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Revenge

Tony Michael
York University, tonymichael@bell.net

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Revenge

Abstract

This is a film review of *Revenge* (2017), directed by Coralie Fargeat.



Revenge (2017), dir. Coralie Fargeat

Revenge narratives, film or otherwise, have been a popular theme for as long as humankind has been telling stories. It is the oft-told story about human-on-human revenge and divine-on-divine revenge. It later became very popular in religious traditions to offer divine revenge for human suffering, especially for the self-perceived “oppressed.” Divine revenge is an essential element of most apocalyptic writings and is a key theme in the New Testament Book of Revelation, which even outlines the quantitative aspect of revenge, i.e., if you take one captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. (NRSV 13:10). Revenge is about justice. It is perhaps the oldest code known to humankind — “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

A fascinating sub-genre of the revenge story is the one of rape-revenge. This theme, made popular in the 1970s exploitation film era, brought with it very graphic scenes of violence, most of which were constructed through the lens of male directors. What makes the film, *Revenge* (2017) interesting is that the director, Coralie Fargeat, is female and so the violence and the justice,

one could argue, is the construction of the female gaze and raises potential questions about how the female might imagine justice (revenge) differently from the male. Another particularly fascinating dimension to this film is its apparently deliberate use of biblical imagery at key points.

The film opens with a helicopter flying across a desert somewhere in the southern United States to drop a man (Richard) and a woman (Jennifer) at an isolated hunting villa. As soon as they land, the pilot hands over to Richard a very small packet as a gift containing peyote. At a popular level, this cactus flower is known for its very strong psychoactive properties, which is addressed by Richard later in the film to his companions. However, among natives it was often used for spiritual purposes and the native term for it has been translated as “divine messenger.”

When the couple enters the lodge, we see a spacious room with a big TV and a large, very white sofa set upon a matching white rug. It takes little imagination to sense that both will be stained with blood at some point in a film called *Revenge*. We witness the couple enjoying the privacy to partake of drugs and sexual delights. From a phone call to Richard, it becomes clear that he is married and that Jennifer is a mere tryst. We witness Jennifer take a bite out of an apple then place it on a table which the camera will return to more than once. The “apple” is very suggestive of the sexuality at the basis of the first act of human disobedience in the Garden of Eden, at least at a popular level. The original plan was for Richard and Jennifer to spend time alone before the other two arrive, but they come a day earlier than expected. That evening Richard instructs Jennifer to hide the peyote somewhere because he is afraid of what may happen if it is consumed. She secretly puts it in the heart-shaped locket that she constantly wears around her neck. Jennifer will dance very seductively with one of Richard’s friends who will think that is an invitation by her to seek a more physical relationship. The next day, while Richard is away from the villa, he attempts to do what he thinks he can. The rape is violent more in the imagination than

on camera. Just before he advances on her the third male friend walks in and, though recognizing what is about to happen, chooses to “look the other way.” When Richard returns and finds out, his solution is to bribe her for her silence. The apple is shown, now partially rotten.

Circumstances lead to Jennifer escaping to the desert because justice was not going to be accomplished with these men and then being pushed from a cliff to an expected death. This “fall,” however, is onto a tree resembling a “cross” where she is pinned with her arms outstretched and a substantial part of the tree sticking out of her abdomen. There is no reason to think that she is anything but dead. The men leave and agree to retrieve her the following morning. During the night, her “resurrection” is paired with the Greek Phoenix rising from the flames she creates through an amazing feat of dexterity and unimaginable suffering. This image is further sustained by her need to burn an aluminum can with a Phoenix image onto her stomach and her back to seal the hole in her body. She endures the immense pain of it all by consuming the peyote that was still with her. She now becomes fully the “divine messenger” of retribution. In a clear sense of poetic justice, she will triumph over far more superior male hunters by her ingenuity and simple, undeterred desire for revenge. So, the man who “turned a blind eye” on her rape is blinded by having both eyes stabbed viciously before he dies. The man who “thought” he could simply take her, has his brains blown out. And finally, the one who played with her heart is shot directly in the heart at the point of his execution. Amen.