

POSTFEMINIST PROMISE OR PARADOX:

Using Textual Analysis to Map Representations, Genre, and #MeToo Discourse in Emerald

Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020)

By

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A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

in Communication and New Media

McMaster University

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TW: Sexual Violence and Suicide

Introduction

At the time of writing, Emerald Fennell's film *Promising Young Woman* (2020) received a total of 108 wins and 169 nominations after its delayed and staggered release resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic. The film has been categorized as one in a slew of recent mainstream films that received wide release, for example *The Assistant* (Green, 2019) and *Bombshell* (Roach, 2019), that narratively dealt with sexual assault and rape culture. The film was lauded for its "Me Too vigilantism" (Douthat, 2021) featuring a stylishly modern "cutting sarcasm" (Lambert, 2020) in depicting the harsh realities of womanhood (Wittmer, 2021).

Using interpretive qualitative analysis with links to social, political, and pop culture discourse, this research explores how *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) navigates rape-revenge filmmaking conventions to produce a modern iteration of a genre known for its essentializing depiction of women. The focused case study approach of this work will contextualize these filmmaking choices within the current social climate of the #MeToo movement to navigate the values being reflected within the film and determine where Fennell situates her work in the vast range of filmic representations of sexual assault and their pop culture communication of feminist values. This research will provide evidence for the film's feminist approach towards representing women and their experiences and problematize this with critiques based in critical race theory and the film's conflicting treatment of agency.

The research questions guiding this paper are:

Q1: How does this film subvert expectations of the rape-revenge genre?

Q2: How does this film use aesthetic and narrative choices to navigate sexual assault dialogues in ways that relate to feminist debates in the #MeToo era?

Q3: How does this film maneuver racial dynamics, and how does it withstand the application of an intersectional feminist lens?

Motivating this case study is a commitment to negotiate a diverse landscape for representations of women in media, and to advocate for the holistic and multi-faceted treatment of all characters who identify as women. This research aims to promote the importance of creating stories about the experiences of women and to amplify the nuances of conducting difficult conversations about representing sexual violence on screen. As a result, this project intends to make discussions about sexual violence accessible and urges the consideration of intersectionality within this vital discourse.

The Film

Promising Young Woman (Fennell, 2020) follows Cassie (played by Carrie Mulligan), a woman who encourages potential perpetrators to take her home by acting drunk. She then reveals her sobriety and confronts them about the problematic nature of their actions. Cassie never commits any violence diegetically (within the world of the film), so we can assume that her corrective action is solely psychological manipulation. As the film progresses, we learn that Cassie's vigilante actions are motivated by her guilt for failing to prevent the sexual assault of her best friend, Nina, and her eventual suicide. When she learns that Nina's perpetrator is returning to the city for his wedding, Cassie falls further into her obsession and begins to target those whom she views as complicit in the assault. Just when it seems like Cassie is beginning to abandon her vigilante mission to explore a burgeoning romance and move on with her life, she is forced to confront this trauma when a video of that night arises and reveals that her love interest was a passive bystander in the event.

Theoretical Framework

A key inspiration for this work's analytic framework is Sabina Sielke's concept of the "rhetoric of rape" (2009). In order to conceptualize what this film contributes to social discourse on sexual assault narratives, justice, and the #MeToo movement, Sielke's rape rhetoric will be taken from the realm of analyzing literature and applied to this film as a narrative text, in order to discern its messages within film studies and feminisms. This theoretical framework is influenced by feminist film scholars Laura Mulvey and Joey Soloway amongst others, with the aim of applying psychoanalytic film theory to discuss representation as a site of feminist resistance and the politics of agency when presented through the film apparatus.

The fundamental goal of this work is to find ways to theoretically negotiate and advocate for the holistic representation of women with intersectional identities in film, such as racialized and Trans women, as well as survivors of sexual assault. Although this research aims to work through an intersectional feminist lens, I would like to acknowledge that this is in conflict with my positionality as a cis white scholar and my highly Westernized academic background. To account for my limited experience, I intend to centre work that is created by intersectional identities that are different from my own. In addition to drawing inspiration from key canonical texts on representation and racial equity like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, this research's intersectional critique will be informed by the works of cited BIPOC critics, blog writers, and podcasters. In reflection of this, I turn to Mott & Cockayne's framing of citation as a practice of assigning value in academia, and their proposal for amending the ways that traditional citation practices reinforce systemic oppressions (2017). A preliminary literature review reveals exclusively white women scholars within the canonical view of theoretical work on the depiction of sexual assault in film. In reviewing nontraditional media this research offers a corrective,

however slight, to the oppressive selectivity of traditional academia in a way that validates this case study's articulation of "popular, common-sense understandings of feminism" (Read, 2000a) as described in the methodology.

Literature Review

Despite the financial inaccessibility of filmmaking created by Hollywood's visual expectations, this research values film as a media art form with emerging digital affordances that facilitate complex nontraditional representations of women and marginalized identities that can become empathetically effective for viewers. Considering the findings of various studies on the negotiated effects of media on audiences, gauging representations of women in rhetoric of sexual assault is vital to the mission of promoting feminist antirape values in media. Sabina Sielke's influential text *Reading Rape* informs my analytic approach to *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) through contextualizing the film's historical influences, identifying its reflexive rhetoric of representation, and ascertaining its feminist messaging in order to situate the narrative potential for "putting crucial feminist positions into perspective" (2009, p. 7). To appropriately locate the analysis that will follow, this review will address the genre conventions of rape-revenge films, providing the landscape for a discussion of the representational effects that occur through the film's use of these tropes. These discussions and an intersectional lens will be used to ascertain the film's messaging with regard to second and third wave and postfeminist principles, as well as within the political climate of the #MeToo movement and its emerging debates.

Reclaiming the Rape-Revenge and Mobilizing Genre

The film form is in its relative youth when compared to long-established narrative forms like novel writing, making formal conventions like genre visually formulaic and highly influential in communicating a film's themes and values. Recognizing the vengeful violence that is typified by rape-revenge films, the discussion of genre in this research will mostly revolve around the conventions adhered to by horror and thriller genres, which this film consciously plays with but never quite in the cathartic way we expect. In scrutinizing the ways that *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) contradicts expectations for rape-revenge films, the works of Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2011a), Carol Clover (1992) and Peter Robson (2019) have been vital for exploring the conventions of the genre and how questions about the nature of justice in sexual assault cases have been previously posed through the film form. Due to the few plot points required and the clear lack of filmic conventions followed, Heller-Nicholas acknowledges the difficulty of defining the genre of rape-revenge, making it a genre-diverse and easily hybridized narrative element. Her work contributes to this research's understanding of the rape-revenge "canon" and the ways in which these limited qualifications for the genre have been navigated in previous films.

Clover's work on the horror genre is renowned for articulating the intricate dynamics of representations of gender and violence in film. Repeated throughout the works in this review, including Clover's, is the association with rape in narrative worlds to power rather than sex. In the chapter "Getting Even" Clover faces how women protagonists' retribution for rape often proves them to be "as vicious as their attackers" (1992, p. 123). The catharsis she acknowledges here is a key element in this research's understanding of genre convention, audience expectation, and filmic representations for women. This film contradicts this norm by challenging the easy catharsis of infamous eye-for-an-eye depictions of rape culture in films like *I Spit on Your Grave*

(Monroe, 2010). Peter Robson's (2019) investigation into justice and rape in cinema tracks the emergence of the rape revenge genre as a vigilante response to past censorship laws and the failures of the legal system to bring perpetrators of rape to justice. By applying Robson's logics, the film poses questions about the nature of justice regarding genre, forms of revenge, and the bystanders to sexual assault. This film confronts whether bystanders are compliant in assault, and whether violent revenge reminiscent of the horror genre is productive to represent justice against perpetrators.

In comparing this film against known tropes for rape-revenge Fennell challenges several conventions to create what many are calling a genre-blending (Rashotte, 2021) film. This film does not situate its narrative against the recurring classist tropified dichotomy of the civilized urban and the 'backward' rural Other (Clover, 1992, p. 120), and unlike many others the film does not depict sexual assault on screen. Sielke frames my approach for analyzing how a rhetoric of rape is created in the film's mythologizing, drawing from conventions for horror and the rape-revenge film genres (2009, p. 6) and using the playful contradiction of audience expectations to show an acknowledgement of the film form. Clover's work speaks to the interplay of genre, intertextuality (a concept understood here through Julia Kristeva), and prior narratives on generating socially understandable and significant representations, and the way that formal and aesthetic decisions reflect distinct moral messages that occur as a result of negotiated feminist values. Wilner's (2021) review places *Promising Young Woman's* (Fennell, 2020) colourful aesthetic in contrast to its dark tone, pointing to *She's All That* (Iscoe, 1999) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Monroe, 2010) to describe the way that the film uses polar opposite filmic expectations to intertextually hybridize the filmic conventions of romcoms with rape-revenge thriller and horror films. The rape-revenge film is no stranger to genre hybridization (as explored by Heller-

Nicholas), but this is critical in its relation to analyzing modern aesthetic indicators of the film's postfeminist values.

While critics and audiences have taken issue with the film's lack of cathartic violence (Wilner, 2021; Young 2020; Zacharek, 2021) as a departure from the norm for rape-revenge films, this paper regards this as a conscious decision in relation to the debate regarding representations of sexual violence on screen. This debate pits the genre's potential for exploitive readings of violence against women, categorized by Jacinda Read (2000b) and her resistance to the reductive potential of horror genre conventions (Heller-Nicholas, 2011a, p. 7), against the genre's ability to motivate meaningful discourse and social change as challenged by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas. The works of film reviewers will be used to highlight and trouble the common-sense understandings of the feminist and filmic messaging in relation to my own analyses. Young (2020) reviews the gaze and character choices in relation to Cassie's character and its empowered use of subtext. Zacharek's review describes the film as "lip-gloss misanthropy packaged as feminist manifesto" (2021) and criticizes how Cassie sets up Madison (Alison Brie) to believe she was raped in order to incite empathy for what happened to Nina, "flirting with the idea that it's OK to throw innocent women under the bus." Through these works, an analysis of the cinematic gaze throughout Cassie's murder, and the playful use of horror conventions in the scene where Cassie is thought to have killed a man who tried to assault her, this research will explore the film's refusal to adhere to genre conventions as enacting an intentionally non-violent feminist approach. The unexpected use of emotional and psychological manipulation in the place of physical violence allows the film to reclaim the rape-revenge genre as a site of formal resistance that refuses the very violence it critiques within its narrative.

Heller-Nicholas' study of *The Stendhal Syndrome* (Argento, 1996) engages genre and aesthetic to critique the mechanics of representation within the filmic apparatus, questioning how the reliance on social discourse for representing narratives can redeploy violence and normalize a loss of identity. Heller-Nicholas explores how Renaissance and Baroque artistic aesthetics are used to depict the rape-revenge genre itself as an act of representational violence upon survivors (2011b). This text is influential to this research for its analysis of the representational consequences of depicting violence as well as the use of religious and classical art aesthetics in this process. In their analytic video, EscapistMovies (2021) appropriately cites Audre Lorde (1984) in examination of how Cassie is limited by the gender dynamics of the genre she works within, ultimately making her story inclined to tragedy. Cassie is a woman in what is a man's world and succeeding at rape-revenge retribution is still socially and politically unrealistic. Through further engagement with these texts, this research encounters the limitations of these male-privileging genres by examining how *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) criticizes the presentation of violence against both women and men on screen.

Navigating Agency and Representation

Sarah Projansky (2001) reveals the ways in which films that show rape as avenged by a male protagonist take agency away from the survivors of sexual assault. Whilst *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) takes a differently gendered approach by making this avenging agent Nina's female best friend, some critics believe this film still fails in its treatment of the survivor of sexual assault. Nina suicides before the film chronologically begins and is never shown on screen, problematizing the concept of agency as tied to diegetic presence as well as this interpretation of Nina's agency. Cassie's inability to obtain consent for her avenging actions situates the motivation for her actions within a problematic internal guilt and psychological

obsession. As McAndrews' critical review states, "this is a film about Cassie's grieving process, but that comes at the price of a sexual assault survivor being stripped of her personhood" (2021), which McAndrews suggests enacts another level of harm on Nina as a survivor. Further complicating this is the paradox of representation (Projansky, 2001, p. 96), which is encountered by media that attempt to promote progressive narratives and challenge rape myths but simultaneously contribute to representations of gratuitous violence against women on screen. *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) creates a narrative enlightened by this knowledge, which avoids redeploing violence against survivors by forcing audiences to watch or forcing characters to live their trauma on screen. This research explores the potential for Nina to be upheld as an example of protecting survivors by telling their stories but not centering them as "props" (Projansky, 2001, p. 60), and analyzes the film's conflicts in its treatment of survivor agency.

In examining the politics of the image and potential for representations, Joey Soloway's (2016) work on the Female Gaze directs the analysis of this film's embodied and empathetic cinematographic gaze. Soloway's concept of the Female Gaze suggests that a woman filmmaker's approach to the filmic gaze reckons with feeling and returning the Male Gaze, echoing the Gazed Gaze by proceeding with a respectful recognition of the way women are often derogatorily perceived in the world. Cassie's portrayal weaponizes the gaze through cinematography and framing (EscapistMovies, 2021), creating an intertextual link to the character of Cassandra in Greek mythology which is supported by the religious set iconography. The film's construction of Cassie as a martyr is evaluated through an analysis of the religious and saintly imagery in scenes where she is framed by halos and wings. This martyr image is troubled by her vigilante mission and the issues of narcissism and agency discussed above.

Through costume, Cassie's image also engages the male gaze's understanding of modesty to highlight how traditional femininity is socially weaponized for believability. Cassie's aesthetic presentation will be discussed through its mobilization of the virgin/whore dichotomy (Projansky, 2001, p. 90) for essentialized representations of women in patriarchal narratives, as well as the exclusivity of visual expectations for sexual assault victims, who are not believed and do not achieve justice if they fight back or do not appear traditionally feminine or adhere to respectability politics.

Promising Young Woman (Fennell, 2020) uses representation to explore complicity and evolve how audiences perceive the perpetrator character in rape-revenge films. This film skillfully uses the wholesome star personas of Adam Brody, Max Greenfield, Bo Burnham and others to "weaponize Hollywood's nice guys" (Wittmer, 2021), reflecting a world in which sexual violence and complicity in this violence can come from previously unsuspected individuals in society. This research will reflect on the selection of these actors through Richard Dyer's star image theory (2004) by considering the way celebrities function as media texts and the role of audiences in the formation of their personas. This deployment of celebrity persona leverages what Horton and Wohl have called "parasocial relationships" (1956) which, through celebrity news media and cinematographic intimacy, allow audiences to believe they know the real identities of stars given their mediated access to them. Complicating this are the character choices within the film when considered through the context of the vilified 'watcher' trope (Projansky, 2001) present in postfeminist rape-revenge films. These are mobilized to examine passive bystanders and community negligence. In the case of *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020), audiences are expected to be drawn to the charming and loving qualities of beloved celebrities thought to harbour similar characteristics to their on-screen characters, a result of

typecasting based on physical features. In this approach Fennell is able to confirm that even “lovable, approachable, low-key internet boyfriends” (Wittmer, 2021) can be perpetrators of and complicit in sexual assault. This thematic discussion occurs within a sociopolitical context of challenging the role of passive bystanders in rape culture. Using the star system to achieve this effect specifically integrates this discussion within the entertainment industry, which is relevant considering the highly publicized allegations against Harvey Weinstein.

Reflections on Feminism and #MeToo

Jacinda Read (1998, 2000b) defines rape-revenge as a narrative structure rather than a subgenre of horror, as is common with other critical film analyses. While this research will use the concept of genre to discuss the specific ways that this film subverts audience expectations, my analytic approach will also read rape-revenge as a unique narrative element that, as Read understands through Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, allows Hollywood to “make sense of feminism” (1998). This seems particularly fitting considering that Sielke, in describing narrative rhetoric of rape, identifies sexual violence in media as echoing the social landscape and expressing political concerns (Sielke, 2009; Heller-Nicholas, 2011, p. 6). This research is inspired by Read’s understanding of the ways that social and political feminist discourse plays out across rape-revenge films and will attempt to locate *Promising Young Woman*’s (Fennell, 2020) reflection of current feminist discourse with regards to changing rhetoric towards survivor agency and bystanders, and in reflection of third wave feminist attempts at inclusivity and the choice-laden failures of postfeminism.

In order to appropriately situate *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) in its sociopolitical context, an understanding of the historical progression of feminism is necessary. Mann and Huffman’s text on the transition between second and third wave feminism (2005),

along with Schuster's exploration of the potentials of choice feminism (2017), provide an initial description of these feminist evolutions and their complexities. It is generally agreed that first wave feminism's priority was suffrage and equal opportunities for women, second wave feminism focused on sexuality, reproductive and civil rights (Rampton, 2015), and the racialized activists that gained influence during this time became "pioneers of the third wave" (Mann and Huffman, p. 59) through their increased interest in the nuanced intersections of race and difference. Like these authors, I use the wave metaphor with hesitation and wish to acknowledge its essentializing depiction of what is in actuality a diverse amalgam of approaches, and the co-constituting of historical knowledge and cross pollination of values across these nonlinear waves. This demands a focus on specific ideological elements which persist within and across these feminist waves. This paper focuses on the following: choice feminism, based on a reinterpretation of the second wave's phrase "the personal is political" to value individual lifestyle choices as acts of feminist advocacy (ibid., p. 70). This was embraced in many iterations including in lipstick feminism, a performative femininity that reflects a conscious reflexivity towards the Male Gaze. Postfeminism emerges during the second and third waves and is categorized by the naturalization of discourse around feminist issues, and the subsequent antifeminist aversion to the 'feminist' term's implications of radicalism. However, this same aversion rightfully questions the highly binary nature of feminist advocacy (Rampton, 2015).

Although public opinion likes to frame third wave feminism as reckoning with the exclusivity of second and first wave feminism, through film we see an interesting adaptation of the issues of these waves in current postfeminist discourse that mirrors its 1980/90s counterpart through elements of antifeminist backlash (Read, 2000a). This is interestingly mirrored in the emergence of pop culture discourse about sexual assault during these time periods, with the first

popular wave of rape-revenge genre films and the current popularity of the #MeToo movement. These developments in feminist thinking will be used to analyze how *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) reflects messaging that gives into commercial and material forms of white individualist feminism and how it reflects a postfeminist attitude of reduced radical activism and increased internalization, despite voicing frustration at a society that refuses to take more action.

Despite an attempt at inclusivity within casting and with the inclusion of some interesting racial dynamics, the narrative constructs a conversation about sexual assault that excludes nontraditional and nonwhite feminine identities and their experiences with gender-based violence. By reckoning with whiteness as a system of knowing, Clark Mane (2012) draws attention to the covert ways that whiteness can be asserted through ways of knowing, which will be applied to the exclusive narrative logics of this film. *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) uses candy-coloured girl power aesthetics and popular music in its soundtrack to promote a lipstick feminism that feels reminiscent of the exclusivity of first and second wave feminism, providing aesthetic evidence of “rhetorical strategies and structures of thought that reproduce whiteness” (Clark Mane, 2012). A criticality towards these epistemological strategies that exclude and manage what is knowable about racialized identities is considered a hallmark of the micropolitics that third wave feminism is concerned with, so the film’s limited identity politics will be analyzed to determine how the film questions or adheres to the whiteness of historical rape-revenge representations.

This research examines the racial dynamics at play within character representations and aims to problematize the dynamics of patriarchy and whiteness, specifically through an analysis of Sam Richardson’s character and his presence on screen in relation to the representation of Black men in rape narratives. This analysis will be informed by Dubrofsky and Levina’s

explanation of the “ways race and gender problematically work together, creating a #metoo movement where only white women can talk of their experiences, and where misogyny is made more horrific via racism” (2020, p. 420). The film also seems to reinforce a familiar racial stereotype in the media, analyzed through Laverne Cox’s portrayal of an eerily recognizable ‘sassy Black friend’ stereotype as an iteration of the controlling mammification of Black women (Collins, 1990). Reintroducing the politics of Dyer’s star image, this critique is confounded by Cox’s stated comfort with the humanity of her character (Newman-Bremang, 2020). These amongst other sites of analysis will be used to examine the film’s dynamics of whiteness. The inclusion of Dyer’s theory in this paper’s approach will attribute world-building impact to interview and review media, exposing the interpretations and intentions of celebrities Emerald Fennell and Laverne Cox in the respective texts Rashotte (2021) and Newman-Bremang (2020) amongst others.

Although this film does not proclaim to be feminist, media response has categorized it as such, and therefore it is valuable to ascertain the feminist messaging within the film’s discussions of rape culture. If pop culture discourse is upholding the feminist values of this film, then it is also valuable to ascertain the values present within its representations. Through Sielke’s focus on the social, aligned with an application of intersectional feminism and critical race theory, this research will explore whether this film aims to mirror or critique the whiteness of the #MeToo movement.

Methodology

This research operates through the method of textual analysis, using this film as a case study for interpreting the messages signaled within the media and how these relate to wider

feminist movements. To ground the method of textual analysis in film studies, this work will dissect thematic and theoretical messages through the examination of decisions regarding narrative and characters as well as specific elements within the *mise-en-scène* as defined by Bordwell & Thompson (2010) in their fundamental work on film analysis. Original thematic and scenic analyses will provide a foundation for this research to relate to wider theoretical works and film review media which are cited throughout this paper in ways that inform and support my analytic findings.

Prominent visual and thematic elements were noted during my multiple screenings of the film. These were then compared to relevant theoretical works to ascertain the values and messaging that could be imparted onto audiences. The use of qualitative textual analysis in this research is mobilized through Alan McKee's (2003) description of the method. McKee emphasizes the post-structural element of textual analysis, acknowledging that media-based messages are influenced by the contextually and culturally constructed nature of meaning. This is worth noting due to the interpretational and unquantifiable nature of this research, and the possibility for imperfect and conflicting messages to coexist within media texts. Jacinda Read favors the search for interpretations of media that will be accessible to the majority of audiences (2000a), but also acknowledges how textual analysis can be complex when feminist agency is prioritized. Here, I draw inspiration from Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's (2011a) mode of analysis which embraces the coexistence of diverse messages specifically within the rape-revenge genre, which typically holds antirape and feminist themes but must operate within a patriarchal antifeminist society. These works reflect the importance of a post-structurally interpretive focus within this research's method as well as the structure of the analytic approach, which will identify audience-attainable messages regarding agency and representations.

These messages are scrutinized against their convergences with the boundaries and patterns of genre, specifically horror and thriller which are common for rape-revenge films, changes in social perceptions and normative approaches to conversations about sexual assault like advocacy for survivor agency, and celebrity media such as interviews that identify the director's and actor's intentions. This analytic approach is shaped by Marc Prensky's (2011) and Henry Jenkins' (2006) works by recognizing that modern audiences are 'smart' and participatory, meaning that their digital eloquence provides an opportunity for world-building power and transmedia storytelling through news and review media as well as their own media fluency which can recognize formal conventions.

Analysis

1. Cinematic Expectations

Genre

Promising Young Woman (Fennell, 2020) hybridizes genre through the playful use of conventions for rape-revenge and horror films, subverting audience expectations to create a reflective approach to a fraught area of film, questioning the systemic gendering of these genres. The trailer (Universal Pictures, 2019) created for this film led viewers to expect that Cassie's retribution against predators was violent in nature, but structuring the plot around revenge for rape, the high-tensity thriller soundtrack, and moments of blood-like visual imagery all also support this expected filmic approach to a rape-revenge story. After Cassie's first encounter with the predator Jerry (Adam Brody) in the film's opening, the pink heart-laden title card fades into a shot of Cassie's barefoot feet walking down the street. As the camera pans up her legs in what is usually a common exploitative camera action that objectifies women by dismembering them, this

effect is perturbed by the red streak of what we think is blood on her leg at 7:55. As a result of the unresolved jump cut from her scene with Jerry, this red streak teases the violent norms of past rape-revenge films. As the camera continues to pan up her body, these red drips are revealed to be coming from a ketchup-soaked hand holding a half-eaten hotdog (8:04). This early decision establishes that the film understands but refuses to follow these typical genre conventions that excuse violence when used with the aim of vengeance. By flirting with the horror genre through this red blood-like imagery, Fennell brings an unexpected take to a genre that is notorious for being predictable and teases the audience by acknowledging filmic literacy and subverting their expectations. By walking the line between thriller and horror but refusing to carry out unnecessary violence, the film is able to critique the construct of genre.

Although the expected direction of rape-revenge films is for violent retribution to be carried out by or on behalf of the survivor against their attackers, revealing the avengers to be just as violent as the perpetrators (Clover, 1992, p. 123), *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) challenges this classic trope by elevating Cassie's actions above violence. Despite causing innumerable complaints from viewers, this course of action exemplifies the message of the film: Audre Lorde's famous statement "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1984). Through this, the film questions the progressiveness of rape revenge narratives for women in a world where vengeance and retribution are still uneven playing fields, even in the fictional world and in representations. Sielke states that depictions of sexual assault "mean just as much by what they leave unsaid as by what they say, by what is absent as by what is present" (2009, p. 3). By this logic Cassie's chosen form of vengeance is left unclear and off-screen. We are led to believe that Cassie is not carrying out violence, but even if she was, the film's diegetic world refuses to force a representational victimhood on these predatory men despite how women

have historically received this fate. Diegetic violence allows viewers to witness the brutality of vengeance (Clover, 1992, p. 120), and in refusing to provide gratuitous violence and cathartic revenge the film forces viewers to problematize the dynamics of grief and loss that become the consequences of sexual violence, challenging the infamously transactional depictions of rape-revenge in films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Iscove, 2010). By decentering the rape in rape-revenge, Fennell tackles societal nuances and avoids what so many films in the genre have been guilty of in the past: romanticizing lived trauma.

This research reads the subversion of these tropes as a comment on the eye-for-an-eye masculinist attitude of prior genre films. *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) refuses to be violent in return to rape culture and provides commentary for the need to improve society by refusing to exploit its characters to give audiences the catharsis and enjoyment they want. This act reclaims the rape-revenge genre as a site of formal resistance that refuses the very violence it critiques within its narrative. Through Sielke's articulation of the political and mythologizing "rhetoric of rape" this film creates a rhetoric of rape that asks viewers to reconsider the fundamental desire for gender-based violence against men in revenge narratives. By complicating the transaction of catharsis, this film questions whether narratives built on systematically gendered and fraught genres can actually be the catharsis we need for meaningful change.

Gaze

This formal reflexivity is made clear on screen through the agency of Cassie's character in comparison to the genre-favourite Final Girl trope (Clover, 1992). The final girl is theorized in genre studies to be caught within a horrific situation through which she must alone survive and be voyeuristically spectated by murderers, monsters, and audiences alike. Cassie subverts this by

dying in the film, but also through her reclamation of the gaze. Most notably this happens during the film's opening sequence when Jerry is revealing his disregard for Cassie's consent. As Cassie lies on the bed, the bird's eye view camera angle shows her body in a crucified position. At 7:33 she meets the camera's gaze, revealing her sobriety and control of the situation. Typically, breaking the fourth wall in this way is used to intentionally address the audience, suggesting a reflection on the film medium being used to communicate through. By acknowledging the camera and audience through her active gaze, not only is Cassie narratively reclaiming the power over her situation through her manipulative sobriety, but she is also elevating herself to the level of film-formal reflexivity. This reveals both a narrative and form-reflexive elevation of Cassie within the dynamics of power between her and Jerry - reversing the roles of predator and prey that audiences were previously seeing.

When she sits up in protest and Jerry sees that Cassie is sober, the camera uses a shot/reverse shot to show them looking at each other through their direct gaze into the camera lens. Here, viewers get to experience the shift in power dynamics through the dramatic contrast in facial expression - Jerry's look changes to comically terrified and Cassie looks assured. In this shot Jerry's face is framed by Cassie's knees. Before Cassie's change in demeanour, Jerry's hands and body dominated over Cassie's knees, but after this change Jerry now seems dominated by her knees. Jerry is the one who is caught with his predatory 'pants' down.

Cassie's powerful gaze is true within the narrative world of the film as well. Cassie's post-Jerry 'walk of shame' takes her past construction workers who aggressively catcall her. She turns to stare at them, returning their gaze, which causes them to falter in their harassing. Both she and the construction workers are framed in long shots (8:52), followed by medium shots, and then long shots again. Cassie's gaze towards the men persists through their protests to "stop

staring” until they leave. Although she is cinematographically presented the same way as them, as Young states, Cassie continuously forces men “to confront that they are well aware that their sexual harassment is a show of power,” directing her gaze in a way that unrelentingly “addresses the uncomfortable silences between them, making the subtext text again” (2020). Cassie’s gaze represents and challenges how assaultive it feels to be gazed *at* by patriarchal rape culture, reflecting what Soloway (2016) calls the Gazed Gaze. This connects to the symbolism behind her name Cassandra, who in Greek mythology was a prophet (explored more by EscapistMovies, 2021). Cassie is cursed with seeing and empowers the audience to see every moment that contributes to the rape culture within the film, which can be used to see it in society at large.

Cassie’s gaze is active and self-aware in making eye contact with the camera. Through direction, she becomes an engaging protagonist who is in on the joke with the viewer and is conscious of where the story is going - because it is the same direction that all realistic stories for women go in her situation. Through this she contradicts the protagonists that precede her who have been criticized for being sexualized and victimized not only by their perpetrators, but by the camera itself. Cassie refuses to play the part of passive victim and refuses to entertain the scopophilic cinematic gaze that follows her tragedy - she faces her viewers, her assailants, and her victims head on.

Star Image

Playing Jerry is Adam Brody, popular for his role on the 2003-2007 television series *The O.C.* as best friend Seth Cohen to the show’s protagonist. Through dialogue, Jerry establishes himself as more rational compared to the competitive and increasingly misogynistic colleagues he is with, which remains in line with the pop culture understanding of his character Seth. When the three men see and start discussing how irresponsibly drunk Cassie is, Jerry steps in to take

her home. The use of limited diegetic sound and the lack of soundtrack during the cab ride and in his apartment compared to previous bar scenes create an ominous and foreboding tone that draws attention to his increasingly questionable behaviour. It becomes abundantly clear from Cassie's lack of participation in Jerry's kiss that he is taking advantage of her, but the awkward silence and slow creaks of the couch at 6:12, and the overcompensating dramatic sounds of Jerry's one-sided kissing draw attention to the infinitely non-romantic tone of the moment. Jerry's comedic jump onto the bed at 6:43, the interestingly phallic string light decoration above the bed, and his repeated statements that Cassie is "safe" while she clearly is not, emulate a boyishness and care reminiscent of his previous characters while the high tension thriller soundtrack mirrors his predatory gestures and heavy breathing. The coexistence of these contrasts on screen unrelentingly situates his 'nice guy' star image within the non-consensual act that is taking place. This selective star image, comedic boyishness and subversion of hyper masculinity is exhibited by the other 'nice guy' characters as well. For example, at 1:38:36, when Joe (Max Greenfield) tells Al Monroe (Chris Lowell) that Cassie's murder was not his fault, he jumps over her lifeless body and throws her arm out of his way, and when they are burning her body at 1:40:48 they could exude manliness when standing over a large fire in the woods, but instead Al is throwing up. *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) mobilizes the star image of celebrities famous for being 'nice guys' to challenge stereotypical depictions of hyper-masculine perpetrator characters and signal how the rape-revenge genre itself has played into structures of complicity.

As informed by Dyer and Horton & Wall (1956), repetitive traits as a result of typecasting and various celebrity-related media like talk shows and interviews frame these actors as similar to their onscreen characters, creating a cohesive 'nice guy' figure that is embodied by aesthetic choices. This film employs these celebrities' star images, and the intimacy of the

viewer's parasocial relationships to point to the covert masculinist hegemony that allows rape culture to go unchecked. Using the star system to achieve this effect specifically integrates this discourse within the entertainment industry and situates this within the #MeToo movement.

Through Horton & Wohl's understanding of audience participation and affect we can consider that comedic 'nice guy' characters are often immediately likable and non-intimidating to the audience, giving them affective support within the narrative story. Where the viewer is positioned to embody the protagonist (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216) the viewer is also told that these 'nice guy' characters are their close friend or sidekick, so this intimate friendship will translate parasocially. Positioned along their idealized protagonist counterparts (*ibid.*, p. 220), these characters become unthreatening, lovable, relatable, and dependable despite being imperfect. The postfeminist appreciative-of-women 'friend' trope is visually and narratively aligned with the complicit 'watcher' trope (Clover, 1992, p. 123) from rape-revenge films through the characters Ryan (Bo Burnham) and Jordan Green (Alfred Molina), allowing the film to directly confront the issue of being a passive bystander in rape culture and adding another layer of patriarchal critique to these character tropes.

Where the film subverts genre-based expectations for dealing with survivorship, it instead addresses the trauma, loss and guilt that can result from rape culture, and how these experiences exact differing gender dynamics. Cassie's inability to move past her own guilt and loss is the driving force behind her character's retributive actions. These feelings are paralleled by Jordan Green (Alfred Molina), the lawyer who bullied Nina and many others into dropping their sexual assault cases. Jordan Green's house and overall appearance are symbolic of his emotional state. Amidst the immaculate mid-century modern furniture his plants have rotted, providing a perfect metaphor for his financially successful but morally decaying career. When Cassie visits him to

exact her revenge, she recognizes their shared obsessive guilt. Upon learning that Jordan will also never forgive himself for what he did, Cassie tells him that she forgives him and dismisses the thug she had initially hired to hurt him. This narrative twist humanizes Cassie's character and shows that although she is out for revenge, all she is truly looking for is an admission of guilt. This is mirrored when Ryan begs for her forgiveness, but she refuses to give it to him. The gender dynamics here are intriguing: although Cassie forgives Jordan for his past actions, she will never be able to forgive herself, speaking to the inescapable gendering within gender-based violence. Although the film does not centre survivors, it still succeeds in critiquing rape culture by examining the effects of a survivor's trauma on everyone around her.

2. Representations

The analysis of representations in media studies is regularly complex, but the power that media has for controlling perspectives in society becomes vital to pinpoint when dealing with survivors of sexual assault. Sielke's rhetoric of rape outlines that the social concept of rape is co-constituted by its mythologized presentations in media (2009, p. 10). *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) performs this postmodernist mythologizing by creating a story about rape culture that surrounds but does not depict the survivor, which allows the film itself to interrogate the rhetoric of the rape without depicting it.

Survivor Agency

An area of critique for this film is its treatment of Nina, the survivor of assault in the narrative, and the gendered genre dynamics historically associated with representing survivors in film. The obvious representational effect, as McAndrews (2021) poignantly criticizes, is that this film removes the survivor's agency by excluding her from the story. As Projansky (2001) has

explored, survivors in rape-revenge films and their traumas are often used to develop men's heroic storylines. Although this gendered expectation is subverted in the film, our protagonist Cassie and her guilt still overtake Nina's tragedy. By focusing on the moral complexities and the vengeful actions that propel the narrative the film participates in telling every story besides our survivor's. At the narrative level this objectifies Nina as a vessel for Cassie's martyred character development.

This critique is complicated by the logistical issue of Nina's suicide which occurs before the film begins. By avoiding any engagement with Nina's life, the film can avoid the paradox of representing her assault, and ultimately avoids visually objectifying her as a "prop" (Projansky, 2001, p. 60). Nina's representation is not completely limited by her nonexistence in the film's world, due to the existence of her memory and image on screen throughout. In accordance with the Female Gaze (Soloway, 2016), *Promising Young Woman's* (Fennell, 2020) cinematic gaze provides an empathy and enigmatic sensitivity to the treatment of Nina's image and her memory. Reclaiming Nina's body and "using it as a tool to communicate a feeling-seeing" (Soloway, 2016), the cinematographic approach uses an ethic of care to embody Nina's memory, making the audience experience and empathize with Nina's absence. Nina is portrayed fondly, if child-like, through the following means: pictures in Cassie's room, pictures on her laptop which magically illuminate her dark room (33:53), Nina's name is a consistent part of Cassie's costume on her friendship necklace, Cassie's monologue at 1:31:30 memorializes Nina, and finally during Cassie's murder at 1:34:11 we see Cassie's red high heels on the floor along with a pair of red boots at the end of the bed which seem to signify Nina's embodied spectral omnipresence. This treatment is afforded to Cassie after she is murdered as well: when her murderer and his friend are discussing what to do with her at 1:37:22, there is an abstract light formation hovering above

her body. Although the lack of elaboration on Nina's character overlooks the opportunity to represent survivors on screen in this film, the framing of Nina as an absent presence through the Female Gaze succeeds in portraying her in a way that holds (Soloway, 2016) and respects her memory. Framing Nina through the Female Gaze allows her to haunt the narrative in a way that works both within and against the norm for rape-revenge films to exploit victim characters as means for plot development.

Sielke draws attention to the importance of what is left unsaid in rape rhetorics (Sielke, 2009, p. 3). By this logic there is an intentionality in leaving Nina's assault unshown. In decentering the rape in rape-revenge this way, Fennell tackles societal nuances and avoids the visual depiction of traumatic assault scenes. In learning from its generic predecessors, *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) is able to sidestep the issues of presenting violence until the film's climax, and instead situates its resistance against the social issues of rape culture, bystanders, victim-blaming, and guilt which take a backseat in regular rape-revenge films. This refusal to depict sexual violence on screen is how the film successfully navigates the paradox of representation (Projansky, 2001, p. 96) and avoids promoting violence against women and men in a way that many rape-revenge films fail to do. By replacing the expected presentation of sexual assault with the depiction of a brutal murder, the film avoids subjecting the film's sexual assault survivor to living her trauma on screen and creates a metaphorical connection with the death of identity that gender-based violence can cause. The film specifically navigates the paradox of representation by leveraging the pervasiveness of digital technology, removing visuals and employing ambiguous audio by allowing the only representation of the actual rape event in the film's diegetic world to take place through a phone recording (heard at 1:17:26). The narrative nuance here reflects a formal (the use of digital technology) and thematic (through the

avoidance of this paradoxical representation) understanding of the consequences of representing sexual assault on screen.

In connecting this analysis to the previous section on genre, this film criticizes the presentation of violence against women on screen and the limitations of these male-privileging genres by highlighting and avoiding the depiction of this particular event. The film critiques rape culture in its decision to situate our avenging protagonist as the best friend rather than the survivor. Cassie's eventual death allows this narrative to become a critique of rape culture as well as the representations of rape culture in media.

Martyrdom

Through its critique of rape culture and genre as structurally limiting, *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) reflects on representations of women in film and art history and represents Cassie as a saint through the use of religious iconography in body language, set design and framing, as well as dramatic chiaroscuro-style lighting which mimics renaissance paintings.

Cassie's body appears in a crucified position in the opening of the film, at 2:05 on the seats at the bar and 7:33 at her first assaulter's home, and again after she is murdered at 1:36:27 and through a long shot featuring bright angelic spot lighting at 1:36:49. This book-ended crucifixion iconography can be seen as foreshadowing of Cassie's future death in a way that again points to the inevitable tragedy of working within inequitable systems of representation. In addition to this more discernible imagery, Cassie is consistently cinematographically framed by set designs that resemble halos (at 40:09, 1:05:35) and wings (at 33:48, 1:02:39, 1:18:12, and even through the chair choice at 1:28:56). This imagery is used to historicize and glorify Cassie as an agent of antirape feminism despite her semi-problematic approach. This can be read as a

message against victim-blaming which leverages women's perceived faults to discredit their experiences and legal credibility.

In discussing the dynamics of Cassie's representation of femininity, her costume is also leveraged to address the virgin/whore dichotomy (Projansky, 2001, p. 90) historically used to represent women in film and rhetorics of rape. Cassie's costumes are child-like in the scheming setting of her childhood bedroom, feature highly feminine and floral dresses during the day, and are more revealing and provocative at night as evidenced when she follows a YouTube tutorial for "blowjob lips" at 13:51. This drastic shift in Cassie's costume and makeup aesthetic highlights how binary and exclusive understandings of femininity are weaponized through respectability (Collins, 1990) politics to create a social expectation for 'believable' rape victims and push an agenda of victim-blaming. These respectability politics are of course compounded by race, and although racial respectability is not problematized in this film, I will examine racial dynamics in the next section.

Projansky suggests that postfeminist representational dynamics like these are often used to place responsibility on women for facilitating the situations where rape occur (Projansky, 2001, p. 107), such as entering fields or settings of male exclusivity that encourage rape (Projansky, 2001, p. 103). The film employs these costumed expectations and implications of respectability most notably when Cassie is wearing what has become marketed as her iconic provocative nurse outfit and colourful wig, entering a Bachelor Party event as their entertainment. The creation of saintliness through religious imagery, and Cassie's use of feminized aesthetics challenge but also--oddly, due to her vengeful goals--work within the idea that women must be passive and exhibit traditional femininity in order to be believed. However,

her ability to use the confines of patriarchally exclusive representations of women to her advantage ultimately becomes a critique of the system through her eventual murder.

At 1:27:18 there is a shot looking outwards through the bars on the headboard to view Cassie handcuffing rapist Al Monroe to the bed under her guise as a stripper, allowing Cassie to put Al in a symbolic jail cell. This foreshadows the arrest of Al at the end of the film, but through their dialogue it also becomes symbolic of how Al has limited himself due to the denial of his actions. When Al gets the upper hand during their struggle, he is shown in a long shot suffocating Cassie on the bed at 1:34:11. This turns into a dolly shot with the camera creeping toward the bed. Accompanied by the high-tensity thriller soundtrack, this lengthy focus on Cassie's increasingly lifeless body enhances the tone of dread. The lack of cuts in editing forces the audience to watch the full horrific length of Cassie's murder, an event that becomes ever more catastrophic after having spent the film's one and a half hours creating an emotional connection with her. Al shouts "stop" at her, in a mercilessly ironic role reversal. During the duration of this scene the kitschy set decoration plays into a hyper masculine caricature through the mounted animal heads; cowboy hats hung on the wall, a signifier of the many men in Al's ranks; and the "Yee Haw" sign above the bed which remains in the shot while Cassie is murdered and is awfully suited to Al's straddling body language. In conforming with the film's candy-coloured sinister approach, this is a painful reminder that Cassie's decision to enter a space of hyper masculine brotherhood and challenge patriarchal rape culture represents attempting to succeed within a structure built for her to fail.

While Young (2020) takes issue with the lack of violence on Cassie's part, as well as her death which, although inevitable, Young states is not "emotionally justified," this provides the foundation for my finding that this film questions filmic and generic convention by subverting

audience expectation. This lack of emotional justification targets the audience's filmic literacy by pointing to how Cassie's mission was doomed to fail, because of the patriarchal structure she existed within and attempted to challenge. This research sees the pointlessness of her death as exactly the film's point - drawing blunt attention to the potential for the victim-blaming of women in every situation.

This film situates Cassie as a temptress through her costume and action leading up to her murder, aesthetically simulating familiar victim-blaming narratives and paralleling murder with rape by employing the postfeminist logic that Cassie's costume and her presence in a male-dominated setting facilitates a situation where rape can occur. This postfeminist logic is subverted when Cassie is murdered rather than assaulted. Projansky's concern with the paradoxical portrayal of violence against women in antirape media can be used to examine Cassie's murder on screen. Rather than the expected rape event, this murder is the only violence shown diegetically. The struggle between Cassie and Al on the bed leading up to her murder resembles the body language positioning and the verbal protests typical of filmic presentations of rape. This, with the help of Cassie's earlier monologue about Nina's loss of identity after her rape, heightens the representational stakes to create a metaphorical connection with the death of identity that gender-based violence can cause, and questions the realistic nature and consequences of the violently cathartic gratification in revenge narratives. Where review media has measured Cassie's failures against the violent successes of her predecessors, this research attempts to view on-screen violence and death with more weight than genre-based convention. By assigning cinematic weight to death, this film is able to create a problematic protagonist that cannot be easily condemned within the legal parameters of her murderous predecessors. Her resistance against patriarchal rape culture exists within a perverted respectability by avoiding her

condemnation for violence. Through this, the film allows her to subvert representational expectations for “mad women” and confronts the audience with their film-informed understandings of women as communicated through genre as a patriarchal system.

This narrative turn can be traced to rape-revenge films of the past. Clover has shown that these films return to the scene of the original crime, relying on the same masculinist logics of domination to enact retribution: “if maleness caused the crime, then maleness will suffer the punishment” (1992, p. 123). *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) uses all the postfeminist logic hallmarks of a victim-blaming narrative to frame Cassie’s entry into Bachelor Party as a form of sacrifice to these masculinist logics of power in order to enact revenge. Though the saintly imagery and postfeminist logics combined with choice feminism could suggest otherwise, Cassie was not willingly sacrificing herself to murder or assault by doing this. She understood it as a possibility (and planned her automated text messages accordingly) but proceeded anyway. Although the *mise-en-scène* framed this situation through societal expectations of the dangers of sex work, Cassie was not ‘asking for it’ and was murdered anyway.

Zacharek’s review criticizes how Cassie sets up Madison (Alison Brie) to believe she was raped in order to incite empathy for what happened to Nina, “flirting with the idea that it’s OK to throw innocent women under the bus” (2021). Although this makes Cassie’s level of commitment to vengeance undoubtedly questionable, this film uses Cassie’s actions to put into practice a hyper liberal condemnation of passive bystanders in rape culture. Through this, Fennell asks audiences whether this level of vengeance is what they want to see and whether they are ready to apply this violence to all co-conspirators of rape culture, including ‘innocent’ women.

Committing Cassie's murder is what finally allowed a rapist to be arrested, and her understanding of rape culture and ability to work within this structure is what allows the viewer to experience some retribution after this event. By leveraging Clover's (1992) framework, if maleness caused the original crime of assault, then maleness could be put in a situation to succumb to violence that would be taken seriously by legal powers. The decision to portray Cassie through the use of religious tragedy iconography and the virgin/whore dichotomy, along with Cassie's murder and the lack of a happier ending representationally return to Lorde's concept of the inability to succeed when working within structural inequitable systems, questioning the progressiveness of existing genre and filmic constructions of rape-revenge rhetorics for women which will "never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984) of rape culture.

3. *Feminisms*

In reflection of the recurrence of Lorde's crucial work, the following analytic section aims to identify the progressiveness of the feminist messaging at play in *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) as influenced by post, second and third wave feminisms, as well as the film's reflections of the #MeToo movement within these messages. Aside from its clear antirape undertones in the narrative and plot, the film's colour palette, costume and set design reflect a 'girlie' or lipstick feminism (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 73) which has contributed to review media calling the film "a feminist manifesto" (Newman-Bremang, 2020). Throughout her oddly pastel and baroque-like filigree-filled home Cassie is framed in long shots, presenting her as lost in a warm but weirdly romanticized world. This is true for her bedroom set design as well, with an added child-like spin added by her costume which includes braids, scrunchies, and florals.

However, this mystical world is not always presented as picture-perfect. For example, after Cassie and Ryan's dinner with her parents there is a clear but backgrounded crack in the wall of the house at 1:11:31, revealing an issue with the foundation of an idealized fantasy and suggesting that Cassie cannot have the normal life that her parents clearly want for her. The film uses candy-coloured palette to create an engaging aesthetic that includes a variety of nuanced symbolic opportunities and integrates a reclamation of the often-demeaned aesthetics of girlhood to celebrate a mainstream and understandable form of 'girl power'.

However, this choice of representation plays into a tonal adherence to an exclusive, commercial and individualistic form of choice feminism. A small detail in Cassie's costume that was amplified in various promotional materials for this film was her multicoloured nail polish. Selling the cultivation of Cassie's feminine image in a highly commercialized way seems at odds with the film's substantive thematic goals, yet it also distils this film's penchant for critiquing but coexisting within a fraught system. Despite displaying a narrative that voices frustration at a society that refuses to take more action, this small detail speaks to the more general approach of the film, whose material forms of choice feminism and aestheticized Hollywood presentation reflect what can be interpreted as a postfeminist attitude of increased internalization and reduced radical activism. Although this postfeminist approach allows the film to be reflective of its representation politics and its film medium (Sielke, 2009, p. 10), in consideration of the film's fundamental feminist values this research argues that the aesthetic display of commercial kitsch feminism plays into what Projansky has described as the postfeminist logics which "depoliticize feminism and feminist antirape activism" (2001, p. 120). This reduced radicalism seems to be a wider trend with third wave feminism (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 86), as well as postfeminist approaches to #MeToo activism which can leverage social media to perform digital slacktivism.

Although the film does not promote this kind of realistically progressive feminist mission, Cassie's character motivation does amplify a logic of radically glorifying sisterhood, a concept strengthened during second wave feminism. As Mann & Huffman have questioned, "the essentialist "we" or "sisterhood" of the second wave was ostensibly meant to unify the women's movement, instead it proved to be a painful source of factionalization" (2005, p. 59). This can be seen playing out in the film's whiteness, as well as Cassie's radicalization of the concept of sisterhood, which only further removes Nina's agency by making her trauma the cornerstone of Cassie's struggle.

While Fennell's work has been celebrated by the media as progressive, she herself has reflected a postfeminist attitude of antifeminist backlash by stating that her film "is not supposed to be medicine" (Rashotte, 2021), simulating Read's evaluation of the feminist discourse surrounding *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991). Despite writer Callie Khouri's claims that the film was not feminist, "the critical reception of the film, nevertheless, centered quite explicitly on assessing the film's status as a feminist text, therefore suggesting that it is not, in fact, possible to separate the textual ('the film itself') from the extra-textual ('the issues surrounding the film')" (2000a, p. 1). The same can be said for *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020), as Fennell makes no excuses for the striking criticisms of gender-based violence and sexism within her film. Intentionality aside, this research asks: why can't films like this strive to be medicine? Why can't a problematic character like Cassie still be understood and empathized with in her struggle against rape culture? Perhaps it is her inability to shake the adherence to a medium that is so easily aligned with mainstream commercialism. Or could it be that she is a product of a time that endorses digital slacktivism and an exclusive choice feminism?

Racial Intersections

Considering the postfeminist antifeminist undertones of this work, I propose that this candy-coloured high-femme aesthetic can be analyzed as evidence of “rhetorical strategies and structures of thought that reproduce whiteness” (Clark Mane, 2012). *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) reflects postfeminist shortcomings in the realm of promoting intersectionality, where the film includes Black characters and a Trans character but mostly fails to elaborate on their intersections in relation to survivorship, and at a surface level seems to merely include them to preach but barely practice an aesthetic colour-blindness. This portion of analysis will use intersectional feminism and critical race theory to problematize the way this film deals with the concepts of race and gender.

Unfortunately, this film is limited because its narrative “represents rape as a white problem, African American women’s potential experience of rape drops out of this film” (Projansky, 2001, p. 116). Ebony Aster, in conversation with Carolyn Petit and Kat Spada, has highlighted the inaccessibility of specific moments of this film. Aster cites the scene where Cassie damages a random man’s car with a tire iron at 50:35: “in that moment I was immediately struck by how white this particular revenge fantasy was, and how the actions that Cassie engages in are not available for women of colour” (Petit & Aster, 2021, at 27:36). In acknowledging the increased attention to racialized police violence after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, this criticism can also be applied to the end arrest scene (1:47:53) which, through its exclusivity, highlights the lack of potential for happy endings for racialized survivors by applying a racial politics to what little retribution exists after Cassie’s murder. Overall, this expression of public rage and the ending’s reliance on police officials have the potential to be inaccessible or differently affected by Black women’s and survivors’ intersectional experiences.

The police arrest as retribution within this plot reinforces a truth that is contestable, which is that the police will arrest the perpetrators of sexual assault. With deeper examination, the murder/sacrifice dynamics instituted by Cassie create an acknowledgement of the sacrifice required to achieve this as a murder (and not a rape) conviction, critiquing the inability to achieve a conviction without a more violent crime such as murder. However, these aspects of the film structure themselves through a narrative logic of whiteness by excluding racialized survivors from being able to identify with or realistically access these key aspects of the plot. This film highlights the shortcomings of this genre-laden mode of storytelling by signaling to moments of white exclusivity, but as a result it also proliferates a lack of equitably relatable storytelling through the upholding of these same narrative structures of whiteness.

This research's discussion of race in the context of sexual assault would be incomplete without addressing how this film's representations and character decisions relate to historically racist and discriminatory representations of Black men. Paul (Sam Richardson) is one of the few Black men present in *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020). After his brief presence in the opening scene he reappears carrying Cassie out of a bar, during which she is confronted by Ryan for seeing another man. At 54:20 Paul finds out that Cassie is sober, and realizes she is the woman his friend Jerry took home in the opening scene. This scene is interesting considering the racial power dynamics that allude to the narratives of Black men being framed as rapists of and by white women. Cassie is doing her drunk act in order to coerce Paul to take her home, in what we assume is an opportunity for him to take advantage of her. Cassie is the one in charge, which we see when she drops the act and returns to cognizance. Although the relationship dynamics between Cassie and Ryan frame Paul as an opportunist, Paul is caught off-guard and protests after seeing Cassie dropping her act. This moment in the story problematizes the historical

framing of Black men as rapists of white women by instead showing Cassie as the one who is directing his actions. Although Paul's actions invoke the Black aggressor stereotype despite circumstance, Fennell's decision to complicate Paul's story amidst the 'successful' white assaulters in the film shows a depth of decision-making that reflects an interest in questioning these racial profiles, whilst not entirely excluding the possibility for racialized men to be perpetrators of assault. In connection with the rape-revenge canon, Sielke has stated that "American rape narratives are overdetermined by a distinct history of racial conflict" (2009, p. 2). This layer of nuanced power politics in *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020) reframes historical narratives and asks audiences to question familiar narratives which Other Black men. However, as Projansky has problematized, "these narratives maintain an attention to whiteness without giving up the possibility of a racialized enemy rapist in some other context" (2001, p. 103). This film still maintains this as a possibility through the inclusion of Paul as a character who is being targeted by Cassie. At the same time the film works against these existing representations by framing Paul as a comedic, fedora-wearing, child-like man who yells "why do you guys have to ruin everything" in a whining voice and runs off whimpering (55:10) after Cassie tells him the story about another woman like her who preys on men but "carries scissors."

Where this film fails to consider the racial intersections of the survivor experience, it also reinforces a tired racial stereotype in the media through the presence of the tropified Sassy Black Woman (sometimes SBW) friend who reinforces the mammification and controlling of Black women's bodies (Collins, 1990). At the coffee shop where Cassie works, Gail (Laverne Cox) is her concerned, maternal, and brazenly funny supervisor and only friend. Gail exhibits the hallmarks of a SBW (also indicated in Petit & Aster, 2021, at 28:22): she gives Cassie advice, pushes her to pursue career advancement and a seemingly healthy relationship, she is sexually

liberated and unafraid to address the tension between Cassie and Ryan. Although a highly lovable character she is very clearly in a supporting role, she is present in limited scenes and her character is not given much nuance or explored through the narrative. Despite this, Cox's stated comfort with the humanistic representation of Gail as a character must be valued as a limit to this critique. As one of the few widely celebrated out Black Trans women in Hollywood, Cox indicated in an interview with Kathleen Newman-Bremang (2020) that this role was a welcome departure from being required to centre intricate Black Trans identity politics and relive her past traumas. Indeed, through Gail, the film is advocating for the inclusion of Black Trans women's places within this existing stereotype for Black women, a stereotype which this film successfully humanizes and avoids caricaturing. In conclusion, while this film is far from including all positions, all situations, and all women, maybe being aware of its limitations and pointing to them so overtly in these character and narrative choices is a strength of this film rather than a weakness.

Findings & Concluding Thoughts

Promising Young Woman (Fennell, 2020) uses genre conventions to subvert audience expectations, creating a rhetoric of rape that critiques the cathartic experiences of avenged violence that typify rape-revenge films of the past. Through questioning the cathartic nature of avenged violence on screen, Fennell applies a feminist acknowledgment of the failures of localized cathartic violence to progress and change the social norms that allow rape culture to endure. Through this reflexive approach to form and Cassie's actively self-aware gaze, the film is able to reckon with the paradox of representation and the potential for representations of violent events in rape-revenge films to redeploy patriarchal antifeminist and pro-rape values. By

replacing the expected presentation of sexual assault with a brutal murder, the film avoids subjecting a sexual assault survivor to living her trauma on screen and instead lends narrative and tonal weight to highlighting the trauma of murder and the loss of identity caused by gender-based violence. Through Cassie's unexpected death, viewers are asked to reflect on the gender dynamics of the rape-revenge genre, and the inherent inequity that women experience within exclusive structures of representation.

Fennell leverages the star image literacy of modern audiences to corrupt their view of 'nice guy' celebrities, interrogating the visual expectations for perpetrator characters and highlighting the culpability of being passive bystanders within rape culture. The film engages the aesthetic features of costume, posture, set design, lighting, and cinematography to mobilize patriarchally established representations for women, using Renaissance and religious imagery to play with film's mythologizing power and an intertextuality that media-literate audiences will easily recognize, using visual respectability politics to trouble the virgin/whore dichotomy that leads to victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault. Again, by highlighting the limitations of the conventional filmic structures of genre and representation, the film asks viewers to question the progressiveness of their expectations and historic filmic rhetorics of rape.

Despite the feminist potential of these avenues for structural subversion, the film's postfeminist attitude of internalization and reduced radical activism reflects an exclusive and disappointing brand of neoliberal choice feminism. This exists tonally within the film, but the depoliticization of the film's rhetoric of rape is also reflected in Fennell's celebrity commentary. With regards to an intersectional feminism, this film problematizes some identity intersections through the inclusion of a Black Trans woman as a beloved character, and by drawing on histories of rape rhetoric in relation to the racist depictions of Black men in rape narratives, but

fails to elaborate on the intersection of race and assault survivorship and uses a rhetoric of whiteness to structure its retribution plot, making the film's limited catharsis potentially unrelatable for racialized identities.

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