FAIR GAMES AND WASTED YOUTH
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF AUSTRALIAN RAPE-REVENGE FILM (1986–2011)

Films where acts of sexual violence are avenged – usually the province of exploitation and horror – are often reviled as vulgar schlock. Focusing on local examples of these films, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas argues that there is much more to the rape-revenge trope than cheap thrills.

It is hardly daring to suggest that there are few areas in screen studies as ideologically explosive as the rape-revenge film. As the name suggests, rape-revenge films hinge on the act of sexual violence and the retaliatory desire for vengeance for that sexual violence. While often assumed to be a genre in itself, its appearance across a range of genres – particularly the western and the horror film – shows that rape-revenge can be more fruitfully understood as a narrative trope that binds the dual actions of rape and revenge. As the controversies surrounding movies such as Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978) and Baise-moi (Virginie Despentes & Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) demonstrate – the former was only granted classification in Australia in 2004, while the latter is still refused classification – Australia has not been immune from the often-heated debates that have followed rape-revenge film's most notorious instances.

Beyond this assumed Hollywood context, some of the most challenging examples of the trope have been produced in countries such as Turkey, Argentina, Japan, Hong Kong and India. While recent American additions to the category continue to illustrate its diversity – from Law Abiding Citizen (F. Gary Gray, 2009) to Teeth (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007) – contemporary instances of the rape-revenge film are just as likely to be associated with Europe, as demonstrated by films such as Irréversible (Gaspar Noé, 2002), Dogville (Lars von Trier, 2003), Baise-moi and the blockbuster The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009). But a range of films from the past twenty-five years, including Fair Game (MarioAndreacchio, 1986), Shame (Steve Jodrell, 1988), The Book of Revelation (Ana Kokinos, 2006), The Horseman (Steven Kastrissios, 2008) and, most recently, Wasted on the Young (Ben C. Lucas, 2010), suggest that Australia also has produced a range of movies that engage with the rape-revenge trope in some way.

Rape, revenge and Australian screen culture

Australian cinema has proven itself fully capable of producing diverse and challenging rape-revenge films equal to their international counterparts. Just as the 'wild colonial boy' image of Australian masculinity has become a steadfast component of such key aspects of Australian cultural life as sport and current affairs, so the depiction of rape in Australian cinema – particularly in the rape-revenge film – tends to reflect this same

CRITICAL views

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Iconic masculinity. In this context, there is often an ugly and terrifyingly thin line between nationally celebrated notions of ‘mateship’ and the grim reality of gang rape. The historical presence of gang rape in post-invasion Australia has been critically acknowledged, and the intersection of masculine ‘mateship’ with groups of men sexually assaulting women is mirrored on screen in a number of memorable and often harrowing instances. Both The Boys (Rowan Woods, 1998) and Blackrock (Steven Vidler, 1997) are loosely based on real-life gang rape cases (the notorious 1986 Anita Cobby case and the 1989 Leigh Leigh case, respectively), and like a number of Australian films that feature rape and sexual violence at their narrative core, it is the relationships between the male assailants (rather than the subjectivity or agency of their female victims) that provide key areas for thematic investigation.

This emphasis upon masculinity, identity and male relationships is a visible component in many Australian rape-revenge films. While Carol J. Clover’s foundational writing on the rape-revenge film in her 1992 book Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film designated rape-revenge primarily as a subgenre of trash horror, other critics have identified its sweeping reach across genres. Certainly, John Hillcoat’s Australian western The Proposition (2005) may not adhere as precisely to the rape-revenge template as neater examples like I Spit on Your Grave, Ms. 45 (Abel Ferrara, 1981) or Death Wish (Michael Winner, 1974). But the fact that rape and revenge manifest in an uncontrolled frenzy of masculine aggression powerfully captures the ethical chaos of the Australian frontier that is the film’s primary focus. Australian cinema has many more clear-cut examples of the rape-revenge film, of course, and the remainder of this article seeks not only to examine their similarities, but also to emphasise their ideological diversity. In terms of the latter, the rape-revenge film may be best understood not as a narrowly defined genre or historically or culturally specific cycle, but as a popular contemporary narrative trope adaptable across genres. Such films adhere to art historian Diane Wolfthal’s observation, with regard to the depiction of rape in medieval and early modern art, that ‘diverse notions existed contemporaneously’.

The trash legacy

Hinging as it does on provoking an audience response through the depiction of sexual violence, it is perhaps not surprising that it has been tempting for many critics to position rape-revenge clearly within the domain of exploitation cinema. But as Sarah Projansky has indicated, there is a distinct ‘feminist paradox between a desire to end rape and a need to represent (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it’. Consequently—and as explored most famously by Clover’s writing on rape-revenge horror film—viewers and critics cannot dismiss all trash or exploitation films as necessarily regressive, just as
more ‘tasteful’ or mainstream titles cannot be assumed to be ideologically more wholesome. Like rape-revenge films from around the world, this too is apparent in rape-revenge cinema from Australia.

Despite the surface novelty of reversing the gender roles Kokkinos’ film ends up in a surprisingly similar place to many more typical rape-revenge films: ultimately, it suggests that attaining revenge risks positioning the avenger in as morally dubious a position as the very people they seek to punish. With its DIY low-budget aesthetics and graphic imagery rendering it closer to the extreme rape-revenge films of Canadian filmmaker Ryan Nicholson than the comparatively prudish Fair Game, Mark Savage’s Defenceless: A Blood Symphony (2004) is a supernatural rape-revenge horror film about a woman who has returned from the dead to avenge her rape and murder at the hands of dangerous property developers. Like Fair Game, though, Defenceless hinges on a similar unification of threatened feminine bodies with the land (here, the rape-avenging protagonist – known only as The Woman, played by Susanne Hauschmid – is an environmentalist). With its extremely graphic sexual violence, it is a difficult film to watch, even for those accustomed to paracinematic excess. But Defenceless significantly revises Fair Game’s central thematic concern with the violated woman in the context of a nature-at-risk narrative, and also pays homage to Terry Bourke’s 1972 Ozploitation horror film Night of Fear (both films have no dialogue and thus engage with ideas of ‘silent’ film). While far from ideologically wholesome, Defenceless must therefore be considered a curious and fascinating addition to the history of the Australian rape-revenge film.

Most recently, this trash legacy has continued with Tomboys (Nathan Hill, 2009), a film that follows a group of five rape survivors who abduct a serial rapist in order to exact revenge. Tomboys’ central thematic preoccupation explicitly concerns the ethical status of the vengeance-seeking women themselves. As such, even though it is tonally and aesthetically very different, the film is aligned with a range of films as diverse as Ms. 45 and Extremities (Robert M. Young, 1986). Tomboys’ manner of addressing this concern is similar to that of a number of contemporary rape-revenge films in that it employs rape itself as a method of vengeance. Most famously typified recently in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, this ‘twist’ has also appeared in Straightheads (Dan Reed, 2007), Descent (Talia Lugacy, 2007), Bad Reputation (Jim Hemphill, 2005), the recent remake of I Spit on Your Grave (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) and the German rape-revenge film One Way (Reto Salimbeni, 2006).

The mainstream legacy

For the generation of Australians who studied Steve Jodrell’s Shame sometime throughout their high school years, the didactic nature of rape as a narrative device in film is something that does not require explanation. Many have suggested the film’s title plays on Shane, George Stevens’ 1953 western about a stranger who arrives in a small town to restore order.³ Stevens’ male

Considering so many of the most immediately identifiable rape-revenge films are exploitation titles – The Last House on the Left, I Spit on Your Grave, Ms. 45 and They Call Her One Eye (Bo Arne Vibienius, 1974) – it is little surprise that in the commercially minded frenzy of low-budget film production that marked the so-called Ozploitation period, filmmakers turned their eyes to rape-revenge. Unlike many of its more internationally renowned counterparts, Mario Andreacchio’s Fair Game (1986) does not feature an actual rape as such. However, the film’s narrative focus on outback wildlife sanctuary owner Jessica (Cassandra Delaney) being harassed by three hooligans (Peter Ford, David Sandford and Garry Who) in their hotted-up, roo-hunting ute ‘The Beast’ is both implicitly and explicitly sexual. At its least subtle, the film shows the hooligans taking naked photos of Jessica while she sleeps, an actual attempted rape, and in one of the film’s most iconic scenes (so much so that it is directly referenced in the ‘ship’s mast’ sequence of Quentin Tarantino’s 2007 film Death Proof), the men tie Jessica to the front of The Beast, rip her clothes from her body and drive dangerously around the outback as the traumatised woman screams.
protagonist is replaced with Asta (Deborra-Lee Furness), a city lawyer whose broken-down motorcycle requires her to stay in the rural town of Ginborak for repairs. Here she meets Lizzie (Simone Buchanan), who has been gang raped by a group of local boys. The group's leader is the spoilt and privileged son of the town matriarch, and is thus seemingly immune to legal action. The film follows Asta in her determination to teach Lizzie (and, in turn, the other women in the town) to "stick up" for themselves — to learn to fight back. But as Lizzie makes clear to Asta on numerous occasions throughout the film, the issue for her is about class as much as gender: rich women like Asta can afford such sentiments (at one point she even tells Asta, "You must be rich ... you're not careful"). Lizzie's death at the end of the film leaves the dumbstruck Asta suddenly intensely aware that hers and Lizzie's plights — and their views of and reactions to rape — are far from unified under an essentialist banner of womanhood. While not a rape-revenge film in the tradition of I Spit on Your Grave, Shame is a deliberately failed rape-revenge film: it is a movie that exposes from within its very own diegesis that there is no "one size fits all" answer to rape trauma, an assumption that many films in the category (but certainly not all) actively hinge upon.

At the more highbrow end of the Australian rape-revenge scale is Ana Kokkinos' The Book of Revelation, based on the 2000 novel of the same name by British author Rupert Thomson. While originally set in Amsterdam, Kokkinos makes the transition to urban Melbourne smoothly as she uses her home city to navigate sexuality and male identity — similar thematic terrain to that of her debut feature, Head On (1998). Unlike many other rape-revenge films, The Book of Revelation follows a male protagonist: Daniel (Tom Long), a dancer who is abducted and assaulted by a group of masked women. Despite the surface novelty of reversing the gender roles, however, Kokkinos' film ends up in a surprisingly similar place to many more typical rape-revenge films: ultimately, it suggests that attaining revenge risks positioning the avenger in as morally dubious a position as the very people they seek to punish. In the film's conclusion, Daniel realises that he has become as bad as the women who degraded him. If the nuance of the gender reversal were framed in reference to the traditions Kokkinos' film appears to wish to subvert, The Book of Revelation could have presented a fascinating and significant insight into how the mechanics of gender, rape and revenge can intersect on film. But in its bombastic construction and self-congratulatory air, The Book of Revelation offers little freshness or insight, despite its highbrow credentials.

The most recent addition to the Australian rape-revenge film category is the 2010 film Wasted on the Young, a movie that merges the 'man acting as an agent for a woman's rape' model of the trope (as typified by films like Death Wish) with the high-school-massacre spirit of Gus Van Sant's Elephant (2003). Compared to many of the more extreme, graphic and/or problematic films outlined in this article, Wasted on the Young is surely one of the rape-revenge films least likely to offend. But at a time where rape and revenge have become staples in a broad range of screen narratives (one need only look for evidence to the "rape of the week" structure of television shows like Law and Order: SVU and the almost ubiquitous appearance of rape-revenge plotlines in programs like True Blood, Dexter, The Sopranos and Battlesstar Galactica), Wasted on the Young pays little attention to the trauma and struggle for agency of its female rape victim, Xandrie (Adelaide Clemens). Instead, the film focuses almost solely upon the male politics of the rapist and her self-appointed agent — brothers Zack (Alex Russell) and Darren (Oliver Ackland), respectively. Wasted on the Young has all the elements available to it to present a rich and thoughtful examination of the politics of rape and revenge, not least the remarkable performance of Clemens herself. But her story is sacrificed to a male melodrama where once again a woman and her trauma become little more than the dramatic terrain for masculine power plays to be enacted.

Beyond high and low

As with their international counterparts, the assumption that Australian rape-revenge film can be understood ideologically through the higbrow-as-progressive/lowbrow-as-regressive binary is a luxury that a close examination of the films does not support. Like the myriad ideological issues they address, rape-revenge films do not permit such simplistic or easy critical readings. While on the surface it is seemingly little more than a gristy blend of Death Wish and Hardcore (Paul Schrader, 1979), Steven Kastrissios' 2008 film The Horsemans is a powerful instance of an Australian rape-revenge film that carefully and successfully treats the fine ideological and ethical lines between entertainment and insight. The film follows the plight of Brisbane pest exterminator Christian (Peter Marshall) as he searches for the men that forced his daughter into pornography and consequently a heroin overdose. The Horsemans presents a harrowing and violent picture of Australian masculinity, but one that never exploits or diminishes female subjectivity and trauma. While still adopting the male-agent model of rape-revenge evident in Wasted on the Young, The Horsemans reaches the inescapably poignant conclusion that vengeful male violence has little to do with female rape trauma: Christian's world collapses into a chaotic and ultimately impotent frenzy of male violence where women only continue to suffer. The film presents a treatment of rape and revenge that is an ideological chasm apart from Wasted on the Young.

Australian rape-revenge films form a category that features a number of central driving fascinations — significantly, the association between the culturally celebrated notion of 'mateship' and its darker manifestation as gang rape. The films are also preoccupied with a binary configuration that posits women, femininity and nature against men, masculinity and technological progress in an Australian cultural context. But just as there are many elements that can be seen to unite the trope, it is crucial also to appreciate their differences: "diverse notions exist contemporaneously". While many rape-revenge films are extremely difficult and outright unpleasant to watch, it is erroneous to assume that they are not complex cultural artefacts that demand finely tuned close examination. "Only by understanding the complex legacy of the past", says Diane Wolfthal, "can we begin to change the future." The oft-derided rape-revenge film must be seen as part of a long representational history that still continues to configure the meanings of sexual violence in the broader public imagination.


Endnotes

1 See, for example, Alice Aston, Islamophobia in Australia, Agora Press, Glebe, 2009, p. 98.
7 Wolfthal, op. cit., p. 198.