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## Rape, Revenge and Remake: Meir Zarchi's *Day of the Woman* and Steven Monroe's *I Spit on Your Grave*

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Meir Zarchi's 1977 *Day of the Woman* was relatively ignored by the public before its title was changed to the more provocative and thus marketable *I Spit on Your Grave* (hereafter abbreviated as *Spit*). Appalled reviewers and its inclusion in the 1983 British list of “video nasties” earned the film a cult status that gave rise to a 2010 remake of what had been described as “an extraordinarily difficult film to watch” (Clover 115). Both films possess a typical rape-revenge plot: a young writer, Jennifer Hills, leaves New York to spend the summer in a remote country cabin, hoping to find the peace and quiet she needs to write her novel. She meets a group of local thugs – one of them being “mentally handicapped” (Ebert) – who first harass, then brutally and repetitively rape her. The second act of the film covers the young woman's bloody revenge against her tormentors.

The protagonist's vengeance has been criticised for being “as vicious” (Martin and Porter 704) as the acts of violence committed against her. According to Carol Clover, “that is of course true. It lies in the nature of revenge or self-defence stories [...] that the avenger or self-defender will become as directly or indirectly violent as her assailant, and, [...] these films are in some measure *about* the transformation” (123). The original *Spit*, however, is often regarded as an exploitation film aiming to bait its audience with unjustifiable and gratuitous violence. In order to address this idea this paper will first consider both movies from the angle of retributive justice and the “lex talionis” (Clover 120) – the law of retaliation – then analyse and compare how directorial choices support and undermine the avenger's position in the 1977 *Spit* and its remake.

### Anatomy of a Vengeance

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*“I Spit on Your Grave (...) leaves us staring at the Lex talionis or law of retribution for what it is.” (Clover 120)*

### Equivalences and Distorted Echoes

*Spit*, as Carol Clover remarks, takes place in a “primitive universe of the lex talionis,” in which “as under the laws of blood feud, [Jennifer's attackers] are corporately liable; any of them - in this case all – are proper targets for retribution, regardless of their own degree of participation” (123). An eye for an eye, as the lex talionis commands, implies an equivalence between crime and retaliation.

Vengeance in both versions of *Spit* being a matter of equivalences, echoes and parallelisms provide a formal structure for both films. The 2010 movie provides such an instance of parallelism with the doubling of the clean, welcoming house that, after her harrowing experience, an altered

Jennifer exchanges for an eerie and run-down cabin in the woods that was absent from the 1977 film. Already glimpsed earlier in the film, the edifice is empty save for broken and decaying everyday items. Seen through the eyes of one of the thugs, the cabin's dangerous and impure status is emphasised through the presence of flies buzzing around a stained mattress – Jennifer's new habitat is represented as a form of hell.

Echoes also appear in the dialogue with the jeering lines Jennifer inherits from her tormentors between act one and two. This phenomenon occurs only once in the 1977 film with Jennifer turning his own words against Stanley when she snaps at him to “Suck it, bitch” before killing him. While, for Carol Clover, the revenge acts in 1977 *Spit* do not create an analogy between the rapes and Jennifer's vengeance as there is no symbolic rape of the men (161), in some form, the protagonist's vengeful murderous spree does echo her own ordeal. It could be argued, for instance, that Jennifer's choice to hang her first victim alludes to Judas' demise, Matthew's participation in the assault being a form of betrayal, since he had previously declared himself her friend. Jennifer's posture as she lets herself fall into the river in the 2010 *Spit* – arms spread, Christ-like – seems to support this hypothesis.

Furthermore, Clover explains the infamous 1977 castration scene in terms of equivalent injuries:

In the rape-revenge film *I spit on your grave*, the heroine forces her rapist at gunpoint to lower his pants, presumably with the intention of shooting him in the genitals. But she changes her mind and invites him home for what he all too readily supposes will be a voluntary follow-up to an earlier gang rape. Then, as they sit together in a bubble bath, she castrates him with a knife. If we wondered why she gave up the pistol, now we know: all phallic symbols are not equal, and a hands-on knifing answers a hands-on rape in a way that a shooting, even a shooting preceded by a humiliation, does not. (32)

Other explanations can be given for the protagonist changing her mind about using a gun, however. Barbara Creed, for instance, reads this sequence differently: “[Johnny's argument that any man would behave as he has faced with a woman 'asking for it'] causes Jennifer to toss away the gun and invite him to the house for a hot bath. If maleness caused the crime, then maleness will suffer the punishment” (1993 123).

This abrupt change of plans could also be understood as Jennifer inflicting on her erstwhile torturer the same combination of false relief and abrupt crushing disappointment which she experienced earlier. A pattern was established then with her being repetitively let go only to be recaptured later, the most striking occurrence of this schema being the last, when a foot suddenly enters the frame and kicks the phone away from her just as the emergency services ask for her name. Assuming Jennifer had planned to take this course of action all along, the presence of a knife under the bathroom rug becomes less puzzling. Moreover, considering that “in American culture, the gun is a

symbol of power – *male* power – par excellence” (Zeiss 352), Jennifer's rejection of that weapon – she allows her would-be-victim to pluck it out of her grasp and fling it off-screen – might also symbolise a rejection of male-identified power – the “Master's tools” being powerless to dismantle “the Master's house” (Zeiss 352).

In this sense, 1977 Jennifer's murder spree does include traces of the crimes that prompted it. However, 2010 *Spit* exploits this device more thoroughly, opting to match each death scene to the specific crime of the character targeted and to quote his exact words back at him.

In this fashion, Jennifer strangles Matthew with a noose as an allusion to his having strangled her during the rape. Similarly, Stanley, who filmed Jennifer's harrowing ordeal, suffers a punishment correlated with his voyeuristic bent. Using an elaborate set up including fishing hooks and fish entrails – unbeknownst to her, an echo of the fishing expedition during which the men decided to assault her – the protagonist has crows peck out his eyes while his own camcorder records the event. Another man who used a baseball bat to terrorise her sees that instrument turned against him. The manner of his death – his face melting off in several stages when he can no longer hold himself up over the corrosive bath placed underneath him – also symbolically echoes the main character's plight. In order to visit upon a physically stronger male character the same helplessness felt during her own unsuccessful struggles against her tormentors, Jennifer chooses a method in which the immediate cause of death is the fact that Andy's strength fails him, a natural phenomenon considering the position he has been forced in.

This constructs a parallel with the idea that women have a responsibility to be able to defend themselves and avoid rape (Carol Clover examines the implications of female self-sufficiency as a hallmark of the rape-revenge genre p.143). During the sequence of humiliations leading up to the rape in the 2010 film, another man makes a point of systematically calling Jennifer “Show horse.” He literalises the “show horse” metaphor at her expense when he forces her to bare her teeth and “prance” to imitate a horse. The use of a metaphor in absentia instead of a simile erases her human status by mentioning only the vehicle of the metaphor – the animal – and not the tenor – Jennifer as woman. This has the added effect of making Jennifer's characterisation as cattle appear as a given in language instead of a construct of discourse, thus blocking the men's reception of any attempt to be perceived as human on her part. The protagonist reverses the situation in the second act and further literalises the trope by echoing these lines back at her tormentor. Furthermore, she physically extends the metaphor through the use of first a horse bit, then of the means usually employed to pacify uncontrollable stallions, thus revisiting the infamous castration scene.

### **Vengeance as Repossession**

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While the equivalence between crime and retaliation is clear, the meaning of said retaliation beyond abstract retributive justice is more elusive. It has been argued that “the subtext – that the trauma of violence (worse, sexual violence) is negated by the shooting, bludgeoning, castration and otherwise of the perpetrator – is nauseating. The film makes no attempt to address the reality: that

while external wounds heal, some internal never do” (Fulwood 41, about the original film). However, the protagonist's facial expression in the last shot of the movie does not suggest that vengeance has returned her to her initial light-heartedness. Camille Keaton plays her character's last scene with the slightest upturn of her lips, barely a smile, let alone a grin. Moreover, the camera does not remain fixed on her face, but glides over to her hand guiding the boat as she speeds away. The shot lingers there before eventually drifting onto the water itself – the very last image of the film. This insistence on the hand in command of the bar seems to suggest that her revenge has enabled the heroine to regain control and agency in her life. As the assault begins with two of the men seizing the rope attached to her canoe and dragging it away despite her struggles, taking control of her life literally and symbolically, it can be argued that her attackers rob her of both. Exacting vengeance can then be interpreted as the necessary condition to survive as an individual after her ordeal. Nevertheless, as Jennifer's unreadable features and ambiguous expression in the last shot seem to indicate, it is not sufficient to return her to her pre-trauma state.

Similarly, the politics of the gaze in both versions of *Spit* also define Jennifer's vengeance in terms of gaining back what has been taken from her. Whereas, during the first act, the protagonist is objectified by the lustful, aggressive male gaze even before the assault, the second act sees the prey become the hunter and thus restores her as the subject from which the gaze originates. Tellingly, in both films she becomes an unseen, threatening observer, for instance when she is shown watching Johnny interact with his family in *Day of the Woman*.

Finally, the heroine's attitude regarding her novel could be understood to symbolise this same process of repossession: in both films, writing is the explicit reason for Jennifer's presence in the country. At the beginning of the first act, her voice-over reads aloud bribes of her unfinished book as she writes, thus making the film's audience the first members of her readership and, through this, giving the viewers a vested interest in her novel. This harmonious creative process is targeted specifically during the last rape scene as the rapists find Jennifer's manuscript and proceed to ridicule it before ripping it up and scattering the pieces over her prostrate form. In a cliché manner, this can be read as a symbolical castration – the beaten and bleeding body as an open wound and the destroyed novel as murdered offspring. It seems significant that the protagonist, once left alone, applies herself to reconstructing the manuscript by gathering and taping together the scraps of paper, then later re-typing her text. Interestingly, the viewer never sees the restored manuscript, suggesting perhaps the insufficiency of Jennifer's efforts: having put the book and herself back together physically, she still has not recovered her agency or creativity.

The process of planning her vengeance is, however, akin to the role of a script-writer or a playwright, and evidence of this can be found in the sense of 'mise-en-scène' the original *Spit* gives:

[Her] revenge is terrible, exact and executed in perfect style. There is no suggestion that she will fail in the execution of her plans. From the moment she picks up her gun, dresses in black and asks God for forgiveness for what she is about to do, we know she – like the hero of the western – will hunt down each man and wipe him from the face of the earth.

Filled with a terrible but perfectly justifiable wrath, Jennifer becomes the all-powerful, all-destructive, deadly *femme castratrice*. (Creed 1993 129)

Having designed the plot and knowing her lines from her earlier confrontations with the villains of her story, the avenging protagonist also assumes the role of seductress to set her revenge in motion. Jennifer's vengeance, then, with its heavy emphasis on play-acting and planning might perhaps be considered as a substitute for the novel she was not allowed to finish and can apparently not complete. In both films the second act can then be construed as a one-woman play through which the heroine reclaims her creative powers.

### **Vengeance, Morality and Direction of Sympathy: Monstrosity & Righteousness**

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Considering the violent nature of the revenge plot as interpreted in examples of the rape-revenge genre such as *Spit, Ms. 45*, or *Rape Squad*, the ethics of vengeance are a problematic subject when engaging with these films. Zarchi chooses to take an unambiguous stance in favour of the victimised heroine from the first contact the viewer will have with the movie prior to engaging with the film text. The 1977 poster of the film bears the words: "This woman has just cut, chopped, broken and burned five men beyond recognition... but no jury in America would ever convict her!" This slogan, conspicuously absent from the 2010 poster, prepares the audience to construe Jennifer's revenge as the natural reaction to her plight, a directorial choice that is maintained throughout the movie.

It is noteworthy that the original title favoured by the director, *Day of the Woman*, with its epic connotations, advertises a narrative of female victory by universalising the alternative American title (*The Rape and Revenge of Jennifer Hills*, *IMDB*). In a recent interview about his 1977 movie, Zarchi recalls the beginning point of the project:

I came from a point [...] of saving a girl who'd just been viciously gang-raped, beaten almost to death, broken jaw, blood, mud, walking out of the bushes toward me in an isolated, half-dark park in New York City. [...] I know the horrors of a girl who's been raped. I've seen it. I witnessed it. I've been to the battlefield...a soldier who's been to the battlefield has seen blood, and death, and horrific scenes. [...] So what I saw is [what you see in] the movie...and I hope I put it in such a way that you will see what this girl that I saved went through. (Eggersten and Zarchi 2010).

Zarchi's experience translates into the 1977 film through painfully long takes of the tortured, mud-covered body of Jennifer while she is being abused, and the absence of a musical soundtrack that renders the footage disturbingly convincing – real life has no soundtrack either. This excruciating *mise-en-scène* of the protagonist's humiliation and torture, filmed using long shots of the beatings and close ups of the threatening faces of the men, espouses the victim's side of the story, thus making it clear that directorial strategies favour her. Engagement with the victim's revenge in slasher and rape-revenge films is "predicated on spectatorial identification with females in fear and pain." (Clover 152)

This is clearer in the earlier version of *Spit*, in which the viewer is presented with a montage of Jennifer's evolution over the two weeks following the rapes. The character is shown bearing the physical traces of the assault in the form of bruises and prominent facial scars, dressed in baggy, genderless clothing contrasting with her earlier stylish sartorial choices and “laps[ing] into an almost catatonic, obsessive silence” (Creed 1993 128). Under the surface of Camille Keaton's glassy-eyed face, the viewer can merely imagine the process that “transform[s Jennifer] from a friendly, likeable but ordinary woman into a deadly and powerful killer” (Creed 1993 129). That absence of interpretation, while it has been criticised as “distan[c]ing the viewer from her, making her seem like a mere cipher and pushing her dangerously close to that negative female stereotype, the all-destructive *femme castratrice*” (Creed 1996 128 commenting on Hardy 329), can also be read as a powerful indication of the extent of the trauma the character is grappling with. The intrusion of senseless violence in Jennifer's highly civilised world has brought about a collapse of meaning that can only be rendered through silence, suggesting that words have become inadequate in the new paradigm forced upon her.

2010 *Spit*, in keeping with its more ambivalent stance on the protagonist's revenge, elects to leave Jennifer after she throws herself in the river and to follow her attackers instead. This change in point of view matches the viewer's perceptions with that of the hunted rapists instead of the hunting avenger as was the case in the first *Spit*, thus discreetly redirecting some of our emotional investment towards them – we too are startled by the sudden jar in the soundtrack when a corpse-like Jennifer appears to Matthew.

The problem of viewer identification is further complicated when the motif of voyeurism, associated with the rapists in the first part of the film, is turned against them by their victim in the second act. As Jennifer leaves Stanley to his bloody demise, the camera shows us at first a selectively focused image containing a sharp medium close up on his face and a blurry shape in the foreground. The focus switches then, blurring Stanley's face and sharpening the vague shape until the camcorder becomes perfectly visible. The viewer's attention is automatically drawn to the black disk of its viewfinder, placing him or her in the same voyeuristic position Stanley assumed during the assault. This device creates a striking parallel between both scenes of violence, suggesting that Jennifer has become a double of her tormentors. The fact that she appropriates and echoes their earlier lines, occasionally building upon them in inventively gruesome ways only furthers this impression, as does the fact that, unlike 1977 Jennifer, she uses guns as actual weapons and not only as props, annexing this symbol of male power (Zeiss 352) for herself and turning it against her tormentors – this development suggests that she is steadily growing to resemble them.

The 2010 *Spit* has the rapists meeting her halfway down this road: the violence of power dynamics within the group is stressed practically from the minute Jennifer disappears from the screen after the rapes and the sheriff – a character absent from the 1977 version – emerges as the uncontested leader, brutalising and threatening the other characters, notably forcing the video tape into Stanley's mouth in a move strongly reminiscent of the first act, with Johnny forcing Jennifer to perform fellatio on his gun.

The particular case of Matthew's implication in the crime and the punishment allotted to him in the two different films provides further insight into this process. It could be said that the second *Spit* contains not one, but two rape victims as Matthew, the mentally handicapped character, has to be forcibly undressed and threatened by his comrades before he rapes Jennifer, and is violently sick as soon as the act itself is over. It must however be noted that, enraged by her struggling, he hits and strangles her. In addition to this, the rape scenes are interspersed with frequent shots of his face, highlighting his obvious distress over the proceedings and, while the men are waiting for Jennifer's body to wash up on the riverbanks, Johnny characterises Matthew as "some crazed dog" watching for his master. The reunion between victim and reluctant rapist has Jennifer in a position of power, as shown in the quasi-religious tableau the pair forms with Matthew kneeling at her feet as he begs for forgiveness, then lays his head in her lap, crying. After this sequence, the suddenness of Jennifer's attack is jarring. The 1977 scene is far less ambiguous: Matthew has come armed with a sizeable butcher knife and the intention of completing the mission he had earlier shirked by killing Jennifer. His apology is merely cursory – he claims to be "sorry for what he did to [her] with them" and that "it wasn't [his] idea" – instead of genuinely regretful as he is in the remake. Also, while 1977 Matthew is lured into the trap by the prospect of sex, the 2010 interpretation of this sequence suggests a child seeking comfort and forgiveness from a maternal figure. However, "[*Spit*] gives no points for hesitation or reluctance or action under pressure" (Clover 123) and the character is subjected to the same treatment as his comparatively guiltier comrades.

The 2010 remake does indeed make an effort to humanise the rapists. Even the sheriff, made doubly unsympathetic to the viewers by his sudden turnabout from helper to vicious opponent, is depicted as a good father and husband. This is achieved through his showing greater concern for his daughter's fate than his own, even as he is being tortured by his erstwhile victim. What happened to his daughter remains unclear as Jennifer speaks about her in the present tense but refuses to answer queries. Implicating innocents in the blood feud is another shift in the treatment of Jennifer's vengeance between the two films and places greater emphasis on the moral ambiguity of her position. Under other circumstances, the sheriff's behaviour would designate the character as a potential heroic protagonist, but the villains of the first act do not, however, become innocent victims in the second. In fact, moral ambiguity seems to be central to the film, as shown by the choice of low contrast images and muted colours. The freshly spilt blood at the bottom of the bath seems more black than red, a definite contrast with the gallons of vibrant red shown in Zarchi's movie, and the characters, including the heroine, tend to wear neutral colours. Sarah Butler's costume for the second act, comprising jeans and a grey long-sleeved shirt, can in this respect be seen as a good indication of her character's journey into the grey areas of morality.

### **The Faces of Jennifer Hills**

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Keaton's interpretation of the heroine is particularly informative regarding the moral stakes in the 1977 film. Her Jennifer executes a dispassionate vengeance in which she "goes about the business of catching and murdering her assailants almost impassively. It is an oddly external film." (Clover

118). The moral implications of her vengeance are not, however, ignored as completely as Clover intimates (119). Two particular moments of the 1977 film can be cited to support this: as Jennifer burns the clothing of her latest victim the appropriate lighting is used to emphasise the firelight bathing her face in hellish red light, and, after she disposes of Matthew, her immaculate white robe becomes as mud-splattered as her tortured body was at the end of her ordeals.

If Keaton's Jennifer is dispassionate, Butler's is played as a woman consumed with primal rage, alternating between dangerously soft-spoken, almost sing-song cruelty and wordless screams. The characters' contrasting appearances further widen the divide between the two incarnations of the heroine, as 1977 Jennifer wears flowing white while she is setting the scene for Matthew's death. She walks barefoot in the forest, reminiscent of mythical beings such as nymphs or dryads – positively connoted creatures in harmony with nature. Conversely, the first visions of 2010 Jennifer post-rape show her grey-skinned and hollow-eyed, made up to look corpse-like. This aesthetic choice places her in the realm of the abject: “within the biblical context, the corpse is [...] utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic” (Kristeva qtd in Creed 1996 39). Reading further into this, the corpse-like appearance of the character may also indicate her mental and moral transformation as “the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. 'I' is expelled” (Kristeva qtd in Creed 1996 38). In that case, it could be assumed that the protagonist's Christ-like plunge into the river marks the symbolical death of the initial, innocent Jennifer.

Both film endings offer the same contrast, and follow the same strategies regarding the direction of sympathy within the story. While 1977 *Spit* closes on a re-empowered Jennifer who seems to have regained some measure of control over her life, the 2010 version offers an idyllic picture of Jennifer sitting on a branch, facing the camera with sunlight giving her hair an angelic golden halo. However, the sinister smirk that slowly rises on her face disrupts this harmonious picture. This effect is only reinforced when the camera cuts to the bloody scene inside the cabin, lingering on the sheriff's destroyed face from which dead, blood-filled red eyes stare out directly at the camera, which cuts back to Jennifer's own pale face appearing roughly in the same area of the screen as the sheriff's. Considering the role of Storch as leader and arguably most vicious of the thugs and the fact that red eyes are a conventional mark of evil in horror cinema, this juxtaposition, occurring at the very end of the film, intimates that the victim has ultimately become as morally perverted as her tormentors, a subtext that did not exist in the first movie.

1977 *Spit* was deemed “An utterly reprehensible motion picture with shockingly misplaced values” in which “[Jennifer] proves to be just as vicious as her attackers. [...] The scene where she robs a man of his offending 'weapon' is one of the most appalling moments in cinema history” (Martin and Porter qtd in Clover 114). Moral condemnations of *Spit* are particularly interesting since “double standards in matters of sexual violence” (Clover 116) often appear at the root of the problem, as, according to Clover, in this particular review. When Gwendolyn Foster compares

the two types of violence depicted in the film, arguing that “Jennifer’s killings are presented in lengthier, grislier detail, suggesting that the vengeful female is more responsible for her actions. She is able to prethink her acts with care, while the group of men act upon a seemingly instinctual impulse” (32), she re-articulates and renders explicit the justifications offered by one of the film’s rapists. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who salute the film’s concern with gendered violence and recognise the ambiguity of its politics (Clover 115-116).

The change of tone between 1977 and 2010 apparently aims to move beyond these questions, opting for an identical treatment of violence regardless of gender. While Zarchi’s film presents agonizingly realistic rapes and fantasy-like retaliation, violence in 2010 *Spit* is gritty all around, whatever its motivation or origin. Violence, then, is never an option, and the black disk of the camcorder’s viewfinder accuses the audience where they sit, guilty by association. It might however not be unreasonable on their part to question the validity of this message diffused through this particular medium, as the camera lingers indulgently on staring mutilated corpses in the purest splatter-porn tradition.

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