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Rape-Revenge Films During the Antirape Movement: 1972-1988

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Abstract: This paper explores rape-revenge films released during the 1970s and 1980s, which coincided with the antirape movement, an extension of second-wave feminism that sought to bring attention to, and eliminate, rape from society. By analyzing how several films portray rape victims and their experiences with law enforcement, which I refer to as the woman-state axis, this paper shows how these films fail to reflect the feminist values of the time, and therefore cannot be classifed as inherently feminist films.

Rape-revenge films follow fairly simple plots. Each one involves a woman, normally young, white, and beautiful, who is raped by a man, normally a stranger. After being failed by the police, or perhaps after bypassing the police all together, the woman gets revenge on her attackers, often through violence. Some of the most notable examples, like the 1978 film *I Spit on Your Grave* and the 1972 film *The Last House on the Left,* coincide with the antirape movement, a movement within second-wave feminism that sought to bring attention to and end sexual violence against women. Feminist texts like *Against Our Will:Men, Women, and Rape* by Susan Brownmiller publicized women's testimonies about rape and their mistreatment at the hands of police, as well as presented statistics and results from sociological studies to educate readers.[1] Despite the public information about rape, the rape-revenge films released at the time tended to be exploitative rather than advancing feminist messages. When these films expose the failings of the state or the ruthlessness of men, they do not offer solutions that translate into the real world or help further the goals of feminists during the antirape era, which as stated in the New York Radical Feminist publication, *Rape: The First Sourcebook For Women, "*rape is not a reformist but a revolutionary issue because our ultimate goal is to eliminate rape and that goal cannot be achieved without a revolutionary transformation of our society."[2] While representation of sexual violence in media is important to the feminist goal of politicization, the films that I will analyze from this period do not contribute to the ultimate eradication of sexual violence. By specifically looking at how the women in the films interact with and work around the state, which I will refer to as the woman-state axis, I will show that while these films might have entertainment value, they cannot be considered inherently feminist films.

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[1] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1975).
[2] *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women,* ed. Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson (New York: New American Library, 1974), 175.

Film Historiography

In order to discuss rape-revenge films as historical documents, we first have to consider how they fit into cinema history. The categorization of rape-revenge films has been a contentious topic for film scholars as they have tried to come up with ways to fit these films into a genre, or questioned whether they belong to one genre at all. In her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws,* Carol Clover analyzes rape-revenge films as a subsect of the horror genre that requires several qualifications. Framing her analyses around the 1978 film *I Spit on Your Grave*, Clover asserts that most of these films hinge on what she calls the city-country axis, in which the viewers are meant to sympathize with people from the city (the victims) and see people from the country (the villains) as lawless others.[3] *I Spit on Your Grave* and the 1971 film *Straw Dogs* fit into this category, as both films feature outsiders from cities who are attacked by rural locals. Clover also claims that rape-revenge films tend to be low-budget because "the fiscal conditions of low-budget filmmaking are such that creativity and individual vision can prosper there in ways that they may not in mainstream environments."[4] Clover sees a strong association between low budget filmmaking and the creation of the "tough girls," or the heroines of rape-revenge films.[5] Barbara Creed, in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis,* builds on Clover's analysis of women in horror movies by looking at women specifically as monsters, or the "monstrous feminine," based on Freudian ideas about male fear.[6] Her analysis relies heavily on the impact the film is able to have on the male viewer based on his fear, which Clover also

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[3]Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 124.
[4] Clover, 6.
[5] Clover, 6.
[6]Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

draws on in her book. While these two scholars place rape-revenge films within the horror genre, others consider a different classification for these films.

Jacinda Read, author of *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle,* directly challenges both Clover and Creed's classification of rape revenge films as horror and sets out to "counter this tendency to locate rape revenge within the horror genre by developing an analysis which argues that rape revenge together with the erotic thriller form part of an ongoing historically, rather than generically, specific cycle."[7] If rape revenge narratives are only studied from the vantage point of the horror genre, then the presence of those narratives that fall outside the horror genre are ignored. Film scholar Sarah Projansky also takes a similar approach to this issue. Projansky says that rape in film is versatile and found in various genres over time, which aligns closely with Read's arguments. Projansky goes on to say that while sexual violence serves different purposes in different genres, such as the expression of tensions about female independence in screwball comedies, and take a racialized form in westerns to motivate conflict between groups, the existence of rape in both very different genres suggests that rape "plays [a role] in supporting genre itself as a narrative form in cinema."[8] While Creed and Clover's analyses rely on rape-revenge fitting into a specific genre, Projansky and Read push for rape-revenge to be seen as a narrative sequence that is central to cinema itself rather than contained to a single realm of filmmaking.

Read also pushes back against Clover's notion of the city-country axis on which rape-revenge films operate and the claim that these films must be low-budget. Read takes issue with

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[7] Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 23.
[8] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 63.

these definitions because Clover is "constantly forced to make qualifications to her arguments."[9] She points out that the only rape revenge film that fits both the city-country axis and low budget is *I Spit on Your Grave,* which Clover significantly analyzes. Other films, like *Deliverance, The Accused,* and *Ms. 45,* all have the narrative structures of a rape-revenge plot, but none fit into Clover's very specific definition within the horror genre.[10] Because Clover's definition of rape-revenge within horror excludes many films, this supports Read and Projansky's view of rape in cinema as being a narrative structure which transcends and supports genre rather than conforms to one genre.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, in her book *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study,* goes a step further than Read and Projansky in terms of categorizing rape-revenge films. While Read and Projansky believe in a narrative formula for rape-revenge films, Heller-Nicholas states that while watching a number of rape-revenge films, "there was no singualar or unified treatment of rape across this category when surveyed as a whole [...] if people are confused about what sexual violence 'means,' then these films offer a notable contemporary example of why contradictory and often hypocritical attitudes can coexist more generally."[11] The contradictions about notions of justice and revenge in the films this paper discusses are not a problem for Heller-Nicholas; these contradictions are the point. She challenges the idea that there is any need to categorize rape-revenge films as a whole at all "because the films themselves reflect a broader cultural confusion about rape more generally. This is exactly why these films have proven so difficult for critics to lump together: when the wide range of texts this book explores is considered, many rape-revenge films are united only through their ability to demonstrate that conflicting attitudes

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[9] Read, 23.
[10] Read, 23.
[11] Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films : A Critical Study* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011), 1.

toward rape have and continue to co-exist."[12] Based on Heller-Nicholas' theory, if we interpret rape-revenge films as being banded together through generic conventions or a narrative formula, we miss the larger cultural implications of the contradictions these films present.

This debate about genre is important because it demonstrates the role of sexual violence in society; if rape in films is not confined to one genre, and if one believes that art imitates life, then rape cannot confined to only conversations within feminist circles. While Clover's city-country axis brings up an interesting tension in rape-revenge films, or at least in *I Spit on Your Grave*, a more pressing tension seems to be between woman and the state, which I will refer to as the woman-state axis. For this reason, I will analyze the films in this paper based on how they employ this woman-state axis, but I will not be making definitive claims about the generic or formulaic aspects of them.

Woman-State Axis in Rape Revenge Films

Brownmiller lays out many issues that second-wave feminists had with law enforcement, namely that women's "complaints [of sexual violence] were met by insensitive, often hostile policemen."[13] She goes on to explain the implications of this by stating that "despite their knowledge of the law they are supposed to enforce, the male police mentality is often identical to the stereotypical views of rape that are shared by the rest of the male culture. The tragedy for the rape victim is that the police officer is the person who validates her victimization. A police officer who does not believe there is such a crime as rape can arrive at only one determination," that determination being that women are lying.[14] The problem with the police therefore hinges on

[12] Heller-Nicholas, 4.
[13] Brownmiller, 364.
[14] Brownmiller, 366.

their ability to determine whether a crime has occurred, and for many rape victims the answer was that no crime had occurred.

The overarching misconceptions about rape, from the media, the public, and law enforcement, led some women in the antirape movement to find new ways to advocate for their safety outside the state. Feminist groups in the 1970s advocated for their rights through public speak-outs and established rape crisis centers and hotlines to better assist victims. A great deal of the anti-rape movement focused on reforming the justice system to work better for victims of sexual violence, with the ultimate hope of eradicating sexual violence entirely. While this was a noble cause, historian Catherine O. Jacquet points out that "the antirape movement is often framed within a 'narrative of decline'—this narrative tells a story of the movement's co-optation by the state, its depoliticization, and its eventual failure to meet its original, utopic goal to eradicate violence against women."[15] By the 1980s rape law reforms spearheaded by feminists were in place in all fifty states, but these laws did not erase violence, and "some scholars now argue that the reliance on the criminal legal system has increased women's vulnerability to violence"[16] This vulnerability Jacquet cites likely refers to the difficulties women faced when their rape reports went to trial.

The 1988 film *The Accused*, follows Sarah Tobias' quest for justice after being gang raped in a bar while bystanders watched. Scenes of Sarah being interrogated at the hospital, by police, and by her attorney about her criminal record, sexual history, and clothing at the time of the rape exemplify Brownmiller's assertions of the hostility and humiliation that rape victims face at the hands of the state and people in authority positions in general. The film emphasizes

[15] Catherine O. Jacquet, "Fighting Back, Claiming Power: Feminist Rhetoric and Resistance to Rape in the 1970s," *Radical History Review* 2016, no. 126 (October 2016), 72.
[16] Jacquet, 72.

the specific challenges faced by rape victims who are not perfect victims, that is anything but respectable, middle-class women, which differs from some of the other films that will be discussed in this paper. Sarah's attorney, Kathryn, is told by her bosses in the District Attorney's office that Sarah "walked into a bar, got loaded and stoned and did everything but yank their dicks. No jury will buy her."[17] While Kathryn is sympathetic towards Sarah, she also says to her coworkers that she does not have a case because of Sarah's reputation. When Kathryn accepts a plea bargain and Sarah's rapists are only sentenced to six months in jail, Sarah confronts Kathryn and accuses her of not defending her because she is a "low-class bimbo." Sarah goes on to say "Everybody figures I'm a piece of shit. I never got to tell nobody nothing. You did all my talking for me. I don't get it. I thought you were on my side."[18] This outburst causes Kathryn to pursue the bystanders who witnessed the rape, and with the testimony of one of the male witnesses, is able to win the case.

By ending in triumph for Sarah and Kathryn, the film subverts the idea that the state fails women in cases of rape by presenting the idea that female partnership, specifically between a college educated Kathryn and her working-class client, is enough to create change. Clover takes issue with this ending, stating that "in its implication that the story is over when the men are sentenced, [*The Accused*] is pure Pollyannaism."[19] Brownmiller found that on average, based on numbers from 1973, when reports of rape were believed, or "founded," 51 percent of offenders were arrested, 76 percent were prosecuted, and 47 percent were acquitted or had their cases dismissed.[20] While Brownmiller notes that we have to be careful when relying on statistics because underreporting of rape skews results, they do offer a useful starting point to

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[17] *The Accused,* dir. Jonathan Kaplan, 1988.
[18] *The Accused.*
[19] Clover, 149.
[20] Brownmiller, 175.

understanding how rape cases were handled during this time. Statistically, the outcome shown in *The Accused* is not outrageous. However, as Clover points out, "*The Accused* shows the system working—but only barely (only by loophole, actually), and only slowly, and only because a man of goodwill and a very smart, sympathetic, and stubborn female lawyer happen to be in the right place at the right time."[21] So the justice shown in *The Accused* does not actually reflect the realities of a rape trial during this time, but rather shows a very specific instance in which a semblance of justice was achieved against the odds. The story of Sarah and Kathryn beating those odds may be inspirational, but it does not interrogate the state for creating those odds.

The loophole that Clover notes is the fact that Kathryn was able to prosecute the witnesses to Sarah's rape, while her rapists took a plea deal. The rape scene is not shown through Sarah's testimony, but rather through the testimony of one of the rapists' fraternity brothers who witnessed the rape. The graphic rape is spliced with shots of the fraternity brother sitting on the witness stand, a horrified look on his face.[22] Projansky takes issue with the representation of violence in this film, saying that "the graphic rape scene functions, paradoxically, both to challenge rape myths from a feminist perspective and contribute to the existence of violence against women in media culture."[23] While Sarah does get her story told, it is not through her own words, and even though her poor character is forgotten in the wake of this testimony, the rape itself is not a feminist scene. If anything, as Projansky says, it is just another excuse to show violence on screen, when the film would have ended the same way with only the testimony from the fraternity brother rather than showing the rape itself.

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[21] Clover, 150.
[22] *The Accused.*
[23] Projansky, 96.

The ending scene shows Sarah and Kathryn leaving the courthouse surrounded by reporters, triumphant and happy. When a reporter asks Sarah what she will do now, she states that she just wants to go home and play with her dog. Clover is correct in her claim that the ending expresses a finality of Sarah's suffering, which overlooks the lasting trauma that she is likely to have even after this victory. While this is not unique for rape-revenge films, as I will show later, it is worth pointing out that the lasting trauma of rape is not explored or even suggested by this film. Clover states that "it is *The Accused's* happy-ending, "feelgood" version of the rape-revenge story that made it through the Hollywood gauntlet and that proved one of the biggest box-office movies of the year."[24] Its commercial success does point to the public's positive reception of a film about rape, which is important to the second-wave feminist goal of politicizing and publicizing sexual violence. Sarah gets her revenge by working through and fighting against the state, and her struggle as a working-class woman carves space in the public sphere for women who are not perfect victims. That being said, the film's simplistic ending does not offer any solutions on how to end rape. At best it is a hopeful film that seeks to suggest a world in which female partnership and the goodwill of strangers can overcome a system that works against women, and at worst it presents an unrealistic, more palatable story of rape appropriate for mainstream Hollywood.

Another type of portrayal of this woman-state axis is by emphasizing law enforcement as incompetent or hostile, and therefore as a result women, or their families, were forced to take matters into their own hands. Self-defense and vigilantism explored in rape-revenge films have historical grounding in the work of radical feminist groups who worked to find solutions to rape outside of the state. Radical feminist groups on the west coast and in cities like Detroit and

[24] Clover, 147.

Chicago formed antirape squads in the early 1970s that acted as vigilante groups against rapists. These groups would respond to calls from victims and go after the men they accused through physical retaliation or public humiliation. Antirape squads fell out of popularity by 1975 because of the time and emotional energy these groups required. Despite this, Jacquet argues that this piece of the movement was not a failure, but rather "speak[s] to the frustration many women felt and the lack of confidence they had in the state's ability to respond to sexual violence. Additionally, these early voices sought to shape a discourse on rape that at the time largely portrayed women as vulnerable victims. In contrast to this portrayal, narratives of antirape squads offered women a feeling of agency and access to power."[25] This shifting of a narrative provides valuable context about the time period in which notable rape-revenge films were released.

It is vital to understand that while antirape squads did not become a defining aspect of the movement, self-defense did. In 1968, activist Jayne West was almost abducted by a group of men, and this inspired her and several other female activists to begin martial arts training. These women formed a group called Cell 16 and taught self-defense workshops to women as a means of rape prevention. Just as antirape squads acted to disrupt the paradigm of men's violence toward women, female violence, "self-defense activists sought to reimagine women's bodies as forces that repelled rapists and stopped rape[...] self-defense allowed women to imagine themselves as powerful agents in their own lives."[26] A small number of feminist groups took this a step further and advocated for women to carry weapons in order to defend themselves, but this was not an extremely popular sect of the movement. The authors of *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* hold self-defense as the feminist solution to lasting change:

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[25] Jacquet, 74.
[26] Jacquet, 77.

> While vigilante groups may happen upon an attempted rape or may become aware of a rapist in the neighborhood, they cannot patrol a whole city nor help a woman who is too frightened to inform them that she was attacked. … Like vigilante justice, weapons only deal with the rapist, and not the roots of the rape psychology. Very often self-defense techniques are viewed as only a 'humanitarian' version of this individualistic solution, but in actuality it involves transformation of our 'mind-set,' of learning how to be strong from each other and with each other.[27]

Extremities(1986), exemplifies this transformation that the authors discuss. The film tells the story of a young woman named Marjorie who, after escaping an attempted rape, turns the table on her assaulter when he comes back to finish the job. When Marjorie goes to the police, she is told by a female officer that even if they were able to find her assaulter, "it still comes down to your word against his. And that means he gets off."[28] When Marjorie asks the officer for protection in case her attacker comes back (after stealing her wallet during their initial struggle), the officer sadly informs her that the police will be there if she needs them, but there is nothing they can do before then. The female officer seems to understand and regret the limitations of law enforcement, but she makes no attempt to help Marjorie in any real way; sisterhood becomes a false promise in police stations. But the potential for the officer to be warmer or more helpful is present because she is female. In addition to these interactions with the female officer, a male officer mistakes Marjorie for a woman who was arrested for prostitution. These early scenes speak exactly to Brownmiller's findings about women's, particularly single women's, uncomfortable experiences with reporting sexual violence.

When Joe, Marjorie's attacker, goes to her house while her roommates are at work, he attacks her and attempts to rape her again. Marjorie is able to get the upper hand and beats and traps him in her fireplace as she waits for her roommates to return. Because of the hostility she experienced when she tried to go to the police, Marjorie relies on her own self-defense skills to

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[27] *Rape: The First Source Book for Women*, 175.
[28] *Extremities,* dir. Robert M. Young, 1986.

protect herself and get justice. She plans to bury Joe alive, because as she tells her distraught roommates when they discover what she has done, "you can't prove attempted rape."[29] Her roommates push her to go to the police, but based on her earlier interactions, she refuses. Marjorie and Joe both state several times that the police would arrest him and then let him go again, and Joe would continue to harm women. The transformation that Marjorie undergoes, from a victim the police fail to help to the captor of her attempted rapist, is in line with what the New York Radical Feminists encourage women to do in their book.[30] While at the beginning of the film she is seen as beautiful and helpless, when her roommates discover what she has done she is covered in blood, both her own and Joe's, and dirt from the makeshift grave she's been digging. She is physically different, and empowered by how she has changed positions with her attacker. She traps him in the fireplace and bangs on the grate with a fire poker, threatens him with a knife, and taunts him with phrases he said to her while attempting to rape her. It is only after one of her roommates shares the story of her own rape and refuses to be arrested for helping with what Marjorie is planning to do, that Marjorie begins to have a change of heart. She forces a confession out of Joe, one that will help her get justice from the state. Only then does she agree to call the police.

The film could be seen as a win for woman in her battle with the state. Marjorie is able to get a confession from Joe, which will presumably result in a conviction, although this is just what we are led to believe, as the film ends before the police arrive. We do not actually know what happens to Marjorie. Her transformation from victim to vigilante may be empowering for some viewers, but what does she lose during that transformation? *Extremities* is not necessarily interested in the lasting change this trauma of both being attacked and becoming an attacker will

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[29] *Extremities.*
[30] *Rape: The First Source Book for Women*, 175.

have on Marjorie. The films end with Marjorie seated beside the fireplace, a relieved, yet dejected look on her face, as Joe cries in the fireplace. By doing the work that the police could not or would not do, Marjorie is retraumatized, and the justice she worked for is not guaranteed from the conclusion. The film may critique the state, and Marjorie's transformation may indeed be an extension of that critique because of what she was forced to do because of the lack of help she received, but it offers no options for ending violence against women and therefore fails to be anything more than a display of sexual violence rather than an inherently feminist tale.

In *The Last House on the Left* (1972) the police officers are not insensitive or hostile, they are just largely incapable of doing their jobs and therefore fail to help the women in the film. Before Mari Collingwood and her friend Phyllis are kidnapped, they hear on the radio that dangerous fugitives have escaped from prison; these fugitives and their accomplices are the ones who later kidnap, rape, and murder the two girls.[31] The police officers have several chances to make the connection between the fugitives and the missing girls, but they only do so when it is too late. The plot of the film therefore hinges on the failure of the justice system to work effectively because of the police officer's incompetence, and this idea is built upon throughout the rest of the movie.

When the girls do not return from a concert, Mari's parents, a doctor and a housewife respectively, call the police. The sheriff, who is pudgy, balding, and wearing thick glasses, is first shown eating the birthday cake Mari's parents made for her and assuring her parents that they have nothing to worry about, that Mari will come home when she's ready to. His deputy, Harry, comes inside the house, makes an insensitive comment about there being no bodies "on ice" matching Mari's description, and then asks if there is any of the birthday cake left. This

[31] *The Last House on the Left,* dir. Wes Craven, 1972.

interaction between the officers and Mari's parents is spliced with scenes of the kidnappers driving near the Collingwoods' house, and the use of this dramatic irony establishes the cops as useless.

As the police officers are leaving the Collingwoods' house, they see the kidnappers' abandoned car, but instead of checking into it, they head back to the station. When they are playing checkers in the station later, they hear on the radio that a group of dangerous fugitives and their accomplices are in the area. They then realize that they drove right past the fugitives' car. The officers then run into a series of obstacles, further proving their incompetence. They run out of gas on the way to the Collingwoods' and attempt to hitchhike, but the cars they are able to flag down refuse to take them and express anti-police sentiments, like calling the officers pigs. Like before, these scenes of the officers attempting to get to the car are spliced together with scenes of Mari and her friend being brutally raped and murdered. These scenes make it feel as though these are two different movies: a buddy cop comedy and a brutal rape-revenge drama. The police officers never interact with the girls, but through their incompetence they are unable to help them at all, making them just as harmful as hostile police officers who do not believe victims.

The murders of Mari and Phyllis are inevitable, in fact the poster for the film states "Mari, seventeen, is dying."[32] Brownmiller writes that rape murders only account for 2 percent of all murders and .8 percent of all reported rapes, based on figures from 1973. She goes on to say that "an understanding that rapists seldom murder their victims is crucial."[33] The myth of the prevelance of rape murder is harmful simply because it perpetuates myths about rapists themselves. Brownmiller describes the typical American rapist as "little more than an aggressive,

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[32] *The Last House on the Left*.
[33] Brownmiller, 198.

hostile youth who chooses to do violence to women," and FBI statistics and sociology studies appearing in the 1970s show "that the typical American rapist is no weirdo, psycho schizophrenic beset by timidity, sexual deprivation, and a domineer wife or mother. Although the psycho rapist, whatever his family background, certainly does exist, just as the psycho murderer certainly does exist, he is the exception and not the rule."[34] Representations of rapists like those depicted in *The Last House on the Left* are the exception, and embrace harmful myths that negate the message that second-wave feminists tried to push: anyone could be a rapist, not just the violent stranger or escaped convict. The filmmakers have no obligation to make a film that realistically showcases the probability of rape murder; however, to frame the film's narrative around this event embraces myths that feminists like Brownmiller worked to dispel, thereby adding nothing to, and in some ways hindering, feminist discourse at the time of the film's release.

After the murders, the killers take refuge at a house nearby, as their car broke down, not knowing that this is in fact the Collingwoods' home. When the police officers finally do arrive at the house, Mari's parents have already realized who the strangers are and murdered almost all of their daughter's killers. The sheriff watches as Mari's father kills the final perpetrator with a chainsaw, and the sheriff's glasses get covered in blood splatters. The deputy simply takes the chainsaw from Mari's father and looks at the sheriff in shock as the film ends.[35] By having the police show up after Mari's parents have already enacted their revenge, the film once again makes a case about the state's inability to obtain justice for victims of sexual violence.

The example of the woman-state axis in this film is more complex than that in *Extremities* and *The Accused.* Mari's parents stand in for her in order to take on killers as a result

[34] Brownmiller, 176.
[35] *The Last House on the Left.*

of the state's incompetence, but the ending says more about the ethics of violence and how sexual violence may affect those close to victims rather than making a statement about how this cycle will continue without real societal change. *The Last House on the Left* is based on the 1960 Swedish film *The Virgin Spring,* which showcases the vengeful transformation an otherwise gentle and pious man goes through after his daughter is raped and murdered.[36] This plot, of a father or in other cases a boyfriend or husband, getting revenge after a loved one is raped, has historical roots in patriarchal ideas of property ownership. Brownmiller states that because women prior to feminist movements were essentially the property of their fathers, and then later their husbands, "the criminal act [man] viewed with horror and punished as rape was not sexual assault per se, but an act of unlawful possession, a trespass against his tribal right to control vaginal access to all women who belonged to him and his kin."[37] Based on Brownmiller's claims, fathers' revenge on their daughters' rapists was not based on the crime of violating a woman's personhood, but was based on the crime of stealing another man's property.

This issue of male property is complicated by Mrs. Collingwood's involvement in the revenge. Perhaps one of the most disturbing parts of the revenge comes when Mrs. Collingwood seduces, fellates, and castrates one of the killers. Castration is a common form of revenge in rape-revenge films, and it has a context within feminist circles during the antirape movement. *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* features the following anecdote: "one woman, a near victim, suggested castration as an appropriate punishment for the rapist[s], and her suggestion was greeted with wild applause by the almost all-female audience."[38] By having Mrs. Collingwood perform castration, the film does tap into feminist ideas about the proper

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[36] Clover, 137.
[37] Brownmiller, 376.
[38] *Rape: The First Source Book for Women*, 1.

punishment for rape, but the act of castration in film, or the presence of the "monstrous feminine" as Barbara Creed writes, is more about "male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity."[39] Creed uses the term monstrous feminine to examine how women in horror films who are presented as monstrous elicit fear from audiences for different reasons than male monsters; the fear of the monstrous feminine stems from her sexuality, and for this reason, female monsters cannot be understood without confronting gender.[40] She draws on Freudian ideas that establish woman as terrifying because they are castrated men, and Creed challenges this point to argue that men's fear of women is caused by men endowing women "with imaginary powers of castration."[41] If women's power comes from their abilities to harm men, to harm them in a way that relinquishes some of men's power to harm women, then the act of castration in *The Last House on the Left*, especially because it happens under the pretense of Mrs. Collingwood seducing the killer, cannot really be seen as a feminist action. The act itself is not about the woman, but is focused on the man.

Mr. and Mrs. Collingwood are able to triumph over evil, but this is not the whole story. As Heller-Nicolas points out:

> In *The Last House on the Left* violence begets more violence and an assumption that "good" will triumph over "evil" has been exposed as naive in the world in which it is set. This is nowhere more apparent than in the film's climactic chainsaw decapitation of the primary villain, Krug, which occurs off screen and is almost immediately replaced by the image of the shocked, bloodied Mr. and Mrs. Collingwood. This is where the melodramatic payoff would traditionally be situated, but any sense of history is denied by the speed and impact with which it collides with the harsh realization that the Collingwoods are now killers themselves. *The Last House on the Left* demonstrates how rape-revenge narratives may actively collapse assumed ethical structures concerning right/wrong and heros/villains from within.[42]

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[39] Creed, 7.
[40] Creed, 3.
[41] Creed, 87.
[42] Heller-Nicolas, 38.

The film's commentary on law enforcement and even Mari and Phyllis themselves, are lost in this final scene. Like *Extremities*, *The Last House on the Left* ends without truly giving a conclusion. Will Mr. and Mrs. Collingwood be tried for these murders? Will their loss of humanity be for nothing? The film is more concerned with the transformation of Mari's parents than with the conversation about sexual violence as it pertains to the second-wave feminist goal of eradicating that violence. The rapes and murders of the girls are props through which these questions about society's heroes and villains binary arise rather than subjects for investigation themselves, and for this reason, along with the use of the statistically rare instance of a double rape murder and the historical roots of male ownership over women's bodies, *The Last House on the Left* can not necessarily be credited with contributing to any feminist discourse.

The third and final type of implementation of the women-state axis that I will be discussing is that which does not include law enforcement at all. The 1978 film *I Spit on Your Grave* is perhaps the most controversial rape-revenge film from this period. It received an X rating when it was released in the United States, a rating which was most often utilized for pornographic films, and did not receive a theatrical release in the United Kingdom. The film became synonymous with the video nasties, a term associated with the U.K.'s censorship of violence, particularly sexual violence, in films. It was outright banned in some countries, like Iceland, Ireland, Norway, and West Germany.[43] Film critic Roger Ebert called the movie "a vile bag of garbage," that lacked even a "a shred of artistic distinction" that had no reason to exist except for "the totally cynical hope that it might make money."[44] The director, Meir Zarchi, has stated multiple times that he had set out to make a feminist film about rape after finding a rape

[43]David Maguire, *I Spit on Your Grave* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 16-23.
[44] Roger Ebert, "Review of *I Spit on Your Grave"* (RogerEbert.com, 1980).

victim in a park and witnessing the mistreatment she faced at the hands of the police.[45] If that was the case, how were Zarchi's intentions so misunderstood by many critics?

The film follows Jennifer Hills, a writer from New York, who rents a house in rural Connecticut to spend the summer working on her novel. When Matthew, a mentally disabled local, delivers groceries to Jennifer and believes she was flirting with him, he tells his friends all about her. Under the guise of getting Matthew "laid," the men approach Jennifer while she is sunbathing and chase her into the woods. When Matthew refuses to have sex with her, two of the other men take turns raping her. When they leave and Jennifer crawls back to her house, she finds the men waiting for her, and the third man rapes her while the others mock her novel manuscript. Matthew partakes this time after drinking alcohol, and after the men leave and realize Jennifer could report them, they send Matthew back to kill her. He is unable to, and instead dips the knife in her blood to prove to the men that he killed her. Jennifer survives the attack, and rather than going to the police, goes to church to ask for forgiveness.

Jennifer's revenge takes up the final third of the film. She orders groceries to get Matthew to come to her house; she convinces him to have sex with her under a tree and hangs him. She lures the leader of the group, Johnny, to her home and takes a bath with him. She then masturbates him and severs his genitals with a knife. When the other two men, Andy and Stanley, realize that something has happened to Matthew and Johnny, they take their boat over to Jennifer's house. Andy comes to shore with an axe, and Jennifer swims to the boat and pushes Stanley overboard. Andy swims out to rescue him, and Jennifer kills him with his own axe. Stanley begs for his life before Jennifer kills him with the boat propeller and rides off, and the final scene shows her riding away on the boat, axe in hand.[46]

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[45] Maguire, 38.
[46] *I Spit on Your Grave.*

Many of the critiques against the film are focused on the rape scenes themselves. David Maguire, in his book of the same name, explores these critiques, as well as the praises, of *I Spit on Your Grave* to showcase that its controversy is the reason it has remained a topic of conversation in cinema. Maguire argues that "having [the viewer] identify with Jennifer while she is being raped is crucial to Zarchi's pro-feminist agenda."[47] The camera work during the rape scenes forces the viewer to put themselves in her shoes by showing close ups of the rapists' faces rather than Jennifer. Maguire goes on to say that "after each rape Jenniefre's naked, bruised and bloodied body attempts to crawl away until she is recaptured and subjected to more torture. Like the real rape victim that stumbled into Zarchi's life in 1974, [Jennifer] here can barely walk."[48] The rape scenes are not erotic, even if Jennifer's revenge is eroticized by her use of her sexuality to fool the men into her traps. But, some critics have cited that the most troubling part is that Jennifer escapes and is recaptured several times, and this sensationalizes the rapes. Both Jennifer and the audience are made to believe that the terror has ended, only for the men to show up again moments later.[49]

The violence of the rape scenes in *I Spit on Your Grave* presents the same problems that arise with all depictions of violence in these films. Heller-Nicholas seems to defend the scenes, saying,

> Somewhere in those grueling 25 minutes is a lightning flash of empathy where we realize we are trapped, too- even leaving the cinema or turning off the DVD can't take back what we've already seen. Jennifer's rape therefore leaves us powerless. *I Spit on Your Grave* moves the onus of trying to comprehend the brutal incomprehensibility of rape firmly onto the spectator.[50]

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[47] Maguire, 33.
[48] Maguire, 33.
[49] Maguire, 38.
[50] Heller-Nicholas, 37.

While this may be true, the empathy these scenes may evoke cannot erase the impact of the depiction of violence in the first place. In Clover's discussion of the horror genre, which she places *I Spit on Your Grave* in, she acknowledges that the target audience for these films is largely teenage boys who "cheer the killer on as he assaults his victims, then reverse their sympathies to cheer the survivor on as she assaults the killer."[51] This knowledge, combined with the graphic nature of the rape scenes is troubling. The film, despite Zarchi's intentions, does not move past the representation of violence in order to make some kind of feminist message about the violence itself. The "brutal incomprehensibility" of rape, as Heller-Nicholas calls it, is something that second-wave feminists had been doing the work to expose during this time, and they did so with the clear goal of eliminating sexual violence from soicety. By only presenting violence without a message about ending that violence, most likely to an audience of young men, the *I Spit on Your Grave* falls into what Projanksy calls the "feminist paradox between a desire to end rape and a need to represent rape in order to challenge it."[52] While Zarchi may have had a desire to represent rape, but he failed to anything more than show violence on screen without any answers about ending it.

Maguire himself questions Zarchi's intentions to make a feminist film, stating that "it is difficult to comprehend how [Zarchi's intention] factors into the protracted multiple degradations he subjects Jennifer to or her sexualised revenge. If Zarchi was so indignant about how police handled rape victims – a common complaint during the 1970s – then why not show this in his film?"[53] The violence of the rapes notwithstanding, the absence of the police can be read as an inherent critique of the mistreatment rape victims experience when reporting their rapes.

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[51] Clover, 23.
[52] Projansky, 19.
[53] Maguire, 38.

Jennifer, who the film establishes as having published stories in women's magazines and lives in New York City, could very likely identify as a feminist and be involved in women's issues.[54] And if that is the case, she could have read feminist publications expressing outrage about how women are rarely believed when they report rape.

Jennifer's choice to not go to the police can also be attributed to the trauma she experiences after the rapes, which the film shows through shots of her staring catatonically into space and painstakingly taping back together the pages of her manuscript that her rapists ripped up. This exploration of her trauma, which is quite surface level, does attempt to show the audiences the existence of that psychological trauma. Jennifer's choice to not go to the police exposes the tension of the woman-state axis; if Jennifer is indeed aware of feminist discourse of the time, she may not believe that the state would offer her justice, and as a result chooses to resolve the issue herself. While the film does not explicitly state that Jennifer has any involvement with or knowledge of feminist organzing, placing her within her historical context does not make this an outlandish leap. For this reason, Zarchi's choice to not have Jennifer report her rapes does not negate his feminist intentions; in fact, it may be one of the few feminist ideals that the film offers.

Topics For Further Exploration

This paper certainly does not present an exhaustive list of rape-revenge films that coincide with the antirape movement, or address several key issues of this narrative structure that need exploration. The films discussed here all united by a crucial fact: they all feature white women who are raped by strangers. Brownmiller notes that approximately 53 percent of rape

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[54] *I Spit on Your Grave.*

victims were attacked by strangers and that most "founded" rape claims were when the attacker was a stranger.[55] While she expresses hope that one day it will be easier for women to report rapes by attackers known to them, "at the present time, police precincts still operate from the perspective that a woman who has been raped by a man she knows is a woman who 'changed her mind afterward.'"[56] There are films from this period, like *The Burning Bed* (1984) and *Rape and Marriage: The Rideout Case* (1980), that discuss marital rape, but there are far more examples of films centered on stranger rape. Is this because filmmakers held the same mentality as police precincts, that women who knew their rapists were unreliable and would therefore make unsympathetic victims for audience members? This seems like an interesting starting point for further exploration of films during the antirape movement. These films, which would perhaps require more thoughtful writing and character development than stranger rape-revenge films, would have been a more feminist endevor because of the potential for these films to change viewers' preconvieved notions about victimhood. While I have stated throughout this paper that representation of rape in films is not enough to make them feminist films, films involving marital rape or rape by an aquaintance could be better interpretations of second-wave feminist thought because of their ability to dispell myths about only violent strangers having the ability to be rapists.

The issue of racial representation in these films is consistent with the context of the antirape movement, and second-wave feminism as a whole. *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* published by the New York Radical Feminists, opens with the authors stating that "it is no accident that the New York Radical Feminist, through the technique of consciousness-raising, discovered that rape is not a personal misfortune but an experience shared by all women in one

[55] Brownmiller, 351.
[56] Brownmiller, 352.

form or another."[57] This discovery of the ubiquity of sexual violence cannot truthfully be attributed to the New York Radical Feminists. In her book *At the Dark End of the Street,* Danielle McGuire sheds light on the work Black women were doing during the civil rights movement to call attention to the sexual violence Black women faced at the hands of white men. Ida B. Well gave a speech in 1892 about the rape of Black girls that was being ignored while Black men were being lynched after being fasley accused of raping white women, long before the New York Radical Feminists began their organizing. Black women in the twentieth century were doing consciousness-raising work in the 1940s "decades before radical feminists in the women's movement urged rape survivors to 'speak out,'" and their public protests "galvonized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity."[58] Black women already knew that sexual violence was a political issue and, as it pertained to Black women, a racial issue.

Perhaps the most notable rape-revenge film from the antirape era featuring a Black woman is the 1974 film *Foxy Brown,* in which the title character infiltrates a drug ring in order to get revenge for her boyfriend's death. Foxy is caught and later raped by a white member of the cartel. She gets revenge on her rapist and her boyfriend's murderers, but her rape is not the main focus of the film, and the traumatic effects of her experience are not explored.[59] Foxy is notably different from the white women discussed in this paper in that her victimhood is not given the same amount of attention. Her rape is a small plot point, and as such, she is not treated as a "real" victim by the film, and viewers are not necessarily encouraged to identify with her as such

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[57] *Rape: The First Source Book for Women,* 1.

[58] Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), xix.

[59] *Foxy Brown,* dir. Jack Hill, 1974.

in the same way they are with Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave* or Mari Collingwood in *The Last House on the Left.*

The centering of white victimhood in rape-revenge films is consistent with conviction rates Brownmiller reports. In a study of three thousand cases from eleven southern states between 1945 and 1965, a Black man convicted of raping a white woman was 18 times more likley to be executed than a white man convicted of raping a white woman, a white man convicted of raping a Black woman, or a Black man convicted of raping a Black woman.[60] A 1967 study from Baltimore found that Black men received the most severe sentences for raping white women, and the most lenient for raping Black women.[61] This reluctance to recognize the rape of Black women is reflected in rape-revenge films during the antirape movement, and more exploration into the representation of Black women in rape-revenge films outside of this time period is needed in order to see how or if white victimhood has been challenged in film.

Conclusion

These films that display this woman-state axis, all end in triumph for the women involved. This does not necessarily mean that they are fixed or healed from their experiences, but rather they get revenge, in the form of the law, violence, or both. But these situations exist solely within the realms of the films. These films expose the failings of the justice system, which correlates with Brownmiller's findings about women's experiences during the 1970s, but they do not contribute anything to the feminist ideal of eliminating rape from society. In order to expose those failings, the films rely on extraordinary women who are able to get revenge through

[60] Brownmiller, 215.
[61] Brownmiller, 216.

extraordinary means, meaning that they do not offer any real world solutions to rape. Representation of rape in media is important to bring attention to it as a political issue, but more is needed in order for a film to truthfully be reflective of feminist thought during the antirape movement. This does not mean that they cannot be entertaining or offer some value to women and victims of sexual violence, and it is not my intention to suggest so. But featuring female protagonists fighting against The Man, and men, does not make these films inherently feminist.

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