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The Violation of Representation: Art, Argento and the Rape-Revenge Film

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Considering the moral controversies surrounding films such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarch, 1976) and *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi, 2000), the rape-revenge film is often typecast as gratuitous and regressive. But far from dismissing rape-revenge in her foundational book *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), Carol J. Clover suggests that these movies permit unique insight into the representation of gendered bodies on screen. In *Images of Rape: The 'Heroic' Tradition and Its Alternatives* (1999), art historian Diane Wolfthal demonstrates that contradictory representations of sexual violence co-existed long before the advent of the cinematic image, and a closer analysis of films that fall into the rape-revenge category reveals that they too resist a singular classification. Despite the broadness of the rape-revenge category, however, these films predominantly involve some kind of visceral skirmish between victim/villain, good/evil, female/male and right/wrong, and the desire for vengeance upon which their narratives rely provides a widely shared melodramatic foundation. The ideological leanings, thematic cores and moral messages of any given text hinge upon its representational mechanics—in this instance, how film formally constructs meaning—and can thus shift radically from text to text, despite the uniformity of the trope itself.

Italian cult horror director Dario Argento's *The Stendhal Syndrome* (*La Sindrome di Stendhal*, 1996) is a rape-revenge film that addresses the representation of sexual violence on screen, placing it explicitly in a cinematic and art-historical context. In the film, Anna Manni (Asia Argento) is afflicted by a titular psychological condition that renders her incapable of distinguishing between the real and the represented image, thwarting her desire to avenge a number of brutal sexual assaults. Through an explicit engagement with Renaissance and Baroque rape imagery, Argento demonstrates how this historical framing of the fictional rape victim is itself an act of representational violence. Anna is trapped within a range of identities: *femme fatale*, avenging tomboy, professional career woman, deranged killer and even daughter of the director, given the extradiegetic complication of the star presence of actress Asia Argento. Anna collapses under the weight of her own status as a representation, and consequently, the revenge components of the narrative provide little consolation for spectators, critics or Anna herself. By exposing and collapsing the inherent contradictions that accompany the act of representing rape through the eyeglass of visual history, Argento provides a sophisticated analysis of the problematic intersection of aesthetics and sexual violence. With the futility of the vengeance component of the rape-revenge trope laid bare, *The Stendhal Syndrome* can be understood as a self-reflexive critique of the rape-revenge category itself.

Representing Rape and Revenge

While the term ‘rape-revenge’ suggests a clear definition, critics have offered a range of different readings. For Clover, rape-revenge is an identifiable horror subgenre. In *Men, Women and Chain Saws* she offers an examination of the notorious rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* to add weight to her central claims for cross-gender identification in horror, challenging orthodox readings of a dominant and sadistic male gaze as outlined in Laura Mulvey’s foundational 1972 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” As Clover suggests, “the only way to account for the spectator’s engagement in the revenge drive is to assume his engagement with the rape-avenging woman” (152). Jacinda Read’s *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (2000) challenges Clover’s argument, as Read views rape-revenge not as a genre or subgenre, but as a narrative structure. While both Clover and Read agree that the rape-revenge narrative appears across a range of genres, Read contends that it is impossible to reduce it to a predominantly horror-based phenomenon (Clover 115; Read 25).

Though the status of rape-revenge as genre is the subject of debate, the notion of rape as a powerful narrative device is less disputed. Sarah Projansky identifies two primary models of the rape-revenge structure, and notes a shift in the function of rape in each:

In these films, sometimes the revenge is taken by a man who loses his wife or daughter to a rape/murder, and sometimes the revenge is taken by women who have faced rape themselves. The films in the first category depend on rape to motivate and justify a particularly violent version of masculinity, relegating women to minor ‘props’ in the narrative. The films of the second category, however, can be understood as feminist narratives in which women face rape, recognize that the law will neither protect nor avenge them, and then take the law into their own hands. (60)

For Projansky, the ubiquity of rape in film and television cultures—both in rape-revenge films and, more generally, deployments of rape as a motif in contemporary screen media— “seem[s] always to be available to address other social issues” and to underscore the seriousness of thematic material other than rape itself (61). Sabine Sielke shares this view, noting that when “transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, and insistent figure for other social, political and economic concerns and conflicts” (2).

For Peter Lehmann, the rape-revenge film problematically reduces female violation, trauma and justice to a titillating spectacle solely intended for male mass audiences (114). But as Tammy Oler argues, the issue of spectatorship is more complex. Most troublesome is the assumption that it is only men who watch rape-revenge films: as publications such as the feminist horror fanzine *Ax Wound* demonstrate, there is a female rape-revenge audience because “despite their often-agonizing depictions of violence against women, they are among the only films in which women are portrayed as triumphant survivors in a world where rape is rarely recognized or prosecuted” (31). Rather than assisting in the clarification of the ideological soundness or lack thereof of rape-revenge, this fantasy

of female agency complicates the subject even further. As Philip Green observes, the view of empowerment contains an inadvertent condemnation of women who do not (or cannot) fight back: “Women can take care of themselves if they’ll just learn karate and get a gun” (193).

At stake here is the issue that the very act of representing rape may diminish its seriousness. Diane Wolfthal traces ‘heroic’ rape imagery to heroes and gods who rape to demonstrate power in Ancient Roman and Greek myths, legends that became immortalized in canonical Baroque and Renaissance artworks by artists such as Poussin, Titian, Correggio and Giambologna (5). For Wolfthal, these paintings sanitize rape, focusing on the rapist’s perspective and celebrating conquest and seduction (9). While it is not uncommon for these images to suggest the victim’s trauma, they “nevertheless construct the hero as an admirable figure, virile, strong and courageous, whose fame rests in part on his acts of sexual violence” (23). Wolfthal contends that a critical short-sightedness for all art outside of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque paradigm has resulted in a unrepresentative canon of European art of this period. By looking beyond Italy and the dominant understanding of ‘heroic’ rape imagery, she claims “no linear chronological development emerges...Europeans did not gradually progress to a more enlightened view of rape...Rather, depictions of sexual violation reveal strikingly different attitudes” (23). In short, “diverse notions coexisted contemporaneously” (182). Is it possible to suggest a similar case for the contemporary rape-revenge film? It may be that the reason the area has proved such an ideological minefield is that the desire to find a catchall critical strategy to tackle this category denies that these diverse notions may indeed coexist contemporaneously.

Aesthetics, Ethics and Rape-Revenge

Accordingly, the ethical and aesthetic construction of rape-revenge films is suitably diverse. Some films such as *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1988) do not show rape at all, while others (*I Spit on Your Grave*) stage it at intolerable length. Dario Argento situates his rape-revenge film *The Stendhal Syndrome* at this intersection of ethics, aesthetics and rape-revenge. Through its conscious engagement with the history of rape in visual culture, particularly painting and film, *The Stendhal Syndrome* interrogates the very mechanics of representation from within. The manner in which acts and characters are represented in this and other rape-revenge films contains inherently moral implications upon which entire films narratively and thematically hinge: who is the villain? Who is the victim? How do we know, when our victims are so often torturing, killing and—in some instances—even raping the villain? Active within these representations lies what Peter Brooks has identified as the “moral occult,” the “hidden yet operative domain of values that the drama...attempts to make present within the ordinary” (vii). For Brooks, the moral occult is the pivotal aspect of melodrama: “The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult” (5).

This is not to say that rape-revenge films like *The Stendhal Syndrome* are necessarily generic melodramas per se. That such a broad selection of films in this category can be said to fulfill Linda Williams’ defining combination of action and pathos warrants a conceptual expansion of melodrama (16). When considered as what Christine Gledhill has identified as “a genre-producing machine”

rather than a genre in and of itself, melodramatic structures may be identified across a broad range of categories, including rape-revenge (227). Crucially, this does not imply that all rape-revenge films support melodrama's key assumptions of binary villain/victim, good/evil and right/wrong, as many instances actively undermine and even collapse such structures. *The Stendhal Syndrome*—along with famous instances such as *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) and Abel Ferrara's *Ms.45* (1981)—challenges the ethical assumptions upon which melodrama traditionally relies. What makes Argento's film even more worthy of note, however, is its fascination with the very mechanics of how sexual violence is represented in the arts.

Framing Rape in *The Stendhal Syndrome*

The work of Dario Argento has spanned over forty years, and his signature flamboyance manifests itself predominantly in hyperactive and excessively stylized horror vignettes. Argento's auteurist vision reaches its most sophisticated expression in *The Stendhal Syndrome*, a film not about rape as such, but about representing rape. Representation is rarely straightforward in Argento's work, in which narratives frequently centre around a protagonist's struggle to comprehend key signs. A fascination with the ambiguity of visual representation has permeated his work since the early 1970s, and narratives commonly rely on misinterpretations of a pivotal event (*The Bird With Crystal Plumage* (1970), *Deep Red* (1975)), deceptive characters (Peter Neal in *Tenebrae* (1982), Frau Brückner in *Phenomena* (1985)) or visible objects that hold secrets (the hidden door in *Suspiria* (1977), the necklace in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971) and the locket in *Cat O' Nine Tails* (1971)). In *The Stendhal Syndrome*, it is the act of misreading rape itself that dominates the film, both diegetically and extradiegetically. Argento employs rape as the central motif in his continuing investigation into the conceptual minefield of artistic representation, and the symbolic force of rape is used to emphasize the seriousness of his mission.

The film is concerned with three representational 'canvases,' each varying in degree of conceptual opacity. Firstly, there are the paintings the protagonist Anna views. Secondly, there is her own body as a surface to redesign, both through the literal application of paint to her body and the use of costume and make up to change her identity. Finally, there is the film itself, with its depictions of sexual violence. *The Stendhal Syndrome* explores both the powers and dangers of the processes of artistic representation, as well as the represented image itself. The film refuses to engage with rape as a simple melodramatic device with which to construct the typical victim/villain binary. Rather, rape establishes the structure of the moral universe—that upon which rape-revenge narratives so frequently hinge—which the film collapses to create its final, shattering impact.

The very title of the film emphasizes the dangers inherent in an inability to 'read' cultural phenomena: the Stendhal syndrome is a psychological disorder where the ability to differentiate between what is 'real' and what is an artistic representation disintegrates into hallucinatory chaos. Like the psychological affliction from which it takes its name, the film is concerned with the

psychological violence that artistic representation has the capacity to produce. The films' credits acknowledge it is based on a book by the same name by Professor Graziella Magherini, who defined the condition as one "in which the viewer of great works of art is overcome by temporary psychosis" (Lorenzi, "Art Lovers Go Nuts Over Dishy David"). The Stendhal syndrome also has historical antecedents, as it is named after the French author Henri Stendhal who wrote about undergoing physical and psychological trauma after viewing frescoes in Florence in the early nineteenth century.

According to Colette Balmain, in this film Argento "uses the analogy between painting and cinema to provide his most extensive, and at times difficult, mediation on the nature of violence and the possibility of its transference" ("Female Subjectivity and the Politics of 'Becoming Other': Dario Argento's *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (*The Stendhal Syndrome*, 1996)"). But the connection between painting and cinema, falling under the broader rubric of 'art,' provides only one of the avenues for exploring the film's primary concern, the violence inherent in the representational project itself. And not only is the content of the paintings themselves important; their contextual construction as 'representations of representations' plays a pivotal role as well. The film's opening sequence in the Uffizi gallery introduces a tangible space where what is real (within the context of the film's diegesis), and what is represented (in the paintings hanging on the walls) must co-exist. In the on-screen gallery, the lines between 'art' and 'the real' are blurred, and this is exposed before the narrative begins: the opening credit sequence is a simple scrolling display of readily identifiable works of art by Modigliani, Warhol, Picasso, Rembrandt and many others. The screen itself becomes a gallery space that collapses the boundaries between the museum about to be shown within the film's diegesis and the experience of watching *The Stendhal Syndrome*. In the opening moments, the screen shifts from *being* a gallery to *showing* a gallery. These first scenes thus foreshadow a pattern of violence in cutting between representational forums that is emblematic of the film's broader thematic intent.

Anna's first bout of the Stendhal syndrome occurs as she views Paolo Uccello's *Niccolò da Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano* (1438-1440) and it triggers a corresponding aural hallucination. She then moves to Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486), where again a clear relationship between what Anna sees and what she hears is confirmed; in this instance the sound of wind corroborates the close-up of Zephyr's breath. A first-person camera shot from Anna's perspective introduces Botticelli's *Primavera* (1482). This shot suggests a narrowing of her attention as the camera pans across the image, paying detail to specific elements. Signifying her ability to 'see herself' in the painting through her experience of the Stendhal syndrome, Anna's reflection is shown on numerous occasions in the glass that protects *Primavera*. As she stands beneath the dancing Charites on the left of the painting, her eyes start from the left and scan across to the figure of Flora. The camera then indicates her focus upon the mythological figures of Zephyrus and Chloris. Wolfthal expands upon Ovid's version of this myth from *Fastis*: "the west wind Zephyrus tried to seize the nymph Chloris, married her, and then transformed her into Flora, whom Botticelli depicts to the left of Chloris" (10). As her reflection is shown over this detail, Anna literally has rape on her mind, and her attention to the particular element of the painting is significant. The close-up of the image, coupled with the aurally hallucinated sound of Zephyrus' breath, immediately aligns Anna with the

source of his attention, Chloris. The suggestion in the painting that Chloris' metamorphosis into Flora is the focus of the painting's broader celebratory tone is significantly ruptured by Anna's close attention only to the rape of Chloris by Zephyrus. Unable to distinguish between the painting and her own reflection, she touches the glass and both literally and metaphorically sets off an alarm: even before she is attacked, she is warned of the dangers inherent within the collapse of the real and representations.

Caravaggio's *Medusa* (1597) marks an increasing deterioration in Anna's overwhelmed state as she makes her way through the Uffizi. Ennio Morricone's soundtrack issues a trumpeting siren that suggests the Medusa is screaming, though it is a warning instead of an attack. It seems as if the Medusa is a friend, a fellow rape survivor emitting an urgent warning to Anna about looming threats, both in the shape of Alfredo and the broader dangers of the representational apparatus that could obliterate Anna's identity altogether. Linda Badley's interpretation of the Medusa as the mythic embodiment of the "rape victim as monster"—the myth's propelling action is the rape of Medusa by Poseidon—holds particular significance to Anna's story, as she transforms from investigator to victim to killer herself ("Talking Heads, Unruly Women and Wound Culture: Dario Argento's *Trauma* (1993)"). Through the parameters established by the Stendhal syndrome, the Medusa warns Anna of the imminent threat contained within the contradictory spaces of the representational domain of rape to which they have both been condemned, yet what remains to be determined is whether Anna can heed that warning. That both Anna and the Medusa default to monstrosity suggests their positions are ultimately untenable, rendering them functionally incapacitated by their status as representations. Trapped in art through rape, their power as agents capable of functioning outside of these representational legacies has been removed.

The climactic moment of the Uffizi sequence pivots around Pieter Brueghel's *Landscape of the Fall of Icarus* (1558). The painting has a visible effect upon Anna, and it is also the privileged moment where Alfredo is introduced to the film's action. As Anna looks at Icarus' legs jutting out of the water, she finds herself plunged underwater in another attack of the Stendhal syndrome. Anna faints, and as she sinks the film cuts to her head hitting the ocean floor. Underwater and unconscious, Anna is approached by a giant fish, uttering a moan which echoes the Medusa's cry, and they kiss. Filled with air, she rises to the surface, gaining consciousness in the gallery. The figure of the fish is as fascinating as it is indefinable, and emphasizes what Maitland McDonagh has observed as Argento's debt to surrealism (253). Rejecting dominant art-historical readings of Brueghel's painting as a lesson in hubris, the scale of mythological tragedy in the context of Anna's visit to the Uffizi—be it Icarus' fall, the rape of Chloris and Medusa or even the rape and consequent obliteration of Anna and her identity—is ultimately small, passing unnoticed by the ploughman and fisherman in Brueghel's painting and, by association, the viewer of *The Stendhal Syndrome* itself.

In this underwater hallucination within Brueghel's painting, Anna is trapped between life and death—and reality and art. Icarus, too, is trapped. Neither dead nor alive, he is about to vanish, the privileging of the moment between appearing/disappearing foreshadowing the film's own attention to

the processes of Anna's obliteration. However, the painting is culpable in a far less metaphorical way; while Anna has lost herself in it, she has inadvertently left herself dangerously exposed to Alfredo. This becomes most apparent when she has yet another bout of the Stendhal syndrome in her hotel room, 'falling into' Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642). The painting morphs into a doorway that Anna walks through to a crime scene in Rome, and her occupation as a detective in the Anti-Rape Squad is explained. She is investigating a series of murders and rapes, and her supervisor had sent her to Florence to continue her enquiries. Like a similar scene in *The Bird with Crystal Plumage* where a painting functions as a wormhole that allows movement between different spaces and times, art is again granted great power. But the cost of experiencing that power is staggering: submitting to the overwhelming sensory experience granted by the Stendhal syndrome, Anna loses her grasp of her reality, presenting Alfredo with his opportunity to launch into the first of a series of violent sexual assaults. Her sensitivity to art renders her trapped in it and at mercy to its representational apparatus. The visual history of rape that has so transfixed her in the Uffizi has now confined her within the very representational structures of *The Stendhal Syndrome*.

Do You Recognize Me Now?

Anna's identity splinters underneath the combined burden of this responsibility to, as well as within, art, and the physical and emotional damage sustained by Alfredo's attacks¹. She is no longer whole, and is increasingly stripped of her identity in her attempt to fulfill the role of so many different types of 'Annas': professional policewoman, rape survivor, tomboy, *femme fatale* and, ultimately, killer. This fragmentation marks her final dissolution into a fractured void in the film's climax where she considers herself as ceasing to exist. "I've become him," she says, removing her wig after the murder of her psychiatrist and Marco, saying "Do you recognise me now? It's me: Alfredo." Anna has been emptied out, as it were, adding new meaning to Argento's statement regarding the clinical manifestation of the Stendhal syndrome: "these works of art, like any great artwork...take a lot out of a person" (Crawford 25). Chillingly, as the film ends it is clear that Anna's attempts to reclaim her own body and construct it as a site of artistic representation under her control are defeated by Alfredo, even after his death.

This secondary level of how art and representation cohabit not just the same space, but battle at the cost of meaningful three-dimensional identity of the represented subject, takes no more literal form than the sequence where Anna becomes a painter herself. Falling into her own portraits—large, overwhelming canvases where a gaping black mouth forms a bottomless abyss—leads her to the only compromise left within the frame of reference of the film: to paint herself. Turning to art therapy, she applies individual colors to her skin, blurring them into a muddy dark grayish-brown. Ultimately, she loses a material grasp of herself, as she almost becomes invisible covered in dark paint in the dark room. For Balmain, this logic is flawless: "With only the tools of her oppression through which to redefine herself (the ideology and iconography of patriarchy contained within its linguistic and symbolic structures), Anna's attempt at catharsis is futile and she soon abandons the frame, turning

instead to her own body as canvas” (“Female Subjectivity and the Politics of ‘Becoming Other’: Dario Argento’s *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (*The Stendhal Syndrome*, 1996)”). Anna’s attempts at self-empowerment through painting herself fail because she is a part of a bigger ‘painting,’ the film *The Stendhal Syndrome* itself.

But even this attempt to paint herself ‘out’ of the film—to delete her own image—is unsuccessful, and she is forbidden to neutralize her own identity. Symbolic suicide is denied to her as an option as much as her instinct to survive prevents her from ultimately taking her own life, though she flirts with it via self-mutilation after the first rape. Although Anna struggles to conquer the challenges that threaten and destroy her own identity, she cannot compete against the representational dominance of the cinematic frame. This is not because she is weak or incapable, but because the film functions on levels that she is not permitted to access as a representation herself. Symbolic planes can be crossed by the paintings in the Uffizi and by Argento himself, even by simply referencing his past films, yet Anna is condemned to only one level of representation.

The Futility of Vengeance

Film history has furnished Anna with a selection of prefabricated roles to correspond with her status as rape ‘victim,’ ‘survivor’ and ‘avenger’—identities that are manifested most visibly in her transformation from tomboy to *femme fatale*. But not only do these identities ultimately fail her; they are complicated by the extradiegetic fact that this is not Anna, but rather actress Asia. For Louis Paul, Argento’s casting of his own daughter in this role is “the pinnacle of unsavoriness,” while for Daniel Schweiger and Geoffrey Macnab it provides an Oedipal undercurrent more bewildering than offensive (57; 40-41; 86). The casting of Asia in part stems from Dario’s faith in her as an actress: in Asia’s own words, “the one thing he likes to say about me is that if he was a musician, I’d be a beautiful instrument to play. Which I find very gratifying” (Curci 57). Yet for a director marked by a “notorious lack of interest in matters of plot” and characterization more generally, *The Stendhal Syndrome* stands apart from the bulk of his oeuvre in its empathetic construction of its protagonist (McDonagh 168). As Schweiger notes, “Anna is Argento’s first three-dimensional heroine, and she makes the film work on both an emotional and stylistic level” (40). Anna is trapped within the formal, aesthetic and conceptual confines of *The Stendhal Syndrome* itself to the degree that the spectator knows that there is no ‘Anna’ at all; there is only Asia Argento playing Anna.

Anna’s desire for revenge is thwarted as she suffers a loss of identity on all levels. She is Alfredo, she is Asia and she is Argento’s daughter. She is a *femme fatale*, she is a tomboy, she is a policewoman and she is an actress. Thus, her rape works on multiple registers. The extreme graphicness of the violent sequences, bereft as they are of Argento’s signature music-laden, brightly colored vignette style, engages the act of rape as overwhelmingly horrific, but at the same time the film itself acknowledges that this is ‘only’ a representation, a staged event within the context of the cinematic medium. Although Anna may or may not have the capacity to recover from Alfredo’s

violence within the confines of a rape-revenge narrative, she is allowed no such flexibility regarding the film's central thematic concern. Anna is trapped under the sheer weight of her represented self, a constructed identity that is shown to have a long, complex history working against her, from Greek mythology to Renaissance art to film noir.

The impotence of Anna's search for revenge and the opacity of Argento's examination of the artistic representation of rape perhaps hinder broader public acceptance of or interest in *The Stendhal Syndrome*, and its conceptual denseness renders it almost impenetrable outside discourses of representation. Regardless, it is a rare filmic exploration of the issues surrounding the act of representing sexual violence and places these concerns above the sensationalism that so often circulates around the female avenger figure in rape-revenge films more generally. From within the confines of a fictional film, it acknowledges that the depiction of 'rape' and the actual lived experience of rape are not the same. *The Stendhal Syndrome* exposes the mechanics of representation, and draws attention to the fact that, as a filmic text, it can only ever frame itself as part of broader discourses about rape by coming to terms with its own status as a means of representation. Anna's violation is presented in such a wide range of narrative and formal frames that she herself becomes nothing but a symbolic space, a personified forum for representation. It is precisely this obliteration of identity that *The Stendhal Syndrome* attempts to address by collapsing the moral configuration on which rape-revenge so often relies for narrative structure. The thematic concerns of Argento's rape-revenge film transcend the experiences and ethical construction of its protagonist, illustrating that she is not merely at the mercy of her rapist, but of the entire aesthetic and representational history of rape itself.

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Not to mention the vague psychological problems Anna has before she was raped: she is taking medication for anxiety before the assault, and later in the film when she visits her brothers and father it is clear that there is trauma located within her familial situation.