

THESIS

HAPPILY NEVER AFTER:

REALITY, FANTASY, AND CULTURAL DISSONANCE IN RAPE-REVENGE HORROR CINEMA

Submitted by

Bradley Kaye

Department of Communication Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2014

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Hye Seung Chung

Scott Diffrient

Bradley MacDonald

Copyright by Brad Kaye 2014

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### HAPPILY NEVER AFTER:

### REALITY, FANTASY, AND CULTURAL DISSONANCE IN RAPE-REVENGE HORROR CINEMA

This thesis examines the “ultra-low brow” exploitation films of rape-revenge horror in order to locate the cultural discourses inherent in all cultural artifacts. The films follow a two-part, formulaic narrative wherein a young woman is stalked, raped, and either killed or left for dead. The result of the first half of the films dictate their second halves. If the woman lives she takes personal revenge on her assailants and if she does not her parents become avengers in her stead. The genre itself provides fertile ground for examination as a number of generic conventions and archetypes are at work in creating the personage of the woman-as-avenger. Adaptation and simulation of social ills is at the heart of these cultural artifacts as they simultaneously address and deal with a social problem, but do so in a way that fails the real victims of the real social problem. The resulting torture of the rapists has been seen as having feminist connotations similar to the “final girl” in Carol Clover’s analysis of slasher films. This is problematized as the films recreate, often shot-for-shot, the woman (or parents) taking the place of the rapists – enacting Sisyphean-like, ironic punishment. The violent, masculine paradigm used in the attack is thus appropriated for vengeance. The viewer may sympathize with the goals of the avenger(s) but is ultimately be left with a false consciousness surrounding the real social problem of rape.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Though there are many people I would like to appreciate for helping me on in this journey, I would first and foremost like to thank my best friend, editorial reviewer, critic, and spouse Lahoma. I literally could not have done it without you as you were both my inspiration and harshest critic – the project was far more reflective than it would ever have been without your support. Your presence and example helped me to persevere whenever my enthusiasm lagged. I can say without reservation that I couldn't have done it without you. Thank you and I love you.

As always I would like to thank my parents and brother for their support and interest in the project. Getting to explain the project beyond the boundaries of academia helped me conceptualize the impact and goals in a unique way.

My thanks to my advisor, Hye Seung Chung, for her knowledge, expertise, and flexibility in assisting in the creation of this thesis. I can say with some certainty that character and function of this project were shaped by her courses and tutelage. Another big thanks to Scott Diffrient who shares my interest in this type of film and who has shaped my desire to study films in general. To Bradley MacDonald, more thanks is owed as his was the instruction on theory that originally set the project in motion.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the Communication Studies department as Colorado State as a whole for their acceptance of this rather oddball scholar and the room to find my voice. I feel extraordinarily blessed to have been part of such a wonderful place.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
I. Introduction .....	1
Identification of Texts .....	4
Justification .....	8
Methodology .....	10
Literature Review .....	11
Genre Theory.....	11
Adaptation and Simulation.....	19
Gender in Cinema.....	23
Overview .....	30
II. Making the Monster: Rape-Revenge Horror as a Genre.....	33
Building Horror .....	33
Of Monsters and Men.....	37
The Horror Aesthetic.....	41
In a Nightmare, Darkly.....	47
III. It's Only a Movie: Adaptation and Simulation in Rape-Revenge Horror Film.....	52
The Perfect Crime .....	53
Rape Culture in Storytelling.....	55
The Procession of Simulacra in a Cinematic Context.....	60
The Ballad of Per Tysson's Daughters in Vänge (Töres döttrar i Wänge). .....	62
The Virgin Spring (1960). .....	62
The Last House on the Left (1972).....	64
I Spit on Your Grave (1978).....	65
The contemporary films.....	66
The Consequences of Simulation.....	71
IV. An Anatomy of Conflict: Gender in the Rape-revenge Horror Film.....	79

Prying Eyes and Dying Eyes.....	82
A Cruel World.....	99
V. Conclusion: Cultural Dissonance in Cinematic Texts .....	104
VI. References.....	116

## I. Introduction

A man in the throes of grief thrusts his bloodstained hands to the sky as he swears to build a church in his daughter's memory. "With these two hands..." he promises as he beseeches his god for clemency for the murders he has committed. A clear, pure spring bubbles forth as the man embraces his daughter for the last time; redemption, it seems, is at hand. The parents and their other daughter (complicit in her sister's murder through silence) cleanse themselves in the water; the ability to wash their nightmare away could not be clearer.



*"With these two hands." The Virgin Spring's penultimate scene*



*The Virgin Spring bubbles forth, the film's final frame*

A man and his wife desperately grasp one another amidst the gory rubble of their home. Unable even to speak, they silently hold onto one another as two policemen gape in horror at the carnage they were too late to prevent. The only reality left is a shattered one. In depths of their vengeance the man and his wife gazed into the eyes of monsters and ultimately saw their own reflections. There is no redemption here.



*The final frame of The Last House on the Left (1972)*

A man, bruised and bloodied, pilots a boat carrying his battered family across the placid surface of a lake as he stares at something only he can see. A memory of torture and death visited upon the body of his enemy, a brute who raped his daughter, is contained within his haunted gaze. The memory of his brutality, the final, shocking cruelty he exhibited leaves no doubt that this is a man who will never be whole again; what life remains has been shattered by the events of the previous night.



*The penultimate scene of The Last House on the Left (2010)*



*The final scene of The Last House on the Left (2010)*

A woman looks ahead, her gaze fixed and determined as she speeds away in a small motor boat. Her mouth is set with the smallest of smiles as she takes not even the most furtive of glances back at the bodies left in her wake. In that smile can be seen satisfaction and triumph, a tacit understanding of righteousness. Remorse for the guilty is treason to the innocent.



*The final frame of I Spit on Your Grave (1978)*



A gunshot rings out as an impeccably clean young woman sits amidst an idyllic setting at the edge of a forest. She is looking somewhere distant, immersed in deep contemplation. The need for meditation ends with the thundering discharge of a gun. The resonance of the blast fades into silence and she adopts a wry grin as her eyes snap back into focus; an ending for someone, but a new day for the heroine.



*The final frame of I Spit on Your Grave (2010)*

The face of a young woman is brought into focus as the aural intensity of symphonic music is brought to a crescendo. The bruises on her face and the troubled stare she affects says that her eyes have seen far too much in recent days. Her expression contrasts oddly with her clean, fashionable dress as the camera pulls back to reveal the fact that she is whole. Gates open and barriers shift aside as she strides resolutely to a place of apparent safety. A small smile of contentment can be seen in the final frame as the streets behind her blur into nothingness and her haven comes into sharp focus.



*The final two frames from I Spit on Your Grave 2 (2013)*

The preceding six summaries represent the final scenes of films (and their remakes) considered to be canon within the rape-revenge genre. *The Virgin Spring* (1960), while certainly not a “horror” film (expect perhaps for parents), created the template of the rape-revenge genre. The original versions of *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) refined the dramatic plot of Ingmar Bergman’s masterpiece into exploitation horror. Each set of three follows a nearly identical plot, with all six following the basic plot structure of the rape-revenge story. A girl/young woman is waylaid by multiple bandits who are usually, but not always, men. The group of criminals rape and either kill or torture the victim until death appears imminent. If the victim survives she may act as the agent of her vengeance else a family member plays the role (always male if it is a singular agent, otherwise married, heterosexual parents if more than one) if the victim is killed.

### **Identification of Texts**

Out of the aforementioned six films, this study will focus on five of them as a catalyst to discuss the implications of the rape-revenge horror film, a hybrid genre (intermixing elements of melodrama, crime, exploitation, horror, and slasher genres) that is often dismissed as cultural waste even while it directly confronts authentic social ills. An examination of the films chosen will provide seek to provide a model for wider research into the portrayal of violence against women on film. *The Virgin Spring* while an important component in any discussion of the formation and creation of the rape-revenge genre, is nonetheless far enough removed from the other five films that any analysis of it in comparison to the horror films it helped spawn introduces a number of irrelevancies. Its tale is one of salvation and the struggle of the main character (the victim’s father) to square his identification with pagan religions with his desire to be a good Christian. The storyline is similar, but the themes in *The Virgin Spring* have very little

to do with horror films. Four of the five horror films were widely-released in the United States, while the fifth (the *Spit* sequel) was released straight to DVD/digital download. Each of the five horror plots follows the aforementioned template of the rape-revenge film.

One of the primary types of studies conducted on cinema are content analyses of films. Of particular interest to this research project are analyses that look at material that fuses the erotic and the violent. As noted when talking about *The Virgin Spring*, eroticized violence is not limited to a U.S. – American context. For example, in their examination of *A Serbian Film* (2010), Mark Featherstone and Beth Johnson (2012) found that while the film was dismissed in the American cultural context as, “a piece of exploitative trash,” the film fit neatly into the Serbian context under Slobodan Milošević (Featherstone & Johnson, 2012). The cultural context of the film, a situation in which rape of women and children was used as punishment, was represented with accuracy (to a degree). Americans, lacking that context, dismissed the film as merely taking shock horror to another level as critics in the U.S. universally demolished the film as exploitation (Featherstone & Johnson, 2012). This analysis led me to consider removing films made outside of the U.S. or at least to consider the cultural context when comparing films to one another – *The Virgin Spring* is thus important as a progenitor, but is unlikely to be able to directly correlate, beyond its narrative elements, with that of the rape-revenge horror film.

*The Last House on the Left* (1972) is the first film chronologically and is an uncredited remake of *The Virgin Spring*. Directed by Wes Craven, the film focused squarely on the elements of rape-revenge (and the violence resulting from those elements) and can be considered to be the progenitor of rape-revenge horror. A Vietnam War-era craft, it took both symbolism and style from the domestic debates surrounding the conflict. The peace symbol worn by the primary victim, Mari, becomes both desecrated and venerated as it is taken by force by her

rapist/killer and ultimately falls back into the hands of her parents as evidence of her fate. The film's aesthetics, particularly the tractless forest where the rape/murder takes place, recalls similar types of violent excesses from war films of that era. It was made on a shoestring budget of under \$100,000, but became a huge commercial hit as it took in \$3.1 million in the domestic box office and \$10 million worldwide (IMDB, 2014). The significance of the film lies not with its creation as an uncredited remake of *The Virgin Spring*, but instead as a cult horror classic that defined the exploitation, rape-revenge horror/thriller.

*I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) was created well after *Last House* and enough after the Vietnam War that its sensibilities run more with Cold War-era paranoia than the domestic binary of peace/war that permeated the era around Craven's film. The film gradually ramps up the threat faced by its isolated victim/anti-heroine until it explodes in a frenzy of violence not unlike the very possible threat of nuclear war. Meir Zarchi, the writer and director of the film, originally released the film under the title *Day of the Woman* in 1978. The film did exceedingly poorly in its first box office run and was quickly pulled from the limited distribution Zarchi was able to secure. As a condition of re-release in 1980 the distribution company (the Jerry Gross Organization) reserved the right to re-title the film and used *I Spit on Your Grave* which is the title the film is known by today. *Spit* (although in no way the first to have a female killer) married the exploitation horror aesthetic found in *Last House* to a tale of revenge conducted by the female victim of the rape.

The *Last House* remake (2009), directed by Dennis Illiadis, sought to distance itself from its exploitation roots. The film typified the current mode of a wide-released, relatively low budget horror film as it played in over 2,400 screens in the U.S. alone. It parlayed a paltry \$650,000 budget and its identification with the current mainstream horror fad (colloquially

referred to as “torture porn”) into a \$45 million worldwide theatrical run and another \$23 million in DVD/Blu-ray sales, making it a commercial success by any metric (IMDB, 2010). The basic plot of the film is nearly identical to the original, but with enough change in the way the scenes played out that it is more than worthy of a side-by-side analysis with its namesake.

The *Spit* (2010) remake and its attendant sequel (2013) delve quite a bit further into the torture porn realm than either their source material or the *Last House* films. Both films have been blasted critically and were not box office successes by any measure. Each film however, more than made up its costs in home DVD/Blu-ray sales and in fact were weekly top sellers on Amazon.com when released. That the films, regardless of the monstrous cruelty they portray, have continued to find a following makes them interesting artifacts by which to measure the historical arc of the rape-revenge horror film.

While the context of the five (horror) films differs radically in terms of their years of production and the various cultural/cinematic norms that those eras embodied, they nonetheless share many more commonalities than differences. The two originals have been canonized as purveyors of modern rape-revenge horror film (Clover, 1992). That each has one (or more) credited remake renders the possibility of comparing similar objects for their content, even taking into account the different contexts they were birthed into. All five films were produced after the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) transitioned from the Production Code Administration (PCA)’s content regulation to the new ratings system in 1968. The introduction of the MPAA ratings system allowed filmmakers the relative freedom to exploit adult subject matter in exchange for harsher ratings. The five films under examination received MPAA “Restricted” (R) ratings for their standard, theatrical cuts. All five utilize the rape-revenge horror

plotline based on the template in *The Virgin Spring*. Perhaps most important, all five films enjoy a cult following that can be seen in brisk sales of home video versions worldwide.

### **Justification**

Mainstream horror cinema has recently taken a direction that has resulted in growing reliance on eroticized violence as a major content component within films. This violence in films is most often committed by male perpetrators against female victims (Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, 1999). This is disturbing in that it echoes the cultural reality of sexualized violence, women comprise almost 82% of the victims and adding in female children that number goes to nearly 90% (American Psychological Association, 2007; R.A.I.N.N., 2013; Harris, 2011). While the content of films does not prove a causal connection, it does simulate disturbing statistics which are a reality.

In giving an interview about his horror film, *Hostel II* (2007), director Eli Roth said the following, "I had been looking for stuff you could do to girls that would be awful but not so horrifying that you felt like you couldn't watch it or you felt like you had been kicked in the stomach" (*Girls rule (at a cost)*, 2007). Psychiatrists asked to review the film noted that it was of concern that deaths were gender specific, particularly in the ways that dehumanized the victims (Edgers, 2007, p. 1). "Her back was turned and the torturer never humanized the victim at all. That was particularly chilling," said Wendy Fabricant, chief resident in psychiatry at Brigham and Women's Hospital (Edgers, 2007, p. 1). Another psychiatrist, Thomas G. Gutheil of Harvard medical school, noted the following, "By fusing the erotic and violent, there are ways you create fantasies that become a playground for serial killers" (Edgers, 2007, p. 2). The analysis of one film, as disturbing as it might have been even for trained psychiatrists, does not in and of itself indicate a trend. The reactions of psychiatrists, ostensibly watchdogs of personal and societal

mental health, necessitate an examination of the implications of horror films; with the rape-revenge horror evincing a particularly strong link between film and the rampant social problem of violence against women generally and rape specifically.

Furthermore, the rape-revenge film is also an interesting construction in itself, borrowing as it does from multiple genres. The first half, in which a woman is raped, is reminiscent of a plot device utilized since the advent of cinema itself. In her book, *Watching Rape*, Sarah Projansky (2001) states,

Given the ubiquity of representations of rape, even someone who is a moderate consumer of mass media would have difficulty spending a week (possibly even an entire day) without coming across the subject. The existence of rape is thus naturalized in U.S. life, perhaps seemingly so natural that many people are unaware of the frequency with which they encounter these representations. (Kindle Location 89-91)

The act or threat of rape in films from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to modern day horror, drama, and indeed comedy is the mosaic on which hundreds of films rest (Projansky, 2001, Kindle Location 610). The first part of rape-revenge horror films is only horror in the sense that watching a violent, starkly constructed rape is horrific. In point of fact the first part of the rape-revenge film is a short drama, not unlike any standard drama in television or film whose plotline includes or depends upon rape. The horror aesthetic doesn't appear until the revenge portion begins. The victim turned avenging angel (or an agent acting for a victim who was killed) enacts revenge, often in implausibly horrific fashion, upon the bodies of the criminal element. While many genres/subgenres contain a mix of elements, the rape-revenge horror film contains two distinct generic paradigms to construct a complete narrative.

There exists a good deal of literature on the horror genre and a reasonable amount about rape in film. Carol Clover's outstanding work, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) devotes the large part of a chapter to looking at the original *Spit* film. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' excellent work *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (2011) provides a strong overview of films across the historical arc and examines them as exemplars of the genre. While a good deal of work exists about this particular genre, the literature generally misses the opportunity to analyze the films as both representational of reality and simulations of fantasy that perpetuate particularly harmful cultural norms. An analysis that employs a close textual examination in order to study genre, simulative/constructed realities, and gender concurrently will further illuminate the function that such films have in a cinematic and cultural context.

## **Methodology**

For the analysis of the five rape-revenge horror films, I will be using a critical approach, specifically textual analysis, in order to examine the interplay of genre, symbolic theory, and gender within the films. The critical approach grew out of the Frankfurt School's insistence upon broadening the scope of what they saw as a previously narrow interpretation of Karl Marx. Jürgen Habermas (1998) refers to the construction as, "The discourse of modernity" (p. 51). The critical approach emphasized the necessity of social change as inherent within the theoretical extension of Marxist theory (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 8). The uses of the critical approach in employing semiotics were primarily to study the interplay between semiotics, genre analysis, and ideology (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 13).

Ideological criticism must be part of any study of film given its status as both a consumptive practice and as a cultural artifact (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 13). Ideology in the rape-revenge horror film can be critically engaged through gender as gendered power



relationships are central to both the narrative and the politics of rape as a cultural product. The study of semiotics is likewise wedded to an examination of film given that the symbols (the images actually presented onscreen) of film are directly relatable to the meaning they seek to create (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 13). In rape-revenge horror films, the images presented are communicative symbols that serve to construct, present, and reinforce ideological values. An examination of genre analysis is, to an extent, implicit when critically examining ideology and semiotics within film (or other practices) (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 13). For rape-revenge horror, with generic conventions much more recently constructed than so-called “classic” genres such as the Western and the musical, placing symbols within a context – the role that genre fills for film analysis – is a key component in its analysis.

The critical practice of textual analysis, “should thus employ a wide range of methods to fully explicate each dimension and to show how they fit into textual systems” (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 14). The following analysis of rape-revenge horror film will employ precisely such a strategy by using a number of theoretical frameworks within each category of genre, symbolic representation, and gender. For each film I will deploy textual analysis in its full measure as semiotic examination, genre analysis, and ideological critique provide a broad framework from which to deconstruct the representation and ideology in the films.

## **Literature Review**

**Genre Theory.** At its heart the rape-revenge horror is not a classic example of a genre film, even while it has specific conventions critical to its construction. Schatz (2009) said the following, “Whereas the genre exists as a sort of tacit ‘contract’ between the filmmakers and the audience, the genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract” (p. 564). The construction of the rape-revenge horror film begins long before *The Virgin Spring* and represents

the kind of negotiative process that Schatz hints at through his use of the word “contract.” Genres shift and evolve through time, the meaning of a genre changes. This is certainly true of rape-revenge horror as the horror genre itself has dramatically shifted since the original *Last House* and *Spit* films premiered. Thomas Schatz (2009) further notes that any category of genre is bound up in perceptual processes, “As we repeatedly undergo the same type of experience we develop expectations which, as they are continually reinforced, tend to harden into ‘rules’” (p. 564). This is equally true of the films under examination as they borrowed the narrative from Ingmar Bergman’s film, placed it within a distinct horror aesthetic, and provided the (dual) formula for the development of the narrative to what is essentially a standard form. Schatz (2009) goes on to suggest a semiotic identification with language systems (p. 564). The cinematic medium is thus a lingual substitute as its signs and symbols (in the form of the images it presents) communicate with its audience. In the context of Schatz’s conception of genre this means that a specific genre, such as the rape-revenge horror film, ought to provide particular symbols which identify it as something unique in order to fulfill the implied contract – and by extension concurrently communicate a similar cultural message.

Rick Altman’s study (1984) extends the possibility of applying semiotics to genre study through a semantic/syntactic approach (p. 552). In examining semantics, “the building blocks,” of the genre must be identified; in the case of the rape-revenge horror film Altman’s question must be asked, “How do we know to which genre the (film) belongs” (Altman, pp. 552,556). In using Altman’s semantic approach, it is obvious that the film must contain a rape and a revenge narrative as a direct result of the rape. As the films under examination are also horror films, a horror aspect must also be addressed. I have previously stated that the first half of the rape-revenge horror film is horrifying, yet lacks traditional semantics of the horror genre. Altman’s

(1984) explanation of the syntax further explains this apparent contradiction as it seeks to, “Isolate a genre’s specific meaning-bearing structures” (p. 557). The narrative force in the first half of the rape-revenge film is the rape sequence. This event, while undeniably horrific, represents something “real” and does so in a very realistic fashion – not unlike what one might read about such an incident. The horror aesthetic seen in the revenge sequence most often resembles the slasher film with implausibly/impossibly elaborate and gruesome kill scenes. In regard to the fundamental difference between the semantic and syntactic, Altman (1984) notes,

Definitions that play up instead certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders— relationships that might be called the genre’s fundamental syntax. The semantic approach thus stresses the genre’s building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged. (p. 556)

Thus the semantics of the rape-revenge horror film, the criminals, the victim, the rape, and the agent(s) of vengeance are the semantic “building blocks” of the genre; while the form they take, even when the basic template remains stable, relies upon historical context to create the syntax of the text.

In the rape-revenge horror scenario, the semantic meaning is consistent within the films under examination. In each a girl/young woman is raped (and tortured/murdered/presumed dead). The narrative of the revenge sequence depends innately on the result of that rape narrative, the rape-revenge horror film must inherently contain a movement from the rape to the revenge. The rape is thus a referent of the necessity for revenge; the semantic meaning of rape in this genre must always be a motive for revenge. The syntax that follows from the meaning of rape in the genre is the revenge narrative and the form it takes based on the era it exists within. The earliest films under examination have relatively tame murders by today’s standards and they

function within the bounds of horror films of their era. By contrast the syntax of the modern remakes presents the revenge sequence in the vivid brutality that is common among the “torture porn” genre. The generic narrative of the rape-revenge horror film, as a complete film, falls squarely within Altman’s (1984) analysis of the semantic/syntactic formulation of genre as he notes, “it binds element to element in a logical order” (p. 560). The clear and logical relationship of the on-screen narrative to the symbols it presents places the rape-revenge horror genre as an ideal example of Altman’s approach.

Generic conventions are not free of their historical context as both Schatz and Altman noted, but rather heavily influenced by their respective, formative eras. In his study of 1970s horror films (both original films were made during the era) Robin Wood (2012) states,

One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression. (Kindle Locations 2348-2350)

As Wood notes, society represses any number of “abnormalities” but also female sexuality in a public sense. When rape is tried in the United States, it is only then that female sexuality becomes a public topic, else we seek to keep our daughters as far from the topic of sexual expression as possible. Oppression is equally plain as Wood (2012) notes, “the particularly severe repression of female sexuality/creativity, the attribution to the female of passivity, and her preparation for her subordinate, dependent role in our culture” (Kindle Locations 2284-2286). Female sexuality is repressed only until it becomes an object, one that can be taken, thus removing the agency from the feminine. That sexuality re-emerges as the nightmare of the rape process culminating in a trial that all too often re-victimizes the woman as her life becomes the

object of the trial, just as her body was the object of the rape. In the case of the rape-revenge horror film there exists a cultural dissonance in the idea of a “happy ending” vis-à-vis the revenge. The scenario of the lone female heroine successfully taking the law into her own hands is virtually non-existent in reality – and overly sensationalized when it does (Lorena Bobbit’s “dismemberment” of her husband/rapist); the rape scenario is conversely omnipresent. The family of the murdered girl (in the *Last House* formulation of the rape-revenge horror plot) remains shattered and broken; there is in fact a great deal more truth in that iteration, even if the justice aspect of it remains rather distant from reality.

The 1970s horror film responds to the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s in that women are bound within the nightmare of the narrative for Wood. The horror film more generally evokes Woods’ (2012) description of them as, “Dreams and nightmares” (Kindle location 2395). The rape-revenge horror film is particularly susceptible to this analogy as a nightmare (for the woman) of reality intrudes upon a female victim. The nightmare the victim suffered is visited upon the aggressors, creating a just balance (or at least a phony moral equivalent). This is the dream; revenge is necessary, possible, cathartic, and realistic. As it has been suggested, there is a strong cultural dissonance between the reality and fantasy inherent within the rape-revenge narrative.

Carol Clover (1992) constructs the “modern horror film” beginning with *Psycho* (1960) (p. 10). Like Robin Wood, she sees the modern horror film as an interpretative process, one which allows the viewer to engage repressed fears and desires in an ostensibly “safe” forum (Clover, 1992, p. 10). Her argument of *Psycho* as the archetypal horror film is compelling. Beyond Alfred Hitchcock’s auteur signature that characterizes *Psycho* aesthetically, the film utilizes familiar generic elements,

The killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually attractive woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point-of-view and comes with shocking suddenness. (Clover, 1992, pp. 23-24)

Moving further with *Psycho* as the archetype of the modern horror film, Clover (1992) notes that those classic horror elements lend themselves to the slasher genre (or subgenre). It is this slasher category that concerns the second part of the rape-revenge horror film. While much of Clover's work is concerned with the dual nature of the "final girl" in the embodiment first of feminine goodness and ultimately masculine power, the slasher element is inherent within rape-revenge. The "final girl" archetype is less consistent due to the two possible formulations of the slasher element present within the revenge portion of the film (the woman herself or an agent acting for her). The slasher elements are otherwise remarkably consistent in the latter half of the rape-revenge horror; indeed it can be argued that the "exploitative" nature of the violence within the slasher film is typified within the revenge segment. In the films under examination, the revenge sequences are far more horrific in the acts of violence they portray – even acknowledging their relative implausibility.

For Clover (1992), the rape-revenge film often exists on several levels at once (p. 115). Beyond the damaging male group dynamic/lone female binary lies inherent class/regional issues (she notes that *Spit*, like *Deliverance* (1972) has a strong city vs. country dynamic) (Clover, 1992, p. 115). Jennifer Hills, the main character in *Spit*, is from New York and well-off enough that she can come to the country to rent a house and simply write, while the men in the film must scrape a living off servicing those of greater means. There is constant mention Jennifer as "That rich, city bitch." The *Last House* films have a similar type of plotline as the idyllic family at

their summer vacation home clashes with a partial family torn by crime. All three incarnations of *Spit* have a similar dynamic, though the “sequel” to the remake places the victim/avenger as a model rather than the intellectual profession (writer) that her progenitors performed. In all five films, Clover’s articulation of modern horror elements, including those found in the slasher film can be seen; indeed even the characteristics of the rape-revenge drama (such as *The Virgin Spring*, *Deliverance*, and the many films examined by Projansky) are present.

In further examining genre as a process, something that is created along with the historical arc of cinema itself, Steve Neale (2012) notes,

It is at least arguable that many of the most apparently “pure” and stable genres, both inside and outside the cinema, initially evolved by combining elements from previously discrete and separate genres either within or across specific generic regimes. (Kindle location 3934)

The process, Neale (2012) states, is an ongoing one that inherently spawns other genres based on elements of previously accepted genres (Kindle Location 3930). The result is genre hybridity. The genre arises only out of the specific historical period from which it exists, thus reflecting cultural norms within that period. Neale (2012) goes on to say,

Genre films, genres, and generic regimes are always marked by boundaries and by frameworks, which always have limits. Thus even hybrids are recognized as hybrids – combinations of specific and distinct generic components – not as genres in their own right. (Kindle location 3949)

Certainly the rape-revenge horror film appears to fall under the category of a hybrid as its very designation relies on several distinct categorizations. First, the idea of rape as a plot device in film is nothing new, as noted by Projansky. Such films were usually, but not always,

dramas/period pieces before the 1940s (for example: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Cheat* (1915), *The Ruse* (1915), *Talk of the Town* (1919), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), etc.) up to and including *The Virgin Spring* in 1960. The revenge plotline was likewise commonplace within cinema, with a variety of motives (including rape) provided (examples include *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1913), *Saved from the Harem* (1915), *Eye for an Eye* (1918), *Moby Dick* (1956), etc. The rape-revenge film constructs rape as the revenge motivator and utilizes the conventions of the modern horror film, pioneered by *Psycho*, in the film's second act.

The rape-revenge horror film superficially appears to be a construction of these various elements; perhaps a mere amalgam of more canonized genres such as melodrama, crime, and horror. Neale (2012) states the following in regards to genre's relationship to the historical/cultural arc,

Hence the importance of historicizing generic definitions and the parameters both of any single generic corpus and of any specific generic regime. For it is not that more elaborate definitions are impossible to provide, just that they are always historically relative and therefore historically specific. (Kindle Locations 3946-3948)

*The Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on your Grave* (as examples of the rape-revenge horror film) are cultural artifacts of an era that followed the advent of Second-Wave Feminism and the 1970s/80s conservative backlash against the movement. The rape-revenge horror film itself combines the story arc of a rape-centered, dramatic narrative with the conventions of modern horror and the sensibilities of an anti-feminist era to give rise to a unique hybrid genre with distinct formulations.



**Adaptation and Simulation.** As I alluded to earlier, the rape-revenge horror film is representative of the cultural dissonance surrounding the (initial) crime it exposes. In combining the reality of the rape with the orgiastic fantasy of violent revenge that follows, the reality/fantasy dichotomy most closely resembles a folk tale/fable. While such a characterization might seem somewhat odd, the rape-revenge narrative is only somewhat dissimilar to the Hansel and Gretel or Little Red Riding Hood fables, beyond the obvious fact of the rape itself. The initial storyline is something based in reality (a stepmother seeing children from a previous marriage as a burden and an able youngster asked to care for an elder), but the tales move forth to levels of highly implausible and horrific violence (the “witch” cooked in her own oven and the wolf split in two by the woodsman to release the grandmother).

This characterization (the rape-revenge horror film as a “tale), articulated nicely by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1968), is useful in seeing how the reality, the “legal story” of rape is adapted to fit the narrative. Propp (1968) states the following in regard to narrative structure, “We shall see that the tale ascribes with great ease identical actions to persons, objects, and animals. This rule is mainly true for so-called fairy tales, but it is also encountered in tales in general” (Kindle Locations 397-398). The rape-revenge horror film performs this adaptation in regards to the aforementioned “legal story” of rape. It is undeniably a cultural norm that we believe crime ought to be punished, rape is a crime so it naturally follows that it is a crime that should be and is punished. Thus the “legal story” of rape follows a narrative where the crime is committed, the criminal is then arrested, tried, and sentenced; justice is served. The research mentioned earlier (American Psychological Association, 2007; R.A.I.N.N., 2013; Harris, 2011) tells us that the common crime and justice narrative often fails to fit rape cases. The rape-revenge horror film, while growing from the aesthetic of several

preceding genres, also has its basis in Propp's notion of the tale. The actions prescribed by the characters in the rape-revenge horror film are fantastical re-enactments of the actions that would normally be performed in the normative crime and justice tale of rape. The actions performed on and by its participants are those that would normally be performed by actors in society, only to a dramatically excessive degree – ultimately constructing a “tale” that is a grotesque mirror of the “real” story of rape.

Propp (1968) makes another excellent point when he says, “Tales possess one special characteristic: components of one tale can, without any alteration whatsoever, be transferred to another” (Kindle Location 425). This is certainly true of the tale crafted in *The Virgin Spring* and with each formulation of the rape-revenge horror narrative it birthed. The *Last House* films as well as the *Spit* films, contain elements that appear literally cut and pasted from Ingmar Bergman's film. The rapists from any of the films would generally do just as well in any other film. The victim/heroine/anti-hero of *Spit* could easily have been killed as a result of the ordeal and been an adequate stand-in for the *Last House* victim. The common components appear more starkly relational when *The Virgin Spring* is left out as the *Last House* couples are at least as interchangeable as the maladjusted criminals in the two sets of films. Furthermore, the ideal of replaceable components extends to the cultural narrative of rape. The traumatized victim (and her family) and the unrepentant criminal(s) – ostensibly confused by a short skirt – can both be placed within the rape-revenge horror film without alteration; an adaptation of a constructed, idealized reality.

In his article, “The Spring Defiled: Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring* and Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left*,” Michael Brashinsky (1998) specifically analyzes one of the films under examination (the original *Last House on the Left*) in terms of symbols, defined as the images in

the film, on top of a similar, austere plot (p. 163). He elucidates the idea of the “austere” plotline as, “the story stripped of its symbols and pared down to a few simple plot points” (Brashinsky, 1998, p. 164). The austere plot of *The Virgin Spring* varies only in the agent of the revenge; by extension the films can all be classified as remakes of Bergman’s original. The remake, according to Brashinsky (1998) is thus an interpretation as he argues, “*Hamlet* and *Medea* would not be classics had they not offered a vast scope of options for interpretation” (p. 164). In furthering his argument about remakes as an interpretation Brashinsky (1998) says,

Just as *The Virgin Spring* was a tale of faith, *The Last House on the Left* becomes a tale of havoc. Order returns at the end of *The Virgin Spring*; it never does at the end of *The Last House*. (p. 166)

And he follows with a question, “But isn’t it the incentive of every remake to tell the same story with a different meaning” (Brashinsky, 1998, p. 166). The austere plot allows side-by-side comparison of the symbols the directors choose to present in order to examine each interpretive incarnation as both a cultural artifact and as the offspring of symbols which preceded it. It is this comparison that is the critical element in a discussion of cinema – why choose those particular images, that particular scene? Why, ultimately, do rape-revenge horror films continue to proliferate?

That rape-revenge horror simulates a scenario grounded in reality is an inescapable truth, but what “simulation” means for cinema specifically and culture more broadly is less clear. Jean Baudrillard (1994) deals directly with the idea of symbolism as a temporal succession (p. 5). He makes specific reference to a particular “procession of simulacra” which postulates the theory that symbols gradually come to replace reality in its entirety (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). For Baudrillard (1994), simulacra are copies of objects which no longer refer to an original or lacked

an original to begin with (p. 6). The argument is made that the nature of simulacra evolve over time. Baudrillard (1994) lays out the procession in four stages,

It is the reflection of a profound reality.

It masks and denatures a profound reality.

It masks the absence of a profound reality.

It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacra. (p. 6)

The stages represent the temporal progression of symbols in society and Baudrillard argues that we are in the final stage; and it is this stage that is of primary concern to the rape-revenge horror film. In this final stage, signs and symbols only reflect other simulacra, resulting in a total simulation of reality. If society accurately reflects Baudrillard's construction of the current context, then examining the symbols that are widely viewed, such as the images that appear in film (of the five rape-revenge horror films under examination all but one was widely released), is of critical importance. The idea that everything is in fact a simulacra, a symbol of something else, indicates that the images within cinema are as well.

There is at least as high a stake in the rape-revenge horror narrative, as a simulation, as exists in any type of cinema. In regards to the problematic aspects of simulation Baudrillard (1994) argues, "Simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (p. 3). Extending this to rape-revenge horror "tale" (when examining Propp's take on adaptation), the reality of rape in a societal context can become conflated with "justice" in the rape-revenge horror film. While this identification with simulated "justice" against the criminals isn't inherently harmful, the problematization of femininity in the cultural master narrative surrounding rape begins to reveal a very real stake in this simulation. In "substituting the signs of the real for the real," simulation in the form of the rape-revenge horror

narrative begets the perpetuation of the (false) belief that rapists are punished in accordance with their crime (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). Indeed the truth lies buried until multiple simulations – the victim often seen as at fault – that serve not to, “at least problematize male sexual violence” (Clover, 1992, p. 115), but instead simulate justice to hide the fact that often there is none.

Cynthia Davidson (1996) reconstructs Baudrillard’s “simulation of crisis” by showing how such an act functions within a cultural text. This simulation of crisis can occur in a simulated text such as film, literature, etc. The act is therefore staged to begin with; it is unreal in the sense that the crisis is not actually occurring (Davidson, 1996, p. 196). A person in the text dies (a simulated death) and the audience connects with the death in some fashion, usually with a visible reaction. The simulation of crisis creates authentic responses in real people (Davidson, 1996, p. 196). Davidson is essentially arguing that even a simulation can have real consequences. In the instance of rape-revenge horror film this potentiality can occur in a number of ways – largely dependent on the viewer’s position. A female who has been the victim of a sexual assault can experience the narrative as a “re-victimization;” essentially forced to experience her own event through the very realistic simulation within the film. A male may indeed perceive such a simulation as problematizing male sexual violence, but may also be viewing the film for titillation as the actresses involved are often young, normatively attractive, and mostly nude for long stretches. It is somewhat unlikely that the typical male viewer would see the films as cautionary tales, even if they are horrified by the violence within in. The rape segment simulates a real crisis, while the vengeance merely re-creates the fantasy of justice.

**Gender in Cinema.** Cinema contains an inherent gender dynamic. This phenomenon is, to an extent, normal in that culture has constructed and enacted a gendered world. The result of this dynamic, in both society as a whole as well as within film, is to create differing power

relations and hence different positions for male and female roles within films. This cannot be more clearly illustrated than within the rape-revenge horror film. The woman must occupy an object position until she has a motive to do otherwise; the woman begins as little more than the canvas for the criminals to paint their crime and the criminals in turn provide vivid shades of red as the tables are turned in the second half. In the 2010 remake of *I Spit on Your Grave*, the victim turned avenging angel pauses to talk to her final prey,

Jennifer (to the Sheriff who participated in the rape): “Imagine if someone did something like that to your daughter...”

Sheriff: “Ma’am, please, what did you do with her? She’s just an innocent girl.”

Jennifer moves and crouches to look him straight in the eye as she whispers: “So was I.”

The next part is the scene described in the introduction; a gunshot, a small smile, and silence. In the end the tables are turned, the only aggressor left is the one willing to commit murder after murder – not unlike Carol Clover’s “final girl.” Gender and gender dynamics are unavoidable in the rape-revenge horror film.

Michel Foucault provides a framework for looking at the visible effects of power upon bodies in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). For Foucault (1977), power is something that is omnipresent as a mechanism of control; it is embedded within the means of control. The visible effects of power can be seen within the “panoptic gaze” which serves a surveillance function in observing proper behavior as well as upon bodies themselves. Controlled subjects manifest the effects of power through behavior modification and examples exist within the military, boarding schools, workplaces, and prisons (Foucault, 1977). In each of these institutions Foucault elucidates the ways in which power produces a desired effect in bodies. The military, for example, uses systematic repetition of actions to produce a soldier capable of instantly obeying

orders; their rigid training changes bodies into soldiers (Foucault, 1977). Panopticism is present within our everyday lives as our information is consistently fed into computers and our desires are fed back to us as advertisements, television, and other media texts. The effect is constructing a normative social image, one that is reproduced in the bodies of the women on film and sought by those who view such images as “normal” or desirable. It can also be said that Foucault’s idea of the visible effects of power upon bodies can be manifested within film. Men normatively hold a great deal more power than women which could be translated into film with women serving as the victims due to that power differential; the result of violence in film is the “visible effect.”

Certainly the visible effects of power upon bodies (female bodies in the first half of rape-revenge films, male bodies in the second) can be seen through a gendered lens. When we examine the images in these films, Foucault’s observations become rather troubling, particularly in the context of simulation. In the first half of the rape-revenge horror film, real power (as it exists culturally) is illustrated upon the passively constructed female body. In the latter half, the roles are reversed physically, but power as it exists in society is in fact reinforced. A woman cannot expect justice, she either “asked for it” or was doing something she wasn’t supposed to be doing. Her only option (or by extension her family’s) is to take matters into her own hands as the law cannot comprehend the crime. The rape-revenge horror film constructs and reinforces power dynamics along a male/female binary rather than a crime/justice one.

In following a similar critique of capitalist enterprises in both the individual and society as a whole, Henry Giroux (2009) writes,

The notion of a culture of cruelty is useful in thinking through the convergence of everyday life and politics, of considering material relations of power - the disciplining of the body as an object of control - on the one hand, and the production of cultural

meaning, especially the co-optation of popular culture to sanction official violence, on the other. (p. 1)

It is not purely coincidence that film reflects the stark reality of violence against women, nor is the reason violence against women is so prevalent. Convergence argues that a meeting point exists between culture and the symbols within it (Giroux, 2009, p. 3). The culture of cruelty exists in the negotiation of liminal spaces where power imbalances are pervasive and within the framing of what is natural and unnatural resulting in punishment (Giroux, 2009, p. 3). Cruelty, Giroux (2009) argues, has to come to serve an almost pedagogical role,

Violence is not simply being transformed into an utterly distasteful form of adolescent entertainment or spectacularized to attract readers and boost profits, it becomes a powerful pedagogical force in the culture of cruelty by both aligning itself and becoming complicit with the very real surge of violence. (p. 4)

The possibility of media as a convergence between violence against women in rape-revenge horror and within society requires an examination of its presentation. This echoes Foucault's notion of the visible effects of power, but adds convergence as a kind of negotiation between the powerful and the powerless.

Laura Mulvey (1975) employs a close reading of the gaze structure in Hollywood narrative cinema in order to postulate a theory about film spectatorship; more specifically she articulates a "male gaze" theory of film (p. 713). The male gaze occurs in film when the audience takes on the perspective of a heterosexual man (Mulvey, 1975, p. 713). This is particularly true of horror cinema where the antagonist is nearly always male. Mulvey (1975) argues that the male gaze functions to objectify femininity as the male heterosexual lens lingers on the bodies of women in film – the disturbing and increasingly lengthy rape scenes in the films



under examination typify this (Mulvey, 1975, p. 716). Mulvey (1975) employs voyeurism and scopophilia to male gaze theory in order to show how the female “object” of the gaze functions as an object for both the male character whose perspective is used, and for the audience. This is particularly true of the nearly 30-minute-long rape scene in the original and remake of *I Spit on Your Grave*. The already victimized woman is left wandering naked through the woods as the camera tracks slowly across her body the whole way. The rape scene itself in the *Last House* remake is particularly repugnant in applying a soft-core pornographic aesthetic to the rape.

Scopophilia, pleasure in looking/gazing, is used to demonstrate that there are specific reasons that audiences accept the cinematic gaze as constructed (Mulvey, 1975, p. 716). In the first half of a rape-revenge horror film, it is nearly impossible to avoid identifying with the horrific trauma being experienced by the female, the object of the gaze, nonetheless is a sympathetic figure. Nevertheless, it is her femininity that is at the root of her suffering and at the center of the cinematic gaze. In the second half of the film, the woman (or her family) is little more than a monster and the gaze is directed instead at the carnage left by vengeance. The gaze remains a “male” gaze even when it is appropriated for female vengeance upon a very male crime.

Linda Williams (1999) provides a structure to compare violence in film with sexual material which she calls, “the frenzy of the visible” (p. 191). She defines this term in the context of the pornographic as well as in the horror genre in terms of penetration, “Like pornography, the slasher film pries open the fleshy secrets of normally hidden things” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 191). This is doubly true for rape-revenge horror as its halves present a violent pornographic aesthetic in the first half and a distinctive orgy of violence in the second. The “hard core” film uses sex as its frenzy culminating in “the money shot,” while the horror film

culminates in the death of the victim, but the final act of killing is no less a “money shot” (Williams, 1999, p. 36).

The current horror phenomena of “torture porn,” (of which rape-revenge horror is at least nominally a part) which amount to little more than snuff films, fit neatly within Mulvey’s analysis that the history of gender relations plays the dominant role in cinematic representation as they center around Williams’ notion of the “frenzy of the visible” (p. 19). The rape-revenge horror film is almost completely centered on the frenzy as conceived by Williams to the extent that the films, in their turn, present all or at least parts of what she calls “body genres” (melodramas, pornography, and horror) (Williams, 2009, p. 603). The first requires audience identification with the woman’s plight. While I would not summarily assign a sympathetic gaze to every viewer, the rape scenes are, by any account, sufficiently disturbing to cut through the artifice of film and provide identification with human suffering. A melodramatic reaction is possible and perhaps even likely, particularly for a person who has been victimized or has close ties to a victim. The rapes are presented in sufficiently pornographic fashion that beyond the fact that all the scenes are clearly constructed as rape, they retain enough of a pornographic aesthetic to be considered soft-core examples of violent pornography. The rape-revenge horror film contains elements most commonly found within violent pornography with sensibilities that tie them disturbingly to everyday life.

Carol Clover (1992) engages horror cinema, in particular the slasher genre, to argue against the claims of Mulvey that the audience sees the film through the eyes of the male perpetrator. Instead of sadistic pleasure in gazing, Clover argues that the audience ends up identifying with the “final girl,” the protagonist who ultimately kills the killer (Clover, 1992). While she acknowledges the cathartic role that such masochistic viewing habits would engender,

it is the role of the audience to identify with the “final girl” on her journey from passivity to dominance (from a female to a male paradigm) (Clover, 1992). The analysis of gender performativity in film and switching gendered roles is central to a narrative that turns the tables on its antagonists. Unlike the slasher film, the criminals (in rape-revenge) choose to become criminals through rape, they are peculiarly human before they make themselves less so. An artificial masculinity is applied to the female after she has had her femininity (ab)used in much the same way as the “final girl” transitions from passivity. The victim (or agents acting for a deceased/incapacitated victim) moves on from the object position, through absurdly horrific violence, to objectify her tormentors; their bodies exposed to at least the same degree of violence as hers.

As with Clover’s “final girl,” it is clear that the women in rape-revenge films are not merely the blank canvas for men’s criminality. Barbara Creed (1993) sought new terminology in which to articulate the role of the feminine gender in the horror film,

I have used the term ‘monstrous-feminine’ as the term ‘female monster’ implies a simple reversal of ‘male monster’. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity. (Kindle Locations 197-201).

In the rape-revenge horror film in particular it is only because of her vulnerable sexuality that she (or her parents) is able to become monstrous. In opposition to male monstrosity in the initial half

of the film, the victim-turned-avenger in the original *I Spit on Your Grave* in having survived her own attack, embodies the monster,

Jennifer's revenge is terrible, exact and executed in perfect style. She is transformed from a friendly, likeable but ordinary woman into a deadly and powerful killer. There is no suggestion that she will fail in the execution of her plans. From the moment she picks up her gun, dresses in black and asks God for forgiveness for what she is about to do, we know she – like the hero of the western – will hunt down each man and wipe him from the face of the earth. Filled with a terrible but perfectly justifiable wrath, Jennifer becomes the all-powerful, all-destructive, deadly femme *castratrice*. She appears to win, not lose, audience sympathy. (Creed, 1993) (Kindle Locations 2851-2855)

While Creed's (1993) statement here is accurate in portraying most of the important points of the revenge portion of the story, she goes on to note that explicit in the revenge in the original *Spit* (as well in the original *Last House*) is the need for female sexual stimulation to enact revenge (Kindle Location 2858). In a highly problematic scene that seems to move the virgin/whore dichotomy to a virgin/whore/monster trichotomy, Jennifer has consensual sex with one of her rapists in order to lure him to his death. "Woman signifies sex and death," says Creed (1993) in examining Jennifer's (and indeed this could be applied to Mari/Mari's mother in *Last House*) role in the film (Kindle Locations 2861-2862). The promise of sex drives the first half of the rape-revenge film while the fear of femininity drives the second.

## Overview

My analysis will begin in chapter one with an examination of genre and the placement of rape-revenge horror films within the wider scope of genre theory. A historical arc that details the coalescence of the rape-revenge horror genre into something distinct with its own set of aesthetic

will follow from a broader discussion of genre in general and horror film specifically. Cinematic history, particularly as articulated by Projansky (*Watching Rape*) will situate the elements of films in other genres into the rape-revenge horror film. Finally, the genre theory of Schatz, Altman, Clover, Wood, and others will be employed for use in a textual analysis of the films themselves to tease out the very specific qualities within the rape-revenge horror film.

Chapter two will engage theory interested in the construction of meaning from symbolic representation such as that of Propp, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Brashinsky. The rape-revenge films will be placed side-by-side in an attempt to get at their representation of “the real.” Textual analysis will be employed to expose the reality... and the artifice... of the story they construct vis-à-vis the story(ies) they simulate. The chapter will focus primarily on the construction of film as a simulation of the broader society.

In chapter three this project will seek to engage a discussion of gender and the roles gender plays in the narrative of the rape-revenge horror film. Gender theory, specifically that engaged with horror film more broadly and rape-revenge cinema more narrowly from authors such as Mulvey, Williams, Projansky, Kristeva, Creed, and Heller-Nicholas will be utilized to analyze the films themselves. The films under examination, while similar, have important differences that can be engaged on multiple levels through discussions on gender and the representation of gender in film.

Chapter four will ultimately serve as my conclusion and the discussion of the implications of the project as a whole. Implications will extend to the theoretical work covered including genre theory, symbolic theory, and gender theory. The project will be linked with broader themes of communicative behavior and possibilities for using the work to further thought in problematic cultural norms.

In analyzing rape-revenge horror films in general, and the five listed films specifically, many of the theoretical analyses will overlap as they reinforce one another. Genre is intimately intertwined with simulation while gender is innate in any discussion of the simulation of rape within the context of symbolic theory. While these concepts will be analyzed in separate chapters, the reliance they have on one another will naturally show through as a cohesive whole in examining rape-revenge horror films. Indeed such overlap is actually desirable as it points to the interconnectedness of the concepts with the films and shows broad social implications within a relatively narrow scope of study.

## II. Making the Monster: Rape-Revenge Horror as a Genre

*Look! It's moving. It's — it's... it's alive. It's alive... It's alive, it's moving, it's alive! It's alive, it's alive, it's alive! It's ALIVE!* – Dr. Henry Frankenstein, *Frankenstein* (1931)

### Building Horror

The genre of a film is always at issue when seeking to examine its constituent parts in any meaningful way; it provides the framework for such scrutiny. By examining the aesthetics of a particular film it is possible to pinpoint the expectations that surround a film and ascertain its purpose. Generic conventions are and must be contextualized. Films, as cultural productions, do not exist in a vacuum and though it is true that new genres constantly arise, the films under examination are an example of such, they have their basis in some previous era. The horror genre, as Rick Altman, Noël Carroll, and others note,

Borrows from a nineteenth-century literary tradition their dependence on the presence of a monster. In doing so, they clearly perpetuate the linguistic meaning of the monster ("threatening inhuman being"), but at the same time, by developing new syntactic ties, they generate an important new set of textual meanings. (Altman, 2009, p. 561)

The presence of the monster and the monster's origin in rape-revenge horror is established as having many of the same parallels as "classic" literary monsters. However the monstrous feminine of rape-revenge horror clearly fits within a contemporary context and not within the overreaching of science vis-à-vis the divine. In speaking of contextual syntaxes Altman states,

With the horror film, a different syntax rapidly equates monstrosity not with the overactive nineteenth-century mind, but with an equally overactive twentieth-century body. Again and again, the monster is identified with his human counterpart's unsatisfied

sexual appetite, thus establishing with the same primary "linguistic" materials (the monster, fear, the chase, death) entirely new textual meanings, phallic rather than scientific in nature. (Altman, 2009, pp. 561-562)

The “unsatisfied sexual appetite” is the catalyst in rape-revenge horror in the same vein as unrequited sexual appetites drive the action in Carol Clover’s conception of the slasher psychokiller (Clover, 1992, p. 23). It is clear however, that the sexual gratification of the rapists carries the same penalty as sexual gratification of an unmarried female in the slasher film. In both cases it is still the “overactive twentieth-century body” that leads to the semantic building blocks – the monster, fear, the chase, and death – that characterize the horror film more generally.

It is instructive to examine the semantics of the slasher genre and their interplay with the social context which allows for the syntax of the rape-revenge horror genre hybrid. If the monster is the classic, then certainly the “psychokiller” is a contemporary stand-in for the monsters of yore. They are created, as mentioned, in much the same way as classic monsters save that their construction reflects the cultural malaise (perceived or real) that contemporary society concerns itself with. In the modern (post-World War I) era, society has become far more secularly-oriented and worries less about offending the divine and more about how children are raised – thus the psychokiller is the product of a poor (literal or figurative) family life (Clover, 1992, p. 23). The monstrous feminine (or the parents turned psychotics) is created by the extension of this process and shares a number of similarities to classic or even mythological monsters. Barbara Creed writes,

Why is the femme castratrice, one of the more deadly personae adopted by the monstrous-feminine, almost always represented as fulfilling a stereotypical image of



female beauty? For she clearly comes across as a modern-day version of the ancient Sirens, those mythological figures who lured sailors to their doom through the beauty of their song. (Creed, 1993, p. 140)

The assaulted woman is the victim of cultural malaise, embodied by the men who rape her, who are themselves supposedly representative of humanity gone wrong (rather than representative of humanity in general, a distinction that will be made clear in the following chapters). As a semantic building block of the rape-revenge horror genre, the monster effectively follows the syntactic formula colored by shifting societal concerns.

The other semantic pieces of the horror equation that Altman mentions, fear, the chase, and death, are more obviously presented in rape-revenge horror generally and in the films under examination specifically. The fear is generated by one of two occurrences – in *The Last House on the Left* films it arises when the criminals, taking shelter at the house of the murdered girls' parents, realize that the parents are trying to kill them. The unexpected, monstrous ferocity of the ostensibly “soft” upper-middle class, the people they have preyed upon, generates genuine fear for their lives. It is difficult for the criminals to conceive of death at the hands of seemingly normal wealthy people, the monster wears a face they never expected. The original *I Spit on your Grave* film features Jennifer's character as a Siren – a beautiful woman from a distance, a monster up close. In the contemporary *Spit* films it is the ethereal quality of the woman who is supposed to be dead; she appears not unlike the ghostly character in Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2002) as both Jennifer and Katie (in the 2009 remake and 2013 sequel respectively) often appear only out of the corner of the eye as an apparition. The fear increases as the women take on that supernatural air of invincibility and comes to a head as each man's life is held in the grip of the monster they created. The chase in both *Last House* and *Spit* (originals and remakes)



From left to right: *The Ring* (2002); Jennifer, *I Spit on your Grave* (2010); Katie, *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (2013)

resembles the stalking scenes from the *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* series. The death scenes in the originals resemble, as stated, those graphic but mostly short murders found in famous horror series. Death in the contemporary version of the films means brutal and lengthy torture; mercy is in the hands of a woman or girl's parents to whom the rapists showed none. Jennifer, for example has one of the men, Andy, tied up over a bathtub filling with water. Andy is precariously balanced over the tub where he must hold himself up or risk drowning. Andy says, "I'm sorry. Please." To which Jennifer replies, "Please? Please is what I said to you. You said..." "Suck it bitch." Jennifer shoves his head underwater then pulls him back out. "Does that ring any bells? Suck... it... bitch..." The scene continues in that vein until she finally kills him by putting lye into the bathtub water. As he is eventually unable to hold himself up his face goes into the water, the lye melts his face, and drowns him. Many of the contemporary scenes are similar to this in tone – though both the originals and the remakes appropriate the male position through violence, only the remakes also appropriate male innuendo and language during the kills. This particular scene is one of the least brutal of the kill scenes. As previously stated the horror aesthetic, especially contemporary horror, is highlighted by implausibly gruesome and elaborate kill scenes. The death scenes in the originals were fairly extreme for their era, but as Altman notes, the semantic building blocks of a genre form themselves around the contextual syntactics of the era (Altman, 2009, p. 561).

## **Of Monsters and Men**

The horror story (and its derivatives) has historically occupied a unique place in the cultural unconscious in re-creating primal human fears in an ostensibly “safe” place. Noël Carroll (1990), in *The Philosophy of Horror*, makes a distinction between “art-horror” and “natural horror” (p. 12). The explanation Carroll undertakes in separating these is horror as story (art-horror) versus things that are horrible or horrifying. Carroll uses the example, “What the Nazi’s did was horrible,” in order to illustrate what he means in terms of “natural horror” – that which occurs in the real world as horrible or horrifying (Carroll, 1990, p. 12). Conversely, Carroll notes that art-horror centers on a monster and seeks to produce specific effects in audience – horror (Carroll, 1990, p. 15). Ultimately it is the relationship to the monster that defines (or fails to define) a horror story – both the characters in the film and the audience watching the film. The reaction to the monster must effect horror vis-à-vis the characters in the story, but in most cases the audience’s reactions will run parallel to those of the characters (Carroll, 1990, p. 17). The question in defining the key semantic building block of horror is thus, “What is a monster?”

A monster, according to Carroll, engenders horror in those who encounter it, both within and outside the story itself (Carroll, 1990, p. 17). The reactions of those within the film gives visual cues to the audience on how to react; a character shudders when touched by Dracula for example (Carroll, 1990, p. 17). The reaction of revulsion points to an impurity within the monster, contamination of some sort. Carroll argues that only in horror do the emotions of the characters reacting to the monster almost always mirror those emotions the audience is supposed to feel (Carroll, 1990, p. 18). The monster is revolting and causes revulsion, the unclean nature

of the monster produces affective responses. Carroll notes the following with regard to necessary characteristics of the art-horror monster,

It is crucial that two evaluative components come into play: that the monster is regarded as threatening *and* impure. If the monster were only evaluated as potentially threatening, the emotion would be fear; if only potentially impure, the emotion would be disgust. Art-horror requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust. (Carroll, 1990, p. 28)

At first glance it seems that such a construction eliminates the vengeful woman (or her parents) of the rape-revenge horror film as they are recognizably human and normal enough in their appearance. There is nothing obviously impure about them – nothing that immediately points to them as monsters. Indeed the first half of the rape-revenge horror film seems to construct them as the antithesis of the monster and the men, the rapists, as the monsters. The men, after all commit acts which revolt the female victim (and the audience); their appearance and personalities is also portrayed as non-normative. However, monsters, for Carroll, do not merely exist – they are created.

Rape, as much as we would wish it otherwise, is a cultural norm. It is a crime, but one that is tacitly accepted as an action of an uncontrollable male libido, an action brought on by feminine temptress, an action constructed as one in which the victim is often complicit in the crime against her. The result, in the context of rape-revenge horror, is that the rape functions in a similar fashion to the potion Dr. Jekyll consumes, the lightning that animates Dr. Frankenstein's creation. It is not Victor Frankenstein or Henry Jekyll that is the monster, but rather that which they created. In other words, the rape creates the monster – a being that did not previously exist. In applying Carroll's theory to the assertion that otherwise normal women (or parents) become monsters in the rape-revenge horror film, it is useful to consider his idea of "impurity." Carroll

states, “Some monsters are things already adjudged impure and interstitial in the culture” (Carroll, 1990, p. 33). Thus impurity is a function of judgment within specific cultural contexts. The reality of the U.S. cultural context can be seen in the fact that domestic violence and sexual assault can still be classified as a pre-existing condition in eight states that can disqualify women from obtaining health insurance. (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). There exists no law that prevents male sex *offenders* from obtaining health insurance. Based on such cases it is possible to paint a picture of what contemporary Western societies consider “impure.” While the woman in the rape-revenge horror film does not begin impure, neither does Henry Jekyll. In both cases a catalyst is required to begin the transformation from human to monster.

Within the process of the transformation of purity to impurity also lies the growing threat the monster represents. Again it useful to utilize, as Carroll does, the example of Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. Carroll writes, “Stevenson’s most famous monster is two men, Jekyll and Hyde, where Hyde is described as having a simian aspect that is not quite human” (Carroll, 1990, p. 33). This lack of humanity often manifests itself physically but can also be revealed in different ways. In the rape-revenge horror films under examination, we see average people become unstoppable agents of vengeance. In examining a quote from Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine*, “She is transformed from a friendly, likeable but ordinary woman into a deadly and powerful killer,” we can begin to identify the women with Carroll’s monster (Creed, 1993, p. 141). The Jennifer Hills character in both *Spit* films (as well as the Katie character in *Spit 2*) is a slight woman of far below average weight and lacking any apparent martial abilities. The father in both *Last House* films is a doctor while the mother is shown as an average American housewife. The avenging characters in these films are nothing resembling the main characters who avenge in *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), or *Rambo* (1982) – the former features a police

detective while the latter two were ex-military, trained killers all. The rape facilitates the transformation from person to something else. In the original *Spit* film Jennifer's first murder is nothing less than a feat of superhuman strength which defies the very laws of physics as she manages to hoist a man who looks to be twice her weight off the ground using a rope and single branch. The threat is created, "From the moment she picks up her gun, dresses in black and asks God for forgiveness for what she is about to do, we know she – like the hero of the western – will hunt down each man and wipe him from the face of the earth" (Creed, 1993, p. 141). There is never a moment where it seems as though the agent or agents of vengeance may fail; the result is a series of increasingly sadistic murders.

The woman or her agents become the monster; they have no choice but to do so. The only possible outcome is the death of the rapists. That the vengeance requires severing connection to the obvious humanity shown by these characters earlier in the narrative typifies Carroll's construction of the monster – that humanity is literally and figuratively stripped from the woman during the rape. The woman's perceived impurity, by virtue of her rape, renders her beyond the boundaries of normative culture and able to become the monster necessary to take revenge. The monstrous aspect is produced by a patriarchal structure that removes power from the feminine, to reclaim it the agent or agents of vengeance must turn their back on normalcy. As Robin Wood (2012) states, "The definition of normality in horror films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them (Kindle Locations 2431-2432). The structures of normalcy in the five films under examination are either broken, useless, absent, or even complicit – leaving the agent or agents of vengeance little choice but to perform "the monstrous." The brutal and horrific ways revenge is taken in these films, in all cases including a

castration, moves the audience (particularly a male audience) to react with disgust – even if the audience’s sympathies lie with the woman-turned-monster. Creed’s notion of, “the monstrous feminine,” is seen clearly as an extension of Carroll’s philosophy of art-horror monster. The feminine, in the rape-revenge horror film, is representative of both sex and death in much the same way the monster functions as symbolic of impurity and threat. The first half of a rape-revenge horror film is thus an exemplar of “art-horror.” It is horrific in the presentation of brutal and sadistic rape; it creates a monster beyond the bounds of the cultural context in the sense that it tells a rape myth, rather than a story of statistically probable rape. The latter half of the films focus on a creature (or creatures) that defy definition within the normative human condition, powerful women who kill – normal people made into unstoppable killing machines. It is the break from normalcy that creates a culturally consistent monster. The dark reflection or “doppelgänger,” to use Wood’s terminology, renders the monster culturally recognizable but still monstrous – the agent or agents vengeance appear the same, but act far beyond the bounds of the normal (Wood, 2012).

### **The Horror Aesthetic**

A monster that is consistent with horror is far from the only consideration in calling a film “horror.” It is a necessary condition, but one which is insufficient, as a dragon in a fantasy tale may function in much the same way as a monster in a horror film. The monster is instead one of a number of semantic building blocks of the genre. Rick Altman states, “The semantics of a genre include a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like.” (Altman, 2009, p. 556) As mentioned the rape-revenge film, that is to say films that contain a rape followed by some sort of revenge, is nothing particularly new. Rather it is the rape-revenge horror film that is a new(er) genre hybrid as its existence begins firmly in the post-

Classical period beginning with the original *Last House*. The rape-revenge horror films in general and the five films under examination specifically exemplify Thomas Schatz's notion of, "genres of determinate space" (Schatz, 2009, p. 571). Schatz states, "In a genre of determinate space we have a symbolic arena of action. It represents a cultural realm in which fundamental values are in a state of sustained conflict" (Schatz, 2009, pp. 570-571). Isolation then, being in a place that is not culturally normative for a woman to be alone, is at contest. Essentially the rape-revenge horror film requires liminal spaces to contest. Both Maris in the *Last House* films seek to find drugs before a concert, a place where suburban normalcy often meets aberrant criminality. The New York-based Jennifer in *Spit* and its remake take a trip to the country where urban excess often comes at the expense of rural life. Katie's isolation, though enforced, is lingual as well as cultural as she is kidnapped and taken to Bulgaria.

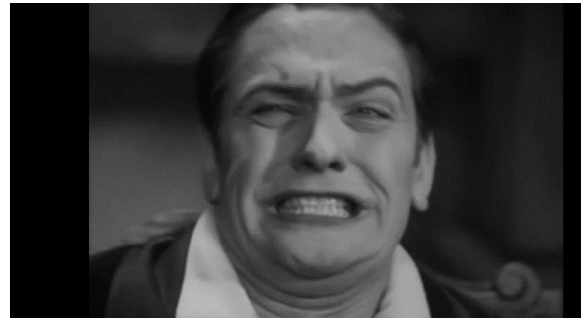
A rape-revenge film is essentially indistinguishable from a crime drama and indeed the initial part of the rape-revenge horror film follows that formula. A woman is by herself in a location where her safety is uncertain. The woman is set upon by a group of thugs and sexually assaulted largely due to the isolation of the woman from a clearly safe location. The preceding austere plot summary covers the first part of famous films such as *The Virgin Spring* (1960), *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), and *The Accused* (1988). These films are in no way horror films as the revenge portion deals with the morality of revenge or else seeks justice – the latter a concept completely separate from revenge. By contrast, the rape-revenge horror film creates a monster or monsters that take a type of sadistic revenge that has nothing to do with the legal concept justice, but rather with personalized, phony moral equivalent of the same. In the absence of justice a monster may act beyond its bounds; Dracula survives by drinking blood, Dr. Jekyll frees himself of social constraints, and Norman Bates suffers a complete psychological



break (as opposed to confronting his repressed memories). The feminine monster is created through violent sexual assault in much the same vein as the violent transformation of other monsters. Carroll notes the interstitial nature of monsters in culture but neglects the violence that is the hallmark of the transformation. Henry Jekyll chokes, groans, and clutches his chair as Hyde is drawn forth. A werewolf contorts and shrieks in pain as his body becomes covered in hair, teeth and claws.



*An American Werewolf in London* (1981)



*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932)

In this same vein is the monster drawn forth from the feminine. Against the culturally normative nature assigned to her she comes to embody the characteristics of the masculine monsters mentioned above. She is amoral, vicious, sadistically brutal, and unstoppable. The parents in the *Last House* films are likewise transformed. Barbara Creed stated the following in regards to the original *Spit* film,

It is important to note that the scenes in which Jennifer carries out her revenge are deliberately eroticized. Woman is monstrous because she castrates, or kills, the male during coition. The first killing, which sets the scene for the later murders, is clearly in the mode of a sacrificial rite. Jennifer is dressed in the garb of a priestess or nymph. She lures her victim into the woods with the promise of sexual bliss. The victim dies, strangled in her noose, just as he achieves orgasm. Woman signifies sex and death. (Creed, 1993, p. 141)

Beyond the visceral rape action that is transformative, it is presented to the audience that the rapists are about to become the hunted, that they have indeed created a monster.



From left to right: Dr. Collingwood (1972), Dr. Collingwood and Emma Collingwood (2009) *The Last House on the Left*



From left to right: Jennifer (1978), Jennifer, (2010), Katie (2013) *I Spit on Your Grave*

The above screen captures represent the victims-turned-remorseless-killers having completed or in the act of murder. The original Dr. Collingwood is in the act of using a chainsaw upon the gang leader, Krug. The contemporary Dr. Collingwood is using a scalpel to sever the spine of the contemporary gang leader; his wife looks, without shock, at the nude, bleeding body of the female criminal she has just killed. Jennifer from the 1972 *Spit* listens impassively to classical music as a man she has just castrated screams and bleeds to death locked in her upstairs bathroom. Jennifer, from the 2010 *Spit* film, holding a pair of gardening shears as she prepares to cut off the penis of a man whose teeth she just removed. Katie, in *Spit 2*, shrieks at a naked, bleeding man she is slowly slicing and subsequently rubbing waste into the wounds; a slow, rotting death awaits him. Their representation marks them as remorseless killers, their conversion from victim is thus complete. The transformation the female undergoes (or her parents as a result of discovering her violation) marks the movement from a crime drama aesthetic to that of a horror film. That brutal vengeance does not occur in films such as *The*

*Accused* marks such film's separation from that of rape-revenge horror films. The resolution of the film, the revenge sequence in the *Last House* and *Spit* films versus the legal outcome *The Accused*, marks the former as rape-revenge horror and the latter as a courtroom drama that contains a version of rape-revenge. The second half of the films under examination evinces a subgenre of horror that focuses on a particular style of killing; that of the slasher subgenre.

The slasher (horror film) genre, as defined by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992), is quite far removed from the "art-horror" Carroll focuses on – even while sharing many of the same characteristics in terms of its monster (Clover, 1992, p. 21). The slasher film is of the exploitation ilk and is not often mentioned in the same vein as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or *Psycho*; yet the slasher monster is conceived of in the same way as characters from films of much greater recognition. Clover writes,

The slasher is the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived. Drenched in taboo and encroaching vigorously on the pornographic, the slasher film lies by and large beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience. (Clover, 1992, p. 21)

While clearly not the plot of the films under examination, I would argue that the rape-revenge horror film merely reimagines the austere plot of the slasher film and adapts it to a real, societal issue. The criminals who rape and leave the girl/woman for dead create a "final girl" of sorts – this is not the heroine but rather an anti-hero who becomes the psychokiller. The revenge sequence is carried out with every bit of the brutality utilized by slasher villains though we see a distinct shift from the originals to their remakes. The originals paralleled the types of slasher killings seen in films like *Psycho* (1960) or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) with the male

parent in *Last House* utilizing a chainsaw and the *Spit* star killing with a noose, axe, and knife. It is important to reiterate Creed's point about the interplay of sex and death as Estelle Collingwood in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) kills by biting off a criminal's penis and Jennifer Hills from *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) literally kills during sex acts. Nevertheless, the kills are fairly tame. The newer films demonstrate a great deal of similarity to "new slasher" films (colloquially known as "torture porn") such as *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) in which elaborate and sadistic torture, rather than killing implements, is the method of revenge. The line between sex and violence, always razor thin, has become blurred – the gang rape in the first half of the films becomes an orgy of sadistic murder in the second.

Clover's point of the films "verging on the pornographic" is well-taken; particularly in applying the slasher aesthetic to the rape-revenge horror film. In a very real sense the films entertain violent pornography in their depiction of women's bodies as used for male sexual gratification. Combining such frank, disturbing, and lengthy depictions of sexual violence with exceedingly gory revenge by the women, thus appropriating male power and position through violence, creates a twist on the slasher film – one which points squarely at a horror film aesthetic. There exists a clear connection to the modern horror film, as laid out by Clover in discussing *Psycho*,

The killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness. None of these features is original, but the unprecedented success of Hitchcock's particular formulation, above all the sexualization of both motive and action, prompted a flood of imitations and variations. (Clover, 1992, pp. 23-24)

In the rape-revenge horror film, the killer is the woman, a product not of a sick family but of perverted criminals – she or her parents clearly break from societal taboos regarding killing. She appears the same as her victim’s persona save the grimness of her countenance. The location is always away from prying eyes; isolation is a key feature of all the films under examination. Her or her parents’ kills always register the horror on her/their victim’s faces. The films are drenched in sexualized violence. The women are the first victims, with that ordeal creating a motive for the revenge sequence in which the men are victimized.

### **In a Nightmare, Darkly**

When we watch or examine a horror film, we are choosing to enter into a waking nightmare of sorts. Whether we want to speak of Freudian psychoanalytic theory in which the monster is a repressed part of the Id or Lacanian mirror theory in which we perhaps engage horror films to look upon (and recognize) those parts of ourselves which remain forever locked away, there is a tacit understanding that there is some connection to the material. Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* (2012) states,

Popular films, then, respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences, the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology. It becomes easy, if this is granted, to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our collective nightmares. (Kindle Locations 2408-2411)

This begs the further question of context in terms of the horror film; what is it about the periods in which the films under examination were made that create these particular, collective nightmares?

Wood writes extensively about the historicization of the horror film and the ways in which the subject matter fits into various societal contexts. He brings, however, with a simple formula by which to recognize the horror film,

At this stage it is necessary to offer a simple and obvious basic formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the Monster. I use ‘normality’ here in a strictly nonevaluative sense to mean simply ‘conformity to the dominant social norms’. (Kindle Locations 2419-2421)

Contextualizing the rape-revenge horror films of the 1970s, the original *Last House* and *Spit* specifically, lies Second Wave feminism of which sexual freedom of women’s bodies was a key tenet. The Monster (to use Wood’s identification) is a result of a patriarchal structure that represses that femininity. This does not mean that the rape-revenge horror film is part of the feminist movement, rather it is a reaction to it. The raped women are culturally normative in appearance; young, slender, and white. It is that normative femininity that renders the women rapable and the Monster is a horror depiction of expressed femininity that threatens patriarchal norms, providing a negative connotation.

The nightmare then is a change in social norms, replacing the “normal” with the Monster or the possibility of that replacement. Horror films express the desire for a return to normality. In comparing the aforementioned “boring” ideal of normality in horror films to the Monster, Wood states,

The formula provides three variables: normality, the Monster, and, crucially, the relationship between the two... The Monster is, of course, much more protean, changing from period to period as society’s basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments. (Kindle Locations 2430-2433)

In the rape-revenge horror films under examination we can see all of the aforementioned criteria Wood lays out for us. Normality is certainly patriarchy; specifically white patriarchy that relies on “good ‘ole fashion gumption.” While rape-revenge horror acknowledges rape as a crime that merits justice, this does not change the fact that the victim of the rape or her family is clearly the Monster. The institutions that defend normality are conspicuously absent, inept (the original *Last House* contains a bizarre “Keystone Cops” narrative throughout) or in the remakes of both *Spit* and *Last House*, actually complicit in the crime. In the 1970s, society’s struggle to accept women as fully functioning members of society allowed the placement of the feminine monster.

The defining feature of the horror film, according to Wood, is the utilization of the Monster to expose cultural nightmares. Films, as cultural productions, contextualize their era to provide for Schatz’s unspoken “contract” between audience and film that genre creates. To reiterate Schatz, “Whereas the genre exists as a sort of tacit ‘contract’ between the filmmakers and the audience, the genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract” (Schatz, 2009, p. 564). Creating a nightmare for consumption relies upon this negotiative process in the sense that the film must address the nightmarish properties of the current day. Horror films in general and subgenres of horror specifically must adapt to their context. The original *Last House* film’s plot centers on the peace symbol given to Mari by her parents (as a birthday present) at the beginning of the film. The same necklace, violently ripped from her, is the catalyst for discovering what became of their missing daughter. The peace symbol was of course a consistent representation of anti-war/anti-violence protests during the Vietnam War. Using that particular sign to facilitate the proof of violence contextualizes the film’s era and its appropriation can be seen as engaging in that debate to a degree. Much of the nightmare, for Mari and her friend, takes place in a tractless forest in much the same style as movies about the Vietnam War. The violence, the

symbolism, and the setting recall the particular cultural nightmare of the Vietnam War. That the Monster(s) of that film kill in and around the home speaks again to the conflict within the United States – a conflict that was literally brought home in any number of ways.

*I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), also filmed during Second-Wave feminism yet closer to the resurgence of the religious right during the Reagan-era, fits the conservative backlash against feminism to a greater degree than *Last House*. The female protagonist, Jennifer Hills, is an educated writer with enough means to be able to rent a home and try to break her writer's block while taking a vacation. Her rapists are lower class men, but clearly far less “normally deviant” than the criminals in *Last House*. Jennifer ultimately must sink even below her attackers to obtain even a modicum of justice, albeit in a depraved and personalized form. The original title of *Spit, Day of the Woman*, seems out of place given the context of the film's particular nightmare.

The contemporary remakes fit the current pre-occupation of the nightmare “Other.” Wood notes that othering is linked to repression which is in turn linked to the place from which the context of the nightmare originates. Wood states,

Closely linked to the concept of repression—indeed, truly inseparable from it—is another concept necessary to an understanding of ideology on which psychoanalysis throws much light, the concept of “the Other.” Otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself. (Kindle Locations 2294-2297)

Female sexuality and the repression of sexuality is not limited to the context of the 1970s - 80s, but is certainly part of the contemporary framework the remakes exist within. Femininity is



rendered as the “Other” in both the rape and revenge sequences of the films as the concept is, as Wood suggests, annihilated. It is male power, through violence, that provides justice; there is no need or place for feminism (or indeed outside systems to intervene in a “woman’s problem”). The current horror film, especially those new slasher films (torture porn), must push the boundaries as representative of the aforementioned annihilation – the contract between the contemporary audience and filmmaker is thus fulfilled.

The rape-revenge horror genre is certainly a hybrid, for as Stephen Neale (2012) noted, genre is invariably a process rather than an endpoint (Neale, 2012). Rape as a plot device did not begin with the films under examination or even with *The Virgin Spring*. Rather, as Projansky notes, rape is at issue in all films which focus upon femininity as a plot device (Projansky, 2001). Revenge stories likewise date back long before film; the Greek Pantheon invariably seeks revenge against one another for slights that seem rather unworthy for the divine. The horror film too has its precursors in the literary tradition that existed long before film. That these elements coalesced in the 1970s to spawn a rape-revenge horror (sub)genre is telling, given the cultural context of the era. This points back at Neale’s assertion that genre’s evolve to meet cultural expectations, rather than being static with consistently identifiable elements.

The combination of generic elements, remnants of cultural norms and archetypes, mirrors the way society transforms itself to react to events. This is not particularly surprising, given that films are nothing more or less than cultural productions and cultural *reproductions*. Ultimately, in the process of examining generic conventions that a genre espouses, it is possible to see cultural norms which the genre seeks to represent; simulation of the cultural context.

### III. It's Only a Movie: Adaptation and Simulation in Rape-Revenge Horror Film



All societies are storytelling societies, though the form the stories take vary wildly in both form and function. The common thread is that it is through stories that we produce and reproduce cultural norms – the archetypal ascriptions we give to roles within particular cultures. The analysis of stories, in all their forms, tells the tale of what a culture treasures. Conversely it also reminds its populace of those behaviors that ought to be avoided, lest various forms of censure fall unwanted upon one's head. Of reality, Jean Baudrillard writes,

On the surface there appears to be no criminal, no evidence, no motive, and no victim.

On the surface there appears to be no crime at all; yet a crime has been committed – we know there must be some crime because we've seen it, at the edges of our consciousness and right in front of our faces. On the surface it appears, by any account, to be the perfect crime. The truth of the crime forever withdrawn by the illusion that no crime exists and indeed its secret would never be revealed for want of clues left behind. (The Perfect Crime, 1996, pp. 1-2)

Cinema is a unique medium for storytelling as it subsumes the immediate need for interpretation; rather it provides all aspects of the story, the words *and* accompanying imagery. It is the images that are of primary concern given their power to replace the imagination of an individual, an audience, and indeed a culture. The images provide context for the story without which a film

would merely be a book on tape. These images, along with their attendant audio, function as metaphors for proper societal roles. It is not enough to note that they tell a story, of course they do; it is their story that is of great interest. The poster, for *The Last House on the Left* (1972), at the header of this section seeks to advertise the extremes it which it goes, but tempers that by reminding the audience of its non-reality. It attempts to draw attention both to and away from its artifice. Its story, the story of cinema in a larger sense, is one of a great crime. It is the story of the truth, that it is never, *only a movie*.

### **The Perfect Crime**

The reality/non-reality of cinema allows for artistic license that can create/recreate some of the vile, sadistic, and brutal scenes in human history. Indeed events which have never and would likely be impossible to ever occur have been committed to our visual cultural consciousness. Cinema and television is nothing more or less than the product of cultural imagination and collective thought. The collectivity of the cinematic apparatus reproduce virtually every aspect of human life, even if the accuracy is somewhat lacking. One shudders to think that *The Human Centipede* (2006) might survive to tell some sort of tale. In discussing the nature of reality Baudrillard comments,

The perfection of the crime lies in the fact that it has always – already been accomplished. A misappropriation of the world as it is, before it even shows itself. It will never, therefore, be discovered. There will be no Last Judgment to punish or pardon it. There will be no end, because the crime has always – already happened. Neither resolution nor absolution, but rather the inevitable unfolding of the consequences. Perpetuation of the original crime – which we might perhaps be said to find in derisory

form in the current procession of simulacra – continually recreates itself within the cultural context. (The Perfect Crime, 1996, pp. 1-2)

As the poster for the original *Last House* states however, “It’s only a movie.” The person who seeks out a film understands that the film they see is not reality. The film, in many cases, may not even be a parody of reality, as is the rape-revenge horror film. There is always, on some level, a tacit understanding regarding the veracity of what the person is about to witness. The act of seeing the film nonetheless requires knowledge of the world else the subject could not be produced. Even the most implausible films has a connection to the real, even if the real, as Baudrillard states, is exposed as deceptive in its existence,

But in reality no crime is ever perfect, for its illusion is betrayed by the very shadow it casts, by a world which points to its non-existence as the source of the sin. In reality, the lack of tangibility in which the crime exists – its continuity of oblivion – leaves traces. In this way its secret is betrayed. The crime thus allows itself to be recognized in the dearth of evidence, the lack of motive, the absence of apparent victims; while at the same time hidden behind the contradiction of its nonexistence. (The Perfect Crime, 1996, pp. 1-2)

The cinematic product has its impetus in a number of locations. The actors want more parts and to be recognized/paid for their work, the director and/or writer may merely want to see their vision on screen, but the production company is certainly hoping to make money; the clearest path to that wish is to give people what they desire. In the rape-revenge horror specifically, and in exploitation horror more generally, that mostly involves breasts and blood. The consumer of cinematic artifacts is necessarily complicit with the exploitation of the crime of rape to make money. The crime of rape is consequently compounded by the non-reality it is presented as in the cinematic format. Baudrillard further states,

Our destiny is the accomplishment of this crime, its inexorable unfolding, the continuity of the evil, the continuation of the shadow it casts. We remain unable to comprehend and experience the primal scene that is its referent, but at every moment we experience its temporal extension without expiation. That there exists no apparent end to this cycle renders the consequences incalculable. (The Perfect Crime, 1996, pp. 1-2)

The final line of Baudrillard's reflections upon the reality/non-reality paradigm can be linked with the cultural reality of rape. The myths and reality of rape are endlessly produced and reproduced, the films under examination being of both the former and the latter. The consequences are already real as evidenced by the epidemic of sexual violence against women, but the cycle is not yet complete.

### **Rape Culture in Storytelling**

When we address "rape culture" we are often speaking about it as a contemporary issue, some modern-day malaise that has infected current society. Speaking about rape culture in such a manner badly misses the fact that rape has been a part of almost every culture and has existed in the U.S. context since the founding of the country. Historicizing the concept of rape and its meaning in stories will assist in placing the rape-revenge horror film within an overarching variety of texts that involve rape.

One of the most famous mythological creation stories in the Greek pantheon is of a rape, The Rape of Persephone. The relevant pieces of the story are as follows,

Demeter had an only daughter, Persephone, the maiden of the spring. She lost her and in her terrible grief she withheld her gifts from the earth, which turned into a frozen desert.

The lord of the dark underworld, the king of the multitudinous dead, carried her off when, enticed by the wondrous bloom of the narcissus, she strayed too far from her companions. In his chariot drawn by coal-black steeds he rose up through a chasm in the earth, and grasping the maiden by the wrist set her beside him. He bore her away weeping, down to the underworld. The high hills echoed her cry and the depths of the sea, and her mother heard it. She sped like a bird over sea and land seeking her daughter. But no one would tell her the truth, “no man, nor god, nor any sure messenger from the birds.”

That year was most dreadful and cruel for mankind over all the earth. Nothing grew; no seed sprang up; in vain the oxen drew the plowshare through the furrows. It seemed the whole race of men would die of famine. At last Zeus saw that he must take the matter in hand. He sent the gods to Demeter, one after another, to try to turn her from her anger, but she listened to none of them. Never would she let the earth bear fruit until she had seen her daughter. Then Zeus realized that his brother must give way. He told Hermes to go down to the underworld and to bid the lord of it let his bride go back to Demeter.

Hermes found the two sitting side by side, Persephone shrinking away, reluctant because she longed for her mother. At Hermes' words she sprang up joyfully, eager to go. Her husband knew that he must obey the word of Zeus and send her up to earth away from him, but he prayed her as she left him to have kind thoughts of him and not be so sorrowful that she was the wife of one who was great among the immortals. And he made her eat a pomegranate seed, knowing in his heart that if she did so she must return to him. (Hamilton, 1942, pp. 49-52)

The story is of great interest considering how we teach young women about rape. It is nearly always a woman's (or girl's) problem. Avoid going out alone lest you be set upon by a stranger

lurking in the darkness. Persephone's story embodies the "stranger abduction rape" that is in clear evidence in rape-revenge horror cinema as well as within society as a whole. It is worth noting that the abduction resulted in marriage. The original poem that told the tale does not mention consent to a marriage as part of the kidnap, nor does it indicate that any such consent was needed from either Persephone or her mother. Indeed it is instructive that this famous story only resulted in some manner of justice due to the possible death of all mankind only then with patriarchal intervention.

The purpose of retelling this tale is to show that the films under examination do not have their roots in some sort of recent phenomena, rather their stories are consistent with the tales that have always been told. More importantly, the tales that have been told and retold can be seen in the contemporary cultural mythos. The language in the story provides an architecture for creating the myths and archetypes which serve to construct societal values. The "dark stranger" who abducts and rapes is still present in the cultural construction of the story of rape. The Miss USA pageant (June 8th, 2014) showcased that this architecture is still used. When asked about the growing problem of sexual assaults on college campuses, the eventual winner Miss Nevada stated the following, "More awareness is very important so that women can learn how to protect themselves" (NBC Universal, 2014). The implication is that it is the responsibility of a female college student to not get raped, just as Persephone's abduction was her own fault as she strayed too far from her companions.

Tales are omnipresent within every aspect of cultural norms and are endlessly produced and reproduced. Cinema is nothing more or less than one contemporary method of passing on tales – stories with embedded value systems. The reality is that the tale rarely changes as Vladimir Propp (1968) noted, "We shall see that the tale ascribes with great ease identical

actions to persons, objects, and animals” (Kindle location 397). The “tale” of rape as a woman’s responsibility has proliferated with many/most of the same actors as in Greek mythology. Propp goes on to state the following with regards to the actors of a tale, the *dramatis personae*,

The names of the *dramatis personae* change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale according to the functions of its *dramatis personae*. (Kindle Locations 662-663)

The rape of Persephone is again instructive as a starting point as it hails from a seventh or eighth century Homeric Hymn (Hamilton, 1942, p. 49). While certainly nowhere near the earliest writings, the fact that the same story is still used as a cautionary tale for young women over a millennium later points to its veracity as presenting enduring cultural values. In utilizing Propp’s assertion, Persephone’s abductor Hades functions in a very similar way to the criminals in both *Last House* films as Mari’s character leaves the safety of her parent’s home and was looking to buy marijuana (before a concert) in both versions. Interestingly enough, both Persephone and Mari could be said to be looking for “weed” (the narcissus can refer to the common dandelion). Similarly, the original *Spit* and its remake both have Jennifer intentionally isolating herself; away from the safety of the city and people she knows she is at first easy prey for men who literally come out of the darkness. The 2013 *Spit* sequel is even more startlingly similar in that Katie is followed back to her apartment by a rapist who has become obsessed with her. After sexually assaulting her he takes to his home in Bulgaria – again isolating her.

The rape myth of the “dark stranger” leads directly to constructing rape as a woman’s tale; protecting oneself from rape leads to not being raped. It takes only a small logical leap to move toward punishing rape as being a woman’s issue as well, particularly since the implication



is that the rape was caused by a failure to protect oneself. This is particularly true if we revisit the “legal” story of rape. A crime, sexual assault, is reported to the authorities. The crime is investigated and if sufficient evidence exists the alleged perpetrator is arrested. After being advised of the charges against him/her, the prosecution and defense present their case. A jury of the perpetrator’s peers judges him/her either guilty or not guilty based on a preponderance of evidence presented. If guilty, the perpetrator is sentenced by the judge to a jail term commensurate with the nature of the crime. The preceding is no less a tale than the snippet from the Greek creation story as, “crime and punishment,” tales can be found since the beginning of the written word – they effectively follow the Babylonian Code of Laws. The rape-revenge horror film is a take on this tale.

In all five films under examination the victim lacks a lawful outlet to report the crime, even while they seek to conform to a crime and punishment paradigm. In the original *Last House* the police are incompetent and fail or arrive at the parent’s house until right as the father commits his final murder; they are bound up in a rather peculiar comedy of errors throughout the earlier parts of the film. In the *Last House* remake there is no phone, no police, and no apparent option but to take justice into their own hands. The original *Spit* film makes it clear that Jennifer will take matters into her own hands as she has access to a working car and could drive away to report the crime if she chose. That there is never a thought of anything other than revenge is telling. The rape was committed against her, it is up to her to act. The remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* goes a step further. Jennifer runs into the local Sheriff in the woods as she is trying to escape her rapists. Far from helping her, he becomes the worst of the group and consequently suffers the most at Jennifer’s hands. The law is thus complicit in the rape. The *Spit* sequel goes even further in having a rape crisis counselor complicit in Katie’s recapture and further

rape/torture. In all five films the criminals receive their retribution in accordance with the “legal” tale of rape, absent the actual legal system, in that there is a crime and summary punishment, but this is at odds with rape in its reality.

As stated, a rape-revenge horror film or indeed any film, is nothing more or less than a tale. Similarities between films within the same genre allow us to examine the function of the characters in a film in the same way Propp elucidated the categorization of folk tales. Even across “types” of tales, such as mythology and film we can see cultural myth and norms bound up in the structure of the tale – regardless of the medium. The Greek deities were assigned rather sordid lives, but even the origin of a children’s film such *Sleeping Beauty* (Disney, 1959) is a rape tale. The original story, *Sun, Moon, and Talia* (Giambattista Basile, 1634) includes raping the unconscious girl; this is the source material for the tale that was eventually adapted into the aforementioned Disney film. Under closer scrutiny we would again see the characters in each version perform the same actions. The act of adaptation, from poem to novel, from written word to silver screen, from film to film, provides us with a history of the tale. This history in turn furnishes the ability to assert that a tale is innately a cultural production as well as a cultural reproduction.

### **The Procession of Simulacra in a Cinematic Context**

In order to reveal the consequences of simulation, the procession of simulacra, as laid out by Jean Baudrillard, must be made clear. Baudrillard’s conception of this procession bears repeating,

It is the reflection of a profound reality.

It masks and denatures a profound reality.

It masks the *absence* of a profound reality.

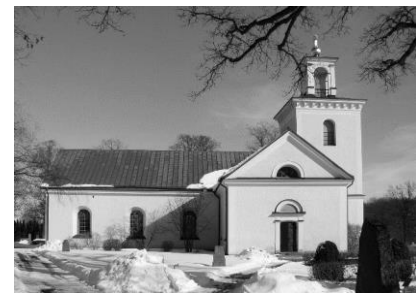
It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacra. (p. 6)

There is ample evidence that the rape-revenge horror film reveals cultural norms in its adaptation, but how to these cultural norms function in society? Films function as a simulative process that provides order, but hides Truth. The reality of what is simulated is lost within the procession of simulacra, hidden beneath layers of simulation which lack reference to reality. This process is difficult to see as cultures tend to ignore the origins of contemporary cultural artifacts (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 5). Having established a line of continuity through the adaptation of tales, the next step is to test that adaptation as a procession of simulacra. The mythological tale, The Rape of Persephone, provided elements to compare the propagation of cultural norms – but a clearer line of adaptation is necessary to elucidate precisely how simulation evolves. As previously stated in the Introduction chapter, the direct source of the austere narrative of the rape-revenge horror films under examination is *The Virgin Spring* (Brashinsky, 1998). The origin of the film's tale lies elsewhere however as it refers to an actual legend in an actual place. The film is in fact itself an adaptation of a 13th century ballad that describes a myth surrounding the construction of a church. Beginning with *The Ballad of Per Tysson's Daughters in Vänge*, the procession of simulacra will be contextualized in the terms of the specific cultural productions under examination.

Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), and the five rape-revenge horror films under examination demonstrate a procession of simulacra of the austere narrative from *The Ballad of Per Tysson's Daughters in Vänge*. These texts exhibit the austere narrative that is useful to be able to examine their respective simulacra in an objective manner (Brashinsky, 1998). *The Virgin Spring* places religious iconography atop the plot, creating a clear connection to the origin of the story. The original *Last House* and *Spit* place symbols upon the austere

narrative that distance them from the origin, but connect them with horror films of their era. The remakes utilize images that allude primarily to their original sources rather than having any particular connection to the actual origin story. Additionally, the films are readily available and are suggestive of the construction of the “tale” as conceived of by Propp. These texts create an appropriate timeline from which the procession of symbols utilized within a similar austere narrative can be seen.

**The Ballad of Per Tysson's Daughters in Vänge (Töres döttrar i Vänge).** This is a 13th century Swedish ballad about the legend of the origins of a 12th century church in the village of Kärna (Forntiden, 2012). This ballad is representative of Baudrillard’s first order simulacra. The myth contained within the ballad simulates the motivation for the construction of the actual, physical church that



The church in Kärna, Sweden (2012)

figures into local legends. The church itself is reality as was its *original* motivation for its construction. It reflects a profound reality for the inhabitants of the area, that a church was built and that there was something special – perhaps a tragedy and a miracle, perhaps mere coincidence – about its construction that made it worthy of commemorating. The ballad itself is still simulation as it reflects the constructed reality of the actual incident (whether or not the ballad was accurate), but it directly reflects the profound reality experienced by the people that live(d) in the area and era.

**The Virgin Spring (1960).** This film, considered one of the finest ever made and a standard for auteurs, was adapted from the aforementioned ballad to cinematic form with a greatly expanded scope. The film makes extensive use of religious iconography/motivation to illustrate the various characters – blond Karin is chaste because she is delivering candles for

Mass while her pregnant maid, brunette Ingeri, is without husband and is decidedly less innocent as a worshipper of Odin. Atop the austere narrative, the story is really about the tension the Karin's father feels at being caught between the worship of Odin and Christ. The girls' story is ancillary in this film to the larger question of what it means to be a good Christian. This is borne out in several iconic scenes as the father rips a sapling from the ground in grief at learning of his daughter's murder then proceeds to (in perhaps the most startling scene in the film) engage in a self-flagellating, ritualistic cleansing before committing his murders of vengeance. The killing of the criminals is depicted as bloodless despite his use of a knife. The spectacle of death is not the central focus of the scene, rather the focus is the father as he looks at his hands wondering at what redemption entails. The father exhorts the Christian God for forgiveness and swears he will build a church as his penance, "Out of stone and mortar. And with these very hands" (see the first picture in the Introduction section for reference). The film's final scene has the entire household gathered as the parents find their daughter's body and as they lift the body a spring wells forth from the indentation in which her head was lying.

*The Virgin Spring* exemplifies a second order simulacrum in that it is first and foremost an interpretation of the myth expressed in the ballad. In interpreting the ballad as a screenplay, instead of the reality the ballad expressed, a local legend about the origin of a church, Bergman's film instead focuses on the tension between paganism and Christianity. Though the film is a classic, the reality the ballad explored (and reflected) is still denatured and distilled into the story that Ingmar Bergman wished to tell. This is to say that the ballad is about the origins of a local church, *The Virgin Spring* is about religion and a father's grief. The film still refers to the origin of a church as set forth in the ballad, but the resolution of the film comes at the father's prayer – the spring that wells forth is merely his answer – the story is ultimately his.

**The Last House on the Left (1972).** This film is clearly a remake of Bergman's classic, which chose not to advertise itself as being a remake (Brashinsky, 1998, p. 163). Instead, Wes Craven constructed this film in the exploitation-horror/slasher genre, even while its story paralleled that of *The Virgin Spring*. This story is not about the girls either (who, it is worth noting, are captured because they sought to buy drugs – a vast departure from Karin taking candles for Mass) but is instead about the criminals and their actions (and the violence that visits them as a result of those actions). The violence leading to the girls' death is extremely graphic and includes a stabbing that ends in intestines being removed as well as the infamous "sign your work" scene. The rape sequence is actually the least graphic of the girls' ordeal at the hands of the criminals. Following the discovery of their daughter's necklace on the youngest of the group, the parents are not even given a decision on what to do, it is only left to them to choose the method of execution.

The sequence that follows resembles a macabre version of *Home Alone* (1990) as much as it does Bergman's film. The mother seduces and performs an oral penile dismemberment on one man as the husband is left to deal with the leader of the gang. Despite the traps set around the house, the father loses the upper hand until the son of the gang leader Krug intervenes and threatens to kill his own father. However, Krug manipulates his son Justin to "blow[ing] his brains out." The mother has meanwhile managed to cut the throat of the female gang member while the father has secured a chainsaw. The father proceeds to use the chainsaw on Krug just as policemen (who spent the entire movie in a bizarre "Keystone Cops" sequence) show up and yell for him to stop. The film's final frame has the couple arm-in-arm, bloodstained and victorious, but just as obviously broken – their world has been stripped from them and there is no redemption from the monsters they have become.

This film veers squarely into simulation of the third order as it is referential to the original reality only by reference to the austere narrative of *The Virgin Spring*. In doing so, this film masks the absence of reality in the bloody guise of exploitation/cult horror; it effectively creates a new reality, albeit a simulated one. Despite the closeness of the austere narrative to that of the ballad and Bergman's film, the symbols contained within it do not concern themselves with that reality. That it is referential in its austerity masks the fact that an underlying reality ever existed. Instead we are left with a text that is only about violence visited on the innocent and the guilty alike – ending not with redemption, but with condemnation – the lives of the parents are over just as surely as those who did not survive the bloodbath.

**I Spit on Your Grave (1978).** The austere narrative of *Spit* is slightly different from that of *Last House*, but only in missing the parents. It is rather a reimagining of that same story. Envision perhaps a grown Karin, no longer living in her father's house, still seeking to deliver candles to the church for Mass. She is set upon by the same criminals where they rape her, beat her, and leave her to die. She doesn't die however and recovers her health while gaining the same righteous anger her father evinced in the original version. Karin lures the bandits to her one by one, subdues, and tortures each of them to death. The difference in the austere narrative between *Last House* and *Spit* is twofold; the presence of the parents and the survival of the girl/woman. The differences from *Last House* are inconsequential as we see that the storyline and the characters otherwise function almost precisely the same. There is never a suggestion that anything other than revenge is an option. The deaths of the criminals are the only option, the only righteous conclusion.

This film too is symbolic of third order simulation. It utilizes a version of the austere narrative adapted by Bergman for *The Virgin Spring* yet exploits its subject, Jennifer Hills, rather

than having her grapple with morality or a belief system. *Spit* plays with the issues of its era, the conservative backlash against the Second Wave Feminist movement – Jennifer is subjected to a beating and rape that lasts nearly thirty minutes. In doing so the reality represented in *The Ballad of Per Tysson's Daughters in Vänge*, the physical reality of the church and its meaning to the residents of the area is concealed by the cultural mythos presented by Meir Zarchi. Jennifer's revenge is brutal and fast, the men are summarily killed and the heroine rides away a victor. The film provides a narrative on social issue, but does so using an implausible slasher aesthetic rather than addressing the issue as a profound reality.

**The contemporary films.** The *Last House* remake veers very little from its source material, the 1972 film of the same title. The violence in the former is more intense, explicit, and realistic thanks to far higher production values than the 1972 version. While the tone of this film is similar to that of the 1972 version, it is much more mainstream than the earlier version (considered a “cult” film). The rape scene in this film is far longer, heavily features female nudity as well as female complicity in the rape. The female criminal (who is randomly and unnecessarily topless at various points of the film) violently rips the panties off the female victim and helps hold her down during the incredibly disturbing six minute rape sequence.

The rest of the film proceeds in the same way as the 1972 film with a couple of notable exceptions. This film is clearly about the parents and asks the question (even as part of its advertising), “If bad people hurt someone you love, how far would you go to hurt them back?” The father tells the mother prior to the bloodletting, “Be prepared to do *anything*,” and so they are. As horrific, deplorable, and agonizing the sequences are in which the girls are raped and tortured – the vengeance visited upon the criminals is worse. One man is cut, partially drowned, has his hand ripped apart in the food disposal, and finally meets his end with a pick to the head –



the sequence of his death is nearly seven minutes long. The other notable difference is that their daughter lives through her ordeal, but only just. As she has no further lines, it appears she is allowed to live so that extremely graphic emergency surgery can be performed on her by her father, a surgeon. Her experience is so torturous through the film that it is certainly more painful than death and a meaningless point of distinction from the 1972 film – the daughter is actually referred to in the past tense several times throughout the remaining narrative. Eventually the male criminals are disposed of, the female criminal is beaten, then shot through the eye as the camera lingers at length on her nude, bleeding body. The leader (Krug) is eventually knocked cold and the viewer is left to assume his death at that moment.

The movie ends with flashback, the father is sailing the family's boat away from the carnage with the mother, the daughter, and the son of the gang leader (who also survived this incarnation) all looking decidedly the worse for wear. The film lingers on the battered father, his gaze distant and cold (see the picture in the Introduction section). We are then left with the film's final scene, obviously what the father was remembering with such aloofness. He is shown graphically severing the spinal column of the unconscious Krug. Krug wakes up and asks him why he can't move, the father replies calmly, "You're paralyzed from the neck down – I didn't have any rope or duct tape. Don't worry, you're going to be fine." He proceeds to place a broken microwave over Krug's head and turn it on; the film's final frame is the image of Krug's head exploding.

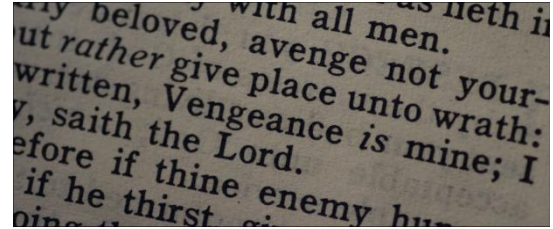
The 2010 *Spit* remake follows the precise austere narrative of its predecessor even while throwing in a few wrinkles that distinguish it. The rape sequence in this version is every bit as lengthy and brutal as the original. The harassment that begins the sequence is particularly realistic and recalls well-publicized accounts of actual gang rapes. Additionally, as previously

mentioned, Jennifer actually runs into a sheriff as she is trying to escape – he is quickly shown to be the most sadistic of the entire group. In total, Jennifer is subject to three separate gang rape sequences, the last presumed to end in her death.

The revenge half of the film is rather dissimilar to the original in a number of ways. Jennifer does not use her sexuality as a lure for the men; rather she appears as an avenging spirit of sorts. She is stealthy, smart, and totally remorseless. While the original utilized some sadistic death scenes for the criminals, the remake takes it to a very different level. There is the usual castration, but only after each tooth is knocked out with a hammer and chisel in an extremely brutal close-up shot. The severed organ is then shoved into his mouth as Jennifer reminds him, “Don’t forget, no teeth.” The rapist who taped the attack has fishhooks put through his eyelids facing a tape recorder on which he can see himself... until his eyes are pecked out by crows; Jennifer tells him, “I know how you like to watch.” The sheriff suffers the same rape as Jennifer, his by a shotgun as she tortures him both physically and psychologically. He suffers the most at her hands as she implies she has also killed his daughter although the film never shows the act. The small smile on Jennifer’s face in the final scene shows satisfaction at the cruelty she ultimately employed as a punitive measure for the brutal crime against her.

The 2013 *Spit* sequel holds to the same adapted austere narrative as its antecedents save that it includes an abduction. After the initial rape Katie is taken to Bulgaria, where she awakes to what is probably the most disturbing scene change in a horror film. As Katie comes to from an unconscious state, we see her shoulders and head gently rocking. The camera pulls back to reveal that she is being raped by her original rapist’s brother and is tied to a post in a basement. She is repeatedly raped until she escapes and actually goes to the police who refer her to a rape crisis counselor. The counselor, a woman, turns out to be the rapist’s mother who takes her back

to the brothers for further rape and torture including a drawn out sequence in which Katie is repeatedly tased in her genitals before being brutally raped again. She escapes a second time and heads toward the U.S. embassy, but leaves at the last minute. She instead goes to a church where the



priest recognizes her as a rape victim and attempts to help her. They converse and she leaves the Bible he gives her open to a particular passage.

The chain of revenge begins with her luring the first rapist into the sewers where she subdues and hangs him from his arms. She proceeds to cut him and rub filth into his wounds, leaving him to rot to death. Another rapist is killed by being drowned in an unflushed toilet while another is electrocuted after having his own genitals tased. The ubiquitous castration occurs with the final rapist who has his genitals crushed in a vice. Katie smiles as she enters the embassy, leaving a trail of bodies in her wake.

The contemporary films are examples of fourth order simulation. They are remakes of their originals, and more importantly adaptations of the original austere narrative, which was shown to mask the lack of reality existent in the symbols which overlay its austere narrative. In all three contemporary films we see far higher production values that result in greater realism both in the terms of the cruelty of the rape scenes and the brutality of the revenge. The rape scenes in particular stand out as symbolic of the new films – all are far more brutal versions of either Wes Craven's or Meir Zarchi's films. The contemporary films only bear reference to their originals; they are about violence and brutality even while referring to religious symbols at times – the references actually serve to distance the films from the original source. They no longer

have any relation to the underlying reality that once existed within the largely unchanged, austere narrative.

As the films are further examined, they also proceed to engage the very worst sort of cultural depravity. First, the films are all mainstream. Each was made as realistic as possible in terms of production values, “name” cast members (especially for contemporary horror films), and spent time, albeit limited, at the top of the box office or at the top of internet sales/rentals (the 2009 *Last House* took in more in its first weekend than the 1972 ever did, even counting for adjusted dollars). Though not close to the earnings of the top blockbuster films, the films all earned a substantial return on a relatively meager investment. The fact that these films exist in the mainstream is evidence of their cultural nature, it is part of our societal context. All films are cultural artifacts, but ultimately consumers vote with their dollars as to what they want to see; the modern horror film is the genre with the highest return on its investment due to comparatively low production costs (IMDB, 2010). Second, they prove their depravity by creating far more realistic and punitive violence than their predecessors and placing it in the mainstream. While Wes Craven intended to make an exploitation film, the 2009 *Last House* was intended as a commercial film. The *Spit* films were likewise intended to capitalize on the commercial success of *Last House* and other films that feature sadistic violence as a key component. The commercialization of the far more brutal nature of these films (and a vast number of contemporaries in the genre) as entertainment that is consumed with considerably less outcry than Chloe Grace Moretz saying the word “cunt” in the film *Kick-Ass* (2010), points to the fact that the symbols which now overlay the austere narrative are accepted. They are invisible as symbols in much the same way as privilege and patriarchy. They are in fact the constructed

reality that we live with – the only reality we are left with – simulacra of Baudrillard’s fourth order.

### **The Consequences of Simulation**

In many ways the world created by films is not unlike the world the Wachowski siblings created in *The Matrix* (1999). Everything in the film is real (to the characters in the film’s Matrix) to the extent that it can be experienced; yet it offers only a simulation of that experience – it masks the absence of the reality to which it refers. The world as conceived of by film directors/producers/writers reflects events and characters in the real world, but through a particular lens that engages patriarchal values, resulting in a simulation of that reflection. The simulation is colored by the zeitgeist of an era, the world of film is thus inextricably bound up in the mythos by which it exists – and all the cultural mythos that preceded it. Often the films that resonate, those that define genre or even genre hybrids, are those films which exist along the temporal boundaries of an era. These boundaries are not merely general in nature (the Cold War era ending with the toppling of the Berlin Wall for example), but are defined by the specific cinematic material they represent. The seminal rape-revenge horror film (*Last House*) is the reflection, at least to a degree, of the conception of rape. What does it mean that the depictions of rape and revenge change from the originals to the remakes? What is the implication of moving from third order simulacra to fourth? The transitions between stages of simulation are the locations where the effects of simulation, real or potential, can be seen.

In the original *Last House* film the actual rape itself is relatively tame. There is a great deal of humiliation and physical torture leading up to that point (and following it), but the rape itself takes place with most clothing intact. The scene is disturbing as the squalid leader of the



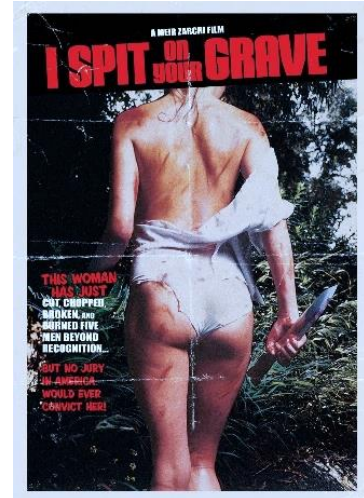
criminal gang drools as he rapes Mari in a 30-second scene. After the scene Mari moves off to vomit and the three criminals (minus the son Justin) appear oddly troubled as they pick grass from their bloodstained hands. The violence of the scene as whole clearly separates it from the rape scene in *Virgin Spring*. The latter is graphic and violent as they do kill Karin at the conclusion, but the extreme close up in Craven's film that shows only Krug and Mari's faces (with the former open-mouthed and drooling) makes the rape far more personal. Krug carves his name into Mari's chest with a knife in the infamous "sign your work" scene just prior to the actual rape. The content of *Last House*, in focusing on the violence of both the rape and revenge, recall an aesthetic that has far more to do with the sadistic violence of the Vietnam War than with the rape and subsequent crisis of conscience in *The Virgin Spring*. The former film marks the transition from second order to third order simulacra and in doing so focuses its attention on an account of crime and punishment while utilizing the austere narrative from *The Virgin Spring*. Rape, then, is no longer merely a moral issue, rather it is an issue that the law cannot comprehend – the police officers only actively try to stop the murder of the rapist, the rape itself cannot be remedied save through the actions of those it affects.

The original *Spit* film completes the transition from second to third order by offering the alternative narrative of the woman taking her own revenge upon her rapists. Jennifer asks for forgiveness, but not



help. She is raped and beaten within an inch of her life, in fact the men leave her to die, but she does not search for a remedy other than the death of the men. The film's poster is telling in the presentation of its material. The caption on the far left reads, "This woman has just chopped, broken, and burned five men beyond recognition... but no jury in America would ever convict

her.” The implication is that Jennifer did the right thing in avenging herself in the manner she did; she was fully justified. In truth it is difficult to argue the point the rhetoric of the poster makes given the brutality of the attack against her. However the film is of course a simulation, nothing of the sort ever occurs in the real world. The film does not glorify male sexual violence in any way, though it does spend an inordinate amount of time lingering



on the nude body of Camille Keaton before, during, and after the rape – this point’s significance cannot be understated. In her book *Rape-Revenge: A Critical Study* Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2011), in regards to *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (1973), states,

The pornographic inserts allow a significant conclusion to be made: their inclusion in such a bleak story is evidence that the filmmakers at least assumed there was a viable demographic who would watch a rape-revenge film for no other reason than the promise of the violent sexual degradation of women. (Kindle Locations 581-583)

While the film unapologetically punishes male sexual violence the overt presence of Camille Keaton unclothed, particularly in the revenge scenes where she is subduing her rapists through consensual sex acts, points toward a different reason for the film’s existence than to “problematize male sexual violence.” The simulation of crime and punishment in this film reinforces the notion that the crime of rape ought to be punished, but is largely the duty of the woman to deal with *her* rape.

All aspects of the original *Last House* and *Spit* identify themselves as a masking the absence of the profound reality *The Virgin Spring* referenced and that the ballad revealed. The original titles, *Sex Crime of the Century* and *Day of the Woman* respectively, give a statement

about the story the viewer ought to experience. The first title references Mari's rape and advertises itself as a film about rape while the film's poster, seen at the start of this chapter (containing the release title *The Last House on the Left*), advertises horrific, torturous death. The second title advertises the revenge half of the *Spit* film just as the poster advertises the brutal murders of the men. The *Spit* poster also clearly advertises Camille Keaton's body, making it difficult to countenance the statement that the film is intended as anything other than an exploitation film. The content of the films, both the marketing and the symbols the films present onscreen, lend themselves to revealing brutality utilizing an austere narrative that once functioned with a very different purpose in mind.

The remakes, due partly to greatly increased budgets and production values, manage to ratchet up the brutality through realism. The rape scenes are far longer (approximately 10 times longer in *Last House*, 45 minutes in length in the *Spit* remake, and well over an hour of torture and rape in *Spit 2*) and contain shots that are reminiscent of soft-core pornography rather than obvious sexual assault. The films contain the austere narrative of *The Virgin Spring* but are not referential to them, only to the films they are rebooting. In a very real sense all remakes are their own simulacra and certainly the three contemporary films under examination are no exception. The films are about rape, violence, and sadistic revenge. They refer to a real social issue, violence against women, even while masking the reality of that issue and any reality to which their forbearers refer. In these films we can see the rape-revenge horror genre become fourth order simulacrum. The question remains, however, what does it mean in a societal context?

Film is both a cultural production and a cultural reproduction in the sense that film can create cultural awareness that lacked full expression, but more often serve to recreate cultural norms and dominant value systems. To an extent the original films, particularly *Last House*,



manage to function in both ways. Heller-Nicholas (2011) writes, “With the hippie dream well and truly over, the film is set in a nihilistic world where there is little place for romantic idealism” (Kindle Locations 541-542). The film effectively recaptures the historical trauma of the United States military becoming killers in the cause of self-defense – a realization that is borne out in the film’s final frame. The couple, embrace without looking at the camera, their faces hidden at the carnage that is their legacy. This is similar to the reception Vietnam War veterans endured as the war became increasingly unpopular. The peace symbol necklace as the pivot point of the action seems to bear out this assertion. Such an analysis begs the question, is that what the film is actually trying to accomplish? Effectively borrowing the precise austere narrative of *The Virgin Spring*, without the use of religious iconography, leads me to the conclusion that Wes Craven was trying to make a rape-revenge movie – merely using the context of the Vietnam War debate as a way of identifying with the zeitgeist of the era. The degradation, torture, and murder of the women in *Last House* is certainly not beyond the context of the atrocities of the Vietnam War, but the rape (and murder) of Mari is the motivating factor for the second half of the film rather than a consequence of losing one’s humanity. The original *Last House* engages cultural material but ultimately reaffirms male dominance and violence as the measure of power while using women’s bodies and sexuality as mere canvas for the statement.

The original *I Spit on Your Grave* follows the path the original *Last House* takes with its brutal and unflinching depiction of rape. Jennifer Hills as a writer and independent woman seems to play out the evolution of women following Second Wave feminism. The men in the film even resent her for this as they take a significant amount of time to mock and destroy her manuscript. The gang of men can represent the conservative backlash against the developing independence of women and the glorification of working-class male values. While this seems to

be the issue the film explores, it takes great pains to have Camille Keaton in the shot whenever she has cause to be nude, she spends almost 20 minutes of the film completely unclothed. Her revenge utilizes consensual sex with two of her four rapists which is the point at which the original release title, *Day of the Woman*, ceases to have meaning. She gets revenge, but only with an act that surely re-traumatizes her. Ultimately she can only be like the rapists, using sex as a violent means to get what she desires – she appropriates the violent male paradigm to exact her revenge.

The direct remakes do little to add to the conversation. Mari lives through her rape and torture, but again there appears little reason for her to do so beyond being the device that exposes the criminals. Her essential function after the criminals attempt to kill her is effectively the same as the peace necklace in the original *Last House* – she is literally and figuratively objectified in the film. Mari and Paige are still portrayed as being in the wrong place at the wrong time (buying marijuana), effectively leading to their rape and torture. There is significantly less subtext than in the original as even Mrs. Collingwood is often reduced to a mere assistant (while her predecessor killed two of the three criminals). That there is less of a cultural conversation points again to the film as fourth order simulacra. The *Spit* remake criminalizes even the law as the sheriff, who at first appears as a possible savior, is the worst of bad lot. He has a wife and daughter that he seems to treat well – yet he is the most violent rapist of the group. The entire film is misogynist and sadistic; Jennifer takes that precise role by utilizing the same words as her rapists in order to punctuate her dominance. Jennifer is, at least, still a writer and thus assigned an intellectual profession – even while indulging in wine and weed the sheriff eventually uses as an excuse to further her harassment. The *Spit* sequel assigns the eventual protagonist, Katie, the role of an aspiring model. Far from an intellectual profession, she is merely a caricature of

idealized beauty and she willingly puts herself in an uncomfortable situation; she refuses to pose topless in a modeling shoot and quickly leaves. One of the men from the modeling shoot stalks her and rapes her before abducting her, killing her well-meaning landlord in the process. It is difficult to see a cultural conversation the film actively engages and seems more intent on following the success of American-gone-abroad horror films such as *Hostel* (2005) and *Turistas* (2006). Katie's ordeal eclipses even that of Jennifer in the other *Spit* films as the multiple rapes she is subjected to include some of the most disturbing sexual torture in any non-pornographic film. Her revenge is more sadistic and disgusting by the same degree. There is again no option but to assume an inhuman, violent male archetype in order to achieve closure.

Violence ultimately begets violence in all five of the films leading to the perpetuation of a number of problematic cultural norms. The violence of the rape is visited upon the perpetrators, but the rapes are still the problem of the victims. If only Mari and Paige hadn't been looking for drugs... if only Jennifer hadn't gone alone to the cabin... if only Katie had only done a background check on her "photographers." The real story of rape is simply replaced by a reproduction of the cultural norm of rape. Rape is the woman's fault to a degree and she is equally responsible for proving that she was raped – that responsibility within the legal story of rape is paralleled in the revenge sequence of the rape-revenge horror film. The woman who is partially complicit in her rape must avenge it.

As stated earlier, the consequences of the "crime" were incalculable and so they are. The signs of the real, the simulacra that we take for reality, have a genuine effect that is hidden behind the fact that simulation can still produce a real effect (Davidson, 1996, p. 196). The rape, either read as a sexual act or a violent one, produces authentic responses of some sort in the audience. The simulated rape onscreen thus becomes a genuine crisis rather than a simulated

one. When the film ends there is some lingering, hidden effect that remains with the viewer. The desensitization effect, that is to say *failing* to be affected by the simulation of crisis, is the true consequence of the crime; its actual victim nothing more or less than the collective mind of the audience – rather than the bodies onscreen. The audience has the illusion of choice, to see or not see the film, to watch or leave the screening, but in either case the cultural script read to the audience ultimately remains the same. The pervasiveness of the perverse leads to a tacit acceptance of simulation as truth, to what Herbert Marcuse referred to as, “One Dimensional Man” (Marcuse, 1964). A capitalist society, a society based on consumption, becomes obsessed with that consumption. The illusion of choice, a simulation of choice if you will, appears in the plethora of possibilities that actually *restrict* choice by offering the same story – until it is the only story. As Baudrillard states, “The more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 163). Rape myths so consume our culture, our patriarchal, hegemonic culture which mass produces cultural norms for consumption/thought control, that even after seeing the atrocities committed onscreen we can walk out of the theater – perhaps even cheered by the victorious heroine to some degree – and tell ourselves, “it’s only a movie.”

#### **IV. An Anatomy of Conflict: Gender in the Rape-revenge Horror Film**

*Justice is about making them pay for causing others pain. Revenge is making them pay for yours.*

– Erica O'Rourke, *Torn*

Gender is inescapable in cinema. The paradigms of the gender binary are endlessly reproduced. To a very real extent that gender binary is more genuine and more poignant than any place in the world we live. The range of characters in a film is limited to cultural reproduction while the range of actual people knows no such limitation. The result is a cinematic world, a simulated world that sees gender along a very specific continuum and when a character fails to meet expectations the film is considered “shocking.” The final scene of *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) that reveals the killer, Angela, to be a fully endowed, gender-confused male, sent shockwaves through the film reviewers though the grotesque and unusual kills in the film garnered little press of their own. I mentioned Chloe Grace Moretz in Chapter One (playing a foul-mouthed, barely pubescent teenage girl) causing greater outcry than the extreme violence in any of the contemporary films under examination. Even in looking at actual events we see a similar pattern. Much of the outcry in the Lorena Bobbitt case, where she snapped and actually cut off her husband’s penis due to repeated sexual and emotional abuse, was against Lorena as an offender rather than a victim pushed too far. This particular incident is instructive in that it is one of the few cases of public record that resembles a rape-revenge horror film. Lorena was raped and abused over several years and after her husband was acquitted of that crime she snapped. Her revenge replaced the justice she couldn’t attain any other way. Though she was eventually found not guilty by reason of insanity, she was widely condemned. Violence, in both a cinematic and societal context, is an innately gendered issue.

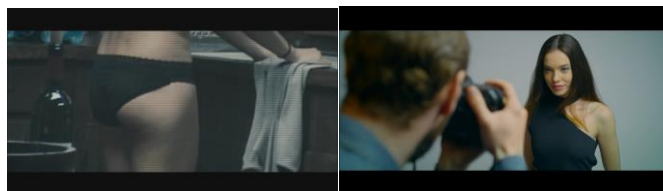
As with the films under examination, the victims of violence are often women (R.A.I.N.N., 2013). Domestic violence for example has been the leading cause of injury to women of reproductive age (15 – 44 years old) for well over a decade (R.A.I.N.N., 2013). There is certainly a correlation of some sort between the images that we create in film and television and the cultural context they are birthed or rebirthed into. Sexual violence in particular is far more prevalent among women than men; approximately 18 percent of all women experience an attempted or completed rape versus about three percent of men. Additionally 99 percent of perpetrators were male and large-scale studies revealed that close male peer groups exacerbated rape culture on college campuses (R.A.I.N.N., 2013). The latter detail points to a feature of the rape-revenge horror film in that a small, out-of-the-way town would likely feature a close male peer group by virtue of the lack of options for companionship. Certainly the films examined contain that attribute, as gang rape is the type of sexual assault prominently displayed. Power disparities between genders then, shown through the ability to inflict violence, is at issue within the rape-revenge horror film and is manifested through the actions of the characters. Males embody violent power and females are the victims of that power.

We do not come into the world knowing the content of films any more than we understand our place in the world; these are learned through consumption of cultural artifacts. Gendered bodies are created even if sexed bodies are birthed. We know that gender roles are reinforced through the process of creating culture; women are victims in both a cinematic and a cultural context. It may in fact be problematic to separate the two. In a very real sense the cinematic context is a cultural context as the former cannot exist without the latter. The cinematic gendered body is thus constructed in specific ways to reflect a cultural context.

The feminine body as represented in the rape-revenge horror films under examination (and those more broadly represented in the horror genre) is produced. S.S. Prawer (1980) in *Caligari's Children: The Film as a Tale of Terror* states, “Her vulnerability and sexuality are highlighted because she is a comely maiden” (p. 39). The thought seems to be that the audience is more interested in seeing and will be more afraid for a woman who conforms to normative ideals of Hollywood beauty. The particular traits are certainly those of the actresses which play the roles, but the generic traits of those bodies are commonplace (within film) and created, not representative of society. A list of well-known “scream queens” at IMDB is telling in that the images of them in their respective films contains virtually no difference in body type; additionally, all of the 63 listed are white (IMDB.com, 2014). The actresses of the five films being examined, as well as *The Virgin Spring* are all normatively beautiful and exposed as such in their opening scenes. The audience is given a voyeuristic shot of Mari in the shower in both the original and remake of *Last House* while Meir Zarchi’s heroine in the original *Spit* displays an odd lack of undergarments throughout the film as she pulls her dress off to reveal she is completely nude. Jennifer in the *Spit* remake is seen through the diegetic camera of one of her eventual assailants and Katie in *Spit 2* is seen posing for camera, clearly without a bra.



From left to right: Mari, *Last House* (1972) and Mari, *Last House* (2009) in the shower. Jennifer in *Spit* (1978) removing all her clothing



From left to right: A diegetic camera zoom of Jennifer in *Spit* (2010), Katie posing in *Spit 2* (2013)

The idea of normative beauty, writes Julie Frechette (2012), is imposed through cultural texts such as films,

Predicated upon bodily stereotypes of Anglo-European whiteness, thinness, buxomness, and curviness, the beauty myth creates what is called a “normative standard of beauty” that reduces the concept of attractiveness to a limited and exclusive set of age, race, and physical traits. Within mainstream media, Hollywood actresses and supermodels are heralded as cultural hallmarks of beauty and success, leading to a Western beauty ideology that values girls and women for their appearance over their intellect, ambition, personality, and unique traits. (Frechette, 2012)

It is likely that the actresses would not have received their roles unless they met the above criteria. The five different actresses could each have played the role of any other, so similar are they in their appearance. This body type came to be normative through the aforementioned power disparities; men normatively have more power, some of that power is expressed through disempowering the feminine.

### **Prying Eyes and Dying Eyes**

The world of the feminine in the rape-revenge horror film labors beneath a male gaze. The heads of the production and distribution companies of all five films are male. The directors of all five films are male. The majority of characters in all five films are also male. The audiences for horror films are presumed to be male. The action within the films is presented entirely from the common male cinematic paradigm; violence as the only answer. The woman/girl who is raped in each of the film is in the film to be watched. She is harassed, humiliated, physically assaulted, and sexually assaulted – the cinematic gaze captures the entirety of her ordeal and every inch her body in the same fashion as the gaze of the antagonists.



The cinematic gaze, presumed to be a male gaze, functions in both the first and second parts of the film despite the apparent ascendancy of the woman. Both versions of *Last House* feature an early shot of Mari in a state of undress in the shower as if to establish that indeed she is both young and normatively attractive – both shots are voyeuristic as if the audience was being given the opportunity to watch her without her knowledge. All three *Spit* films begin with a similar shot of Jennifer (or Katie in *Spit 2*) in a state of total or partial undress and contain the men who will become her assailants watching her (see the frames above). In all three films the men refer back to this moment during their assault of her. In the original *Spit* the main antagonist attempts to explain that his rape of her was something normal rather than a crime,

Johnny: Come on, this thing with you is a thing that any man would have done. You coax a man into doing it to you, and a man gets the message fast. Now look, whether he's married or not a man is just a man. Hey, first thing you come into the gas station and you expose your damn sexy legs to me walking back and forth real slow, makin' sure I see 'em good."

This shot of Johnny on the ground pleading with Jennifer mirrors a similar one from earlier in the film where their positions were reversed. Being gazed upon or rather inviting the gaze, is



potentially dangerous and ultimately results in harm to the object of the gaze. Early in the film it is the clothed men gazing upon the unclothed Jennifer. Johnny now is forced at gunpoint into removing his clothing. The result is still a masculine gaze denoting power – even when the ability to gaze is strictly Jennifer's. Noting that the woman is the mere "object" of the gaze is the most accurate assessment one could make of her role in the first half of the film. She exists in a

state of partial or total undress even before the rape sequence begins, her on-screen body is to be gazed upon by audience as she is often the center of the frame. When the assault begins the women are again at the center of the gaze. The camera shots pan around to the faces of the men to show that their gaze is strictly on the body they've objectified as "usable" and "rapable."

In the original *Spit*, Jennifer is raped multiple times. In each scene the men are gather around her, looking down at her nude as she struggles and they prevent her escape. The pattern is precisely replicated in the other four films as the shots of the assaults place the woman's ordeal at the center of the scene with her attackers spread around her, literally gazing as the setup of the



Scenes from the three *Spit* films (above) and the two *Last House* films (below), chronologically from left to right



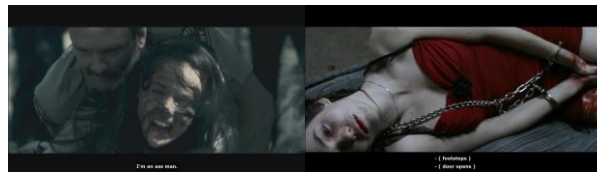
shots suggest the audience is intended to do. Scopophilia, pleasure in looking, is quickly transformed into the traditional, ordered gender binary – masculine power and feminine powerlessness. Laura Mulvey writes,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1975, p. 715)

The actresses in the five rape scenes precisely fit Mulvey's profile in that the camera directs the audience's gaze to the body of the female at whom the male characters are gazing. In the *Spit* remake one of the assailants is filming the assault and the audience occasionally sees the action through the lens of that diegetic camera, enhancing the sensation of the audience as



From left to right: Mari's ordeal in *Last House* (1972), Jennifer's in *Spit* (1978), Mari in *Last House* (2009)



From left to right: Jennifer's fourth rape in *Spit* (2010), Katie after her final rape *Spit 2* (2013)

voyeur. That the male assailants are displaying power at the time the gaze is most evident is crucial. The men are both gazing and displaying masculine ability to place the passive feminine under their control. The story effectively pauses as the assailants go about their business.

Mulvey states,

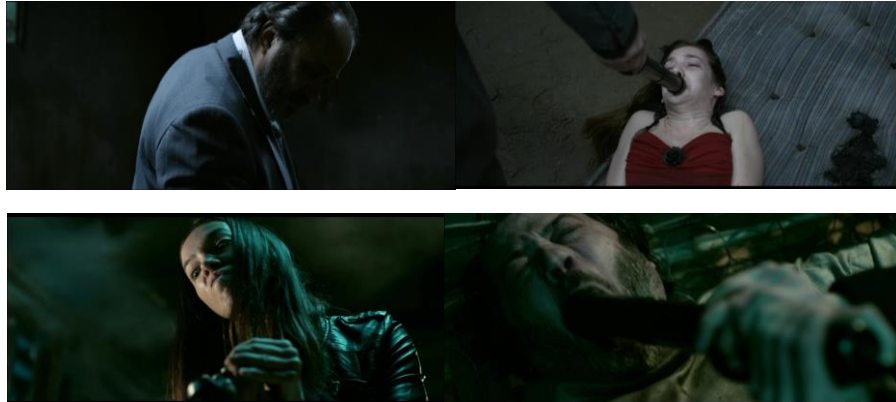
The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975, p. 715)

The rape of Jennifer in both the original and remake of *Spit* last 26 and 43 minutes respectively. Jennifer's experience in the scene never varies, she is not "more raped" after her violation by every man than she would have been by one or two. The scenes seem to be extended only to indulge in the spectacle as the motive, the rape itself, has long since been committed by the time

the plot moves forward. Regardless of how long the attack continues, the second half of the rape-revenge horror film cannot begin until the woman is allowed outside the eyes that ring her. The passive female upon which power is enacted is always the object of the scopophilic gaze rather than its subject – the film at this point is about the agency of the assailants rather than the victimization or lack of agency the women possesses. The actress functions as a prop in the scene, little different than a sculpture save that cinema rarely has such works of art defiled in the same fashion as its female characters.

The second halves of the films are at least as important to examine from a gendered perspective as they superficially appear to place the female in a dominant position. While it is certainly true that the women in all five films, Mari's mother included, take revenge, it is less clear that it has anything to do with their femininity. Rather it is the lack of feminine passivity, which they displayed in the first part of story, which allows them to take revenge. It is only through enacting male power, in the form of sexualized violence, that the previously passive character (or characters) is able to achieve some form of closure. In the first half of the film the actress is the prop to be terrorized, used, and looked upon. In the second half of the film the woman or her family take the place of the assailants and it is the rapists who ultimately fill the passive role – they are beaten, sliced, chopped, tortured, and often castrated. In the revenge portion of the films, it is the bodies of the assailants which exist as the object of the gaze. The picture of Johnny naked, on his knees, and at the mercy of Jennifer is a perfect example of this paradigm shift. The avengers ultimately enact a close approximation of the sexual violence they endured. Linda Williams states the following, "The female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male who desires her" (Williams, 1996, p. 15). The object of the gaze, the person who is looked upon by both the audience and the origin of the gaze, is imbued with

feminine passivity. Thus the second half of the rape-revenge horror features the assailants failing to look at the woman (or her parents) who now desires their body – if for a far different purpose. Rape is about power rather than sex; the revenge sequence functions precisely the same as the rape sequence – to enact masculine power upon the powerless. The revenge shots, when



Katie's ordeal (top) and revenge (bottom) in *Spit 2*

compared with the rape scenes are striking in their similarity. The above scene from *Spit 2* is clearly intended as an exact replica; great care was taken to recall the earlier instance and place the rapist in the position he once held Katie in. After the phallicly-shaped taser was used, Katie was raped. Lacking a penis Katie employs a drain snake she forces down the man's throat. Deficient of the male ability to rape, the revenge employs a stand-in for the male organ used in the crime.

Though not always the same, there is a clear thematic attempt for ironic revenge in each of the five films – Jennifer, in the *Spit* remake employs particularly sadistic versions of her rapist's crimes against her while appropriating their sexually degrading language. Jennifer too employs literal rape as she sodomizes the Sheriff with a shotgun Jennifer asks, "What's wrong? I thought you were an ass man." She additionally forces Johnny's own severed organ into his mouth, the same treatment she received. She ultimately chides him with the exact same line as seen in in the frame below, "No teeth show horse." That such revenge often places the feminine

in *exactly* the same position her assailant occupied earlier is evidence of a repetitive paradigm; that is to say repetition of the masculine gaze rather than perhaps a feminist one.



Top: Andy, Johnny, and Stanley take part in the assault on Jennifer in *Spit* (2010)

Bottom: The three suffer ironic, torturous deaths mirroring the harm they inflicted

The revenge sequence of the films provides a large degree of change from the original films to their remakes. While the original *Spit* and *Last House* featured brutal revenge sequences, the remakes take the violence to a much higher level. In the original *Last House* the parents dispose of the criminals in mostly conventional fashion – with one notable exception; one criminal’s throat is slit while the ringleader is killed with a chainsaw. The film does include a castration of the one of the assailants as do all other films under examination. This particular scene is carried out by the mother while performing fellatio on the man. The castration, literal or figurative, is a key component of all the films as Clover states,

And yet even this most body-based of genres manages to complicate the sex/gender system – especially on the side of the victim-hero, whose gender is clearly coded feminine (at least in the first phase of the story) but whose sex, it seems, is up for grabs. (Clover, 1992, p. 157)

The castration then is the point at which the shift of masculine power is complete. The male penis, the literal instrument of rape, is removed – appropriated by a female in all five films. The

revenge scenes of the *Spit* remake and its attendant sequel are particularly strong examples of this. The females enact eye-for-an-eye retribution upon their male assailants while often using the same sexually degrading language. In *Spit 2* Katie castrates two of the three men who raped her while reminding them of the things they said and did to her – in one scene she tases the genitals of the man who did the same to her, “Just a little foreplay,” Katie tells him. Masculine power, epitomized through violence in the rape-revenge horror film, is ultimately the apparatus of control. The story of the rape-revenge horror film then is a masculine story; it does not concern itself with feminine characteristics. Those traits associated with the feminine are used and abused as a means of creating spectacle, never as a possible end in themselves.

The marriage of sexual violence, sexual gratification, and brutality is at the heart of the rape-revenge horror film. The woman’s overtly sexed body is displayed and used for violent sexual gratification regardless of the various mechanisms that the assailants use to explain why they rape. The overall functioning of the films follow the infamous film *Snuff* (1976) which features a consensual sex scene that transitions to an ostensibly real, brutal murder not unlike the first two murders Jennifer commits in the original *Spit*. Of the final scene in *Snuff*, Linda Williams writes,

The particular obscenity of this last sequence thus resided in a perverse displacement of pornographic hard-core sexual activities, which typically end in penetration, onto the penetrating violation of the body’s very flesh. *Snuff*, then, seemed an utterly sadistic perversion of the pornographic genre’s original desire for visual knowledge of pleasure – the desire of the male performer and viewer to probe the wonders of the unseen world of the female body. (Williams, 1999, p. 192)

The rape-revenge horror film could be described in a very similar fashion as the sexual assault is graphically represented as both violence and a means of male sexual gratification. The former is painfully obvious while the latter can be seen in the faces of the men as the camera shows them in a state of sexual excitement. The revenge sequence is likewise wedded to sexual violence as the focus of many of the murders committed by the women or the parents are focused around the male sex organs. In the original *Last House* Mari's mother bites off a penis. Jennifer, in the original *Spit*, kills one man at the moment of climax and castrates another as she manually stimulates him in tub. The father in the *Last House* remake paralyzes the primary antagonist before torturing him to death. Jennifer in the remake of *Spit* castrates one of the men and puts the severed organ in his mouth and sodomizes the primary antagonist before killing him as well. Katie utilizes a phallic-shaped taser in a similar fashion as was used on her forcing it into the mouth of the man at one point before electrocuting him to death with a car battery. The rape-revenge horror film is not pornography, but is pornographic in its presentation of the interplay of sex and violence. It engages in, "the frenzy of the visible," as it relates to sex and violent penetration enacted upon passive bodies.

The rape-revenge horror film parallels that of violent pornography in that the male characters often react to their rape of the woman in much the same way as male characters react within intended pornographic films. Indeed the rapists discuss the rape among themselves and often with the victim (or her parents) as if the act was one of sex rather than sexual violence. The agent or agents of revenge treat their murders in a similar fashion, they clearly desire to see the spectacle and involuntary spasm of death. That many of the deaths include removal of the male sex organ, literal and figurative elimination of male power as it were, adds to the sexuality of the scenes. The violence through the entire film, not merely the rape sequence, is sexual in



nature. The first half of the rape-revenge horror film promises a horrifying exhibition that seeks to mirror reality while the revenge sequence promises the specter of witnessing the moment of death for criminals that ostensibly deserve it.

The five films exhibit very little gray area. The rapes are constructed as rapes even while they seek to exhibit the actress, there is no question of the trauma the woman is experiencing in the moment; this is not an enjoyable experience. The women are beaten and tortured to the point of death if not killed outright. That the Jennifer character in the original *Spit* utilizes consensual sex with two of her assailants is disturbing indeed though not repeated in any of its remakes even while the mother in the original *Last House* used a similar technique. Even without the promise of sex, the lure of the rapable woman is apparently inescapable as all the *Spit* films feature the death of the rapists due to following their victim. They cannot see their death in the eyes of those they regard as passive. Life and death then, in the rape-revenge horror film, hinges upon sex even when the actual act of sex becomes one of torture and death. Williams writes, “But the idea of going to the cinema to watch a death spasm is obscene” (Williams, 1999, p. 186). The true obscenity of the rape-revenge horror film is perhaps not merely that it reproduces gendered relationships as power/powerlessness and violence/passivity, but that it mirrors something within our society that we would prefer be kept hidden.

### **Disciplining the Feminine**

Michel Foucault (1977) in, *Discipline and Punish*, argues that a particular type of power, sovereign power, was exercised by the lords of land. The law of the sovereign was enacted through visible effects on bodies. The public torture of a criminal who committed crimes against the lord is an example of this type of power which Foucault (1977) called, “The spectacle of the scaffold” (pp. 32-33). He goes on to give a historical account of the change this type of

punishment underwent; penal punishment was ultimately hidden from the masses rather than a public event. Foucault argues that the body ceased to be the locus of punishment, trials instead judged the soul of a person (Foucault, 1977, pp. 26-27). The result is a disciplinary system rather than a corporal one, a system of surveillance rather than summary punishment. This evolution is manifest through the Panopticon that Jeremy Bentham first conceptualized and which Foucault more fully articulated; Panopticism is intimately tied into the concept of the modern prison where inmates can always be observed but not see their observer. Foucault states, “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). An assumed state of constant observation is the goal and the result. While Foucault was speaking of a specific instance, there exists broader implications for society as a whole.

In examining the trajectory of punitive measures, Foucault asserts that any such investigation ought to be undertaken on the basis of, “The political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations and object relations” (Foucault, 1977, p. 24). The history of power relations can be seen as a story of the visible effects of power upon bodies. On the surface, Foucault’s treatise on the birth of the prison might not seem analogous to the depiction of women in rape-revenge horror films, however they share a great number of similarities. Male power is both discursive and real in nature. Discursive through spiritual texts that provide a paradigm in which male superiority, and thus male privilege is innate. The Christian creation story surrounding Original Sin is one such example; a particularly poignant one given the influence of Christianity in the United States. The Rape of Persephone, though not as obvious, depicts women and men in certain ways. Persephone is the silly girl who gets herself kidnapped by Hades – presented as all-powerful in his realm, her mother is powerless to do

anything but (selfishly) withhold her bounty from the mortals who had no part in the abduction. Only Zeus, the father of the gods, is able to step in to avert complete destruction. Other faiths have similar stories that discursively institutionalize male privilege and dominance. This pattern is equally present in secular texts as the second line of the Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal;” any mention of women was unnecessary as women (and children) were chattel until the late nineteenth century. Male privilege and dominance is also real. This can be seen in the aforementioned rape statistics, the number of CEOs of large companies, or the number of full professors in academia among a substantial number of other examples. This power disparity can allow the masculine to enact disciplinary power over the feminine – the position of women as chattel for over a thousand years bears out this assertion.

The Panopticon as conceived of by Bentham and Foucault has been used in prison systems, but it also exists in the broader societal context as a technological Panopticon. The key point of the Panopticon’s function is to induce the state where the inmate always believes he is being observed to ensure that disciplinary power, in the form of desired behaviors on the part of the inmate, functions automatically. The modern technological Panopticon functions in this precise way in order to induce desired behaviors. Those with the power create cultural artifacts embedded with messages about how to act and what to think. Foucault states, “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). This statement nicely summarizes the state of the current society, a far greater degree of surveillance than has ever existed. People willingly feed themselves into social media websites and receive targeted advertising in return letting them know how to fix the perceived flaws they shared with their friends. The result is the same sort of self-policing that is the goal of the

original Panopticon; one never knows who is looking so the impetus to eat right and lose weight becomes self-imposed. The constant fear of being overweight or depressed, to list two prominent examples, is so well-marketed that a self-policing society is grown around the need to look and act a certain way. The financiers of cultural artifacts control the new political technology of the body where the consumer is the object of information to be collected and never a subject in that communication. Though this applies to men and women, men are far more likely to control the large media conglomerates that synthesize the cultural messages to be consumed in a manner beneficial to the retention of power (Bielby, 1996; Bielby, 2009). Men are likewise the predominant force in the creative studio jobs, such as writers and directors, where the ratio is just below eight times as many men as women in the former job and about 25 times as many men in the latter positions (Bielby, 1996; Bielby, 2009; Keegan, 2011). Over two-thirds of the actors with speaking roles were also male resulting in a male voice that often delivers the values to be consumed (Keegan, 2011). The result is that the messages originate with men, are distilled through male creative processes, and ultimately delivered mostly by men. There is little reason to believe a feminist message exists within the media paradigm.

Cinematic texts can function the same way as advertisements in that they reveal societal values. The rape-revenge horror film is part of a surveillance society that encourages particular behaviors from particular segments of the population in the same way creation myths encourage a particular world view. The women/girls in the films fail to self-police in order to avoid rape. By this I mean that the characters in the films are raped because they are out-of-place (out of their city, looking for drugs, etc.) and thus transgressing. In that way the female viewer is given the strong hint to avoid those situations and/or behaviors to avoid rape; even if the real causes of rape are rather different. The message of the films, that the female must seek to avoid rape if she

would only make the proper decisions, reinforces cultural rape myths that rape is a woman's problem – that the rape is punished by her or agents further reinforces this myth. The characters in the films are of course raped as the film lacks the ability to change courses. However, had the characters made other choices, not looking for drugs or remaining safely in the city she knows for example, the films indicate that she would not have been raped. That the female's transgressions (through alcohol, drugs, or merely being away from a man that could protect them) lead to rape reinforces the disciplinary nature of the films. Beyond cultural rape myths there is only one female body type in all the films; the aforementioned Anglo-beauty ideal; this is true of the vast majority of horror films and cinema in general as younger, white women comprise the vast majority of women in films (Lauzen, 2014, p. 2). More specifically the bodies of the young, white women in horror/slasher films are utilized for particular purposes, nudity and death. In a study of 50 slasher films it was found that females who engaged in transgressive behavior in horror films (defined as illegal or puritanically immoral activities), suffered deaths 50% longer than their male counterparts and their deaths were more likely to appear on-screen (Welsh, 2010, pp. 8-11). The female body in all five films is constructed in the same fashion; young, white, and normatively attractive. Disciplined bodies are both the objective and the result of power. Foucault states, "In every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed upon it constraints, prohibitions or obligations" (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). The rape-revenge horror film reinforces masculine cultural norms by presenting violence as the problem and solution. The films further create disciplined feminine bodies first through the normative presentation of its female protagonist and later through the fantasy of its revenge tale.

The disciplinary gaze then does not function in opposition to the scopophilic gaze; rather it is the companion to it. The male gaze subsumes both in the cultural context to which the

films are birthed. By this I mean that in a culture where masculine traits are more valued, both the disciplinary measures and the ability to gaze lie with the ideology of masculinity. In the rape-revenge horror film the disciplinary gaze falls squarely upon transgressors as it does in the horror film more generally. In reference to victimization in the slasher film, Clover states, “Sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for destruction” (Clover, 1992, p. 33). This notion has to be extended a bit more broadly to apply to the first half of the rape-revenge horror film as the women who are raped are not clear sexual transgressors. Instead they are perceived to be such by the men in the film. In the aforementioned scene, Johnny tells Jennifer, in the original *Spit*, that she flaunted her sexuality. In the original *Last House* film, Krug tells Mari, “You’re really going to get yours, I know you want it.” The assailants hold Jennifer down in the *Spit* remake in order to get Matthew, the mentally challenged errand boy whom Jennifer kissed in thanks for some groceries, laid. “Come on Matthew you know she likes you. Don’t be a pussy, she wants it.” The idea that feminine allure is complicit in rape is a major part of the cultural myths surrounding rape. Several major sexual assault cases, the Kobe Bryant case for one, have been dropped after the woman’s sexual history or “public image” has been successfully attacked. The comic Dave Chappell sums up this particular myth nicely in a bit that has 60 million views on YouTube alone,

The girl says, “Uh uh, oh no. Wait a minute, wait a minute! Just because I’m dressed this way does not mean I’m a whore.” Which is true, gentlemen this is true. Just because they dress a certain way doesn’t mean they are a certain way. But ladies you must understand that that shit is fucking confusing. It just is. That would be like me, Dave Chappell the comedian, walking around in a cop uniform. If someone came up to me and said, “Officer please you have to help us!” and I’d say, “Just because I’m dressed this

way... does not make me a police officer.” So ladies fine, fine, you are not a whore. But you are wearing a whores uniform I’ll tell you that shit right now.

The disciplinary gaze is omnipresent when the subject is feminine sexuality. Conformity to an ideal of femininity is necessary to avoid transgression that can be construed, even legally, as sexual transgression. Thus the horror paradigm mentioned by Clover has its place in the rape-revenge horror film and results in the discipline of the feminine.

A disciplinary gaze does not miss the male sexual transgressors in any of the films. To a man they are punished for their own crimes. The gaze structure is still masculine and disciplinary in nature in that it captures punishment in a retributive fashion. There is no rehabilitation, merely torture and death. The revenge sequence in fact reproduces Foucault’s “Spectacle of the scaffold” in which the power of the ostensibly male sovereign can be witnessed upon the criminals, a spectacle we know to have no place in “civilized” society. The disciplinary gaze in the rape-revenge horror film and other similar, visual texts functions as part of the technological Panopticon that in punishes “fake” transgressions to attempt to deter those behaviors. That such a gaze acts upon the masculine and feminine bodies in the film is undeniable. The difference is that the feminine discipline the film enacts has a strong echo of reality to it, the punishment the men endure does not. The rapes of Jennifer in both *Spit* films can be read about several times a year in various news articles about gang rapes; the University of Colorado, Boulder had such a gang rape occur within miles of the campus – the young woman describes an ordeal only mildly dissimilar from that in the films. The rape of Katie in *Spit 2* is more sensational, but certainly mirrors prominent sex-trafficking cases that we know occur on a daily basis. The rape of Mari in *Last House* and its remake is only fictional by extension. While we know such abduction rapes occur, far more likely would be an assault on her by a fellow

partygoer of her own age. The torture and death of the men for the crime of rape has no direct comparison.

The visible effects of power on bodies within the normative gender binary is the primary issue of the rape-revenge horror film and centers the disciplinary gaze. The cinematic mechanism itself, with its emphasis on a specific female form as well as the punishment of both that female form and the transgressive male body, constitutes a hierarchical observation as Foucault states,

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation: an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (Foucault, 1977, pp. 170-171)

Literally and figuratively fitting the Hollywood paradigm of female beauty, as a means of being judged attractive and thus worthwhile in a U.S. context, continues the process of reinforcing the training a myriad of other cultural artifacts and influences provide. Consider that both Jennifers, both Maris, and Katie represent a normative feminine form that is judged attractive. In the first half of each film, male power is exerted upon their transgressive female body in accordance with Foucault's normalizing judgments. That the woman is "rapable" and raped in the film is both an expression of her desirability as well as punishment for her transgressions. The non-compliant, objectified, female body becomes the site for the normalizing male gaze. Embodying male power in the form of violence becomes the examination; the female or her parents are left to either personify male power to a greater degree than their assailants or meekly accept rape and likely death.



## **A Cruel World**

The masculine and the feminine, life and death, reality and fantasy all meet within the rape-revenge horror film; this is undeniable. There is a sought after degree of realism, at least in creating the rape sequences, which casts a reflection into the reality of at least some of the people as they leave the theater. The cruelty, the sheer brutality of the films under examination is real. Certainly not in the specifics of the fantasy of the film, but in the context of a society that pays to be entertained by the sadistic; as if that were the fantasy. The reality is that the films, regardless of merit, exemplify and perpetuate what Henry Giroux refers to as, “A culture of cruelty” (Giroux, 2009, p. 1). Giroux writes,

But if a legal culture emerged that made violence and human suffering socially acceptable, popular culture rendered such violence pleasurable by commodifying, aestheticizing and spectacularizing it. Rather than being unspoken and unseen, violence in American life had become both visible in its pervasiveness and normalized as a central feature of dominant and popular culture. (Giroux, 2009, p. 3)

The supremacy of violence as a spectacle would not be as problematic if the reality of violence as an issue did not disproportionately affect women. The fear, then, is that the rape-revenge film provides a measure of closure for a rape victim that does not exist. Rather, the film creates a person who is crueler than even her assailants could ever hope to be; the brutal reality of women in that world begets only increasingly sadistic violence. The message seems to be that brutality is the only answer as it comes so easily to us in popular culture. Giroux states, “Morality is irrelevant... It is all about personal pain, vendettas, hedonism and fantasies of revenge, while inflicting pain on others” (Giroux, 2009, p. 4). The rape-revenge horror film occupies a place in culture that intimately ties it to some of the most glaring social problems that face society, yet

distances it from any possible solution to them. The films merely reflect a culture and cycle of cruelty.



The rape-revenge horror film does not exist in a vacuum, rather it is one artifact of a myriad of artifacts that reflects cultural norms and values. The films under examination serve to reinforce attitudes that already exist regarding violence against women rather than create them. The films are however, as are all forms of media, cultural artifacts and are not be dismissed for the role they serve. Giroux states,

What they do achieve is the execution of a well-funded and highly seductive public pedagogical enterprise that sexualizes and stylizes representations of violence, investing them with an intense pleasure quotient. I don't believe it is an exaggeration to claim that the violence of screen culture entertains and cleanses young people of the burden of ethical considerations. (Giroux, 2009, p. 4)

The distance then, between the images on the screen and perceived reality, allow a sort of absolution for consumers – particularly male consumers for whom the realities of rape are actually distant – who see the resolution of the rape-revenge horror film as an act rather than representative of actual gendered relations. The rape-revenge horror film, indeed all films to

some degree, are pedagogical in nature. A survey of cinema would teach another culture what bodies we value and what bodies we do not. When we see crimes that are later punished, we understand that those behaviors are prohibited. Viewing cinematic representations of death may even allow for a cathartic space in which one can deal with one's own fear of death and the unknown. The rape-revenge horror film functions in all of these ways, but the pedagogical function is at the heart of each. In a very real sense the cultural artifacts that are produced are the *only* tangible representation of cultural values.

The rape-revenge horror film certainly has a number of troubling elements within its plot that point to phallogentric cultural values. A normatively attractive woman is nude for long stretches and subjected to male discipline for some transgression. The raped woman (or her agents) stalks and kills the criminals, who at this point have shown themselves to be aberrant males rather than "normal" ones, in a fashion that would leave Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* or Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* in disgusted awe. Obviously the sympathies lie with the woman in the same fashion as Clover's "Final Girl," in the slasher film. The difference is that while Clover's girl is innocent, the agents of rape-revenge horror are anything but. The films themselves do not, as mentioned, create a negative environment for women. However, as Williams states, "Such films can change subject's *attitudes*, as opposed to behavior, towards women" (Williams, 1999, p. 187). To a certain extent the problem would be easier to diagnose if the films could be shown to have substantial impact on behaviors. Stopping the production of media that caused violence against women would logically aid in correcting that particular epidemic. That the films reinforce or influence attitudes that state only certain women are "rapable," that rape is woman's issue to correct, that rape is a stranger crime, and that violence against women is aberrant rather than statistically normal, is a far larger issue.

The focus comes back to watching or gazing, and the gendered relationships inherent behind the locus of that gaze. Williams states,

Whenever the movie screen holds a particularly effective image of terror, little boys and grown men make it a point of honor to look, while little girls and grown women cover their eyes or hide behind the shoulders of their dates. There are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look, not the least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder. (Williams, 1996, p. 15)

Despite the revenge sequence, ultimately the story is about the brutalization of the woman to such an extent that she or her parents has a psychological break and is able to brutalize others – even if they deserve some sort of punishment – in a fashion so horrific that it passes well beyond the borders of believability into the comic. That is perhaps the reason, as mentioned in Chapter One, that I stated that the rape-revenge horror film does not, as Clover states, “At least problematize male sexual violence” (Clover, 1992, p. 115). There is no moral equivalency between the reality of the rape and the fantasy that is the revenge. The function is quite different; it hides the fact that real women are raped and brutalized every day in a similar fashion. The reality of the rape sequences is disturbing to say the least. In his review of the 2010 *Spit* film Roger Ebert wrote,

They use words and guns. They insinuate. They toy with her answers. They enjoy her terror. This is rape foreplay, and they stretch it out as long as they can. There is a reason for this. Rape is a crime of violence, not sex, and the male rapist typically savors the fear he causes more than the sex. Indeed, if he enjoyed sex more, he might not be a rapist. The

true pornography in this film involves the dialogue and situation in the cabin before the physical assault. It is well done. This is a professionally made film.

The reality of the rape is followed by increasingly bizarre, almost Rube Goldberg-like devices of torture; most of which would be completely impossible for a 110-pound woman to carry out. All five films share this aesthetic. The revenge is brutal, but far closer to *surreal* than real, the men pay for their crime – in reality most do not, the woman seems whole at the end – but again this breaks from reality.

Gender is at the center of the rape-revenge horror film. She cannot be raped unless she is a woman and they cannot rape unless they are men. In fact she is raped *because* she is a woman and they rape *because* they are men. Beyond that, they are raped because they are particularly desirable women of the right age, skin color, and body type; they are raped because they are “rapable.” In each of the five films, the leering gaze of the masculine eye catches the body of the woman and there is little doubt that she will be a target. Because of how she looks. Because of how she acts. Because she is an object of desire. She is stripped, she is humiliated, she is beaten, she is tortured, she is raped, and she may be killed. This experience does not render the woman or her parents unable to act, psychologically scarred to the point where the world becomes a place of constant fear. The inhuman experience at the hands of drooling, pawing, violent swine creates the imperative and possibility of revenge. She stalks, she kills. Every degradation heaped upon her comes back to the men tenfold. Their lives are forfeit not at the point of a gun, but at the darkest heart of their worst nightmares. For women, reality and fantasy dance in the most intimate fashion possible in the rape-revenge horror film, the dance of life and death.

## V. Conclusion: Cultural Dissonance in Cinematic Texts

*No words. I went over exactly what had happened. The man I was living with had pulled a gun on me, had forced me to undress, had thrown me into a room with five strange males, had watched them rape me over and over, and now he was angry because I hadn't been exciting enough for them. Good God!* – Linda Lovelace, *Ordeal* (2012)

An analysis of the rape-revenge horror film provides a unique look at the interplay of social issues with the impetus to produce cultural texts that reinforce cultural norms. The rape-revenge horror film appears as nearly a feminist text when freed of its cultural context. The women, by the end of each film under examination, appears empowered. Not only does the woman survive, she enacts her will upon criminals of the vilest sort. Yet appearances are deceiving as the avenger or avengers must adopt a masculine paradigm, appropriating the highly problematic and violent male archetype that plagues a society that is rife with male violence enacted upon the feminine. The films appear to offer cathartic moments for male viewers in seeing that rape is ultimately punished – and they need never lift a finger. Even in the act of presenting the horrific rape scenes that the films do, they obscure the facts of rape in the larger societal context; women are at risk of rape regardless of skin color, body type, or age. The normatively attractive actresses in the films thus belie the truth of the women actually at risk. The films ultimately offer a phony moral equivalency that bears no resemblance whatsoever to the realities of the crime. The viewer, male or female, is placed in a position of experiencing cultural dissonance. The cultural artifacts they consume do not square with reality, resulting in a simulacrum in which the crime of rape continues to be miscast and covered in myth. The rape-revenge horror film becomes a part of a simulated society that obscures the reality of the cultural context which birthed it.

Disparate impacts upon differing groups with less/greater power is certainly of great concern when discussing cultural artifacts as their values are often hidden under the guise of entertainment; they are, after all, only movies. The generic conventions, the struggle to reproduce a desired, simulated reality, and gendered politics are far from the only items of import in examining the rape-revenge horror film. The cinematic medium certainly has real effects, even if it doesn't actually cause the behaviors it sometimes represents. A possible venture of great interest would be to examine feminine perceptions of the films beyond a theoretical context. While scholars such as Linda Williams, Laura Mulvey, Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Alexandra Heller-Nichols, and others have created a phenomenal body of work on both horror films generally and rape-revenge horror films specifically, it is less clear the perceptions such films create among women. Reality and fantasy intersect at some point in the creation and distribution of cinematic texts, locating such an intersection is of great import.

### **The Twilight of Love**

To an extent, cinematic texts do nothing more or less than distill real life to 90 minute vignettes. Certainly it is true that the austere narrative of cinematic texts are usually sensationalized versions of actual events in the same way as literary works. Real life contains crime and death just as the horror film does, if in a very different fashion; more specifically, the rape-revenge horror film contains horrific elements that present a reflected, if distorted, reality that exists in truth. It is true women are raped. It is true that rapists ought to be and sometimes are punished. The narrative of the rape-revenge horror film gives certainty where none exists however, gives resolution where trauma is the reality, and gives closure when the opposite is often true. In this way the rape-revenge horror film resembles an enormously popular teen-romance series, *Twilight*.

Research surrounding Stephanie Meyers' popular series focuses largely on the interplay of romantic relationships with abuse. The common theme in several studies is that the novels portray an abusive relationship paradigm rather than a loving one (Collins & Carmody, 2011; Durham, 2011; Schachar, 2011). Durham (2011) states,

Five dominant ideological themes emerged from this analysis, all of which offer insights into the intersections of gender, sexuality and violence in these texts. First, the texts recurrently represented violence as an inherent and presumptive characteristic of masculinity. Second, male violence was portrayed as an acceptable and justifiable byproduct of male-female relationships. Third, masculinity was defined in terms of a Manichean dualism wherein in "good" boys recognized and repudiated their own "instinctive" predilection for violence and "bad" boys allowed it to go unchecked. Fourth, the human girl protagonists were continually imperiled, not just in the context of their relationships with nonhuman boys, but also by means of the narrative events that cast them into dangerous situations from which they were rescued by boys. And fifth, boys almost inevitably asserted control over Bella's life in various ways, especially in decision-making over significant life choices. (p. 6)

The parallels to rape-revenge horror films are obvious. The problematic portrayal of masculinity as tending toward violence that is justifiable and perhaps even normative in male-female relations is cast in precisely the same light in rape-revenge horror whether the topic is the rape or the female's revenge. Violence is power, control is gained through violence. The control exerted over the female is likewise repeated in rape-revenge horror as the violence exerted by the men in the rape sequence determines the course of action for the female or her parents, there is no suggestion otherwise. If *Twilight* is supposed to be a story of "wholesome, restrained, teen



romance,' then the five films under examination are surely *Twilight's* uncle that everyone avoids talking about. The rape-revenge horror film is merely another level of the same problematic paradigms constructed in far more visible and popular texts.

The issue is that *Twilight* constructs relationships that exist in reality, abusive relationships, but fails to equate those relationships with the actual trauma involved. Instead, the books and films construe the abuse as *normative* within the context of a loving relationship. Rape-revenge horror builds upon this. If *Twilight* constructs violence within a romantic relationship as normal, then the rape myths engendered by rape-revenge horror build upon that cultural paradigm. The result is a procession of cultural simulacra that perpetuate a fantasy that is at best non-existent and at worst will result in real harm. *Twilight* and rape-revenge horror are but a small part of the overall picture, but with enough of an audience and similarities to warrant comparisons. We know both texts are works of fiction, but the fantasy they indulge in is compelling – the reality is something quite different.

### **An Ordeal**

The Linda Lovelace biography *Ordeal*, provides an excellent and disturbing account of the meeting point between cultural fantasies and their attendant realities. The account of her life was only accepted by the publishers after Lovelace had taken and passed a lie detector test, so implausible did her stories seem. Yet the fantasy she sought mirrors that which seems to be intended by the *Twilight* series and represents the cultural myths of the rape-revenge horror film. Indeed she found herself in the reality of such a film. Lovelace (2012) writes,

There was always a gun pointed at my head. Even when no gun could be seen, there was a gun pointed at my head. I can understand why some people have such trouble accepting this as the truth. When I was younger, when I heard about a woman being raped, my

secret feeling was that that could never happen to me. I would never permit it to happen. Now I realize that can be about as meaningful as saying I won't allow an earthquake or I won't permit an avalanche. (Kindle Locations 841-844)

The reality of rape as experienced by a victim is nearly impossible to find in the candid format as it appears in *Ordeal*. Linda Lovelace sought the romance she idealized in marriage, she sought the “bad boy” of *Twilight*, and unfortunately found him. What followed were years of abuse, rape, and violent pornography that culminated in perhaps the most infamous pornographic film ever made, *Deep Throat* (1972). While the film did not remotely mark the end of Linda Lovelace's personal story, it is the point at which the abuse that is her life intersected with her status as a public figure. Her story, like the multitude of non-famous women, would likely have never seen the light of day save for *Deep Throat*.

The film itself, *Deep Throat*, takes on an entirely new context when seen with the Lovelace biography in mind. Rather than “a poor attempt at an expression of sexual freedom,” as Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the film, instead we have a rape scenario. The life of Linda Lovelace represents the reality that the fantasy of cultural artifacts hides. The notoriety that *Deep Throat* received underscores the hidden nature of social problems within culture production. Pornography is still widely considered smut, even if its aesthetics have become far more mainstream. Pornographic films are still thought to be a choice rather than something forced. *Ordeal* points to a very different sort of truth where parts of the industry are little more than extensions of the very real sex-trafficking trade. Lovelace (2012), in retelling her story, states,

Since I was now able to meet the press on my own, without Chuck feeding me lines, I decided to tell the truth. And I did. I told the exact story you've been reading here— that

I had been brutalized, raped and forced into every sexual situation imaginable. But maybe you never read that story in your favorite tabloid. They couldn't use that story. The minute I started telling it, the reporters would turn off their tape recorders. They'd explain to me about the laws of libel. And then they'd point out that the true story would really be a downer for their readers. (Kindle Locations 3147-3151)

The true story is not the one we want to hear, nor is it the story that the producers want to tell. The production of cultural artifacts exists within a system that is highly vested in maintaining profits and by extension, maintaining power. From the Linda Lovelace story we can clearly see the dissonance between the polish of the product upon the screen and the reality behind it. The rape-revenge horror film is in many ways representative of the staggering abuse suffered by Lovelace at the hands of her husband. In just as many ways, the stranger rape myth for example, the rape-revenge horror film falls far short of the depth of cruelty experienced by real women in daily life.

### **Implications**

**Genre.** The rape-revenge horror film (sub)genre is rife with the symbols that characterize horror films. The Monster is created through pain and suffering. The woman-as-Monster ultimately kills. The original *Spit* and *Last House* strongly resemble other horror films of their era (such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) in much the same way the rape-revenge horror film as it exists in the *Last House* and *Spit* remakes appears typical of the “torture porn” aesthetic that was popularized in the *Saw* and *Hostel* series of films. The five films under examination feature heavy doses of highly realistic-looking violence enacted upon bodies. The cameras utilize extreme close-ups of the wounds inflicted; this is true of both the rape and

revenge sequences in the films. These types of conventions create what Thomas Schatz calls, “the iconography of the film.” Schatz states,

A genre’s iconography reflects the value system that defines its particular cultural community and informs the objects, events, and character types comprising it. Each genre’s implicit system of values and beliefs – its ideology or world view – determines its cast of characters, its problems (dramatic conflicts), and the solutions to those problems.

(Schatz, 1981, p. 24)

Thus the rape-revenge horror film, steeped as it is in male sexual violence and owing its aesthetic to the slasher film, results in a repetition of the visual symbols in the film. To a degree the iconography within the rape-revenge horror film cannot be other than what it is given the value systems that surround its content.

While the iconography of the genre is standard for a horror film, particularly in the revenge portion, the genre is unique in that it requires empathy with the eventual instigator of those elaborately gruesome deaths. The woman who is raped in the films undergoes the ordeal of a true crime of which we can identify. The rape-revenge horror film certainly asks more of its audience than even cheering for the “final girl” of the slasher films in Clover’s analysis. The final girl may be the level-headed, innocent girl/woman who made no mistakes, but she does invoke empathy save perhaps with her fear. The victim-turned-protagonist in the rape-revenge horror film undergoes a Kafka trial so brutal that empathy is impossible, identification with the swine abusing her is rendered impossible. That the murders she performs are by a degree more brutal is immaterial. On some level the reality of the crime against the woman is understood and her vengeance appears just as a result. The rape-revenge horror film creates a genre about a social problem, but covers it with the cultural myths that confound the very issue it addresses.

The genre, while not new, has a number of unique properties within both its inception and continuation.

**Simulated Society.** Escaping simulation has become impossible as there is simply no place to escape to; symbols of the real have replaced reality. The location of the tangible evidence of cultural values and norms, of which cinematic texts are one, points to a reality in which it is inevitable that the dissemination of those cultural norms and values comes only from simulation. The origin of the rape-revenge horror film is located, for example, in a Swedish church. The story of that church is gradually buried beneath the symbolic representations of cinema until it is impossible to distill reality from the symbols that proceed from it. While the rape-revenge horror film is one infinitesimally small matter among a myriad of others, the pattern is similar. The general structure of storytelling continually reproduces the cultural norms and values through the symbols they disseminate. Creation myths become the basis for a society in which men are biologically superior and where women can be complicit in crimes against them. The reproduction of stories, shown in this analysis as the movement from the originals to their remakes, results in an inevitable procession of simulacra that hides problematic aspects of society and instead reinforces dominant cultural values.

Rape-revenge horror films become symbolic of the interplay of sex and violence in society. Rather than potentially see the real rape, we instead see rape represented in a particular way again and again. The pattern of domestic and relationship abuse, mostly affecting women, has been produced and reproduced over centuries – *The Rape of Persephone* is perhaps one of the first to name it as such. The films under examination merely serve to reinforce that simulation. The result is a cycle that is potentially impossible to break. Simulation serves a purpose. Just as the reporters did not want to hear Linda Lovelace's real story, those symbols

were unrecognizable except as potential libel, the rape-revenge horror film cannot comprehend the real horror of the story it engages in. In precisely the same way as Pakistani bride-burning stories covered in the U.S. news media serve to conceal our epidemic of domestic violence, so too does the rape-revenge horror film bury the truth surrounding rape. Both instances serve as simulation; symbols that allow the viewer to say, "it is only a story."

**Gender.** The empowerment of the female in the rape-revenge horror film comes only at the cost of incredible trauma. The film thus lacks any identification with feminist concerns and instead employs a prominent male gaze structure. Male sexual violence is indeed punished, but only with the same degree of sexual violence. Roger Ebert states in his review of *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010),

Let's dispatch with the fiction that the film is about "getting even." If I rape you, I have committed a crime. If you kill me, you have committed another one. The ideal outcome would be two people unharmed in the first place. The necessity of revenge is embedded in the darker places of our minds, and most hate speech is driven by "wrongs" invented in unbalanced minds. No one who commits a hate crime ever thinks his victim is innocent. (Ebert, 2010)

His notion of tying revenge to prejudice is insightful. The rape-revenge horror film, all of which were financed, written, and directed by men, points to an extraordinarily disturbing misogyny that has been pervasive within the cinematic apparatus for its entire lifespan. The identification with masculinity has been a staple of cinema, stripping, both literally and figuratively, actresses of their dignity. A cultural misogyny, too, seems to exist in regards to the treatment of women. Cinematic texts are not the cause, rather they are a symptom of cultural malaise in regards to half

our population. They are symbolic of the place of women in society. That that place was as property as recently as 150 years ago echoes the necessity for critique.

The gaze structure of the rape-revenge horror film is at least concerned with proper discipline for transgressions as cultural norms that imply that women beyond the confines of the private sphere can be punished are rife in the rape-revenge horror film. The male gaze is disciplinary in this way throughout each of the five films. Every woman in the films who transgresses is punished. The implication is that the bounds of propriety, rather than lawfulness/lawlessness, govern the feminine. The male assailants are representative of the “bad things” that women must keep away from. The message is clear and it is not, “Don’t rape.” Rather it is, “Don’t put yourself in a position where you could be raped.”

Gendered issues are central within the rape-revenge film, but the films offer only fictional solutions to the real problem it confronts. Schatz states,

They (films) repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts (opposing value systems) within a certain cultural community, suggesting various solutions through the actions of the main characters. (1981, p. 24)

The problem, filtered through a gendered lens, is that the rape-revenge horror film creates a problem that is real, the rape of women, but sets it in a context that is mostly useless. The out-of-the-way stranger rape is vastly less prevalent than the domestic abuse seen in *Ordeal*. The “solution” is even more implausible, even if potentially cathartic, than the problem. Having a 110 lb. woman dragging 200-300 lb. men around and placing them in Rube Goldberg-like torture contraptions is impractical at best. The actions of the women in the film serve only to reinforce cultural rape myths – a fictional solution to the fictional problem

## Further Research

The pattern is difficult to discern when seated in a dark theater surrounded by the spectacle of the cinema, perhaps the new version of the “spectacle of the scaffold.” The texts we consume are rarely considered for the messages they relate; far easier to consume is the superficiality of what they represent. The pattern of simulation to distort and distill messages to produce and reproduce cultural values is present within all cultural to some degree. Examining the messages that the text provides and the truth it hides as a result is certainly worthy of greater study. Within the rape-revenge horror films there are a number of avenues that could offer greater material of study.

The male group dynamic is present within all five films in that it takes all of them to talk themselves into the act of rape. It has been suggested that perhaps the men didn’t even intend to rape, merely harass, until they were put in that situation with the others goading them on. Certainly an enormous number of college campuses are plagued by precisely this behavior, particularly in sports teams and fraternities, those bastions of normative masculinity. A larger pattern of male group behavior within the cinematic context, extending beyond a single genre, would likely provide a fruitful insight as to the attitudes surrounding the interplay of male groups and the rape of women.

The original *Spit* film and its remake both feature a mentally challenged man, Matthew, who appears to be, as Roger Ebert writes, “Their pet retard” (Ebert, 2010). The image of disability within the film as usable and exploitable is at least as perverted as the rape itself, as both versions of the film have the men hounding him to commit the rape. Both versions in fact, have the male characters state that the assault of Jennifer is a gift for Matthew. Jennifer ultimately finds both men as guilty as their collaborators and both are summarily executed. A



detailed look at these portrayals could provide a solid framework for a more expansive study on the images of disability. Utilizing more cinematic texts where a disabled person figures into the story could serve to draw parallels to the pervasive cultural attitudes against people with disabilities. Such a study could be expanded to see how attitudes are related about any group with less power than the dominant group.

The rape-revenge horror film is a narrow, but fertile ground of material. Feminism, gender issues, social problems, and power/powerlessness cross paths in the films under examination. The films are commercial enterprises in the end and as such seek to sell a particular message. Any notion that they are bereft of meaning is as absurd as stating that comic books are directly responsible for criminality in youth. Symbolic meaning is inherently embedded in cultural artifacts and the greatest part of continued scholarship should focus on locating and deciphering that meaning.

## VI. References

- Altman, R. (2009). A semantic/syntactic approach to Film Genre. In L. Baudry, & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory & Criticism* (pp. 552-563). New York City: Oxford University Press.
- American Psychological Association. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association Public Interest Directorate.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. (S. F. Glaser, Trans.) Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. (S. F. Glaser, Trans.) Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The Perfect Crime*. New York: Verso Publishing.
- Bielby, D. D. (1996). Women and men in film: Gender inequality among writers in a culture industry. *Gender and Society*, 10(3), 248-270.
- Bielby, D. D. (2009). Gender inequality in culture industries: Women and men writers in film and television. *Sociologie du travail*, 51, 237-252.
- Brashinsky, M. (1998). The Spring, Defiled: Ingmar Bergman's "Virgin Spring" and Wes Craven's "Last House on the Left". In A. Horton, & S. Y. McDougal (Eds.), *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (pp. 163-170). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Carroll, N. (1990). *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hill, Inc.

- Clover, C. J. (1992). *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. London, England: British Film Institute.
- Collins, V. E., & Carmody, D. C. (2011). Deadly Love: Images of Dating Violence in the "Twilight Saga". *Afillia*, 26(4), 382-394.
- Cowan, G., Lee, C., Levy, D., & Snyder, D. (1988). Dominance and Inequality in x-rated videocassettes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 12, 299-311.
- Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous-Feminine* (Kindle ed.). New York City: Taylor and Francis Group Publishing.
- Davidson, C. (1996). Riviera's Golem, Haraway's Cyborg: Reading "Neuromancer" as Baudrillard's Simulation of Crisis. *Science Fiction Studies*, 32, 188-198.
- Durham, M. G. (2011). Blood, Lust, and Love: Interrogating gender violence in the Twilight phenomenon. *Journal of Children and Media*, 1-19.
- Ebert, R. (2010, October 6). *I Spit on Your Grave*. Retrieved from Roger Ebert.com:  
<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/i-spit-on-your-grave-2010>
- Edgers, G. (2007, July 23). *Psychiatrists-turned-film-critics call 'Hostel II' painfully compelling*. Retrieved April 21, 2011, from Globe Staff:  
[http://www.boston.com/yourlife/health/mental/articles/2007/06/23/psychiatrists\\_turned\\_film\\_critics\\_call\\_hostel\\_ii\\_painfully\\_compelling/](http://www.boston.com/yourlife/health/mental/articles/2007/06/23/psychiatrists_turned_film_critics_call_hostel_ii_painfully_compelling/)
- Featherstone, M., & Johnson, B. (2012). "Ovo Je Srbija": The Horror of the National Thing in a Serbian Film. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 2, 37-41.
- Forntiden, F. (2012, August 12). *Projekt Runeberg*. Retrieved December 8th, 2012, from  
<http://runeberg.org/folksang/1/0010.html>

- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish*. London, England: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Frechette, J. (2012). Beauty and body image: Beauty myths. In M. Kosut (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of gender in media* (pp. 17-21). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Girls rule (at a cost)*. (2007, July 23). Retrieved April 19, 2011, from fourfour:  
[http://fourfour.typepad.com/fourfour/2007/06/girls\\_rule.html](http://fourfour.typepad.com/fourfour/2007/06/girls_rule.html)
- Giroux, H. A. (2009). Living in a Culture of Cruelty: Democracy as Spectacle. *Perspective*, 7, 1-7.
- Habermas, J. (1998). *The philosophical discourse of modernity: Twelve lectures*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hamilton, E. (1942). *Mythology*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Hammer, R., & Kellner, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Media/Cultural Studies: Critical approaches*. New York City: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Harris, K. L. (2011). The Next Problem With No Name: The Politics and Pragmatics of the word Rape. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 34, 42-63.
- Heller-Nicholas, A. (2011). *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Kindle ed.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc.
- IMDB. (2010, September 15). *IMDB: The Last House on the Left (2010)*. Retrieved from IMDB.com: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0844708/business?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0844708/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus)
- IMDB. (2014, February 1). *The Last House on the Left (1972)*. Retrieved from IMDB.com: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068833/business?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068833/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus)

- Keegan, R. (2011, November 22). *Gender inequality still has a starring role in Hollywood, USC study finds*. Retrieved from Los Angeles Times:  
<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/22/entertainment/la-et-film-gender-20111122>
- Lauzen, M. M. (2014). *It's a man's (celluloid) world*. San Diego State University. San Diego: Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film.
- Lovelace, L. (2012). *Ordeal*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corp.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Monk-Turner, E., Ciba, P., Cunningham, M., McIntire, P. G., Pollard, M., & Turner, R. (2004). A Content Analysis of Violence in American War Movies. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 4*, 1-11.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In L. Braudy, & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory & Criticism* (pp. 711-722). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- NBC Universal. (2014, June 8). *Miss USA*. Retrieved from Miss USA:  
<http://www.missuniverse.com/missusa>
- Neale, S. (2012). Questions of Genre. In B. K. Grant (Ed.), *Film Genre Reader IV* (Kindle Edition, 2012 ed., pp. Kindle Locations 3693-4250). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Projansky, S. (2001). *Watching Rape* (Kindle ed.). New York: New York University Press.
- Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the folktale* (Kindle ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- R.A.I.N.N. (2013). *Who are the Victims?* Retrieved February 23, 2013, from R.A.I.N.N.:  
<http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>

- Schachar, H. (2011). A Post-Feminist Romance: Love, Gender, and Intertextuality in Stephanie Meyer's *Seda*. In M. Parke, & N. Wilson (Eds.), *Theorizing Twilight* (pp. 147-160). Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co.
- Schatz, T. (2009). Film Genre and the Genre Film. In L. Braudy, & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory & Criticism* (pp. 564-575). New York City, NY: Oxford University Press.
- The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. (2013, June 1). *The 33rd Academy Awards (1961) Nominees and Winners*. Retrieved from Academy Awards:  
<http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/legacy/ceremony/33rd-winners.html>
- US Department of Health and Human Services. (2014, June 2). *Coverage Denied: How the Current Health Insurance System Leaves Millions Behind*. Retrieved from HealthCare.gov:  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20130501111002/http://www.healthreform.gov/reports/denied\\_coverage/index.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20130501111002/http://www.healthreform.gov/reports/denied_coverage/index.html)
- Welsh, A. (2010). On the Perils of Living Dangerously in the Slasher Horror Film: Gender Differences in the Association Between Sexual Activity and Survival. *Springer Science+Business Media, 62*, 762-773.
- Williams, L. (1996). When the woman looks. In B. K. Grant (Ed.), *The Dread of Difference* (pp. 15-34). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Williams, L. (1999). *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, Ltd.

Williams, L. (1999). *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd.

Williams, L. (2009). Film Bodies: Gender, genre, and excess. In L. Baudry, & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory & Criticism* (pp. 602-615). New York City: Oxford University Press.

Wood, R. (2012). *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*. New York City: Columbia University Press.