately started questioning her even though she was critically injured. This backstory of the film's inception showcases how Zarchi’s film was made from a place of anger for women, and as Clover argues, it translates onscreen. While most films in the

genre are directed by men, and problematic cinematic conventions like the male gaze can be observed, the genre is still inherently feminist regardless of production value. Because the characteristics of the rape-revenge film consist of an act of sexual violence (usually male abuser(s) and female victim) and a subsequent act of retributive violence enacted by the (female) survivor, the genre seeks to critique the patriarchal order. It ultimately points out how reprehensible it is for men to abuse and injure women.

Throughout the 1980s, rape-revenge films continued to appear and evolve. A few rape-revenge films to emerge in this decade include *Ms. 45* (Ferrara, 1981), *The Ladies Club* (Greek, 1986), *Demented* (Jeffreys, 1980), *Violated* (Cannistraro, 1984), *Mother's Day* (Kaufman, 1980), *Naked Vengeance* (Santiago, 1985), *Savage Streets* (Steinmann, 1984), and *Necromancer* (Nelson, 1988). One of the most well-known rape-revenge films is *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981), which follows Thana (Zoë Tamerlis), a mute woman in New York City who is raped by two separate assailants on the same day. After murdering the second man that attempts to assault her in her apartment, Thana embarks on a quest for revenge, killing many men throughout the film. *Ms. 45* is an example of how the rape-revenge genre began to evolve away from the “old-style” rape-revenge tropes, as Thana takes revenge “not only for her own literal rape but for the figurative rape of all women. *Ms. 45* is a virtual checklist of masculine privilege” (Clover 144). Echoing Clover’s arguments regarding the shifts in the genre, Barbara Creed contends in *The Monstrous Feminine*, “The film carefully avoids the sensational; the attacks on Thana are not filmed in order to encourage the audience to identify with the rapist; nor are her acts of vengeance filmed so as to invite audience pleasure in scenes of blood and

gore” (123). However, while Clover accredits the shifts in the rape-revenge genre to societal attitude shifts, she does not explicitly state the political and cultural implications of the time.

The rape-revenge genre’s association with feminism has remained since the 1970s cycle, and as our culture and society’s understanding of feminism changes, so has the genre’s appeal to audiences. The 1970s rape-revenge films are considered products of that period and, on some level, connect with pressing issues of that generation. Most notably, the second wave of feminism began in the 1960s and sustained momentum through the 1980s, and focused heavily on reproductive rights and women’s place and rights in the workplace. It is arguably the most widely known wave of the movement due to the tumultuous nature of these eras, as many social movements surrounding topics like civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, opposition to the Vietnam War, and LGBTQ rights arose. Additionally, during this time, the Anti-rape and Anti- Domestic Violence movements were formed and encouraged women to speak out about their experiences. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, there was gradually a greater acceptance or awareness of the severity of the crime of rape and that we live in a patriarchal society that promotes “rape culture.” In reaction to the rise of women’s rights in the 1960s, there was a common perspective that women's rights directly threatened and harmed masculinity and the male position in society. In Alexandra Heller Nicholas's book *Rape Revenge: A Critical Study*, she argues that the initial cycle of films could be "attempting to make sense of feminism" (11) as it arose during the 1970s. These films in which women take revenge on their rapists do not show one or the other; they show the female as both the victim and vanquisher of evil. A transformation occurs between the first and final act, which may be understood as marking a

change from a feminine to a feminist perspective (11).

The third wave of feminism came around the 1990s and sought to expand the boundaries of feminism by embracing intersectionality. Many of the major priorities of the first and second waves of feminism concerned the experiences of white, middle-class, cisgender women.

Third-wave feminism challenged the oppression within second-wave feminism and worked to recognize that women of different backgrounds and identities will prioritize different concerns. As Clover explains, depictions of rape virtually moved off-screen during the 1980s (with the exception of *The Accused*), and this largely continued in the following decade.

However, arguing against Clover, the mainstream rape-revenge films in the 1990s showcased the most growth within the genre and correlated with the dealings of the third wave of feminism that was occurring during this decade. For example, Joel Schumacher's 1996 *A Time to Kill* stars Samuel L. Jackson as a distraught father over the rape and murder of his ten-year-old daughter, who avenges her by murdering the assailants. The film deals not only with the court's ignorance and neglect towards rape cases but how race and class play into this as it mostly surrounds Jackson's murder trial. Additionally, John Schlesinger's 1996 film *Eye for an Eye* starring Sally Field, deals with similar themes of violence against children, as Field's character avenges her 17-year-old daughter's rape and murder after the assailant walks free from court. While both *A Time to Kill* and *Eye for an Eye* are reminiscent of the "old-style" rape films because they feature someone other than the victim enacting revenge, they divert from the other tropes associated with these films. In other words, the assault is not shown onscreen like in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) (which also deals with minors) or *Straw*

Dogs (1971), nor do the cinematic techniques situate viewers from the perspective of the assailant. Barry Levinson's 1996 film *Sleepers* is about four young boys who are sent to a juvenile detention center and repeatedly abused and assaulted by four guards. The film skips to thirteen years later when two survivors come across one of the guards at a bar and shoot him in front of witnesses. The rest of the film takes place in a courtroom as they attempt to expose the rest of the guards and evade conviction for murder. *Sleepers* is notable because not only does it have male survivors, but they are also minors. *Sleepers* is an important film in the rape-revenge genre as it expands the ideas about who is impacted by sexual violence. The focus on teen male victims displays that rape is not only a woman's problem but, in fact, a problem of patriarchy. Third-wave feminism displaces the complaint of sexual violence away from the most significant target of it (women) and forces viewers to take a hard look at the mechanics of patriarchy.

3. As Feminism Changes, So Goes the Rape-Revenge Genre

In her book *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Banet-Weiser surveys the current feminist landscape and clarifies that feminism needs to be viewed and analyzed differently than its previous iterations as the digital age has inevitably changed how to define feminism. She declares that feminism has become “popular” in a sense, with social media, or as she words it, “a landscape of visibility” (6). Banet-Weiser encapsulates her thinking of popular feminism as: broad accessibility across multiple platforms, an attractiveness of “popularity” that allows for the coming together of the like-minded into cliques, and the struggle for visibility among various feminist groupings across media platforms (Banet-Weiser 7:34). Banet-Weiser further explicates how because of the capitalist logic of social media circulates and addresses us as individuals, the machinery of political movements - mobilization of the masses - is thwarted and visibility becomes the politics itself, a “radical announcement” of one’s individual self (Banet-Weiser 10:15-14:40).

Perhaps it is because of popular feminism’s intrinsic use of social media perennial feminist issues such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence have become more visible as topics in open discussions in recent years. Sexual assault has been a prominent and consistent issue in all the different waves of feminism; however, in the fourth-wave of feminism, the digital age has allowed for more participation and circulation of rape discourse.

The fourth-wave is not drastically different from the third. Some even argue it is a continuation as they both prioritize female empowerment, intersectionality, LGBTQ+ rights, sex crimes like assault and harassment, domestic abuse, and rape culture. However, technological advancements distinguish the fourth wave from the third. Social media plays a prominent role in fourth-wave feminism, and through this, there is an additional focus on body positivity and emphasized focus on transgender/non-binary rights due to the upsurge of anti-trans sentiments currently circulating throughout our country. Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* which asserted the notion that gender is a social construct among other influential ideas was published in 1990 and had a profound impact on the movement; however, it is perhaps the heightened visibility of feminist activism online that has cast more light on this notion. Butler asserts that gender is taught, or in other words, there are expectations (masculinity, femininity) for a person depending on what sex is assigned at birth. However, transgender people, intersex people, and gender non-conforming people exist, and social media has brought heightened visibility to them and their voices.

Additionally, hashtag activism is one of the driving forces of fourth-wave feminism.

#MeToo, #TimesUp, #AllBodiesAreBeautiful, #YesAllWomen, and #FreeTheNipple, have all gained enormous traction online in the past decade, and more continue to surface every day. A prime example of the power of hashtags and online activism was the Women's March held in January 21st, 2017, the day after Donald Trump's inauguration as U.S. president. The march was worldwide and was the largest single-day protest in United States history (Broomfield). Not only was the protest for women's rights, but its goal was to “send a bold

message to our new administration on their first day in office, and to the world that women's rights are human rights,' according to the event's official website" (Salazar). Fourth-wave feminism intersectionality has expanded even more to include and place a greater spotlight on different or often overlooked facets of womanhood. One example of this would be the adoption of various terms like WoC (Women of Color), cis (cisgender), or TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), which is a radical feminist group that spreads transphobic notions arguing that trans-women are not "real" women. This term started circulating online in response to a recent upsurge (or heightened visibility) of trans-inclusive feminists. It can be argued that intersectionality is not just increased in each wave, but fourth-wave feminism *is* becoming intersectional. In other words, as more minority groups and their battles against inequality gain visibility, feminism morphs and expands to incorporate and assist these groups.

Most notably, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have played an enormous role in shedding light on the severe issues of gender inequality and sex crimes. The term "Me too" first surfaced on the social media platform Myspace in 2006 by activist and sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke. However, the term did not become a hashtag or gain immense popularity and attention until October 2017, when an explosive *New York Times* piece written by investigative journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey exposed Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuse through various accounts from multiple women. The hashtag, #MeToo, exploded on social media, resulting in thousands of survivors banding together to expose guilty individuals and the severity of the issue in our patriarchal society. Since 2017,

the hashtag is still popular and utilized often as more and more survivors decide to speak up against their abusers. #TimesUp is a non-profit organization formed by celebrities who were part of the #MeToo movement to raise money to support survivors of sexual violence. Because of Hollywood, celebrities, and the film industry's power over our society and culture, these movements have played a significant role in these topics being discussed more broadly and publicly, as well as instituting various sexual harassment/assault prevention procedures in a variety of workplaces. Not only have female celebrities publicly spoken about the issue, but male celebrities are also coming forward to share their experiences in greater numbers. For example, male actors Terry Crews, James Van Der Beek, Brendan Fraser, Alex Winters, and Anthony Rapp (whose courage led to the exposure of actor Kevin Spacey who was the target of “one of the swiftest #MeToo takedowns”) have all publicly shared their stories as survivors of sexual assault, with many of them stating the #MeToo movement inspired their decision to come forward (Pruitt). Because of star power, celebrities wield much influence, and their courage to reveal their trauma to the world and subsequent change or justice served (or lack thereof) encourages others to do so as well. The significance of social media exposure allows for heightened visibility of the issue, and online accounts of experiences allow survivors to speak their truth in a somewhat controlled environment and find communities of support and resources.

Rape, at its core, is about patriarchal dominance and control over other bodies, predominantly women, as a demonstration of power. Many of the current political battles across the country lead back to this idea that women and other non-cis-white-male identifying bodies do not have

the right to make decisions for themselves about their bodies. Today, bodily autonomy, or the right to determine what happens to one's body without coercion or threat, is again challenged with the U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The government's control over particular bodies is slowly becoming a reality as individual states now have the ability to alter laws surrounding or outright ban abortion.

Because of these reasons and more, the battle against rape and sexual assault is and has always been a fundamental battle of feminism. Undeniably, if all genders were equal and respected as equals, there would not be rape. It is widely known that victims of sexual violence do not report to law enforcement or even speak to anyone about the assault for countless reasons, including shame, guilt, fear, denial, and victim-blaming. Accordingly, "Researchers have long criticized the criminal-legal system's reliance on patriarchal beliefs, rape myth acceptance, and rape culture endorsement, with scholars pointing to the problematic effects of these beliefs on legal decision making" (Acquaviva et al. 3866). Studies show that in America, one in four women have been the victims of attempted or completed rape at some point in their life, and "just 5.7 percent of incidents end in arrest, 0.7 percent result in a felony conviction, and 0.6 percent result in incarceration" (Van Dam). While different studies reveal different numbers, the statistics are disheartening. Equally disheartening is the lack of justice afforded sexual assault survivors. Could it be, then, that social media and fourth-wave feminism provide survivors with an outlet to be seen, heard, and validated? Can the "popular feminism" phenomenon be credited with elevating the visibility of sexual violence by demonstrating its pervasiveness, as evidenced by #MeToo and #TimesUp? Finally, can the downfall of powerful

men implicated and condemned in the court of public opinion culled by social media be considered a version of justice for countless survivors of sexual violence failed by the criminal legal system?

While films that do not show rape, and it is instead insinuated, can be considered rape-revenge films, I analyze two contemporary films that include graphic scenes of sexual violence because these films tend to spark more controversy and polarizing reception, they correlate to the films of the 1970s more directly, and they often leave a very different impact on audiences than films where it is only insinuated. The genre has distinguished characteristics; however, as scholars like Jacinda Read and Claire Henry point out, these are becoming harder to define. To put it broadly, the criteria for rape-revenge films consist of precisely what it suggests; there is a rape and a subsequent sequence of revenge. However, because the genre has evolved throughout the decades, the criteria have also changed. As Carol Clover showcased, the classic films of the early 1970s often use rape as a spectacle, and the female protagonist is sexualized and rendered an object. Even in the most violent moments of the films, the female is sexualized, which is also underscored by the trope of the protagonist using her sexuality to enact revenge. For example, in *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1972), the cinematic techniques of the rape scene align viewers with the rapist, which can allow or inspire viewers to sexualize, be titillated by, or fantasize about sexual violence. Additionally, after about a minute or so into the scene, the victim, Amy (Susan George), grabs and kisses her attacker, directly sexualizing the assault and aligning with the harmful ideology that Amy was somehow “asking for it” (not to mention that Peckinpah wrote the character of Amy to enjoy the assault). While I contend

with Clover's analysis of the film and many of her claims pertaining to "low" rape-revenge films, the rape scene in the original *I Spit on Your Grave* is brutally and excessively thirty minutes long. Additionally, after the assault, Jennifer's modest attire from the film's beginning is substituted for a sheer white dress that exposes much of her body. While *I Spit on Your Grave* has many more "feminist" moments compared to films like *Straw Dogs*, it can be (and has been) argued as exploitative and potentially harmful. Particularly in comparison to contemporary films, *I Spit on Your Grave* employs many conventions that contemporary female filmmakers avoid or subvert.

One of the most recent scholarly works on the rape-revenge genre is Claire Henry's book *Revisionist Rape Revenge* published in 2014. In each chapter, Henry chronicles some of the various ways the narrative structure has appeared in cinema after the turn of the 21st century and declares the films she analyzes as belonging to the "revisionist rape-revenge genre," or in other words, as straying from the classic tropes presented in the cycle of films from the 1970s. She first analyzes the remakes of two of the most popular films from the 1970s like *The Last House on the Left* (Denis Iladias, 2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010); then postfeminist critiques of the genre with analyses of *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2004) and *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007); then victim-avengers who are women of color with an analysis of *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2006); then male victim-avengers and shame with analyses of *Acolytes* (Jon Hewitt, 2008), and *The Book of Revelation* (Ana Kokkinos, 2006); and lastly, collective revenge or films that feature multiple avengers or an avenger who is not the victim with analyses of *Death Proof* (Quentin Tarantino, 2007), *Sleepers* (Barry Levinson, 1996),

and *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003). Analyzing two or three films in each chapter that belong to their respective subject, Henry showcases how the loose genre conventions have resulted in the rapid evolution of the narrative structure from its exploitative origins of a degenerate male(s) raping an innocent (“feminine”) woman to including a range of different circumstances where this crime can (and does) occur. While the budding of this evolution is evident in the films of the 1980s and 90s, Henry illustrates how graphic depictions of sexual abuse returned to the screens after the turn of the 21st century. However, many of the films that Henry analyzes in her book are directed by men. I argue that, particularly in the past decade, as more female storytellers and filmmakers continue to appear in greater numbers in mainstream cinema, greater female subjectivity is being filtered into the genre and can be directly related to the changing feminist notions in the fourth-wave.

4. Rape-Revenge in the 21st Century

While analyzing rape-revenge films produced and exhibited from 2013 to 2023, I have noticed multiple patterns within contemporary rape-revenge films that differ significantly from their predecessors and can be associated with notions particular to fourth-wave feminism. Firstly, rape-revenge films directed by women were significantly absent from the canon until the turn of the 21st century. Today, particularly within the last decade, a majority of rape-revenge films are written and directed by women. Moreover, many of the women-directed rape-revenge films are “mainstream” films. *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell), a Universal Pictures and Focus Features film, stars Carrey Mulligan and premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2020. *The Nightingale*, directed by Jennifer Kent (a well-established horror director due to her film *The Babadook* (2014)), premiered at various festivals worldwide and was picked up by Netflix. *M.F.A* (Natalia Leite), another film that gained exposure and popularity through Netflix, stars Francesca Eastwood and premiered at SXSW in 2017. Coralie Fargeat’s directorial debut *Revenge* in 2017 premiered at Toronto International Film Festival and was distributed by Neon in the U.S. and eventually Shudder, a popular streaming service dedicated solely to horror entertainment. Expounding upon Banet-Weiser’s conversation about social media and visibility, streaming services have been a topic of debate within the film industry for quite some time, as they are completely changing how viewers consume media. These services play a significant role in exposing types of media that were previously often neglected. In other words, films and

television shows made by minorities, about minorities, or taboo subjects are being made and consumed on greater scales due to the heightened visibility streaming services provide.

Secondly, an increasing number of films reflect the expanded intersectionality present in fourth-wave feminism. For example, Richard Shepard's 2018 Netflix film, *The Perfection* starring *Get Out* (Peele, 2017)'s Allison Williams, features an interracial lesbian couple as they avenge their abusers. Charlotte (Williams) is a talented cellist forced to leave Bachoff, a prestigious music academy, to care for her dying mother. When she returns after her death, her spot as the "golden pupil" of music instructor Anton has been taken by Lizzie (Logan Browning). She befriends Lizzie by taking her to a club, and the two women sleep together at the night's end. In the morning, Charlotte gives Lizzie "ibuprofen" for her hangover, which turns out to be a drug that causes Lizzie to become violently ill and viscerally hallucinate insects squirming under her skin. Charlotte purposefully escalates the situation by handing Lizzie a meat cleaver and encouraging her to amputate her hand. When Lizzie returns to the academy enraged and without a hand, she tells Anton about how Charlotte manipulated her out of jealousy. Anton turns cold and tells Lizzie she must leave the academy, sparking Lizzie to go after Charlotte for revenge. However, in a twist, it is revealed that Charlotte was protecting Lizzie from a cycle of torture and sexual abuse. Before returning to the academy, Charlotte saw a picture of Lizzie in a magazine, where she noticed a musical note tattoo on her back that indicates she has been indoctrinated into a sadistic sex cult where Anton and others groom and sexually abuse students in order to reach "perfection." At the film's end, Charlotte and Lizzie band together as a couple and enact merciless revenge on Anton and other accomplices. There are no graphic scenes of the

abuse, and the second half of the film spends a significant amount of time exposing grooming tactics, the mental trauma that Charlotte endured from Anton's abuse after she returned home to care for her mother, and how she realized and broke free from Anton's brainwashing. Displays of child abuse, pedophilia, and, particularly, the grooming process are largely left out of the rape-revenge genre. While Charlotte's actions towards Lizzie are extreme, the joint revenge of the couple reflects the sentiments of the #MeToo movement and the power survivors can wield when they come together and support one another. Moreover, Anton and the other instructors/accomplices highlight the abuse of power that is significantly connected to sexual abuse, and as we have seen, present in a multitude of environments, including Hollywood, which initially sparked the movement. While the film does not particularly focus on or showcase how homosexuality (or race in Lizzie's case) affects Charlotte and Lizzie's personal experiences, women of color and homosexual characters have largely been left out of the genre.

More specific cinematic conventions or narrative changes I have noticed within the contemporary rape-revenge film canon include the denial of a satisfying or relieving ending; the entirety of the films are filled with relentless violence, leaving viewers with a strong sense or feeling of hopelessness and sorrow. Rape-revenge films are very *angry* films, and the plot's engine is the protagonist's drive to make the rapist(s) pay for the assault. However, while the need for revenge is still present and vital to the plot, in many films, the violence has become less of a spectacle, and the endings reflect how most victims do not get happy or satisfying endings. Not only do victims rarely see justice served, they often will have to struggle with the

trauma from the event for months, years, or their entire lives. The fantasy of revenge is imagined to be therapeutic, which is the 'public good' these films have historically fulfilled. Rape-revenge films today highlight the stark reality of the crime and its aftermath, and if there *is* an act of revenge, the gratuitous brutality of that act. Secondly, many films include and display the mental anguish and trauma survivors undergo. As Amanda Spallaci writes, "As rape has become more prominent in popular culture through the circulation of personal testimony on social media and memoir, depictions of rape in cinema have slowly started to change from presentations of rape scenes to representations of rape trauma that highlight different effects, such as shame" (1). Lastly, the surveyed contemporary rape-revenge films' commentary relies on exposing the harmful aspects of patriarchal masculinity, placing all blame on the attacker, and shattering rape myths. In the initial cycle of rape-revenge films, the rapists and attackers are usually degenerates, clear-cut predators or criminals, which is both beneficial and problematic.

On the one hand, a menacing attacker can invoke fear and disgust in viewers, which is a crucial identification to avoid the fetishization of sexual violence. On the other hand, more than half of reported rapes are attempted or completed by someone known to the victim (Walters et al.), and this is more often than not an intimate partner or significant other. Additionally, victims of this situation are often met with significantly more criticism. "Sexual assault incidents involving married or cohabitating suspects and victims are sometimes met with skepticism by the criminal-legal system due to stereotypes that communicate that stranger rape is the only "real rape" (O'Neal, 2017; O'Neal & Hayes, 2020a)" (Acquaviva et al. 3866). Films like *Revenge*

(Fargeat, 2017), *The Perfection*, and *Promising Young Woman* feature and expose characters close to the victim. Without removing the blame from the individual, a significant component of many contemporary rape-revenge films is working to expose the broader socio-cultural and political conditions for sexual violence to occur. For example, *The Nightingale* is working to expose the harmful (patriarchal) system the British soldiers are part of. Emerald Fennell's 2020 film *Promising Young Woman* exposes the accountability men do not hold against one another and that so-called "normal men" are also hard to trust as "all males [...] are directly or indirectly complicit, and men are thus not just individually but corporately liable" (Clover 139), due to patriarchy and its subsequent rape-culture. Because of the content in rape-revenge films, they have the ability to simultaneously showcase the female experience and expose how sexual violence is systemic violence.

5. *The Nightingale* (2018): When History Informs Our Present

Jennifer Kent's 2018 Australian rape-revenge film *The Nightingale* subverts all exploitative conventions and tropes and expands the genre's possibilities by setting her film in the penal colony of 1825 Tasmania. By doing this, Kent can use the rape-revenge model to comment not only on gender and rape culture but the "subjugation against indigenous peoples and other minorities" (Johnson 1), showcasing how these relate and expose the effects of colonization that still permeate societies today. At the film's beginning, it is established that the main protagonist, Clare (Aisling Franciosi), is an Irish convict servant to a denomination of British colonizers. She is valuable to the soldiers because of her singing voice and is nicknamed the nightingale by Lieutenant Hawkins (Sam Claflin). The fact that she is nicknamed this is symbolic, as she is a "captive songbird" waiting to break free from her captivity (Johnson 4). This is echoed in the first rape scene when Hawkins verbally (and physically) reminds Clare that she is his property. In addition, the other female servant she is subordinate to mistreats her, and Clare is relatively passive; however, there are moments in the beginning sequence that foreshadow her strength. For example, a soldier makes an inappropriate comment at Clare as she serves him a drink, and she knocks it over before walking away. Because of the constant danger, Clare is surrounded by as a convict and a woman in this world, she must be passive, silent, and "feminine" to survive. *The Nightingale* succeeds in avoiding the exploitative tropes; however, it also alters the classic tropes of revenge, highlighting one way the genre has evolved since it emerged. There are three scenes in the film that include sexual violence and two that showcase revenge. Some of the

ways in which the tropes are subverted are: Clare's anger and need for revenge blind her and do not change her situation in the end; all violence in the film is never justified or sensationalized; Clare is never objectified, and it is not only rape that triggers her desire for revenge. James Findlay's article "Convict/Aboriginal Partnerships and Ruptured Histories in *The Nightingale*" explores how Kent's film contributes to a (predominantly Australian) canon of films that revolve around or feature a relationship between convicts and Aboriginals. He writes, "In her own words, Jennifer Kent 'wanted to tell a story about[...]the fallout of violence from a feminine perspective' (Kent 2019). 'Colonization by nature is a brutal act,' she writes in the film's production notes, 'And the arrogance that drives it lives on in the modern world. For this reason, I consider this to be a current story, despite being set in the past'" (Findlay 69). The period in which it is set plays a crucial role in Kent's ability to subvert the conventions and make various social commentaries. Historical films can comment on current political/cultural issues by asking the audience to contemplate how the past shapes and informs the present. Examining and referencing the past or past wrong-doings is inherent to any social movement to educate and support claims about the current moment, which is why historical films can have such a profound impact on viewers. The film is set in the penal colony of Van Diemen's land (now known as Tasmania). While the story is fictional, there are numerous accounts of the horrors presented in the film to have occurred in reality (Findlay 65).

As stated earlier, there are three rape scenes within the film, and Clare is the victim in two. There are significant differences between all three. The first rape and her lack of retaliation highlight not only her abuser's manipulation tactics but how her position as a female convict

with the goal of leaving the colony safely and legally with her husband Aidan (Michael Sheasby) and child renders her unable to make this shift. After singing for the men at the bar at the film's beginning, Clare asks Hawkins for a letter of recommendation that would free herself and her family. It becomes clear that she was supposed to receive it months ago, but Hawkins refuses, stating he will do it when he is ready. Hawkins expresses his power over Clare by lying about buying a horse for her, which she respectfully rebukes, stating her husband worked for three years to pay for the horse. Hawkins punishes her by slapping her across the face and proceeds to rape her. In this scene, it is made clear that this was expected of her and that this is not the first time.

The build-up to the first rape poses Hawkins as a very dangerous, power-hungry, manipulative, temperamental, yet fragile man. In *The Nightingale*, Kent refuses to glorify anything or allow fantasization. In both assault scenes, Clare is not objectified, her clothes stay on, and the rape is not a spectacle as the camera stays fixed on Clare's or the rapist's face, which can induce empathy for the victim and disgust towards the attacker (Spallaci 5). The first rape scene in the film demonstrates how Kent has subverted classic tropes by establishing why Clare cannot fight back, avoiding objectification by keeping her clothed and fixating on her pain, and inviting the audience through camera techniques to feel empathy and disgust.

The second rape scene is exceptionally barbarous and acutely demonstrates how the conventions have changed. When Clare returns home that night, her husband suspects Hawkins hurt her and drunkenly brawls with Hawkins, his second-in-command Sergeant Ruse (Damon

Herriman), and Ensign Jago (Harry Greenwood). Hawkins desperately wanted to leave the penal colony but did not receive the promotion that would grant him to do so because of the brawl. Hawkins, Ruse, and Jago prepare to journey through the Tasmanian bush to the town of Launceston in hopes of negotiating with the officer. Afterward, Aidan convinces Clare to take their chances and flee; however, the soldiers intercept them before fleeing. After Aidan attempts and fails to shoot Hawkins, Hawkins rapes Clare and invites Ruse to do so as well. Hawkins then, without hesitation, shoots and kills Aidan and commands Jago to “quiet” Clare's crying baby, resulting in Jago killing the child, seemingly accidentally due to panic, but still incredibly ruthless and shocking. Instructed by Hawkins to kill Clare and “finish things,” a reluctant Jago instead knocks her unconscious with the butt of his rifle after Hawkins leaves. Because of the other brutal violence in this scene, sexual violence becomes less of a focal point, and the scene gradually builds intensity through editing, camera, and sound techniques. The sound design consists of only diegetic sound, with Brigid screaming in the background and Hawkins aggressively yelling at Jago to “shut it up.” When Jago kills Brigid, the overwhelming sounds abruptly stop, faint ringing sound chimes in, and the camera fixates on Clare's face as she completely dissociates from her surroundings due to shock. The sound design aids in placing viewers in Claire’s perspective. One of the ways in which *The Nightingale* does not differ from rape-revenge traditions is through multiple male abusers. As Clover writes in her analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*, “Gang rape has first and foremost to do with male sport and male pecking order and only secondarily to do with sex, the implication being that team sport and gang rape are displaced versions of one another, male sorting devices both, and both driven by male spectatorship” (122). This is a prominent trope in the genre, as almost all rape-revenge films

mentioned in this paper, classic and contemporary, have multiple assailants against one female to arguably exacerbate the power dynamics associated with the act of rape and rape culture. As Clover continues, rape-revenge films are not so much concerned with “male sexual nature per se (that is, the individual male’s sexual appetite) but with male social nature, or male sexual nature as it is constituted by group dynamics” (123). Mirroring Matthew from *I Spit on Your Grave*, who is mentally disabled and constantly pressured to take part in the assault of Jennifer, Jago is made out to seem reluctant but ultimately fearful of Hawkins.

In contrast to the first rape scene, Clare awakes in horror; her violent anger is immediate as she marches across the dirt path with her murdered child in her arms to report the incident to an RPM officer. After receiving zero help or empathy from the officers, reflecting women's struggles today to receive justice towards their attackers, Clare must hire an Aboriginal tracker to guide her through the thick Tasmanian bush to hunt down the soldiers. She completely disregards all possibility of punishment, as she has lost everything she had. “In a study of American adults cited by McCullough, only the murder of a child was more likely to trigger vengeful thoughts than the rape of a family member or oneself (23)” (Andrews 3). Not only does Kent feature the brutality of rape, but she also amplifies it with the ruthless massacre of her family. Even though this film is a period piece, a fictional story that draws upon factual accounts of what life was like during this time and place, the entirety of the film is fixed on translating the anger of the oppressed to the screen. As A.O. Scott writes for *The New York Times*, “The punishment is the point. This is a difficult movie because the questions it raises are not easy. There are sentimental and reassuring movies about vengeance, and comforting stories

about the resistance to historical oppression. This isn't one of those. You might say it's too angry. Or too honest." While the world and society have made significant progress since 1825, *The Nightingale* exposes and comments on the many ways society has not changed. Kent also uses the rape-revenge model to comment on racism and the hierarchies of oppression as Billy, the Aborigine, has a significant role in the film.

Clare is a complicated character and undeniably unlikable at times. At the beginning of the journey into the Australian Bush, Clare is racist towards Billy, staying on her horse and pointing the rifle at him, calling him "boy," and not listening to or trusting him. Billy unapologetically bites back at her constantly but ultimately is the one that first realizes similarities in their suffering. James Findlay contends, "*The Nightingale* has a lot to say about the way power oppresses the marginalized and the way those less marginalized still wield unjust power over those at an even greater societal disadvantage" (Findlay 70). Even after Billy finds he relates to Clare and empathizes with her, Clare still holds prejudice towards him. For example, after Billy wakes Clare from one of her nightmares, she has lactated through her shirt due to recent motherhood and has breast pain from not breastfeeding. Billy tries to help her by offering to make a paste and performing a ritual, to which Clare angrily responds, "I don't want you putting your hocus pocus on me." However, not only does this scene highlight her racism towards Billy, it reminds viewers of the loss she has experienced and showcases an aspect of the female experience that is abject within our patriarchal society and, therefore, rarely shown in cinema. In addition, Clare has disturbing dreams and flashbacks throughout the film that emphasize her trauma. This element is becoming more apparent in narratives that include rape and is a vital

aspect. Aligning with the complaints of Jodie Foster and Kiera Knightley, Amanda Spallaci argues in her article titled “Representing Rape Trauma in Film: Moving beyond the Event” that Hollywood is saturated with depictions of rape but devoid of depictions of rape trauma. The increasing portrayals of trauma beyond the event assist in shifting popular discourses about rape (1). Incorporating the various ways the trauma affects Clare evokes a greater sense of empathy from the viewers and Billy, which leads to the pair eventually forming a close partnership. The increasing portrayal of subsequent mental trauma after the event in rape- revenge films is an important aspect that was not explored or often depicted in the genre before recently. A significant component of fourth-wave feminism is to highlight how sexual abuse or violence can affect a victim, not just physically but psychologically and sociologically. The MeToo movement digitally revealed the long-lasting trauma of rape globally and intrusively whether we were prepared for another rape survivor story or not. We stopped scrolling to read story after story that was filled not with anger but with long-lasting pain endured for years, sometimes decades. The closest rape-revenge films came to depictions of trauma before this past decade was mostly through anger. While female anger is essential to portray as it is largely absent from cinema and often drives the protagonists’ need for revenge, incorporating other emotions or effects from the traumatic event aids contemporary narratives that seek to align viewers with the survivors, as these elements make the film more relatable and realistic.

Clare's complex characterization also functions as a subversion to our previous understanding of the rape-revenge genre. In comparison to films like *I Spit on Your Grave* or *Ms. 45*, where there is a sudden shift to an angry “masculinized” avenger who proves is more than capable of

enacting the same level of violence as men, Clare's anger often blinds her judgment throughout their journey, and violence of any kind is never sensationalized or presented as just. Clover writes, "Female self-sufficiency, both physical and mental, is the hallmark of the rape- revenge genre" (143). Clare showcases female anger and self-sufficiency; however, there are moments when she cannot do everything alone. For example, when they are about to catch up to the soldiers, Billy tells her they must wait because the river is too high to cross. Clare disregards his guidance and attempts to cross the river anyway, almost drowning before Billy saves her. She does not become this all-knowing, extremely dangerous avenger; Clare is a complicated character rooted in realism whose need for revenge is led mainly by grief.

The film switches between Clare and Billy and Hawkins and his men as they travel through the bush. The soldiers also have an Aboriginal guide named Charlie, whom Billy considers his only family still alive. Charlie purposefully leads the soldiers in the wrong direction to the edge of a cliff as revenge, in a sense, for the treatment the Aborigines have received. Hawkins immediately murders Charlie without hesitation. Perhaps Charlie knew the outcome of this decision because the British soldiers were now vulnerable without a guide through the Tasmanian bush. The third rape scene occurs when Sergeant Ruse finds an Aboriginal woman and her toddler son in the woods, and the soldiers stop their journey to rape her. However, the violence is quickly interrupted as a group of Aborigines attack the soldiers; Hawkins kills the woman, and Jago is injured by a spear and left behind as the rest of the men frantically flee. The first enactment of revenge is by Clare when they find the wounded Jago in the bush. When Billy informs Clare that he saw one of the soldiers in the bush, Clare instructs him to stay while

she hunts him down like prey. In a brutal scene filmed in real-time duration, Clare finally catches up to Jago. With his hands raised, he surrenders, which only angers Clare more. She initially shoots him in the leg, and when she gets closer to finish the job, begging her, he says, "I didn't mean to kill the babe. I just wanted it to be quiet. Please. I'm sorry." However, the gun jams, and the two engage in a brawl. Jago attempts to defend himself using a knife, but Clare ultimately grabs hold of it and brutally stabs him multiple times in the chest as she screams in anger. After stabbing him, he is still alive, gasping for air through blood. Clare takes the butt of her rifle and begins beating him in the face. The first hit to Jago's face is filmed from Clare's perspective, with only diegetic sound, making the brutal scene feel incredibly realistic and harder to watch. Jago's lip quivers, and he looks up at the sky and says, "Mother." Jago was the only one of the soldiers that showcased resistance during the rape and murders and regret afterward for his participation. Kent complicates the act of revenge because she previously includes scenes that invite viewers to empathize with Jago, as he was forced to kill Brigid and is deeply distraught over the event. His calling for his mother further highlights how Jago's mentality and personality are unfit for his role. "But it also uncannily references Clare's motherhood as what brings them together into the intimacy of that encounter. It is as a mother that she enacts a rage of overkill upon him" (Faulkner 31). Because of the brutality of the world Clare inhabits, and Kent repeatedly showcases how rape is a constant threat to women, the rape alone is not justifiable for Clare's anger and revenge. Instead, it is the massacre of her family, particularly the murder of her child Brigid. In addition, Clare is framed and filmed in a conventional way that intends to horrify the audience. Throughout the film, the many acts of violence are never made out to seem justified, and "catharsis is steadfastly withheld" (Johnson

4). In addition to the murder of Brigid, there is another moment in the film where violence toward children highlights the colonizer's brutality. When Hawkins, Ruse, and young orphan Eddie escape from the Aborigines, Billy and Clare are separated at this point in the film, and the three soldiers come across him. Hawkins orders Eddie to kill Billy, but Eddie purposefully misfires. Outraged that Eddie let Billy escape, Eddie starts crying and begging him for another chance. Reflecting the earlier scene, annoyed by Eddie's cries, Hawkins turns around and apathetically shoots him in the chest, saying, "I can't stand the fucking noise of it." *The Nightingale* consistently employs ruthless acts of violence throughout the film to further highlight the inescapable violence of the world they inhabit.

The second act of revenge, committed at the film's end, is by Billy. At this point, Clare and Billy are very close and have come to understand one another's sufferings and respect each other's cultures. When they reach the town of Launceston, Billy discovers from a group of chained Aborigines that he is the last of his tribe, which is shocking and incredibly upsetting to Billy. After discovering this, Billy is now invested in revenge. In our current moment, movements like #MeToo highlight allyship and alliances across systems of oppression, reminding modern feminists that none are safe until all are safe. They then meet an old couple who take them to their house for a "wash and a feed." Billy sits on the floor while the couple and Clare sit at the table. The older woman is prejudiced toward Billy, but the man shows empathy, inviting Billy to eat with the rest of them at the table. Billy cries at the table, stating, "This is my country. This is my home." In a powerful scene highlighting that Clare has realized that violent revenge will not change her situation, Clare verbally confronts Hawkins in front of

his comrades. She will never be the same person she was and will be forever changed.

However, the empathy and love she develops toward Billy demonstrate that she can and will move forward. However, it is not the same for Billy because he is the last of his tribe and has no escape from the life he lives. Later that night, Billy paints his body, completes a ritual, enters the home the soldiers are staying in, and kills Ruse and Hawkins with spears. Even though the second half of the film shifts to focus on Billy's suffering, and his act of revenge is satisfying for viewers, it is still not justified. As Johnson explains, the film seems to suggest that, as a society, we must not perpetuate the hierarchy of oppression by committing acts of violence (Johnson 5). The film ends with a very ambiguous ending, Billy is mortally wounded, and the pair walk to the beach and watch the sunrise.

Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* uses the rape-revenge narrative structure to tell a tale about empathy in a horrifically violent world. Kent subverts many tropes of the classic rape-revenge films that emerged in the 1970s, including the satisfying and empowering acts of revenge. By setting her film in the horrors of a penal colony in 1825, inviting viewers to contemplate how our history informs our present, she is able to make social commentaries about gender, rape culture, class status, race, etc. While Kent's film received controversial responses upon release because of the relentless and various kinds of violence, her film highlights how the rape-revenge genre has transformed since it first appeared, continues to develop globally, and, when handled correctly and skillfully, can be a compelling model to make many different kinds of social and political criticism related to fourth-wave feminism in cinema.

6. *Revenge* (2017): The Weaponization of The Male Gaze

Coralie Fargeat's 2017 French rape-revenge film *Revenge* is especially similar to the classic films from the 1970s and could even be read as an homage to classics like *I Spit on Your Grave* (for example, the main characters in both films are named Jen). While *Revenge* utilizes many of the classical tropes, the slight changes Fargeat made to them through visual and audio techniques can directly relate to popular feminist sentiments of the digital age. Firstly, the film's protagonist, Jen, does not showcase the traits typically assigned to the female victim-avenger of rape-revenge films. Jennifer Hills in *I Spit on Your Grave* is an author, an independent career woman, who travels to a rural location to work on her novel; Clare in *The Nightingale* hints at her strength and disapproval of degrading male behavior at the beginning of the film; Cassandra, of *Promising Young Woman*, is very cold, cunning, intelligent, and bluntly loathes men; Charlotte and Lizzie, of *The Perfection*, are talented and dedicated cellists attending a prestigious music academy. Compared to these examples, *Revenge*'s Jen is the mistress of a married man with dreams of moving to Los Angeles "to be seen." She is naive and stereotypically beautiful with long blonde hair, a fit physique, and tan skin; she is keenly aware of her appeal. In addition, and most importantly, she is barely clothed throughout the film.

Particularly because of this aspect, *Revenge* garnered polarizing reviews. For example, Kevin Maher of *The Times* begins his film review with the question: "Does regularly filling the frame

with the lead actress's barely covered buttocks qualify as an act of female empowerment?"

Maher argues that the film mirrors the exploitative tropes from the films of the 1970s; however, by the end of his review, his analysis suggests that, because of this aspect, Jen's rape was inevitable. Like many other critics, Maher misunderstood the purpose of the excessive "bum shots" and perpetuated the rape myth that Fargeat attempts to shatter by concluding that a victim can somehow "ask for it" through appearance and behavior. These shots are intentional; the sheer excess of extreme close-up shots of Jen's body and barely covered behind makes that clear.

Fargeat encourages viewers to sexualize and objectify Jen at the beginning of the film, to highlight later that no behavior or appearance triggers sexual violence, or in other words, shatter the common rape myth that suggests a victim's appearance or actions are a valid reason for violence. In an interview given to the *Financial Times*, Fargeat says, "I wanted to embrace the fascinating, polarizing image of the Lolita. Jen can be empty and stupid and an object of desire if she wants. It shouldn't lead to what's going to happen next" (Fleming). This notion has been a vastly popular topic of debate in recent feminist discourse. First of all, social media plays a prominent role in perpetuating hegemonic beauty standards, which is arguably one of the most challenging battles facing fourth-wave feminism today. While social media can have benefits like heightened visibility, it can also be very damaging. Studies show that body dysmorphia is on the rise in young teenagers and can be directly related to social media addiction (Rizwan et al.). Likes, followers, comments, and views, or lack thereof, can have severe impacts on one's

self-confidence. As technology advances, more and more content is being seamlessly edited (for example, many influencers use apps like Facetune to edit their face and body to match unrealistic beauty standards). Additionally, as Banet-Weiser explains in her book, with popular feminism comes popular misogyny. Influencers like Andrew Tate, a former professional kickboxer and an outspoken and self-proclaimed misogynist, gained immense popularity online over the past few years. His opinions are incredibly threatening toward women and the LGBTQ+ community. His mass following (6.2 million on Twitter) highlights why feminism is still critical and how we are still fighting the same battles as previous waves. For example, he believes and preaches that women are property to be owned by men and, in response to the #MeToo movement in 2017, stated that rape victims “bear some responsibility.” Tate is currently banned from all social media platforms except Twitter and is currently detained in Romania with charges of human trafficking and rape; however, regardless of this factor, he is still widely supported, and clips of his dangerous opinions from various platforms still circulate online. Even among women and feminist women, there is debate surrounding beauty standards, as some argue that free expression over appearance is an act of agency. In contrast, others argue that following current beauty standards is a product of patriarchy and an act of subordination. Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, published in 2009, unravels this debate further, showcasing that it is “a woman’s right to choose what to want to look like and what she wants to be, rather than obeying what market forces and a multibillion-dollar advertising industry dictate” (2). Anything other than free expression over appearance aligns with what feminism is fighting against: outside control over our bodies and decisions. While yes, beauty standards are constantly shifting and largely a product of

hegemonic cultural practices, the latter half of the argument perpetuates the rape myth that a woman can somehow “bear responsibility” for the violation of their body and pulls attention away from the root of the issue: patriarchy. As Wolf writes, “Beauty provokes harassment, the law says, but it looks through men’s eyes when deciding what provokes it” (45). Women should not be restricted to a specific appearance or behavior to avoid rape; men should be taught not to sexualize, objectify or commit sexual assault.

Fargeat explores this debate in *Revenge* through the character of Jen. However, in opposition to the claims of critics like Kevin Maher that this is damaging or exploitative, the film demands viewers to contemplate this notion through cinematic techniques. Firstly, Fargeat directly places all of the blame on the men in the film by including an equal amount of shots of all three men menacingly gazing at, objectifying, and sexualizing Jen. The male gaze frequently showcased in the genre before the turn of the 21st century has not disappeared, as evidenced in *Revenge*. However, it is deployed differently. Fargeat weaponizes the male gaze instead of employing it to cater to or titillate a predominantly male audience (which happened with the films of the 1970s). At the film's beginning, Richard and Jen arrive by helicopter at a beautiful villa in the desert for a short vacation. Soon after, Jen wanders into the kitchen and grabs an apple; when she turns, she is startled by the sight of a man unabashedly staring at her through the large windows that line the house holding a rifle, and another man enters the frame shortly after. When Richard enters the living room, he reassures her they are his friends here for their yearly hunting trip. Later that night, the four are partying outside, and Richard reveals he has some peyote. When the other men, Stan and Dimitri, show eagerness to take the drug, Richard denies

them, stating, "This plus weapons is a guaranteed accident, you morons. A few years ago, a Polish guy got so high on this shit that he sawed his leg off without feeling a damn thing." He then gives it to Jen and tells her to go hide it from them, and she decides to put it in a gold locket that hangs around her neck. While there are many close-up shots of Jen's body during these opening sequences, there are also excessive shots of Dimitri and Stan ogling at Jen. When she returns outside, she turns on dance music, struts back out to the pool, and starts dancing. She attempts to get Richard to dance with her, but he refuses, leading her to invite Stan to dance. What seems to be a harmless bit of fun for Jen to grab the attention of Richard is soon revealed to be misinterpreted by Stan. The following day Jen awakes to Richard absent from the house. She walks outside and finds Stan sitting at the table, waiting for her, while Dimitri nurses a hangover in the pool. Once she sits, Stan tells Jen that Richard went to get their hunting permits and that it will "take all morning. So it is just the two of us." Stan is creepily staring at her from across the table from the moment she sits. Jen's demeanor differs significantly from the night before, and her discomfort is visible. She politely smiles back but keeps breaking eye contact and fidgeting with her hands. Feeling uncomfortable by this and the awkward silence that followed, Jen starts playing a game on her phone, looking up a few times to see that Stan is still staring. She decides to leave to "start packing," and Stan's smile immediately drops from his face.

One of the ways in which the film subverts typical conventions is that the film's main villain becomes someone other than the rapist, and the rapist himself differs significantly from the

typical offender in the rape-revenge genre. The differences reveal another prominent aspect of rape: rape is a cowardly crime and not about sexual pleasure or love; it is about power and control over another being. The film exhibits rape as perpetrated by cowardly men who compensate for their inadequacies with acts of violent power and control. All three men in the film are interested and titillated by having power over Jen. The film cuts to Jen standing in the bedroom, having just showered and getting dressed. The camera pans to reveal Stan peering at her around the corner. She quickly covers up when she turns and sees him, but he comes in and sits beside her on the bed. Jen's polite smile has left her face, and Stan says, "It is a shame we didn't have more time to get to know each other better," hands her his business card, and says, "Call me when you can...we could do a thing or two together." She responds by stating she probably will not have time with work and everything, which triggers Stan to change his demeanor quickly. Laughing at first, he states, "Oh, so now you're a fucking politician?" which quickly changes to a straight face, and after a pause, he says, "What is it that you don't like about me?" From this moment on, accentuated by a change in the score, the conversation becomes threatening. Trying to be kind, she tells him he is not her type. Stan presses her more, asking why, and she says, "your too small; I like taller guys, that's all." They both awkwardly laugh it off for a moment, but Stan continues, "But I haven't changed height since yesterday, have I?" Jen's expression quickly becomes anxious, and Stan gets closer to her face. "I asked you a simple question...Even for your tiny little oyster brain, it shouldn't be too difficult to understand." He repeats the question slower in her ear. Jen stares forward out the window and shakes her head. "And yet, you seemed to like me yesterday." Jen jumps up from the bed, but he

quickly follows, standing menacingly behind her with his body against hers. “When we were dancing together last night, everything was very clear. You came onto me like a pussy in heat, rubbing yourself against me, turning me on. And now, suddenly, I’m not your type? Like that, boom. During the night, I’ve become too small for you?” Jen tries to escape, but he slams his hand against the glass window pinning Jen up against it. With tears in her eyes, Stan starts touching her without consent, and she tries to stop him. “Stop. Richard will be back anytime soon.” Mocking her, Stan responds, “Oh, Richard,” then forcibly flips her around, pins her against the glass, and begins assaulting her. Through the build-up of this scene, it becomes clear that the assault is not enough for Stan; he purposefully taunts, manipulates, and frightens Jen for his pleasure.

However, right before Stan rapes Jen, the camera pans to reveal Dimitri standing in the doorway with an expressionless face, eating a candy bar. Frozen, they all stare at each other. The camera zooms in on Jen’s face as she cries with a look towards Dimitri, begging him to intervene. Stan says, “Can’t you see we’re busy? If you want some, come in, otherwise, get lost.” He stands there momentarily, taking another bite of his chocolate bar, filmed in an extreme visceral close-up in slow motion before leaving and closing the door. The film is littered with stylistic choices like these, often adding to the moment's suspense. The camera follows Dimitri into the living room while grunts and Jen’s screaming can be heard in the background. He stops momentarily, tricking the audience that he might go back and stop the event, but instead turns the television on, raising its volume to drown out the noise. The camera follows Dimitri as he

walks to the edge of the pool, cutting back and forth between the back of his head and Jen slamming up against the glass behind him. Fargeat does not place the assault on full display for viewers and instead focuses on the men, their decisions, and their menacing behavior. Instead of taking the risk of sexualizing the assault, Fargeat translates the horror of the event through audio techniques. By following Dimitri during the assault, she exposes his complicity and culpability in the crime. The blatant inclusion of and focus on Dimitri's decision to turn a blind eye to the event can be connected to fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo movement, as a significant part of the Weinstein case was concerned with the countless amount of people that knew of his misconduct and chose to do nothing. *Revenge* seeks to hold witnesses and bystanders accountable for not stopping acts of violence or abuse.

Afterward, Richard returns to find Jen curled in a ball crying in bed, begging him to call the helicopter and take her home. In a short-lived burst of anger towards Stan and Dimitri that teases viewers with the hope that Richard decides to hold his friends accountable, he returns to the room and attempts to buy Jen off by setting her up with a job in Canada and a bank account with money. When she refuses and again begs him to call the helicopter, he reveals his true self. "Okay, they fucked up big time, but you're so damn beautiful it's hard to resist you. Come on, Jen, they'll come and apologize and we'll forget about the whole thing." She threatens him by saying she will call his wife and tell her everything if he does not call the helicopter. Richard abruptly slaps Jen sending her to the ground, "Who do you think you are? You little whore. Don't you ever talk about my wife. Don't you ever say her name." In a panic, Jen takes off running

into the desert, and Richard chases her. Stan and Dimitri see this through the window and chime in on the chase. They corner her on a cliff, and Richard pretends to call the helicopter pilot to gain her trust. After she agrees to go back with them, Richard turns away from her, takes a deep breath, then suddenly turns and pushes her off the cliff. A standard convention of the rape-revenge film is either a completed or an attempted murder of the assault victim to cover their crimes. Jen falls on a tree, impaling her in the stomach. From this point forward, Richard becomes the main villain in *Revenge*, as Stan is immediately appalled by Richard's actions. Richard claims it was to save them from prison time and that they will deal with her body when they go hunting. Significant reasons many men in Hollywood or other industries evade consequences for abuse are power and money. These are also reasons why survivors or bystanders choose not to report the crimes because while it is already challenging to prosecute sexual assault, wealthy or powerful assailants are more likely to walk away free. Additionally, particularly in the film industry, influential figures have the ability to smear reputations or ruin careers, which is why many #MeToo survivors have waited years or decades to come forward. Richard can be connected to this type of figure, as he is very wealthy, and it is established earlier in the film that Jen is relying on his connections for her career.

When Jen awakens on the tree and decides to light the trunk on fire with a lighter to weaken it so she can break free. From this moment on, Jen reveals her mental acuity and self-sufficiency that was not previously apparent. Another way that *Revenge* echoes the classic films of the 1970s is through Jen's quick and dramatic shift to the "feminist" avenger that seeks brutal revenge against her attackers and picks them off one by one. With the branch still protruding

through her abdomen, she hides against the rock wall as the three men peer down to see that she has vanished. The three hunters follow her trail of blood until it stops at a river; thinking she cannot get far with her injuries, the men decide to split up and search the desert. The first act of revenge occurs when Dimitri turns away from the river to urinate in a bush. Instead of quietly or skillfully sneaking past Dimitri, she hides in the dark water until she sees his rifle sitting by his car and goes after it. She successfully gets it and has Dimitri pinned with his hands up. After a few moments, Jen pulls the trigger, but nothing happens. Dimitri immediately grabs the gun and pushes her to the ground, saying, "Did you really think I was that fucking stupid? A fucking idiot, who would leave his rifle loaded, lying around for you to touch!" He then radios to Stan and Richard that he will "take care of her" and meet them afterward. The film then cuts to Stan hearing Dimitri's message in the jeep, taking a deep breath, slowly clapping, then playing music in celebration. Throughout the hunt, Stan constantly complains, blames Richard for their situation, and does not acknowledge or want to be part of the "clean-up" of his mess. Stan's weakness and cowardice are quickly revealed, echoing the fact that rape is a very cowardly offense. Meanwhile, Dimitri attempts to drown Jen in the river. However, instead of quickly "taking care of her," he taunts her, continuously submerging and pulling her out. When he pulls her out, he says, "My preferred hunting technique...is to let the prey come to me, letting it think it's attacking me...when in fact it's me who is waiting for it." The last time he pulls her up, Jen grabs a hunting knife from his belt, he submerges her once more, but when he pulls her back up again, she quickly turns and stabs him in the eyes. In horror, she watches as he screams in pain, flailing around in the water, which is intercut with Stan smiling and nodding his head to the

music in the car. After Dimi finally dies from the attack, Jen momentarily stares at his mangled face before removing the knife and stealing his supplies and ATV. Dimitri's death by stabs in the eyes is also symbolic, as he was the accomplice who watched the rape happen and did nothing to intervene. She rides his ATV in the dark desert until it dies, and she must continue on foot. She finds a cave, starts a fire, and attempts to remove the branch from her stomach. Unable to bear the pain, she remembers the peyote that she stored in her locket and the story that Richard told about not the Polish man not feeling pain. She eats the peyote. Once it takes effect, after a few moments of drug-induced panic, she takes the hunting knife and makes slices in her skin around the tree branch to loosen it. With wide eyes, she pulls the entire branch out without flinching. As blood gushes from her wound, she opens a beer can that Dimitri had in his pack, unravels the can, and uses the metal to cauterize her wounds. Stan and Richard awake in the morning to find that Dimitri has not returned and is not answering the radio. While Richard attempts to call for him on the walkie, Stan goes towards the water to urinate and drowns a spider in his pee, reflecting his disregard and desire for power over other life. He then goes to the water to freshen up, and Dimi's body floats to the surface, startling Stan so much that he falls into the water on top of his body, screaming. He throws up as Richard calmly goes to investigate, jumps in the car, and has an angry temper tantrum punching the wheel and roof of the car. Then he attacks Richard stating, "If only you hadn't pushed her off that fucking cliff," to which he responds by punching Stan in the face. Stan's inherent weakness is progressively revealed throughout the film.

After a few trippy dream sequences, where she imagines Richard finding her in the cave

and murdering her, Jen awakens and leaves the cave. At this moment, there is a recognizable shift in Jen from the feminine victim to the feminist avenger. Bloodied, bruised, and burned, she stands on top of a cliff, scanning the vast desert for signs of the men. To Stan's annoyance, Richard and Stan have split up again, and Jen spots Stan's Jeep in the distance. Jen now has the advantage and, switching from the hunted to the hunter, engages in a long bloody battle sequence with Stan before fatally shooting him through the car window as he drives full speed at her.

Jen is not left unscathed through each kill and is arguably lucky to have been the one to come out alive in each instance, echoing that her desire for revenge is more potent than her will to live. However, rape-revenge films often focus on and emphasize female anger, but Jen shows little to no emotion in the second half of the film. In fact, Jen does not speak any words at all after Richard initially attempts to kill her. In contrast, all three men display various fits of anger throughout the film. Stan continuously throws temper tantrums, Dimi's anger leads to him taunting Jen while attempting to murder her, and Richard's anger slowly builds throughout the film when things do not go his way, or in other words, once he begins to lose control over the situation. Once Richard realizes Jen found Stan and killed him, he leaves the desert and returns to the house to wait for her. After scouring the house, he decides to take a shower. While in the shower, a soft diegetic thud can be heard in the background prompting Richard to grab his gun and strategically move throughout the house. With very few cuts in the sequence, suspense is built as Richard nervously walks through the modern architecture. Finally, Jen appears in the window staring and pointing the gun at a naked Richard, mirroring

the scene at the film's beginning when Dimi and Stan ogled at her. He tries to say something, but without hesitation, she shoots and severely injures Richard in the abdomen. The once-lovers are now hunting each other through the house, and part of the house's architecture consists of a long hallway that creates a square back to the living room. Again echoing an earlier part of the film, Jen easily tracks Richard's path in the house by his trail of blood. The pair anxiously chase each other around this path until Jen slips on the immense amount of blood covering the floors. Unable to get up, Richard catches up to her and strikes her in the head with his rifle. The camera switches to Jen's blurry and bloodied POV as Richard picks her up by the neck, pinning her against the wall. However, like the other men in the film, Richard hesitates to kill Jen. His anger blinds him, and he says to her, "Who the fuck do you think you are? You think you're smart 'cause you could fuck those two assholes over? Those two fucking losers. And you thought you could win? Against me? The only moment that was possible was when I offered you to leave without putting up a fight. But you had to put up a fight. Women always have to put up a fucking fight." Distracted by *his* need for revenge, Jen jabs her hand into his abdomen wound, making him drop her and fall back, giving Jen enough time to grab the rifle and shoot Richard in the chest. This last sequence also subverts typical conventions, as Richard is completely naked and vulnerable. Male nudity is not nearly as common in film, especially in the rape-revenge genre. In the exploitative classic rape-revenge films, the female victims are almost always exposed in some fashion. While Jen's body is somewhat exposed throughout the film, and many critics have argued this is repeating exploitative tropes presented in the classic films of the 1970s, the various subversions Fargeat makes to these tropes in congruence with full male-nudity at the end of the film, highlight the film's social commentary that relates to concerns of fourth-wave feminism.

7. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that the rape-revenge genre is inherently feminist, and its evolution since its initial emergence in the 1970s has aligned with the changes showcased in each respective wave of feminism. The rape-revenge genre's origins are not ambiguous and can be traced and connected back to the pre-code era of Hollywood. The rise of sexploitation cinema and schlock horror in the 1950s, as the production code weakened, led to the formation of the genre, gaining success through the combination of sex and violence as spectacle. Using seminal film scholar on the genre Carol Clover's chapter on the subject as an aid to my arguments, I account for the various ways the genre manifested during the 2nd wave, third wave, and finally, fourth wave in accordance with the changing notions in each respective wave. Fourth-wave feminism and its particular use of social media highlight how the heightened visibility of feminist discourse online has led to hashtag activism and the formation of various movements like #MeToo to expose abusers and bring awareness to the issue. I use Sarah Banet-Weiser's work on fourth-wave feminism and her notions about "popular feminism" and heightened visibility to help explain why there has been a resurgence of rape-revenge films by female filmmakers in the past decade. As I have illustrated, progressive depictions of sexual violence in the rape-revenge genre have garnered popularity, evidenced by many films moving into the mainstream, particularly in the last decade, because of the female subjectivity being filtered into the genre due to the growing presence of female storytellers, the changing feminist politics in the fourth wave, and the heightened visibility of feminist notions due to social media and streaming services.

Like their predecessors, contemporary rape-revenge films remain controversial and produce polarizing reactions from audiences. As Sarah Projanksy articulates, films that depict scenes of sexual violence seem to present a "feminist paradox between a desire to end rape and a need to represent (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it" (19). *The Nightingale* had both standing ovations and multiple walk-outs at the premieres; however, the majority of critical reception applauds Kent for her innovations within the genre and the film's ability to evoke different emotions from viewers and provide a space for multiple analyses. In other words, many applaud the feminist qualities of the film. Additionally, many of the walk-outs could arguably be due to the overwhelming and endless amount of graphic violence showcased in the film (not just sexual violence), and many critics' reviews comment on the unrelenting dread the film induces in viewers. Fargeat's career as a successful writer-director was catapulted after the release of *Revenge*, as she stated in an interview that she had received an overwhelming amount of offers from Hollywood. While many critics felt that the film was too similar to the genre's exploitative roots, the success of the film and the recognition that Fargeat is currently receiving for her work demonstrates how many viewers did not feel this way and that Fargeat's feminist intentions for the film were widely and positively received. Both films have won many awards at various film festivals and have much higher average ratings on popular cinema websites like IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes, and Letterboxd than a significant amount of their predecessors like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) or even mainstream films like *The Accused* (1988). Fargeat and Kent's films showcase how the genre is evolving in the digital era to encourage introspection from the audience about notions related to and

specific to fourth-wave feminism. To better encapsulate the current attitudes toward rape-revenge films, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas writes, "Many women watch and enjoy rape-revenge films, and this, despite the 'conventional wisdom' that encourages the rejection of rape-revenge as 'nothing but misogynistic shlock destined to titillate male audiences,' we can now safely say that 'feminists and film critics alike now grudgingly recognize that the films are doing more complicated cultural work" (Heller- Nicholas 8). The critics and scholars like Roger Ebert, who regard the genre as nothing more than exploitation and do not see a place for this kind of storytelling in the cultural landscape, disregard the elements of the films that led to the progression evidenced in the genre today. The films of the 1970s planted the seeds for what the genre has evolved into today, which is a genre that can provide filmmakers, particularly female filmmakers, with an outlet to tell stories with greater female subjectivity and inspire introspection in viewers on feminist notions.

Other areas that exceeded the limitations of this particular study but would enrich this kind of discussion would be audience reception. Few studies have examined this specific genre of filmmaking, and the ones that currently exist primarily focus on the initial cycle that emerged in the 1970s. Many of these studies focus on the effects watching sexual violence can have on a viewer. It would be interesting to expand those studies to contemporary rape-revenge films directed by female filmmakers to gain more insight into the cultural impacts these films are having, and could further support my claims about the genre's progression. Additionally, a further examination of films with survivor-avengers that identify as a gender other than a female would enrich the conversation surrounding the genre. Hopefully, the discussion in this thesis will generate more conversation in these areas that fell outside the scope of this paper.

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