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Film Genres after #MeToo: *Promising Young Woman* as a Rape-Revenge Film and a Rom-Com

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ABSTRACT

From 2017 on, the #MeToo movement has resulted in a set of new perspectives and narratives in cinema; narratives, which, so far, have only ever been presented from and for the point of view of the male gaze. A special case in this process is Emerald Fennel's 2020 directorial debut, *Promising Young Woman*. This essay argues that the film not only capitalizes on rape-revenge genre clichés, but it also relies on the tropes of romantic comedy traditions to give a sharp critique of the cultural climate that tolerates, denies, and normalizes rape. The subversion of the male gaze, the centrality of morality in revenge, and the avoidance of the spectacle of female suffering align *Promising Young Woman* with the rape-revenge genre. At the same time, the film's take on the Hollywood myth of the likeable and harmless "good guy" highlights the role of classical romantic comedy conventions in perpetuating rape culture. (ZSOR)

KEYWORDS: #MeToo, rape-revenge, romantic comedy, rape

15 October, 2017. American actress Alyssa Milano retweeted a friend's status: "Suggested by a friend: if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Milano's tweet started a landslide with millions of women stepping forward, often after decades of silence, to talk about the humiliation and harassment they endured, which they had often perceived as a necessary condition of womanhood. As a result, film and other industries have been exposed as systematically overlooking such abuses of power, such as those of Harvey Weinstein's, and overall revealed a toxic work culture in all Hollywood. As Cobb and Horeck contend, "the post-Weinstein reckoning reverberates far and wide: there are key lessons to be learned regarding how other industries—in other countries—work to contest inequity and advance meaningful structural change" (Cobb and Horeck).[1] The #MeToo movement, however, not only reflected on the situation of women within the film industry, but it also functioned as an incentive to revisit how stories about women and by women are being told in film. As a result, in line with the zeitgeist, new perspectives are shown and new narratives are told in cinema; narratives, which, so far, have only ever been presented from and for

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the point of view of the male gaze. These new stories, however, have to navigate in a culture that is based on the repetition of previous cultural patterns—in Fredric Jameson's terms, a culture dominated by pastiche. The portrayal of party rape and the grey area of women being barely able to give consent is one such example of untold narratives, especially as it appears in the now half-century-old rape-revenge film genre. A special case in the history of the genre is Emerald Fennel's 2020 directorial debut, *Promising Young Woman,* which, despite facilitating considerable discussion in online film journalism and inspiring a great number of opinion pieces in the media, has received very little academic attention so far.[2] Although the film, to a certain extent at least, fits what Claire Henry calls "revisionist rape-revenge" (2014), this article argues that *Promising Young Woman* uses and reuses the genre conventions of both rape-revenge and romantic comedy, while it also draws on the logics of pop culture as it appears in popular music and music videos to give a sharp critique of the cultural climate that tolerates, denies, and normalizes rape. In order to support that claim, I shall provide a close reading of *Promising Young Woman* in the light of both genres' conventions, exploring how the film relies on its intertexts and, in general, how new narratives are being told in contemporary pastiche culture.

The title *Promising Young Woman* is clearly a reversal of a typical rape trial trope: "Why ruin the career of this promising young man over a stupid mistake?"—goes the line that leaves the perpetrator acquitted by peers, family, decision-makers, and media, altogether granting forgiveness at a societal scale.[3] The plot of the film sets off ten years after a similarly typical case, a campus party, where a woman is drugged so much that she cannot give her consent and is therefore raped, but this time the story is told from a woman's point of view. The once "promising young woman," Nina Fisher is now dead; she committed suicide shortly after the case. The protagonist of the film is Cassie (Carey Mulligan), Nina's best friend, who left university after the tragedy and now works in a café, and is unable to move on with her life. She lives with her parents and on her free nights she visits various bars, pretending to be completely drunk, waiting for a chivalrous man to "save" her. Invariably, the "good guy" tries to have sex with the semi-unconscious woman. At this point Cassie would reveal to the man that she is in fact very much sober and challenge him. This is when Ryan (Bo Burnham)—Cassie's former university classmate, now a successful pediatrician—enters her life. While they slowly get closer to each other, Ryan's stories about their university classmates wake something in Cassie, and she manufactures a more specific way to revenge her friend now that Nina herself is unable to do so.

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She calls into account her former friend, who never supported Nina after the case, the dean who did not want to "ruin a young man's life" (00.46.26) over a "he said, she said-situation" (00.45.28), and the lawyer who won the man's case by digging up all the embarrassing details from Nina's social media accounts to profile her as a frivolous, inebriate girl, whose alleged behavior was used by the jury to acquit the rapist. Finally, Cassie realizes that the perpetrator, Al Munroe (Chris Lowell), is now preparing to get married, and Cassie goes to the bachelor party where Al, in despair, suffocates her with a pillow. The rapist is arrested with murder charges at his own wedding.

Promising Young Woman **as revisionist rape-revenge**

At first glance, the plot fits in with the rape-revenge genre conventions. The genre, navigating through the ripples of second-wave feminism, introduced the pop culture stock character of the violated woman who returns as an avenging angel (McCaughey 2001, 1).[4] Rape-revenge was however framed as a low-prestige product marketed for an uneducated young male demographic. Contemporary reception is well illustrated by Roger Ebert's review of the now-cult classic *I Spit On Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978):

> It is a movie so sick, reprehensible and contemptible that I can hardly believe it's playing in respectable theaters . . .. This movie is an expression of the most diseased and perverted darker human natures. Because it is made artlessly, it flaunts its motives: There is no reason to see this movie except to be entertained by the sight of sadism and suffering.

The main reason behind Ebert's disdainful opinion might be that the genre can be understood as an extreme realization of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema operates with what she calls narcissistic scopophilia (17), that is, the double pleasure of seeing one's likeness and enjoying the sight of the female shape. She identifies a gendered division between the active and passive roles of men and women respectively (19), contending that "the male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (20). In Mulvey's understanding, (male) spectators necessarily identify with the perspective of the active male protagonist and indulge in the pleasure of watching the female one. Rape-revenge tradition is fundamentally interested in turning the vulnerable female body into a spectacle, which is still true even if the protagonist is female and the second half of the said films capitalizes on the joy of watching violent female revenge. In *I Spit On Your*

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Grave the notorious group rape scene takes up to 34 minutes altogether, urging the spectator to identify with the perspective of the rapists, while the fragile female body remains a spectacle in the second, "revenge" part of the film.

According to Claire Henry, the rape-revenge genre has well-identifiable markers: a young white woman, who is turned from a half-naked victim to a revengeful femme fatale wearing fetish clothes and red lipstick; a two-part structure concluding on the transformative power of violence (rape and revenge), gang rape, castration (4), and a Christian iconography. These features are not only present in "classic" rape-revenge films but are also well identifiable in what Henry calls "revisionist rape revenge films." These latter pieces are often directed by female directors to display the feminine point of view; they experiment with turning around the appropriating and sexualizing male gaze, and contemplate the morality of revenge inasmuch as it provokes a "cycle of vengeance" (Henry 6). *Promising Young Woman* does play with these genre markers, which is clearly visible in the trailers and the one-liner of the movie posters: "Take her home and take your chances." Similarly, reception has been quick to use rape-revenge as a frame of understanding the film. *The Guardian*'s review, for example, concludes that "[t]he film has been billed as a thrilling revision of the tired rape revenge drama, a #MeToo romp that relishes comeuppance for self-justifying bad men" (Horton).

The opening scene situates the film in the paradigm of reverse male gaze, which is characteristic of the revisionist rape-revenge genre. The film opens with a montage composed to Charlie XCX's song, "Boys," starting with the medium close up of middle aged, sweating, paunchy men, first concentrating on their crotch area, then moving on to a metonymic display of the men having fun: hands holding beer, fragments of male faces licking their lips, stained shirts lolling out of the belt. Already at this point, the montage looks comical as it uses the toolkit that is generally used to depict attractive female bodies, similarly to the music video of the very same song, presenting "boys" lifting puppies, posing with water-guns, and pillow-fighting, without any image of the singer herself. After a cut, the music is muted by the general mumble of in-pub conversations, with a full-shot contextualizing the previous images: on the stage of what is presumably a bar, a group of heavily intoxicated office workers are dancing. It is not only the reversal of the oversexualized heterosexual male gaze that is subverted here, but also a foreshadowing of a hunter's sober and sarcastic glance, as Cassie would evaluate her future preys.

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In the rest of the scene the viewer encounters several white-collar workers, visibly less inebriated than the previous gang, who suddenly notice Cassandra, sitting-lying in a semi-crucified position, in an obviously heavily drunk state. One of them, Jerry (Adam Brody) goes to her "to see if she's ok" (00.02.53), offers to call her a cab, but they magically end up in his apartment. Although he presumes the woman to be semi-unconscious, he offers her a huge glass of alcohol, while only spilling a sip to himself, then tries to have sex with the woman, who is lying with her arms spread, again evoking religious associations. With a menacing music in the background, the camera looks down at Cassie to show her eyes popping open, very clear, with an ironic half-smile on her face, asking: "I said what are you doing?" (00.07.36–00.07.40). The scene ends with a jump cut, omitting the exact action she took after revealing her sobriety.

The title appears with sparkling pink letters against a black background with glittery hearts: Promising Young Woman. The letters, evoking both ice cream and blood associations, start to run down, nodding to both genre traditions in question: the shiny rom-com world and the pulpy rape-revenge genre. Meanwhile, an adaptation of "It's Raining Men" is on, which, similarly to "Boys" and almost all the theme songs of the film, focuses on this novel heroine of both popular culture and male fantasies: a strong woman, who is very much aware of her own sexual desires. Also, it should be noted that this specific adaptation is just as evocative of Geri Halliwell's 2001 take on the song as the original version by The Weather Girls. In this sense it is similar to many soundtracks from the film, referencing the noughties—coinciding with the time when Nina and Cassie attended university; way before considerations of fourth wave feminism or #MeToo in general were present in public discourses. (See, for example, Munro.)

Behind the title Cassie appears on her walk home, in daylight, presumably the morning after. The film still maintains the equivocality of revenge, already giving a glimpse into the image of the femme fatale, which is key to the finale of the film. The camera tilts to look at Cassie from her naked feet through her high heels in her hand, her shirt lolling out of her skirt, up to the blood-like red substance running down her arm, resting on a close shot of her face, while she is munching on a hot dog with visible pleasure. The scene plays spectacularly with viewers' expectations, which are obviously shaped by the realization that, based on the introductory scene, *Promising Young Woman* belongs to the rape-revenge genre. The playfulness of the symbolism—the ketchup on her arm looking like blood and the obvious phallic connotations of the hot dog sausage—underline the same idea. The

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camera zooms out into a full shot of Cassie walking, and the film continues with an episode that happens quite frequently to urban women. A group of construction site workers start to catcall her: "Walk of shame! Good time last night, sweetheart?" (00.08.42–00.08.46). Cassie however does not react the way most women would: she does not try to cast her head down and flee the area, attempting to become unnoticed and invisible, as a person in actual shame would. Instead, she stops and returns the gaze. The workers still attempt to urge her to smile, but slowly they start to feel awkward, then threatened, and casting their heads down, they walk away. Besides a very explicit turning over of the male gaze, this scene also depicts Cassandra as a powerful, destructive force, which is also underlined by the moving magnet crane collecting metal junk, which appears in the long shot framing Cassie.

In addition to scrutinizing the mechanics of the male gaze, a frequent trope in revisionist rape-revenge—taken over from classic rape-revenge pieces—is that rape is usually committed by a gang or a group of male friends, and the rapists are habitually depicted as repulsive, their portrayal building on race and class-based stereotypes (Lehman 107). This is where the explicit impact of the #MeToo movement can be best traced in *Promising Young Woman;* while the rape itself was committed by one single man, the revenge is by definition targeted against many. In addition to "good guys" like Jerry, Cassie takes revenge on actual actors in Nina's case: Madison (Alison Brie), their female friend, who still maintains her view that if someone acts like that, it is no wonder something bad happens to her; Dean Walker (Connie Britton), who took Munroe's side; the lawyer who represented the man (Alfred Molina), and the perpetrator himself. It is important to remember that two of the four people are heterosexual women,[5] which already supports one of the main claims of the film: as opposed to classic rape-revenge, rape is not a gang crime here, but a societal one. It accuses not only the actual perpetrator but the entire rape culture, the society that endures, excuses, understates, and normalizes rape.

The revenge of the rom-com

Buchwald et al. define rape culture as follows:

> A complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to

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rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm (Buchwald et al. viii; qtd. in Rentschler 66).

Promising Young Woman suggests that the entire society is complicit in letting such crimes happen: the ones who, with their decisions, allow for these to be committed, but also the ones who tolerate them, who are willing to look the other way. The film's main perpetrators, contrary to classic rape-revenge narratives, cannot be excluded from the social normality, or framed as abject. These are not the rednecks in dirty pants from *I Spit on Your Grave,* shown from a distinctly urban perspective. This time it is the "good guys"—white, urban, well-groomed, educated people, reliable-looking enough for anyone to ask for their help. Casting also underlines the idea that these "good guys," who invariably expose their impure intentions, were cast from "likeable beta-comedy darlings," as a Twitter user puts it (qtd in Bradley). Adam Brody (*The O. C.*), Max Greenfield (*New Girl)*, Christopher Mintz-Plasse (*Superbad*), Sam Richardson (*Veep*), Chris Lowell (*Glow*), and Bo Burnham (*Eighth Grade*) tend to play nice, funny, attractive male protagonists in a selection of romantic comedies that the target audience is probably familiar with (Wittmer).[6]

The film's chilling realization—and probably greatest strength—is that it is not only the rape-revenge genre that reflects on rape culture, but rom-com traditions also belong to (and represent) the very same twisted social order. The casting of the male protagonists and the narrative arch of the film equally support this idea. Regarding its structure, *Promising Young Woman* does not follow rape-revenge logics. The genre, by definition, employs a two-part structure with a central, cathartic turning point: the first half deals with the rape itself, while the second half is about the victim or someone standing for her (her husband, or father) feeding on the traumatic memory to revenge the perpetrator. This structure, therefore, makes it unavoidable to frame violent action against the female body as cathartic and transformative, and result in the fantasy of the strong, seductive, avenging angel and the pleasure of vengeance as a spectacle. In *Promising Young Woman,* none of that happens; in line with Amanda Spallacci's observation, there is a considerable shift from the representation of rape scenes to that of rape traumas. Here the violence took place years before the story begins; it is by no means portrayed as liberating, but as clearly traumatic, as it breaks the lives of both Nina and Cassie into two. The lack of the two-part structure makes the film more comparable to those of romantic comedies than rape-revenge films.

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Tamar Jeffers McDonald defines romantic comedies as films driven by the desire to find love, whose pursuit is presented in a light tone, almost always with a happy ending (9). In spite of the new academic interest in the genre in the last decades (see Mortimer, Kaklamanidou, Deleyto, Filippo, Henry, and Guilluy), the genre is still treated with slight contempt: "saying you like romantic comedies is essentially an admission of mild stupidity" (Kaling, qtd. in Kaklamanidou 1). The revulsion might be explained by the viewers' overt familiarity with the genre's panels: such is the urban environment, the "meet cute"—a funny first encounter of the lovers to be, the "masquerade" in which one (or both) of the couple pretends to be something other than themselves, a public humiliation of one of the lovers to confess their feelings, a love montage composed for a popular song, breaking up and making up, a failed wedding, and of course the happy end that unites the lovers (Jeffers McDonald 118). However, as Betty Kaklamanidou emphasizes, all this works only "in a sociopolitical environment which does not seem to cause any serious problems to their evolving and/or already formed relationship" (8).

As Maria San Filippo and others point out, more recent examples of the genre from the 2010s seem to break with the original formula and the ideological disposition that it entails, rendering it more diverse and suited for contemporary audiences (Filippo 22). The 1990s and 2000s, however, witnessed a flourishing of neo-traditional rom-coms (36); and this is the genre variation that *Promising Young Woman* uses. Just like in the soundtracks, the 2000s is evoked as a point of reference. In *Promising Young Woman,* variations on all the rom-com tropes mentioned appear; the first encounter of Cassie and Ryan, for instance, is a classic meet cute. Cassie works in a café, and Ryan, her former classmate recognizes her. With an unfortunate phrase he implies that selling coffee is inferior to healing. As an apology, he offers that she can spit in his coffee, which she does. Ryan, while maintaining eye contact, drinks the liquid. The theme song of the scene, "Nothing's Gonna Hurt You Baby" by Cigarettes After Sex also underline the (false) sense of safety provided by handsome romantic comedy heroes: "Nothing's gonna hurt you baby/As long as you're with me you'll be just fine."[7] These lines uncomfortably resonate with what Jerry tells Cassie at the beginning while trying to have sex with the (to his knowledge) almost unconscious woman: "It's ok, you're safe."

The reason why viewers do not primarily understand *Promising Young Woman* as a rom-com can be identified by Kaklamanidou's warning about the scale of obstacles. A happy end for Cassie is not possible because she herself

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as a traumatized subject is not ready for that, but it is also inconceivable because rape culture frames their love story. According to rape-revenge clichés, the female protagonist, most often than not, leaves behind her usual urban milieu and experiences the traumatizing rape scenario(s) in a rural area that is foreign and hostile to her (Clover 160–65). *Promising Young Woman,* however, with the exception of the ending, takes place in a city—as it would be expected from a romantic comedy. This is a significant shift, because in the rape-revenge genre the *lex talionis,* that is, the eye for an eye principle is used in a city-countryside axis, which helps to fix the order of the world (Young 46): once revenge is taken, the woman can safely return to civilization where she is once again safe. The fact that the film does not maintain this protective dichotomy between city and country results in the realization that the refined, cultured urban spaces will lose their innocence too. Similarly to casting considerations, the use of rom-com panels is more successful in destabilizing any false sense of safety in the viewer than openly violence-focused rape-revenge films.

Masquerades, as known from romantic comedies, that is, scenarios where one of the lovers pretends to be something other than herself or himself, also appear in *Promising Young Woman,* but with a twist. A prerequisite of Cassie's night-time hunting trips is that she is not simply dressed up pretty or even in a "provoking" fashion, but that each time she goes out; she embodies a certain character. These are maybe girls and women she knows to have gone through the same ordeal, or just ideal types who might as well find themselves in a situation when a "good guy" runs to their rescue: the office worker, the hippie, the Lolita, and the hot disco babe equally get their turns in a sort of menacing danse macabre. Cassie's day-time and night-time appearance is visibly different: her nocturnal characters, although very diverse, invariably wear dark and monochrome tones, while day-time Cassie usually wears girly-romantic clothes with pastel colors and floral patterns. Parallel to that, her usual spaces—her parents' house and the café—along with her nail polish also echo the candy color aesthetics, what Fennell herself calls a kind of "feminine uncanny": "a world that feels familiar and safe and feminine until it isn't" (Bastién), a world that gives a false sense of safety until it reveals its inherent hostility.

When Ryan runs into the seemingly completely inebriated, barely walking Cassie in a bar, supported by a random man, their encounter is followed by yet another rom-com trope: an honest apology (although no explanation) and then making up. As director Fennell points out, "day-time Cassie" is just as much of a mask as her night-time version, but the latter is

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supposed to suggest: "I'm functioning. I'm sweet and easy-going and I'm happy and you don't need to ask me any questions" (Mitchell). At the same time, by the end of the film it also becomes apparent that Ryan is also wearing a mask. Cassie realizes after watching the video of Nina's rape that Ryan was there, laughing with the rest of the people at the party. When she finds it out, it is also followed by a tearful apology and a confession of his feelings. Cassie, however, contrary to rom-com heroines, does not fall into his arms and has no intention to forgive.

The power of kitsch and the logic of repetition

Romantic comedies tend to illustrate mutually acknowledged, budding romance with love montages appealing to the viewers' genre memory, and this is what *Promising Young Woman* also capitalizes on. The montage starts off with Ryan and Cassie's first trip to the pharmacy. The camera loiters over a postcard with two crowned Persian cats against a pink background, saying "I Love You." Meanwhile, the viewer hears Ryan remarking on the significance of the two of them visiting such an everyday place together. The pharmacist's radio plays Paris Hilton's "Stars Are Blind," another early 2000s hit; first Ryan starts lip-syncing and dancing, and Cassie later joins in with the shocked shop assistants and customers looking on. As the music moves from the diegetic to the extradiegetic level, the montage also features the new couple eating pizza with Cassie's boss Gail (Laverne Cox), then, presumably, in Ryan's bed, suggesting that their relationship now includes sex. As in most other cases in the film, popular music is used in an allegorical role. Even the choice of the song is telling: Paris Hilton's only hit, contrary to the rest of the songs that were selected for the film, is not about a woman embracing her sexuality, but a feminine desire for a monogamous, romantic relationship.

However, the music video that was created for the song gives a very different perspective on the meaning of the lyrics, especially in the context of the film. In the video, Hilton plays a photo model starting a liaison with her photographer. The first half of the music video focuses on the romance that is budding in a paradisiac setting, on a white sand beach. The singer, while photographed, maintains eye contact with the man and hence with the viewer too, unambiguously positioning the audience as heterosexual and male. In the last minute of the video the model gets hold of the photographer's camera, taking pictures of the lying man and kneeling above him, as a clear reversal of the iconic Verushka-scene in Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). Unarming the man as such, she steals his car keys from his back pockets, and, at the

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conclusion of the video she happily drives away in his car, alone. Based on the logic of the music video, therefore, both the gaze and the agency are possessed by the female subject who acquires both by offering herself as the object of the gaze—quite similarly to how Cassie "hunts" at the beginning of the film. The music video, as a possible context in which to understand the film, foreshadows that the romantic plotline cannot be maintained in a convincing fashion. Like the cat postcard, it is framed as kitschy, empty, and, to a certain extent, insincere.

The way the song from the pharmacist's radio moves to a non-diegetic level through lip-syncing and becomes a theme song for the montage reveals how the film believes popular culture works. Both the postcard and the music build on empty, deictic phrases, that is, the instability of the freely substitutable nature of first and second person singular personal pronouns. This empty deixis in turn makes it possible to imagine an interpersonal relationship; the postcard, for instance, offers the position of "I" from "I Love You" to anyone who is willing to purchase it. In popular music, the viewer/listener can take either the position of the "I" or the "you." The very same idea is manifested in music videos by popular female artists, where the singer, looking at the camera, takes the first person singular position of the lyrics and unmistakably allocates the position of the "you" to a heterosexual male viewer. The lip-syncing scene of Cassie and Ryan underlines the logic of kitsch in operation in popular culture. Based on that, the participants of a romantic relationship can be substituted by anyone; the lure of popular culture is that everyone can find love, that it can happen to *you, too*. *Promising Young Woman* seems to re-read and twist that statement in the light of the #MeToo movement: it is not only love, but also rape victimhood, that can happen to anyone. This way, the temptation of the rom-com genre is transformed into the barely veiled threat of rape culture; bodies are freely substituted with each other, which is not only the appeal, but also the dark side of popular culture.

Revenge and repetition

This interchangeability of bodies, in fact, results in a kind of narrative repetition that echoes the obsessive repetition of memories in a traumatized person. *Promising Young Woman* does not use the iconic language of trauma that relies on "flashbacks, dreams, and other intrusive repetitions" (Leys 93; referring to Caruth) to present Cassie as a character suffering from post-traumatic symptoms. Broadly speaking, the film is not interested in the representation of individual traumas. Instead, it does present how the means

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of the vengeance Cassie undertakes seem to habitually repeat the deed itself, but this time changing the actors. Her hunting trips that maniacally follow the same pattern also support this idea. Her first act of revenge, for example, against Madison, her former schoolmate, replays the original events. As they get together and Madison gets jovially day-drunk (Cassie pretends to drink champagne with her but in fact she sticks with ginger), Cassie commissions a man to take her to a hotel room and pretend to have had sex with her—very much like how Nina could have felt. Dean Walker is revenged by pretending to kidnap her daughter and telling her that the girl is in the room of a group of very reliable, promising young men, probably offered some alcohol—also similarly to Nina's tragedy. Traumatic repetition is by definition unreflected, leaving the victim unable to interpret or integrate it into her own narrative about herself. Here this is not the case: Cassie's decisions and her acts of revenge are very much the products of a sober and rational mind. "I cannot begin to tell you how much I've thought about this" (01.21.01–01.21.04) she tells Ryan at one point. The cycle of traumatic repetition is transformed into the cycle of violence that is so often criticized in rape-revenge films.

The film's final act of revenge at the bachelor party, where Cassie confronts the rapist himself, also starts off with a similar premise of interchangeable bodies: striptease. This time, Cassandra is admittedly in a costume, wearing a fetish nurse dress as a bitter reference to her failed medical career and quite in line with rape-revenge narratives, pretending to be the stripper one of them paid for. After showing up in the cabin, she drugs the participants, then reveals her identity to Al Munroe, already handcuffed to a bed. As she attempts to use a scalpel to carve the name Nina Fisher all over the man's body, the terrified Al frees one of his hands and chokes Cassie to death with a pillow. At this point the film visibly reverts the voyeuristic position offered by the rape-revenge genre, which forces the audience into an alleged enjoyment of the sight of violence against women. It consistently avoids any visible and overly sexualized provocation of the male gaze: for instance, when Cassie watches the video about Nina's rape, the camera only shows her reaction, excluding any possibility of sexual fantasies and only allowing for empathy from the viewers. In the choking scene, however, Cassie's agony is shown for more than three minutes, but the representation completely lacks erotic overtones. Her face is not visible because of the pillow pushed against her head, it is only her whimpering that is heard. The only movement that grabs the eye is her hand and feet gradually losing strength to resist. The focus of the camera is not on Cassie, but on Al Munroe, who, in a milieu suggesting extreme masculinity, with the embroidered "Yee-Haw"

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on the wall, is crying and moaning, with one hand still tied to the bed, waiting for Cassie to die. This image gives no space to sadistic power fantasies and by no means does it encourage the spectator to identify with his perspective. Joe (Max Greenfield), Al's best friend, when faced with the situation, at first tries to joke it away: "You killed the stripper at your bachelor party? What is it, the '90s?" (1.37.50–1.37.52), evoking yet another genre, the 1990s teen comedy.

Joe offers to help Al get rid of the body. This act is presented in a minute-long sequence that seems to satirize public discourses acquitting rapists. After Joe hugging and consoling the still handcuffed Al in the cabin, reassuring him that "You did nothing wrong. This is not your fault" (01.39.35–01.39.37), the audience is presented an aerial/establishing shot of a valley in the forest, with the sun shining against the camera in warm, golden tones over a trail of smoke. At the same time, "Something Wonderful" from the 1956 musical *The King and I* starts to play—a song that is very different from the other musical choices of the film. On the one hand it is decades older than the rest of the soundtrack, on the other hand, more importantly, this is the only theme song of the film that, although sung by a woman, does not speak from a strong and self-conscious female position; it does not even have a grammatical first-person singular speaker. While images of Al and Joe standing over Cassie's pyre are played, with Joe watching over the scene stoically and Al struggling with guilt and nausea, the lyrics go as follows: "This is a man who thinks with his heart / His heart is not always wise / This is a man who stumbles and falls / But this is a man who tries // This is a man you'll forgive and forgive / And help protect, as long as you live / He will not always say / What you would have him say / But now and then he'll say / Something wonderful" (1.39.48–1.40.54). The lines that originally referred to King Mongkut of Siam, now recontextualized as a theme song for destroying Cassie's body as evidence, can be understood as an ironic take on how society seems to unconditionally forgive "promising young men," even if they are right in the act of burning a body.

The finale of the film, once again, is better understood from the genre of romantic comedies than from that of rape-revenge. A failed wedding in a romantic comedy means the preventing of a somehow flawed unity, eventually resulting in the true lovers finding each other. In *Promising Young Woman,* however, the wedding takes place after Ryan and Cassie break up, what is more, after Cassie's death. Al and Anastasia say their marriage vows, but during the reception, Ryan receives a pre-scheduled text message from Cassie: "You didn't think this was the end, did you?" while Juice Newton's

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"Angel of the Morning" starts to play.[8] As the police arrests Al Munroe for murdering Cassandra Thomas, her messages keep arriving: "Now it is. Enjoy the wedding! Love, Cassie&Nina :-)." The winky emoji that closes Cassie's lines right before the final credits can be understood as a playful take on the frequent closing image of rape-revenge films with the avenging female protagonist looking into the camera in a defiant fashion. Still, it seems that Cassie's message rather rereads rom-com wedding conventions: triumphant music together with the "Cassie&Nina" signature suggests that the desired revenge and unity, from the perspective of Cassie, did actually happen.

This unity is once again rooted in the concept of interchangeable bodies, but at a different level. As already pointed out, Cassie takes revenge in Nina's stead. She literally takes her place, which is also strengthened by the half of the heart-shaped medal worn by Cassie, reading "Nina." When her body is finally incinerated, the only thing that is left is the medal, identifying Cassie as Nina. Considering their special relationship, the one faded childhood photo of the two of them—two indistinguishable, smiling blond girls—together, and the repeated claims of both Nina's and Cassie's parents that the girls were "like daughters" to them, Nina and Cassie can easily be regarded as two sides of the same person, at the very least, at a symbolic level. After the rape and the humiliation, part of her really did die, as Nina did, but part of her tried to move on, to no avail, before she finally sought revenge. The much-discussed and controversial ending of the film is of course utterly dissatisfying if one expects "a moment of triumph" (Bastién), which is invariably provided by rape-revenge films. But if one considers it as a twisted take on the wedding trope of romantic comedies, it can be turned into a statement about how traumas can never be fully resolved: working through a traumatic experience is a painful and, in most cases, unfinishable process.

Empty spaces in popular culture

The fact that the #MeToo-movement was born in the all-permeating culture of pastiche means that it has to search for its own novel means of expression in the empty spaces that are created and opened up by existing pop culture. This sense of pastiche culture permeates *Promising Young Woman*—Cassie can only avenge Nina by taking specific ready-made roles, echoing well-known scenarios; pop music in the film works with the interchangeability of kitsch, and the radical question the film raises comes hand in hand with the recycling and re-weaving of the traditional web of

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genres. *Promising Young Woman* visibly capitalizes on the tropes of both rape-revenge and romantic comedy traditions. One can certainly argue for it being a special case of revisionist rape-revenge—the spectacular subversion of the male gaze, the centrality of morality in revenge, and avoidance of the spectacle of female suffering all seem to support this case. However, the integrity of urban, civilized, modern life is way more threatened by the way Fennell frames the ever-present, but often silenced or ignored phenomenon of rape with the genre of romantic comedy. The Hollywood myth of the likeable and harmless "good guy," the regularity and normality of funny romance stories based on mutual deception, a popular culture soaking in a sexualized vision of violence all contribute to many promising young women posting a status update: "Me too." Their tales are as old as time, but they were muted before the 2010s.

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Notes

In 2022, a considerably shorter version of the present paper was published in Hungarian; see O. Réti.

1. At the same time, there is a newfound academic interest in the impact of the movement pertaining to the film industry (Verhoeven, Coate, and Zemaityte; Cobb and Horeck)

2. At the time of submitting this paper, the only research paper dealing with the film is York's 2021 study.

3. Probably the most well-known example is Brock Turner's 2016 case, who was habitually referred to by the media as the "Stanford swimmer" even after he was proven guilty and sentenced. See: LaChance 2016.

4. Claire Henry gives a convincing case of rape-revenge films considered as a genre. See Henry 2014.

5. In both cases, the film clearly emphasizes the fact that they are mothers.

6. In addition, in the case of Burham, his image of a" good guy" mostly originates from his satirical stand-up comedies from the early 2010s on.

7. The very same theme song is quite frequently used in contemporary film and television (including *The Handmaid's Tale, Shameless,* and *Big Little Lies*), regularly suggesting a sort of longing for less complicated times.

8. The lyrics of the 1981 song depict a then taboo extramarital relationship from the perspective of the woman. The words in this context might be read as an admission of deliberate death: "There is no need to take a stand / For it was I who chose to start / I see no need to take me home / I'm old enough to face the dawn." At the same time, the angel symbolism of the lyrics might also evoke the figure of the avenging angel.

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