

Revulsion

The Paradox of Disgust
in the Rape-Revenge Narrative

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Series in Critical Media Studies



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To Georgie,
Gone too soon

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Foreword

This project started its life as a response paper for a Renaissance revenge tragedy course I took as a graduate student with Dr. Katherine Cleland. The sexualization of murder in *The Maid's Tragedy* troubled me so much that I felt compelled to ask what narrative function the sexualization and, by extension, sexual violence can fulfill. Since I was already familiar with the rape-revenge film's existence as well as acquainted with scholarship of those singularly alienating works, the connection between the two disparate media, Renaissance plays and 1970s horror films, felt natural to me. And, still feeling unsatisfied with my response paper's exploration of the morally treacherous topic, I undertook a longer study in a seminar paper that forms the basis for this manuscript's first major chapter.

My work on rape-revenge, then, started with a short, two-page paper about a scene with which I could not quite reconcile myself. The sexualization of violence raised, for me, too many ethical, affective, and narratological questions to overlook. My continued reckoning with these issues has owed largely to my continued desire to address these questions insofar as I am able. These stories have held me firm for several years now, that grip rooted in my disgust and discomfort with them. Perhaps both these responses, however, stem partially from my personal history. Like many involved in the production, analysis, and/or spectatorship of rape-revenge works, I have been a victim of sexual abuse.¹ Writing this book has, therefore, taken on a somewhat therapeutic role for me, as the occasion has forced me to confront finally that demon from my past.

It is possible, however, this demon will never be laid to rest. Indeed, it has dogged me this far, throughout the original two papers, into the conference presentations forming the basis for further chapters here, and into a second seminar paper I wrote during my doctoral studies, which also forms a chapter in this volume. I have, the reader may notice, been circling back to these same questions and this same type of story for some time and in different forms.

¹ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* 2nd edition. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021), 5-6. Like Heller-Nicholas herself, I choose not to delve into the details of my personal experience. Nevertheless, I identify its existence in this volume because it forms an important part of my history and engagement with rape-revenge texts.

Introduction

Among film's most maligned yet resilient narrative forms lies the rape-revenge film, existing readings of which, I argue in this book, are too dichotomous. To date, readings of these films have tended to argue for rape-revenge's feminist bonafides (Clover) or dismiss these texts as misogynistic (Creed). Both of these camps would benefit from considering the rape-revenge narrative's inherent ambivalence. In this book, I argue contra feminist readings of rape-revenge films that this narrative form is, in fact, less redemptive than this camp construes it to be. Simultaneously, I argue contra readings of rape-revenge as misogynistic that these texts do often contain overt and latent feminist messaging, that the weight of the evidence for the stories I discuss tends to lean toward meanings more feminist than not.

Key to rape-revenge's ambivalence and the enduring difficulty I and so many other scholars have had in interpreting these texts is the paradox of disgust. That is, I argue these texts' reliance on evoking disgust through their narratives and imagery largely dooms the texts to ambivalence and the inability for one to deem them wholly feminist or wholly misogynist.

Aside from my personal investment in these stories, there is clear societal exigence for further scholarly work on rape-revenge. Today, past the #MeToo era, the problems of rape culture remain. Thus, much work remains as well. By continuing to engage in critical discussions of the crime of rape, I hope this volume and other works in this area may continue contributing to this cause. And while the texts I discuss in this book are works of fiction, I nevertheless maintain that examining our fiction helps tell us about ourselves. Films, after all, do not merely reflect our values; they also help determine them.¹ And movies help give us a sense of order and meaning.²

That established, allow me to delineate the texts I am considering. One of the major obstacles facing a work such as mine is the sheer number and variety of rape-revenge narratives. Rape, as Sarah Projansky observes, is narratively versatile.³ Further, the rape-revenge narrative has existed at least since

¹ Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign." In *Feminism and Film*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

² Vivian C. Sobchack, "The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies." In *Screening Violence*, edited by Stephen Prince. (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 117.

³ Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. (New York University Press, 2001), 3.

medieval ballads, has an established lineage through literature, and exists across a large range of film genres and in a variety of cultures. As such, considering the entire breadth of rape-revenge fiction in a single book is infeasible. To focus my argument and analysis, I have chosen, therefore, to hone in on rape-revenge films that originate from the Western world (but especially the United States) between 1970 and 2021.⁴

Focusing on this period not only allows me to control my study's scope but also identifies a place and time in which rape-revenge films proliferated. The start date of 1970 sets the oldest films in this volume during the decade of *I Spit on Your Grave's* release. *I Spit on Your Grave* is not only (possibly) the most infamous rape-revenge film, but it is also the first I discuss in this volume. Its influence is profound, and it (and its sequels) will occupy a significant portion of my discussion. Meanwhile, the end date of 2021 marks when I began writing this volume in earnest and could not continue adding new rape-revenge releases.⁵

At times, however, I will reference works from rape-revenge's literary past where they provide useful counterpoints and so that I can offer some insight into rape-revenge more broadly while nevertheless leaving my analysis mostly grounded in a specific medium and time period. By referring to a couple of literary works (*The Maid's Tragedy* and *Clarissa*), I hope to demonstrate how much Western conceptions of rape and consequent revenge have changed while also showing some of the rape-revenge narrative's variety and, moreover, how deep its troubles run. Furthermore, in favor of keeping my analysis at least somewhat concise, I have curtailed the number of texts I consider. As such, some highly influential rape-revenge texts (e.g., *The Last House on the Left*) will not receive substantial discussion in this volume.⁶ Instead, I have tried to pick a smaller selection of texts upon which to focus.

I am, however, going to narrow my focus even more by only considering rape-revenge in two film genres: horror and thriller.⁷ This approach allows me to

⁴ As such, discussion of, for example, rape-revenge in Japanese cinema (e.g., *Rashomon* and *Lady Snowblood*) will fall outside my scope in this volume.

⁵ Numerous factors allowed for American films in the 1970s to become more graphically violent. Thus, the stage of 1970's America was one set for a film like *I Spit on Your Grave*. 1970 is, ergo, a natural starting point for a study of rape-revenge films. That said, studies on rape-revenge in cinema before 1970 could be fruitful even though they fall outside my scope here. Likewise, studies of rape-revenge films released after this volume began (or is published) could also prove fruitful.

⁶ I plan to write about my thoughts on *The Last House on the Left* at another time and in another project.

⁷ Rape-revenge does appear in other genres (e.g., in the crime film *Thelma & Louise*).

avoid devoting this volume to delimiting where, exactly, the rape-revenge “genre” lies. Doing so is its own can of worms since Jacinda Reed has argued rape-revenge is not a genre at all, but rather a narrative structure that various artists have adapted for use in a large number of different genres.⁸ Contrariwise, Claire Henry has asserted the value of deeming rape-revenge a genre and thereby applying the insights of genre theory to studies of rape-revenge.⁹ My goal is not to settle this debate. As such, I am focusing on rape revenge where it exists as a particular sub-genre of horror and thriller films. Such an approach allows my project greater specificity and a clearer agenda. To this end, I take pains in this volume to forego referring to rape-revenge as a genre unto itself.

So, what is the rape-revenge sub-genre of horror and the thriller? These texts are largely similar in that they follow a female protagonist who, typically while on a journey, is raped and left for dead only to then kill her rapists one-by-one. To be sure, this sub-genre shares significant overlap with other sub-genres of horror and the thriller. Even sexual violence is not unique to the rape-revenge film, as Nick Groom has noted how frequently the American gothic contains or is about sexual violence.¹⁰ This is not, however, a book on the gothic. Nor is this a book on the road horror film. Finn Ballard has cataloged the aspects of the road horror film, which do resemble those of the rape-revenge movie to a remarkable degree.

Films from both these sub-genres tend to feature white, middle-class protagonists, to take place on journeys, and to have strong female leads.¹¹ Nevertheless, rape is not always a key feature of the road horror film, whereas it is essential to the rape-revenge film. The rape-revenge’s dual focus on, first, rape and, second, revenge, do distinguish it from road horror, even though the two will often overlap, meaning some of the works I examine could easily fit into a volume on road horror films.

Similarly, rape-revenge films often resemble slasher movies (e.g., *Friday the 13th*) in that both show a character killing a group of people one-by-one. Like the road horror, however, the slasher does not always foreground the issues of sexual assault and revenge, meaning that, while the sub-genres of slasher and

⁸ Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*. (Manchester University Press, 2000), 11.

⁹ Claire Henry, *Revisionist Rape-revenge Redefining a Film Genre*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 8.

¹⁰ Nick Groom, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 11.

¹¹ Finn Ballard, “No Trespassing: The post-millennial road-horror movie,” *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 4 (2008): 22-24, <https://irishgothicjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/finn-ballard.pdf>.

rape-revenge may overlap, they are not identical. And I can say the same for the rape-revenge and the western movie, both of which feature what Bernice Murphy has called regeneration through violence.¹²

Finally, as I have been revising this book, Barbara Creed has released a follow-up on her seminal *The Monstrous-Feminine* in which she discusses a new genre she christens the Feminist New Wave. Given that Creed devotes a chapter in her new book, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, to contemporary rape-revenge films, it is unsurprising that the Feminist New Wave and the rape-revenge film overlap at times. Examining the list of films Creed includes, we can see that some Feminist New Wave movies (e.g., *Revenge*) are rape-revenge narratives and that others are not.

These matters established, allow me to turn to my methodology. To examine my key texts, I primarily use narratological analysis, focusing on matters of plot and character. To this end, I have made the conscious, albeit possibly controversial, decision to (largely) eschew historical analysis. That is to say, I will not spend as much time connecting these films to their differing historical and cultural contexts as I could. I have made this decision not out of disdain for historicism but for pragmatic reasons. Namely, part way through drafting this volume, I realized my historicist analyses were too disparate from my focus on disgust and were too lengthy to fit tidily alongside my examination of disgust in a single volume. I plan, therefore, to write a later volume that picks up the historicist thread for these movies.¹³

There is some critical backing for my decision to eschew a focus on historical analysis. Peter Brooks, for example, notes that plot reveals narrative intention.¹⁴ Plus, David Bordwell has argued narrative has primacy in cinema.¹⁵ And Andrew Tudor writes: "Narrative, then, has to be a central focus for any socially sensitive approach to a popular genre..."¹⁶ Thus, the plot is

¹² Bernice M. Murphy, *The Highway Horror Film*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10.

¹³ In the meantime, see Robin Wood and Adam Lowenstein for historicist readings of horror films, including rape-revenge films in the horror genre.

¹⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. (Harvard University Press, 1984), 37.

¹⁵ Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*. (Routledge, 2010), 168. Hans Robert Jauss has argued that focus on historicist analysis often comes at the detriment of considering aesthetic matters (33). While my own analysis is more narratological than aesthetic, Jauss's point nevertheless stands: To focus my analysis, I must also narrow its lens.

¹⁶ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters And Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. (1989), 81.

important, and in this book, I look to the stories these films tell so I can discern their messages and discuss their impacts.

I will, however, move beyond plot to connect these films' stories to issues of disgust and feminist film theory. I will argue that careful analysis of rape-revenge texts, in fact, disrupts existing understandings of gender in film. Nevertheless, I do so with the following caveat in mind: some of the feminist scholarship I consider and offer to complicate concerns not rape-revenge but classical cinema, meaning some of the challenges I offer to the extant theories will be historically-conditioned.¹⁷ That is, rape-revenge films, I argue, differ from feminist film theories, sometimes, because these texts are newer than the theories are.¹⁸ Thus, when I argue one of these texts challenges or complicates existing theory, I am not arguing my perspicacious predecessors were wrong but, rather, that we need to alter how we apply their ideas moving forward. And because I am entering the realm of feminist film theory, my discussion contains references to psychoanalysis, which has had a profound influence on much seminal work in this area.

And now, I turn to one final matter: some disclaimers. First, I wish to follow in the steps of Douglas Cowan by noting that my book is not supposed to offer *the* way of discussing rape-revenge but, instead, is offering *a* way to understand the works I discuss.¹⁹ I have to acknowledge up front that while the scholars I cite and I have particular ways of responding to my key texts, others might respond differently.²⁰ Again, my analysis offers one way of viewing these texts, not the only way, as my discussion of historicism shows. Second, and finally, I offer now a content warning. This book discusses rape and disgust in-depth and at length. Many readers may find this material objectionable or deeply disturbing, and I urge such readers to seek different films and (as much as I hate to state it) a different book.

¹⁷ That said, tracing the exact line of *how* these sensibilities and theories have changed is outside my purview in this volume, where I focus on the tension between feminist messaging and the evocation of disgust in these works.

¹⁸ This is, however, not always the case. Not only does some of the feminist scholarship I consider directly address rape-revenge, including some of the texts I discuss at length, but some of the scholarship also rose well after the modern rape-revenge cycle began in the 1970s.

¹⁹ Douglas E. Cowan, *The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination*. (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 10.

²⁰ Stephen Prince, "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects." In *Screening Violence*, edited by Stephen Prince. (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 23.

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