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"Can you guess what every woman's worst nightmare is?": Good for Her Film and Contextualising Rape-Revolt in post-Weinstein America and *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020).

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The #MeToo moment following Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuse allegations led to a change in the way we make sense of rape allegations within popular discourse. In film, changes to the discursive construction of women's rights movements became key to what Barbara Creed calls *Feminist New Wave* cinema. The rape-revenge film inserts itself into this new landscape of social and online activism too, as it starts to evolve into a 'rape-revolt' narrative structure, which aims to treat rape within film as a source of political revolt and a way to challenge institutions which uphold rape culture. *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020) interrogates these changes to the public reception of rape culture within a post-Weinstein framework which allows for a nuanced perspective on rape-revenge, taking into account a flawed criminal justice system, corrupt institutions, and enablers' personal failures. This article argues that the Weinstein scandal and its consequence on public discourse have started to influence the ways in which cinema makes sense of rape, and furthermore situates films of the Feminist New Wave within a movement which social media users have called the 'Good for Her' film.

"Can you guess what every woman's worst nightmare is?": Good for Her Film and Contextualising Rape-Revolt in post-Weinstein America and *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020).

Chris Frantz

Introduction

The conviction of American producer Harvey Weinstein and his sexual abuse scandal in 2017 led to an irreversibly changing landscape in the production of women's cinema. Sexual harassment became part of wider cultural discourse and one of the largest feminist moments of modern history was formed. This article discusses how cinema adapts to this change in public awareness, as the rape-revenge film of the 1970s shifts towards a new movement, the 'rape-revolt film', which is facilitated by what Barbara Creed calls *Feminist New Wave* cinema.[1] I argue that the rape-revenge film represents female rage and trauma in a violent and masculine way whereas rape-revolt interrogates the consequences of trauma on victims and their friends and family. The rape-revolt film therefore aims to challenge the structures that uphold rape culture but nevertheless represents the criminal justice system and the police as ultimate saviours which neglects any structural work that requires doing. I argue that Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) serves as a starting point for such a shift in mainstream cinema. Furthermore, I also claim that the years following Weinstein's incarceration have led to a reformed understanding of women's cinema and female protagonists to a phenomenon social media users have dubbed the 'Good for Her' film.

Trump's America and Rape Culture

The mid-2010s were marked with public displays of misogyny and sexism, amidst Donald Trump's first presidential campaign. His widely shared comments about women and their bodies on social media have been the subject of widespread media coverage. This led to an understanding of his view of women as sexual objects to be violated and disrespected. He famously bragged that "[when] you're a star, they let you do it. [...] Grab 'em by the

[1] Barbara Creed, 'Introduction: The Monstrous-Feminine in Feminist New Wave Cinema' in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–21 (p.1).

pussy. You can do anything."[2] He commented on feminist moments like #MeToo and their effects on men, and proclaimed that this is "a very scary time for young men in America."[3] Trump's defence of then-Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh in light of sexual assault allegations made against him by several women, and the numerous comments about female sexuality illustrate the state of extreme misogyny perpetuated by the Head of State of the so-called Free World. Not only was Trump defending Kavanaugh, but he mocked the survivor of the alleged assault by mimicking her and encouraging his audience to laugh.[4] His disrespectful demeanour towards women was clear from the start of his election campaign, seen in the ways that he referred to opponent Hillary Clinton, which Melissa Deckman characterises as "misogynistic and vulgar."[5] Deckman emphasises that his campaign was loaded with a stereotypical display of masculinity as the only possible and successful form of governance. Trump understood that it was important to have a "commander-in-chief who was tough and masculine [...] and who could provide strong, broad-shouldered leadership."[6] Such emphasis proved particularly useful when popular feminisms were at an all-time high, which caused public controversy, and thus free publicity. To understand the cultural climate of this time, it is important to note that Trump became president "during a time in which his misogyny and (alleged) sexual assaults were widely known".[7] He called Megyn Kelly and other women who do not comply with his abuse as 'nasty'. When she dared to challenge him on his derogatory misogynistic behaviour, he insinuated that her anger would lead to blood coming out of her vagina.[8] The climate was incredibly tense, and misogyny once again became widely acceptable.

Cinema is also informed by these contemporary socio-political contexts and incorporates them to represent a construction of modern rape culture. In her writing about celebrity sexual offenders such as Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey, Maja Andreasen quotes Emilie Buchwald's definition of rape culture which she understands

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[2] Mark Makela, 'Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women', 8 October 2016, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html> [accessed 18 January 2024].

[3] Christina Wilkie, 'Trump: Kavanaugh allegations are a part of 'a very scary time for young men in America'', 2 October 2018, *CNBC* <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/02/trump-kavanaugh-allegations-usher-in-a-very-scary-time-for-young-men-in-america.html> [accessed 18 January 2024].

[4] Unknown Author, ''I don't know': laughter as Trump mocks Ford's sexual assault testimony – video', 3 October 2018, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2018/oct/03/i-dont-know-laughter-as-trump-mocks-fords-sexual-assault-testimony-video> [accessed 31 January 2024].

[5] Melissa Deckman, 'Civility, gender, and gendered nationalism in the age of Trump', *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 10, No. 3 (2022), 430–454 (p.430).

[6] Ibid, 434.

[7] Lucy Valerie Graham, 'On misogyny and the women who say "no"', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 21, No. 4 (2020), 416–432 (p.420).

[8] Ibid, 426.

as "complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. Within a rape culture, heterosexual sex is constructed as violent, and violence is encouraged."[9] Zsófia O. Réti also explains that rape culture normalises "physical and emotional terrorism against women."[10] Within Trump's America, rape culture was persistent and thriving, and his own emotional terrorism against women is leading the movement.

Harvey Weinstein's conviction following multiple police departments in the US and the UK reviewing his sexual abuse allegations marked a turning point in the conversations about rape culture in Western society. In her book *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* Karen Boyle outlines popular digital feminism's treatment of the Weinstein allegations and trial. Popular feminism focuses on appearances, wherein being considered a feminist is more urgent than *doing* feminism.[11] Although digital feminism can be very useful in that it provides a platform to share the important message of feminist resistance, Boyle contends that popular and *visible* feminisms "do not challenge deep structures of inequities."[12] Instead they aid the individual rather than constitute a collective effort for liberation. Boyle also distinguishes between the discursive feminism of the #MeToo *moment* and the earlier Me Too movement, which was launched by Tarana Burke in 2006, and rather than being a discursive strategy constitutes an activist effort.[13] In her movement, Burke is calling for an intersectionality in the support of, and reignition for young women of colour with experiences of sexual abuse.[14] The allegations around Weinstein, albeit a turning point in how we understand rape and sexual assault, discursively hinders some of the feminist analysis of the systemic protection of sexual abusers. In Boyle's analysis it is made clear that the focus on individual 'monsters' marks sexual abuse as an individual issue rather than a collective social, political, and legal problem.[15]

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[9] Maja Brandt Andreasen, 'A monster, a pervert, and an anti-hero: the discursive construction of Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and Louis C.K. in humorous #MeToo memes', *Feminist Media Studies* 23, No. 5 (2023), 2218–2234 (p.2220).

[10] Zsófia O. Réti, 'Film Genres after #MeToo: *Promising Young Woman* as a Rape-Revenge Film and a Rom-Com', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (2023), 189–206 (p.194).

[11] Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein, and Feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid, 4–5.

[15] Ibid.

Weinstein, Allen, and Polanski: Rape Culture in Media Industries

Feminists have been advocating for a public condemnation of rape culture for decades. Anti-rape activists have been outspoken about rape being a tool to contain and control women since the 1970s. In an article about feminist herstories Tanya Serisier refers to Susan Brownmiller, a young journalist who participated in women's liberation groups like 'West Village I.' Brownmiller calls rape an action which intends to intimidate women into "keeping *all women* in a state of fear."[16] However, support for anti-rape activism has found new heights with the #MeToo moment following Weinstein's accusations, which not only sparked consistent cultural discourse but led to influential public figures, including politicians and artists, speaking up about their own experiences of sexual abuse. In 2019, Jay Roach's *Bombshell,* which dramatizes the sexual abuse perpetuated by Fox News CEO Roger Ailes and highlights systemic and industrial rape culture sheds light not only on Fox News but also on the wider issues in entertainment. Men in high positions of power in media industries have been discovered to perpetuate a routine of sexual abuse, and when corporations are as powerful as Fox News and the Weinstein Company, the fight for systemic change is near-impossible. Kate Nunez explains this through the toxic cultures at Fox News, where CEO Roger Ailes has been accused of sexual misconduct by prominent members of staff such as Gretchen Carlson.[17] The film industry has suffered further scandals through the actions of directors like Woody Allen and Roman Polanski. Both scandals were publicly known pre-#MeToo, although the post-Weinstein effect brought their cases back to light. Such resurgence of previous misconduct is one of the reasons why Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck, amongst other media scholars and journalists use the phrase "post-Weinstein", "to signal the cultural fall-out from the Weinstein revelations," and emphasise the "need to contend with this particular cultural moment as one fraught with both great promise – and peril – for feminist media scholars".[18] Were it not for the discursive strategies around #MeToo and Weinstein, the public would have forgotten about their abuse (and their status as free men).[19]

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[16] Susan Brownmiller, quoted in Tanya Serisier, 'Speaking out against rape: Feminist (her)stories and anti-rape politics', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* 16 (2007), 84–95 (p.84).

[17] Kate Nunez, 'Toxic Cultures Require a Stronger Cure: The Lessons of Fox News for Reforming Sexual Harassment Law', *Penn State Law Review* 122, Issue 2 (2018), 463–517 (p.465).

[18] Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck, 'Post Weinstein: gendered power and harassment in the media industries', *Feminist Media Studies* 18, No. 3 (2018), 489–491 (p.489).

[19] It is worth noting that while they are free, Polanski is in exile in France.

While Woody Allen is known for a large filmography many remember him for the sexual abuse accusations made against him by his adoptive daughter Dylan Farrow, as she recounts events from when she was only seven years old.[20] Although the public condemns Allen, he has been able to make films regardless. He did however note difficulty in funding his projects, which confirms that public outrage *can* be punishment, even if the justice system fails.[21] Despite this, Allen is a free man and has released a film in 2023, which proves that the justice system neglects to condemn alleged sexual abusers, and similarly some of the public refuses to boycott his work for the sake of his 'genius'. Similarly, Roman Polanski was accused of drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl in the 1970s. He subsequently settled for a deal and pleaded guilty for the lesser charge of unlawful sex with a minor.[22] His reputation has not stopped him from working and receiving awards. In an award ceremony, French actress Adèle Haenel famously stormed out, refusing to clap for a paedophile.[23] Some public condemnation of their actions and accusations have nonetheless not stopped audiences from appreciating their work. Stefania Marghitu has commented on the auteur apologism that came with the post-Weinstein effect. Whilst Allen and Polanski were adored for their auteurist work such apologism was never granted to Weinstein, who was not seen as a creative genius by virtue of his producing work. Allen and Polanski, on the other hand "can be excused because of their brilliance."[24] In fact, Hollywood defended Polanski for years following his admission of guilt.

Good for Her Cinema, Female Revenge, and Rape-Revolt

Barbara Creed coined the term 'Feminist New Wave Cinema' to mark a change in women's filmmaking practices in the twenty-first century. In her book *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine,* Creed calls Feminist New Wave filmmaking "heterogenous, diverse, and

[20] Moira Donegan, 'Allen v Farrow takes Dylan Farrow's accusations seriously. She deserves no less', 13 March 2021, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/13/allen-v-farrow-docuseries-dylan-farrow> [accessed 31 January 2024].

[21] Elsa Keslassy, 'Woody Allen Considers Retirement After Latest Film, Still Maintains Innocence and Calls Cancel Culture 'Silly' (EXCLUSIVE)', 3 September 2023, *Variety* <https://variety.com/2023/film/global/woody-allen-dylan-ronan-being-canceled-new-movie-1235712494/> [accessed 31 January 2024].

[22] Nardine Saad, 'Roman Polanski and the woman he pleaded guilty to raping pose together 45 years later', 1 May 2023, *Los Angeles Times* <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-05-01/roman-polanski-samantha-geimer-photo-emmanuelle-seigner> [accessed 7 February 2024].

[23] Unknown author, 'Roman Polanski: Actress walkout as he wins best director at 'French Oscars'', 1 March 2020, *BBC News* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-51684494> [accessed 7 February 2024].

[24] Stefania Marghitu, '"It's just art": auteur apologism in the post-Weinstein era', *Feminist Media Studies* 18, No. 3 (2018), 491–494 (p.492).

distinctive", which "break[s] tradition, challenge[s] norms", spans over a variety of genres and most importantly "speak[s] for the rights of women and social minorities."[25] She cites films such as *Promising Young Woman, Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), *Nomadland* (Zhao, 2020), and *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003) as examples. The contemporary rape-revolt film falls within this cinematic movement. Both share their incorporation of, and intention of female satisfaction. This not only refers to the female character experiencing satisfaction over her temporary triumph over the men in her life, and seemingly over patriarchy, but also the female spectator who experiences relief. Users on social media, such as on Letterboxd have called such narratives 'Good for Her' films.[26] I define the 'Good for Her' film as a post-Weinstein sensibility, in which films foreground a female protagonist who, no matter how righteous, vigilante, or immoral her behaviour, experiences triumph over the men in her life. The Good for Her film does not prioritise relatability but instead builds on the creation of empathy to her struggle, and forms admiration and support, despite the possibility of being radically different from the female audience member. Although the Good for Her film invites identification, its primary purpose is to celebrate other women's successes over patriarchy. The audience does not condone her actions but instead celebrates her newly found wellbeing.

Rape-revenge is a genre which initially became popular with male audiences, and therefore avoids inviting radical social change. In his article about female rape-revenge films, Peter Lehman explains that the film follows a specific formula. It often starts with a rape involving multiple men, and the subsequent punishment of the male is highly sensationalised. The women who are raped are always beautiful, which he suggests is "crucial to the pleasure that men get from watching them exact retribution".[27] The use of gang rape also facilitates the story remaining tense and interesting throughout an entire ninety-minute run, because revenge is enacted one-by-one. The rapists in these films are often characterised as repulsive, which is not dissimilar to how online memes have responded to celebrity rapists (see Maia Brandt Andreasen).[28] Although *Promising Young Woman* utilises some of the tropes provided by the rape-revenge formula the film can more accurately placed in Feminist New Wave cinema, and in the reformulated rape-revolt genre, because some of rape-revenge conventions are reimagined and reframed.

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[25] Barbara Creed, 'Introduction: The Monstrous-Feminine in Feminist New Wave Cinema' in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–21 (p.1).

[26] See examples of Good for Her films on a Letterboxd user's list: https://letterboxd.com/paulnewman/list/good-for-her.

[27] Peter Lehman, ''Don't Blame This on a Girl': Female rape-revenge films' in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), 103–117 (pp.105–107).

[28] Ibid, 109.

Instead of a rape occurring in the beginning of a film, the scene is never shown on the screen. The rape victim (not survivor) is never shown and we cannot comment on her attractiveness. The victim being dead reinforces the idea that rape is destructive and cannot be reprimanded by vigilante actions. Instead, it is fatal. Whilst a group of boys (or, a gang) was involved in her rape, it is made clear that they were enablers and bystanders rather than active participants. The revenge which is sought by Cassandra (Cassie) extends to multiple characters: the rapist, silent bystanders and accomplices, enablers, and apologists of rape culture (rather than merely direct contributors to the rape).

Rape-revenge and rape-revolt are not interchangeable terms, rather they denote a socially aware progression. According to Jeffrey Brown the rape-revenge genre has historically eroticised images of violence against women, despite a temporary victory over men, and seemingly over patriarchy.[29] Brown also comments on torture porn which is a subgenre of horror that combines the torturous violence employed in the horror/slasher film while drawing on the erotic pleasure of pornography. Rape-revenge utilises such trauma porn to accentuate the severity of rape as a spectacle, whereas rape-revolt refuses to eroticise trauma. Whether rape-revenge is a subgenre of horror, or a narrative structure is contested, according to Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.[30] Rape is identified as a narrative device, and Sarah Projansky describes that revenge is usually taken a man who avenges his wife's or daughter's murder and/or rape. In such stories, women lack complete agency. Alternatively, revenge will be taken by the woman who has experienced the rape herself.[31]

What is interesting is that the audience of these films consisted primarily of male viewers, which Brown attributes to the masochistic pleasure men experience due to the male's submission to the female avenger.[32] Hence it is not surprising that representations of female revenge are masculinised. The women usually are seen to employ stereotypically masculine strategies to incite violence, such as the use of guns or firearms. Whilst it can be argued that there is a psychosexual, phallic element to the use of guns, it is also worth emphasising that the use of guns and engaging in masculine power is what forms identification with the male viewer, rather than the 'pathetic' and 'disgusting' rapist. Interestingly, it was not until recently, particularly because of the post-Weinstein culture,

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[29] Jeffrey A. Brown, 'Torture, Rape, Action Heroines, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*' in *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 24–54 (p.24).

[30] Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, 'The Violation of Representation: Art, Argento, and the Rape-Revenge Film', *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts* 13 (2011), 1–11 (p.2).

[31] Sarah Projansky, 'A Feminist History of Rape in U.S. Film, 1903–1979' in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 26–65 (p.60).

[32] Brown, 'Torture, Rape, Action Heroines, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo',* 28–29.

and the Me Too movement (2006) that female audiences became invested with rape-revenge. Tammy Oler links this growing female interest in the genre with being one of the few film categories which position woman as heroines and survivors, which proves problematic with a film like *Promising Young Woman,* which neither has a definitive hero nor survivor.[33] Unlike in the real world, the women in rape-revenge defeat their rapists, who otherwise escape legal prosecution (such as Al Monroe). In reality, rape culture has not been recognised as a real, socio-political problem, although the social landscape has dramatically changed since the Weinstein scandal.

The Good for Her Film and rape-revenge both originate in female rage, a phenomenon derived from 'female hysteria', an outdated term which was used to control women's display of emotion or disobedience. Elaine Showalter has theorised female hysteria in her writing on 'hystories'.[34] She references Juliet Mitchell who refers to female novelists as hysterics because she both accepts and refuses "the organization of sexuality under patriarchal feminism."[35] As such, female rage (as the self-aware version of hysteria) are mere symptoms of the experience of womanhood in a male-centred world, filled with sexual violence and subjugation. According to Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, who have discussed female rage during the #MeToo moment, women have been publicly expressing their anger like never before.[36] Whether the public can accept and condone such displays of rage is dependent on a woman's social standing, therefore class and racial privileges are at play. Orgad and Gill identify female rage as paradoxical because it functions both to benefit the patriarchy and can be used as a feminist resource.[37] They use Uma Thurman's reaction to the Weinstein scandal as their case study, and describe that Thurman refuses to speak in anger and asks the press to get back to her when her rage has settled. This statement has gained traction with news outlets, some of which are praising Thurman's ability to control her feelings, comments that feed into stereotypes about female rage and hysteria. Rape is in fact an emotional matter and should be discussed as such.

Rage is not merely emotional, but in rape-revenge it is channelled through physical force. In films like *Revenge* (Fargeat, 2017) or *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978) rage is not dealt with verbally (such as Thurman) but is exercised as revenge. Lehman recounts the

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[33] Tammy Oler, 'The Brave Ones', *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Responses to Pop Culture* (2009), 30–34 (p.31).

[34] Elaine Showalter, 'On Hysterical Narrative', *Narrative* 1 (1993), 24–35.

[35] Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution: On Feminism, Literature, and Psychoanalysis* (New York, Pantheon, 1984), 289–290.

[36] Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, 'Safety valves for mediated female rage in the #MeToo era', *Feminist Media Studies* 19, Number 4 (2019), 596–603 (p.596).

[37] Ibid.

ways in which the rape victim has killed her assailants: "she hangs one, castrates another, and runs over one with a motorboat."[38] Critics even described it as "sick, reprehensible", and Lehman himself attributes the controversy of the film to the fact that it is "graphically uncompromising".[39] The violence is unpolished, which is what turned off many critics, while drawing in cult and male masochistic viewership. The promotional posters for each film represent violence through dirty bodies, ripped clothing, and impressive weaponry. Female rage becomes essential to women's cinema. Whether in horror (*Jennifer's Body)* or crime-drama (*Hustlers,* Scafaria 2019) the frustration with a male-dominated society is let out on seemingly innocent men.

Such violence enacted on men can turn into a cathartic feeling for audiences. Leon Golden interrogates catharsis as articulated by Aristotle in *Poetics* as a "process of purgation", which leads to the cleansing of negative feelings such as pity, fear, or anger.[40] Aristotle viewed tragedy which produces catharsis as a healing method and considers it a necessity for the wellbeing of citizens. However, I do not employ catharsis within rape-revenge and Good for Her narratives to cleanse a female audience from the symptoms of patriarchal oppression. Any such "catharsis" would lose its effect once they exit the cinema and re-encounter misogyny. Rather I propose the term "cathartic relief" which female audiences may feel when they witness some, albeit vigilante justice in a world that denies women legal justice. Cathartic relief thus feels like a break from the real world. Such cathartic relief occurs primarily in traditional rape-revenge narratives (such as *I Spit On Your Grave)*, whereas *Promising Young Woman* refuses to deliver such relief.[41] Such refusal on feelings of experiencing cathartic relief reinforce that there is no (momentary) happy ending for the female viewer in narratives of revolt, rather they raise questions for further revolt action and about the validity and helpfulness of the criminal justice system.

In the subsequent analysis of *Promising Young Woman,* I will move away from the rape-revenge film and will analyse the film within a rape-revolt framework, conceptualised by Barbara Creed based on Julia Kristeva's definition of revolt as an "act

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[38] Lehman, 'Don't Blame This on a Girl', 105.

[39] Ibid, 103.

[40] Leon Golden, 'The Purgation Theory of Catharsis', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31, Number 4 (1973), 473–479 (p.473).

[41] Molly Miles, 'No Revenge Taken: The Misplaced Politics of Promising Young Woman' in *Film Hounds* [accessed 1 June 2024] https://filmhounds.co.uk/2021/03/no-revenge-taken-the-misplaced-politics-of-promising-young-woman/; Mary Beth McAndrews, 'On the Disempowerment of Promising Young Woman' in *Roger Ebert* [accessed 1 June 2024] https://www.rogerebert.com/features/on-the-disempowerment-of-promising-young-woman.

of discovery and a return to one's beginning."[42] Rape-revolt films characterise 'revenge' not through a selfish, personal lens inherent to the rape-revenge film but, according to Creed constitute a political revolt against a sexist and patriarchal system which refuses to condemn and eradicate rape culture.[43] Rape-revolt returns to a sense of humanity, in which one discovers that revenge in itself is not durable or sustainable whereas striving for institutional change is. Barbara Creed argues that rape-revolt is the logical extension of rape-revenge with the emergence of a Feminist New Wave. Such rape-revolt utilises violence in different ways than rape-revenge, which appropriates masculinity in battle. In Creed's words, "the woman who seeks justice transforms herself into a powerful and avenging form of the monstrous-feminine."[44] This change is influenced by a shifting social landscape which I attribute to the post-Weinstein effect. Although argued differently by Boyle, I believe that rape is no longer considered a stand-alone act of violence but as a social and political problem within a system one which elects a well-known alleged offender into the White House. What makes Cassie a rebel and an agent of revolt is her acceptance that she has already "died of grief [...] Her actual death, or preparedness to die is her greatest weapon as she embarks on her journey into the horrific world of rape culture."[45] The films belonging to this movement explore female characters' journeys from experiencing traumatising acts of male violence to forming a deep abjection within themselves and detaching them from their realities. They later transform into agents of simultaneously personal and systemic revolt.[46]

Promising Young Woman, Rape-Revolt, and Limitations of the Mainstream Film

Emerald Fennell categorises *Promising Young Woman* as a twisted female revenge comedy-thriller.[47] The film follows Cassie (Carrie Mulligan), a medical school dropout who works at a café with seemingly no passion nor drive. Beyond the surface, however, she is dedicated to revolting against a thriving rape culture. As she pretends to be drunk at bars and waits for a self-proclaimed 'nice guy' (played by beloved comedy actors such as Adam Brody)

[42] Barbara Creed, '#MeToo – Rape and Revolt: *Promising Young Women, Revenge,* and *The Nightingale',* in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 51–67 (p.54).

[43] Ibid, 52.

[44] Ibid, 52.

[45] Ibid, 57.

[46] Ibid, 51.

[47] Emerald Fennell, 'Emerald Fennell – Writer/Director – Promising Young Woman', interview with FabTV. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW7stn-IYqI&ab_channel=FabTV [accessed 15 May 2024].

to bring her home safely, however afterwards they change their mind and take them to their own homes instead, where they try to take advantage of her intoxicated and unresponsive state. Cassie then admits to being sober, and the men quickly realise that they have been tricked, and all desires to sleep with Cassie vanish. Over the course of the film, Cassie's late best friend, Nina comes up. She was raped by fellow student Al Monroe (Chris Lowell), who faced no consequences in an effort to protect *promising young men* like Al. Although Nina reports her rape, she never sees justice, while a lawyer bullies her into dropping the case and a dismissive university dean offers no support. The film implies that Nina commits suicide, and she is never shown on-screen.

Although she has been enjoying a happy romance in the middle of the film, Cassie is thrown off by the news of Al getting married and living a good life, which pushes her to re-start her revolt. Not only does Cassie wish to take personal revenge against Al, but she also wants to revolt against the social structures that allowed Nina's quest for justice to fail. Her multiple targets throughout the film include Madison, a former classmate who dismissed Nina despite having seen evidence of the rape, Dean Walker who protected Al instead of supporting Nina, and Al's lawyer who bullied Nina into giving up her case. The film concludes with the lawyer admitting to his guilt, the two women forcefully having been taught a lesson, and Al being arrested for Cassie's murder. Although she dies, the film conveys that she is triumphant and is getting legal justice. She strives for institutional revolt and dies with the knowledge (or faith) that she did. However, it is interesting to note that Cassie's hopes for justice hinge on (what she experiences as) a flawed criminal system. While there may be enough evidence to get Al convicted, there is nothing to suggest that another expensive lawyer cannot bargain a deal for his freedom. The ending initially seems hopeful for a clearer and better future, but ultimately considers the legal system as the potential saviour, despite its repeated criticism as being ineffective and biased against women and minority groups.

Nina is purposefully excluded from the narrative on-screen which subverts our expectation of a classic rape-revenge tale. As Lehman describes, victims are usually portrayed as sexually attractive women (which positions rape as a sexual act rather than violence). The women are typically covered in dirt, and the camera disengages from fetishizing her face or her "bruised, bloody body".[48] The rape-revenge film engages in a conversation about rape as sex (beautiful women) but simultaneously disavows eroticism by representing the assaulted body in undesirable and repulsive ways. The use of the camera in rape-revenge is significant. Despoina Mantziari comments on scopophilic

[48] Lehman, 'Don't Blame This on a Girl', 104.

sadism and cites the use of the diegetic camera in *I Spit On Your Grave* as to advance the plot of the rape and male violence.[49] Mantziari argues that media technologies are used to exploit women, female sexuality, and the female body.[50] This is not dissimilar to technologies that expose women's sexual parts such as in creepshot photography.[51] As Nina is raped, Al's friend filmed the entire event. This tape was then distributed to classmates such as Madison, who shares it with Cassie years after Nina's death. Cassie's viewing of the rape breaks her spirit. We see and understand the pain that rape causes through her eyes. While we understand this as a vulnerable and important moment for the feminist message of the film, we can also compare this to Ryan seeing the tape via Cassie, where he pushes back immediately upon realising what he is (re-)watching. His refusal to watch and engage with it serves to disavow his own complicity in the crime.

Pornography and sex work are used to critique the systems which allow for rape culture to thrive. The use of the diegetic camera which documents Nina's rape reminds of pornographic material. Pornographic films set in university halls and with large groups, and rape-adjacent material are not uncommon. The references to pornography and sex work are explicit and aim to show how women's bodies are treated as a commodity in rape culture. When Cassie is seen in a stripper outfit, Al's friends encourage him to use her as he pleases. The entitlement of the heterosexual male is made apparent, and this scene encapsulates how rape culture has formalised the use of the female body for selfish pleasure. Sex workers are treated are less than human and the profession is represented as far from empowering. The politics of this scene is in fact more in line with radical feminist Andrea Dworkin's ideas about pornography and sex work as repressive.[52]

Rape-revenge heroines often are characterised as cold and unfeeling as their rapists.[53] Cassie, on the other hand shows empathy and compassion as her quest for institutional revolt goes on, because its aim is to protect women in the future. She did not try to kill Al, but she wanted him to remember, and to warn other women (such as his wife). She never reached the level of cruelty that Al was capable of, such as rape and murder. Although Cassie's methods were undoubtably extreme, Al and Cassie are not alike. Cassie's actions are crimes of passion and vigilantism, with necessary precautions

[49] Despoina Mantziari, 'Sadistic scopophilia in contemporary rape culture: *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010) and the practice of "media rape"', *Feminist Media Studies* 18, Number 3 (2017), 397–410 (p.397).

[50] Ibid, 198.

[51] Marc Tran, 'Combatting Gender Privilege and Recognizing a Woman's Right to Privacy in Public Spaces: Arguments to Criminalize Catcalling and Creepshots', *Hasting's Women's Law Journal* 26, Number 2 (2015), 185–206.

[52] Andrea Dworkin, 'Pornography' in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London and New York: Plume under Penguin Books, 1989 [1979]), 199–202 (p.200).

[53] Posada, '#MeToo's First Horror Film', 198.

taken to avoid women from getting hurt, whereas Al's crimes showcase male entitlement.

Promising Young Woman subverts classical rape-revenge tropes by rejecting traditionally masculine revenge and instead utilising revolt as a framework. While Cassie has engaged in masculine forms of violence, such as demolishing a man's car with a bat, the scene makes clear that Cassie receives no satisfaction from this scene, and neither does the audience. Her face post-tantrum neither smiles, nor does it look relieved. The ways that revenge is enacted differs, as it is not the victim who avenges her own rape as per Projansky, but someone else's. While we understand that Nina's quest was so hopeless that it drove her to suicide, the film also makes it clear that Cassie's quest for revenge is far from selfless. Nina's mother asks, almost begs her to let it go and to find peace. It is evident that Nina would not consent to, nor agree with Cassie's actions and her descent into obsessive lust for revenge. Nina would not want Cassie to end like she did, driven into her early grave by a man. She would certainly not want her best friend to put herself in a position in which she could easily have been raped (by Al's friends at the cottage). Whilst Cassie challenges structures which protect men who have wronged women like Nina, her quest cannot be selfless. Institutional revolution does not occur within the story, and at most, the film re-ignites conversations about institutional change in our world, but not Cassie's. Revolt does not truly occur, because patriarchy refuses to let feminism win, but the fight for justice is far from over.

Conclusion

Emerald Fennell denied that the film was a product of #MeToo despite its timely references. She explains that these are themes women have been advocating for long before the emergence of the #MeToo moment. Rape culture has been alive before and after Weinstein, and before and after Trump.[54] A recent post on X (formerly Twitter) shows how years after #MeToo's rise, the moment "doesn't matter anymore if you're a 'good' enough director or actor. Shia [Labeouf] is still being booked, Ansel Elgort still being booked, Kevin Spacey still being booked [...]. I'm tired."[55] It does not matter which cultural moment we are in, auteur apologism and rape apologism remains and is thriving, despite efforts to paint 'cancel culture' as terminal. However, Weinstein's conviction has undeniably facilitated the release, promotion, and acclaim of films like *Promising Young*

[54] Emerald Fennell, ''Promising Young Woman' Cast Explains the Female Revenge Thriller', Interview with *Variety,* 28 January 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFg8Hh5LpZ4&ab_channel=Variety> [accessed 31 January 2024].

[55] <https://twitter.com/ilyclemmie/status/1790406956022202767?s=12&t=kW-XaDswrsK0iUJtAQfbyw> (@ilyclemmie, 14 May 2024), [accessed on 15 May 2024].

Woman, Bombshell, and *She Said* (Schrader, 2022). The public awareness of the form of rape culture in the workplace and education make the film engage in conversation with the post-Weinstein culture, whether consciously or not. Not only does the film form an elegant critique of rape culture (although perhaps too hopeful an outlook on the criminal justice system) but 2017 also marks the turning point in the formation of the Good for Her film, and the Feminist New Wave film. As Fennell wins Best Original Screenplay at the 2021 Academy Awards, and other female directors such as Chloe Zhao, Greta Gerwig, Celine Song, and Sofia Coppola release critically acclaimed films, the culture is shifting. Films centred around the female experience (*Midsommar,* Aster 2019, and *The Invisible Man,* Whannell, 2020) become part of Good for Her cinema. Following *Promising Young Woman,* rape-revolt and Good for Her have the potential to becoming pivotal movements in the Feminist New Wave, and could continue the conversations started by, and publicised by the Weinstein scandal, by Me Too, and by #MeToo. While a great starting point, future films which continue where *Promising Young Woman* left off could and should address intersectional approaches to sexual and domestic abuse as well as the many ambiguities of the legal justice system that have been highlighted by abolitionist feminists. Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote her influential piece on intersectionality (race and language) about domestic abuse in 1993, and it is vital that mainstream feminist cinema picks up her work.[56]

[56] Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43, No. 6 (July 1991), 1241–1299.

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