
A Senior Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in American Studies

By

Emily A. Troisi

Washington, D.C.
April 19, 2017

Emily Troisi

Thesis Advisor: Caetlin Benson-Allott, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers why two rape-revenge horror movies from the 1970s, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), were remade within just one year of each other, in 2009 and 2010, respectively. These films were not high grossing at the box office nor were they favored by many movie-goers; if anything, they gained notoriety for their violent depictions of sexual violence against women and gruesome revenge scenes. Given this lack of commercial success, this thesis considers the cultural and political reasons why *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) were remade, and why they were remade in the late 2000s.

Employing film analysis, interviews with the films’ directors, movie reviews, opinion polls, and newspaper articles, this thesis argues that the War on Terror and the moral questions it raised for Americans provided culturally fertile ground for *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) to emerge. The films’ plots, of protagonists who have been wronged and who adopt gruesome means to avenge those wrongs, allegorize the narratives of the Vietnam War and the War on Terror. While not necessarily allegorizing it, the films’ visual aesthetics, of extreme violence and human degradation, offer audiences a window into the violent nature of combat going on in Vietnam and Iraq. The utility of the films’ plots and visual aesthetics, as well as audiences’ emotional reactions to each, pushes viewers to question the supposed righteousness of America and to ask whether it ever actually existed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank:

My advisor, Professor Caetlin Benson-Allott, for the expertise you provided and for encouraging me to be a bold, confident scholar.

Professor Erika Seamon, for guiding me through this amazing American Studies experience and allowing me the opportunity to explore what I love.

Colva Weissenstein, for introducing me to the academic study of horror films. I could not have conceived this thesis without you, nor could I have completed it without your guidance.

My American Studies family, for the solidarity, comfort, and endless laughter you’ve provided this year.

My family and friends, for providing endless support, for your attempts to keep me somewhat sane this entire year, and for entertaining endless Snapchats you never asked to see.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter I: Vietnam and the Originals .............................................................................................. 13

Chapter II: The War on Terror and the Remakes ........................................................................ 39

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 62

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 66

Appendix............................................................................................................................................... 72
INTRODUCTION

“A thing (as opposed to a film)” – Howard Thompson on The Last House on the Left (1972)¹

“A vile bag of garbage . . . An expression of the most diseased and perverted darker human natures” – Roger Ebert on I Spit on Your Grave (1978)²

When The Last House on the Left and I Spit on Your Grave premiered in 1972 and 1978 respectively, they generally received poor reviews if they were considered by critics at all. The two rape-revenge horror films were so upsetting to viewers that some reported leaving the movie theater in the middle of a showing and one Chicago theater decided to stop running I Spit On Your Grave (1978) during its first week in circulation.³ Despite this negative reception, The Last House on the Left and I Spit on Your Grave were remade in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Investigating why these remakes emerged, especially given the contempt many viewers and critics have for them, is the driving force of this thesis project.

Deemed little more than an exploitative genre, the premise of a rape-revenge horror film is relatively simple. A woman is raped in the first half of the film, during the “rape sequence.” If she lives, she avenges her assault and kills her rapist(s) in the second half of the film, during the “revenge sequence.” If she dies as a result of her rape or is subsequently murdered, a relative or significant other exacts the revenge and kills the woman’s rapist(s). This transformational period between the rape and the revenge sequences of these films is crucial to the function of the subgenre and will be discussed at great length in this thesis. Though this narrative arc is


³ Thompson, review of The Last House on the Left (1972).
straightforward, rape-revenge films complicate many constructs of the horror genre, complications which point to the utility of the subgenre.

First and foremost, the rape-revenge subgenre subverts horror norms in that the primary violation in it is wholly different from that in traditional horror: it is interior. In her article, “The Lady Van(qu)ishes: Interiority, Abjection, and the Function of Rape in Horror Films,” Eugenie Brinkema writes: “Horror interrogates the world of the visible-invisible: unseen anxieties made manifest, the lurking shadows of nightmares unmasked. But the female body essentially frustrates this visual obsession: ‘The visibility of the phallus predominates over the black hole of the female genitals’ (Benvenuto 186).” As Brinkema explains, the horror genre is obsessed with making the invisible, visible, which is something that is physically impossible in the context of rape. Brinkema continues to complicate rape’s place in horror asserting: “A rape, an interior harm, works against horror’s fierce, insistent need to expose meanings.” The rape-revenge subgenre deviates from horror’s incessant need to portray external destruction and violation, or to bring viscera out where it can be seen, while still exposing anxieties and “unmasking nightmares.” The subgenre does this by intensifying the external violence done onto its protagonists during the rape sequences, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter II.

Additionally, the women in rape-revenge films do not adhere to the gender constraints placed upon them by the horror genre. The horror genre is “preoccupied with issues of sexual difference and gender” and thus organizes itself around the male/female gender binary and

---


5 Brinkema, 38.

6 Ibid., 45.
depends on its neat maintenance. Save for the final girl in slashers, whose difference from the women in the rape-revenge subgenre will be discussed later, women in American horror are supposed to be feminine; if they survive, it is because they uphold the virginal ideal of femininity, and if they die, it is because they do not, or because they do not conform to other standards of femininity.

The rape-revenge subgenre makes space for female characters to violate this standard through the revenge sequence. When the women in rape-revenge transition from tortured to torturer, from victim to perpetrator, during the revenge sequence, they effectively abandon all stereotypical semblances of women in horror. It is when women in rape-revenge take a more active, aggressive role in the revenge sequence that the dissident nature of the subgenre takes form. According to Carol Clover, the women in rape-revenge’s “transformation from passive victim to aggressive avenger, from mutilatee to mutilator, can be construed as a regendering not unlike the one undergone by the Final Girl of slasher films.” The final girl, however, does not adopt masculinity and does not gender-bend as convincingly as the woman in rape-revenge. The woman in a rape-revenge film successfully kills her rapist(s), whereas the final girl can never actually kill the murderer or the monster pursuing her; the rape-revenge film allows women to ultimately be the victor, and thus occupy a space traditionally reserved for men within the horror genre. However, this victory does not come without moral repercussions; these consequences will be discussed later and are foundational to this thesis. Nonetheless, in conquering their

---


monster (their rapists and in some cases, murderers), the protagonists of the rape-revenge subgenre thwart the gender norms of the horror genre.

Not only do the women in rape-revenge films challenge the gender constructions set for them by adopting masculine, violent behavior during the revenge sequences, but they challenge the sexual norms set for them as well. If they want to survive, women in horror films are supposed to be completely non-sexual; this is the crux of the “final girl,” whose virginity and avoidance of sex are the reasons she is the only female to survive in slasher films. The final girl is a virgin who performs femininity and shies away from any sexual advances made within the film’s plot; even if other characters are having sex, or if another is pursuing her to do so, the final girl resists and thus maintains her virginity and reinforces the ideal femininity she represents. In rape-revenge films, the women’s sexuality is still at the crux of their character, at least initially, but because her body and her sexual agency is violated, not preserved or revered. Importantly, it is this violation of a woman’s sexual agency that motivates the protagonists in rape-revenge films to take action and to perform more masculine, non-feminine action. Therefore, it is the exploitation of a woman’s sexual capacity that allows her to gender-bend and defy the constructions set for women within the horror genre. Eugenie Brinkema alludes to this, writing:

Indeed, the rape-revenge heroine is even more of a Final Girl than the ones Clover analyzes; because she not only protects herself but actively seeks revenge, she is more aggressive, more phallic, more male than any other type of female character. Rape ironically masculinizes this Final figure. Brinkema notes what the rape-revenge film can do that the slasher cannot: it uses women’s sexuality, or at least their sexual expression, constructively. Where the traditional woman in horror shies away from her sexuality, because she is a virginal final girl or a frigid mother, the

---

9 Brinkema, 60.
rape-revenge heroine’s success is predicated on it. While the rape half of this subgenre is inherently destructive in terms of sexual expression, it seems that the rape survivor can use both sexual exploitation and expression in more powerful ways than the women traditionally can in horror. For example, in *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), Jennifer uses her sexuality to kill two of her assailants; she seduces Matthew to the point of having sex with him just before hanging him from a tree, and she fools Johnny into thinking she wants to have sex with him before castrating him in a bathtub.\textsuperscript{10} By employing her sexuality, which was previously defiled, in a way that women in horror traditionally do not, and in the process, defies genre standards and regains agency. The rape-revenge subgenre shows women taking ownership of their sexuality and sexual expression and choosing how they employ it. Where traditional horror shies away from women expressing their sexuality, or if they do, living through the end of the film, the rape-revenge subgenre embraces women’s sexual agency and thus defies the norms of the horror genre more generally.

At the same time that *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) defied standards of the horror genre, American soldiers were defying standards of war and American morality in Vietnam. Though the ethical implications of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War had been questioned from the outset of the conflict, challenges to the way in which U.S. soldiers conducted warfare, and thus American morality, increased after the My Lai Massacre in 1968. This is where the utility of the rape-revenge subgenre emerges: to help viewers make sense of these complications and moral questions, through the complications and moral questions that arise in film. When asked about his motivations for making *The Last House*
on the Left (1972), Wes Craven cited the moral unraveling of American soldiers in Vietnam and the violation of the “rules that had been established for handling violence,” that occurred there; this will be discussed at greater length in Chapter I. The violence and questionable morals enacted by American soldiers at My Lai appeared on screen in The Last House on the Left (1972) and I Spit on Your Grave (1978), through violent rape scenes unlike any seen in film previously. Not only that, but the moral devolution of the American soldiers, from supposed guardians of peace and justice to perpetrators of violence and atrocity, manifested on-screen through the moral devolution of the protagonists during the transformational period between the rape and the revenge sequences. While these representations on film can help viewers understand the cruelties of war, perpetrated by their own soldiers, this ultimately leads viewers to challenge the validity of a national, ethical standard, one that they were imposing onto these soldiers.

In 2004, with the revelation of the torture and abuses that occurred at Abu Ghraib Prison, U.S. soldiers were once again seen as defying American standards of war and morality. They were enacting violence and torture unlike anything to which Americans had ever had visual access, and as such, American civilians were pressed to reconcile their desire to avenge the 9/11 attacks with the means with which U.S. soldiers were doing so. This caused Americans to once again doubt the same, national, ethical standard that came into question after the My Lai Massacre. Therefore, this thesis argues that the War on Terror and the corresponding national crisis of moral ambiguity provided culturally fertile ground for the remakes of The Last House on the Left (2009) and I Spit on Your Grave (2010) to emerge. Not only did the films reemerge, but revisions to their plots and aesthetic presentation served to remind audiences that America’s

---


LITERATURE REVIEW

The argument proposed in this thesis draws from scholarship that is essential to the horror genre, while identifying a connection to the Vietnam War and the War on Terror that has yet to be made directly. This thesis takes on a similar project as Sabine Sielke’s in *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*. In this book, Sielke attempts to lend visibility to the contexts in which rape is discussed “to show how our very sense of any historical issue is inseparable from its various cultural representations, representations that are themselves driven by cultural anxieties and desires.” However, where Sielke’s project goes on to talk about how rape itself is discussed and constructed, this thesis focuses on using the representation of rape to unpack and understand two historical events and time periods that have yet to be explicitly discussed in relation to the rape-revenge subgenre.

Carol Clover’s scholarship on the function of gender in horror appears throughout this thesis and is foundational to any work that engages with these issues. Her theorizing on the rape-revenge subgenre generally, as that which challenges conventions of women in horror, informed the background research for this project, as noted by previous discussion in this introduction. However, it is Clover’s analysis of positionality within the rape-revenge film and emotional response within horror at-large that contributes most uniquely to this project. She writes:

> What I am proposing is that the position of rape victim in general knows no sex, and that a film like *I Spit on Your Grave* is literally predicated on the assumption that all viewers, male and female alike, will take Jennifer’s part, and via whatever

---

set of psychosexual translations, ‘feel’ her violation. Without that identification, the revenge phase of the drama can make no sense.”

Clover’s creation of an environment in which viewers of both gender identities experience the rape-revenge victim’s violation contributes to this project in that it allows for a stronger correlation to be drawn to viewers of these films and American civilians. By proposing that these films effect and upset men and women equally, Clover allows for this thesis to make a more streamlined argument about how audiences use that outrage to justify the actions of the protagonists, and to therefore justify the actions of American soldiers at war; that all viewers experience this violation also ensures they eventually recognize the hypocrisy in this reaction versus the lack of outrage they feel when the victim enacts their revenge; this dichotomy is explained explicitly in Chapter I. This leaves room for this thesis to show how the emotional trajectory of these films correlate to that of the Vietnam War and the War on Terror, and thus reflect the moral questions that these emotional shifts manifest.

Linda Williams’ examination of Clover’s theory of horror as a “body genre” and her subsequent defense of excess greatly informed the way in which this thesis interprets the violence in these films. By calling horror a “body genre” Clover means that it is a film genre that plays to and depends on the audience’s emotional response. While any film aims to “emotional[ly]/physical[ly] excite the audience,” Clover asserts that horror is different from other genres for the way in which it is “specifically devoted to the arousal of bodily sensation”

---

13 Clover, Men, Women And Chain Saws, 159.

14 I say “both” rather than “all” genders because Clover’s book only engages with a binary theory of gender.

and claims that it “exist[s] solely to horrify and stimulate.” This thesis challenges Clover’s assertion that horror is merely meant to horrify and stimulate and argues that it does purposeful, political work to alert audiences the moral inconsistencies in their moral construction of America, and its custodians’ realization of that construction; it uses Linda Williams’ discussion of excess in film to do so. In her article, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Linda Williams goes into exactly what about horror films makes them so emotionally provocative: people’s perceptions of excess. While Williams herself does not believe that films within this genre display any gratuitous imagery, it is the audience’s perception that they do that fulfill the requirements of a body genre; viewers’ perception of exorbitant amounts of violence when watching horror films brings about an exaggerated, bodily response intrinsic to a body genre. This thesis assumes Williams’ position, that the presentation of violence in The Last House on the Left (1972/2009) and I Spit on Your Grave (1978/2010) is always imperative and never inessential, and thus theorizes about why this violence exists as it does in these films: the violence becomes a way to understand the Vietnam War and the War on Terror, and offers viewers an outlet to recognize and accept the moral questions that emerge from each. However, this project also acknowledges viewers’ perception of the violence as groundless and uses this perception to support claims about their emotional responses and subsequent moral hypocrisy.

Finally, Aaron Michael Kerner’s and Steve Jones’ books on torture porn horror films post-9/11 were integral in considering the transformation of the protagonists between the rape

---

16 Clover, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” 189.

and the revenge sequence, from victim to torturer.\textsuperscript{18} Jones in particular articulates that torture porn films offer a space for characters to be both tortured and to become the torturer. This “binary role-reversal” and the fluidity of the victim/torturer binary gives rise to moral complexities in torture porn, but also, in the films considered in this thesis.\textsuperscript{19} Steve Jones writes about this transition and how audiences are reluctant to see torture porn protagonists as torturers or as morally corrupt, given their initial position as “innocent victim.” Viewers of rape-revenge experience a similar reaction, championing the protagonist at the end of the film, when she kills her rapists, despite condemning her rapists at the beginning of the film for enacting violence, albeit a different brand of it. The heart of Jones’ argument about torture porn films is that the characters’ fluctuations between tortured and torturer makes audiences re-evaluate their understanding of morality; this thesis applies this line of thought to the rape-revenge subgenre in a novel way, specifically through narrative analysis of the original films.

\textbf{METHODOLOGY}

When considering topics for this thesis project, I knew I wanted to contribute to scholarship on the horror genre through some sort of analysis related to gender. To make a novel discovery, I would have to navigate the work of Carol Clover, who was already an expert on the slasher subgenre, and writers like Lucy Fischer and Barbara Creed, who had masterfully written on “monstrous mothers” and supernatural teens. It was at this moment that I realized I could make the greatest contribution by writing about the rape-revenge subgenre, an area of horror

\textsuperscript{18} Though torture porn is notoriously difficult to define, at the most basic level, torture porn horror is that which utilizes intense, violent torture scenes to navigate questions about morality, and that does so through a specific, dark, colorless aesthetic. This aesthetic will be discussed further in Chapter II.

often avoided by novice scholars and sometimes even experienced ones. However, to make a genuine contribution, I would have to go beyond unpacking rape-revenge within the context of horror in general. While reading into the rape-revenge subgenre, I noticed that two notable films, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) were both remade within one year of each other, in 2009 and 2010, respectively. With this in mind, I set out to contribute to rape-revenge scholarship by interrogating the value and purpose of remakes, and specifically, remakes of 1970s films in the late 2000s.

To answer the question, “What warranted the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010)?” it was first imperative to understand the function of the rape-revenge subgenre; investigating this subgenre was the first step in understanding the time periods in which it emerged. I first looked to secondary sources on the rape-revenge subgenre and the horror genre more broadly; from this research, I gained great insights into the function of gender in horror and how dependent the genre is on the male/female gender binary and gender difference more generally.

Once I felt that I understood the rape-revenge subgenre and could identify its differences from the horror genre more broadly, I moved into analyzing my films as texts, digging into the narratives and cinematic structures of each. Much of the analysis I did during this time was qualitative, reading into the emotional effect of the films. During this part of my analysis, I noticed a great discrepancy between which sequences were emphasized in the originals versus in the remakes. I saw that originals were much more brutal and shocking in their rape sequences, whereas the remakes were more violent in their revenge sequences; this observation remained constant in my mind for the duration of the semester and would eventually inform my research on torture porn and my subsequent thesis statement. While researching the
movies themselves, I considered historic shifts in film, such as the dissolution of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968, and researched aesthetics of violence to understand that which appeared in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).

My research on the films themselves included reading film reviews from newspapers (i.e. *Chicago Tribune, New York Times, LA Times*) and horror fan sites, as well as watching interviews with the films’ casts and crews. Many reviews of the originals failed to move beyond assessing the violence depicted in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) to provide a nuanced understanding of the films; providing this understanding is the project of this thesis. The reviews of the remakes made it clear that critics considered them against the originals and were fairly critical because of this. My findings during this portion of my research convinced me that these movies were very much connected to the 1970s which helped me think about how and why they re-emerged in the late 2000s.

In researching 2000s remakes of 1970s horror films, I realized that most adopted a visual aesthetic similar to that of a newer subgenre of horror: torture porn. It was in researching torture porn and the moral questions it begs as a result of the simultaneously tortured and torturous characters it presents that I came to consider the moral questions that arose in the 2000s and 1970s. It was in considering these questions that I drew the connection between the War on Terror and the Vietnam War, and subsequently, the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*, and the originals. This realization led to researching the wars more specifically and engaging with American society’s perceptions of the conflicts; this contributed to the contextualization of viewers’ perceptions of the films.
CHAPTER I: VIETNAM AND THE ORIGINALS

To understand how *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) reflect the moral quandaries Americans had about the Vietnam War, it is important to understand what these moral questions were. For many Americans, suppressing the spread of communism and reinforcing American values of democracy were seen as respectable reasons to get involved in the region, and thus initial support for American intervention and escalations in Vietnam was high.\(^20\) However, challenges to the legitimacy of our intervention emerged when thinking about whether it was America’s responsibility, let alone its right, to interfere in the conflict; this led dissenters in the moment and many initial supporters retrospectively, to question the ethics of American intervention. Retroactively, many opponents to the war charged that American intervention in Vietnam violated the “just cause” clause of *Jus Ad Bellum*, the provision of The Just War Theory which speaks to the morality of declaring war.\(^21\) The provision of the “just cause” clause most invoked when debating the morality of the Vietnam War is that which relates to interventionism; although a nation certainly has the right to initiate war out of self-defense or in response to direct aggression, intervening into a conflict is only justified if an act of aggression or imminent threat against the intervening nation is perceived.\(^22\) From Truman and

\(^{20}\) For an explanation of the conditions that led to America’s intervention in the Vietnam War, see the following: Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1982); In August 1965, just one month after President Johnson announced he would deploy more troops to Vietnam and solidify the United States’ presence there, sixty-one percent of Americans polled by Gallup said that the United States *did not* “make a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam.” Additionally, more Americans said they favored escalation of the troop deployment, as opposed to withdrawal, for the first four years (1965-March 1969) the nation was involved. The largest difference in opinion between escalation and withdrawal was in November 1967, when fifty-five percent of respondents favored escalation and only ten percent favored withdrawal. — William L. Lunch & Peter W. Sperlich, “American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (March 1979): 25, 27, accessed January 20, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/447561.

Eisenhower, who initially involved America in the region, to Lyndon B. Johnson, who escalated America’s involvement throughout the 1960s, United States leaders believed the spread of communism in Southeast Asia posed an imminent threat to the United States if not literally, through an actual attack by communist nations, than ideologically.\footnote{Dwight D. Eisenhower: ”The President’s News Conference,” April 7, 1954. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, \textit{The American Presidency Project}. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10202; Lyndon B. Johnson, “The President’s Address on Vietnam Before the National Legislative Conference,” \textit{LBJ Library}, September 29, 1967, accessed April 13, 2017, http://www.lbjlibrary.org/exhibits/the-presidents-address-on-vietnam-before-the-national-legislative-conference.} However, opponents to the war were quick to point out that America was never directly threatened in any of the conflicts unfolding within the region; dissenters argued that unless the warring regions directly attacked or suggested they would attack the United States, there was no imminent threat to react to nor did the ideological spread of communism constitute one.\footnote{Walzer, 80-81.} Therefore, the ethical standards surrounding America’s involvement in the Vietnam War was questioned from the war’s outset, and would only intensify as it progressed.

This intensification came when reports of atrocities committed by American soldiers began to surface. Though the way in which Americans conducted war against the North Vietnamese was subject to moral questioning, the crimes American troops committed against Vietnamese civilians raised more severe charges. One event that challenged American civilians’ view of the troops and the war was the My Lai Massacre. On March 15, 1968, soldiers from several American brigades were preparing to enter the village of Sơn Mỹ on a search-and-destroy mission against a Vietcong battalion thought to be hiding there after the Tet Offensive. The 11th Infantry Brigade, known as Charlie Company, was instructed by their Captain Ernest L.

Medina that by 7:30 a.m. on the day of the attack, “any civilians remaining in the villages would be considered Vietcong or actively sympathetic to the Vietcong,” and should be attacked accordingly. However, motivated by the tragedy his company had encountered over the past few months, Captain Medina “embellished” his orders and “add[ed] a ‘revenge element’ in his briefing;” Medina essentially encouraged his men to use their suffering to motivate their attack on Sơn Mỹ. On March 16, 1968, the members of Charlie Company descended upon Sơn Mỹ and killed approximately 400 civilians. In addition to killing these civilians, American troops burned and destroyed houses, foodstuffs, livestock, and crops, and raped women. As news outlets gained more information about the massacre and reports became more detailed in the coming months, more Americans began to question the morality of the American troops there, but more importantly, the moral project of the war.


26 Just two days before the My Lai massacre, Sergeant George Cox of Charlie Company was killed by a booby trap, “and two other GI’s [were] seriously injured. News of the popular sergeant’s death so devastated the members of Charlie Company they retaliated against a female civilian, shooting and killing her as she worked in a field. Charlie Company had also lost several of their members in February 1968, adding to the “frustration and anger” that would fuel their assault on the civilians of Sơn Mỹ.” “Timeline: Charlie Company and the Massacre at My Lai,” PBS, accessed February 5, 2017, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amERICANexPERIENCE/features/timeline/mylai-massacre/.

27 In October 1969, over seven months after the My Lai Massacre, TIME magazine conducted a poll gauging American support for the war. The results revealed that “Where two years ago 83% of the public agreed that the war was necessary to resist Communist aggression in Asia, today only 55% of the general public and 49% of the leadership accept this explanation. Even fewer said that Viet Nam is crucial to U.S. interests.” The initial support, warranted or not, that the war had as a morally responsible attempt to quell the spread of communism had deteriorated, and the massacre at My Lai undoubtedly exacerbated that deterioration. “Americans on the War Divided, Glum, Unwilling to quit,” TIME, October 31, 1969, accessed January 19, 2017 via Academic Search Premier, http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/ehost/detail?sid=4109&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRJIPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=54044660&db=aph; Despite the U.S. Military’s attempts to cover-up the My Lai Massacre, news reports eventually surfaced and led to the court-martialing of several officers involved in the incident. These trials validated the moral quandary Americans felt as a result of the massacre. Perhaps the best challenge to and questioning of the moral project of the Vietnam War came from Warren Rogers, a Los Angeles Times writer who covered the court trial against Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr. In one particular article, entitled “Conscience of U.S. on Trial With Lt. Calley,” Rogers attempts to identify who/what is to blame for the My Lai Massacre: platoon leader Calley, the U.S. Army, the Vietnam War itself, or something else? The something else
Wes Craven aimed to emulate the blurring of morals instigated by the Vietnam War through his film, *The Last House on the Left* (1972), and the complicated ethics of the characters in it. *The Last House on the Left* (1972) follows John and Estelle Collingwood as they avenge the rape and murder of their 17-year-old daughter, Mari. Mari’s violation occurs at the hands of an escaped convict, Krug Stillo; his son, Junior; his sometime-lover, Sadie; and his criminal companion, Fred “Weasel” Podowski. After heading into the city for a concert, Mari and her friend Phyllis attempt to buy marijuana from Junior. Junior brings the girls to the criminals’ hideout for some “company,” and the gang begins their sexual humiliation and exploitation of the girls, first by sexually assaulting Phyllis in their apartment. While attempting to flee state lines with the girls, the gang’s car breaks down outside of Mari’s house, though they are unaware of this fact. Krug and his gang proceed to drag the girls into the woods near Mari’s home, killing them both, but not before Krug rapes Mari. After raping Mari and shooting her in the lake, Krug and his gang return to the Collingwood home, where their car previously broke down. Dr. and Mrs. Collingwood take them in for the night and quickly discover, through Mari’s bloodied clothes in their baggage and her necklace around Junior’s neck, that the gang has just murdered

which Rogers suggests is responsible for the Massacre is “the American conscience itself.” Rogers explains that at some point during the conflict, destruction and gratuitous chaos became commonplace; this ideology is best summarized by a quote from an American officer, who justifies his company’s destruction of a village during the Tet offensive, saying “‘We had to destroy it to save it!’” Rogers concludes, “But . . . the issue at the Calley court-martial is not now so much what one young man has done, but what we as a nation, intent on policing the world, have done to one young man.” – Warren Rogers, “Conscience of U.S. on Trial With Lt. Calley,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1970, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers, http://proxy.library.georgetown.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/156658845?accountid=11091.

28 *The Last House on the Left*, directed by Wes Craven (Sean S. Cunningham Film Enterprises, 1972), Amazon Instant Video.
their daughter. This discovery initiates the Collingwoods’ retaliation as they proceed to murder each member of Krug’s gang, except for Junior. 29

When talking about his motivations for making the film, Craven cited the violence and the unique moral quandary created by American soldiers’ conduct in Vietnam. The way in which American soldiers defied the standards of goodness, and thus violence, at war, correlates to the ways in which Craven’s protagonists defied these same standards in his film:

_Last House_ did not play by the rules that had been established for handling violence, where the people who did the violence were always bad, and if a good guy did it to the bad guy, it was very clean and quick . . . That was the sort of attitude that America had gone into Vietnam with . . . that they were the bad guys and we’d go in like _Gunsmoke_, face ’em down, and bang, they’d be dead. The fact of the matter was that the war involved horrendous killings piled upon killings.30

In Vietnam, as evidenced by the My Lai Massacre, the “good guys,” the American soldiers, became the bad guys and the violence they enacted was not “clean and quick;” it was actually quite savage and would be remembered and drawn out by American society for decades. This complication and challenge to America’s perception of our soldiers is seen through the

---

29 It is important to note that it is not the Collingwoods who kill Junior, but Krug, indirectly. While Krug is struggling with Dr. Collingwood, Junior fires a gun at him, just narrowly missing. Krug proceeds to coach Junior on how to aim and shoot the gun in order to kill him; this is one of many mental abuses Krug inflicts upon his son. Krug then advises Junior, “Listen to daddy, come on. Now I want you to take the gun, and I want you to turn around and I want you to put it in your mouth and I want you to blow your brains out! I want you to take the gun and I want you to put it in your mouth and I want you to blow your brains out! Blow your brains out! Blow your . . . .” at which point Junior does shoot himself. Not only is this plot point missing from the remake, but Junior, now Justin, actually lives and is saved by the Collingwood family. This revision reinforces and adds to the theme of familial preservation and defense inaugurated by the film, which will be discussed in Chapter II. Where Krug actively destroys his own family (Junior) in the original _The Last House on the Left_ (1972), the Collingwoods try to preserve it, along with their own family, in the remake. However, what will be discussed later is whether or not the Collingwoods are any better off in the remake, despite technically having a whole family once again: _The Last House on the Left_, directed by Wes Craven (Sean S. Cunningham Film Enterprises, 1972), Amazon Instant Video.

30 Wes Craven in David A. Szulkin, 15.

*I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) chronicles the rape and subsequent revenge of Jennifer Hills, a writer and an aspiring novelist from Manhattan. That Jennifer is from the city is not insignificant to the plot of the film, as it sexualizes her and warrants her assault in the eyes of her rapists. Jennifer travels to a secluded cabin in Connecticut to work on her first novel and in doing so, meets Johnny, a local gas station attendant, Matthew, his mentally challenged friend and grocery store clerk, and Stanley and Andy, two other friends of Johnny and Matthew and local degenerates. The men decide that Jennifer is an excellent, sexually experienced candidate to take Matthew’s virginity and set out to enslave her to do so. When Stanley and Andy abduct Jennifer and the men try to force Matthew to have sex with her, he refuses; this prompts Johnny to rape her, and subsequently Andy, Matthew, and Stanley. After her four assaults, Jennifer is left alone in her cabin to nurse herself back to health and plot her revenge. The revenge sequence of the film sees Jennifer avenge her rapes, killing all four men through hanging, castration, axing, and disembowelment.

It is important to note that like American civilians at the start of the war, viewers of these films initially champion the protagonists (as civilians championed U.S. soldiers) and fail to recognize their moral devolution and the fact that the violence they enact during the revenge sequence is just as objectively immoral as the violence enacted by the antagonists during the revenge sequence. This is due, in part, to the violence enacted on screen, which upsets the audience and compels them to identify with the protagonists/victims. This is a natural reaction given the disturbing, graphic nature of the first half of the films: the revenge sequence. Consider that of *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978): For approximately thirty minutes of the 101-minute film,
Jennifer is brutally raped and sexually assaulted four times by four different men. After Stanley and Andy use their motorboat to drag her canoe to a field, removed from her rental home, they begin to push Jennifer around, literally passing her between themselves, Matthew and Johnny. The four men strip off Jennifer’s bathing suit, push her to the ground, and try to coach Matthew into raping Jennifer; when Matthew cowers away, Johnny begins to vaginally rape Jennifer while Andy and Stanley bind her legs and arms. After Johnny climaxes, the men leave Jennifer as she begins to wander away from the field, into the woods. However, it is not long until Jennifer meets the three men once again, and Andy begins to rape her anally, face-down, against a rock. Andy looks more like a wild animal than a man as he violently thrashes his body against Jennifer’s, making horrible, primal noises while doing so; these are not sensual, orgasmic sounds or movements, they are violent, painful, and barbaric. Although the camera angles during the rape vary from wide to medium to close up shots, after the three men leave once again, the camera maintains a long shot of Jennifer’s defeated, bloodied body on the rock for almost a minute; Meir Zarchi forces his audience to look at his victim for an uncomfortable, but purposeful amount of time. The next few minutes depict Jennifer crawling back to her home, completely naked, and depict some of the most obvious desperation in the entire film. When Jennifer finally enters the home and attempts to call 9-11, the four men appear once again and abruptly kick the phone out of her hand; just when audiences felt a bit of relief and thought

---

31 Both Meir Zarchi and Wes Craven expressed purposeful intention to film the rape scenes in *I Spit on Your Grave* and *The Last House on the Left* with few cut-aways and little artistic camerawork; they filmed the scenes like they were actual rape scenes. This resulted in scenes filmed from the perspective of the victims as well as potential onlookers. The full minute spent observing Jennifer’s body on the rock after her second rape is also a result of this intention; for a film to spend a full minute with no dialogue, action, diegetic or non-diegetic sound, or shifting camera angles is uncommon and it speaks to the atypical intentions of these films. The way in which these scenes were filmed is meaningful because such cinematic attention was rarely given to assaults on women, both in terms of duration and style – Chris Eggerton, “Interview: Original ‘I Spit on Your Grave’ Director Meir Zarchi!,” *Bloody Disgusting*, October 5, 2010, accessed January 16, 2017, http://bloody-disgusting.com/news/21921/interview-original-i-spit-on-your-grave-director-meir-zarchi/; “POST MORTEM: Wes Craven – Part 1,” Filmed October 2014, Youtube video, 12:38, Posted October 2014, accessed October 1, 2016, https://youtu.be/tDuEVLdST1k.
Jennifer may escape the ordeal, Zarchi alters the course of action and initiates the final two rapes in the sequence. As Jennifer lies unconscious from her latest beating, Matthew begins to penetrate her vaginally, although he cannot reach sexual climax, at which time, Stanley takes over the assault. Jennifer pleads, “I’m hurt. Please, I’m hurt. I’ll do it to you with my hand. You’ll like it, you’ll see.” For Jennifer, this is the moment of utter defeat. Jennifer has come to realize and accept that she has no control over her body or the men exploiting it; her attempt to reclaim power is to submit to further violation, but under her terms (i.e. with her hand). When Stanley rejects her plea, he effectively solidifies her powerlessness. Stanley dismisses Jennifer’s proposition, responding, “Total submission. That’s what I like in a woman. Total submission,” just before penetrating Jennifer’s vagina with a bottle. Despite her screams, Stanley then forces his penis into Jennifer’s mouth, slaps her, and yells, “Suck it, bitch.”

This close reading of the rape sequence in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) conveys the duration and distressing nature of the rape sequence in this film specifically, but which is found in all four of these films. Hopefully reading that description of the rapes in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) demonstrates the excessive nature of violence in the film and how both the acts themselves and the abundance of them cultivate a specific, emotional reaction in the audience: one of disgust, fear, and eventually, vengeance. A common charge against films, like *I Spit on Your Grave*, that depict a lot of violence is that such imagery is pointless, tasteless, and simple. This was one of many critiques Roger Ebert wrote against *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), writing:

> 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. As a critic, I

---


33 By “vengeance,” I mean that seeing the female protagonists brutally raped and assaulted in the first half of these films certainly disgusts and upsets viewers, but also makes them feel the same need for revenge that the female protagonists do.
have never condemned the use of violence in films if I felt the filmmakers had an artistic reason for employing it. "I Spit on Your Grave" does not. It is a geek show.\textsuperscript{34}

Ebert argues that the lack of artistry in \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978) detracts from the power and the impact of the film; the images displayed on screen are visceral, not thoughtful or symbolic and thus cannot be meaningful. However, central to this thesis project is that meaning and power do exist in this film, one that Ebert claims lacks “a shred of artistic distinction” and “simple craftsmanship.”\textsuperscript{35} In his review, Ebert tries to claim that because the film does not conform to his standards of cinematic artistry and because it “closes all the intellectual doors and windows,” its use of excessive violence is unjustified and useless.\textsuperscript{36} One need only to consider Carol Clover’s analysis of \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978) to see Ebert’s flawed logic. Clover contends that the film should be revered, not condemned, for its “perverse simplicity.” She writes, “What disturbs about \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} is . . . the way it reminds us that lots and lots of the movies and television dramas that we prefer to think of in higher terms are in fact funded by impulses we would rather deny.”\textsuperscript{37} Clover argues that many dismiss \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978) prematurely for its offensive violence, without considering the purpose behind it and thus the truths it attempts to expose; Linda Williams makes a similar critique, as noted in the introduction, of audience members who view the violence in horror as gratuitous. For example, though Ebert criticizes the redundancy of the plot, writing, “They strip the girl, beat her and rape her. She escapes into the woods. They find her, beat her, and rape her again. She crawls home. They are

\textsuperscript{34} Ebert, review of \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978).

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Clover, \textit{Men Women and Chain Saws}, 151.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
already there, beat her some more, and rape her again,” he fails to consider the function of this repetition.\(^{38}\) While Ebert could not appreciate this plot point’s inclusion, Meir Zarchi certainly did and was purposeful in his inclusion of it.

The repetition of Jennifer’s assaults and the explicitness of them were typical of rape scenes in the 1970s, in which sexual violence against women was reimagined to parallel the shifting discourse about it in American society. Sarah Projansky says as much in her book, *Watching Rape*, where she provides a detailed history of rape in U.S. film from 1903-1979. Projansky writes that the proliferation of films depicting rape in the 1970s, including rape-revenge horror films, resulted from a second-wave feminist agenda that positioned rape and violence against women as one of its central issues. In her book, *Against Our Will* (1975), Susan Brownmiller reframes rape as “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear” and as “a crime not of lust, but of violence and power.”\(^{39}\) Though it was not her intention, by reconstructing rape as violence and not sex, Brownmiller paved the way for a new, more vicious representation of rape in film. The dissolution of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968 allowed for this more violent representation to emerge as well.\(^{40}\) Until the 1930s and the implementation of the Code, “explicit references to rape and onscreen depictions of attempted rape were relatively common.”\(^{41}\) Therefore, the dissolution of the code along with the attention being paid to rape and feminist

\(^{38}\) Ibid.


\(^{41}\) Projansky, 26.
resistance to it, allowed for a reemergence and reimagining of rape on screen, to the extent that one film critic called rape “the new Hollywood game” in 1973. On-screen rape was reimagined in the rape-revenge subgenre through shooting techniques seldom before used to depict rape as well as enhanced levels of film violence, which were also emerging at the time.

In general, the 1970s was a time when on-screen violence became more engaging, visually intense and narratively central, both of which are exhibited by films within the rape-revenge subgenre, like *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). J. David Slocum explains the shift that occurred within cinema as a movement away from “sentiment” and towards “sensation.” This “cinema of sensation” is “inaugurated” by Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, “in which viewers were more viscerally engaged by new aesthetic forms than they had been by the previously dominant ‘cinema of sentiment.’” To compete with the budding television and amusement park industries, film “began to invent new scopic regimes of visual and visceral ‘attraction;’” one such regime was increased violence on screen. Though use of special effects and editing added to this increased violence, most notably, the 1960s introduced “protracted images of physical brutality and bloodshed,” both of which are featured prominently in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).


44 Slocum, 19.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 16-17.
Wes Craven was intentional in his use of prolonged, violent scenes in *The Last House on the Left* (1972), given these shifts within the film industry, and the cultural context of war in which the movie was filmed. Craven has stated:

‘*Last House* was a product of its era. . . it was a time when all the rules were out the window when everybody was trying to break the hold of censorship. The Vietnam war was going on, and the most powerful footage that we saw was in the actual documentary films of the war. There was a great amount of feeling that, ‘the worst of it is being censored, so let’s try to get our hands on what’s really going on over there.’”

Wes Craven was right to cite Vietnam war documentaries as the medium that best and most accurately depicted the reality of war. Documentaries such as *The Anderson Platoon* (1967) and *A Face of War* (1968) premiered just a few years after the United States entered Vietnam, and followed U.S. soldiers through their day to day activities, including combat. These films offered American civilians greater exposure to the war than the medium most commonly associated with the war: television. From 1965-1969, approximately ninety percent of the CBS and NBC nightly news coverage focused on the war, forty-eight percent of which was coverage dedicated to combat stories. However, the television medium faced technological limitations that restricted the impact these stories could make and what they could show. According to Chester Pach, “Obtaining combat film was difficult,” because “the television crew had to get out to the field, be lucky enough to accompany a unit that made contact with the enemy, and make sure that

---

47 Wes Craven in David A. Szulkin, 15.


its equipment worked properly.”

Even then, if the battle was too dangerous, the cameraman would have to retreat, or risk damaging his equipment or ruining his shot if he stayed. With this in mind, much of what appeared on television screens was not action-packed combat; it was “routine battle coverage (several days old because most film was shipped by air); report on technology; human-interest vignettes about the troops; occasional ‘light’ stories about such trivia as what it is like to parachute out of an airplane; and many speeches and press conferences, relatively few of which were of real historical significance.” However, it is important to remember that despite the content of Vietnam coverage not being so compelling, there was a lot of it. The Vietnam War was dubbed “the living-room war,” in part, due to the endless stream of war images and reports that entered American homes each day. In the words of Daniel C. Hallin, “The problem with Vietnam coverage was quality not quantity.”

The reaction that Craven wished to illicit from his audience can actually be seen in one scene from *The Last House on the Left* (1972) [see Appendix, Figure 1]. The scene takes place in the gang’s hideout, after Junior lures Phyllis and Mari there under the premise of purchasing marijuana; it is the moment where the girls realize they will not escape unscathed, if at all. As the gang undress Phyllis and presumably sexually assault her, the camera actually focuses and

---


51 Hallin, 95.

52 Ibid., 209.


54 Hallin, 209.

55 *The Last House on the Left*, directed by Wes Craven (1972).
zooms in on Mari watching from the side; with her hands against her chest and eventually running through her hair, Mari looks genuinely distraught while watching and listening to Phyllis’ assault. The camera continues to zoom, transitioning from a medium to a close-up shot of Mari, as she looks around the room, raising her eyebrows and widening her eyes, helplessly observing her friend’s assault; she is frozen in fear. Mari’s shock, confusion, and paralysis is similar to that which audiences would experience, watching the remainder of *The Last House on the Left* (1972), and correlates to the shock, confusion, and paralysis some Americans would experience watching news reports on the Vietnam War; more Americans would react this way, Craven suggests, if they had greater access to the realities of the war, realities which he wished to expose through his movie. In this moment, Mari’s reaction both mirrors the audience’s and suggests that worse violence is yet to come, both in the film and in the war.

Just as the 1970s was a period that forced America to “look at” rape as an important, cultural issue, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) forced audiences to “look at it” visually as they never had before. The novelty of these rape-revenge films was not necessarily that they depicted rape; as noted previously, rape had been part of film pre-production code and made a major resurgence once it was dissolved in 1968. The novelty of these films was in the augmented violence and techniques used to depict these rapes. These techniques included but were not limited to prolonged shots that did not cut-away from the rape, more explicit scenes of the male rapists on top of/penetrating the female victims, and, in the case of *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), no soundtrack to distract from the savagery of the action.

Eugenie Brinkema theorizes about why this enhanced violence occurs in rape-revenge films in her essay, “The Lady Van(qu)ishes: Interiority, Abjection and the Function of Rape in Horror Films.” As mentioned in the introduction, Brinkema argues that the literal interiority of
rape counteracts horror’s “fierce, insistent need to expose meanings.” Audiences cannot see the physical harm caused by a penetrating penis like they can see that caused by a knife. She continues, “Because the film cannot show the one thing horror desperately wants to see, everything else in this film becomes too visible, painfully so.” She cites the rapes in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) occurring in daylight as evidence of this hypervisibility, in that the assaults occur during a time when natural light is abundant and forces audiences to see the assaults. The full body shots of the rapes, particularly in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), the repetition of the assaults, and the long duration of the scenes are evidence of this hypervisibility as well. The rape sequence in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) lasts approximately twenty-three minutes, during which time audiences see Jennifer assaulted four separate times. The film simultaneously prolongs the sequence while fitting several assaults into it so audiences see as much graphic imagery as possible. The fact that during each of these four rapes, audiences see full body shots of Jennifer and therefore as much of the actual rape as possible supports Brinkema’s claim that the “too-visible rape scenes stand in for the one thing that can never be fully shown or known: the locus of harm in the female body itself.”

*The Last House on the Left* (1972) upholds this standard of visibility and sets the tone for the brutal aesthetics of the genre by only using close-ups during the rape scene. From beginning to end, the rape sequence in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) is comprised of close-ups of Krug unbuckling Mari’s pants, Junior’s face, Krug’s and Mari’s pelvic area, and finally Krug’s and

---

56 Brinkema, 38.
57 Ibid., 45.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
Mari’s faces; their faces remain the focal point for the duration of the scene. By focusing closely on Mari’s and Krug’s faces, the juxtaposition of her innocence and his depravity becomes clear; the audience is forced to look at Mari’s flawless, clear face being smothered by Krug’s, which is unshaven and dripping with blood and saliva [see Appendix, Figure 2]. Adding to the discomfort of the scene is the score dubbed over it; entitled “Mayhem Montage” on the official soundtrack, the disjointed combination of high pitched bells and deep, echoing organ bellows is jarring and reinforces the abhorrence of the scene.

By the time *I Spit on Your Grave* comes around in 1978, the close-ups shown in the four-shot rape sequence in *The Last House on the Left* (1972) are less effective in conveying the depravity of rape, and in eliciting thoughtful response from the audience. After the conclusion of America’s decade-long involvement in Vietnam, as well as almost a decade’s worth of consumption of hyper-violence on screen, shifts in presentation and aesthetics had to be made to accommodate Americans’ habituation to violence; a similar desensitization will occur after 9/11 and will require greater cinematic adjustments from the films’ remakes. Where *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) goes that *The Last House on the Left* (1972) does not, apart from the number of rapes, is in what it shows and how it is filmed. Where *The Last House on the Left* (1972) depicts the rape scene from the perspective of an observer, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) is filmed from the perspective of the victim. Again, returning to the example of the first rape scene, once Andy and Stanley actually chase Jennifer to the field, where Johnny is waiting for them, a shot looking down at Jennifer from behind Johnny’s left side transitions into an up-ward facing close-up of

---

60 *The Last House on the Left*, directed by Wes Craven (1972).
Johnny from Jennifer’s perspective; this is the first of many shots which will be filmed from the perspective of Jennifer, thus placing the audience in the position of the victim.\footnote{I Spit on Your Grave, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978).}

The fact that the audience is frequently positioned to identify with Jennifer is significant; it privileges the audience feeling violated, like Jennifer, over them feeling dominant, like the rapists. This aesthetically reoccurring violation primes the audience to identify with Jennifer, and therefore justify the violence she will inflict later in the film; this personal feeling of violation temporarily prevents the audience from seeing the hypocrisy in their initial condemnation of the rapists’ violence and allowance of Jennifer’s, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Therefore, by filming scenes from Jennifer’s perspective, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) places the audience in the middle of the film’s action, in a more personal and troubling way. By putting the audience in the position of victim, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) creates anxiety for the audience in the moment, and confusion later when they must reconcile the terror they felt being in Jennifer’s position when she was the recipient of harm with the triumph and justification they feel when she administers it.

That *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) does not have a score also adds to its unprecedented representation of rape. The lack of non-diegetic sound, and the subsequent exacerbation of diegetic sound, makes Jennifer’s rapes more realistic. Though it may seem trivial to point out, “stop it” is something an actual victim of rape would cry out. Because there is no non-diegetic sound or score to distract from Jennifer’s cries, the rape is less cinematic and more “real.” Meir Zarchi makes no attempts to shroud Jennifer’s rapes in symbolism or reimagine them in an artistic way allowed by film; he depicts sexual assault against women as it actually happens. In a 2010 interview, Meir Zarchi reflected on his experience of “saving a girl who’d just been
viciously gang-raped,” and explained how that experience shaped his depiction of Jennifer’s rapes in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). He states: “So what I saw is [what you see in] the movie and I hope I put it in such a way that you will see what this girl that I saved went through.” In this interview, Meir Zarchi reveals that he essentially tried to recreate a real assault on screen, and he did so through his filming techniques. Where *The Last House on the Left* (1972) reminds audiences that “it’s only a movie,” through its use of a score, *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) lacks that reminder and connotes verisimilitude for the audience. This adds to the disgust and anxiety felt by the audience, which in turn informs the contradictory moral schema the audience constructs to justify Jennifer’s revenge. While still being believable, the diegetic sounds depicted in the film were intentionally shocking and perhaps made audiences think about rape differently than they had before. Jennifer’s exclamations of pain and the discomforting, animalistic sounds her rapists make while penetrating her are not sexy and remind audiences that rape is not sex, but rather, an act of violence. As mentioned previously, this reconstruction of rape as a crime of “violence and power,” and not lust, was central to Second Wave feminist rhetoric. The fact that the screaming and jeering persists through four sexual assaults leaves audiences unsettled and disgusted, but also with a new understanding of sexual assault demanded by the 1970s.

Through their depictions of rape, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) offered audiences realistic imagery and violence that they were not seeing from the images and footage of the Vietnam War. Where “the worst of” the war was being censored due

---


63 The tagline used in the film poster and trailer for the original *The Last House on the Left* (1972) was: “To avoid fainting, keep repeating: it’s only a movie.”

to technological limitations and an attempt to preserve the conception of America as a moral agent, nothing was being censored in these films. As such, *The Last House on the Left (1972)* and *I Spit on Your Grave (1978)* help viewers understand and conceptualize the violence going on at war, to which they were being denied access.

The rape sequences of these films leave audiences feeling “unclean, ashamed, and depressed.” These sequences are so disconcerting that the only alternative, the revenge sequence, appears palatable and even desirable. Roger Ebert features this attitude in his review of *I Spit on Your Grave*, writing that after the rape sequence, “When the tables turned and the woman started her killing spree, a woman in the back row shouted: ‘Cut him up, sister!’” The audience’s reception of the revenge sequence is predicated on their trauma from the rape sequence; it is in the first, rape sequence that the audience aligns themselves with the protagonist/victim, and thus experiences her emotional shifts as they unfold on screen. Linda Williams contends that the synchronization of the protagonist’s and the audience’s feelings and reactions proves the success of the film as part of a body genre. She writes, “It seems that the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen.” As mentioned previously, Meir Zarchi ensures his audience mimics what is seen on screen by shooting the rape scenes to place viewers in the position of Jennifer, and thus in the experience of violation. The audience sees what Jennifer sees during her rapes and this musters a feeling of powerlessness among viewers, one that Jennifer experiences as well [see Appendix, Figure 3]. Therefore, just as Jennifer feels pain, fear, and helplessness,

---

65 Ebert, review of *I Spit on Your Grave (1978)*.

66 Ibid.

67 Williams, 4.
screaming during her assaults, the audience screams and feels similar pain, fear, and helplessness alongside her.

Had the first half of the film not been so traumatizing, perhaps audiences would have been less receptive towards the second half. Had audiences not been so disgusted with the way in which Jennifer was violated and defiled perhaps they would not have been as accepting of her acting similarly towards her rapists. Not only that, but the methods in which Jennifer enacts her revenge are particularly relevant to her assaults, and thus appear almost sensible to the audience. For example, it is easier for audiences to make sense of Matthew and Johnny’s deaths, which come as a result of Jennifer’s seduction, given that this sexual control is exactly what Matthew and Johnny violated earlier in the film, when they raped her. By taking control of her sexual expression to kill Matthew and Johnny, Jennifer counteracts the agency she was previously denied. Though some may argue that Jennifer using her sexuality to lure Matthew and Johnny to their deaths actually furthers her exploitation, in that using her sexuality is the only way she’s able to achieve her goal (revenge), it is important to remember that she is using her sexuality to outsmart the men who previously degraded it. The revenge sequence of *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) is more than retributive, it is restorative; it rehabilitates what was once defiled (Jennifer’s sexuality) to its original (if not more empowered) state [see Appendix, Figure 4].69 The way in which Jennifer kills Johnny is equally as reciprocating. Jennifer kills Johnny by poetically

---


69 By “if not more empowered,” I mean that perhaps Jennifer’s successful deployment of her sexuality to kill Matthew and Johnny does more than merely restore it; perhaps it gives her a greater sense of power, and thus agency over her sexuality. Consider the ways in which Jennifer kills her rapists; each murder is physically strenuous and thus requires a great amount of physical power to execute (hoisting Matthew’s body upwards to asphyxiate, severing Johnny’s penis, driving an axe into Andy’s back, and starting a boat motor against Stanley’s body). Jennifer experiences some power literally, by physically overpowering her rapists. Jennifer’s expression in the final scene of the film also illustrates the power she gains. Jennifer appears to be smiling, looking both vindicated, strong, and confident; it is a drastic shift from the helpless, hopeless expression she adopts after her rape, while she is rehabilitating herself; *I Spit on Your Grave*, directed by Meir Zarchi (1978).
castrating him in the middle of manual genital stimulation. As Carol Clover posits, “If maleness 
caused the crime, then maleness will suffer the punishment.” Jennifer goes after that which 
violated her in the most literal sense: Johnny’s penis. Because Jennifer’s revenge is so intimately 
related to her rape, audiences are more likely to view it as warranted and support it.

However, it is in noticing the discrepancy in their feelings about the two halves of the 
films, in their repudiation of the rape sequence and championing of the revenge sequence, that 
audiences can truly appreciate the moral quandary that Vietnam posed and that the films become 
an allegory for some Americans’ contradictory experience of the war. Over the course of these 
films, the audience experiences a conflicted and drastic shift in emotional response. Where they 
feel disturbed and discomforted by the malicious, violent behavior of the male rapists and 
murderers at the beginning of the film, they feel relieved and justified in supporting violent, 
profane behavior enacted by the female victim/protagonists at the end of the film. However, 
when thinking about each character’s violent actions at the most fundamental level, the relief 
and/or excitement they feel as a result of the antagonists’ pain contradicts the disgust they felt as 
a result of the protagonists’ pain. When the protagonists transform from the victim to the 
torturer, the violence they enact is, objectively, equally as immoral as the antagonists’ violent 
acts committed at the beginning of the films. How can audiences feel so disgusted with the 
actions of Matthew, Johnny, Andy, and Stanley at the beginning of the film, but so relieved by 
the actions of Jennifer at the end? How can they feel so disturbed by Krug’s violation and 
murder of Mari, but support Dr. Collingwood killing Krug with a chainsaw? In both films, the

---

70 Clover, Men, Women And Chain Saws, 123.
protagonists inflict a similar kind of pain onto the antagonists, so why should viewers be so accepting of one series of actions and not the other?71

Americans had to ask similar questions of the initial support of the Vietnam War and the means with which the nation was conducting it. It was not until reports about My Lai emerged that Americans more seriously began questioning the reasons America was involved in the Vietnam War and began questioning the methods with which the nation was conducting it. My Lai made Americans realize they could not support a cause they believed in, suppressing communism and advancing democracy, if it meant sacrificing the nation’s ethics in the process. Similarly, viewers of The Last House on the Left (1972) and I Spit on Your Grave (1978) come to realize they cannot support the protagonists’ revenge, if it means that the characters must sacrifice their morals and lower themselves to the ethical standards of the antagonists, of the enemy.

The power of these films and the political argument that can be made from them depends on the discovery of this contradictory reaction. While the intended message of the films is to feel disgusted by the rape sequence and vindicated in the revenge sequence, these films also strive to convey meaning in the process of making people feel this way, not just in provoking a specific reaction. The power of the “process” rests in making audiences feel those contradictory emotions (of disgust and vindication) at the beginning and the conclusion of the films, but also in making the audience realize the contradictory nature of their emotional response. The realization of this contradiction sets off a third emotional response: that of discomfort and confusion. By the end of

71 I say that the original I Spit on Your Grave (1978) parallels the actions of its protagonists and antagonists more so than the other films because of the actions’ connection to sex and sexuality. Although the rape of Jennifer is not sexual, it is violent, it is an assault on/exploitation of Jennifer’s gender and sexuality. To parallel and respond to the assault on her own gender/sexual identity, Jennifer punishes her rapists by targeting their masculinity/bodily representations of it.
the films, audiences are left feeling uneasy and confused about their dramatic shift in emotional response, much like certain groups of Americans were left confounded by their sentiments regarding the Vietnam War following particularly deplorable acts committed by U.S. soldiers.

Part of the audience’s discomfort with and uncertainty about the transformation of the protagonists comes from the characters’ own unease about their transformations. This unease is especially clear in the final minutes of *The Last House on the Left* (1972). After slitting Sadie’s throat, Mrs. Collingwood begins to walk back to her house, though her furrowed gaze remains fixed on Sadie’s body, floating in the pool. Mrs. Collingwood looks noticeably distressed as she places one hand over her mouth and the other on the side of her face; the placement of her hands in combination with the tortured concentration she has on Sadie’s body, while not necessarily signaling remorse, at the very least shows that she is distraught by her actions. It is also important to note that the frame only includes Mrs. Collingwood and never returns to Sadie’s body; this frame is all about Mrs. Collingwood perceiving the gravity of her actions, and therefore, the audience doing so as well. The scene then moves into the Collingwoods’ living room, where Dr. Collingwood has just murdered Krug. The Sherriff and his Deputy enter the room as Mrs. Collingwood does, covering her face with her hand and hurrying over to Dr. Collingwood; he is sitting, staring into his lap where the chainsaw he used to kill Krug rests. When Mrs. Collingwood makes it over to her husband, Dr. Collingwood lets out an audible sigh, and does so several more times as Mrs. Collingwood cowers behind him. Mrs. Collingwood completely obscures her face behind Dr. Collingwood’s head, leaning onto him as he continues to pant. It isn’t until the Deputy removes the chainsaw from his lap that Dr. Collingwood looks up; when he does, he makes eye contact with the Deputy, looking physically exhausted and drained. Dr. Collingwood then directs his gaze towards Krug’s dead body, though once again,
the frame does not allow the audience to see Krug; this frame is about seeing and interpreting Dr. Collingwood’s depleted expression and body language. Dr. Collingwood hunched over, covered in Krug’s blood, with Mrs. Collingwood physically hiding behind her husband’s body, is the final scene in the film and an ambiguous one at that. The audience is left guessing at how Dr. Collingwood will react after he catches his breath and, because she is obscured by her husband, they do not even have the opportunity to read Mrs. Collingwood’s reaction. Though *The Last House on the Left* (1972) displays an unprecedented amount of violence and imagery for much of the film, it ends by revealing much less to its audience; the fact that the audience is left with such little information and imagery to fully understand the Collingswoods’ regret and the impact of their actions, especially when juxtaposed with the film’s deluge of imagery earlier, speaks to the moral project of *The Last House on the Left* (1972). At the film’s conclusion, it assumes the audience has seen enough moral violations to process them and judge its characters accordingly; though the lines between good and bad have been blurred, the audience should recognize that the Collingswoods’ actions were just as cruel and immoral as those of Krug, Weasel, Sadie, and Junior. In recognizing this, audience members start to process and understand their own moral inconsistencies as they relate to the Vietnam War.

It is in observing and interpreting the Collingwoods’ distress at the end of *The Last House on the Left* (1972) that audiences begin to feel uncertain about their own reactions to the film. Seeing Mrs. Collingwood look as distressed as she does by the pool makes viewers second-guess their initial calls for vengeance and question whether they should feel distressed as well. Watching Dr. Collingwood pant, unable to move or respond to the officers’ presence as Mrs. Collingwood hides behind him, makes audiences appreciate the severity of their actions. As Linda Williams contends, “the success of these [body] genres is often measured by the degree to
which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen,” and thus the success of *The Last House on the Left* (1972) is in making audiences feel as uneasy as the Collingwoods do by the end of the film.\(^7^2\)

That being said, the character development of the Collingwoods, apart from reading into the characters’ own processing of their deeds, also conveys the complicated moral schema of *The Last House on the Left* (1972). Wes Craven, the director of *The Last House on the Left* (1972), speaks to this point, stating, “‘Last House did not play by the rules that had been established for handling violence, where the people who did the violence were always bad, and if a good guy did it to the bad guy, it was very clean and quick . . . ’”\(^7^3\) As Craven suggests, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) does away with the tendency to morally typecast its characters; by having the characters we would traditionally deem as “moral” or “good” perform similarly horrendous acts as the characters we would traditionally deem as “amoral” or “bad,” the film shocks audiences and makes them reconsider their characterizations. Though this explanation comes from his book on torture porn, Steve Jones’ description of the function of torture in torture porn films can be applied to the type of violence seen in rape-revenge films. According to Jones, “Torture porn narratives rarely depict morality in such stark terms, and their failure to fit the ‘good versus evil’ moral dichotomy imposed upon them has resulted in the subgenre being dismissed as amoral or even immoral.”\(^7^4\) Like the torture porn subgenre, the rape-revenge subgenre’s depiction of morality is complex, though rather than being dismissed as “amoral or even immoral,” the rape-revenge subgenre has been dismissed as exploitative or tasteless. Jones continues to caution

\(^7^2\) Williams, 4.

\(^7^3\) Wes Craven in David A. Szulkin, 15.

against moral typecasting in such a complicated subgenre, quoting Kurt Gray and Daniel M. Wegner who write that the moral typecasting is the “‘general perceptual tendency to view others as either victims of pain (moral patients) or perpetrators of misdeeds (moral agents), but not both.’”

The complexity of *The Last House on the Left* (1972/2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/2010) lies in the fact that the films’ characters are simultaneously moral patients and moral agents and that audiences initially sympathize with the protagonists in both instances; because the audience is unable or refuses to initially see Jennifer and the Collingwoods as committing moral wrongs and only as “victims of pain,” they are accepting, if not excited about, the violence inflicted by the characters. Rather than seeing Jennifer castrating Johnny or Mrs. Collingwood slitting Sadie’s throat as morally wrong, audiences initially see these acts as justifiable; the protagonists are righting a wrong done onto them and this does not warrant skepticism or condemnation. However, once audiences realize that the violence inflicted by the protagonists is as cruel and immoral as that inflicted by the antagonists, the moral project of the film becomes clear. Just as we were supposed to comprehend the contradictory nature of our emotional response to the two sequences in the films, audiences are supposed to recognize and react to the exception they make for the violence inflicted by the protagonists, one which contradicts the contempt they felt for the antagonists. By the end of the film, audiences are left feeling less certain about their understanding of the characters’ morality than they were at the beginning; in evoking this reaction, both emotionally and narratively, *The Last House on the Left* (1972/2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/2010) show that “good” and “bad” are not clearly defined, certainly not in Vietnam and not even in a film where there is the potential for a neat, controlled ending.

---

75 Jones, 83.
CHAPTER II: THE WAR ON TERROR AND THE REMAKES

Immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, support of the U.S. government and its decision to invade Afghanistan was exceptionally high. In an NBC News poll issued on September 12, 2001, when asked if the United States “should take forceful military action against the people who are responsible for these attacks, even if it means risking further retaliation and the threat of war,” eighty-three percent of respondents said “Yes,” the United States “should take forceful military action.” Of the same respondents, fifty percent were “concerned that the United States will underreact and not be strong enough . . . in its response to the attacks;” immediate, strong, military action was favored by Americans just days into what would become a decades-long conflict. The surge in government and Presidential approval ratings immediately following the 9/11 attacks also demonstrates Americans’ fervent support and trust that the government would take appropriate actions to react strongly. From September 7-10, 2001, President Bush’s approval rating was fifty-one percent, a six percent decrease from the initial fifty-seven percent approval rating he garnered at the start of his first term (February 1-4, 2001). In the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks (September 14-15, 2001), Bush’s approval ratings jumped to eighty-six percent and continued to rise until they

76 NBC News. “Do you believe that the United States should take forceful military action against the people who are responsible for these attacks, even if it means risking further retaliation and the threat of war?” September 12, 2001, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2, https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/misc/USNBC2001-6018/version1/usnbc2001-6018_toplines.pdf.

77 NBC News. “Are you more concerned that the United States will overreact and go too far in its response to these attacks, or that the United States will underreact and not be strong enough in its response?” September 12, 2001, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1. https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/misc/USNBC2001-6018/version1/usnbc2001-6018_toplines.pdf.

reached a peak of ninety percent approval.\textsuperscript{79} Reported rates of patriotism increased as well and triggered many Americans to enlist in the military.\textsuperscript{80} Post 9/11, Americans enlisted in the military at rates that had not been seen since the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. According to military statistics, “. . . in 2002 – the first full recruitment year after the attacks – 79,585 people joined the army, compared with 74,577” that enrolled in the previous year.\textsuperscript{81} However, this surge in enrollment did not last long; by 2005, the Army fell short of their recruiting goal by 7,000 soldiers, suggesting that the immediate response to 9/11 and a desire to avenge the United States played a heavy role in enlistment early on in the conflict.\textsuperscript{82} Once America actually invaded Afghanistan, eighty percent of Americans supported the use of ground troops in the region; while it was still early in the conflict.\textsuperscript{83} Though they may seem redundant, these statistics demonstrate Americans’ desire for revenge immediately following the 9/11 attacks.

In the months following the terror attacks, opinion letters flooded into U.S. news organizations, dictating both an impassioned desire for and logical hesitation to retaliate. Letters from those who lost loved ones in the 9/11 attacks, such as Elizabeth Gilligan whose husband Ron died in the first tower, were fervent in their desire for revenge, with language such as: “I

\textsuperscript{79} Gallup, “Presidential Approval Ratings – George W. Bush.”


want revenge – revenge against the Taliban and revenge against Bin Laden. From a US viewpoint, the feeling is that they are getting exactly what they deserve.” On September 12, 2001, notable journalist Lance Morrow made a “case for rage and retribution,” writing: “A day cannot live in infamy without the nourishment of rage. Let’s have rage. What is needed is a unified, unifying, Pearl Harbor sort of purple American fury, a ruthless indignation that doesn’t leak away in a week or two, wandering off into Prozac-induced forgetfulness or into the next media sensation . . . or into a corruptly thoughtful relativism.” While not explicitly calling Americans to action, Morrow does urge them to recognize and develop their anger. While not as sensational, there were also articles and letters written, urging Americans to pursue “justice” rather than “holus-bolus revenge.” The fear that the Taliban would retaliate against a U.S. attack was real and made many Americans quell their initial desire for revenge. Nonetheless, many Americans did feel those initial urges for retribution and such feelings did work to justify America’s invasion of Afghanistan, and later, Iraq. With these initial reactions to the 9/11 attacks and fervent support of the initiation of the War on Terror in mind, it is important to consider what contributed to decline in support for the war and the moral implications of America’s conduct abroad.


One incident that shocked Americans and that made previous war supporters question the ethical standards of the U.S. military was the discovery of the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners committed by Military Police at Abu Ghraib Prison. As early as June 2003 (only two months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq), Amnesty International “expressed concern over the current human rights situation in Iraq,” and reported on injustices occurring at Abu Ghraib Prison. However, it was not until April 2004 that widespread reports of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib emerged. On April 28, 2004, CBS News broke the story during a 60 Minutes II program and broadcast images of the abuse that would eventually be proliferated by news sources around the world [see Appendix, Figure 5].

After the release of these images and other video footage, Americans were outraged and support for the War on Terror declined. According to a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll released on May 10, 2004, seventy-three percent of people believed the abuse conducted by U.S. soldier at Abu Ghraib was “unjustified” and seventy-one percent said the abuse was “a serious offence rather than a harmless prank.” Additionally, approval ratings for President Bush sank to the lowest of his presidency: forty-six percent. This is a far cry from the eighty-six percent approval rating President Bush garnered in the days following the September 11th attacks. Finally, the portion of Americans who saw the war in Iraq as “worthwhile” dropped to forty-four

---


90 CNN, “Poll: 73 percent say Iraqi abuse unjustified.”
percent following the discovering of abuse at Abu Ghraib: this was the lowest, swiftest drop in approval rating for the war since its inception, dropping twelve points in just two months.\footnote{“General to testify on abuse probe,” CNN, May 11, 2004, accessed January 29, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/05/11/iraq.abuse.main/} 

What is interesting is that a majority of Americans did not find fault with executive officials like President Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, but rather with the U.S. soldiers themselves and their direct superiors.\footnote{CNN, “Poll: 73 percent say Iraqi abuse unjustified.”} The construction of these American soldiers as monstrous and immoral is consistent with soldiers’ own reports of their behavior and mental state working in Abu Ghraib. In \textit{The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib}, many of the M.P.s (Military Police) charged with torturing and mistreating Iraqi prisoners recognized and spoke about the changes in their behavior and minds. Javal Davis, who served six months in a military prison for abusing detainees at Abu Ghraib, states in the documentary: “We were at war. It was not pretty. It was not nice. These guys [Iraqis] killed people. Oh well. After a while, you become numb. You just zone out. Everyone did.”\footnote{\textit{Ghosts of Abu Ghraib}, directed by Rory Kennedy (HBO, 2007), DVD.} Sabrina Harman, who like Davis, served six months in a military prison, is quoted as saying: “You started to forget what you saw the day before, because the next day would always usually be worse. So, you kind of went numb the day before and then it just kept going. It was like a cycle.”\footnote{\textit{Ghosts of Abu Ghraib}.} What both Harman and Davis express is that given the orders they were expected to carry out and the torture they were compelled to execute, they became fundamentally different people. Whether it was to cope with the distress of being given these orders, the freedom they had to enact torture, or a combination of the two, the actions of the M.P.s at Abu Ghraib strayed from the standards of “respect, honor, integrity, and personal
courage” established by the U.S. Army and resembled those of the terrorists they were fighting, more so than those of American soldiers.\footnote{“The Army Values,” \textit{Army.mil}, accessed January 29, 2017, https://www.army.mil/values/.
} According to Alberto Mora, General Counsel in the Department of the Navy from 2001-2006, “If we embrace torture as something that is expedient and necessary . . . we blur the distinction between ourselves and the terrorists.”\footnote{\textit{Ghosts of Abu Ghraib}.} That members of the 372\textsuperscript{nd} Military Police Company acted similarly to the terrorists who executed 9/11 was a common charge made against them after the atrocities at Abu Ghraib came to light.

The soldiers of the 372\textsuperscript{nd} Military Police underwent a similar transformation and moral devolution as the American soldiers at My Lai, and therefore, as the Collingwoods and Jennifer in \textit{The Last House on the Left} (1972/2009) and \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978/2010). Just as Charlie Company initially felt justified enacting violence at My Lai, and just as the Collingwoods and Jennifer feel justified in their vengeance in \textit{The Last House on the Left} (1972/2009) and \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978/2010), the soldiers of the 372\textsuperscript{nd} Military Police Company felt justified in torturing those who they thought to have information about the attacks and/or al-Qaeda; having been initially wronged in the 9/11 attacks and in subsequent warfare that followed during the U.S. invasion supposedly justified this abuse. Ken Davis, one M.P. involved with the scandal at Abu Ghraib but who never abused detainees himself, explains the vengeful attitudes of many soldiers involved, simply stating: “‘You struck my home country. I’ll fight you for that.’”\footnote{Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, \textit{The Ballad of Abu Ghraib} (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2008), 222.} Davis expressed frustration with his position in Iraq, feeling like he was “engaged in a ‘kind of parody’ of the war on terror,” given that America’s invasion into Iraq was objectively seen as
less warranted than that of Afghanistan. Wanting to right the wrongs done to the United States during the 9/11 attacks, but not being in the right place to do so, left soldiers like Davis feeling impotent and ineffective; this frustration inevitably fueled their abuse of Iraqi detainees. This frustration, coupled with the inevitable strain and loss that accompanied warfare and that was suffered by soldiers like Davis, made them want to kill for the simple “fact that [they were] there.”

Americans were not naïve about to the savage potential of military combat. However, to see it occur away from the “battlefield,” without resulting from combat, and through only the twisted thoughts of American soldiers, was new and startling. It was in reacting to the atrocities at Abu Ghraib and correlating the actions of the soldiers there to the actions of our “enemy” that the American public began to question the purpose of the war, the moral implications of it, and therefore, the ethical code of our nation. None of this would have been possible, however, without a visceral, emotional reaction to the images that came out of Abu Ghraib.

Part of the reason Americans reacted so emotionally towards Abu Ghraib was because there were images that candidly depicted incidents of violence and torture. Reports of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners would have been shocking in word alone, but the fact that there were images to substantiate the abuse is significant. In the documentary *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, Sergeant Javal Davis says: “If there were no photographs, there would be no Abu Ghraib.” Such a seemingly obvious remark is actually quite substantial; Abu Ghraib was as significant and as shocking as it was because of the imagery. This points to one major reason for the emergence of the remakes of

---

98 Gourevitch and Morris, 222.

99 Ibid.

100 *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib.*
The Last House on the Left (2009) and I Spit on Your Grave (2010), as well as the enhancement of violence seen within them: that despite knowing what they did about Vietnam and U.S. soldiers’ conduct there, during the War on Terror, Americans were still unable to fathom its own military committing the atrocities that it was. The remakes shock Americans just as much as the originals and once again forced them to come to terms with the questionable ethics of their nation. Sabrina Harman attested that “she began photographing what she saw because she found it hard to believe.” Harman’s instinct was to “‘show what was going on, what was allowed to be done,’” and to do so through photographs so it could not be denied. This language is eerily similar to that of Wes Craven, whose reasoning for making The Last House on the Left (1972) was “to get our hands on what’s really going on over there [in Vietnam] . . . it’s time we showed things the way they really are.” Similarly to the way that the originals emerged as a testament to the violence in Vietnam, the remakes emerged as a testament to the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. The remakes of The Last House on the Left (2009) and I Spit on Your Grave (2010) substantiated the violence being enacted by U.S. soldiers, just as much as the photos from Abu Ghraib did.

One way in which the remakes did this and thus, much like the originals, provided a medium through which audiences could better understand the War on Terror, was by utilizing techniques from the emerging “torture porn” subgenre; adopting the aesthetic qualities of torture porn was common of many post-9/11 horror remakes. Although critics contend that the proliferation of horror movie remakes in the 2000s was the result of a “creative bankruptcy of a

---


102 Gourevitch, “Exposure.”

103 Wes Craven in David A. Szulkin, 15.
national film industry” and the American horror film having fallen into a “slump,” these remakes actually came about because the stories they depict and the questions they ask became relevant once again; the unique aesthetics of these remakes are evidence of this.  

During the War on Terror, America once again found itself questioning its involvement in an international conflict, the ethics that informed its actions there, and the moral implications of the role it played in the psychological deterioration of American soldiers; these were the same questions America was grappling with during and following the conclusion of the Vietnam War. For *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) to become relevant again and be remade, the cultural climate of the 2000s had to match that of the 1970s.

In the 2000s and at the time of that these remakes premiered, a new visual aesthetic for horror films was emerging within a new subgenre called “torture porn.” A torture porn film looks as depressing as it sounds; aesthetically, “the color of age, or of wear, is characteristic of the overall color palate of torture porn.” Given the dominance of these films and this aesthetic quality in the 2000s, both *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) “are dominated by earthen hues” and utilize a “muted” color scheme of grays, dark browns, and blacks.

---

104 Steffen Hantke, *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), viii, x.


107 Kerner, 45.
Consider the shots from *The Last House on the Left* (1972/2009) republished in the Appendix, Figure 6.¹⁰⁸ Narratively, they are the same; both show a close-up of Mari’s face, her eyes closed, as she is being raped by Krug in the woods. Though they are shot from different angles, the larger aesthetic discrepancy is in their coloration and use of light. The shot from the original film is much brighter, more saturated in terms of color, and thus features greater contrast than that of the remake. Mari’s rape scene in the *The Last House on the Left* (2009) remake features much less contrast in color than that in the original; this absence makes the whole scene’s aesthetic much darker and more typical of post-9/11 horror. This aesthetic discrepancy, between the bright, highly saturated originals and the dark, colorless remakes becomes even clearer when considering the scene from *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/2010), where Jennifer is running naked through the woods [see Appendix, Figure 7].¹⁰⁹ In the shot from the original, the green from the trees’ leaves starkly contrasts the pale whiteness of Jennifer’s skin; the colors are vibrant and easily distinguishable. There are clearly identifiable shadows and highlights being cast by the trees as well, therefore indicating a great use of light. This shot stands in stark opposition to the one from the remake, in which Jennifer’s pale body is barely distinguishable from the muted color of the decaying leaves on the forest floor. In general, the shot from *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) lacks color and relies on shades of gray and muted colors to recreate scenes from the original; this is typical of post-9/11 horror, which removes saturation and natural colors from its aesthetic presentation. This diminished coloration, from vibrant, realistic hues to

---

¹⁰⁸ *The Last House on the Left*, directed by Wes Craven, (1972); *The Last House on the Left*, directed by Dennis Illiadis, (Rogue Pictures, 2009), Amazon Instant Video.

somber, muted ones, is indicative of shifts in the horror aesthetic from the 1970s to the 2000s more broadly, but more importantly, of the “dark” violence carried out by U.S. soldiers during the War on Terror. Contrasting the injustices committed during the My Lai Massacre with the abuse carried out at Abu Ghraib Prison, it is understandable why the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) adopt a physically darker tone. The torture inflicted upon Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib was more vicious than the atrocities committed at My Lai in that they were more calculated and designed to “break” the detainees, not kill them.\(^\text{110}\) The purpose of the violence enacted at Abu Ghraib was to cause misery, pain, and anguish, not death. The cruelty which informed the actions of the M.P.s manifested in the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) through a noticeably darker, paler visual aesthetic.

The sadistic nature of the offenses committed at Abu Ghraib in conjunction with the rise of torture porn also demanded a more perverted type of violence to emerge in horror; this resulted in more brutal, depraved revenge sequences in the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) than had appeared in the originals.\(^\text{111}\) Looking at the difference in revenge enacted on any character between the originals and the remakes illustrates this enhanced violence. For example, in the original *The Last House on the Left* (1972), Mrs. Collingwood bites off Weasel’s penis, leaving him to bleed out. In the remake (2009), Weasel’s (now called Francis) murder begins in a similar fashion, with Mrs. Collingwood making sexual advances towards him, but ends in a much more gruesome manner. The trajectory of Francis’ demise starts with Mrs. Collingwood hitting him over the head with a glass bottle and stabbing

\(^{110}\) Gourevitch and Morris, 87.

\(^{111}\) Kerner, 13-14.
him with a knife, at which time Dr. Collingwood enters to gouge out his eyes, drown him in the sink, grind his hand in the garbage disposal, and finally, thrust the back end of a hammer into his head. In the original *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), Jennifer disembowels Stanley with her motorboat. In the remake (2010), Jennifer traps Stanley with a bear trap, binds him to a tree, pierces his eyelids with fish hooks, ties the fishing line around the tree, rubs dead fish on his eyeballs, and films crows pecking out his eyes. The fact that the remakes of both *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) augmented their revenge sequences is important and speaks to the demands of horror audiences in a post-9/11 culture, where Americans had seen their own military torture and degrade human beings.

Post 9/11 and several years into the War on Terror, Americans had been exposed to unprecedented levels of violence, much more so than they had been in the 1970s given what was capable of coming back from Vietnam. As mentioned in Chapter I, though the imagery available from the Vietnam War were overwhelming in quantity, they were less so in quality. While gruesome images of combat and casualties did emerge from Vietnam (as evidenced by more notable images such as Nick Ut’s “Napalm Girl,” or Eddie Adams’ “Saigon Execution), they were less numerous than the average images of daily military activity. This stands in stark contrast to the proliferation of violent images that came out of the War on Terror, first starting with pictures and video footage of the falling Twin Towers and escalating to the personal footage captured at Abu Ghraib Prison. The physical violence depicted in the originals would pale in comparison to what Americans saw in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the release of the images from Abu Ghraib. According to Edelstein, torture porn and its aesthetics emerged at a time when the stakes needed to be “ratcheted up;” for a genre like horror, which aims, in part, “to
have a visceral impact,” in this post 9/11, War on Terror moment, “actual viscera [were] the final frontier.”

The War on Terror and the abuse that occurred at Abu Ghraib, more specifically, reminded Americans of a truth that the Vietnam War forced them to renounce previously; that Americans were always the good guys and the perpetrators of morality. Aaron Michael Kerner explicates this disavowed truth as it relates to torture porn, writing that “what it [torture porn] finally reveals is that violence lurks within the sinews of American culture. Torture porn negotiates the violence we can no longer disavow.” Just as in the original films, the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) reveal in a digestible way the truth Americans have avoided acknowledging for decades: the immoral violence being enacted by Americans. Film can be a more palatable medium to view and come to terms with unfavorable or upsetting realities, and it certainly was in the case of *The Last House on the Left* (1972/2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/2010). Through its shocking, extreme aesthetics, torture porn offers an analogy to the real violence being inflicted by Americans during the War on Terror. These films and the aesthetics they employ reveal an American tradition, of violence and vengeance, that society prefers not to acknowledge. By blurring the lines of torturer and tortured, and allowing both moral agents and moral subjects to carry out brutal acts of violence, torture porn “posits that we have become the very thing that we are fighting.” That *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) incorporate similar visual and narrative aesthetics as torture porn films allows them to do the same: to suggest that Americans

---

112 Edelstein.
113 Kerner, 3.
114 Ibid.
have become the terrorists they thought they were fighting in the War on Terror. Though the presentation of war-grade violence and bodily torture on screen portrays this reality of the war, the audience’s consumption and processing of this representation leads to further questions surrounding the ethics of the War on Terror and the morality of the soldiers fighting it. Kerner states: “Torture porn undoes this fetishistic logic [the ‘I know, but . . .’ defense of condemnable American conduct at war] and confronts the spectator with his or her complicity in the American institutionalized campaign of violence.”

Though Americans were already morally anxious and conflicted about the War on Terror due in no small part to the images released from Abu Ghraib and the torture memos drafted by members of the Department of Justice, seeing comparable torture in film reinforced this already present moral anxiety.

The enhanced violence of the revenge sequences in the remakes resulted in less attention being paid to the rape sequences. While the rapes in the remakes are still disturbing, they are not as shocking or unsettling as those in the originals. Adjustments made to the filming of the rape sequences in the remakes detract from their impact, one which was so great in the originals. For example, in the original The Last House on the Left (1972), as mentioned previously, Wes Craven intentionally did not move his camera during Mari’s rape, nor did he move away from Krug and Mari’s bodies. In the remake, Dennis Illiadis shot the sequence from several angles, using a wide range of shots (close-ups, medium, and long shots) and moved the camera away from Mari’s body more so than Craven did in the original; during Mari’s rape, the audience sees the reactions of Justin, Francis, and Sadie, as well as a medium shot of Paige (formerly Phyllis) dying in the background. These techniques do make the film more dynamic cinemographically: audiences get to observe more characters, a greater variety of shots and camera angles, and

115 Kerner, 3.
therefore more of the setting, as well as more than simply Mari’s body during the rape scene. However, by offering this diversity of images and film techniques, the remake minimizes the impact of the rape. In an interview with journalist Ryan Turek, Dennis Illiadis said that he tried to “cut those diversions” out of the film and that he “wanted the movie to throw you into this scene with no place to cut away to. Because if you cut away, you have this feeling you’re leaving the moment and things could turn out differently, but here, every second and every behavior counted.”

Though this may have been Illiadis’ intention, the way he shot the rape scene actively cuts away from Mari’s actual rape and fails to keep audiences in the moment; over the course of the rape scene, starting when Krug begins to undress Mari, Illiadis makes thirty-eight cuts, and seventeen do not depict Mari’s body during the rape at all, rather showing Justin’s reaction to the rape, Paige bleeding out in the distance and Sadie helping to hold Mari down. Of the twenty-one shots that are of Mari’s body, many do not show the area of actual penetration, instead focusing on Mari’s hands and feet. The original The Last House on the Left (1972) did more to achieve Illiadis’ goal of cutting out diversions, by maintaining a focus on Mari and Krug for almost the entire rape sequence, save for one shot of Junior crying. With this in mind, there are more cinematic distractions in Illiadis’ version of the film than Craven’s; Illiadis’ attempt at artistry ultimately lessened the effect of the rape sequence and set the stage for greater attention to be paid to the revenge sequences.

The remakes’ disproportionate emphasis on the revenge sequences is clear in The Last House on the Left (2009) given the methods with which the Collingwoods kill Francis, Krug, and to a lesser extent, Sadie. As mentioned previously, Francis’ death is prolonged due to the

---

Collingswoods’ inability to kill him. Francis dies only after the Collingwoods hit him over the head with a glass bottle, stab him with a knife, gouge out his eyes, drown him in a sink, grind his hand in the garbage disposal, and lodge the back end of a hammer into his head. Francis’ is the first of the gang to die and it shows; Dr. and Mrs. Collingwood are inexperienced killers and torture Francis in part because do not know how to kill him efficiently. After Francis sees that Mari is alive and in the Collingwoods’ living room, Mrs. Collingwood hits him over the head with a wine bottle, initiating his murder though not doing much to actually kill him. As Francis corners Mrs. Collingwood into the kitchen to retaliate for being hit with the bottle, Mrs. Collingwood grabs a kitchen knife and turns around just in time for Francis to lunge into it; even this more directly injurious action is performed passively, and thus without efficiency. Francis immediately pulls the knife out of his abdomen and continues his assault on Mrs. Collingwood; this is when Dr. Collingwood arrives to finally kill Francis. Dr. Collingwood proceeds to re-break Francis’ nose (which he had previously set), which would seemingly have little effect on whether he lives or dies. After being thrown to the ground by Dr. Collingwood, Francis crawls toward the sink, giving Mrs. Collingwood the idea to drown him in the dishwater; Mrs. Collingwood’s expression changes from one of shock to one of realization when the thought enters her head to drown Francis. This shift in reaction indicates that the Collingwoods had no real plan of how they would kill Francis, but rather, that they improvise as the revenge sequence progresses. Unable to physically keep Francis under the water herself, Dr. Collingwood steps in to do so; as he does, Dr. Collingwood and Mrs. Collingwood share a moment, glancing at each other with concern. It is both a moment of panic and of realization; nothing they have tried has successfully killed Francis, but they so desperately want him dead. The result of this exchange is that Dr. Collingwood turns on the garbage disposal, grinding Francis’ hand, though still not
doing enough to kill him. The Collingwoods back away from the sink, as Francis stands up, screaming, his hand immovable within the garbage disposal; they still look shocked and disgusted, unsure how finish the job. Just as it dawned on Mrs. Collingwood to try to drown Francis, Dr. Collingwood spots a hammer under the kitchen table and uses it to finally kill Francis, lodging the back end of it into his head. Francis’ screams whilst having his hand ground up in the garbage disposal are representative of the frantic nature of his death; unable to move, all Francis can do is scream.

Though there is less trial and error to the murders of Sadie and Krug, they are just as gruesome. In the original *The Last House on the Left* (1972), Mrs. Collingwood kills Sadie by slitting her throat in the family’s pool; it takes place in the dark, it is quick, and the audience only sees blood covering Sadie’s mouth. In the remake, however, Mrs. Collingwood shoots Sadie in the eye, allowing the audience to see the bullet maim her eye socket and her brains splatter onto the bathroom wall. Krug’s death is even more exemplary of the enhanced violence of 2000s horror, and of the morally conflicting nature of the film. After driving Mari, Mrs. Collingwood, and Justin to safety, Dr. Collingwood returns to their vacation home to kill a previously unconscious Krug. Joking that he doesn’t have any “rope or duct tape” to hold Krug down, Dr. Collingwood resorts to paralyzing him from the waist down to begin this final act. Dr. Collingwood then positions Krug’s head inside the family’s broken microwave, impossibly exposing his head to radiation and causing it to explode. Krug’s death in the remake is more visible, and thus the graphic nature of it more obvious, than his death in the original. Although Dr. Collingwood presumably dismembers Krug’s body with his chainsaw in the original *The Last House on the Left* (1972), the audience does not see the act like it sees Krug’s head exploding in the microwave during the remake; the most the audience sees of Krug’s actual
death in the original *The Last House on the Left* (1972) is Dr. Collingwood lunging the chainsaw at him and after the act, his bloodied body propped up against the wall, his head and neck occluded from view. Therefore, the hyper presentation of violence and graphic death in the remake of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) served the needs of its post 9/11 context: a time when women’s exploitation (rape sequence) was secondary to the vivid depiction of violence inflicted by moral subjects.

Exploitation of and sexual violence against women were not as pertinent to the 2000s as they were to the 1970s, an era marked by its own distinct, politically-based wave of feminism. Feminists and feminism certainly still existed in the 2000s, but there were no catchy slogans (the personal is political), no cohesive mobilization for a cause (anti-rape or abortion rights), and there now existed a disdain for feminism, more powerful than that of the 1970s, in that it had been percolating for three decades. In June 1998, *TIME* magazine published a cover story entitled: “Is Feminism Dead?” and chronicled just this: contemporary women’s “divorce” of feminism from a “public purpose” and of women’s hesitancy to identify themselves as feminists.\(^{117}\) By the 2000s, postfeminism had firmly existed for two decades and can account for much of the indifference people felt towards feminism. Postfeminism is by definition, indifference: it is “a depoliticization of feminist goals, inherently opposed to activist and collective feminist politics.”\(^{118}\) Through its depoliticization, postfeminism adopts a “retrogressive and reactionary conservatism,” essentially taking for granted, rejecting, and


rendering unnecessary the advancements, many of them political, of previous generations of feminists.\footnote{Genz, 336.} A stipulation of postfeminism, however, is that it encouraged women to “‘cite . . . in order to qualify and remain a viable subject;’” it essentially encouraged women to adopt their femininity as a bodily property and one way in which women did this was through a “‘shift from objectification to subjectification,’” by presenting themselves as “sexually empowered.”\footnote{Kristin Aune, “Third-Wave Feminism and the University: On Pedagogy and Feminist Resurgence,” in \textit{Renewing Feminisms}, ed. Helen Thornham and Elke Weissmann (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 49.}

Having been primed by society to expect women to embrace and act on their bodily autonomy, audiences would not have responded to the rape scenes in these films the same way audiences did in the 1970s; they now looked beyond it, anticipating how the female protagonist would regain her bodily autonomy, of which they saw her in rightful possession. Not only that, but given the violence consumed as a result of the 9/11 attacks, the War on Terror, and the abuse at Abu Ghraib more specifically, Americans were mentally prepared to see the protagonists regain this autonomy by any, gruesome means possible. This resulted in a minimization of the rape sequences and an intensification of the revenge sequences in the remakes of these films.

This shift is clear in \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (2010). While the original \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (1978) forces audiences to endure four, unique assaults, the remake only fully portrays two of the implied five. Blurry and disorienting camera work suggests that audiences won’t see the full extent of Jennifer’s assault, and as the third assailant (Johnny) descends upon Jennifer, while she is still being raped by Sherriff Storch, Jennifer does indeed black out. She awakens to Stanley zipping up his pants, having just dismounted her, while Andy talks about raping her previously. Just like in \textit{The Last House on the Left} (2009), this diminished depiction of rape detracts from the emotional impact of sexual violence against women and positions the film to emphasize the
moral implications of a moral subject enacting violence against moral agents through the barbarity and creativity of the revenge sequence. Where the original saw Jennifer hang Matthew, castrate Johnny, axe Andy, and disembowel Stanley with a boat motor, the remake sees Jennifer avenge her assaults in far crueler ways; she points a gun into the buttocks of Sher riff Storch, causing him and Matthew to be shot in a chain reaction, drowns Andy in a bathtub full of lye, and ties causes crows to peck out Stanley’s eyeballs whilst he is still alive. The murder most like one from the original is that of Johnny, in which Jennifer does castrate him, but only after binding his arms and legs, stretching him across the width of the room, strapping a horse bit to his mouth, and pulling out his teeth. While the rape of Jennifer Hills is still crucial to the plot of the film, her revenge is more compelling in a postfeminist, post-9/11 context, and thus demands more aesthetic development and enhancement in the remake.

Beyond the aesthetic changes made to the remakes, revisions to the plots of both I Spit on Your Grave (2010) and The Last House on the Left (2009) serve to reflect cultural changes between the 1970s and the late 2000s, while reminding audiences that during the War on Terror, America still had reason to question the ethical standard with which it was conducting war and saw itself as upholding. In I Spit on Your Grave (1978), this question is raised through the addition of a fifth rapist: Sheriff Storch. Jennifer first encounters Storch while fleeing her home, where Johnny, Stanley, Andy, and Matthew have just sexually harassed and embarrassed her. Jennifer initially feels relief upon finding Storch, a law enforcement agent who she trusts to detain the men who just harassed her. However, Jennifer’s relief quickly turns to terror once it is revealed that Sheriff Storch is in collusion with the four men and ultimately facilitates and participates in her rapes. The addition of Sheriff Storch, an agent of the law, as someone allows and actively engages in Jennifer’s sexual violation reminds audiences that the “good guy” is not
always good.\footnote{Though one could argue that the addition of a Sheriff character as a rapist points to the inefficacy of law enforcement’s handling of sexual assault crimes, this inefficacy is not unique to the late 2000s. If anything, criticism of law enforcement’s unsympathetic handling of sexual assault crimes and the lack of adjudication they faced began in the 1970s, with Second Wave Feminism. For more on law enforcement’s response to and role in prosecuting sexual assault cases and feminist responses to it, see: Nancy Gager and Cathleen Schurr, \textit{Sexual Assault: Confronting Rape in America} (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976); Valerie Solanas, \textit{Scum Manifesto} (London, UK: Phoenix Press, 1967); Kathleen Hendrix, “Women Take the Offensive on Rapists,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, December 8, 1974.} Just as Storch violates the system of rules he is supposed to uphold as a Sheriff, the M.P.s at Abu Ghraib violated the system of rules they were supposed to uphold as U.S. soldiers. While \textit{I Spit on Your Grave} (2010) still blurs the line between good and bad through the moral devolution of Jennifer, it also does so through the moral corruption of Sheriff Storch: a character who is supposed to be a steward of justice.

The major plot shifts in the remake of \textit{The Last House on the Left} (2009) serve to restore the American ideal of morality and goodness that is destroyed in the original upon Mari’s murder and the subsequent moral unraveling of her parents. In an attempt to preserve this American ideal, of wholesomeness and righteousness, the remake allows Mari to survive her rape and attempted murder, and thus make her family whole again at the film’s conclusion. Preservation of the family was and still is representative of America’s goodness and moral principles in \textit{The Last House on the Left} (1972/2009). The remake sees Dr. Collingwood able to do what he is denied the opportunity to in the original: save his daughter. In the remake, Mari fights to swim across a lake from the place she was raped in the woods, to her house, despite being shot; in the original, Mari merely walks into the lake and awaits her execution. From this early point in the remake, based on Mari’s will to live and to return to her family, preservation of the family is just as important as the revenge taken to restore it. Once the Collingwoods find Mari on their porch, shot and deteriorating rapidly, but alive nonetheless, it is Dr. Collingwood’s medical expertise that saves his daughter. Dr. Collingwood’s use of household items to treat Mari, such as a hot
knife to seal her gunshot wound and the suction tube from a spray bottle to drain blood from her chest, points to the great lengths the remake takes to preserve this American family. Not only that, but the remake adds an additional plot point, that the Collingwoods had a son, Ben, who died prior to the events of the film; this trauma is alleviated when they save Justin (Krug’s son, formerly named Junior in the original) at the film’s conclusion and take him in as their own. The end of the film sees Dr. Collingwood driving a motor boat away from their home, carrying his wife, Mari, and their new son, Justin. On the surface, the Mari’s survival and the addition of Justin to the Collingwood family compensates for the degradation the family experiences through Mari’s assault, while restoring it to the undamaged condition it was in prior to Ben’s death. These revisions seem to reinforce and add to the theme of familial preservation and defense inaugurated by the original film, but that the Collingwoods were unable to achieve in 1972. Where Krug actively destroys the Collingwoods’ and his own family (Junior) in the original The Last House on the Left (1972), the Collingwoods appear to preserve both in the remake, through their violent revenge. Mari’s survival and the restoration of the Collingwood family to the state it occupied prior to the death of their son seems to suggest that the savagery enacted to produce this outcome was warranted; this correlates to a justification of the savagery enacted during the War on Terror and at Abu Ghraib more specifically, so long as it served to “find, stop, and defeat,” terrorism and to sustain America’s image of itself as righteous.  

However, closer examination of Dr. and Mrs. Collingwood at the end of the film reveal that they are just as broken in 2009, with a seemingly whole family, as they were in 1972 with an

---

122 In a speech given on September 21, 2001, President Bush stated: “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.” The language I used of “‘find, stop, and defeat,’ terrorism,” is a nod to this speech.; “Transcript of President Bush’s Address,” CNN, September 21, 2001, accessed April 16, 2017, http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/.
incomplete one, and that perhaps their end does not justify the means they used to get there. They both look physically defeated: they are exhausted, dirty, sweaty, and bloody, just as they were at the conclusion of the original film [see Appendix, Figure 8]. Driving the boat forward, Dr. Collingwood cannot help but gaze back at his family, looking conflicted, tired, and distressed. He looks at his wife, unable to take her eyes off Mari, and Justin, who is positioned too far away from Mrs. Collingwood and Mari to truly be a part of their family. The somber instrumental score that plays throughout this scene reinforces the grimness of the conclusion. The bleak conclusion of The Last House on the Left (2009) suggests that even though the Collingswoods’ actions produced the outcome they desired, rescue of their daughter and replacement of their son, their characters and their family have been irreversibly tainted. Americans began to think of the War on Terror with a similar, brutal realism after the abuses at Abu Ghraib came to light; even if America eventually “found, stopped, and defeated terrorism,” the character of the nation would be irreversibly tainted by the means through which it achieved this end. The destruction of the Collingwood family’s integrity at the conclusion of The Last House on the Left (2009) symbolizes that of the nation’s after Abu Ghraib. In viewing the broken Collingwood family, viewers are not only forced to consider how Dr. and Mrs. Collingwood’s actions tainted their morality, but they are forced to question the validity of the righteous standard that Dr. and Mrs. Collingwood violated. Abu Ghraib and other morally questionable decisions made during the War on Terror forced Americans to question the supposed righteousness of their nation in a similar way.

123 The Last House on the Left, directed by Dennis Illiadis, (Rogue Pictures, 2009), Amazon Instant Video.
CONCLUSION

In 1972, the tagline of *The Last House on the Left* allowed for a certain level of escape: “To avoid fainting, keep repeating, it’s only a movie” [see Appendix, Figure 9]. This tagline reminds viewers that the events unfolding on-screen are merely fictional; it’s only a movie. Though Wes Craven intended for his film to parallel the real-life violence occurring in Vietnam, in 1972, it was possible for viewers to distance themselves from the realism in the movie. However, by 2009, Americans had no choice but to come to terms with the correlation between what was happening on screen and what was happening in reality. In asking, “If bad people hurt someone you love, how far would you go to hurt them back?” the tagline of the remake of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) assumes Americans know that what they see on screen is not “only a movie” and that they have been exposed to enough real life trauma to answer the question [see Appendix, figure 10]. In 2009, after the 9/11 attacks and the abuses that occurred at Abu Ghraib, America had experienced enough national upheaval and challenges to its moral image to consider the question being asked of the film’s protagonists, on a national level.

That Americans had to reconsider their nation’s ethical standards in 2009, after having to do so in the 1970s at the conclusion of the Vietnam War, is evidenced by the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010). In 1972 and 1978 respectively, the originals of these rape-revenge horror films emerged to illustrate the violence and moral injustices being enacted by U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. Three decades later, when the United States was enmeshed in yet another war where soldiers perpetrated more violence and violations of 124 “The Last House on the Left (1972),” IMDB, accessed April 3, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068833/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2.

what the nation saw as an unwavering ethical standard, the remakes of these films premiered. In the late 2000s, just like in the 1970s, Americans needed a way to comprehend the conflict the nation was involved in, as well as U.S. soldiers’ questionable conduct within it. Therefore, it was the War on Terror and the corresponding national crisis of moral ambiguity it created that provided the culturally fertile ground for the remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) to emerge.

In terms of method, this thesis calls for a return to political analysis of the horror genre, something which is perhaps even more relevant in 2017 than it was in 2009-2010. Going forward, there is great scholarship to be gained by applying political readings to horror films and to considering the political events that inaugurate their emergence, as this thesis has. Though scholars like Robin Wood have advocated for this approach since the late 1970s, less has been done since then to understand why, politically and culturally, certain films emerge when they do. Asking this question is especially critical to understanding the success of remakes, reboots, and franchises, which inherently possess political meaning based on their connection to previous time periods. Asking these questions avoids simplifying horror to that which is devoid of new concepts, provocative meanings, and is seen as useless beyond its profitability and “high return on investment.” It is not enough to merely accept the remakes of films such as *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974/2003), *Halloween* (1978/2007), and *Friday the 13th* (1980/2009) as


127 NPR reports that horror is one of the most profitable film genres, given the small amount of investment it requires to generate a much greater profit/return (ROI: Return on Investment). ROI is calculated using the “amount of profit from an investment relative to the cost of the investment.” NPR reports that the ROI of the top 5 horror films since 2010 was 2,000 percent, or, in other words, “for every $10 put into a movie, an investor would get $200 in profit.” Top comedy films only had an ROI of around 1,200 percent.; Quoctrung Bui, “Horror Is The Best Deal In Hollywood,” *NPR*, August 21, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2015/08/21/433505958/horror-is-the-best-deal-in-hollywood.
reiterations of the originals for the sake of making a profit; the success of the remakes was predicated on the success of the originals, and thus the related political climates in which each emerged. That being said, with the emergence of films like *Get Out* (2017), audiences are being reminded now more than ever of the overtly political nature of the horror film.\(^{128}\) While there is much to be gained by applying a political lens to a seemingly apolitical film, perhaps the future of horror will offer even more obvious political content to analyze and use to understand American culture.

Though this thesis strives to contextualize the function of rape-revenge horror films within the social context of the Vietnam War and the War of Terror, and to illuminate the purposefulness of *The Last House on the Left* (1972/2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/2010) in the process, it is ultimately a commentary on challenges to perceived truths and how society navigates those challenges. The “truth” of horror inherently deconstructed by the rape-revenge subgenre is the function of gender and sexuality. The protagonists in rape-revenge films subvert the norms for gender and sexuality set by the horror genre, by performing aggressive, active, traditionally masculine behaviors, and by doing so while employing their sexualities on their own terms. The “truth” of war interrogated by this thesis is that there is a robust, national moral

---

\(^{128}\) *Get Out* (2017) tells the story of “a young black man who becomes increasingly unnerved when visiting his white girlfriend’s family for the first time in an upscale neighborhood with a dark secret.” It is a film that “rubs against a nerve that the culture isn’t truly post-racial,” and thus exposes a truth, much like the films analyzed in this thesis do. Also similar to this thesis, the villains in this film are not typical of horror, nor of films that deal with race more generally: “They’re middle-class white liberals . . . the kind of people who shop at Trader Joe’s, donate to the ACLU and would have voted for Obama a third time if they could. Good people. Nice people . . . The thing *Get Out* does so well – and the thing that will rankle with some viewers – is to show how, however unintentionally, these same people can make life so hard and uncomfortable for black people.” It is a horror film that deals directly with real-time political issues (racism, post-racism, police brutality etc.) currently plaguing our nation, and is perhaps indicative of the type of horror that will emerge during this politically charged time in America; Robert Marich, “‘Get Out’ Marketing Tapped Into Relationship Between Racism and Horror,” *Variety*, March 22, 2017, accessed April 17, 2017, http://variety.com/2017/biz/news/jordan-peeble-get-out-marketing-racism-horror-1202012833/; Lanre Bakare, “Get Out: the film that dares to reveal the horror of liberal racism in America,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2017, accessed April 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/28/get-out-box-office-jordan-peeple.
standard upheld by American soldiers and the military that directs them. The conduct of American soldiers during the Vietnam War and the War on Terror explored in this thesis show that this standard was tenuous, at best, and that it was disregarded to advance the interests of the United States, at worst. The “truth” about violence against women inherently challenged by the films investigated is that rape is “a crime . . . of lust, but [not] of violence and power.” This project ultimately forces readers to re-evaluate things they know to be “true,” and thus it exposes their falsities and contradictions. While some may see this as pessimistic, realizing the fabrication of what Americans blindly accept as a national principle makes viewers of these films better, more critical citizens. In the words of Edward Murrow, “We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty,” but rather, use it to make the nation’s actions more consistent the values it esteems. Going forward, viewers of these films are not just better equipped to understand potential hypocrisy perpetrated by the nation; they are equipped to challenge and speak out about it, as this thesis does.

129 Brownmiller, Against Our Will, 15.

130 “We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty,” was uttered by Morrow during a broadcast of “See It Now,” on March 9, 1954. Morrow was defending those that Senator Joseph R. McCarthy had unjustly accused of having Communist sympathies. Though this phrase was spoken in reference to dissent as it was seen to relate to Communism, the meaning behind it, that Americans should be free to challenge and disagree with their government, withstands the test of time. Recognizing and challenging the moral inconsistencies perpetrated by the United States does not make anyone a bad American; it makes them a concerned, engaged one. – “Edward R. Murrow: ‘We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty,’” aired March 9, 1954, Youtube video, 2:19, Posted September 2, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgejlbN9UYA.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. Directed by Rory Kennedy. HBO, 2007. DVD.


APPENDIX