

Jacinda Read: The New Avengers. Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle (Inside Popular Film)

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One has the impression that there were parts of Carol Clover's *Men Women and Chainsaw – Gender in the Modern Horror Film* which made Jacinda Read's blood boil. However, her anger or frustration, although it informs every page of *The New Avengers*, is used as a blunt weapon to bludgeon us into submission. She has only a few points to make but they are relentlessly hammered home. This is because Read is on a crusade. For her, feminism is still a force which exists for cultural change albeit in less radical form than in the past. Feminism, she believes, is not dead or in crisis but in a period of transition or renegotiation. She says: "If we are to make feminism mean more to our students than a degree certificate, we need to find a model of feminist theory which [...] attempts to negotiate the contradictions between their lived experience of femininity/feminism and academic feminism" (p.250).

What she finds objectionable in Clover's work, which applies Laura Mulvey's heavy psychoanalytical approach to the modern horror film, is Laura Mulvey's heavy psychoanalytical approach. Read prefers a more cultural or historical paradigm for interpreting films. Clover views 'rape-revenge' films, such as *I Spit on your Grave* (1977), where the female protagonist is violently raped but through the experience is masculinised and later exacts a bloody revenge, as a horror sub-genre. Although Read doesn't disagree with Clover's thesis that men masochistically identify with the female victim, she feels the 'feminist' avenger is clearly erotised not masculinised during her revenge, supporting her view that feminism and femininity do not have to be mutually exclusive "sexiness is (not) inimical to

the feminist story” (p.35). And in any case, she views the rape-revenge narrative as purely that, a narrative, but a narrative of transformation which “on meeting the discourses of second wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced a historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films [...] which might be usefully read as one of the key ways in which Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing shape of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period” (p.240).

She has turned to the concept of hegemony, where meaning is produced through a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, to produce an alternative account of the relationship between feminism, femininity and popular film. Through extensive textual analysis of a limited number of examples, Read follows the uses the rape-revenge narrative has been put. Rape has always been a motif in melodrama but it can also be found in westerns, *Hannie Caulder* (1971), court room dramas, *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), *The Accused* (1988) and thrillers, *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991). I am surprised Read does not also put forward a stronger case for the SF/action genre. Action heroines Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* series and Sarah Connor in the *Terminator* films are both ‘penetrated’ by the monsters before wreaking their revenge.

Prior to the 1970’s, during the period of pre-feminism, the rape motif was ideally suited to convey the dangers of sexual and financial independence encouraging a return of the woman to the family, however, men did the avenging. After the advent of second wave feminism in the 1970s, women started to revenge their own rapes. Read concludes that the rape motif has been deployed particularly at times of uncertainty about gender roles in society and is certainly not only found as a horror sub-genre.

Post-war unease produced the noir femme fatale. Post-modernism and post-feminism, if indeed feminism is post which Read argues against, has produced the neo-noir fatal femme. She finds the character of Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992) to be a site of renegotiation between the powers of backlash politics inaugurated in the 1980s by the New Right which construct contemporary working women as depressed and terminally single, victims of ‘feminism’, and women as disenfranchised objects, victims of ‘femininity’. Read also sites *The Last Seduction* (1993) as an interesting intersection between the discourses of feminism and Reaganism where the femme fatale’s transgressive greed and ambition are legitimised by the 1980s philosophy of upward mobility and consumerism, ‘having it all’ in both cases. Consequently, far from suggesting that feminism was undergoing a wholesale rejection in the early 1990s, these films suggest a renegotiation was taking place. That is not to say there is no backlash against feminism. A variation of the rape-revenge structure depicts the maternal avenger, that is the mother who avenges her daughter’s rape (*An Eye for an Eye*, 1995). These films could be seen as a response by the New Right to the aspects of feminism found to

be most threatening, attacks on the family and motherhood. The mother's career is seen to be directly to blame for her daughter's rape. The substitution of morally justified mothers for female victim-avengers inserts a New Right ideology into the rape-revenge cycle while diverting potentially subversive feminist politics.

The New Avengers contains some interesting ideas and can be seen as a complement to *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (or vice versa). Read is clearly passionate about her responsibilities as a feminist educator of feminism and the book is deliberately aimed at graduates and academics. However she belabours her points which takes some of the fun away from reading them.

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