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### **I. De-phallicizing the body**

In an astonishing scene in the middle of French director Coralie Fargeat's first feature film *Revenge* (2017), the heroine Jen (Mathilda Lutz), who has survived rape and being pushed off a cliff by her married lover and left for dead in the desert, takes refuge in a suspiciously womb-like cave in order to rest and recuperate overnight. When her lover Richard (Kevin Janssens), flanked by rapist 'associate' Stan (Vincent Colombe) and sidekick Dimitri (Guillaume Bouchède) pushed Jen to her death, she landed impaled on a small dead tree from which she later — once she had regained consciousness — managed to free herself by setting light to its trunk. She is however still carrying the phallic spike of the branch on which she was impaled, which protrudes menacingly from her midriff. Exhausted, tearful and slow to act rather than alert or impressively resourceful, Jen realizes that the girly heart-shaped locket around her neck still contains a hallucinogenic drug given to her by Richard for safekeeping while she, Stan and Dimitri were partying at his luxury ranch-style villa the night before. This she chews on with disgust, inducing an alarming high that anaesthetizes her body sufficiently

for her to undertake surgical removal of the phallic branch-spike. One of *Revenge's* extraordinarily gory sequences follows in which, after cutting repeatedly into the flesh of her stomach and extracting the spike, the gaping wound in her midriff pulses blood for some seconds longer before quietening itself. The wound will still kill her if it is not cauterized, and Jen has already lit a cave-dweller's fire in which she can sterilize any cauterizing instrument, the only candidate for which is an empty can of Mexican beer with which she earlier quenched the thirst of half a day of dragging herself through the desert. (The beer can, like the knife she has used as a scalpel, came from Dimitri's backpack, purloined after a riverside encounter and midstream confrontation that ended with her stabbing him through the eye.) Cutting the beer can open and flattening it out, she suspends it in the flames to sterilize it, then impresses it over the wound in her stomach, in which it burns a perfect imprint of the beer can's eagle logo (the American eagle?). After this she falls into a deep sleep.

It will be clear from my account of this central scene in *Revenge* that despite its mixed reviews,<sup>1</sup> I regard Fargeat's film as an intelligent and stylish contemporary contribution to a genre that can now claim a history of at least sixty years.<sup>2</sup> The rape-revenge film has been the subject of a number of studies including a chapter of Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Jacinda Read's *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*.<sup>3</sup> Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* initially appeared in the context of US debates about slasher movies and 'lust murder' treated by studies such as Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer's *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder*, Jane Caputi's

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<sup>1</sup> The review of *Revenge* by Kevin Maher is a good example of continuing misunderstanding of the feminist rape-revenge movie by male critics. Maher begins by labelling the film "a cheap and tacky piece of exploitation perv-bait," then proceeds to undermine it on generic grounds: "Can a movie be feminist and misogynist at the same time? [...] Does regularly filling the frame with the lead actress's barely covered buttocks qualify as an act of female empowerment? These are some of the many questions that swirl around, and ultimately trouble, the French director Coralie Fargeat's blood-spattered feature debut. Labelled a "feminist rape-revenge movie," it takes all the traditional tenets of *that most dubious of genres* and simply does them again." See Kevin Maher, "Film review: *Revenge*," *The Times* (11 May 2018). My emphasis. Unable to get past *Revenge's* "bum shots" (a lot of which do figure in the scenes of Richard and Jen's arrival at the villa and of later that evening, as the group parties and Jen flirts with Stan in a manner that leads him to consider himself entitled to force sex upon her the following day), Maher unforgivably terms the way Jen is "brutally raped" "inevitable." In Maher's eyes, empowerment is the only measure of what is feminist, and the film fails to empower Jen because its "bum shots" reveal the cardinal sin of patriarchal/phallogocentric film form, the male gaze, to be at work: "[Stan/Dimitri] stares at Jen, up close, through a pair of binoculars in a scene that's positively screaming out for a cardboard sign that reads: 'It's the Male Gaze! Quick! Run!'" Maher dwells on *Revenge's* use of a gaze at Lutz's shapely bottom and jumps to the conclusion that because Jen's bum is initially sexualised and objectified, Fargeat's film is misogynist and cannot therefore also be feminist. The male gaze at Jen's bottom mediated by the looks of Richard, Stan and Dimitri in fact ceases to be the voyeuristic kind originally outlined by Laura Mulvey after *Revenge's* short if unpleasant rape scene and becomes a different kind of look in the second part of the film. In fact, *Revenge* charts how Jen herself acquires a look with which she will be able to look out for and look after herself in the violent, consumerist world of North America in the twenty-first century.

<sup>2</sup> The first rape-revenge film is often held to be Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), and a wave of movies important to the genre including Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972), Meir Karchi's *I Spit on Your Grave!* (1978) and Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981) were made in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015 [1992]); Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Books, 2011)

*The Age of Sex Crime* and Philip Jenkins' *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide*,<sup>4</sup> and is devoted to slasher movies and other sub-genres of modern horror along with the rape-revenge film, reflecting the complex mix of genre characteristics often found within rape-revenge films, which can be viewed as situated at a crossroads between slasher and 'vigilante' movies. In 1970s examples of vigilante films such as *Death Wish* (Winner, 1974), *Rolling Thunder* (Flynn, 1977), and *Hardcore* (Schrader, 1979), the theme of vengeance absent from most sub-genres of horror is uppermost, so the feminist rape-revenge movie can be understood to have arisen out of a feminist appropriation of the thematic of revenge against sexual violence that is drawn from the vigilante and slasher sub-genres respectively. Evidently in existence by the release of Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave!* in 1978, the feminist rape-revenge film is arguably seeing a twenty-first century revival following its heyday in the 'long 1970s,' in productions such as Virginie Despentes' and Coralie Trinh Ti's *Baise-moi* (2000), Fargeat's *Revenge* and Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020). The primary objective of this article is to offer close analysis and an interpretation of *Revenge*, but in so doing I shall also offer some reflections on the historical evolution of the feminist rape-revenge film between the 'long 1970s' and what may be termed 'the age of #MeToo,' in which the rhetoric of 'moral decay' associated with the Western panic about serial killers active in the earlier era has shifted in multiple ways, while the intensity of attention to sexual violence against women (in all its forms) has increased massively.

*Revenge* is a self-reflexive and knowing contemporary 'take' on the feminist rape-revenge film. It clearly alludes to the genre's history, through elements of its narrative as well as through its female lead being called 'Jen,' after Jennifer Hills of the original *I Spit on Your Grave!* its 2010 remake and the franchise of sequels released from 2013 onwards. (Unlike Jennifer Hills, Jen in *Revenge* is not a career woman who has come to an isolated rural location to work on a book manuscript: she is a model and aspiring actress planning to 'get noticed' in LA. As a woman who is not successful or sexually independent at the start of the film, what marks her out — and all that marks her out — is her Hollywood-worthy looks). Released in France just as 'Me Too' began in the US in the autumn of 2017, *Revenge* has an intriguing relationship to the re-questioning and 'zero tolerance' of sexual violence and abuse spearheaded by the 'Me Too' movement, which rapidly gained momentum in French discursive space under the hashtag *#BalanceTonPorc*, the following account of which concludes the first section of this essay:

The *#BalanceTonPorc* hashtag appeared on Twitter in response to the American *#MeToo* movement in October 2017.<sup>5</sup> Translat[able] as "Denounce Your Pig", it encouraged victims of sexual harassment to call out their abusers by name. Sandra Muller, a French journalist based in New York, became the spearhead of this movement when she created the hashtag to call out a French executive who had made inappropriate sexual remarks towards her.<sup>6</sup> Three days later, "tens of thousands of Frenchwomen" posted their own accounts of sexual harassment and abuse online.<sup>7</sup> An online petition was soon created, "addressed to [President]

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1987); Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Donadio, "#BalanceTonPorc is France's #MeToo."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Bilefsky & Peltier, "France Considers Fines for Catcalls as Women Speak Out on Harassment."

Macron, urging him to treat sexual harassment as a national emergency; it gained 100,000 signatures in its first three days online.”<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, the French government have acknowledged the problems continuing to affect French women. Following the emergence of the #BalanceTonPorc movement, in November 2017 President Macron declared that French society was “sick with sexism” and “announced measures to crack down on sexual crimes and make it easier for victims to press charges.”<sup>9</sup> These measures included a law against street harassment, which was implemented in August 2018 and issues perpetrators with “fines of between €90 and €750.”<sup>10</sup>

In November 2019, thousands of French women exercised their collective voice once again “to protest against alarming levels of deadly domestic violence against women” after over 100 French women were killed that year.<sup>11</sup> France currently “has among the highest rates of domestic violence in Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, “almost half of those killed by their partners had previously filed a report with the police, but [...] 80% of the complaints did not lead to prosecution.”<sup>13</sup> This shows how, even when women find the courage to report their abusers, they are prevented from obtaining personal safety and justice by a patriarchal criminal justice system.

Furthermore, prominent French actresses, such as Adèle Haenel, used their platform again to protest against injustices against women during the 45<sup>th</sup> César Awards in 2020, when they abruptly left the award ceremony after Roman Polanski was awarded Best Director for his film *J'accuse*.<sup>14</sup> He pleaded guilty to statutory rape in 1977 and received allegations of sexual abuse from several other women, all of which he has denied.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, “[the] award was viewed as provocative and a slap in the face for sexual abuse victims and #MeToo campaigners who have struggled to gain recognition in France.”<sup>16</sup> Polanski’s award does indeed convey a concerning message that honouring the talents of male sexual abusers is considered more important than showing support for their (often female) victims.<sup>17</sup>

Returning from this summary of how debates about sexual harassment, abuse and violence have played out in France and French cinematic culture over the last few years to *Revenge*, the film not only shows the transformation of Jen as rape victim from a pretty and uncomplicated girl-woman into an action heroine who has to kill the three men implicated in her rape in order to survive an out-of-control situation, but reflects upon women on screen and on how women may wrest control of the look from men too preoccupied with their own presumed superiority to pay attention to the challenge. In charting this bloody survival struggle and epistemological power grab, I shall pay close attention to *Revenge*’s mixture of

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<sup>8</sup> Rubin, “Revolt in France Against Sexual Harassment Hits Cultural Resistance.”

<sup>9</sup> Breeden, “Sick with Sexism: France Must Fight Violence Against Women, Macron Says.”

<sup>10</sup> Chadwick, “France issues more than 700 fines under new street harassment law.”

<sup>11</sup> Slawson, “France’s shame: thousands protest against gender violence.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Williamson, “Femicide: New French action amid protests – but is it enough?”

<sup>14</sup> Willsher, “Polanski’s ‘Oscar’ divides elite world of French cinema.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Rachael Gunn, “From Post-war France to *Le deuxième sexe* to #BalanceTonPorc: the Changing Position of French Women,” unpublished dissertation submitted towards the BA Modern Languages, (University of Birmingham : 5 May 2020).

generic markers (action-adventure as well as the slasher and vigilante sub-genres important to the origins and evolution of the rape-revenge film), but I turn first to two philosophical essays on revenge that will allow me to analyse the intersubjective dynamics and violence of *Revenge*, and to make the feminist argument that the film is ultimately more about the survival of an ethical and embodied mode of female subjectivity than about revenge per se.

## II. ‘An Eye for an Eye’? Simone de Beauvoir and Emmanuel Levinas on Revenge

Philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Emmanuel Levinas both wrote essays about revenge with almost identical titles.<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir’s “An Eye for an Eye,” which was published in 1946 in the journal she and Jean-Paul Sartre had founded in October 1945, *Les Temps modernes*, then included in her 1948 book of essays *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom*, was written to explain why she refused to sign the petition circulated among French intellectuals early in 1945 that urged a pardon for anti-Semite author and critic Robert Brasillach, who had just been convicted of treason for revealing the whereabouts of French Jews in Nazi-occupied Paris and thus effectively for signing their death warrants. “An Eye for an Eye” was of a piece with the other essays in *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom* in that it sought to defend existentialist thought against the critics it had garnered since Sartre and Beauvoir were first labelled the movement’s leading proponents in 1943, when Sartre had published *Being and Nothingness* and Beauvoir her first novel *She Came to Stay*. (Despite the fact that the 1940s saw the publication of all Beauvoir’s single-volume philosophical essays – *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944), *For an Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and *The Second Sex* (1949), it was only in *She Came to Stay* and “An Eye for an Eye” that she ever explored the topic of revenge, implicitly via Françoise’s murder of Xavière in the novel and explicitly in the essay.) But the classification of types of crime Beauvoir undertakes in “An Eye for an Eye” draws on both the concept of ambiguity fully expounded in *For an Ethics of Ambiguity* and summarized by the translator of the essay as meaning that “a human being exists both as a consciousness and as a material entity”<sup>19</sup> and on the notion of reciprocity — that because everyone is rooted in their own subjectivity, the other is reciprocal to rather than equivalent to oneself — Beauvoir first formulated in her 1920s diaries. In this way “An Eye for an Eye” is strongly connected to the philosophies of freedom and ethical subjectivity Beauvoir was developing independently of Sartre in her 1940s writings, the importance of which to existentialism would not be fully appreciated until they were uncovered by feminist scholarship after her death in 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “An Eye for an Eye,” in *Difficult Freedom: Writings on Judaism*, trans. by Séan Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 146-148; Simone de Beauvoir, “An Eye for an Eye” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 237-260. A detailed comparison of Beauvoir’s and Levinas’s approaches to revenge has been undertaken in the article by David Seltzer from which I quote in this section, which uncovers both similarities and profound differences between the two philosophers. See David Seltzer, “An Eye for an Eye: Beauvoir and Levinas on Retributive Justice,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 39/1 (2007), 59-77. No ready parallels suggest themselves, however, between either Beauvoir’s or Levinas’s treatments of revenge and other thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition. Aristotle and Nietzsche treat the topic of revenge, for example, as do late sixteenth and early seventeenth century English-language revenge tragedies, but the historical overlap of Beauvoir’s and Levinas’s careers and their respective connections to existential phenomenology and ethics means that comparing and co-applying their approaches to revenge brings out the distinctiveness of these approaches more effectively than any longer historical view.

<sup>19</sup> Kristana Arp, “Introduction” to de Beauvoir’s “An eye for an eye,” 241.

Levinas's "An Eye for an Eye," whose English title translates "La loi du talion" or *lex talionis*, the principle or law of retaliation that a punishment inflicted should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer, was published in 1963 in his book of Talmudic writings *Difficult Freedom*. It is "technically an exegesis of sorts of Leviticus 24:17-22, which contains the famous "eye for an eye" passage,"<sup>20</sup> but as David Seltzer demonstrates, is much more concerned to set out a theory of retributive justice than to offer Biblical commentary. Whereas Beauvoir considers both vengeance and a trial both to be live options with their own advantages and disadvantages, Levinas comes down squarely on the side of a trial. Vengeance is just a "law of the undergrowth" and as such is strictly forbidden by the Bible. Even the "eye for an eye" passage from Leviticus, which may appear to modern eyes to advocate vengeance, is in fact nothing of the sort. The Bible directs us to take an eye for an eye, but only as a legal penalty to be inflicted after a trial has taken place and the accused has been convicted. The eye for an eye prescription takes place within a social order, not outside of it as in Beauvoir.<sup>21</sup>

Seltzer notes that Beauvoir and Levinas "divide up crimes differently, and [...] take different positions on how we should address these crimes when they do occur,"<sup>22</sup> but observes that they are addressing similar questions about crime and punishment. In his "An Eye for an Eye," Levinas divides crimes up into the two categories of "mortal fractures" and "financial fractures," adopts the viewpoint of the victim to a far greater extent than Beauvoir (who is concerned mainly with the intent of the criminal), and focuses on the purposes that might be served by punishments decided upon at a trial, which Seltzer estimates to include a restorative and possibly a rehabilitative function.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, Levinas considers retribution in kind "according to the formula, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"<sup>24</sup> to be the only solution that ensures redress for mortal and financial fractures (injuries), and although no direct links are made in "An Eye for an Eye" to the substantial philosophical writings on ethics he had published by 1963, when *Difficult Freedom* first appeared, the essay echoes the primacy of ethics that pervades his philosophical project, in which the priority of ontology over ethics is reversed and ethics is "first philosophy." (This is not at all the case for Beauvoir, whose ontology begins with the involvement of individuals in projects and "who cannot even admit the possibility of an interruption of my project which Levinas demands."<sup>25</sup>)

In her "An Eye for an Eye," Beauvoir also distinguishes between two types of crimes, "abominations" or "absolute evil," and "common" or lesser crimes: "abominations" are defined by the way they "entirely refuse to acknowledge the subjectivity of the other person," treating him/her as a mere thing or object in the world rather than as a consciousness aware of what is being done to them. Beauvoir's classification of crimes is better suited than Levinas's to analysing the single rape that takes place in *Revenge* where Jen is raped 'only' once (many rape-revenge films feature repeated rapes or gang rape, whereas in *Revenge*, the violence of the scene is not lingered on by Fargeat's direction, in that we see Jen banging on the window of the bedroom in which she has been cornered by Stan, and hear her muffled screams from outside, but there is no lengthy scene as in an exploitation film like Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave!* in which the violence is drawn out almost unbearably over half an hour). A few quotations from "An Eye for an Eye" and Kristana Arp's commentary on it will demonstrate why Beauvoir's idea of an "abomination" fits the crime of rape so well:

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<sup>20</sup> Seltzer, "An Eye for an Eye," 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 63-4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 64-5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 71.

If [...] someone “deliberately tries to degrade man by reducing him to a thing” then one commits an absolute evil”, Beauvoir argues<sup>26</sup> [...] Only in such cases is violent revenge justified. Indeed in such cases vengeance is “a metaphysical requirement” because it re-establishes the reciprocity between humans that this crime negated.<sup>27</sup>

As Arp notes, Beauvoir does not mention rape as an example of an absolute evil, but her definition of this type of crime “does seem to apply” to it extremely well. Rape calls for revenge because only vengeance — and it can obviously not be specified what form such vengeance should take or how it should be enacted — can re-establish reciprocity between victim and perpetrator. Vengeance has a moral goal and is a form of retributive or restorative justice. All too often its goal cannot be achieved, but it is the idea of a form of retributive action that does not pass via a court of law or other social or institutional processes that maps out the territory of the rape-revenge film, in which (as in the vigilante genre) wronged parties “privately” undertake, always through violent action, to restore the reciprocity that has been violated through the crime of rape. As the tag line of *I Spit on Your Grave* put it, “This woman has just chopped, broken and burned four men beyond recognition...but no jury in America would ever convict her!”

In *Revenge*, Stan is the rapist and his overweight buddy Dimitri, who sees Stan assaulting Jen but instead of intervening to stop him, leaves the room and turns the television in the next room up to an uncomfortably high volume so that he cannot hear Jen’s screams, is his undeclared accomplice. Lover Richard is out getting licences for the men’s hunting trip while this happens and is momentarily angry when he returns to find Jen, subdued and tearful, cloistered in the villa’s opulent master bedroom. However, he immediately concocts a plan to cover up his buddies’ crime by sending Jen to start a new life in Canada far from family and friends (I return later to the significance of Canada as his choice of cover-up destination). When she rejects his plan, a chase out of the villa ensues in which Richard is on Jen’s heels, with Stan behind him and Dimitri at the back, all four characters coming to a halt at the edge of a deep canyon that stops the chase in its tracks. Richard and Jen initially travelled out to the desert by helicopter, and now, in a charade of mercy, he fakes a phone call to the helicopter pilot asking him to come out and take her home, before suddenly and forcefully pushing her over the canyon and onto the protruding branch of “a fake spiky tree that looks exactly like the one they always use in stage productions of *Waiting for Godot*.”<sup>28</sup> Murder or attempted murder has followed rape according to the codes of the rape revenge film in which the rape victim is left for dead or “finished off” so that that no crime can be reported that the perpetrators can be charged with: What this frequent narrative proximity of death to rape in the rape revenge genre means, I suggest, is that rape really is a kind of death, which fits Beauvoir’s idea of a crime that is an “abomination” or “absolute evil” because it treats its victim as a thing without consciousness or subjectivity. It is made absolutely clear in *Revenge* that guilt is collective: Stan may have committed the initial rape, but Dimitri is complicit, and Richard repeats the crime and magnifies it by pushing Jen over the canyon. Richard becomes

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<sup>26</sup> Arp, “Introduction” to “An Eye for an Eye,” 241.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Maher, “Film review: *Revenge*,” *The Times*, 11 May 2018. It is of course from the tree that Estragon aspires to hang himself in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, so if we take Maher’s quip seriously (and why not, given the seriousness of violent crimes against women?), applying the comment Estragon makes about failure at suicide, “This tree will have been no use to me at all!” to *Revenge* could indicate the superfluity of phallic (natural) structures. These, I would agree, have been overvalued for far too long.

the lead villain from this point onwards, with Stan later (and quite atypically for the rape revenge film) showing some genuine regret about Jen's apparent death.

In the second, longer part of *Revenge* in which Jen deals with each of her three rapist-assassins one by one, the three men effectively get the hunting trip they came to the desert for. Their prey is, rather than wild animals, the woman they have assaulted and attempted to kill, while Jen, of course, turns hunter and has to dispatch all three men before she can be sure of surviving. *Revenge* is much more action thriller than any other genre in this second part of the film, with episodes of horror supplied by the large amounts of blood and gore that figure in the confrontations with Stan and Richard — which, incidentally, resonate powerfully with the qualified endorsement of revenge on which Levinas's "An Eye for an Eye" essay ends

Yes, eye for eye. Neither all eternity, nor all the money in the world, can heal the outrage done to man. It is a disfigurement or wound that bleeds for all time, as though it required a parallel suffering to staunch this eternal haemorrhage.<sup>29</sup>

Each of the three men meets his death in a particularly symbolically appropriate way: Jen stabs Dimitri — who stared at his buddy's assault on her in totally passive complicity — in the eye, shoots Stan through the head at the wheel of his Range Rover as he attempts to drive over her, and punches then shoots Richard in the stomach (a zone equivalent to the nurturing female uterus) after several bullets into the same area have already fatally weakened him by causing the loss of large amounts of blood. It is when Richard holds her up against a wall of the villa and lectures her about how "Women... always have to put up a f\*\*\*ing fight!," words she cannot hear because he has just temporarily knocked her out, that Jen is able to deliver the near-fatal punch: it is because Richard is off his guard, too busy talking and (ridiculously at this stage) not able to believe in or give credit to the violence that is killing him that Jen gains the final and decisive upper hand.

Gendered sexual imagery like the phallic spike through her stomach removed by Jen reappears even before her attack on Richard's abdomen when, during the hunt-like stake-out with Stan on the desert road, she scatters glass by smashing her binoculars on a rock, a shard of which cuts an enormous vulva-like wound in Stan's foot that oozes blood continuously as he agonizingly removes the shard, howling into the desert like a baby. The body imagery of the film moves progressively from the phallic branch on which Jen is impaled towards the more female-oriented imagery of the womb and the vulva. The killings committed by Jen do not correspond to 'an eye for an eye' in the manner of Beauvoir's philosophy of revenge, because the male 'victims' of the film are not treated like things or material entities without subjectivity or consciousness; in other words, Jen's killings are not 'abominations' because they do not in any obvious sense reverse the rape and attempted murder. The body imagery and symbolism that figures them does, however, make them correspond to the *lex talionis* of Levinas's version of "An Eye for an Eye," the "principle or law of retaliation that a punishment inflicted should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer."<sup>30</sup> Jen's collectively guilty rapist-assassins are punished in equivalent degree, by losing their lives, and in kind because the manner of their deaths matches their respective offences — passive, complicit voyeurism for Dimitri; driven, libidinal sadism (voyeurism then rape) for Stan; and exploitation as a dispensable commodity for Richard, who ceases even to refer to Jen as a person by refusing to use her name after he has pushed her into the canyon. According to Beauvoir's commentators, rape is a type of crime that justifies vengeance, or

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<sup>29</sup> Levinas, "An Eye for an Eye," 148

<sup>30</sup> Definition of *lex talionis* given at <https://www.wordreference.com/definition/lex%20talionis>. [Accessed 15 February 2022].

retribution: this is what rape-revenge films ‘know’ and the territory they work on. In these films retributive justice does not pass via a court of law: Jen survives and prevails by acting ‘privately’ or out-of-court to reciprocally restore the subjectivity that has been violated through the brutal crime of rape. Criminality is irrelevant to her violent actions, for which she would surely not be convicted by any court...

### III. Pain, Fear, Vulnerability and Victimhood

In *Revenge*, Jen is undeniably transformed from a girl-woman into an action heroine during the film’s battle of the sexes but is shown on several occasions not to be iron-hard and invulnerable in the manner of Hollywood action heroines. During her battles with the three men, she is twice wounded by bullets, of which the first temporarily damages her hearing as it removes one of her girly pink star-shaped earrings (these match the pink cigarette lighter that falls just near enough to her in the canyon to serve to set fire to the dead tree). At this moment and during the final fight with Richard, POV shots with her bodily sensations communicate just how chaotic and confused her fight for survival is. Interestingly where the gendered nature of rape as a crime is concerned, the final ‘act’ of *Revenge* — the battle between Jen and Richard — is very carefully choreographed around the domestic home, to which Richard returns at ferocious speed on his motorbike once he realizes Jen has killed Stan as well as Dimitri and only he is left alive. Home is the place or space in which a person of whichever gender ought to feel safe, but Richard clearly no longer has any such sense of security and hears noises or glimpses presences because of his paranoid knowledge that Jen is coming to get him. Before she arrives, stationing herself outside the tinted plate glass windows of the villa through which Dimitri and Stan impassively ogled her when they turned up forty-eight hours earlier, he cuts short the relieving shower he taking to wash off the dust and dirt of the desert, and paces round the villa and its terrace area naked, walking out along the wall of the swimming pool to survey his territory, looking nervous, vulnerable and exposed. When the blood-soaked battle with Jen that follows is over, she picks her way over his dead body and, filthy and caked in dried blood, takes the same walk out along the swimming pool wall. The probably unthought purpose of this walk is to look out over the desert territory in which her survival struggle has been staged, but Jen’s purpose seems served when, in *Revenge*’s dramatic final shot, she suddenly turns and look back at the viewer and at the villa — not just the bedroom, the scene of the original crime, but the entire property with its spectacular prospects out over the desert. This walk and look, I suggest, signify anything but an acquisitive or proprietorial attitude to the riches that allowed Richard briefly to entertain her so lavishly: they are, rather, a means of distancing herself from the Western capitalist consumer culture the villa symbolizes (concentrated in the huge TV screen on which a shopping channel plays throughout the struggle with Richard). Her look back at the villa is far from a greedy, possessive, consumerist gaze at the villa or the uninhabited land its situation allows. The battle Jen has won has freed domestic space of men’s violence and abuse and enabled a look that sees a very different world.

### IV. Embodied Female Subjectivity and Ethical Violence

In bloodily surviving her rape and attempted murder, Jen forges a mode of embodied female subjectivity it would be easy (and not inaccurate) to describe as ‘empowered.’ I argue, however, that it is as a subject of violence rather than a subject of power that Jen merits feminist attention, and that the capacity for violence she demonstrates follows from the ethically embodied female subjectivity we watch in action in *Revenge*. In *The Body and the Screen*, I drew on the writings of Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and to a lesser extent Sonia Kruks, Judith

Butler and Iris Marion Young to set out an account of an embodied and ethical female subjectivity that is also an intersubjectivity, because it “is not one” (an echo of Irigaray’s 1977 essay and book *This Sex Which Is Not One*).<sup>31</sup> A complementarity between the thought of Beauvoir and Irigaray not widely written about because they were a generation apart and had very different kinds of philosophical training, I argue, concerns embodiment and ethics: Beauvoir can be credited as the inventor of feminist phenomenology, because she added (with *The Second Sex*) sexual difference and extensive descriptions of female embodiment to the existential phenomenological thought of her contemporaries Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and was also the author, in *For an Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) of the only ethics written by an existentialist. Irigaray’s 1983 book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* added credentials as a philosopher of ethics to feminist thought that had clearly been concerned with female embodiment since its beginnings in her magnum opus *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), publications caught up in the 1970s *écriture féminine* movement. Irigaray theorizes ethical relational identity and intersubjectivity more than Beauvoir and writes a great deal about mother-daughter relations and relationships between women generally, which Beauvoir does not do in her philosophical essays of the 1940s, though does extensively in her novels and autobiography. However, a theory of the embodied female subject can more easily be drawn from Beauvoir’s work, something Sonia Kruks and Toril Moi both made essential contributions to in their books *Situation and Human Existence* and *What Is A Woman? And other essays*.<sup>32</sup> The notion Kruks advances to particular effect is that of the “situated subject” forged by both Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir: Merleau-Ponty says that the situated subject “is an opening, through the body and perceptual experience, onto a common being and is always an intersubjectivity,”<sup>33</sup> while Beauvoir asserts that the body “is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects.”<sup>34</sup> The body *as* situation is an idea that not only merits thorough consideration but has yet to be fully transferred from existential phenomenology to literary and film criticism, in my view.

The readings of films in *The Body and the Screen* were undertaken with what I called this ‘feminist ethic of embodiment’ in mind, supplemented at the end of the book’s first chapter with some considerations from Foucault’s late work on ethics. How, though, is the ethically embodied woman-subject a subject of violence? (a question I now think I did not address sufficiently in the book). In the films discussed in its seventh chapter, the murder of her ex-husband’s father is committed by Maria Vial in Claire Denis’s *White Material* (2010), the vengeful kidnapping of her seducer’s daughter by main protagonist Mia in Andrea Arnold’s *Fish Tank* (2009), and a panoply of identity crimes (identity theft, fraud and Antigone-like ‘private’ disposal of a body — her lover’s rather than brother’s as in the drama, myth and tragedy of Antigone) by Morvern in Lynne Ramsay’s *Morvern Callar* (2002). Only Maria commits a crime for which she may face trial, although given the state of the unnamed African country in which *White Material* is set (it is disintegrating into violence and civil war), this seems unlikely. As I set out in the chapter, one aspect of Irigaray’s philosophy of desire treats exactly this question of ethical violence ‘committed’ by women:

According to Irigaray, in a sexual economy organized around masculine subjectivity... the “active’ mobilization of the death drives is prohibited for/in

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<sup>31</sup> See Kate Ince, *The Body and the Screen: female subjectivities in contemporary women’s cinema* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence* (Sydney and London: Allen and Unwin, 1990); Toril Moi, *What Is A Woman? And other essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence*, 17 and Ince, *The Body and the Screen*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 46 and Ince, *The Body and the Screen*, 5.

female sexuality".<sup>35</sup> Under the particular symbolic organization of the patriarchal social order, women's desires and alternative libidinal economy are 'used' for the representation and sublimation of men's death drives, but are unable to sublimate or represent themselves. A phallogocentric symbolic economy allows the representation and sublimation of men's death drives, but not the "rechannelling, metaphorization or sublimation"<sup>36</sup> of women's [...]

My main reason for drawing on remarks by Irigaray that suggest an approach to desire involving a redistribution of the death drives is that a considerable amount of aggression and violence attaches to the actions and behaviour of the female protagonists of *Fish Tank*, *Morvern Callar* [and] *White Material* [...]. All four<sup>37</sup> of these women live or work in difficult —materially impoverished, war-torn or conflict-ridden— circumstances, and for all four, the effort of dealing with and attempting to overcome these circumstances sees them behave with a socially unacceptable degree of aggression and violence [...]. By behaving "badly" at least in part because they are driven to by circumstances, these women might be said to inhabit a zone in which the symbolic and social reorganization of sexual desire is taking place, and a modification of the economy of masculine subjectivity going on. The fact that a patriarchal economy of subjectivity is also the upholder of masculinist *moral* values is more a Beauvoiran than an Irigarayan emphasis, but the female protagonists of these four films invite comparison with one another in the challenge they represent to conventional civilized morality as well as in the extreme and violent behaviour they exhibit.<sup>38</sup>

If Jen's final look back at the blood-soaked villa in *Revenge* indicates a distancing of ethically embodied female subjectivity from US-led capitalist consumer culture, how is this borne out earlier in the film? The film was actually shot in Morocco, but as I have suggested, its desert location passes for Arizona, Nevada or another south-west American state, because only this explains Jen's aspirations to make it in Hollywood, which is confirmed by the casting of Italian-American actor Mathilda Lutz as Jen. Lutz speaks only English, but both French and English are used in the film, as the male characters are played by French-speaking actors who use their language among themselves: Vincent Colombe as Stan and Guillaume Bouchède as Dimitri speak the French of mainland France, whereas Kevin Janssens as Richard, who is Belgian, speaks French with a detectable accent and near-perfect English to Jen. Unconfirmed though the national location of the film is, the desert of the south-western US is also indicated by the solution Richard comes up with to covering up the rape — that Jen go and live in Canada (implied to be a poorly policed backwater). *Revenge's* uncertain location and the mix of languages spoken by the characters would typically be viewed as a weakness in the writing of the film, but could also be said to lend it a degree of universality that enhances its subject, interpreted less as revenge than as survival and the forging of a bodily female subjectivity that suffers victimhood and trauma but successfully steers a course through them.

The philosophical approach to revenge forged in this essay by drawing on relevant writings by Beauvoir and Levinas and supplementing it with the (existential-phenomenological and Irigarayan) framework I developed for Chapter 7 of *The Body and the Screen*, the purpose of which was to account for violent and vengeful acts undertaken by embodied female subjects, might prove very fruitful if applied to more films than just

<sup>35</sup> Irigaray in Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Irigaray in Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, 96.

<sup>37</sup> A 4<sup>th</sup> film is treated in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of *The Body and the Screen*, Catherine Breillat's *Sex Is Comedy* (2002).

<sup>38</sup> Ince, *The Body and the Screen*, 133-34.

Fargeat's *Revenge* — that is, to rape-revenge films and other sub-genres featuring violence undertaken by women and/or presented as feminist. Film-philosophy, including feminist film-philosophy, has shown little interest to date in the rape-revenge or vigilante film, when a number of possible philosophical accounts of revenge are available to be drawn on. The modified sociological and philosophical questions raised by the twenty-first century revival (or continuing vitality) of the rape-revenge film does not seem to have received any specific attention at a time when (in the wake of #MeToo), rape and sexual violence against women are under more intense media scrutiny than ever before.

## V. 'Final Girl' or Ordinary Embodied Woman?

The theoretical approach to sexed subjectivity in horror cinema taken by Clover in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* has been criticized by subsequent feminist studies of the slasher and rape-revenge genres. In *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, Jacinda Read takes Clover to task for an inadequate account of historical change and of “either the endurance or the mutability of the rape-revenge story” that she reasonably attributes to “much orthodox feminist film theory influenced by psychoanalysis.”<sup>39</sup> Read advances the broader argument “that rape-revenge is not a sub-genre of horror, but a narrative structure which, on meeting second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced a historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films,”<sup>40</sup> and concomitantly, that “the female avenger of the rape-revenge film has more in common with the erotic thrillers and neo-noirs of recent years than Clover's generically specific argument acknowledges.”<sup>41</sup> Read seems to be substituting her new female avenger for the figure of the Final Girl first advanced by Clover in the essay that became Chapter 1 of the first edition of *Men, Women and Chainsaws*,<sup>42</sup> a figure to which she returns in her Preface to the Princeton Classics Edition,<sup>43</sup> seemingly acknowledging Read in the process:

The fate of that trope since then has largely determined, for better or worse, the intellectual and more broadly cultural trajectory of the book itself. I say “for worse” not because of the Final Girl's appropriations in rock and rap music, novels, plays, films, and the like, but because, in the course of that history, she has eclipsed other figures and issues in the book and, more to the point, has in her wanderings become a rough sketch of her former self. Detached from her low-budget origins and messier meanings, she now circulates in these mostly cleaner and more up-scale venues as a “female avenger,” “triumphant feminist hero,” and the like.<sup>44</sup>

Considerably more recently than Read's book on the rape-revenge cycle, Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Ruznak summarize the critical importance of the Final Girl as follows:

The remarkably mobile and infinitely interpretable figure of the Final Girl has evolved into an important concept for theoretical work on film, gender and sexuality by scholars including Jack Halberstam, Isabel Pinedo, and Kathleen Rowe Karlyn. Despite its unquestionable influence on horror studies and on the directions often taken in this field in the intervening years, Clover's model has

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<sup>39</sup> Read, *The New Avengers*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>42</sup> Clover, „Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” *Representations* 20 (1987): 187-228.

<sup>43</sup> Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, ix-xiii.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., x.

been widely critiqued in academia. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Clover's formulation has been the characterization of the Final Girl as a "male in drag?" (216), which refers to her presumed masculine aggression and phallic agency.<sup>45</sup>

Clover's comments on her famous and "infinitely interpretable" figure in the 2015 Preface to *Men, Women and Chainsaws* do however revise the figure's most criticized characteristics of masculine aggression and phallic agency:

As a sketch, at least, the Final Girl does look something like a female hero [...] But a sketch is only a sketch. Fill this one out with the dimensions of affect, identification, pacing and audience, and the picture gets kinkier. Yes, the Final Girl brings down the killer in the final moments, but consider how she spent a good hour of the film up to then: being chased and almost caught, hiding, running, falling, rising in pain and fleeing again... and so on. "Tortured survivor" might be a better term than "hero." ... Or, as I call her, "victim-hero," with an emphasis on "victim." It's a great moment when she stops the killer, but to imagine that her, and our, experience of the film reduces to that last-minute reversal is truly to miss the point.

The point is fear and pain — hers, and, by proxy, ours. ... It is with the Final Girl's suffering that the film leads us to identify, and not only narratively, but cinematically. To be sure, we see much of the action through the usual third-person camera. We also see the Final Girl from the perspective of her pursuers, although these shots are fewer and further between than one might expect. ... What is impressive, though, and all but unprecedented, are the many shots, some of them excruciatingly long, that reverse that optic, giving us fuller, more intense and unambiguous access to the victim's points of view — in effect, putting us in the mind and body of the prey rather than the predator.<sup>46</sup>

Here, Clover maintains the femaleness of her original invention while jettisoning the figure's function as an identificatory 'fix' for teenage male spectators of slasher movies, and emphasizing spectatorial empathy with fear, pain and victimhood by viewers whose gender is unspecified. The appeal of *Revenge's* Jen to audiences is broad in just this way, I would maintain, and she is in my view certainly a version of the figure for the 2010s and the #Me Too/ #BalanceTonPorc era. She is the only woman seen in the film and the only one heard apart from the disembodied voice of Richard's wife on the phone, and she stands out for her lack of exceptionality as an American woman: professionally she is unaccomplished, a wannabe in the film industry, and personally she seems to be no more than the lover of a cheating married man. We might agree that all Jen has achieved at the end of *Revenge* is survival as an ordinary embodied woman, but in the process of the ethical violence through which she achieves this, she has been transformed into a savvy, tough, vigilant woman who knows how to look out for herself and her 'estate' (if I may so put it): she wins the battle for a domestic space free of dominance and abuse. Her survival tracks the turbulent transformation of screen women objectified by the male gaze over the last 40 to 50 years, from blonde to brunette, and girly hanger-on to independent action heroine. Through fear, vulnerability and exhaustion Jen out-stares, outwits and vanquishes her male antagonists, and in so doing inherits the earth.

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<sup>45</sup> Paszkiewicz and Ruznak, "Revisiting the Final Girl: Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards," in *Postmodern Culture* 28/1 (2017).

<sup>46</sup> Clover, *Men, Woman and Chainsaws*, x-xi.

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