Rape and Retribution in WASTED ON THE YOUNG

This stylish debut feature examines the intersection of technology and sexual violence in Australian teen culture. While a promising debut, the film makes some dangerous assumptions about gender politics when considered in the context of the broader rape-revenge category, writes Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.

Contemporary screen cultures over the last fifty years have convincingly demonstrated that rape is an enduring plot device. The persistence of sexual violence in film, television and other fictional modes, and its ability to add gravitas to a range of other topics, has been referred to as the 'rhetoric of rape' by theorist Sabine Sielke. This echoes art historian Diane Wolffthal's observation that despite engaging explicitly with rape itself, there is a long history of 'images of rape often involving other issues - political concerns, sexual desire, or ethnic, class and gender difference'.

The intersection of rape and revenge in particular has long provided a rich source of interest to media producers and audiences alike, evident in the 'rape-of-the-week' structure of the popular television series Law & Order: SVU, films such as the Oscar-winning The Virgin Spring (Ingmar Bergman, 1960), the international success of Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy of books and films and a seemingly never-ending slew of exploitation variants. Defined loosely by Jacinda Read as 'narratives of transformation', rape-revenge films, once they are taken beyond their assumed generic framework, are perhaps surprisingly varied in their approaches to and treatments of sexual violence. Indeed, Wolffthal's observation that, in the case of rape, 'diverse notions coexisted contemporaneously' is nowhere more evident than the rape-revenge film.

Wasted on the Young may be a low-budget production, but it is...
slick and confident, and Lucas brings his vision to the screen with a stylistic flair more typical of filmmakers with a number of features under their belt. Although at times slipping into after-school-special terrain, his dialogue is for the most part snappy and natural, and the decision to include no adults in the film adds to its intensive study of contemporary teen life in Australia.

Narratively and formally stationed somewhere between Elephant (Gus Van Sant, 2003) and Bad Reputation (Jim Hemphill, 2005), Wasted on the Young follows Darren (Oliver Ackland) and his difficulties fitting in at an elite private school after his mother’s remarriage. To all but the beautiful Xandrie (Adelaide Clemens), Darren lives in the shadow of his popular, athletic brother Zack (Russell). Xandrie is raped at one of Zack’s legendary sex-and-drug fuelled house parties after being drugged by the socially powerful but bitchy pair Karenn (Kym Thorne) and Simone (Georgina Haig). The rape is committed not only by Zack but also his friends Brook (T.J. Power) and Jonathan (Tom Stokes), and the whole event is filmed. After the assault Zack, Brook and ‘Johnno’ dump Xandrie at a deserted beach.

During Xandrie’s ensuing absence from school, Zack and his friends (including Karenn and Simone) embark on a vicious campaign labelling her a slut. Xandrie returns to school apparently unfazed at first, but the increasing nastiness of the rumours against her culminate in fantasies of revenge. Darren is increasingly concerned for Xandrie during her absence, and hacks into Johnno’s computer where he discovers the rape video. Shocked at what he has witnessed, Darren’s disillusionment increases as he too entertains revenge fantasies that culminate in Darren and Xandrie’s shared dream of a Columbine-style school massacre.

Tormented by both social pressure and direct harassment from Zack himself, Xandrie ultimately believes that she is trapped in a social system that protects her rapists and condemns her, so she takes the only action she feels she has left. The technologically mobilised and even more enraged Darren converts his initial frenzy of hatred towards those responsible into a systematic process of exposure and humiliation, using technology to vindicate Xandrie and punish those who caused her such extreme and unnecessary trauma.

Technology and the ‘spectacle’ of rape

There is little doubt that the strong performances of Ackland, Clemens and Russell carry much of the film, and its creative approach to visual storytelling is also to be commended. Employing clever stylistic gimmicks such as the typographical appearance of SMS messages on screen, as well as positioning social networking and online video cultures as crucial to the plot as a whole, Wasted on the Young is not shy in articulating the function of technology in stories such as these. In an interview with Adam Fulton in June 2010, the film’s director spoke of his own experience as a teenager in an Australian high school – ‘they were so violent and horrible and bitter and just, if I can say it, ignorant’ – and emphasised the centrality of communication technologies and cyberbullying to the contemporary youth experience. As Linda Williams so powerfully argues in her recent book Screening Sex, ‘the very act of screening has become an intimate part of our sexuality’ and – as so vividly and viciously demonstrated in the now notorious schoolyard production of Cunt: The
Movie by the self-named ‘Teenage Kings of Werribee’ in 2006 – the act of screening has become as much a part of sexual violence during the teenage years as it has in adult non-violent erotica. The repeated mantra throughout Wasted on the Young that ‘you can stop this’ (words that literally appear on the screen at crucial points) may not be subtle, but the framework of social networking and mobile phone technologies that surround this plea easily transcend to a non-diegetic plane.

Despite the absence of adult figures in the film, this near-didactic tone implies a sense of authority. It is therefore surprising that the film is, in places, ideologically ambiguous in its use of technology as a narrative device. It must be noted that Wasted on the Young does not show Xandrie’s rape in any way, and so avoids accusations of making a physical spectacle of her assault for the audience’s perverse titillation. While this may be true of the film in terms of audience spectatorship, her rape is still a spectacle within the film’s diegesis: Xandrie’s trauma is replayed time and time again, exacerbating her humiliation and exposing her violation to an audience of her classmates against her will.

This is nowhere more shocking than in the film’s climactic party scene, when Darren – supposedly acting to defend Xandrie’s honour – sends the video out to every single attendee’s phone. More problematic than this disregard for her privacy is the very fact that the video functions as ‘evidence’: Darren is able to reclaim Xandrie’s reputation by proving that Zack, Jonathan and Brook raped her – but only because he has tangible proof that such an event occurred. The absence of material proof is one of the fundamental problems that has plagued the legal system ever since rape became a criminal offence ‘through the back door’ as a property crime between men. That Xandrie’s claims are so easily proven may be narratively convenient in Wasted on the Young, but at the same time positions the film far beyond the reality of most actual rape survivors.

Masculinity in crisis

Wasted on the Young’s narrative is broadly disinterested with Xandrie and her experience as such – rather, it is how her experience impacts Darren. This is very much Darren’s story, and Xandrie’s rape is a necessary sacrifice to underscore the seriousness of his journey, of his subjective experience and of his search for agency. Like many other rape-revenge films, this too is a narrative of transformation, but Xandrie’s journey is merely an aside to the central focus on Darren’s transformation. In her foundational book Watching Rape, Sarah Projansky succinctly defines the two primary models of rape-revenge narratives:

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.

Despite Clemens’ outstanding performance, Wasted on the Young is never really allowed to be Xandrie’s story: she is denied agency, and for the most part is even denied the opportunity to grant the audience her subjective view of events (aside from very brief scenes in her bedroom, her short flashback of getting home after the rape and her confrontation with Zack at her home). Instead, Xandrie is continually shown throughout the film from Darren’s besotted perspective, and the characterisation of the platinum blonde Clemens is often too simplistic,
presenting her as an angelic beacon of whiteness and innocence that literally lights up his otherwise miserable life at their privileged, violent private school. *Wasted on the Young* is unapologetic about its focus on Darren, never once acknowledging that it is at the expense of Xandrie's story: it is about masculinity and brotherhood, and despite the fact the film hinges on Xandrie's rape, she and it serve as 'minor "props" in the narrative', propelling Darren's story. The rape of a woman becomes a problem for men to solve, and the film's narrative hinges not upon Xandrie's experience, search for agency or subjective experience, but simply positions her rape as an issue for two brothers to 'duke' out.

For a film that is so sophisticated and confident in so many ways, it is surprising and a little disappointing that *Wasted on the Young* is never really allowed to be Xandrie's story: she is denied agency, and for the most part is even denied the opportunity to grant the audience her subjective view of events.

While all female-centred rape-revenge films should not automatically be deemed progressive, the ideological chasm that lies between these films, in which a woman seeks vengeance against her own rape, and male-centred rape-revenge films, in which a man acts as an agent for vengeance upon a woman's behalf, is certainly worthy of note. As much maligned as *Spit on Your Grave* may be, what we see of the 25-minute rape scene -- every intolerable, gruelling, horrendous minute of it -- is, as Carol J. Clover so famously notes, "Jennifer's story. Most of the action is registered from her vantage point, and there is no doubt whatsoever that its sympathies lie with her."^9

The ideology of revenge

As a film that hinges upon sexual violence and retribution, *Wasted on the Young*, whether it wanted to or not, becomes embroiled in the debates that haunt the rape-revenge tradition. When considered in this context, it is clear that the film made some crucial errors of judgement regarding certain aspects of gender politics that even some supposedly 'lesser' exploitation titles have, over history and through trial and error more than anything else, been forced to address. This is a resilient and highly adaptable trope that, as films like *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009/David Fincher, 2011) and its sequels demonstrate only too clearly, holds enormous commercial potential.

In many ways, *Wasted on the Young* exists in a conceptual bubble, seemingly immune from the new directions...
a range of contemporary rape-revenge films have sought to explore. Although far from ideologically flawless, recent films such as *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002), *Straightheads* (Dan Reed, 2007) and *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007) all acknowledge the complexities of the traditional rape-revenge structure, elements that are denied by *Wasted on the Young*. Indeed, this film does not appear to challenge some of its basic ideological assumptions: that the rape of a woman is a 'problem' to be 'solved' by men; that action against rape can only be taken and publicly justified if there is enough 'evidence' to prove the rape happened in the first place; and that female subjectivity and agency are only useful in their pertinence to the rough-and-tumble dynamics of handsome white boys engaged in class war.

As the film so continually reminds us, we – like the film’s party-going teens – may be able to 'stop this' by rejecting a culture that assumes female rape survivors are lying to sully the good name of popular men. Like so many AFL footballers embroiled in rape scandals recently, Brook and Zack are sports stars. The appeal of these iconic figures of Australian masculinity has created a culture that absolves them of moral (and even legal) liability for sex crimes. That *Wasted on the Young* treads dangerously close to hypocrisy considering its own unchallenged assumptions and missed opportunities regarding the intersection of rape and revenge on film.

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Endnotes