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The re-rape and revenge of Jennifer Hills: Gender and genre in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010)

ABSTRACT

This article aims to address the largely negative critical response to Steven R. Monroe's remake of I Spit On Your Grave (2010), by both considering its themes in comparison to Meir Zarchi's 1978 original film, and positioning the new version within its own generic context. Using examples from feminist film theory that analyses Zarchi's film, I suggest that Monroe's version not only interprets, but actively enhances the perceived feminist message of the original, and consider how role reversal during the revenge section of the film contributes to this. I also outline the way in which Monroe's film can be understood as representative of recent trends in the horror genre – most notably, its inclusion of explicit, gory violence and themes of retribution. Ultimately, the portrayal of the remake's female protagonist as less sexualized and arguably more monstrous than the original character works in conjunction with other changes and a torture porn aesthetic in order to position the film clearly within the context of contemporary horror cinema.

KEYWORDS

remake
rape-revenge
contemporary horror
cinema
torture porn
gender
feminism

1. See Kim Newman (2011), Britt Hayes (2010), Paul McCannibal (2010) for examples.
2. See Clover (1993), Creed (1993), Read (2000) for examples.

This article focuses on *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010), a recent remake of Meir Zarchi's controversial 1978 film of the same name. Following festival screenings and a limited theatrical release in America and the United Kingdom, director Steven R. Monroe's film was released on DVD in early 2011 to a mixed critical response of indifference, derision and disgust. With the exception of a handful of positive reviews (mostly on horror forums),¹ this new version attracted criticism that, while frequently acknowledging marked improvements upon the original's direction, acting, script and cinematography, repeatedly drew attention to the perceived 'pointlessness' of remaking Zarchi's film. Excerpts from some of the more negative reviews highlight this opinion, suggesting the film is 'a completely worthless enterprise that offers nothing to the world other than the crushing realisation that it exists' (Hall 2010), and describing it as 'witless, ugly and unnecessary [...] a generic, distasteful and pointless photocopy of a flick that doesn't deserve one' (Weinberg 2010). Even the most scathing reviews were constructed around the notion of *I Spit on Your Grave's* 'worthlessness'. *Little White Lies*, for instance, labelled it 'completely pointless, like being in the *Guinness Book of Records* for eating a wheelbarrow of your own shit', and claimed 'the most shocking thing about this film is that anyone bothered to make it once, let alone twice' (Glasby 2011).

Discourses of insignificance often feature in reviews of any remake – and of horror remakes in particular. Yet the criticism levelled at Monroe's film seems excessive by comparison, and is accompanied in many cases by vitriolic comment on its violent content. In a review that reflects upon his own, now infamous, response to Zarchi's film (Ebert 1980), Roger Ebert refers to this new version as a 'despicable remake' of a 'despicable film' that 'works even better as vicarious cruelty against women', before suggesting that couples in the audience may wish to rethink their future together should one of them find the film remotely enjoyable (Ebert 2010). Also known by Zarchi's original title *Day of The Woman*, and on an early poster as *The Rape and Revenge of Jennifer Hills* (Kerekes and Slater 2000: 190); the 1978 film initially encountered similar complaints regarding its brutal depictions of sexual violence, yet has subsequently come to be widely discussed within feminist psychoanalytical film theory due to its rape-revenge narrative and infamous castration scene.² However, it remains problematic as a legitimate example of a feminist text, due in no small part to the highly sexualized depiction of its female protagonist and the methods by which she undertakes her revenge. This article aims to address the largely negative response to the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* by analysing some of the film's themes in comparison to the original, with particular attention to the way in which Monroe's version can be seen to both interpret and enhance the perceived feminist message of Zarchi's film. Carol J. Clover's (1993) and Barbara Creed's (1993) analyses of the 1978 film remain the most useful in approaching its gender issues, and are used here as a framework for comparison with the remake, before moving on to consider how Monroe's film should also be positioned within its own genre context by looking at recent trends in contemporary horror cinema.

RAPE AND THE CITY/COUNTRY DIVIDE

The plot of the original runs as follows. A writer from New York, Jennifer Hills (Camille Keaton), escapes to a secluded lakeside cabin to spend the summer working on her latest novel. There she encounters a group of four

local men who, under the pretext of 'deflowering' mentally challenged virgin Matthew (Richard Pace), capture Jennifer, and subject her to a series of brutal rapes. Matthew, unable to bring himself to kill her as instructed by the gang's ringleader Johnny (Eron Tabor), coats a knife in her blood to lead the others into believing her dead, and leaves her for such in her cabin. Jennifer slowly recovers from the attack and sets about undertaking her revenge. She hangs Matthew, castrates Johnny, kills Stanley (Anthony Nichols) with an axe, and Andy (Gunter Kleemann) with a boat propeller. Monroe's remake follows the same narrative thread as Zarchi's film, retaining enough of the plot and offering in-jokes and visual references to the original in order to appeal to its fans. For example, Jennifer (Sarah Butler) buys \$19.78 worth of petrol in a nod to the original year of release, and Andy (Rodney Eastman) ominously greets her at the garage by playing his harmonica – which he also does through part of the rape scenes in the 1978 version. Yet there are sufficient changes that work to distinguish it from Zarchi's film. The rape scenes, although brutal, are less protracted, placing more emphasis on Jennifer's degradation and mental torture than any explicitly sexual act, while the violence and gore during the revenge sequences is intensified in a series of increasingly creative and gruesome set pieces. The addition of the local Sheriff (Andrew Howard) to the gang of rapists both changes the group dynamic and answers the question of why Jennifer exacts her own bloody revenge, rather than going to the police.

In *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1993), Carol J. Clover suggests that *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) is 'an almost crystalline example of the double-axis revenge plot so popular in modern horror: the revenge of the woman on her rapist, and the revenge of the city on the country' (Clover 1993: 115). Leaving aside the woman versus rapist axis for the moment, it is worth first considering how the films deal with said city versus country polarities. The city, representative of civilization and normality, pitched against the threatening, rural Other is a widely recognized trope in horror cinema; consider *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) or *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977), as well as their respective reboots (Nispel, 2003; Aja, 2006).³ The relocation of action from the city to the country in horror cinema (and notably in rape-revenge films) is a trope that, as Clover notes, 'rests squarely on what may be a universal archetype' (Clover 1993: 124), ascribing a folkloric, fairy tale quality to these films:

Going from city to country in horror film is in any case very much like going from village to deep, dark forest in traditional fairy tales. Consider Little Red Riding Hood, who strikes off into the wilderness only to be captured and eaten by a wolf (whom she foolishly trusts), though she is finally saved by a passing woodsman. Multiply and humanize the wolf, read 'rape' for 'eat', skip the woodsman (let Red save herself), and you have *I Spit on Your Grave*.

(Clover 1993: 124)

I Spit on Your Grave, alongside films such as *The Last House on the Left* (Craven, 1972), represented a shift in the 1970s from rape as a narrative aside to rape-revenge as a 'drama complete unto itself [...] (in folkloric terms, what had been a motif graduated into a tale-type)' (Clover 1993: 137). The importance of *I Spit on Your Grave* in understanding rape-revenge as folklore is apparent then, and Clover's assertion that 'horror movies look like nothing so much as folk tales – a set of fixed tale types that generate an endless stream of what are in effect variants: sequels, remakes and rip-offs' (Clover 1993: 10)

3. See Clover (1993: 124–37, 160–65) for a detailed discussion of city versus country themes (or 'urbanoia') in horror cinema and further references.

4. Critic Joe Bob Briggs also observes this in his 2004 DVD commentary: 'These men look at rape as a recreational sport, proving their manhood to one another'.
5. Interestingly, this clearly resounds with radical feminist Robin Morgan's statement that 'knowing our place is the message of rape – as it was for blacks the message of lynchings. Neither is an act of spontaneity or sexuality – they are both acts of political terrorism' (Morgan 1977, in Read 2000: 96) – written a year prior to the release of Zarchi's film.

would further suggest that Monroe's remake should function in much the same way as Zarchi's film. And yet, while the 'wolves' are just as vicious and 'Red' just as vengeful, the blurring of the city/country divide in the 2010 film arguably reduces the folkloric elements of Clover's 'double-axis' plot.

Zarchi's film amplifies the differences between educated, affluent and sophisticated Jennifer and her hillbilly rapists. 'You're from an evil place', Matthew tells Jennifer upon their first meeting, after Hills rewards him with what she refers to as a 'big tip from an evil New Yorker' for delivering her groceries. We are reminded of Jennifer's city status through her internal monologue as she works on her book, and the assumptions that the men draw from this during the harrowing rape scenes, where Andy, mocking her unfinished manuscript as he tears up the pages, exclaims 'New York broads sure fuck a lot'. Jennifer Hills 2010, meanwhile, might not speak with the heavy southern accent of her tormentors, but her city credentials are only assumed, and never made explicit. Despite referral to her as a 'stuck-up city bitch', or a 'big-city, cock-teasing whore', Butler's Jennifer never flaunts this fact in the slightly patronizing way that Keaton's did. There are no establishing shots here of Jennifer's doorman seeing her on her way as she escapes the concrete jungle and noisy streets of Manhattan, as there are in the original film. She stops for petrol in a 4x4, and seems just at home in practical jeans and a check shirt as the men do, rather than her 1978 counterpart's dress and high heels, which signify her as a city dweller. Her initial banter with Johnny (Jeff Branson) is friendly, and there is no mention of where she has travelled from. Her biggest 'crime', then, does not seem to be that she is somehow seen to boast her 'big-city' superiority over the men, as Jennifer arguably does in the original film, but simply that she has the audacity not to find them attractive; to laugh at Johnny when he tries to seduce her, and to unintentionally humiliate him in front of his friends as a result of this rejection. It is also worth noting that perhaps the most crudely drawn southern/country stereotype in the film is old-timer Earl (Tracey Walter), who happens to be the only amiable character that Jennifer encounters, and certainly the only male genuinely concerned for her welfare. The men do, on occasion, take umbrage with what they perceive to be snobbishness on Hills's part: before forcing her to drink liquor during her ordeal, Johnny asks her 'you too good to have a drink with us? What are we to you, bunch of dirt?' However, as Kim Newman observes in his review for *Sight & Sound*, 'she pointedly doesn't express any negative attitude on class grounds, and even when she comes back for revenge belittles them not for their backgrounds but for their actions (which, in this context, makes her saintly)' (Newman 2011). It is not my intention here to suggest that the city versus country dichotomy is not an issue in *I Spit 2010*, but rather that this axis is played out in the narrative through the men's own insecurities rather than Jennifer believing herself to be superior in any way, and that this is ultimately used as their excuse for attacking her. Clover discusses the rapes of the original as a sporting act that functions as a test of group dynamics and hierarchy, with Jennifer as mere playing field on which this game is carried out (Clover 1993: 122).⁴ This is certainly evident here, in Johnny's need to regain respect as ringleader of the gang after Hills humiliates him, and in the power struggle between Johnny and Sheriff Storch, who asserts his authority by delegating tasks during Jennifer's assault. But the rapes are also clearly the group's way of teaching the 'stuck up city bitch' a lesson and an attempt to put her back in what they see to be her place.⁵ Thus, Clover's 'double axis' of city versus country and man (as rapist) versus woman function in the remake in ways that are intertwined.

The attacks on Hills are noticeably different across the two versions of *I Spit* – most obviously in the screen time dedicated to the act of rape itself. While both of the films devote around 25 minutes to these scenes, the original shows three separate, increasingly violent rapes that take up much of this time. The remake instead emphasizes Jennifer’s psychological assault and humiliation. Over a period of twenty minutes, Hills is forced to drink liquor, has lit matches thrown at her, and is made to perform fellatio on first a bottle and then a pistol (‘if I don’t like your enthusiasm, I may cum bad’, Johnny warns her), before escaping – only to encounter Storch. Initially believing him to be a potential saviour, a twist reveals the Sheriff to in fact be the leader of her gang of tormentors and thus her ordeal begins anew as she is made to strip and dance for the group. The focus on Hills’s bullying in the remake coincides with feminist discourses of rape as a display of man’s violent power over women rather than as an explicitly sexual act; these men appear more angry than aroused.⁶ The attacks are largely shot in a similar way to those in Zarchi’s film in respect to the point of view with which the audience is awarded. As with the original scenes, the initial intrusion is from Jennifer’s perspective. The group enter her cabin as we watch from inside, just as helpless as she is; the viewer is not offered the opportunity to identify with her attackers as they conspire to break in. The camcorder footage Stanley (Daniel Franzese) shoots, witnessed by the audience first hand, positions the perspective briefly with the gang, but rather than ‘encouraging viewer complicity’ with the rapists, as the BBFC suggest in a press statement justifying their associated required cuts (Anon. 2010), it instead acts self-reflexively, forcing the audience to question what they are seeing, while also highlighting Jennifer’s discomfort by having her effectively address the camera. When the first rape occurs, we witness the events equally from both Matthew (Chad Lindberg) and Jennifer’s points of view. By the second attack, association and empathy is solely with Jennifer. The shots directly from her perspective begin to blur, Johnny addressing the camera directly as Jennifer blacks out, in effect making the audience ‘fade out’ with her. Similarly, as the next scene begins, so the viewer is aligned with Hills, distorted snatches of the men’s post-rape jeering vaguely heard as she comes to and the shot comes in to focus. It would be difficult to argue that the scenes present rape in any way other than as a despicable, violent act or that we are encouraged to identify with anyone other than the victim. While the remake does differ in its presentation of Jennifer’s rape, then, it essentially works in the same way as the original, albeit with slicker production values and an emphasis on the threat of assault rather than the attack itself. Ultimately, however, it is the revenge section of Monroe’s film that displays the starkest difference to Zarchi’s *I Spit on Your Grave*, and it is Jennifer’s return as avenger that I will now consider.

6. See Read (2000: 104–05) for discussion on this perspective of rape.

REVENGE, ROLE REVERSAL AND THE ‘MONSTROUS’ FEMININE

In her study *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed discusses Hills as being representative of the ‘all-powerful, all-destructive, deadly *femme castratrice*’ (Creed 1993: 129). In her dual roles of both symbolically castrated (through the act of rape) and literal castrator (with the emphasis ultimately on the latter), Jennifer’s revenge is shown to be justifiable and her actions sympathetic. Yet, Creed argues, the film remains misogynistic in spirit, mainly due to the eroticized depiction of male torture, and its resulting association of death with masochistic pleasure (Creed 1993: 130). Matthew is enticed into

7. Creed discusses the murder of Matthew as being 'in the mode of a sacrificial rite', with Jennifer 'dressed in the garb of a priestess or nymph' (Creed 1993: 129), thus further cementing the association between ritual, eroticism and death.

the woods by Hills,⁷ who bares her body with a promise that she could have given him 'a summer to remember for the rest of your life', then encourages him to penetrate her before she tightens a noose around his neck at the very moment of his ejaculation. After having Johnny literally stare down the barrel of her gun, she chooses not to shoot him, instead taking him back to the cabin. She masturbates him in the bath before severing his penis, his initial reaction being to mistake pain for intense pleasure before he looks down to see his arterial blood spurt forth. While the need to first seduce her rapists in order to then kill them could be understood as some kind of feminist statement, perhaps the use of her body and sexuality as her ultimate weapons, the way in which Jennifer lures her rapists to their eventual deaths is decisively problematic – not so much in the use of seduction to entrap her tormentors-turned-victims, but in the fact that (and particularly in Matthew's case) she actually follows through with the sexual acts offered as allurements. Conversely, 2010 Jennifer's method for capturing her attackers involves no enticement, no luring them with nudity or the promise of a 'nice, hot bath'. Instead, they are caught in bear traps or knocked out with a baseball bat; the one exception being to expose her behind to Johnny anonymously in order to get him close enough to hit him over the head with a crowbar. Furthermore, and in parallel to how Jennifer's sexuality is portrayed and used in each film, there is a very distinct contrast in the way she is physically presented across the versions. Keaton spends much of the first act in a bikini, a dress or apparently bra-less in a thin shirt, and is often heavily made up. Butler, meanwhile, is usually seen in jeans, running gear or pyjamas and minimal make up. The early, brief scene in which she sunbathes by the lake in a bikini was added, according to Monroe in his director's commentary, as a homage to similar shots of Keaton in Zarchi's original.

For Creed, in *I Spit on Your Grave*, 'woman-as-victim is represented as an abject thing, [while] man-as-victim is not similarly degraded and humiliated' (Creed 1993: 130). The remake certainly addresses this, primarily by turning each of the attackers' own perversions back on them during Jennifer's revenge. Thus, self-confessed 'ass-man' Storch is anally raped with a loaded shotgun in a mirrored attack, which follows Jennifer's subjection to a similar violation at the hands of the Sheriff. Voyeur Stanley, who filmed Jennifer's assault, has his eyelids pried open with fishing hooks and his eyeballs smeared with fish guts before they are pecked out by a murder of CGI crows while his own camera records his torture; and Andy gets his face dunked in a lye bath as a consequence of his near-drowning Jennifer in a dirty puddle. Johnny, who reduced Hills to animal status during her ordeal, labelling her a show horse and commanding she show him her teeth, is referred to as an 'ornery stallion' and has his own teeth pulled with pliers before she produces a pair of shears, taunting 'you know what they do to horses that can't be tamed, Johnny? They geld them'. Creed discusses the significance of pulling teeth in Freudian dream analysis, concluding that the meaning of such an act, if the tooth was understood to represent the penis, could be interpreted threefold: as an act of castration, intercourse or masturbation (Creed 1993: 117–19). This association of castration with sexual gratification again signifies a kind of symbolic masochistic pleasure, an element of the original film that, as stated earlier, caused Creed to ultimately view it as a misogynistic text (Creed 1993: 130). Despite this connection, I would suggest that the literal pulling of Johnny's teeth in the remake prior to his actual castration, and the methods Jennifer uses to capture him (violence as opposed to seduction) only serve to further distance

Butler's Hills and her vengeance from Keaton's siren and the eroticism of the original's equivalent scene.

Even Matthew's death, via an unwittingly self-inflicted shotgun blast through Storch's body, is reflective of his reluctant complicity in the attacks. Initially refusing to take part in Jennifer's humiliation, vulnerable Matthew only rapes Jennifer after bullying from the other men and Johnny's threat to 'get your clothes off, Matthew, or I'll slice her from chin to cunt'. His attack on Hills is a direct attempt to save both Jennifer from this fate and himself from a potential beating from Johnny and exclusion from the group. And yet, as we have clearly established that Matthew both knows the act to be wrong (he verbally defends Hills, refuses to participate in her assault until Johnny's warning, vomits immediately afterward in disgust, and subsequently suffers flashbacks of the attacks) and ultimately – physically, at least – enjoys it regardless of this fact (he orgasms), he must suffer the consequences of his involvement. As Jennifer states before tightening a noose round his neck, in response to his apologetic exclamations: 'it's just not good enough'. Matthew wakes up to find himself tied to a chair, a string looped round his wrist (in place of the rubber bands he nervously plays with throughout the first half of the film) that leads to the trigger of the shotgun buried inside Storch but unknowingly pointing in his direction. Despite Storch's warning, Matthew moves to free his arms, killing both himself and the Sheriff – his death explicitly linked to another person in much the same way as his place as Jennifer's rapist was influenced by other members of the gang.

Clover suggests that we may choose to interpret the ways in which Jennifer 1978 dispatches her attackers as 'symbolic rapes, the closest a penis-less person can get to the real thing', but argues that 'the film itself draws the equation only vaguely, if at all [...] it is an available meaning, but the fact that it is not particularly exploited suggests that it is not particularly central' (Clover 1993: 161). The brutal acts of torture in the remake can in contrast be understood as explicitly symbolic rapes that mirror Jennifer's own violations. The restraints that each of the men find themselves in – absent from the original – reflect how Hills was pinned down by the men as they took turns raping her. The intrusions on the male body – Storch's shotgun rape, Stanley's eyes being pecked out, and Johnny being forced to perform fellatio on a pistol before his teeth are wrenched out and his severed penis is stuffed into his mouth – are in direct response to Jennifer's forced anal, vaginal and oral penetrations. The language she uses either explicitly quotes her rapists jeers of 'no teeth, show horse', 'deep, deep, deep' and 'suck it, bitch', or otherwise highlight how she has turned the tables in ways they could not have imagined possible: 'now it's my turn to fuck you'. This gender role reversal is furthered by the men begging, crying and screaming during their torture, displays of abject terror that traditionally, according to Clover, are gendered feminine (Clover 1993: 51). Thus they are reduced to shows of female traits, a further humiliation that enhances their symbolic castrations. Johnny does respond to pain – 'even your boys didn't piss themselves', Jennifer taunts in response to his reaction to her pulling his teeth. But as the only member of the gang who refuses to cave in and plead, instead laughing maniacally and yelling 'fuck you' at Hills through a mouthful of blood, he must be literally (as opposed to symbolically) castrated as the ultimate punishment for his actions.

If the fates of her rapists result in them being demasculinized, then Jennifer as their torturer surely runs the risk of becoming phallicized, not just the ultimate 'Final Girl' (Clover 1993), but a near monster who stalks, captures and

8. See Jamie Graham (2010), John DeFore (2010), Scott Weinberg (2010), Peter Hall (2010) for examples.
9. Monroe observes in his director's commentary that, although Chastity's subsequent fate is never made clear, this was not addressed as he never assumed viewers would think that Jennifer could harm the girl.

tortures her prey with practically superhuman strength and prowess. Indeed, one of the issues critics seem to hold with the remake is this shift in Jennifer's personality between the rape and revenge halves of the narrative, and the resulting potential loss of sympathy towards her character.⁸ Yet this seems an illogical complaint, not least because these two sides of Jennifer represent her as victim and victor, captive and captor, raped and symbolic rapist: dichotomous roles that would obviously see her adopt different traits. Furthermore, Jennifer's strength and determination, her will to fight, her intelligence and physical fitness have already been made apparent throughout the first half of the film. What could be a problematic portrayal of Jennifer as unsympathetic avenger is further balanced with glimpses of the woman she was prior to her ordeal, in the fleeting expressions of hesitance, sadness and disgust on her face as she conducts her revenge. Storch begs Jennifer to release his young daughter (the ironically named Chastity), taken temporarily by Hills as bait, with the plea 'she's just an innocent girl'. 'So was I', Jennifer responds sombrely.⁹ Bitter reminders throughout the torture scenes of the men's nature keep sympathy firmly on Jennifer's side, and her actions justified; Storch's last words to her are 'I'll rape you in hell; you're just a piece of meat. I'll find you, I'll hunt you down in hell, you bitch'.

Although Hills is represented as a sympathetic character throughout her revenge, there is no doubt that her acts, and the determination with which she carries them out, are indeed monstrous. This is enhanced by her physical absence during a twenty-minute mid-section that divides the rape and revenge halves of the narrative. We do not see Jennifer's slow recovery and her pre-emptive praying to God for forgiveness as we do in Zarchi's film, although similar scenes were initially shot (and seen in early trailers). Instead, the focus is on the rapists, their group dynamic collapsing and paranoia growing as Jennifer, unseen and anonymous, begins to stalk them over the course of a month – stealing Stanley's home video of the attacks and sending it to Storch's wife, and dropping dead birds on Johnny's doorstep (a motif repeated from her own protracted torture earlier in the film). Again, rather than allowing the audience to identify or sympathize with the men during these sequences, with the possible exception of Matthew, we are instead reminded of their earlier acts. Johnny tries out his pick-up lines on another potential victim. Andy voices disbelief at Matthew's remorse, telling the group 'I think he even feels guilty'. And Storch, in an attempt to tie up 'loose ends', shoots Earl, a man he has known since childhood, at point blank range. Jennifer's sudden, almost silent return after this point, and especially her brutal acts of vengeance, contribute towards a positioning of Monroe's film as one that belongs firmly within the horror genre. Understanding *I Spit* 2010 as a remake, and comparatively analysing it in this context alongside Zarchi's film, is undoubtedly important in addressing its key themes. But in order to establish how the film functions within its own genre context, and indeed to appreciate the necessity of the changes made, Monroe's film should also be considered alongside recent trends in contemporary horror cinema.

CONTEMPORARY GENRE TRENDS, TORTURE PORN AND RETRIBUTION

Jacinda Read has argued that categorizing rape-revenge as a sub-genre of horror is problematic, not least due to its parallels with other genres such as the Western, the absence of a clearly defined and unsympathetic monster, and

the fact that other revenge dramas are not usually considered within the realms of horror cinema (Read 2000: 25–27). Instead, she suggests rape-revenge should be understood as a ‘narrative structure which has been mapped over other genres’ (Read 2000: 25). Arguably then, by this understanding, Zarchi’s 1978 *I Spit on Your Grave* is not easily defined as a horror film, and certainly not when judged by more recent genre conventions. The target audience for the remake, meanwhile, is not comprised primarily by fans of 1970s exploitation cinema – with the notable exception of those curious to see how Zarchi’s version has been adapted. Rather, Monroe’s film is made for a new, young horror audience expecting *Hostel*-esque (Roth, 2005) gruesomeness, and it is to these potential viewers that the film must ultimately appeal. The early buzz and subsequent marketing for the film does rely on the notoriety of the original, a strategy frequently used when promoting horror remakes. This is most obvious in the posters and DVD covers that practically replicate the original’s promotional imagery, an unmistakable reference to the infamous, somewhat sexualized shot of Hills from behind, dirty and wounded, her white underwear and shirt (seen in neither version) torn, carrying a bloody knife (a weapon that Jennifer never actually brandishes during the remake). Zarchi’s approval of the remake has also been promoted; he retains an executive producer credit and is included in DVD extras discussing the new version as a stand-alone entity, and as a huge compliment and tribute to his original. Yet *I Spit on Your Grave* 2010 is clearly not simply promoted as a respectful retelling of Zarchi’s film.

Early reports in the trade press of production company CineTel acquiring the rights to the screenplay suggested that ‘contemporary genre fare has become so graphically violent that the original doesn’t seem as outrageous as it did 30 years ago’, and claimed that the producers were looking at ways to ‘ratchet up the shock factor’ (Fleming 2008). CineTel President Paul Hertzberg told *Variety*: ‘After seeing what was done with an R rating on films like “Saw” [Wan, 2004] and “Hostel”, we think we can modernize this story, be competitive with what this marketplace expects and not have to aim for an NC-17 or X rating’ (Hertzberg, in Fleming 2008). In acknowledging these films as inspiration for *I Spit on Your Grave*’s adaptation, and by expressing their intention to intensify the ‘shock factor’, the remake’s producers explicitly align the film with a cycle of successful, graphically violent horror that had become popular in the mid-2000s. *Hostel* and *Saw* were included – alongside *The Devil’s Rejects* (Zombie, 2005), *Wolf Creek* (Mclean, 2005) and others – in a 2006 *New York* magazine article by critic David Edelstein to express his personal concerns over a new wave of explicitly violent horror films that he dubbed ‘torture porn’. Edelstein identified these as predominantly mainstream horror films that featured extreme gore and bloodshed, usually within ultraviolent scenes of protracted torture, typically inflicted upon ‘decent people with recognizable human emotions’, and which presented an arguably more ambiguous sense of morality than their generic predecessors (Edelstein 2006). Edelstein’s ‘torture porn’ label became the established term for the more visceral horror cinema of the last decade, although it has attracted criticism from horror fans, critics and academics alike.¹⁰ Adam Lowenstein (2011) goes so far as to argue that ‘“torture porn” does not exist’, suggesting that the term ‘spectacle horror’ is a more appropriate working definition for ‘the staging of spectacularly explicit horror for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as shock or terror, but without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development or historical allegory’ (Lowenstein 2011: 43).¹¹ The popularity of the torture porn/spectacle horror film remained

10. Hostel director Eli Roth also highlights film-makers’ discomfort with the term:

It shows a lack of understanding and ability to understand and appreciate a horror film as something more than just a horror film. The gore blinds them to any intelligence that goes into making the film. And I think that the term ‘torture porn’ genuinely says more about the critic’s limited understanding of what horror movies can do than about the film itself.

(Roth, in Capone 2007)

11. It is well beyond the scope of this article to consider the wealth of academic writing on torture porn, but studies of the cycle remain prevalent as the trend continues. In addition to Lowenstein, see also for example Dean Lockwood (2009), Christopher Sharrett (2009), Jeremy Morris (2010) and Steve Jones (2010). Jones also has both an essay and a monograph on the cycle forthcoming (both 2013). A number of essays on other areas of genre cinema also make reference to the influence of torture porn (most notably its aesthetics) – see for example Craig Frost’s (2009) analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake, and Johnny Walker’s (2011) discussion of contemporary British horror cinema.

12. See Kim Newman (2006), David Church (2006), Xavier Mendik (2006) for examples.

evident throughout the latter part of the decade with a *Hostel* sequel (Roth, 2007) (followed by a third film, released direct to video [Scott Spiegel, 2011]), and six further, successful instalments of the *Saw* franchise between 2005 and 2010 (as well as a theme park ride and two video game releases). These aside, however, it would be difficult to locate many later texts featuring spectacle horror tropes among mainstream genre cinema (where, according to Edelstein, torture porn belongs), or to suggest that films lumbered with the description feature many connections other than their visual extremities. Critical failures such as *Captivity* (Joffé, 2007) and *The Tortured* (Lieberman, 2010) are difficult to place alongside controversial foreign fare like *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (Six, 2009), *Srpski film/A Serbian Film* (Spasojevic, 2010), or the new French extreme cinema such as *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008), *Frontières/Frontiers* (Gens, 2007) or *À l'intérieur/Inside* (Bustillo and Maury, 2007), and yet are often discussed almost interchangeably as part of a torture porn 'cycle', despite their varying themes.

The association of any contemporary genre film (and particularly American horror) with torture porn does risk the imposition of a particular allegorical reading of its themes. Edelstein's article aligned the trend with post-9/11 debates surrounding the ethics of torture, debates 'fuelled by horrifying pictures of manifestly decent men and women (some of them, anyway) enacting brutal scenarios of domination at Abu Ghraib' (Edelstein 2006). Metaphorical associations with 9/11, the subsequent War on Terror, and media circulated images of abused Abu Ghraib prisoners have been made by critics and academics in discussions of many of the films, especially *Hostel*.¹² Similar suggestions have been made of *I Spit on Your Grave*, most notably with reference to its torture imagery. Kevin J. Wetmore argues that 'all of the images in the film are lifted directly (if, perhaps presented more extremely) from Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. Naked men, suspension in chains, waterboarding, stress positions, beatings, chokings, all designed to humiliate and cause pain are present' (Wetmore 2012: 113). Furthermore, Wetmore suggests that in showing Jennifer's attacks as responses to her own assault, the torture is defensible: 'Torture, humiliation and terror are justified if one is using them in response to the same. Like the end of both *Hostel* films, it is acceptable for an American to do this to those who did this to Americans' (Wetmore 2012: 113). The interpretation of Andy's punishment as explicitly representing waterboarding, and the men's restraints as holding them in stress positions, along with the observation that Hills's jeans and vest are 'clothing more suggestive of the military than suggestive of being suggestive' (Wetmore 2012: 112), clearly aligns Jennifer with the American forces and her rapists as camp prisoners. Yet this interpretation of meaning is problematic – in *I Spit on Your Grave* and potentially for rape revenge films more broadly – not least because it risks ignoring the important central issues of gender, sex and rape in the film. The suggestion that the film is concerned with allegories of American vengeance bypasses the obvious point that the men are also, in fact American (and that their 'otherness' is identified predominantly through their gender, rather than their geographical origins, as discussed earlier in this article). The tortures inflicted upon the men are highly personal punishments for their respective parts in Hills's assault; both series of attacks are difficult to see as metaphorical representations of terrorism or subsequent American retaliation.

The mirrored suffering of the rape and revenge sections of the narrative – the men torture Hills, Hills tortures them in symbolically equal ways – aims to validate both Jennifer's actions and her new-found, 'monstrous' personality;

her rape and humiliation serving as retributivist justification for both the punishments she inflicts and her change in demeanour. As Jeremy Morris (2010) says of victims-turned-torturers in films, 'such role reversals are one technique that encourages the audience to "be on the side of" the torturer' (Morris 2010: 45). Justification for Hills's revenge is further strengthened through the use of 'equal-punishment retributivism' (Morris 2010: 46), in those inventive tortures that reflect Jennifer's own suffering.¹³ It is worth noting here that, in keeping with the idea of 'suitable' reverse punishment, Jennifer, while obviously being responsible for their suffering and ultimately their inevitable deaths, does not actually 'kill' a single one of them. The men are left to bleed (Johnny, Stanley) or burn (Andy, in acid) to death, or their fates are put in each other's hands (Storch and Matthew). Hills is not present at the moment of any of their deaths, just as the audience is not made privy to their last breaths (again, aligning identification with her) – we hear the men scream, see them struggle and suffer, but then cut to see their lifeless faces, post-death. Jennifer leaves them for dead in much the same way as the men did her after she jumped from a bridge to escape them – and they intended her death just as she then sets up theirs.

Torture porn is perhaps best understood here at the most basic level through Lowenstein's spectacle horror model then – its most obvious and undeniable tropes being the visual presentation of suffering and explicit violence. While Jennifer's drawn out torment at the hands of her rapists is evident of these trends, the revenge half of *I Spit on Your Grave* certainly pushes them, with cleverly designed traps and restraints, painful and ultimately explicitly gory tests of physical endurance, and that eye-for-an-eye retributive logic that would not be out of place in a rurally set *Saw*. The association with a torture porn aesthetic is also apparent in the teaser poster – Jennifer brandishing her bloody shears, with the emphasis on her weapon, above the threatening tagline 'it's date night' (a line she actually turns on Johnny). In addition to its torture porn imagery, *I Spit on Your Grave* also employs other motifs from horror cinema more widely. From early in the film, the use of jump-shocks, POV shots of Jennifer stalked unknowingly through Stanley's camera, and an added intense score all aim to increase the suspense and to explicitly code the film as belonging to the contemporary horror genre. The shift towards a more 'obvious' horror formula in *I Spit on Your Grave* is somewhat similar to the remake of Wes Craven's 1972 rape-revenge film *The Last House on the Left* (Iliadis, 2009) – which may have faced similar potential problems with its genre identification.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately then, while any potential feminist message in *I Spit on Your Grave* 2010 is arguably confused by the representation of its protagonist as a monster (albeit a sympathetic one), I would suggest that this is as a result of the need and deliberate attempt to position the film clearly within a particular contemporary genre context, and to market it as such. Furthermore, and despite the near demonizing of Jennifer, it could be maintained that Monroe's film not only interprets the perceived feminist agenda of Zarchi's original, but actively enhances this theme – Butler's Hills does not need to exploit her sexuality as a precursor to vengeance in the way in which Keaton's Jennifer does. While the plot does need to be understood within the context of *I Spit* as a remake, and thus takes the rape-revenge storyline and neatly maps it over

13. See Morris (2010) for a more in-depth discussion on philosophical theories of retributive justice and torture horror.

Monroe's version, the film can be seen to comparatively progress elements of other, recent films with which it may be thematically grouped. The most obvious of these would be Dennis Iliadis's *The Last House on the Left* – a film that had its rape victim survive the ordeal (the character dies in Craven's version) just to have her passive during the second act, as her mother and father undertake vengeance on her behalf. This parental revenge for the rape (and murder, in these instances) of a child is seen elsewhere in films like *The Horseman* (Kastrissios, 2008), *Les 7 Jours du Talion/7 Days* (Grou, 2010) and *The Tortured*. Jennifer battles until the final frame just as the heroines of so-called 'survivalist' horrors *Haute Tension/Switchblade Romance* (Aja, 2003), *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), or *Eden Lake* (Watkins, 2008), but unlike these women is neither recaptured (*Eden Lake*) nor revealed to be delusional (*Switchblade Romance*, *The Descent*) in a last minute twist. Here is a strong, smart and determined female protagonist who not only survives, but returns to avenge her own violations, and although there is no suggestion of a 'happy ending' for Hills after justice is supposedly served, she is seen in the final shot of the film having lost neither her mind nor her life, but instead calmly reflecting on her actions. To appropriate the title of Marco Starr's 1984 defence of *I Spit on Your Grave*: J. Hills – version 2.0 – is alive.

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