

“A LITTLE BIT OF EVERY WOMAN’S RAGE”: FEMINIST VIOLENCE ON SCREEN

The Female Avenger, Women’s Anger, and Rape-Revenge Film and Television. By Margrethe Bruun Vaage. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. Pp. 206. ISBN 9781399532112.

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Traditionally, violence and anger are associated with masculinity rather than femininity, and therefore, so is their depiction. Representing rape on screen, or taking revenge for said rape is naturally transgressive, but the method of depicting it greatly affects not only the result but also audience’s reactions. In the socio-cultural *Zeitgeist* that includes the #MeToo movement (and its ramifications), the fourth wave of feminism, and their backlash somewhat simultaneously, addressing such a controversial theme as rape-revenge narratives is a challenging task. Margrethe Bruun Vaage’s monograph titled *The Female Avenger, Women’s Anger and Rape-Revenge Film and Television* examines what she terms as the rape-revenge convention, across genres, decades, and directors, and offers comprehensive, convincing readings of the emotional, affective aspects of rape-revenge films.

The volume already at first glance manages to offer a glimpse into the complexities of these narratives. The cover image from Coralie Fargeat’s *Revenge* (2017), also used as a poster for the film itself, shows Matilda Lutz in the role of the protagonist, Jen, pointing a shotgun towards the camera. She is visibly shaken – with tears in her eyes – as she stands in the desert; and yet, a big, pink, star-shaped earring is hanging from her left ear. The image outlines the sharp contrast between the angry, violent narratives, on the one hand, and the female protagonists – often victims – on the other. In Bruun Vaage’s reading, Jen is already transformed into the avenger she needs to become to survive, and the image thus marks the most crucial motif linking the films that the author discusses. Bruun Vaage also points out the clear associations between *Revenge* and the #MeToo movement that heavily shaped rape-revenge narratives, which further reinforces the connections between the well-chosen, representative cover image and the themes discussed in the volume.

Bruun Vaage almost effortlessly navigates the line of discussing films, including *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (dir. David Fincher, 2011), *Twilight Portrait* (dir. Angelina Nikonova, 2011), *Women Talking* (dir. Sarah Polley, 2022), *The Nightingale* (dir. Jennifer Kent, 2018), *Blue Steel* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 1990), *Promising Young*

Woman (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020), *Irreversible* (dir. Gaspar Noé, 2002), and *Holiday* (dir. Isabella Eklöf, 2018); and television series such as *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020). This list, however, is far from complete: although the corpus is already extensive and maybe somewhat overwhelming, the author manages to showcase an impressively deep and overarching knowledge of the topic as she mentions films and series wherever appropriate and applicable, without that becoming a burden to the volume. Although the volume is sometimes heavy-handed with plot descriptions, the author aptly highlights the emotional and affective nuances of rape-revenge narratives, especially in the context of the contemporary feminist wave.

While the effects of different assaults, including rape, have been well-researched across numerous fields, female anger, especially vindictive anger serves as the overarching theme, a key notion for Bruun Vaage. She observes the transformation female protagonists need to go through in order to leave behind their victimhood and “[live] out the contradiction experienced by many women as they try to make sense of femininity and feminism” (2024, 49). Arguing that female avengers inherently exist in gendered contradictions, the author showcases numerous theories and filmic tools representing these complexities in order to point out that the tools and the literature all focus on the rape-avenger characters’ fight being eroticised. She also contends that even though these struggles seem to be unalienable from the convention itself, recent films still manage to break away from this tradition. Vindictive anger is positioned as a catalyst for the protagonist’s transformation and a clear separation from traditional femininity; it is an emotion that “communicates how violated she feels” and a proof that the protagonist is not echoing the usual, victim-blaming chants from society but is “directing her anger at the rapist” (89). Bruun Vaage’s fundamental claim is that vindictive anger is the “core to the affective structure of the rape-revenge film” (90), and she builds a consistent, persuasive argument throughout her volume to make that point.

In relation to the emotions which the rape-revenge conventions evoke in the viewers, Bruun Vaage explains that audiences might experience a visceral aversion at the representation of rape, at an intensity that murder or other violent acts might not evoke. She highlights that, within narratives, rape is often reduced to a mere plot device or a simple mark of a character being a villain. However, she concludes that this reduction is sharply contrasted by reality, where authorities are rarely able to react to rape in favour of the victim and that social responses are “more unsettled and muddled” (161) than they are to murder or torture. However, Bruun Vaage neglects to touch upon arguments about the actresses who have to act out being raped, the questionable on-set dynamics that are difficult to navigate even though intimacy coordinators are employed and becoming standard practice was one of the

most significant achievements of the #MeToo movement. Bruun Vaage also fails to mention that rape is one of, if not the only, crime that in no way can be justified; but she does mention that rape used to be “silenced and ignored” (163), implying that audiences might not be so used to seeing it on screen or even discussing it.

Bruun Vaage’s comprehensive knowledge of rape-revenge narratives, however, allows for the understanding of changing tendencies in the industry. Thus, she points out that recent films can be positioned within the Feminist New Wave, arguing that these films, especially female filmmakers tend to imply rape – rather than representing it on-screen – or use more subversive methods; therefore, rape ceases to be the centre of attention, allowing the film to focus on the characters and emotions, rather than the violence of the act itself.

Unable to avoid the inherent difficulties of writing about rape-revenge narratives, such as overusing the term or running into tautologies such as “rapists rape” (Bruun Vaage 161), the author still manages to convincingly explore the convention with a corpus that spans decades, genres, tropes, and filmmakers. As for the occasional shortcomings, Bruun Vaage makes up for them in a vast array of theories to support her claims, for which she argues firmly, even though rape as a topic is by default difficult to see from one perspective. Taking into account different aspects and arguments, Bruun Vaage effectively bridges affect, film, and feminist studies to provide multi-faceted, sensitive analyses about a plethora of films. The monograph serves as an important, essential piece of literature in feminist film theory, and possibly a soon-to-be staple of course materials.

