

Destruction of the “Promising Young Man”: Fennell’s Un/usual Approach to Rape-Revenge Films

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Introduction

Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) is a contemporary cinematic piece that mixes rom-com, traditional rape-revenge, revisionist rape-revenge and horror genre conventions, with which it has a double aim: to expose the underlying myths and mechanisms of contemporary rape culture, and to go against the conventions of traditional rape-revenge films. Rape culture, as Susan Griffin defines it, "expresses this view that in our patriarchy 'eroticism is wedded to power' and romantic 'love finds erotic expression through male dominance and female submission'" (Griffin qtd. in Higgins 99). According to Merrill D. Smith:

A rape culture is one in which rape and other sexual violence against women and children are both prevalent and considered the norm. In a rape culture, rape and sexual violence are accepted as inevitable and are not challenged. The term *rape culture* originated in the 1970s during the second-wave feminist movement... [and] ... according to the editors of *Transforming a Rape Culture*, 'is a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women.' A rape culture believes that sexual aggression in men is biologically determined, rather than learned behavior. In turn, it considers women to be sexually passive and meant to be dominated by men. Consequentially, a normal sexual encounter is represented as a heterosexual man forcing himself upon a woman. Thus in a rape culture, rape is the model for most sexual activity. (174)

This paper does not share the biologically deterministic beliefs of rape culture. It simply treats rape culture as a set of historically and culturally specific views, practices and representations connected to sexual violence (outlined by Griffin and Smith), as a reaction to which the genre of rape-revenge and revisionist rape-revenge films emerged.

According to Carol J. Clover, the agenda of second-wave feminism is also responsible for the emergence of the rape-revenge genre (138-139). The representational and productional details of films in this category have reinforced the conventional power dynamics between men and women, and continue to do so even today because of the societal roots of rape culture. In short, a rape-revenge film is built around a narrative that includes an unwanted sexual intercourse by a group of men or a single man, usually unknown to the victim, and after the abuse, "the narrative shifts to focus on how the wronged woman will enact her revenge" (McAndrews n.pag.). It is important to note that recent remakes of 1970s rape-revenge films, like *The Last House on the Left* (2009, dir. Dennis Iliadis), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010, dir. Steven R. Monroe) were all directed by men, thereby representing rape and revenge from a

male perspective. Furthermore, concerns related to narrative patterns are well-illustrated by *Three Billboard Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017, dir. Martin McDonagh), in which the protagonist, Mildred achieves her revenge but only through a male partner, indicating a denial of female agency (McEntee n.pag.). These films thus confirm the claim of Alexandra Heller-Nicholas that “[t]he combination of rape and revenge when united in cinema have long been synonymous with exploitation and misogyny” (“Reviews” n.pag.). As Joy McEntee argues, *Promising Young Woman* allegedly challenges the traditional aspects of the genre by joining “a new, female-directed mini cycle of rape-revenge films, including Coralie Fargeat’s *Revenge* (2017), *M.F.A. (AKA Revenge Artist)*, 2017, dir. Natalia Leite), and *Violation* (2020, dir. Madelaine Sims Fewer and Dusty Mancinelli)” (McEntee n.pag.). McEntee described these films as unconventional, because they all centre a female protagonist, and the story is from their point of view, therefore, they work with balanced gender politics, while they were also made by female directors or co-directors. (n.pag.)

Written and directed by a woman and told from a female point of view, *Promising Young Woman* “wrests rape-revenge back in the direction of the cisgender woman avenger” (McEntee n.pag.). As McEntee argues, it also “carves new generic pathways for rape-revenge” in many other aspects. Inspired by McEntee’s argument, in this paper I explore the innovatory elements of Emerald Fennell’s film, including 1) the protagonist’s ambiguous role; 2) the collapse of the demon-angel dichotomy; 3) the “reversing [of] the gendering of hunting”; 4) the reappropriation of the voice and the gaze; 5) the portrayal of technology as a tool to expose rape culture; and 6) the not fully sensational ending because revenge is unfulfilled until after the protagonist’s death. Yet, I also argue that the film retains generic conventions, including 1) the partly sensational ending by the punished perpetrator; 2) the avenger who is close to the victim; 3) the vengeance unfinished by the victim; and 4) the erotically represented physical features of the female protagonist.

Thus, the question arises: is Fennell’s approach entirely unconventional? If not, is that a problem in terms of whether the film can effectively expose viewers to the myths and mechanisms of rape culture? Though rebellious at the first glance, this paper attempts an in-depth analysis of *Promising Young Woman* to determine whether it is indeed revolutionary as McEntee argues or is it rather an example of “revisionist rape-revenge films”, a group of contemporary productions that, according to Claire Henry, aim to “challenge the precepts of rape-revenge”, but “cannot resist delivering on the expectation[s]” attached to the genre, including a satisfactory ending (6). In Henry’s words, the latter trait explains why revisionist rape revenge films are “fascinating, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory texts” (6). It is

my claim that *Promising Young Woman* shares this ambiguity by using a mixture of traditional and new elements. This quality, however, does not lower its capacity of calling attention to the presence of sexual violence in our contemporary cultures. In fact, by retaining some of the traditional genre's exploitative aspects, Fennell's film becomes a self-reflexive device that reveals how rape-revenge have contributed to perpetuating unbalanced power relations between men and women. As such, it also leads the viewer to interrogate their own ideas about responses to rape and the morality of revenge.

Traditional rape-revenge films

As Carol J. Clover argues, rape-revenge films have emerged as a sub-genre of horror movies in the 1970s, when "rape moved to center stage and the rape-revenge story as a drama complete unto itself came into its own" (137). As a key feature of this sub-genre, she claims that although the solutions as to how women seek their revenge to an act of sexual violence differ, they share certain qualities that were conditioned by changes in social attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s, namely,

that rape deserves full-scale revenge; that a rape-and revenge story constitutes sufficient drama for a feature film and that having the victim survive to be her own avenger makes that drama even better; and (more directly politically) that we live in a "rape culture" in which all males—husbands, boyfriends, lawyers, politicians—are directly or indirectly complicit and that men are thus not just individually but corporately liable. (138-139)

Clover's definition thus describes a female-centred sub-genre which, although narratively dramatizes rape as well as the course and climax of revenge that it provokes, it also aims to expose rape culture, which blames and shames women for expressing sexual impulses, daring to report being sexually harassed or abused, while rewarding men, in Kate Harding's words, "for bagging as much anonymous pussy as possible" (8), which, in short, normalises sexual violence against women and the protection of men through a set of unfounded myths.¹

Although she argues that rape-revenge cinema is not a sub-genre, but a narrative structure, Jacinda Read also acknowledges the tradition's connections to second-wave feminism, which, as she declares, "has produced a historically specific but generically diverse

¹ Connected to the double standard of "shaming the victim", these ethically loaded myths include that the victims are "responsible for their own rapes", that "victims are sluts and are asking for it" and that "'no' really means 'yes'" (Oliver 12). Psychologists Diana L. Payne, Kimberly A. Lonsway, and Louise F. Fitzgerald identified seven categories under which (American) rape myths fall: 1) she asked for it; 2) it wasn't really rape; 3) he didn't mean to; 4) she wanted it; 5) she lied; 6) rape is a trivial event; 7) rape is a deviant event.

cycle of films” (11). Yet, Heller-Nicholas claims that the ubiquity of the rape-revenge theme in cinema puts an end to any suggestion that rape-revenge is historically or generically specific (155), setting out instead to demonstrate, through various contemporary examples, “the scope of rape-revenge and its diversity across genres, borders and historical periods” (Henry 3). Nevertheless, as Henry convincingly argues, rape-revenge has its own characteristics that were first defined by Lehman, Clover and Creed in the 1990s.

Lehman described the genre through a set of 1970s and 1980s American B-movie cult classics, such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978, dir. Meir Zarchi), *Alley Cat* (1984, dir. Al Valletta, Victor Ordoñez, Eduardo Palmos,), and *Ms. 45* (1981, dir. Abel Ferrara), in which “a beautiful woman hunts down the men who raped her and kills them one by one, frequently reveling in the pleasure of the man’s agony when he realizes who she is and what she is about to do” (103). Lehman’s definition, although reductive, thus provides an explanation for why many rape-revenge films have been accused as sensational accounts of either the violent sexual act, favouring the male gaze and the male viewers, or the violent act of revenge, favouring the female counterpart of the male gaze and the male viewers.

Owing to the genre’s sensational aspect, which is also detectable in later examples, Henry argues that rape-revenge films do work with their “own loose iconography”, including

(mud-covered semi-naked rape victims; red lipstick and fetish costumes of the transformed avenger; castration; women with guns), stock characters (young, white, attractive victim turned femme fatale avenger; rapists; rednecks), and key themes and conflicts (transformation; rape trauma; ethics of revenge; vigilantism; torture) as well as the standard two-part structure most critics identify (rape followed by revenge). (4)



Camille Keaton in *I Spit on Your Grave*, half naked, covered with mud



Zoë Tamerlis in *Ms. 45* wearing red lipstick, a fetish costume and holding a gun

Concerning the narrative pattern of such films, Heller-Nicholas argues that “[s]urely a definition of rape-revenge is simple: a rape-revenge film must most immediately feature both a rape (or many rapes, or an attempted rape) and an act of revenge” (1). Drawing on Rick Altman’s schema describing the basic characteristics of Hollywood genres, Henry adds that this dualistic structure is completed by “a cumulative effect; predictability; a heavy use of intertextual references; a symbolic usage of key images, sounds, and situations; and a social function (qtd. in Henry 4). The key images of the female protagonist (in make-up, costumes

and semi-naked) are overly sexualized, therefore traditional rape-revenge films usually comply with the mechanisms of cultural voyeurism² and scopophilia in sexual acts – whether consensual or not – thus making the protagonists’ bodies the target of the camera that carries the gaze of the male perpetrator and with which the (supposed) male viewer is invented to identify.³ While these films visually objectify the female protagonist, the revenge narrative reduces their agency. As Lena Wilson highlights, “[a] woman, once made powerless by an attacker, can take justice into her own hands — but she must pay for that power with her personhood” and these “films from the ’70s and ’80s ... reduced rape victims to emotionless, even sexy avengers ... and offer[ed] female characters a facile kind of agency” (n.pag).

In short, a rape-revenge film is one where a rape is central to and provokes a narrative of revenge, the desire for which is motivated by an eye-for-an-eye principle and thus culminates in a (usually) violent act against the perpetrator, an act that is supposed to restore a balance of morality both within the diegetic world and in the spectator. For Alison Young, this rule of law is another key feature of the genre: “Rape-revenge stories are primarily about the *lex talionis*, the notion that once rape takes place, the world is out of kilter until vengeance is carried out by the victim” (46). Expanding the latter assumption, Heller-Nicholas provides one more criterion for the genre concerning the position of the avenger: as she argues, the perpetrator is punished either “by the victim themselves or by an agent (a lawyer, policeman, or, most commonly, a loved one or family member)” (1), usually a male character who is close to the victim or her case.

Revisionist rape-revenge films

Although, as one can see from the overview above, the genre has some loosely definable characteristics, almost all its theorists acknowledge the wide scope and variety of rape-revenge representation in cinema. According to Henry, it is this diversity, ambiguity and flexibility

² Cultural voyeurism means gaining pleasure and satisfaction from seeking/peeping and objectifying (mostly women’s) bodies.

³ Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) came up with the theory of the male gaze, and explained voyeurism and scopophilia, which are usually the driving forces in rape-revenge movies. Similarly, to voyeurism, scopophilia means that looking (and/or being looked at) is a source of pleasure. Furthermore, Mulvey’s theory is “demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (6) and “the way film reflects...on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference...controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle.” In this sense, the socially established sexual difference was formed by the “castration complex”, which meant that the woman in the phallogocentric society is only a “signifier of the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (8). Thus, the woman is a passive object, to the active subject, the male, a dichotomy also organising traditional rape-revenge films.

which allows the genre to revise itself from within, that is, to adapt to “shifts such as the postfeminist rather than feminist engagement with rape politics within some of the contemporary films; the common ethical questioning of revenge (the moral and affective lynchpin of the genre); and the various ways of reworking, refining, or reinstating the genre’s codes and conventions” (5). Henry terms the films that adapt to the above-mentioned shifts “revisionist”, as they stretch the boundaries of the rape-revenge genre rather than breaking them completely.

According to Henry, although the point of revisionist rape-revenge films is that they defy to be constrained by defining characteristics, one of their special traits is how they tend to display “generic awareness and self-reflexivity” (6). One way to achieve this is to raise some thoughts and doubt about the strict moral laws that govern the narrative of traditional rape-revenge films by, for instance, clashing opposing views of two or more characters on revenge or the means to exact revenge. As Henry puts it, “[a]n ambivalent relationship to revenge is characteristic of the revisionist genre” (17).

Henry’s example to demonstrate this is Dan Reed’s *Straightheads* (2007), where the heroine, raped by a group of men in the country, is convinced that she must achieve a violent revenge while her boyfriend, who was also brutally attacked, believes that violence will not solve her problem. Henry’s reading highlights that the heroine’s “actions and determination are based on a belief that eye-for-an-eye vengeance restores order or balances the scales of justice” (17), but this moral order is questioned by her male companion, who also invites the viewers to interrogate their own expectations about the genre’s narrative conventions and its moral implications. Even though *Straightheads* ends with the victim committing a retaliatory rape of the main perpetrator with a rifle, and her companion brutally stabs him in the eye and kills the other men involved in the original assault, previously there is a questioning of revenge and its violent means, which causes the questioning “of our complicity in desiring this revenge” at the end (17). Therefore, revisionist rape-revenge films like *Straightheads* are ambiguous because they challenge the conventions of the genre, but still satisfy the viewers’ expectations of a climactic, violent revenge scene. As Henry puts it, “[w]atching graphic acts of revenge is a key generic pleasure of rape-revenge, while revisionism challenges the ethics of violent responses to rape and considers the consequences of sustaining the cycle of vengeance, brutal climactic scenes of revenge remain core” (6).

Another way of criticising the violence-driven rape-revenge that Henry mentions, is by rendering rape as either visibly absent – as in *Katalin Varga* (2009, dir. Peter Strickland), and in *Promising Young Woman* – or replacing it by “alternative forms of female exploitation” – as

in, for example, *Lady Vengeance* (2005, dir. Park Chan-Wook), and *The Woman* (2011, dir. Lucky McKee) (16). The conscious omission of the act of sexual violence spares the female victim the images that would objectify and further humiliate her. At the same time, revisionist rape-revenge films engage in a “foregrounding of looking relations, particularly in terms of gender and ethics” by exploring, in a sophisticated manner, “the ethics of looking relations and notions of the gaze” (19). Revisionist rape-revenge films approach this generic convention critically by rendering the female avenger the subject, while the perpetrators – and indirectly, the spectators – the objects of the gaze. Although one must mention that reversing the roles of the gazer and the object of the gaze along gender lines might lead to a similarly unequal power relationship, the aim of reversal in revisionist rape-revenge films is only to highlight and raise doubt about the instability of the system.

Another way of how revisionist rape-revenge films criticize traditions is using media as a tool to expose rape culture rather than maintaining it. As Henry mentions, the films *Hard Candy* (2005, dir. David Slade), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011, dir. David Fincher), and *Straightheads*, all highlight, in their respective ways, a common focus “on surveillance culture and technology as both a tool of sexual violence and a tool for its eradication” (19). In other words, video and surveillance equipment as well as the image and video sharing functions of contemporary social media are also used by contemporary revisionist rape-revenge films to comment both on these technologies’ contribution to normalising sexual violence and their capacities to subvert the processes of objectification, control, scopophilia and sexual violence.

Besides the above-mentioned characteristics, the target audience of the rape-revenge genre has also changed. Previously, as Roger Ebert described it, rape-revenge, especially *I Spit on Your Grave*, was “so sick, reprehensible and contemptible,” that it was considered to be an “expression of the most diseased and perverted darker human natures” (n.pag.). Ebert also claimed that since the film was made “artlessly, it flaunts its motives: There is no reason to see this movie except to be entertained by the sight of sadism and suffering” (n.pag.). This criticism suggests that the target audience of rape-revenge films was interested more in the genre’s entertaining qualities than its artistically and politically subversive features. In contrast, contemporary consumers of the (revisionist) rape-revenge genre include anyone who is open to challenge their prejudices towards rape-revenge narratives. As Claire Henry mentions, revisionist rape-revenge’s agenda is to reach for people and to make the viewer to be more emphatic (179-180). Furthermore, as Sarah Projansky argues, “rape narratives (in film) help to organize, understand, and ... structure social understandings of complex phenomena such as gender, race, class and nation” (7), therefore revisionist rape-revenge films have developed

educational purposes over the years, which increasingly overwrite the objectives of entertainment.

At the same time, as Henry argues, rape-revenge “has proven to be more versatile and durable than Read [or, for that matter, Lehman, Clover and Creed] expected, sustained through the high number of remakes and adaptations as well as its hybridity with the ‘torture porn’ genre on the one hand and its move into art house cinema on the other” (3-4). The genre’s hybridisation with more exploitative genres such as torture porn and more abstract ones, like art house films, is yet another reason why these contemporary female-centred productions are ambiguous and often contradictory. In what follows, I analyse Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* as a further example of Claire Henry’s revisionist rape-revenge films, highlighting the scenes and aspects which challenge the codes and conventions of the genre along with those that retain the customary sensational and exploitative aspects. The mixture of the usual and unusual rape-revenge elements makes this film highly ambiguous, but in my reading, it is this quality from where its power comes from to challenge both the genre’s, and the spectator’s responses to the issues of rape and its representations.

Synopsis

Emerald Fennell’s film revolves around its female protagonist, Cassandra Thomas (Carey Mulligan), whose fate as a “promising young woman” vanished way before the plot started. The viewer gradually learns that her best friend, Nina was raped at a medical school party and supposedly killed herself, which is the reason why Cassie dropped out and started to work in a coffee shop by day. At night, however, she goes “hunting,” which means that she pretends to be drunk in bars and clubs until a man offers to accompany her home. After playing along with the men’s plans of sleeping with her, she reveals her sobriety – and the “nice guy’s” true intentions – which leads to a reversed role of predator and prey. This is her idea of fulfilling her revenge on the whole society that contributed to Nina’s rape. While confronting possible abusers at night, she visits and confronts people from her and Nina’s past, whom she thinks were responsible for the rape. Through these predominantly non-violent modes of revenge, she tries to call attention to how rape culture normalises sexual violence against women and the protection of men. As she makes progress in her revenge plan, an unforgotten classmate, Ryan (Bo Burnham) unexpectedly returns into her life and diverts her attention; for a moment she gets caught up in romance instead of following through her obsessive revenge. At this point, meeting Ryan may distract the viewer who may think that her past traumas might be solved by seeing the world through rose-tinted glasses. Later on, however, she receives a videotape about

Nina's rape from another previous classmate and learns that Ryan was a bystander. Her focus returns to revenge, which culminates in her participation at Nina's perpetrator's, Al's (Christopher Lowell) bachelor party as a stripper, handcuffing the groom to a bed and preparing to carve Nina's name on his stomach. At this point, however, Al breaks free and suffocates her with a pillow. The next morning, Al's best friend helps him to burn Cassie's body. The grim ending is complicated by Cassie's scheduled text messages addressed to Ryan, because they help to identify Al as the perpetrator, while also warning Ryan of the dangers of being a bystander; and by a necklace that they had with Nina, which remains in the ashes, suggesting that her death is not the end. Later on, at Al's wedding, the police come to arrest all who were involved in Nina's rape and who were responsible for Cassie's death.

Traditional characteristics in *Promising Young Woman*

First of all, Cassie as the avenger is close to the victim since they were best friends in school, thus, the film follows the traditional rape-revenge narrative described by Heller-Nicholas as that in which vengeance is carried out "either by the victim themselves or by an agent (...most commonly, a loved one or family member)" (3). Sarah Projansky adds that "the distinction between these two categories in the female-centered rape-revenge film contains crucial ideological meaning" (Projansky qtd. in Heller-Nicholas 3), since films with relatives and the victim's loved ones acting as avengers are "relegating women to minor 'props' in the narrative," while in the case of film where the victims themselves are the avengers, "women face rape, recognize that the law will neither protect nor avenge them, and then take the law into their own hands," therefore, they can be understood as "feminist narratives" (3). In *Promising Young Woman*, the differentiation between these two categories is not clear because, as Zsófia Orosz-Réti argues, "[c]onsidering their special relationship, ... [and] the repeated claims of both Nina's and Cassie's parents that they both were 'like daughters' to them, Nina and Cassie can easily be regarded as two sides of the same person, at the very least at a symbolic level" (n.pag.). At the same time, since Cassie fails to carry out (complete) vengeance, the final agents who punish the perpetrator – the last target of Cassie's revenge – are the police, an official force that is dominated by men, which confirms Heller-Nicholas' claim that revenge can be also carried out by – usually male – lawyers or police.



male agents of the police force carrying out the perpetrator, Al Monroe

Therefore, the ending where the perpetrator, even if not by the female-avenger, gets punished aims to satisfy the viewer's expectations about the consequences of rape, even if not in the usual, extremely violent way.

Another aspect in which *Promising Young Woman* fulfils traditional expectations is the occasionally overly eroticized representation of the protagonist who wears sexy dresses and red lipstick in moments when she is acting out certain parts of her mission. Throughout the film, Cassie puts on several costumes, including a fetish costume and a sexy nurse dress at the end, which aims to be a reference to her plans to be a doctor. Also, as with the costume, she is usually wearing a red lipstick at night, to emphasize her darker, more sexualized side. All these dresses, the make-up and the taken-up roles serve as tools to play with the viewer's expectations about the typical representations in the rape-revenge genre.



Cassie in her nurse dress, playing a stripper



Cassie doing a “blow job lips makeup tutorial” before going out

Revisionist elements in *Promising Young Woman*

First, as mentioned before, the film was written and directed by a woman, while told from a female point of view, which implies that it engages in rethinking rape-revenge with a “cisgender woman avenger” (McEntee n.pag.). This can be considered a revisionist aspect, because rape-revenge films from the 1970s and ‘80s were predominantly made by men, and even though they operated with female avengers, they never failed to exploit them at the same time. Furthermore, within the bounds of traditional rape-revenge films, where it is either the victim herself or another agent who seeks revenge, it is hard to define in which position Cassie is. Since she gets close to experience assaults, even though she does not suffer the trauma of rape directly, only through Nina, she can be considered to be a victim, while she also functions as an avenger who is acting on behalf of the victim. Therefore, her role is ambiguous as a mixture of a victim and an avenger, who, at the same time, becomes a martyr at the end.



Cassie's martyrdom represented by a Jesus-like position, foreshadowing that she will sacrifice herself for the greater good – to expose abusers and rape culture

This position means that she is emotionally drawn to the case while she also has a kind of superlative knowledge, an objective, critical insight into the mechanisms of rape culture, as she has witnessed how the people involved were eager to push the memory of Nina's assault under the rug.

Consequently, although Cassie reclaims the agency to cisgender women within the genre, her position is ambiguous as it simultaneously holds the chance of the character pursuing her nonviolent revenge according to plan and that of running amok. As I see it, however, this complex position is not a relapse into the genre's old ways, rather a new, self-reflexive element as it shows how we, as a society and as individuals can only approach the issue of rape and its representations with difficulty, full of conflicting ideas and feelings. As Heller-Nicholas aptly argues, "at their most powerful, rape-revenge films can expose and collapse our simplistic assumptions about the ethics of rape and its representation onscreen and remind us that what we are seeing is only a small, controlled window into the true horror of rape and sexual violence" (4). The revisionist quality of *Promising Young Woman* lies in its capacity to re-evaluate earlier elements of the genre and also invite the spectators to face their expectations about the representation of rape and its moral implications.

Furthermore, an element which the film uses to confront viewers with the underlying mechanisms of rape culture is the title, which shows that Cassie's life as a "promising young woman" ended a long time ago because of her traumas, while the male perpetrators and bystanders, whose futures were similarly promising, were spared their punishment. Ironic messages reminding the viewers of the injustices of rape culture against women are also contained within the film's mise-en-scène, for instance, in the poster advertising the medical training programme at Cassie's former school. In the context of Cassie's vengeance not only against one perpetrator but rape culture itself, the slogan "Your future starts here" reads as a false promise for female students.



Cassie sitting in the medical school's office where she and Nina went

This scene reinforces the message that Cassie's life, along with Nina's, was predestined to be sabotaged by their trauma, because their future (as promising young women) did not start but instead ended in the medical school.

The second aspect in which *Promising Young Woman* differs from traditional rape revenge films is that it collapses the demon-angel dichotomy. At this point, I would like to mention a contemporary rape-revenge series called *I May Destroy You* (2020, dir. Sam Miller, Michaela Coel), which, also collapses the demon-angel dichotomy with quite similar methods. As McEntee argues, both “sufficiently proximate to resonate with each other” and each “inflects the discussion of rape, consent, revenge and forgiveness interestingly” (n.pag.). In both productions, the protagonists' roles are double sided in the sense that they switch between the image of an angel and a demon. As Judith Stephen argues, the demon-angel dichotomy, also known as an Eve-Mary syndrome or a Prostitute-Madonna Complex, is a “dual image traditionally used to portray females” in literature, drama and film as either as a bad, or a good woman (53). In *Promising Young Woman* and *I May Destroy You*, the respective protagonists take up both roles, which serves as a “strategy to break the pattern, expose its limitations for women and create a new space for female representation” (53). Their double role is supported aesthetically since the characters operate with a different scale of colours when it comes to role shifting. When Cassie or Arabella (the series' protagonist played by Michaela Coel) appears as an angel, they are presented in refined pastel colours, such as bright pinks, blues, and greens.



Cassie at her workplace, the pastel-coloured coffee shop in bright pinks and greens
with candy nails



Arabella in light blue and bright colours, contrasted with the black clothes of the other character in the scene

In addition, the usage of baby blue in *Promising Young Woman* also functions as a Biblical reference since Cassie resembles both an angelic figure, and Virgin Mary, who is associated with the colour blue.



Cassie as an angel and a Virgin Mary figure



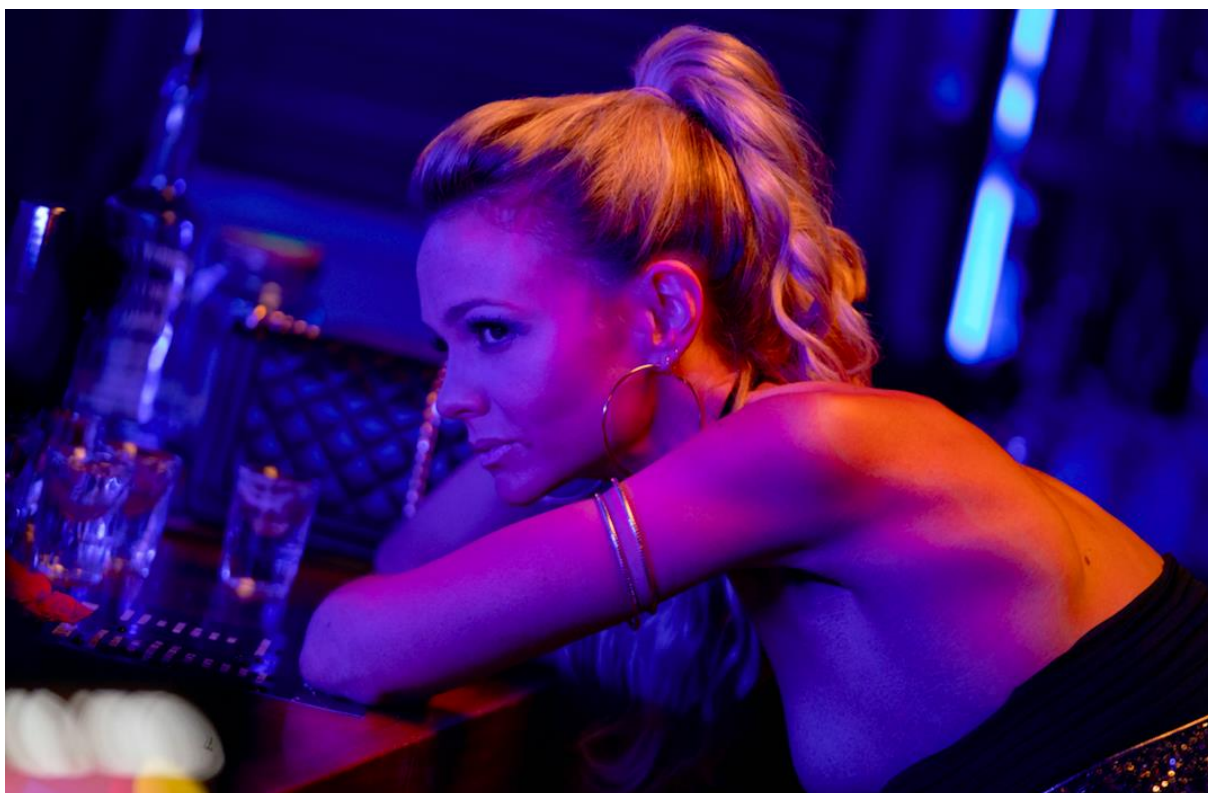
Cassie forgiving Al's lawyer in a pastel blue dress

What is even more interesting about the second picture is that Cassie is not only wearing Virgin Mary's colours, but also delivers forgiveness, like the icon does in the Bible, forgiving Jesus's death, and as Cassie does with the lawyer who contributed to Nina's tragedy.

However, when these characters appear as demons, the whole imagery switches to vivid, dark neons, contrasted with darker hues. This colour scheme resembles the palette of the devil's representations and the palette of contemporary porn, which thus confirms the argument that revisionist rape revenge films incorporate elements from the genre of porn.



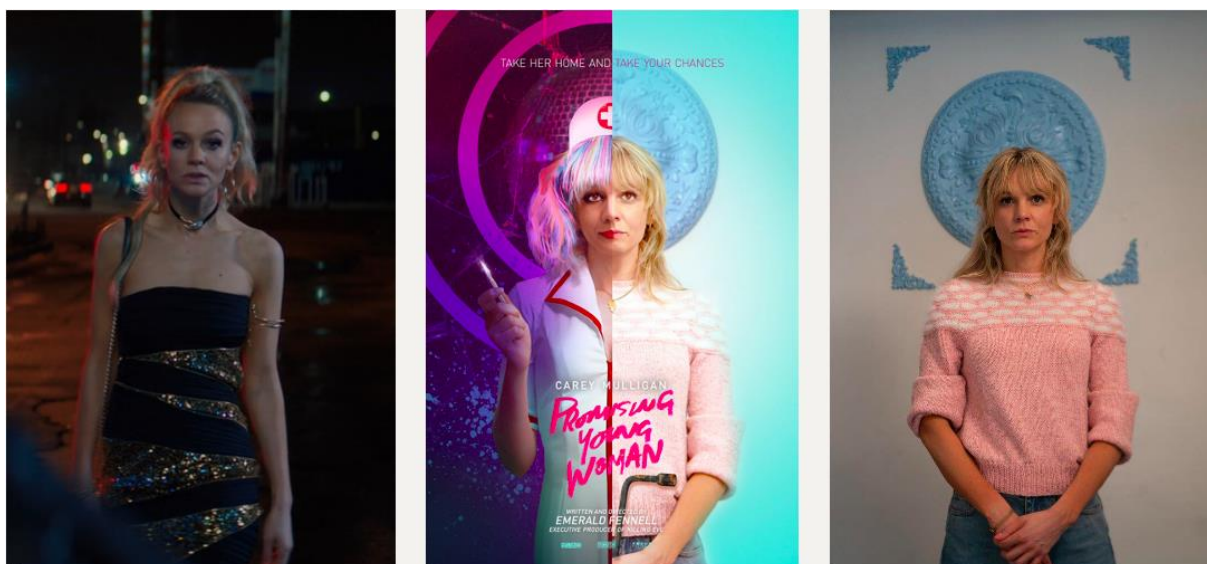
Arabella dressed as the devil with neon reflections



Cassie in a bar, dressed in dark with neon reflections



contemporary illustration of porn in *Brazen* from 2022, directed by Monika Mitchell



Cassie's double role is also presented by one of the posters – second illustration – of the film

The third aspect in which *Promising Young Woman* revises the genre is Cassie's ability to reclaim the voice and the gaze, which the female protagonists are usually deprived of. As mentioned before, although second wave feminism hugely contributed to the emergence of the rape-revenge genre in the 1970s, rape-revenge movies at the time were still adjusted to pleasures of the male gaze. The visual representations were created for male preferences, and were also violent, capitalising on the voyeuristic, sometimes sadistic pleasures of sexually abusing women. Therefore, sexualizing the female body was a commonly used element in traditional rape-revenge narratives. *Promising Young Woman*, while still using sexualized images of the female protagonist with her dresses and make-up, does not show the protagonist naked or even semi-naked, thus it does not totally contribute to the objectification of the female

body. The first proof which supports the argument that the gazing positions are reversed in *Promising Young Woman* is the film's opening scene, which is a mockery of the attempt to sexualize men, with "men's crotches at a sweaty nightclub [shown] in slow motion. Nothing about the angle of the camera ... is flattering and none of the men ... are portrayed to be sexy in any way" (McGlone n.pag.).

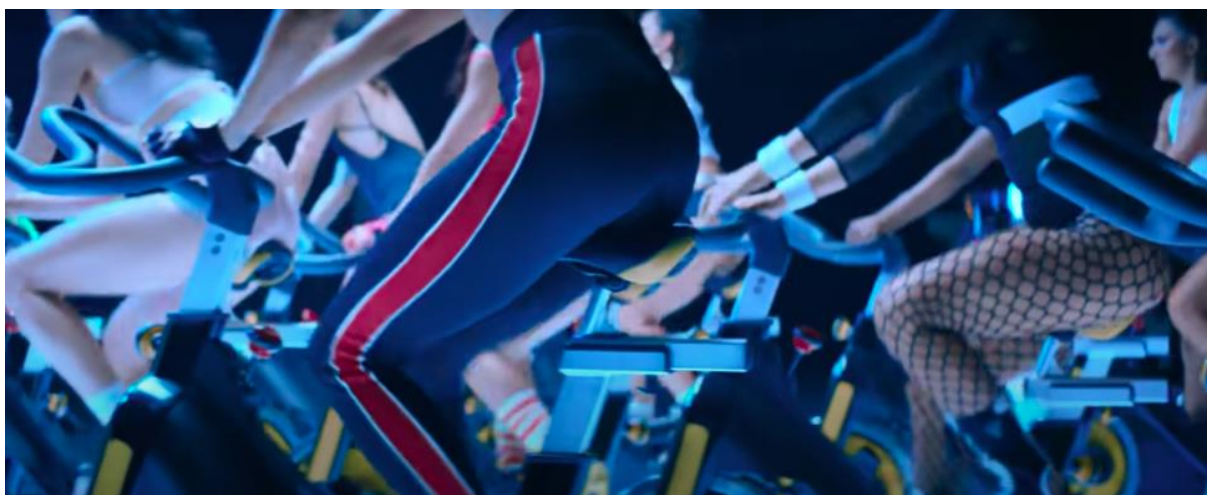


Men's bottoms in a nightclub when Cassie goes for her first "hunt"

This shot uses the same techniques of sexualisation, namely, focusing on certain body parts in order to show how women were sexualised before in rape-revenge movies, and how they are still sexualized in rape culture and popular culture today.



Paris Hilton, the singer of the song “Stars are blind” that is featured in the movie,
posing the same way in *V Magazine*’s March 2014 issue



Women in the same position in Ariana Grande’s “Side to side” videoclip from today’s
pop-culture)

The power of this scene is that unlike to pop-culture, these images of men are not flattering, but rather caricaturistic and ridiculous, therefore the viewer does not feel any sexual tension, or the perverted pleasure of voyeurism. In this way, the scene is self-reflexive, since it critically and wittily engages with the genre’s convention of objectifying and sexualising female bodies. As Henry argues, it consciously foregrounds looking relations and the mechanisms of gazing particularly in terms of gender and ethics.

Another supporting scene for the reappropriated gaze is the construction scene, where the protagonist is walking home after one of her “night hunts”. She passes by a group of construction workers staring at her, catcalling her, making jokes about her appearance and

explicitly labelling Cassie's passing a "walk of shame".⁴ Cassie stops, and (apparently) without bad feelings, stares back, with such an intensity and persistence that the workers are getting confused, starting to feel disgraced, and as a typical reaction to being confronted, start to yell defensive comments at her, and eventually asking, almost begging her to stop staring at them. Therefore, the scene reverses the looking relations, projecting the violating male gaze back at the male characters, making them the object of the gaze, and thus confronting them with the humiliating effect of being looked at. Reinforcing the scene's revisionist quality, in the background, there is a compactor (a machine used to crush and compress cars), which is also mirrored by a half-eaten, messy, bloody looking hot-dog in Cassie's hands, symbolizing her power to crash the symbolic phallus at her whim, which also refers to men and the stereotypes they invented to bracket women as, for instance, sluts.



(Cassie's gaze and the compactor machine in the background)

The fourth aspect in which the film can be viewed as a revisionist piece of rape-revenge cinema is the that it "reverses the gendering of hunting" (McEntee, n.pag.), since Cassie constantly switches between the roles of prey and hunter/predator. Hunting, in sociocultural terms, is used to refer to men as hunters for animals and women, therefore women are treated as prey, which reinforces rape culture in Western patriarchal societies, while perpetuating misogynistic beliefs and attitudes, and normalising violence and abuse against girls and women. As Kelly Oliver, the writer of *Hunting Girls* argues, in America, the behaviour towards sexual assaulters who seem to be "promising young men" is the following:

⁴ The term was coined recently, and it refers to a woman leaving the place of a one-night stand in the morning, feeling embarrassed and ashamed as a proof of her having internalised one of the myths that sustain rape culture, that is, that women who act on their sexual desires are sluts and should be ashamed of their actions.

There is the notion that “boys will be boys” when it comes to sexual assault. Within a culture that still has not shaken off its patriarchal heritage, these men are the heirs to the future. College administrators, the general public, and the media have resisted the idea that these successful college boys and men who have bright futures ahead of them might be sexual predators. Often taking the perpetrator’s side over their victim’s, popular sentiment too often has been that the men are the ones harmed by rape charges, that they have the most to lose, which assumes, of course, that their futures matter more than those of their victim’s. (8)

Furthermore, Oliver also mentions, that in America, “half the college men surveyed said they had used force on a date; and ... over 30 percent of men surveyed said they would force a woman to have sex and yet didn’t consider this rape. Obviously, for these college boys and men, the boundary between sex and rape has been blurred” (6). These statistics thus reveal that rape culture normalises hunting for women and treating them. As a response to the male-gendered hunting, the film uses Cassie as a female hunter when she “hunts” for “nice guys” to broaden her revenge to all members of rape culture. As an example, when Cassie is in a night club, she pretends to be intoxicated and in need of help who needs a “nice guy” to take care of her. Her bait works, and Jerry (Adam Brody), the first “nice guy” that the viewer meets throughout the movie, comes up to “help” her. Instead of taking her home, Jerry takes her to his house, and offers her one more drink, even though Cassie is clearly not in a state to be able to answer this question. When she accepts the drink, however, Jerry intentionally pours a lot more into her cup to make her condition worse. Then “he starts to undress her back at his apartment, blatantly ignoring her verbal cues of discomfort” (McGlone n.pag.). At this point Jerry is still in the supposed predator position, and Cassie’s verbal cues are only shy, “what are you doing” questions. However, at the next moment, she emerges from the putative prey position, and takes up the role of the predator. The role shift is signalled by her looking directly into the camera, thus breaking the fourth wall⁵ and confronting the spectators with their expectations about the scene’s outcome. Apart from reclaiming the gaze, Cassie also reclaims her voice, when she switches to a deeper, almost masculine voice, repeating “hey, I said, what are you doing” to Jerry. In conclusion, by reappropriating the voice and the gaze, Cassie revises

⁵ Breaking the fourth wall means that a character looks directly into the camera, acknowledging the viewer’s “intruding presence” (Brown 177), and directly addressing them, suggesting that what happens onscreen does not completely cover reality, only a glimpse of it or that it is unreal/fictional.

the rules of rape-revenge and calls out to the audience to interrogate their own expectations about what unfolds in front of their eyes.



The moment of breaking the fourth wall with a counter shot of Jerry's perplexed face

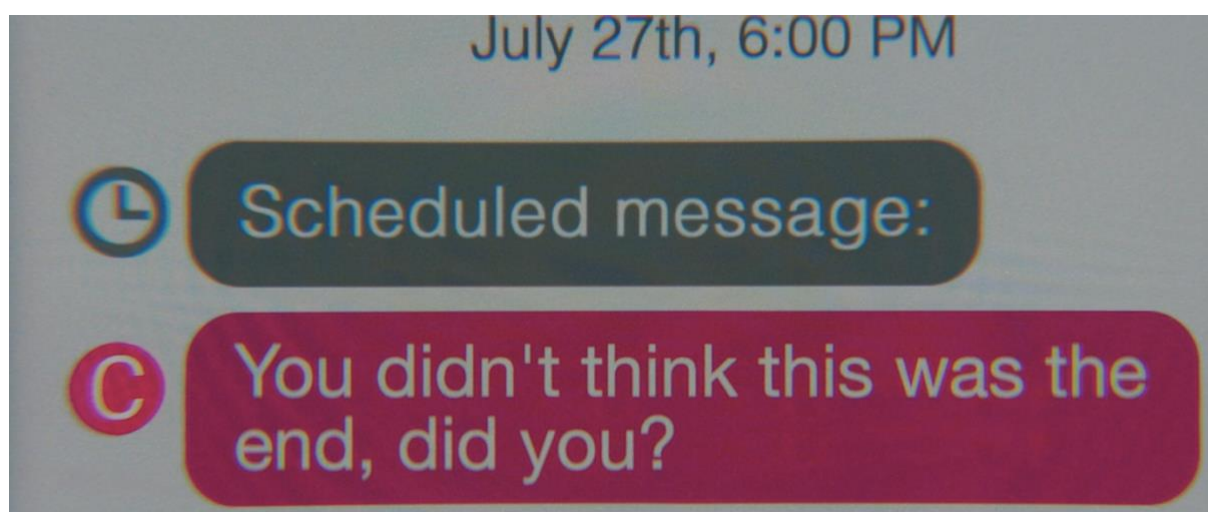
Besides the moments when Cassie acts as a hunter, there are multiple scenes when Cassie appears as prey. One of these is at the bachelor party where Cassie dies and appears as a victim of her own hunt. Her being one of the “headcounts” for men in rape culture is represented by cowboy hats – which are associated with men with guns in Western movies – which can be seen as trophies on the wall, next to her dead body.



Hat trophies on the wall next to Cassie's stiff legs

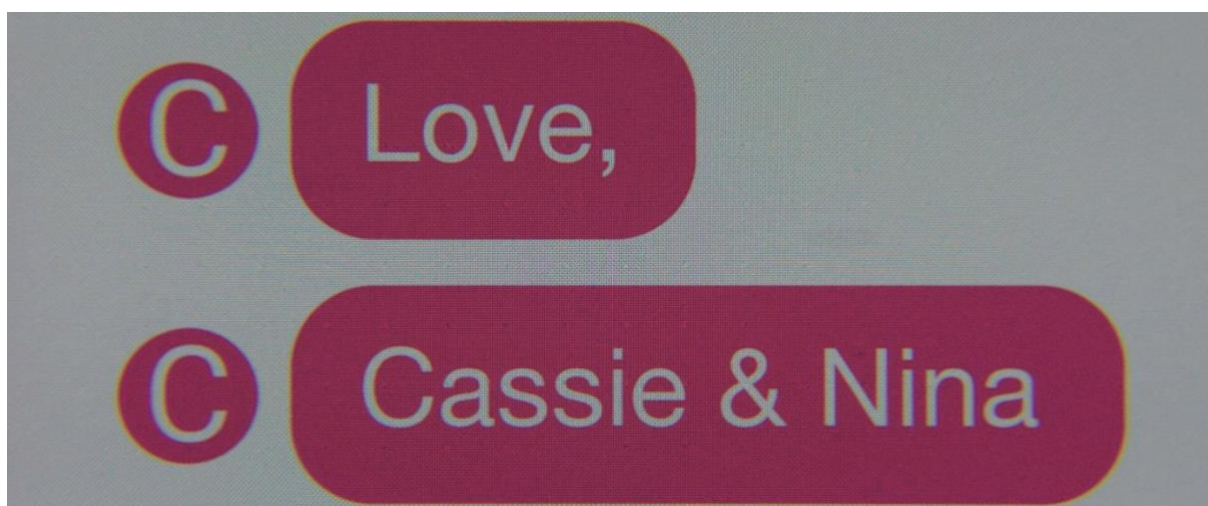
The fifth revisionist aspect of the movie is that it represents social media and technology not only as tools that help to maintain or preserve, but also to expose rape culture. Although Nina's rape was “preserved” by technology as a video on an old phone, which could have served as a source for a satisfying trauma representation for the viewer, the film only uses its audio to end the circulation of rape culture's myths. The circulation of videos of rape, that tend to

accompany cases of so-called “party rape”⁶ are dangerous, because “non-consensual sex has become a form of entertainment in our culture” (Oliver 14). The mentioned video is a key-element to the film, because that is how Cassie figures out that Ryan, her romantic interest, was a bystander at her friend’s rape and failed to act against the abuse. As a way of showing that technology can also be used as a tool to help rape victims, the film includes a scene in which Ryan receives Cassie’s scheduled text messages. This plot element also confirms that the film was created in the #metoo⁷ era, in which victims of sexual abuse use technology as a form of empowerment. In the film, Cassie schedules text messages in order to gain back some agency for herself (and also Nina) by tipping off the police and warning Ryan about the dangers of being a bystander.



⁶ According to Oliver, “party rape” is a sexual abuse that usually happens at college campuses or off-campus fraternity houses, where the victim is usually in an unconscious or in an intoxicated state, and it is “classified as a form of acquaintance rape” (Oliver 10).

⁷ The #metoo movement is a social movement that was created against sexual abuse, harassment, and rape culture, where people share their own experiences about “the humiliation and harassment they endured, which they had often perceived as a necessary condition of womanhood” (Orosz-Rétin, pag.)



Cassie's prescheduled messages for Ryan

The last aspect in which *Promising Young Woman* revises the rape-revenge genre is the non-sensational ending. As mentioned before, in traditional rape-revenge narratives endings are always satisfactory and sensational, where the victim or another agent carries out the revenge, and the abuser gets punished. To some extent, the movie lives up to the expectations, because Al gets punished by the police, but at the expense of Cassie's martyrdom. Although Cassie's death could have served as a satisfaction for the viewer (as violent, cathartic deaths were central motives in rape-revenge to please the viewer), in this case, its representation is rather painful to watch, since – according to Fennell – it happens in real time (for around two and a half minutes), only to generate disgust and disappointment, therefore forcing the viewer to reflect on what they expect from this particular genre. As Fennell also added, “[t]he whole point of doing it in real time and pushing in and getting closer was that you [the viewer] shouldn’t be able to dismiss or look away from it” (qtd. in Cohen n.pag.).



Al next to Cassie's stiff body

In addition, by demonstrating Cassie's agony, the fantasy of the strong heroine who is capable of defeating the male is also destroyed because the viewer discovers the imaginary nature of fantasy. Analysing Lacan's and Žižek's theories, Todd McGowan argues that "[f]antasy provides a screen in front of the gaze, allowing the subject to avoid its trauma. If the gaze presents the subject with an impossible question, fantasy provides a solution. Through fantasy, the subject imagines a scenario in which the desire of the Other...becomes clear" (36). By this McGowan means that the fantasy prevents the viewer from the traumatic encounter with the "Real, traumatic dimension" (36), in this case, from facing the fact that the heroine can only defeat a perpetrator in a fantasy, because most likely she does not have the physical strength, and that the world that is out of kilter is possibly reparable only by taking revenge in fiction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by using the generic conventions of the traditional rape-revenge genre not only in the usual, but also in an unusual way, ambiguously and in a self-reflexive manner, *Promising Young Woman* confronts the viewers with the exploitative characteristics of former cinematic rape-revenge representations, and asks them to interrogate their own responses to rape-revenge narratives. By doing so using elements in both ways, Emerald Fennell joins the group of revisionist rape-revenge films, which are constantly transforming generic conventions. Regarding traditional characteristics, I argued that the film retains the following: first, the avenger is someone close to the victim; second, vengeance is carried out by the police, which is dominated by men, therefore male agency is essential for the revenge, which also satisfies the need to punish the perpetrator; and lastly, the female protagonist is sexualized in her physical appearance with the red lipstick, revealing dresses and costumes. Meanwhile, the film also uses revisionist elements: first, the film was written and directed by a woman, while told from a female point of view; second, the protagonist's role is ambiguous as she could be viewed as an avenger, a victim and a martyr; third, it collapses the demon-angel dichotomy; fourth, it reappropriates the voice and the gaze; fifth, it reverses and confuses the gendering of hunting, as the protagonist ambiguously takes up the roles of the hunter, the predator and the prey; sixth, it uses technology to expose rape culture rather than to maintain it; and lastly, its ending, while fulfils traditional expectations, is still not sensational, and, as such, it highlights that the endings of previous rape-revenge narratives were only fantasies regarding the physical capability of their protagonist's strength and power.

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