



Getting Even

From Men, Women, and
Chain Saws
by Carol Clover

I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE (1977) has done a brisk business in video rentals, and not only among horror fans.¹ Michael Weldon blames its success on critical condemnation. "Thanks to the PBS Sneak Previews show, which labeled it inhumane and sexist, this revenge exploitation feature has gained a new audience of videocassette buyers. Camille Keaton (Buster's grandniece) stars as a novelist spending the summer alone at an isolated lakeside house. Four locals (one retarded) beat and rape her. She eventually hangs, axes, or castrates the whole group. A humorless and disturbing movie shot in Connecticut."² Mick Martin and Marsha Porter are less generous. "After being brutally raped by a gang of thugs (one of whom is retarded), a young woman takes sadistic revenge. An utterly reprehensible motion picture with shockingly misplaced values. It seems to take more joy in presenting its heroine's degradation than her victory. She is repeatedly raped and tortured. When the tables finally turn, she proves to be just as vicious as her attackers. The scene where she robs a man of his offending 'weapon' is one of the most appalling moments in cinema history. This is, beyond a doubt, one of the most tasteless, irresponsible, and disturbing movies ever made. Regardless of how much you may enjoy 'bad' films, you will hate yourself for watching this one."³

¹ Although reference works date the film variously between 1977 and 1981, it seems in fact to have been first released in 1977 under the title *Day of the Woman*.

² Michael Weldon, *Psychotronic Encyclopedia*, p. 354. The PBS Sneak Preview in question is that of Gene Siskel, "Extreme Violence Directed at Young Women" (23 October 1980). Together with Ebert's essay "Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Any More," it set the benchmark for the film's reception. In Britain *I Spit on Your Grave* was the centerpiece of the "video nasty" hearings, and it figures centrally in *The Video Nasties*, ed. Martin Barker.

³ Mick Martin and Marsha Porter, *Video Move Guide: 1987*, p. 704.

There is no doubt that *I Spit on Your Grave* is an extreme case. But case it is—an almost crystalline example of the double-axis revenge plot so popular in modern horror: the revenge of the woman on her rapist, and the revenge of the city on the country. Although some films of the genre work on the male-female axis only (*Ms. 45*, for example, or *Eyes of a Stranger*), and some concentrate on the city-country axis (*The Hills Have Eyes*), a striking number are hybrids, combining the two in ways which suggest that the connection is more than casual. Those revenge plots, singly and in combination, are the subject of this chapter. Revenge dramas are by no means the sole property of horror; vengeance may very well be the mainspring of American popular culture, from westerns and *Dirty Harry* to teen comedies and courtroom dramas. "Revenge," *Dirty Harry* says in *Sudden Impact*, a film in fact focused on rape, "is the oldest motivation known to mankind." Nor is the rape-revenge drama exclusive to "low" genres; the success of such mainstream films as *Lipstick*, *The Accused*, *Straw Dogs*, *Extremities*, *Sudden Impact*, and *Deliverance* (a male-only version) suggests that the appeal of rape-revenge stories is in fact broadly based. (There are, as we shall see, some telling differences between high and low treatments of the story.) It would be easier to discuss the category without reference to *I Spit on Your Grave*—it is an extraordinarily difficult film to watch—but given its video popularity, and further given the fact that it reduces the genre to its essence, and finally given the project of this book to offer an account not just of the most but also the least presentable of horror, I have decided, at the risk of compounding the sin of PBS Sneak Previews, to use it as a point of entry into a thriving branch of modern horror.

That having been said, let me add that I do not fully share the critical judgments quoted above. This is not the place to go into the reception of *I Spit on Your Grave*,⁴ but I might note that I have talked with several viewers, including feminist critics, who hate themselves more for having seen *Dirty Harry* (which Martin and Porter give a top rating) or *Rambo: First Blood II* (which Martin and Porter judge "exciting, involving, and explosive entertainment") or the rape-murder in Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (a film they give four-and-a-half stars) than *I Spit on Your Grave*, which for all its disturbing qualities at least problematizes the issue of male (sexual) violence. One such viewer (female) went so far as to call it a radical feminist film; another (male) found it such a devastating commentary on male rape fantasies and also on the way male group dynamics engender violence that he thought it

⁴ Marco Starr gives a brief account in his "J. Hills Is Alive."

should be compulsory viewing for high school boys. In Britain, commentators bent on censoring *I Spit on Your Grave* (in the "video nasty" hearings) claimed that it glorified the act of rape and indeed had inspired "copycat" crimes, whereas commentators bent on defending it claimed that it "wants us to hate the nature of the act of rape and what it calls forth."⁵ I mention these responses not in an effort to arrive at the real politics of *I Spit on Your Grave*, but to suggest that pinning down politics can be a tricky business even in the most apparently transparent of cases, and that the politics of horror in general and this film in particular are less than self-evident. (Certainly Martin and Porter's assessment of the castration scene as "one of the most appalling moments in cinema history" is itself a pretty appalling testimony to the double standard in matters of sexual violence.) *I Spit on Your Grave* is a shocking film, and one is inclined to suspect its makers of the worst possible motives. But if cash-value shock were grounds for dismissal, our collective film list would be a lot shorter than it is. It would in any case not include *Straw Dogs* and *A Clockwork Orange*—films that, were they less well and expensively made by less famous men, would surely qualify as sensationalist exploitation. My point is not that *I Spit on Your Grave* has particular artistic merit or offers particularly original insights into the nature of sexual violence; it is simply that there are viewers, including myself, who do not find its values more "shockingly misplaced" than those of a great deal of critically acceptable mainstream film and video fare, and who moreover appreciate, however grudgingly, the way in which its brutal simplicity exposes a mainspring of popular culture.

The story goes as follows. Jennifer, a published writer of stories for women's magazines, has rented a riverside summer house in the country in the hopes of finishing a novel. When she arrives at the village gas station, she encounters three of the four men who will later seize and rape her: Johnny, an ex-marine who works at the station and is the group leader, and Stanley and Andy, both unemployed. These three will later be joined by the retarded Matthew, played in exaggeratedly comic terms, who works as a delivery boy for the local grocery and who brings an order to Jennifer that same afternoon. Jennifer settles in, but it quickly becomes plain that she will not get the peace she came for. The four men keep coming by her house and harassing her, either on foot or by speedboat. One day, when she is sunning herself in a canoe, the men motor up, lasso her canoe, and drag her upriver. They put ashore, chase her through the woods, catch her, throw her down, and strip her. At first they

⁵ Martin Barker, "Nasties," p. 105.

offer her to the virginal Matthew, but when he runs away in fear, Johnny falls on her and rapes her brutally. She staggers to her feet and runs through the forest but is caught, beaten, and now sodomized by Andy—again after being offered to Matthew. They leave her bloody and unconscious. When she comes to, she struggles back to the house, staggering and crawling by turns, but they have preceded her there, and a third rape ensues. This time Matthew manages to penetrate her inert body, but his victory is short-lived and he gives way to Stanley, who tries to force her to fellate him ("Suck it, you bitch!"), but she falls into unconsciousness. After reading a page of her novel aloud, laughing uproariously at her references to "love-making" and tearing the manuscript to bits, they go outdoors. Johnny gives Matthew a knife and instructs him to go back and kill her. He goes in but is even less able to stab than he was to rape her, so he wipes some blood on the knife to satisfy the others and they leave her for dead.

So the first forty minutes. After a short transition (representing the passage of two weeks) during which we watch Jennifer shower and bandage herself, tape together the pieces of her manuscript, begin typing again, stare fixedly out at the river, and go to church to pray to the Virgin Mary, the revenge half of the film begins. She calls in a grocery order. The terrified Matthew (who has in the meantime been beaten by his comrades when they discover she is still alive) takes a butcher knife on the delivery, intending to perform the murder once and for all. When he arrives, however, he is disarmed by Jennifer's seductive demeanor. Promising him a summer to remember, she entices him outdoors and, as they begin to have intercourse, slips a noose over his head, trips a switch, and hangs him. She pushes his body and bicycle into the lake. Next comes Johnny. She drives to the gas station and wordlessly invites him into the car. Because he is all too ready to believe that she "really liked it" and wants more, he goes along. At a secluded spot they get out of the car and she pulls a pistol on Johnny and tells him to drop his pants—evidently planning to shoot him in the genitals. He slowly registers that this is genuine danger and tries to talk her out of it. She seems to yield, throws the gun to him, and invites him to her house, an invitation that quickly throws him back into his earlier conviction that she "really liked it." We cut to her bathroom, where the two of them are sitting facing one another in a bathtub, Johnny chatting cheerily. "God bless your hands," he repeats, as she fondles him underwater. She then slips a knife into the tub. "God bless your hands," he repeats, and then, "that's so sweet . . . that's so sweet it's painful"—at which point he bellows and rises, blood gushing from his now genital-less

crotch.⁶ Jennifer locks him in and coolly listens to opera downstairs as he bleeds to death. That body too goes into the river. There remain Andy and Stanley. They come to her place by boat with the intention of killing her. After a struggle, she takes possession of Andy's ax and the motorboat and pushes the two of them into the river. After buzzing them in much the way they earlier buzzed her, she puts the ax into one of them and mangles the other with the boat propeller.⁷ With that, the film ends, aftermathless.

I Spit on Your Grave is a roughly made, low-budget production.⁸ Like a number of revenge-horror films, it owes a clear debt to *Deliverance* (the retarded country man, the harmonica-playing sequence, and so on). Although there are a couple of men-only sequences, the film is framed from beginning to end as Jennifer's story. Most of the action is registered from her vantage, and there is no doubt whatever that its sympathies lie with her.⁹ The film gives equal time and in some sense equal terms to the presentation of the rape and the revenge. The claim that *Spit* shows the woman enjoying the rape is flatly dishonest; not for a moment does she express anything but protest, fear, and pain.¹⁰ And neither I nor those viewers with whom I have spoken found in the rape sequence even a trace of the "joy" of which Martin and Porter speak; the rapes are presented as almost sexless acts of cruelty that the men seem to commit more for each other's edification than for their own physical pleasure.¹¹ Nor is there

⁶ The shower sequence in *Psycho* is probably the most echoed scene in all of film history. The bathtub scene in *I Spit on Your Grave* (not a slasher, though with some affinities) is to my knowledge the only effort to reverse the terms.

⁷ The videocassette box cover twice states that the woman kills five men, but the versions I have seen, and the discussions I have read, have her killing only four.

⁸ I would not go so far as Starr, who calls it "well made, interestingly written, beautifully photographed and intelligently directed" ("*J. Hills Is Alive*," p. 49).

⁹ See *ibid.*, esp. p. 50; and Phil Hardy, *Encyclopedia of Horror Movies*, p. 329.

¹⁰ See Barker, "Nasties," p. 114. I refer here as well to the verbal reports of colleagues who have not themselves seen the film but who "have heard" that "she liked it."

¹¹ It should be noted that Siskel and Ebert's well-known attack on the film is said to have been prompted in part by their observation of live-audience shouting and cheering during the rape sequences. Starr notes much the same response at the New York showing he attended but offers a somewhat different analysis. Noting the infamous tendency of horror audiences to call out to the screen, to cheer and boo apparently indiscriminately, and to get into verbal duels with each other (vide Pauline Kael's appalled reaction, twenty years earlier, to the live-audience response to Franju's *Eyes without a Face*), he cautions against any simple reading of such behavior. (As Levine's history of public performance—opera and drama as well as lower forms—eloquently demonstrates, the silent audience is both a modern phenomenon and a created one, the product of a variety of "taming" strategies. Historically speaking, horror audiences represent the norm and the silent audiences of mainstream cinema the exception.)

any discernible "joy" in the revenge section; Jennifer goes about the business of catching and murdering her assailants almost impassively. It is in fact an oddly external film.¹²

One of the most disturbing things about *I Spit on Your Grave*, I think, is its almost perverse simplicity. The men are not odd specimens but in the normal range of variation; their acts of brutal rape are not traced to dysfunctional upbringing (no Mother Bateses here); Jennifer takes the revenge she does not for deep-seated psychological reasons but because it is the punishment that fits the crime; there are no extenuating circumstances; the law is not involved, nor are legal questions raised; and there is no concern whatever, not even at the level of lip service, with moral and ethical issues. In short, *I Spit on Your Grave* offers no outs; it makes no space for intellectual displace-

Starr offers an additional explanation. "Watching a film as personally intense as *I Spit on Your Grave* is, to some degree, an upsetting experience under any circumstances. To watch it in the presence of a large, mostly male audience, however, is to witness the film with some terrified viewers, despite appearances to the contrary. The realization that one's fellow viewers are potential rapists can be devastating when one is relating to the experience of being raped. No wonder men resort to laughing and joking around—they will do anything to prove that they are *not* upset by all this rape business, so that the real 'vicarious sex criminals' [the film's point of address, according to Siskel and Ebert] in the audience will *not* become aggressive toward *them*, the 'woman-identified' men. Camille Keaton, the actress who played Jennifer Hills, said it all when she commented that the film 'made males in our audiences singularly uncomfortable.' Thus far, the critics have taken the mood of the audience completely for granted, as if it was inseparable from the film itself. (One critic was so influenced by the hecklers that he actually described the rape scenes as 'silly'.) Sometimes, though, the truth will inadvertently find its way into print. It can be found in the wonderful comment of a gore-enthusiast turned reviewer who noted that while *I Spit on Your Grave* may sound 'like great fun . . . unfortunately, [it] has a disturbing quality about it in that it takes itself far too seriously'" ("*J. Hills Is Alive*," p. 54). Starr and others also argue that one cannot take account of audience reactions during the rape sequence without also taking account of the reactions ("stunned silence") during the revenge.

¹² Hardy (*Encyclopedia of Horror Movies*, pp. 329–30) finds this impassivity problematic. "By allowing her to lapse into an almost catatonic, silent obsessive, the film distances the viewer from her, making her seem like a mere cipher and pushing her dangerously close to that negative female stereotype, the all-destructive femme castratrice (quite literally, as it happens, in this case)." Although Hardy has, I think, put his finger on a question raised by Zarchi's "external" approach, it would take a very tone-deaf viewer to imagine that Jennifer's motives are anything other than situational. It is also worth noting that Zarchi has inserted a scene, during the transitional period between rape and revenge, in which Jennifer is shown going into a church, dressed in black, kneeling at the altar, crossing herself, and asking in advance for forgiveness. The scene is designed, I think, to establish the purity (as it were) of Jennifer's coming actions. But for this quibble, I regard Hardy's discussion of the film as one of the very few sensible ones I have found (Starr's is another).

ment.¹³ If higher forms of the rape-revenge story involve us in a variety of ethical, psychological, legal, and social matters—hooks and angles that allow us to look away from the action itself to a system of explanations and solutions—I *Spit on Your Grave* closes all such windows and leaves us staring at the lex talionis or law of retribution for what it is. *I Spit on Your Grave* shocks not because it is alien but because it is too familiar, because we recognize that the emotions it engages are regularly engaged by the big screen but almost never bluntly acknowledged for what they are.

I have overstated the case slightly. Although *I Spit on Your Grave* comes remarkably close to being an explanation-free revenge narrative, it is not absolutely so. The polarities I mentioned before—male/female and city/country—do function, however primitively, as a set of analytic categories, and it is to them I now turn.

Jennifer's urbanity is announced in the film's opening shots, which show her amid city bustle in New York, tipping her doorman, climbing into her car, and threading her way through downtown traffic. She gives the impression of being well-heeled and self-possessed. If her pumps and chic dress are in place in New York, they are very much out of place at Johnny's gas station, where we see her next. Local women, we will later see (in the scene where Johnny's wife comes looking for him), wear jeans, sloppy shirts, and sneakers. Money and city are explicitly linked when Jennifer tips Matthew for bringing her groceries. In reply to Matthew's "You come from an evil place!" she responds lightly, "Here's a tip from an evil New Yorker." "I never got a tip like that before!" he blurts. Jennifer, in short, is not just a woman; she is a woman from the city, and to be from the city is to be, at least in the eyes of the country, rich.

To be from the country is, by the same token, to be poor. Andy and Stanley are unemployed, a point to which the film repeatedly returns ("I despise people who don't work," Johnny will later say; "they just get in trouble"). Matthew and Johnny work at jobs that

¹³ It is precisely the absence of psychological motivation for the rapists' behavior that seems to bother Ebert. Even films as "apparently disgusting as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* somehow redeem themselves, become palatable to large audiences (if not, of course, to the squeamish). These films are about heinous villains and contain them as characters. They are studies of human behavior, no matter how disgusting, and the role of the audience is to witness a depraved character at work within his depravities." The killer of *Halloween*, for example, "has been clearly established in the film as a character. We see a traumatic childhood experience that warps him. We learn through his psychiatrist that the unfortunate child has grown up to become the embodiment of evil. As he develops in the film, he takes on a very specific reality, and it's up there on the screen. In the audience, we watch. We are voyeurs. We are not implicated" ("Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Any More," p. 56).

have them performing menial tasks for the city rich: Matthew by delivering groceries on his bike, and Johnny by servicing a far better car than he himself could ever hope to own. They are all uneducated (so we judge from their bad grammar). Johnny is an ex-marine. Matthew is of course retarded—which condition locates him in the venerable "degenerate locals" tradition in horror (more on this later). The community in general appears economically depressed.

City, money, and women come together in the conversation the men share during a nighttime fishing expedition early in the film. After some general talk about women as a category ("Sometimes I look at those gorgeous chicks . . . and I wonder, do they take a shit too?" "Sure—women are full of shit."), the discussion turns to their new summer neighbor. To Matthew's report of her generous tip, Johnny says, "The New York broads are all loaded, Matthew." "Yeah, they fuck around a lot," Stanley adds, "I'm going to go to New York and fuck all the broads there." "Yeah, I'm going to do the same in California," Andy chimes in, "Sunset Strip is just swamped with broads looking to get laid." Stanley agrees: "Chicks come from all over the country to places like that for one reason—and that's to get laid." The conversation is punctuated with remarks about Matthew's virginity, his possible homosexuality, and the need to find him a "broad." The next day, they seize Jennifer and the rapes begin.

At this point, the city/country axis yields to gender issues. The nighttime fishing conversation just quoted introduces two features of what the film defines as masculinity that will underwrite the remainder of the story: categorical claims about male and female nature and a group dynamic that drives men to deeds of which they might not be singly capable. The latter, in fact, is what *I Spit on Your Grave* is centrally about. The organizing fiction of the threefold rape (meadow, forest, house) is that it is all for the virginal Matthew. "Here she is, Matthew," they call out when they have her pinned in the meadow (two holding her legs, one her arms). "You want to be a man, don't you? Don't miss your chance, Matthew. . . . you're going to die a virgin," and so on. But Matthew cannot even get near; he is in fact visibly horrified. So Johnny takes her instead. Likewise the forest episode. When they get her pinned on the rock, they begin goading Matthew again: "Come on, Matthew, move your fucking ass!" This time he comes closer and tentatively helps hold her down for a few moments before fleeing into the forest. Andy elects to sodomize Jennifer, a move meant at once to one-up Johnny and to win his approval. It is in the third attack, in the house, that they bear down on Matt in earnest: "Hey Matthew! Come on, Tiger! Don't miss your chance—show us what you can do!" And then, in unison, "Go!

Go! Go! Go!" At first it seems that Matthew will succeed: he strips (at least down to socks and hat), imitates a victory trumpet, and falls on and penetrates Jennifer. Stanley puts his foot on Matthew's rump to help him along: "All right! Come on, killer!" But Matthew's nerve fails ("You're interrupting my concentration") and he again pulls away. After some remarks about Matthew's impotence, virginity, masturbation, and homosexuality, Stanley, who had earlier declared that he likes a woman who is totally submissive, tries to force the near-unconscious Jennifer to fellate him. She faints, a fight starts up ("You wanted total submission, you got it," Matthew says to Stanley), and they leave.

To regard Matthew as a nonparticipant, as do the remarkable number of descriptions that speak of three rapists rather than four, misses an important point. For one thing, it is against his failed performance that the others can define their own as successful. They are what Matthew is *not*; Matthew is what they are better *than*. Once set in motion, the proposition that masculinity is little or nothing more than a function of comparison leads to another series of questions: how *much* better is Stanley than Matthew? Andy than Stanley? and Johnny than Andy than Stanley? and so on. Matthew is not only the one they compare themselves *to*; he is the one they compare themselves *through*. The pretense is that the assault on Jennifer is an act of generosity toward one of their members, a gift from the guys to Matthew. The fact is that it is a sporting competition, the point of which is to test and confirm an existing hierarchy: Johnny the winner, Andy a strong second, Stanley the loser, Matthew on the bench. To all but Matthew, the woman is little more than the playing field—and even Matthew is finally goaded into at least trying to join the game. The goading itself, particularly during the sequence in the house (when Matthew manages to effect penetration), echoes the crowd cheers of a football game ("Go! Go! Go! Go!"—faster and faster, in unison). For *I Spit on Your Grave*, at least, gang rape has first and foremost to do with male sport and male pecking order and only secondarily to do with sex, the implication being that team sport and gang rape are displaced versions of one another, male sorting devices both, and both driven by male spectatorship.

Ironically, the men's individual protestations, when they find themselves at Jennifer's mercy, almost perversely acknowledge the force of the group dynamic. Stanley facing the boat propeller: "I'm sorry, I really am. It was Johnny who talked me into it. It was Johnny made me do it. I didn't want to do it." Or Johnny at gunpoint: "Look, you've got the wrong man. Stanley, the guy with dark hair, the guy's a sex maniac." Or Matthew: "I hate you. I've had nothing but bad

luck with you. I have no friends now because of you. . . . I'm sorry for what I did to you with them, but it wasn't my idea. I have no friends." In a sense, each of the men is right to feel that he is not individually responsible, for the film keeps insisting that the dynamic of male groups is larger than the sum of its parts. But that does not mean, in this primitive universe of the *lex talionis*, that the individuals are therefore not responsible for the actions of the group. On the contrary, as under the laws of blood feud, they are corporately liable; any of them—in this case all—are proper targets for retribution, regardless of their own degree of participation. For the viewers with whom I have spoken, the murder of Matthew is the film's most disturbing moment, for he is so clearly drawn as the others' victim. But *I Spit on Your Grave* gives no points for hesitation or reluctance or action under pressure. That Matthew never quite made it off the bench is beside the point; what matters is that he *would* have played if he could. Reviews may speak of "three rapes" and "three rapists," but, as the final body count of four shows, Jennifer knows better.

The "explanation" that *I Spit on Your Grave* presents on the gender axis is thus one having to do not with male sexual nature *per se* (that is, the individual male's sexual appetite) but with male social nature, or male sexual nature as it is constituted by group dynamics. The only appeal made to male sexual nature is made by Johnny at gunpoint, and only as a gambit for sympathy. "Look, you can't do this to me—I got a family," he begs, when his argument that it was all Stanley's fault falls on deaf ears. "This thing with you is a thing any man would have done. You coax a man into doing it to you and a man gets a message fast. Now look, whether he's married or not, a man's just a man. Hey, first thing, you come into the gas station, you expose your damn sexy legs to me, walking back and forth real slow . . ." But if Johnny thinks this appeal to his uncontainable sex drive will elicit sympathy, he is dead wrong; it is this speech that causes Jennifer to toss away the gun and invite him to the house for the hot bath. If maleness caused the crime, then maleness will suffer the punishment.

When the tables are turned, Martin and Porter remark, Jennifer "proves to be just as vicious as her attackers." That is of course true. It lies in the nature of revenge or self-defense stories (horror makes the point over and over) that the avenger or self-defender will become as directly or indirectly violent as her assailant, and, as we shall later see, these films are in some measure *about* that transformation. They are also about our nervous relationship to third-party dispute settlement, at least as far as rape is concerned. *The Accused* (the 1988 film based on the New Bedford gang-rape case) is an example of a

rape-revenge film in which the woman's quest for retaliation is submitted to the legal system, thereby displacing the conflict into the verbal arena. Even in this most respectable version of the story, however, there is overt suspicion of and frustration with the legal system, and the case is won only through a last-minute, long-shot ploy—an eventuality that hardly inspires confidence in the regular workings of the law. I shall speculate later on what it is about rape in particular that seems to justify the syncope of the third party and the lapse into blood feud. For the moment suffice it to say that as the bottom-line, "policeless" version of *The Accused*, *I Spit on Your Grave* reveals a great deal about our cultural stake not only in low horror but in the long march of film and television dramas that concern themselves in varying degrees of civility with "getting even."

URBANOIA

The city/country split is by no means confined to the rape-revenge film—or even the revenge film in general. An enormous proportion of horror takes as its starting point the visit or move of (sub)urban people to the country.¹⁴ (The eternally popular haunted house story is typically set, if not in the country, then at the edge of town, and summer camps set in deep forests are a favorite setting of slasher films. Stephen King tirelessly exploits the device.) That situation, of course, rests squarely on what may be a universal archetype. Going from city to country in horror film is in any case very much like going from village to deep, dark forest in traditional fairy tales. Consider Little Red Riding Hood, who strikes off into the wilderness only to be captured and eaten by a wolf (whom she foolishly trusts), though she is finally saved by a passing woodsman. Multiply and humanize the wolf, read "rape" for "eat," skip the woodsman (let Red save herself), and you have *I Spit on Your Grave*. (Nor is the woodsman's revenge in the folktale—slashing open the wolf to let Red back out—all that much prettier than its cinematic counterparts.) The point is that rural Connecticut (or wherever), like the deep forests of Central Europe, is a place where the rules of civilization do not obtain. People from the city are people like us. People from the country (as I shall hereafter refer to those people horror construes as the threatening rural Other) are people not like us.

¹⁴ A filmographic discussion can be found in Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies*, especially chapter 5, "Deep in the Heart of Texas, Or: The Down-Home, Up-Country, Multi-Implement Massacre Movie."

Just how they are not like us is of some interest. In horror, country dwellers are disproportionately represented by adult males with no ascertainable family attachments (Abner in *The Nesting*, various unnamed men in *Deliverance*, the backwoods poachers in *Hunter's Blood*).¹⁵ These men do no discernible work and are commonly shown lying about the home farm in the middle of a workday—usually singly, sometimes in groups. When we do see country families, something is always terribly wrong with them. One standard problem is a weak or missing father and a correspondingly too-powerful mother (so the parodic *Mother's Day*, in which a ridiculously controlling mom sends her hick sons out on commando raids). More commonly, however, the problem is patriarchy run amok. Such is Mr. Sawyer's tyranny in the womanless family of the *Texas Chain Saw* films that his grown sons are cowering boys. Likewise Papa Jupe's authority over the feral family of *The Hills Have Eyes* (apparently influenced by the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*): he treats his grown sons like slavish errand boys and for her misdeeds puts his daughter in ball and chain. In *Hunter's Blood* (1986), the primitive backwoods poachers keep women only to "use" them: "They last a mite longer if you give them food and water," one reproaches another. The terrible Hittites of *Deadly Blessing* live under the Law of the Father—a law that infantilizes all the younger men and drives the women to lesbianism. One way or another, in short, country parents produce psychosexually deformed children. The ubiquity of degenerate specimens (the retarded Matthew of *I Spit on Your Grave*, the "genetically deficient" banjo player in *Deliverance*, Henry in *Straw Dogs*) is the material expression of family wrongness (inbreeding being one obvious form of wrongness).

More to the point, country people live beyond the reaches of social law. They do not observe the civilized rules of hygiene or personal habit. If city men are either clean-shaven or wear stylish beards or moustaches, country men sport stubble. Likewise teeth; the country is a world beyond dentistry. The typical country rapist is a toothless or rotten-toothed single man with a four-day growth. (It is remarkable how many cinematic rapists both in and beyond horror—in *Virginiana*, for example, or *Virgin Spring*—are orally deficient.) As with hygiene, so with manners. Country people snort when they breathe,

¹⁵ As Robin Wood notes, the in effect all-male family of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* "derives from a long American tradition, with notable antecedents in Ford's Westerns (the Clantons of *My Darling Clementine*, the Cleggses of *Wagonmaster*) and in *Man of the West*. The absence of Woman (conceived of as a civilizing, humanizing influence) deprives the family of its social sense and social meaning while leaving its strength of primitive loyalties largely untouched" ("An Introduction to the American Horror Film," pp. 20–21).

snore when they sleep, talk with mouths full, drool when they eat. The hill people of *The Hills Have Eyes* do not even know how to use knives and forks. Country people, in short, are surly, dirty (their fingernails in particular are ragged and grimy), and slow ("This ain't the big city, you know, things take time," a local handyman drawls to our city heroine in *The Nesting*, and the city invaders of *Pumpkinhead* refer to the locals as "vegetables"). What is threatening about these little uncivilities is the larger uncivility of which they are surface symptoms. In horror, the man who does not take care of his teeth is obviously a man who can, and by the end of the movie will, plunder, rape, murder, beat his wife and children, kill within his kin, commit incest, and/or eat human flesh (not to speak of dog- and horsemeat, lizards, and insects), and so on and on. No wonder, given their marginal humanity, country people are often nameless or known by cognomina only (Leatherface and Hitchhiker/Chop Top in the *Texas Chain Saw* films, Papa Jupiter and sons Pluto and Mars in *The Hills Have Eyes I*, The Reaper in *Hills II*, Redbeard and Birdie in *Hunter's Blood*, and, in a campy reflex, Ike and Adlai in *Mother's Day*).

Finally, and above all, country people are poor—if not utterly impoverished, at least considerably poorer than their city visitors. They drive old cars, wear old clothes, watch old televisions (if they have any at all), use old phones, eat badly, are uneducated, are either unemployed or work at menial service jobs or subsistence agriculture, and live in squalor (their delapidated houses are surrounded by rusting cars and couches with springs sticking out). The city visitors, by contrast, are well dressed (city youths inevitably wear college T-shirts), drive late-model cars (often foreign), are laden with expensive gear (hunting, fishing, camping), and so on (*Deliverance*, *Hunter's Blood*, *Pet Sematary*, *Cujo*). One of the obvious things at stake in the city/country split of horror films, in short, is social class—the confrontation between haves and have-nots, or even more directly, between exploiters and their victims.

With that in mind, let us turn to the film that stands as the influential granddaddy of the tradition: *Deliverance* (1972). Although *Deliverance* is commonly taken less as horror than as a "literary" rumination on urban masculinity, its particular rendition of the city-country encounter has been obviously and enormously influential in horror—so much so that it is regularly included in cult/horror lists. The homosexual rape of *Deliverance* will of course become a heterosexual one in the films that follow—a point to which I shall return—but the city-country dynamic remains intact.

Four men from Atlanta (Lewis, Drew, Ed, and Bobby) decide to go canoeing in what is said to be the last free-running river in the

South—a river that is itself near extinction, thanks to a dam that is being erected by the "power company." The film proper opens with their arrival in the Appalachian backwoods and their encounter with the local mountain people. While their cars are being filled with gas, Drew pulls his guitar out and begins to play "Dueling Banjos" (also known as "Feuding Banjos") with a retarded local youth ("Talk about genetic deficiencies," Bobby asides to Ed as they look on. "Ain't that pitiful."). After they negotiate to have their cars driven to the end of their river run, they set off. Three of them are visibly inept; only Lewis, their leader and a self-appointed primitive man, seems to know what he is doing. On the second day of their run, Ed and Bobby put ashore and encounter two mountain men who, after a verbal exchange, tie Ed to a tree and force Bobby onto all fours to squeal like a pig ("Is he a hog or is he a sow?") before one of them sodomizes Bobby. The other mountain man then turns to Ed and makes moves to force him to "pray" ("He's got a real pretty mouth, ain't he?") when Lewis silently appears and with bow and arrow shoots one of the rapists in the back. The other flees. The question now is whether they should take the body downriver and turn themselves in or hide the whole matter. Drew argues passionately for the legal solution but he is outvoted by Lewis (whose belief in the primitive inclines him toward the *lex talionis*), Bobby (who realizes that going to law would make his sodomy public), and Ed (who, having narrowly escaped rape himself, is now identified with Bobby's humiliation). So they bury the body and set off. The feud played out initially at the musical level—guitar and banjo answering each other in an escalating tit-for-tat—now turns flesh and blood. The price of rape (of Bobby) is murder (Lewis shoots the mountain man). The price of that murder will be the death of Drew, which Lewis is quick to interpret not as an accident but as a retaliatory killing,¹⁶ and the price of that death will be yet another (Ed shoots one of the mountain men). After a harrowing run down a sequence of rapids (during which they lose a canoe and Lewis is wounded), they arrive, finally, at the village where their cars are waiting. Lewis is hospitalized and the other two try to harmonize a story for the suspicious sheriff. The film closes with Ed's nightmare memories of the rising lake.

The economic context of this story is spelled out during the credit sequence: over scenes of a dam being built and a lake filling, we hear the voices of city men in loose conversation about the "drowning" of

¹⁶ Whether Drew falls into the rapids because he is shot from the cliff (as Lewis claims) or because of a psychotic impulse (as his increasingly erratic behavior might suggest) is not clear.

the "last wild, untamed, unpolluted, unfucked-up river in the South." Why is the dam being built? A voice we will come to recognize as Lewis's tells us: "You push a little more power into Atlanta, a little more air conditioners for your smug little suburb, and you know what's going to happen? We're gonna rape this whole god-damn landscape. We're gonna rape it!" "Oh, Lewis," the others respond, "That's an extreme point of view, Lewis. You're an extremist."

But Lewis is of course right: it is at bottom an issue of class. When the city men drive into the Appalachian backwoods community that will serve as their point of departure, the first question they are asked by the first local they meet is: "Are you from the power company?" The following sequence—the scenes in which the men interact with the locals—is fraught with a tension that devolves, finally, on money. After Drew and the banjo player have finished playing "Dueling Banjos," Drew asks the young man whether he would like to play another tune. When the boy turns away wordlessly, Bobby says sotto voce to Drew, "Give him a couple bucks." This is followed, minutes later, by an analogous "duel" in which Lewis and a mountain man negotiate a fee for the driving downriver of the cars. Lewis offers thirty dollars; the man demands fifty; they agree on forty. Ed, fearing an outburst, keeps begging Lewis to back off, but Lewis, who knows a challenge when he sees it, persists.

The city not only has money; it uses its money to humiliate country people. Uses it, indeed, to commit an economic and environmental version of the act in question ("We're gonna rape this whole god-damn landscape!"). The last section of the film (in which Ed and Bobby are detained in the village) shows us a community in the process of literal dismemberment: the church being dragged up the main street on wheels for relocation on higher ground, the cemetery being exhumed a coffin at a time. This so Bobby on the strength of his career selling insurance can have an air conditioner (the air conditioner that created the need for a power-creating dam), a purchase that in turn, because it causes his electricity bills to rise, disposes him to vote for the bond that would build the dam, a dam that in its turn, because it will destroy the last free-running river for all time, disposes the city men toward a final sentimental canoe trip. We must add another step to our blood feud sequence. The chain does not begin with the mountain men's rape of Bobby in the forest; it begins with the city men's "rape" of the landscape, the visible destruction of the physical habitat of the mountain people. The city approaches the country guilty, and by aligning our sympathies relentlessly with the city people, director Boorman invites us to participate not only in

their arrogance ("Give him a couple bucks"), but also in their palpable nervousness at having to face directly those they recognize, at some level of consciousness, as the rural victims of their own city comfort.

The construction of the city as metaphoric rapist of the country is an increasingly common one in horror. The *Hills Have Eyes* films play out their horror in a desert area once alive with silver mines but now, the silver gone, given over to nuclear testing. If in fact the feral family of that set of films came into being as a result of radiation, as the first film suggests (the son born to a displaced silver miner is a mutant who eventually takes to the hills), then we have yet another way that country folk are the direct victims of urban interests (in this case the military-industrial complex). The wilderness to which the city men betake themselves in an annual deer-hunting ritual in *Hunter's Blood* is about to be "ripped up for toothpicks and firewood"—and by the very company that two of the city hunters own and that a third of them, Marty, serves as "big-city lawyer." *Mother's Day* twits the convention when it has one of the city characters remark, as she looks out at a lake, "You know, we could really make this place into something. Six lanes of blacktop right there to the lake, pave that whole area there for a parking lot, maybe a taco stand here, some landfill, shopping centers, casinos." Environmental sentiments in fact thrive not just in city-revenge films but in modern horror in general. In *Prophecy*, for example, a big-city lumber company is releasing mercury into northwoods rivers, thus causing monstrous birth defects among the Native Americans who live there. In *Wolfen*, animal-related Native Americans living and working in Manhattan (in skyscraper construction) bring a halt to the building of a new development on their ancestral land. It is no surprise that a text in the business of defending the environment should expose the depredations of big-city industry; what is rather more surprising is that a text in the business of justifying the anger of particular city folks toward country people should also be so willing to expose and play up those depredations.

Needless to say, not all horror located on the city/country fault line explores the economic tensions with the same degree of sophistication that *Deliverance* does. But it is by the same token the rare example that does *not* appeal, however crudely, to some version of economic resentment. In *I Spit on Your Grave*, that resentment comes up in the attention paid to Jennifer's nice car and clothes and her generous tip, which seems to cause as much resentment in the other men as it does pleasure in Matthew. (The source of Jennifer's income is a particularly sore point; from the perspective of someone who

pumps gas for a low wage, writing, like selling insurance, is at best a nonjob and at worst a parasitic scam.) The *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* films take it a step further. Once top workers in the local slaughterhouse, but now displaced by mechanization, the Sawyers have turned their death-dealing expertise onto human subjects; and as a solution to their unemployment, they have in the best entrepreneurial tradition set up their own cottage industry—producing sausages made of special secret ingredients. The irony, of course, is that the sausages, which are much sought after as a specialty item, are made for city people of city people. (The same joke is elaborated at length in the parodic *Motel Hell*.)

Class confrontation is manifest in the opening sequence of *Texas II*, in which two obnoxious Mercedes-driving college boys force the Sawyers' country pickup into a game of highway chicken. Certainly the Cleveland family of *The Hills Have Eyes* that gets stuck in this desert wilderness are folks with all the usual signs of affluence (nice car, large trailer house, Ohio State T-shirt, and the like), whereas the feral family is literally starving and in fact attacks the city people in the first instance to get food. The "profession" of the city youths in the sequel—motorcycle racing—is, relative to the feral family's struggle to subsist, not so different from writing fiction or selling insurance.

Hunter's Blood, spinning off from *Deliverance*, pulls out all the stops. The city men who go on a hunting trip to an Arkansas forest "swarming with whitetails and rednecks" commit every possible offense against local people. From the window of their new Bronco 4x4, one of them, the New Yorker Marty, takes pictures of local "rednecks" barbecuing outside a run-down bar. "It's like something out of *National Geographic!*" he exclaims as he snaps away, utterly unaware of the insult involved and startled when one of the natives comes over to the car and asks, "What do you want with that picture? I ain't done nothing to you." (Picture taking of "natives" figures in *Pumpkinhead*, as well.) In the bar where they later stop for a beer, David, the young man who will emerge as the film's hero, fabricates a long tale intended to humiliate the waitress, at whose gullibility the city men laugh openly in front of a group of local men. "City cocksucker!" she shouts when the trick is revealed. Now offended, the "rednecks" gather around the city men and try to extort fifty dollars to let them go their way, but the city men escape, their Bronco easily outrunning the local men's dilapidated pickup. (That evening, at campfire, the city men play poker for stakes considerably higher than fifty dollars; a close-up shot shows stacks of bills lying on the ground.) In addition to driving a Bronco (understood, in the film, as a vehicle city men buy in order to seem rugged), the urban hunters

tote ludicrously overpowered weapons and wear expensive gear of the Banana Republic or Urban Survival sort. They have brought Jack Daniels (in contrast to the backwoodsmen's moonshine), marijuana, a boom box, and all manner of small comforts. More to the point, the wilderness they so visit is not long for this world, for again, three of the city hunters are involved in the business venture that will soon deforest it. The primitive backwoods poachers who will attack the city men kill not for fun but for a living, and not just deer but the occasional human, and not for their own immediate consumption but for city markets (the local Razorback Meat Company is said to provision hamburger chains). The city, in short, could hardly be richer and the country could hardly be poorer; and the job of the narrative is to acknowledge in order to override that fact, to engage the spectator in the project of destroying the country despite—or, rightly, because of—that guilt-inducing difference.¹⁷

But imbricated in the economic confrontation in these films is another confrontation, equally central and equally brutal: the confrontation, cast in almost Darwinian terms, of the civilized with the primitive. The scenario to which city/country horror obsessively returns is one in which the haves, the civilized urbanites, are separated from the system of supports that silently keep their privilege intact. What would happen—and this is always the underlying question—if the haves had to face the have-nots in a struggle for survival just muscle on muscle, wit on wit, without recourse to the law, or to verbal argument, or to money payoffs, or to sophisticated weaponry, or whatever? Could "we" (the film's "we"—city people) do what is to be done under such conditions—eat raw meat, sleep on the bare ground, betray our comrades, kill someone? Or have city people, like Hegel's master, refined themselves out of the Darwinian game?

"It's true, Lewis, what you said," one of the men remarks at campfire the first evening in *Deliverance*. "There's something in the woods and water we've lost in the city." "We didn't lose it; we sold it," Lewis responds. For Lewis, however, the "it" we sold refers not just to our relationship to the mysteries of the wilderness; it refers to our relationship to the physical realities of life before air conditioning and the social realities of life before insurance. Insured and air-conditioned man is a man unfit for what Lewis calls "the game"—the dog-

¹⁷ *Pumpkinhead* offers a rather different solution. Rather than annihilate the country man bent on murdering the city youths who ran down his son with dirt bikes, the plot instead drafts him to their side; when he sees how cruel is the monster he unleashed to take revenge (the "pumpkinhead"), he changes his mind and joins the city folks in hunting it down and killing it. The "good" country assists in its own demolition, in other words.

eat-dog world of survival that lies in our common past, according to Lewis in our common future, and for the space of a few days in Appalachia (and a couple of hours in a movie theater) in our present. Certainly the city men (Lewis excepted) are inept at canoeing, and certainly they are risibly dependent on expensive gear (only Lewis sleeps under the open sky and on unmattressed ground). Ed has brought his bow and arrow with the intention of shooting at something other than a straw target, but when he actually draws a bead on a deer, his nerve fails and his weapon falls. City man may be rich, but he is also soft; and he is soft *because* he is rich.

So soft that he is rapable. Whether Lewis's unhesitating willingness to put an arrow through the rapist is right or wrong is irrelevant for present purposes. The point is that civilization sits lightly on even the best-bred among us; turn push to shove and we will revert to savagery. When the "shove" is sodomy, savagery seems to come especially easily. Lewis has of course kept his savagery skills honed (as if waiting for a moment like this), but his friends are novices. At the moment they bury the mountain man's body, however, they bury their civilized innocence. From that point on, they are in the "game," and they play it with all the energy they can muster. When they realize that bringing Drew's body back for burial might reveal not only their own crime but their own humiliation, they sink it in the river with remarkably little ado. Ed, the member of the group initially unable to shoot a deer, finally finds it in himself to shoot and kill a man. And he and Bobby negotiate the harrowing final run down the river and engineer the set of lies that will get them off. The journey they began as good men—honest husbands, fathers, and workers—they end as killers and liars. Innocence too is an artifact of civilization, a middle-class luxury the moral equivalent of insurance.

To be in the country, then, is not only to confront the poverty that one may have colluded in creating and maintaining; it is to confront poverty without the protection of the judicial system and its coercive apparatus—to face the victims of one's class comforts without recourse to the police. It is no surprise that the site of city/country horror is always just inches beyond the grasp of the law's long arm (and that telephones are always absent or broken)—"out there where no one can hear you scream," as the promotional poster for *Hunter's Blood* puts it. For the collision between city and country is also a collision between a state mentality (in which citizens can submit their grievances to the executive function) and statelessness (in which citizens rely on vigilantism). Much of the ambient horror of these films resides in the fact that statelessness—our collective past—is not dead and buried but is just a car ride away; what the city limits mark, in

horror, is the boundary between state and no-state. And the question that these stories worry is whether, in their dependence not only on the appurtenances of civilized living (air conditioners) but on the apparatus of the state, city folks have not become unfit.

The Hills Have Eyes I works on the contrast between two families: the civilized family from Cleveland and the primitive family up in the hills.¹⁸ Part of that contrast, as I have suggested, devolves on questions of affluence and social class (the wild family's personal habits are as atrocious as the city family's are proper, the wild family's food is as inadequate as the city family's is abundant, and so on). But the other part has to do with their respective relationship to coercive power. Against the "outlaw" family, beyond the reaches of legal responsibility, is a city family whose father is, significantly, a retired policeman. Aging but tall, tough, and familiar with guns and violence, he ought to be a match for his rural assailants, but he is not; he is quickly killed by them and his family left to their own devices. Those devices are pitifully inadequate in the beginning, and the city people are picked off one by one until they grasp the life-and-death nature of the situation and sink to the occasion. By the end they have not only set out their dead mother as bait; they have burned, shot, and stabbed their way to survival. The final scene of Part One shows us a recently peaceable young man from Cleveland plunging a knife into the back of his rural assailant; the scene fades to red at that moment and the film ends.¹⁹ Like other city-revenge films, *The Hills Have Eyes* both asks and answers the question of hypercivilization. Yes, city people *are* up to the challenge; despite air conditioning and insurance, despite their concentration on mental activities rather than physical ones, and despite reliance on "authorities," they still *can* kill. Even David (in *Hunter's Blood*), who by his own account became a doctor because as a child he was so disturbed at duck hunting, finds it in his heart to murder some backwoods poachers before the day is out, and his girlfriend Melanie unhesitatingly sinks a set of antlers into the back of a would-be rapist.

"He's typically suspicious of city folk," says the urban Lauren of the country handyman in *The Nesting*. Just the reverse is true, of course; Lauren and her city boyfriend are the ones suspicious of

¹⁸ D. N. Rodowick pursues the comparison further in his "The Enemy Within."

¹⁹ "Craven's obsessive theme," Newman writes, "is the depiction of antagonistic groups, usually parallel families . . . more or less representing the forces of destructive anarchy and normal repression. The only possible contact between the two is psychopathic violence, and Craven wittily has the carnage stem from each group's desire to emulate its mortal enemy"—the point being, once again, that victims, in the process of combating monsters, become themselves monstrous (*Nightmare Movies*, p. 55).

country folk (though nowhere suspicious *enough*, naturally). The term "urbanoid" is up to a point apt. At least at the archetypal level (the "deep, dark forest" level), the city-revenge film seems built, as a character jokingly puts it in *The Hills Have Eyes II*, on the "typical paranoia of a person alienated from his planetary roots by too much urbanization." But "paranoia" in this general ("planetary") sense does not account for these films' obsessive contrasting of city wealth and country poverty and, more to the point, the notion that the former has *caused* the latter. It is not just that the city men have more money than the country people; it is that their city comforts are costing country people their ancestral home. The real motor of the city-revenge or urbanoid film, I suggest, is economic guilt.

The story is a familiar one in American popular culture. The city approaches the country guilty in much the same way that the capitalist approaches the proletariat guilty (for plundering her labor) or the settler approaches the Indian guilty (for taking his land). In fact, films like *Deliverance*, *Hunter's Blood*, and the *Hills Have Eyes* films resemble nothing so much as thirties and forties westerns of the settlers-versus-Indians variety. The latter genre rests, of course, on a land seizure of fantastic dimensions. Although we all inhabit, as Michael Rogin has put it, a "society built on Indian graves,"²⁰ the original audiences for those films, as children and grandchildren of the settlers in question, would have had an immediate stake in an account that in one stroke admits the land theft and even the genocide (the Indians in these films being depicted as a decimated, displaced, and ragged band whose sad leader is given to intoning speeches about the white man's treachery) but in the next attributes to the Indians characteristics so vile and deeds so heinous that the white man's crimes pale in comparison. The modern urbanoid film is no less brazen in its admission of urban crimes against the country (dammed rivers, stripped forests, dirt-biked and snowmobiled wilderness, mercury-filled lakes, irradiated rangeland) and by extension against those who have been economically dispossessed in the process. In both cases—urbanoid horror and settler western—it is as

²⁰ Michael Rogin, "Liberal Society and the Indian Question," p. 137. Note that actual Indian graves figure in horror, as well. In *Poltergeist*, the trouble begins when a real estate developer builds over a local graveyard without translating the burials. Although the dialogue gives us no reason to suppose that the buried are anything but white, the ghostly figures who eventually invade the Freeling house look very much like Indians (and in *Poltergeist II*, present-day Native Americans become part of the story). A remarkable number of horror films turn on "title disputes" between present living owners and past dead ones, and one cannot help suspecting that the past dead ones always, at some level, represent the original ones—that even "haunted house" horror devolves, finally, on the Indian Question. See also chapter 2, n. 55, above.

though the demonizing mechanism must begin by acknowledging that which must be overridden.

But it is not just the demonizing mechanism that the city-revenge films have inherited from the western. It is the redskin himself—now rewritten as a redneck. If "redneck" once denoted a real and particular group, it has achieved the status of a kind of universal blame figure, the "someone else" held responsible for all manner of American social ills. The great success of the redneck in that capacity suggests that anxieties no longer expressible in ethnic or racial terms have become projected onto a safe target—safe not only because it is (nominally) white, but because it is infinitely displaceable onto someone from the deeper South or the higher mountains or the further desert (one man's redneck is another man's neighbor, and so on). In fact, the race and ethnicity of the Other of revenge narratives have always been subject to historical shifts (from Indians and blacks to Vietcong) and there is a sense in which the redneck of the films under consideration here is doing multiple duty for the lot.²¹ But I would like to make a case for a special connection between the coun-

²¹ Rogin has argued that the history of demonology in American politics comprises three major moments: racial (Native Americans and blacks), class and ethnic, and cold war. Of the first two, which bear most directly on the revenge films under discussion here, he writes: "The expropriation of Indian land and the exploitation of black labor lie at the root not only of America's economic development, but of its political conflicts and cultural identity as well. A distinctive American political tradition, fearful of primitivism, disorder, and conspiracy, developed in response to peoples of color. That tradition draws its energy from alien threats to the American way of life, and sanctions violent and exclusionary responses to them. Class and ethnic divisions define the second demonological moment. The targets of countersubversion moved from the reds and blacks of frontier, agrarian America to the working-class 'savages' and alien 'reds' of urban, industrializing America. The defense of civilization against savagery still derived from repressive conditions of labor on the one hand and from internal, imperial expansion against autonomous communities on the other. But the terms of the struggle shifted from racial conflict to ethnocentric class war" ("Kiss Me Deadly," p. 1). "Ethnocentric class war" is very much alive in recent horror. A number of commentators have noted the tendency of popular culture to understand the Vietnam war in White-Indian or White-Black terms (Harlan Kennedy in "Things That Go Howl in the Id," for example, or Newman in *Nightmare Movies* or Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser in "Never Having to Say You're Sorry"), but the displacement of ethnic otherness onto a class of whites—to my mind far and away the most significant "ethnic" development in popular culture of the last decade—has gone unnoticed. *Southern Comfort* (1981) goes so far as to blame the entire Vietnam experience—from initial involvement to failure—on the "redneck." For a "scapegoat" analysis of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (which also gestures in the direction of the Indians), see Christopher Sharrett, "The Idea of Apocalypse in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*." The film *Pumpkinhead* gestures toward the blackness as well as the Indianness of the redneck subtext when it has one of the (white) city youths explain to his girlfriend why he has brought a rifle: "Because yo' never know what yo' goin' to find in the jungle—yo!"

try folk of the urbanoia films and the Indians of the settler-versus-Indian western. For in these stories, both redneck and redskin are figured as indigenous peoples on the verge of being deprived of their native lands, and the force of the demonizing mechanism derives, I think, from just this issue of land- and genocide-guilt. Consciously or not, the makers of city-revenge horror fall back on the analogy, to the point that the rednecks of modern horror even look and act like movie Indians. *I Spit on Your Grave* indulges the convention only obliquely, if at all, but the mountain family of the *Hills Have Eyes* films is blatantly based on movie Indians (a tattered band of last survivors, living a subsistence life in the hills, wearing moccasins and headbands, engaging in pagan rites, and so on), and the "redneck" clans of the *Texas Chain Saw* films, *Hunter's Blood*, and *Deliverance* bear a more-than-passing resemblance. Like the world of the movie Apache, the world of the horror movie's redneck is a world of tribal law, primitive hygiene, tyrannical patriarchs (or matriarchs), cannibalism, incest, genetic failure from inbreeding, enslaved women, drunkenness, poverty, and cognomina in place of Christian names.²² Between *Running Deer* and *Leatherface* (Chop Top, Hitchhiker, Jupiter, Pluto, Reaper, Redbeard, Birdie) there is not much to choose.

If what he *is* goes a long way in establishing the exterminability of the redneck/redskin, it is what he *does* that makes it happen. In the modern urbanoia film, murder (of one's fellow) and rape (of one's fellow or oneself) have pride of place. To judge from the two thousand plot summaries in Brian Garfield's *Western Films: A Complete Guide*, the standard precipitating incidents are murder and abduction, particularly of women and children. In this Hollywood echoes nineteenth-century representations of Indian atrocities. "When we make the case of Mrs. Manly and her family and Mrs. Crawly our own," Andrew Jackson wrote to Willie Blount in 1812, "when we figure to ourselves our beloved wives and little, prattling infants, butchered, mangled, murdered, and torn to pieces by savage bloodhounds [Indians] and wallowing in their gore, you can judge of our feelings."²³ Outright rape is rare in the western, but it could be argued that the possibility of sexual violation inheres in the abduction situation. It certainly hovers about the abduction of Lucy in *The Searchers*. "They'll raise her as one of their own, until she's of an age to . . ." an experienced frontiersman predicts, his voice discreetly trailing off. When her body is found, her brokenhearted fiancé asks,

²² See Rogin's "Liberal Society and the Indian Question" for an enumeration of the barbarisms attributed to Indians.

²³ *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, 1:231; also quoted in *ibid.*, p. 149.

"Did they . . . was she . . . ?" "Don't ask!" comes the brusque answer.²⁴ What 1940s Hollywood knew is that the implication of rape makes the deed all the more avengable. And what 1970s horror realized is that one's own rape is the most avengable deed of all.

RAPE REVENGE

Rape—real, threatened, or implied—has been a staple of American cinema more or less from the beginning. Until the early 1970s, however, rape was typically a side theme: one of several horrors blacks would visit on whites in the case of a Union victory (*Birth of a Nation*), a psychopathic flourish in a suspense plot (*Frenzy*), one assault in an escalating sequence on a man's household (*Straw Dogs*), the starting point for a blackmail plot (*Blackmail*), a datum in the consideration of the nature of violence (*A Clockwork Orange*), and so on.

In the 1970s, rape moved to center stage and the rape-revenge story as a drama complete unto itself came into its own. (In folkloric terms, what had been a motif graduated to a tale-type.) An example that achieved a certain underground notoriety was Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left*, a gritty low-budget film from 1972, inspired by Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1959). Bergman's film (based on a novel by a woman, Ulla Isaksson, the novel in turn based on a medieval ballad) tells of the rape and murder by toothless, unshaven itinerants of a virginal girl on her way to church and of her otherwise gentle father's rise to anger and his grisly revenge. (A central concern here, as in *Straw Dogs* and the distantly related *Hardcore*, is with the provocation of essentially peaceful men to acts of savagery.) *Last House on the Left* also has the raped woman die and the parents take revenge, but it adds a twist that points to the genre's future development: the raped girl's mother participates in the revenge by offering to fellate one of her daughter's rapists and then, in the act, biting off his penis.²⁵ The rape and murder are conducted with considerable sexual energy, but when they are over, the assailants look at the girl's limp body in a kind of dumbfounded shame; it is a very long take and indeed "the most disturbing moment in this most disturbing of films."²⁶ *Act of Vengeance* (1974, a.k.a. *Rape Squad*) takes the next step,

²⁴ According to Rogin, the historical record presents a picture of the Native American as sexually underfunded, in contrast to the plantation black. If that is so, Hollywood has emended the picture.

²⁵ See Wood's defense of *Last House on the Left* in his "Neglected Nightmares."

²⁶ Craven's own description is worth quoting. "The killing of Phyllis is very sexual in feeling, and ended with her being stabbed not only by the men but by the woman

dispensing with male help altogether and having the victims take their own revenge. Angry in the first instance at their rapes (a serial rapist forces his victims to sing "Jingle Bells" as he assaults them) and in the second because of their humiliating treatment at the hands of the police (who wonder why women don't just lie back and enjoy it), a group of victims band together to track down and kill their hockey-masked assailant. *Act of Vengeance* is an amateurish and (at least in hindsight) predictable film, but its influence, particularly its critique of a male justice system, has been extraordinary. It is one of the prototypes of *Lipstick* (1976), in which a model named Chris is raped by her kid sister's music teacher and takes the case to court. Because she is unable to prove that she did not consent, she loses the case and the rapist is acquitted. When he then assaults the kid sister, Chris goes into a rage and shoots him in a parking lot. With *Lipstick*, the rape-revenge tradition enters the mainstream; in the spate of rape-revenge films that follow in the late seventies and eighties, rape becomes a problem for women themselves to solve.

In *I Spit on Your Grave*, the parodic *Mother's Day*, *Act of Vengeance*, *Eyes of a Stranger*, *Ms. 45*, *Ladies' Club*, *Extremities*, *Savage Streets*, *Positive I.D.*, *The Accused*, and even, in its way, *Sudden Impact*, women seek their own revenge—usually on their own behalf, but sometimes on behalf of a sister (literal or figurative) who has been murdered or disabled in an act of sexual violence. The twists and solutions vary (as do the proportions of calculated revenge to self-defense): *The Accused* (based on a real-life case) has the raped woman and her woman lawyer win the case in court; *Sudden Impact* interweaves the rape-revenge story with a Dirty Harry plot; *Extremities* shows us a woman who has the chance and desire to take blood revenge but comes to her senses in the nick of time and submits the case to the law; *Ladies' Club* has victims form a vigilante action group that tracks down and castrates recidivist rapists; *Positive I.D.* puts the rape in the backstory and focuses on the woman's violent revenge; *Eyes of a Stranger*, like *Lipstick*, has sisters kill a serial rapist; and so forth. But they share a set of premises that, while not entirely unprecedented, are conspicuously conditioned by changes in social attitudes of the two decades in question: that rape deserves full-scale revenge; that a rape-and-revenge story constitutes sufficient drama for a feature film and that

repeatedly. Then she fell to the ground and Sadie bent down and pulled out a loop of her intestines. They looked at it and that's where it all stopped. That's when they realized what they had done, and they looked at each other and walked away. They were disgusted at what they had done. It was as if they had been playing with a doll, or a prisoner they thought was a doll, and it had broken and come apart and they did not know how to put it back together again" (as quoted by Wood in *ibid.*, p. 28).

having the victim survive to be her own avenger makes that drama even better; and (more directly politically) that we live in a "rape culture" in which all males—husbands, boyfriends, lawyers, politicians—are directly or indirectly complicit and that men are thus not just individually but corporately liable.

The representation of rape has undergone a striking evolution since the early seventies. *Frenzy* and *Straw Dogs* are for all practical purposes the last of the "old style" rape films—films in which the rape is construed as itself an act of revenge on the part of a male who has suffered at the hands of the woman in question (to have been sexually teased, or to have a smaller paycheck or lesser job, is to suffer) and in which the viewer is invited by the usual narrative and cinematic conventions to adopt the rapist's point of view. The rape in *Frenzy* (the camera focuses in excruciating detail on the woman's face as she is simultaneously raped and strangled) exudes a kind of lascivious sadism with which the viewer is directly invited to collude. The rape in *Straw Dogs* is a classic in the "asking for it" tradition: Amy goes braless and flaunts her looks in front of the local men, and when they undertake to rape her, her "no, no" turns to a "yes yes" (so during the first man's turn, in any case). Director Peckinpah is quoted as saying that "there are women and there's pussy," and his Amy is pure pussy.²⁷ On the other side of the divide is *Lipstick* (1976), which rings the old theme of rape as an act of male revenge, but for purposes of exposing it as such, not drawing us into it. The rapist, a music teacher and would-be composer, is given reason enough to resent Chris: she is beautiful but rejecting (the cocktease motif), she is visibly bored with his music tape, she is rich and famous, she has pictures of well-known people all over her house, and so on. There is only one way he has left to prove his maleness, and he uses it. The rape itself—he ties her to her bed and sodomizes her—is brief, brutal, and unerotic. The rapes of *I Spit on Your Grave* are more problematic, focusing as they do at length on Jennifer's tortured body, but there is much truth in Starr's observation that "instead of getting close-ups of a terrified woman staring into a camera (a standard cinematic device equating viewer with attacker), the film features similar shots of the rapists' threatening faces; the viewer is thus forced into the position of victim, not villain" and in Phil Hardy's judgment that "the men are so grossly unattractive and the rapes so harrowing, long-drawn-out and starkly presented that it is hard to imagine most male spectators identifying with the perpetrators, especially as the film's

²⁷ As quoted (from a *Playboy* magazine interview) by Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, p. 363.

narrative structure and *mise-en-scene* force the spectator to view the action from [Jennifer's] point of view. Further, there is no suggestion that 'she asked for it' or enjoyed it, except, of course, in the rapists' own perceptions, from which the film is careful to distance itself."²⁸ Even *Savage Streets*, a film otherwise relentlessly invasive in its relation to female bodies, manages to rein in its voyeuristic impulses during the rape proper. *Ms. 45* marks yet another phase, moving the very brief and very unerotic rape to the front of the film in such a way as to give it the character of a credit-sequence incident.²⁹ By the mid-1980s, rape moved virtually offscreen. By having no rape, technically speaking, but rather attempted rape, *Extremities* draws attention away from the sex act to the dynamics of force. *Sudden Impact* shows us the actual rapes only in brief and fuzzy flashback. *Positive I.D.* puts the rape entirely in the backstory and devotes itself to the woman's revenge. A striking exception is *The Accused*, which puts rape back on screen in elaborate detail and close to real-life time—though only at the end of the film, after ninety minutes of legal arguments on both sides of the consent issue. Despite considerable individual variation, the general drift is clear: from a more or less justifiable male-centered event to an unjustifiable female-centered one; from the deed of a psychopathic creep to the deed of a "normal" man; from an event construed as an act of sex, in which one or both parties is shown to take some pleasure (if only perverse), to an act of violent humiliation.

To get a better idea of the politics of the double-axis revenge film, let us look at a single-axis example—a rape-revenge story that is set in the city and has nothing to do with city/country tensions but everything to do with male/female ones. The example I have in mind is *Ms. 45*, a low-budget production from 1981, like *I Spit on Your Grave* a film with something of a cult following.

A beautiful young woman named Thana (lest we miss the association, a character remarks that it sounds Greek) has a menial job ironing clothes in a New York garment district firm. Thana is mute—a handicap, her boss says, that means that she will have to try harder, be better—and obviously shy. The boss is male, and his employees (models, seamstresses, secretaries, and ironers) are all females. On

²⁸ Starr, "J. Hills Is Alive," p. 50 (see also pp. 52–54), and Hardy, *Encyclopedia of Horror Movies*, p. 329. See also Barker, "'Nasties,'" pp. 112–18.

²⁹ "There was no conscious decision not to have nudity in the film," director Abel Ferrara is quoted as saying. "Zoë Tamerlis [the actress who plays Thana] was willing to do it. It was just a flash decision to not have it. We were aiming at a cold sexuality, a violent tone. Roman Polanski is an influence in all my work" (as quoted in Danny Peary, *Cult Movies 2*, p. 102).

her way home from work one evening, Thana is yanked off the street and raped at gunpoint by a man in a mask. She pulls herself up and gets home only to be assaulted a second time by another man, lying in wait in her living room, who first robs and then rapes her. As he comes to orgasm, he drops his gun, enabling Thana first to stun him with a paperweight and then to grab an iron (the tool of her trade) and bludgeon him to death. After she pulls herself together, she saws the body into pieces, puts them into a number of garbage bags, and stuffs them into her refrigerator. Every day she takes a garbage bag out—this is the film's structuring device—and deposits it somewhere in the city. On one of those forays she is nearly apprehended by a street heckler in a back alley, and she shoots him with a .45-caliber pistol.

At this point, reactive murder turns to proactive murder. For the violence visited on Thana has caused her to notice, as the film has us notice, that in every corner of life, men take it as their due to dominate and abuse women. The remainder of the film shows Thana (increasingly sexily dressed) as a kind of ultimate feminist vigilante gunning down men who traffic in women. She shoots an arrogant photographer ("I'm a gourmet of beauty . . . I mean, when I see beauty, I got to go after it") who offers her a career chance in exchange for sex. She shoots a pimp in the act of beating a whore for low productivity. She shoots an Arab sheik who smugly believes that the huge bill he waves in front of her will buy her for the night. (The morning newscast, noting that the dead man had \$2,800 on his person, wonders what the motive for his murder could have been.) She shoots street guys who circle around for a gangbang. She shoots (or tries to shoot—he ends up seizing the gun and shooting himself) a man who picks her up in a bar and pours out a long and self-pitying monologue about his girlfriend's becoming a lesbian and his strangling her cat in revenge. (This man, like those before him, does not notice she is mute but takes her silence for feminine attentiveness.) And in the end, at the Halloween dance party, she goes on a rampage (dressed as a nun) and guns down a string of men: one who brags about buying virgins in Puerto Rico for a mere three hundred dollars; one who reneges on his promise to his wife to have a vasectomy; her boss, who has just referred to the women in his firm as "my little brownies, my little workers" and to Thana as "a protégé of mine"; and others who qualify for elimination by virtue of the simple fact that they are male.³⁰ ("Thana" indeed.) The slaughter ends only

³⁰ According to Peary, who does not question the male spectator's "identification" with the rapist, "something fascinating happens" in the theater at this point. "Once



Thana takes revenge (Ms. 45).

when she is (literally and figuratively) stabbed in the back by a co-worker.

It goes without saying that the notion of women going around New York putting bullets through male chauvinists has everything to do with fantasy and little to do with reality. Just what the male spec-

these men identify with the rapist, the filmmakers have Thana conk him on the head with an iron and kill him. Then she chops him up into little slabs and stores his parts in the refrigerator. Unexpectedly, the men who had whooped all through *Amin* and the obscenely gory previews of *Dr. Butcher* (1982), whimpered worrisomely "Oh, my God!" and slumped in their seats and shut up. Never has a 42nd Street theater been so quiet and disciplined as when Thana went through her rounds and murdered every offensive male who crossed her path. Had the men in this audience witnessed their own possible fates if they continued to relate to women as they did?" (*Cult Movies 2*, pp. 101-2). The "silenced male audience" phenomenon is widely reported in discussions of rape-revenge films, though no one, to my knowledge, has asked the rather obvious questions it prompts. If the male silence is simply the result of chagrin, why do the silent men sit through the rest of the film (the rapes are over in the first five minutes), and why is this film so abidingly popular with male audiences (surely word would get around if it were a true bummer)? If the male spectator is able to "identify" with the woman on her revenge quest, then is he not equally able to "identify" with her during the rape sequences—is not, in fact, his identification during the revenge predicated on some "identification" with her as rape victim? If the male spectator can only identify with male characters, he must get some sort of pleasure in being repeatedly "killed" at the hands of a woman. However you cut it, the male spectator of this film is masochistically implicated.

tator's stake is in that fantasy is not clear, but it must surely be the case that there is some ethical relief in the idea that if women would just toughen up and take karate or buy a gun, the issue of male-on-female violence would evaporate. It is a way of shifting responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim: if a woman fails to get tough, fails to buy a gun or take karate, she is, in an updated sense of the cliché, asking for it. Moreover, if women are as capable as men of acts of humiliating violence, men are off the guilt hook that modern feminism has put them on. At the very least, the male spectator may take some comfort (sadistic delight?) in the idea that his services as protector of his wife or girlfriend are not as obligatory as an earlier era would have them be. That would seem to be the lesson of *Mother's Day*, in which the sons who have been required to devote their lives to the protection of their mother end up as idiotic louts. That would also seem to be the lesson of the stock figure of the would-be savior who is incompetent, unneeded, too late, self-important, and generally useless: don't even try. "You save her—she's your girlfriend," one young man says to another in *The Evil Dead*. Better yet, let her save herself.

Extremities in particular plays to the "tough woman" notion: Farrah Fawcett is both convincingly athletic in her self-defense and eventual command of the situation and convincingly murderous when the tables are turned (she undertakes to bury her assailant alive). Likewise the parodic *Mother's Day*, in which Trina and Abby do in the two rapist-killers of their girlfriend by putting a television aerial through the neck of one and, once they have poured Drano down his throat, taking an electric carver to the other. What Jane and Tracy in *Eyes of a Stranger* lack in athletic ability, they make up in resourcefulness: the blind Tracy throws hot coffee in the face of her assailant, putting them at least temporarily on equal terms, and her sister grimly pulls the trigger. Julie, in *Positive I.D.*, proves herself as skillful in mugging one man and shooting another as she is in creating a new legal identity for herself. Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave* turns out to be perfectly capable of rigging up a spring-noose, driving a speedboat, slicing off genitalia, and getting rid of bodies. The women of the *Ladies' Club* vigilante squad locate, seduce, sedate, and castrate the rapists on their hit list with perfect efficiency; Julie, the policewoman of the group, is a karate expert. And so on; female self-sufficiency, both physical and mental, is the hallmark of the rape-revenge genre. (Some of these female avengers are more convincing in their role than others; if Farrah Fawcett of *Extremities* stands at the more credible end of the continuum, Linda Blair in *Savage Streets* stands at the other.) It is perhaps no accident that the "masculinization" of the

rape victim is accompanied by a "normalization" of the rapist (that is, the decline of the rapist-as-psychopathic-creep and the rise of the rapist-as-standard-guy). It is as though narratives of rape stand in a zero-sum relation to denial mechanisms. If feminism took away one standby denial mechanism (rape is committed by people totally unlike oneself), feminism has also supplied a happy substitute (self-defense and assertiveness training for women). If a fair percentage of males go around feeling even faintly guilty on one hand at their own complicity in creating and maintaining a world in which women cannot walk alone after dark and/or, on the other, at their reluctance to play the role of protector in a world that has grown unsafe for them as well, then it is clear how these films might afford relief.

But there must be more to the story than that. For revenge fantasies to work, there must be something worth avenging—something egregious enough to justify hideous retaliation. In the case of rape-revenge films, that something has to do not only with rape, but with the power dynamic between men and women that makes rape happen in the first place and, in the second, that makes it so eminently avengable. We might expect that an unadorned attack on the part of a savage psychopath would be cause enough, but for whatever reason, the isolated-act explanation is not sufficient in the modern examples. As if in deference to the feminist discussion of rape in the last two decades, rape is virtually always seen not just as an individual act but as a social and political act as well. Ironically, then, the fantasy of female revenge, which may serve less than savory purposes for the male viewer, brings with it, is indeed predicated on, detailed and sometimes trenchant analyses of quotidian patriarchy.

In *I Spit on Your Grave*, that analysis turns on the dynamic of males in groups—how they egg each other on to increasingly abhorrent behavior, and then, when they are brought to account, how they disavow individual responsibility. *Ms. 45* plays in a rather different key. Except for a few moments in the Halloween party sequence, male buddyism per se is not an issue. The interest here lies rather in the way individual acts of domination add up to pervasive structural misogyny. The two rapes that open *Ms. 45* state the basic proposition: men use their superior strength to victimize women, and women for that reason live in constant threat. What follows is the social generalization of that physical fact: men plunder women not only sexually, but economically and socially as well. Thana kills not only for her own literal rape, but for the figurative rape of all women. *Ms. 45* is a virtual checklist of masculine privilege. *Ladies' Club* concerns itself not with the reasons men rape (that is a given), but rather with the variety of ways that "good" men (boyfriends, husbands) fail to compre-

hend the nature and significance of the crime—a failure that inheres in the law itself. *Hunter's Blood*, one of the few hybrid forms to pursue an analysis of masculinity, considers rape and hunting ("that male ritual") part and parcel of the same masculinist ideology. *Positive I.D.* focuses on the way rapes and rape trials are publicized—what several of these films call the "second rape." *Lipstick's* analysis is multilayered. The immediate reason for the rape is male backlash: men rape when rape is the only way they have left of asserting their domination over women.³¹ But *Lipstick's* trial defense also exposes the cultural context for rape. Because Chris, in her capacity as a world-famous model, sells an image of herself as a woman "asking for it," she is construed, by the court and by the culture, as party to the rape; and to the extent that women everywhere admire and imitate her, and buy the products she is advertising, they too are "asking for it," and they too are construed to be party to whatever rapes might come their way.

But the real concern of *Lipstick*, and of the other mainstream versions of the rape-revenge drama, is with the law and the legal system. We see the rape in *Lipstick* with our own eyes; we watch the man overpower the woman against her objections, tie her to the bed, and sodomize her. Chris decides to pursue the case legally despite the warning that to do so constitutes "its own form of rape" and also despite the fact that her boyfriend Steve, initially eager to have her press charges, changes his tune when he finds out that it will become public (tune changing on the part of the boyfriend is another cliché of the tradition). What emerges in court is quite another story: a "rough sex" narrative in which Chris is claimed to have been a consenting partner with masochistic tastes. The jury buys the lie and the rapist is acquitted. When the rapist later assaults her younger sister, Chris takes the law into her own hands and murders him in a parking lot. The law fails in *Eyes of a Stranger*, too, but in a rather different way. A rapist/killer ("phone freak") is on the loose, but when a woman calls the police to report suspicious phone calls, an officer responds in some irritation that they don't have time to deal with all the inquiries the television reports are generating and that they'll try to get out in the morning; the caller is of course attacked and killed that night. And when the hero of the piece, Jane, begins to suspect one of her neighbors of being the killer and to submit bits of evidence

³¹ "When other expressions of manhood such as gainful employment and economic success are blocked," writes Robert Staples, "those men will express their frustration and masculinity against women" ("Commentary," p. 363). Menachim Amir has argued that such men are the ones most likely to commit gang-rape as they compete for status with one another" (*Patterns in Forcible Rape*).

to her criminal lawyer boyfriend Steve, he is dismissive: "Before you start taking the law into your own hands, think for a minute . . ." The evidence is circumstantial, he explains; if he were to take it to court, he would lose and his reputation as an up-and-coming criminal lawyer would be ruined. When Jane ends up indeed taking the law into her own hands (she shoots the killer in the act of assaulting her sister), it is because the proper authorities refused to take it into theirs. *Ladies' Club*, a poorly made but ideologically energetic film based on the novel *Sisterhood* by Betty Black and Casey Bishop, is precisely about the failure of rape law ("Where rape is concerned, the system stinks"). Angry in the first instance at how few rapists are actually convicted (this film too turns on a successful "rough sex" defense) and in the second instance at the fact that even those who are convicted and sentenced are soon released to rape again or to kill the women who turned them in, a group of rape victims and relatives of rape victims form a self-help group in which they locate, capture, and castrate recidivist offenders (in the interest of reducing their testosterone levels).

Extremities too takes sharp aim at the law—at the distinction it draws between rape and attempted rape, at the issue of consent, and, again, at its failure to acknowledge the fact that the men who are released can freely return and punish the women who put them away. Joe never quite rapes Marjorie. He is on the verge in the car when she escapes (she goes directly to the police but quickly realizes there is no point in even filing a charge under the circumstances), and he is again on the verge when, having traced her home address, he captures her in her house. But as he shouts when the tables are turned, "Go ahead! Go ahead and call the cops! You can't prove a fucking thing! You got no witnesses, you got no come up your snatch, you got nothing, pussy. It's my word against yours!" And even if she *does* win the case, he says, he'll come right back and get her as soon as he's free. Marjorie gets the point and sets about digging a grave in the yard to bury him alive. Her roommates, when they come home, are shocked at her fury and touched by Joe's bid for pity. But Marjorie is implacable. He'll come back, she says, and kill them all: "Choose: him or us." Only when she has extracted a full confession in front of the others (holding a knife to his genitals) is she willing to turn him over to the police.

With *The Accused*, the rape-revenge drama hits Oscar level. It is perhaps no coincidence that the most highly produced version of the story to date should also be the one not only most focused on third-party intervention but also the one in which the third party succeeds in meting out justice, thereby proving the judicial system woman-

friendly after all. It is of course true that the story is constrained by the facts of the real-life case on which it is based, but it is also true that there have been a fair number of cases in the last decade, some of them just as highly publicized, in which the outcomes are less happy: cases in which men plead "rough sex" and are acquitted, cases in which men are convicted and sentenced but come back to kill the women who turned them in, and so on.³² But for reasons at which we can only guess, it is *The Accused's* happy-ending, "feel-good" version of the rape-revenge story that made it through the Hollywood gauntlet and that proved one of the biggest box-office movies of the year.

The Accused has its considerable virtues, one of which is the broadside way it engages the issue of consent and another of which is the way it highlights the legal difficulties in prosecuting rape. And like other films of the tradition, it is informed by an analysis of sorts. Rape, in *The Accused*, is male sport. The college boys who turn up at the bar that night and end up party to the rape have just come from "the game"; the television set there keeps blaring out sports events; for her job waitressing at "The Dugout," Sarah (the victim) dresses as a baseball playerette; a framed newspaper on the wall in the DA's office bears the headline "Plowing Match"; the rape takes place on a pinball machine featuring the game "Slam Dunk"; and during the rape itself, the male spectators cheer and clap and chant in unison "One, two, three, four—poke that pussy till it's sore" and the rapists in turn undertake their task as if it were the World Series (one spits on his hands as he steps into the batter's box). The rape-sport analogy is hardly new—*I Spit on Your Grave* made the same point a decade earlier, right down to the recognition that they also serve who cheer from the sidelines—but with *The Accused* it enters the mainstream, and the status of those who serve by cheering from the sidelines is established as criminal.

If something gets gained in this most civilized version of the rape-revenge story, something also gets lost. There is a sense in which the third party, the legal system, becomes the hero of the piece; focus has in any case shifted from the victim to her lawyer, from questions of why men rape and how victims feel to questions of what constitutes evidence, from bedroom (or wherever) as the site of confrontation to courthouse. (Compare the final shot of *I Spit on Your Grave*, which shows us a triumphant Jennifer speeding along in a motorboat, with *The Accused's* helicopter shot of the courthouse.) Sarah is

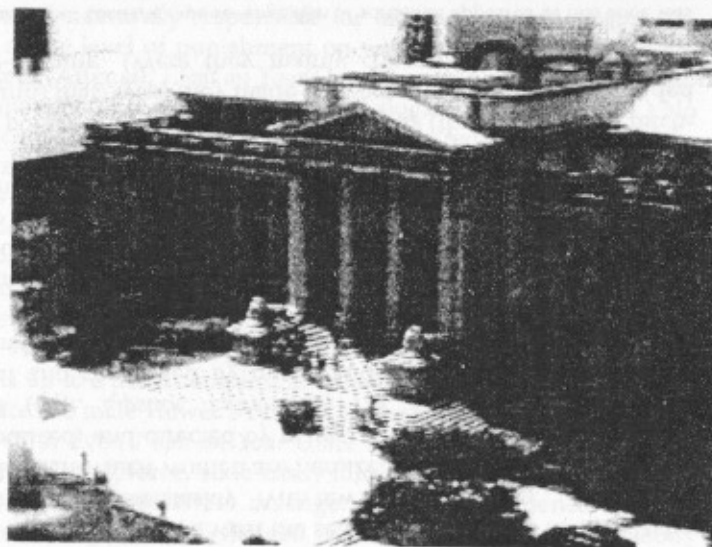
³² Katha Pollitt enumerates a variety of recent examples in "Violence in a Man's World."



The final shot of *I Spit on Your Grave*.

vehement enough in her wish for revenge ("I want those motherfuckers put away forever!"), and when the law fails her on the first round, she even engages in an act of vigilante justice (ramming her car into the pickup of one of the men who cheered her rapists on), but for the most part, the retaliatory urge is displaced onto the woman assistant district attorney assigned the case. And in our increasing engagement with that assistant DA's uphill struggle (to plea-bargain effectively in the first trial, to hit upon the right charge for the second, to gain the support of her cynical colleagues, to triumph over the warning that she will ruin her career, to talk a reluctant witness into testifying, and so on), we lose sight of what the lower forms of the rape drama unfailingly keep at center stage: the raped woman herself. And the fact that justice finally is served not through the straightforward prosecution of rape but through the unorthodox deployment of a statute concerning criminal solicitation—presented, in the film, as a stroke of luck—does little to dispel suspicion about the law's efficacy in such cases.

No less undermining is the fact that the film ends where many women's fear begins, at the moment the jury delivers the "guilty" verdict. As I have suggested, a more or less explicit complaint about the justice system in the rape-revenge tradition is the understanding that even when the law succeeds in the short run, it may fail in the long run. A recent *New York Times Magazine* essay offers the case



The final shot of *The Accused*.

of Lisa Bianco, the "battered Indiana woman who finally, after hundreds of attacks, succeeded in having her ex-husband put in prison, only to be murdered by him on a brief furlough"—of which a friend said, "What did she expect? There's only so much the system can do. She should have gotten a gun and blasted him."³³ *Extremities* turns on just this point; as the assailant himself points out, even in the unlikely event that he's convicted and sentenced, he'll be out soon enough and back to kill the women who turned him in. Their choice is exactly what Marjorie says it is: to kill or be killed ("Choose: him or us"). And *Ladies' Club* is a wall-to-wall indictment of the system that either fails to convict rapists or convicts and sentences them only to release them so they can rape (and/or murder) again: "Where rape is concerned, the system stinks." From the perspective of the rape-revenge tradition, and indeed from the perspective of those involved in real-life male-on-female violence, *The Accused*, in its implication that the story is over when the men are sentenced, is pure Pollyannaism.

Finally, there is the fact that although *The Accused* seems to bring male gazing to account (by bringing to bear on the cheering onlookers a charge of criminal solicitation), the authority for that conviction, and indeed for the status of the incident as a whole, rests finally and

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

solely on the authority of a male spectator: Ken, the college boy who witnessed the event, called the police, and finally, after some equivocating, provided the testimony that convicted his fellows. The importance of his vision is established in the first shots of the film, and it is remarkable how often and at what length the film has us look at his eyes looking at something—or nothing, as in the case of two intercut shots of him staring pensively out of his fraternity house window, shots whose only purpose can be to remind us that amid all the conflicting accounts there is a truth and *this* is where it resides. Likewise the rendition of the rape itself, during which the camera seems as interested in watching Ken's face watching Sarah being raped as it is in watching the rape itself. But the real giveaway is the fact that the rape itself can be shown directly—the flashback can happen—only when Ken takes the stand and narrates his eyewitness account. Sarah, the victim, testified to precisely the same events shortly before, but whereas her testimony remained her own version, his testimony becomes our version, *the* version. After a few sentences, his voice-over ceases and the rape unfolds before us as visible, omniscient history takes over. Seldom has a set of male eyes been more privileged; without their witness, there would be no case—there would in fact, as the defense attorney notes, be no rape.³⁴ Those male eyes point up a fundamental difference between *The Accused* and the lower forms of the rape-revenge story, in which there is a rape because a woman knows she has been raped. The features of *The Accused* that make it such a welcome contribution to the ongoing consciousness-raising regarding the workings of rape law are the very features that make one understand just why the self-help versions of the story not only exist but flourish. As the public reaction to the Bernard Goetz subway incident makes clear, even respectable citizens can sink to the vigilante mentality when they feel inadequately acknowledged by the justice system. *The Accused* shows the system working—but only barely (only by loophole, actually), and only slowly, and only because a man of goodwill and a very smart, sympathetic, and stubborn female lawyer happen to be in the right place at the right time.

Although *The Accused* may at first glance seem a world apart from *I Spit on Your Grave*, the two films are, in fact, high and low (and pretty and ugly) versions of one and the same story, right down to the sports metaphor. I have included *The Accused* in this survey not only for that reason, but also because it owes its conception, its

³⁴ This is perhaps the answer to Leonard Maltin's "only quibble: Was the climactic reenactment really necessary?" (*TV Movies and Video Guide: 1990*, s.v. "The Accused").

terms, and much of its success to a lowlife ancestry that has been neatly erased in its migration from the category of horror to the category of courtroom drama. But take away *The Accused's* elaborate displacement machinery—its legal, psychological, ethical, and social ruminations—and relocate it beyond the reach of the law ("out there where no one can hear you scream") and you have *I Spit on Your Grave*: the story of a gang-raped woman hell-bent on revenge. One cannot quarrel with civilization, but it is sometimes useful to look past its comforts to see the stories we tell ourselves, as a culture, for what they really are. I suggested earlier that what disturbs about *I Spit on Your Grave* is its perverse simplicity, the way it closes all the intellectual doors and windows and leaves us staring at the *lex talionis* unadorned. Let me now be more explicit: what disturbs about *I Spit on Your Grave* is the way it exposes the inner workings of *The Accused* and films like it—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. *I Spit on Your Grave*, in short, is the repressed of *The Accused*, and I suspect that it is for this reason as much as any other that it has met with the punitive response it has.³⁵

The rape-revenge genre deserves fuller treatment than I have been able to give it here. Not only is it a premier processing site for the modern debate on sexual violence in life and law, as I have suggested, but it presents us with the same contradictions as the slasher film—and even more starkly. With few exceptions (e.g., *Ladies' Club*), these films, in which women are heroized and men vilified, are written, produced, and directed by males; and although the mainstream versions (e.g., *Lipstick*, *Extremities*, *The Accused*) are presumably aimed at and consumed by mixed audiences, the examples at the lower end of the scale appear, perhaps even more than the slasher film, to be disproportionately if not overwhelmingly consumed by young males.³⁶ Actually, the rape-revenge film goes the slasher one better, for rape-revenge films not only have female heroes and male villains, they repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist politics. So trenchant is the critique of masculine attitudes and behavior in such films as *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Ms. 45*, *Eyes of a Stranger*, *Positive I.D.* (up to a point), and moments in *Mother's Day* (the scene on the pitcher's mound) that, were they made by women, they would be derided as male-bashing. (Were they mainly consumed by women, they

³⁵ On *Thelma and Louise*, a rape-revenge film of sorts that appeared as this book was going to press, see the Afterword, below.

³⁶ On audiences, see the Introduction.

would by the same token be derided as a sop to feminism.) I have suggested some ways in which the rape-revenge plot may not be as inimical to male interests as it might at first seem (ways having to do with the abnegation of male responsibility in matters of sexual violence), but these "advantages" hardly seem sufficient explanation for the market success of the genre among male viewers, nor do they reasonably account for the intense engagement of the spectator in the revenge drive on which the drama is inevitably predicated.

The only way to account for the spectator's engagement in the revenge drive is to assume his engagement with the rape-avenging woman. I argued in chapter 1 that the slasher film draws the male spectator into identification with the Final Girl, and that the slasher genre is predicated on spectatorial identification with females in fear and pain. So too the rape-revenge film, even more unambiguously and even more passionately. The female victim-hero is the one with a backstory and the one whose experience structures the action from beginning to end. Every narrative and cinematic device is deployed to draw us into her perceptions—her pain and humiliation at the rape, her revenge calculations, her grim satisfaction when she annihilates her assailant. Although earlier cinematic rapes allow for a large measure of spectator identification with the rapist (I am thinking of *Frenzy* and *Straw Dogs* in particular), films from the mid-1970s go to increasing lengths, both cinematic and narrative, to dissociate us from that position. Even when the rapes are shown, they are shown in ways that align us with the victim. And often the rapes are not shown at all but are only reported or suggested in flashback (in which case we may not even see the rapist). It may be impossible to depict a rape in a way that forecloses on any possibility of sadistic participation, but it is certainly the case that the array of cinematic and narrative devices traditionally employed to that end are not in evidence in the films discussed here.

In distancing oneself from the rapist, one also distances oneself from the rape, however. There is an odd sense in which the rape-revenge film simultaneously declares and denies the sexual nature of the crime. The fact that explicit rape is just one of several precipitating crimes, and a recent one at that, in the larger revenge tradition (it fills a structural slot that can also be filled by theft, murder of a family member, land dispossession, and the like) reminds us that this subject is as historically overdetermined as the next. Ironically, it may be the feminist account of rape in the last two decades that has both authorized a film like *I Spit on Your Grave* and shaped its politics. The redefinition of rape as an offense on a par with murder, together with the well-publicized testimonials on the part of terrified and angry vic-

tims, must be centrally responsible for lodging rape as a crime deserving of the level of punishment on which revenge narratives are predicated. (After all, *I Spit on Your Grave* is nothing more or less than a dramatization of the "castrate rapists" slogan of the seventies.) No less welcome to popular cinema has been the redefinition of rape as less an act of sex than an act of power—"not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust," in Susan Brownmiller's formulation, but a "deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear."³⁷

Whatever else they may be, these are terms that men can "identify with."³⁸ Whereas rapes of the *Straw Dogs* (1971) sort, in which the woman is up to a point complicit and even sexually welcoming, must complicate the male viewer's relation to the victim position, rapes of the *Ms. 45* or even *I Spit on Your Grave* variety, largely desexualized acts of humiliating force, slide easily into the popular-culture lexicon of heinous crime and sweet revenge. It is no coincidence that the emergence of rape as a full-fledged cinematic subject is simultaneous with its being yoked to a retaliation plot and coded as an action film.³⁹ And for the action plot, resting as it does on an aesthetic of suffering and retribution, and hungry as it is for more and worse humiliations, the "new rape" is a natural. Tania Modleski has defined "post-feminism" as the appropriation of feminist thought for nonfeminist purposes, and despite the fact that the politics of the rape-revenge film are not readily classifiable as non- or antifeminist (and also despite the fact that feminists themselves have on other grounds begun to question the desexualization of rape),⁴⁰ it is certainly the case that these movies constitute an unsettling unintended consequence.

Still, however desexualized, minimalized, and distanced, the crime is a rape, and the question is why—what, in other words, the male

³⁷ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, p. 439.

³⁸ Of *Ms. 45*, Zoë Tamerlis (the actress who played Thana) is reported to have said, "It's truly, in my more elaborate view, about anyone who's been raped or screwed in any way. The real villain is Thana's boss, who wants to keep his women for forty years in his service. He's the one person she sets out to kill" (as quoted by John McCarty, *Psychos*, p. 129).

³⁹ A number of the rape-revenge films I viewed in connection with this chapter are categorized in video rental stores under "action" or "suspense." Production values, not just subject matter, play a role in the perception of genre. High-budget forms are likely to be categorized as drama, suspense, or action and low-budget forms as horror or cult—even when the plots are virtually identical.

⁴⁰ See, in particular, Monique Plaza's critique of Foucault's wish to "desexualize" rape law ("Our Costs and Their Benefits").

viewer's stake might be in imagining himself reacting to that most quintessentially feminine of experiences. The answer lies, perhaps, in the question: it is precisely *because* rape is the most quintessentially feminine of experiences—the limit case of powerlessness and degradation—that it is such a powerful motivation, such a clean ticket, for revenge. I have argued that the center of gravity of these films lies more in the reaction (the revenge) than the act (the rape), but to the extent that the revenge fantasy derives its force from *some* degree of imaginary participation in the act itself, in the victim position, these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal sort.

THE BODY IN QUESTION

But how do we square the male-on-male rape of *Deliverance* with the female standard in the tradition before and since? We might be inclined to dismiss it as a singular, "literary" variant were it not for the obvious influence it has had on low-horror versions—including, in fact, on *I Spit on Your Grave*. Thus although the heterosexual rape of *Spit* is very much in line with the tradition at large (including the pre-*Deliverance* tradition), it is also the case that one of its immediate models was a homosexual one. That fact alone suggests that the sexual politics of the rape-revenge tradition, at least in its recent phase, are not as straightforward as they may at first seem. Certainly *Hunter's Blood* (1986), another *Deliverance*-based text, mixes homo- and hetero- in ways that unsettle the apparent categories.

I have mentioned *Hunter's Blood* in passing, and it is now time to give a fuller account. Even in the horror world of promiscuous borrowing, *Hunter's Blood* (from 1986) is a highly derivative piece of work, referring not only to *Deliverance* but also to *The Hills Have Eyes* and the "human meat" films (e.g., *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*). It tells the story of five men (two are brothers, two are father and son, and one, Marty, is the New York lawyer) who go on a deer-hunting expedition in the northern Arkansas wilderness. The wilderness, as I mentioned earlier, is doomed, for two of the big-city hunters, the brothers Al and Ralph, work for a company that, with the legal help of Marty, is about to timber the forest into oblivion. The city men could hardly be more obnoxious about and toward the country folk they encounter at the "redneck bar" where they stop for beer. (This is the site of the barbecuing incident and the female bartender incident.) After a car chase in which they eventually leave their "redneck" pursuers in the dust, our city heroes turn their Bronco off the road and tear cross-country to their destination. There they set up

camp. Two game wardens on horseback come by and warn them that the woods are full of poachers—dangerous, primitive folk. The poachers show up that very evening and are threatening to rape three of the city men (who are both drunk and stoned) when David and his father, Mason, return from a walk and drive the poachers off at gunpoint. (Although the poachers and the "rednecks" are different sets of folks, they stand in an economic relationship, the former supplying the latter with meat—meat that is of course city-bound.)

The remainder of the film charts the efforts of the country poachers to rape/kill the city hunters and the efforts of the hunters to escape with their lives. The chief difference between poachers and hunters, the film observes, is that the latter own the law. The hunters realize the extent of their danger only when they find the bodies of the two game wardens strung up on trees. The hunters find it in themselves to wound and kill as many of the poachers as possible, and the poachers in turn kill Ralph and wound Mason. This chase or "feud" sequence is crosscut with a sequence showing David's girlfriend Melanie driving to the country to join him as they earlier agreed. When she arrives at the bar, the "redneck" there offers to drive her into the woods, but he of course drives her straight into the arms of the poachers. She too is strung up and David, who has been captured and brought to the same place, is invited to watch her be raped. Just as Redbeard is on the verge of penetrating Melanie, David breaks loose and frees her; the two of them vanquish their captors (Melanie stabbing Redbeard in the back with antlers) and, after a chase through the woods, jump onto a passing train.⁴¹

"I wouldn't dream of joining your male ritual," Melanie says in the film's opening scene when David suggests she might meet him in the country. And male ritual—ceremonialized deer hunting—is precisely what *Hunter's Blood* is all about. The men themselves speculate on the meaning of hunting in a campfire conversation the first evening. For Mason, it is not the hunting but the stalking. The fatuous Marty suggests that "the act of hunting brings out a rapport with a certain forgotten part of you"—to which Ralph retorts, "Yeah, the killer part." For Al, the crudest but most on-point member of the group, it is somehow sexual: the appeal of hunting for him lies in facing "whatever's out there" with "just your brains and your balls." "A man's got to *feel* his balls," he exclaims. "I mean, when a man gets old enough for his pecker to stand up, he's got to go hunting."

What distinguishes *Hunter's Blood's* otherwise predictable working

⁴¹ The closing shot of the film shows us the back of the train—which features an advertisement for Razorback Meats. Just where the train is going, on a city delivery or back to the country source, is not clear, but the sign is ominous; the horror, we are to assume, is not over.

out of the rifle = penis equation is its interest in the object: what or whom exactly the standing pecker is aimed at. There are no actual rapes in *Hunter's Blood*. There are repeated threats and attempts, though—and with the exception of the Melanie episode, they are all threats and attempts traded between men. If the “male” of “male ritual” is a standard genital trope, the “ritual” has to do with enacting a barely disguised buggery drama. At the level of hunting, that means preferring a buck—a “big buck”—to a doe as the object of one’s bullet.⁴² But what our heroes encounter in the woods is not unarmed deer but armed men—other bearers of standing peckers, and other seekers of “male ritual.”

“I’m going to ream your butt in a minute, Ralph,” Al responds to one of his brother’s remarks during the drive to the country. “These road trips bore me,” Ralph responds. “I’m just trying to amuse myself.” “I’ll ‘bore’ you,” says Al, with emphasis. Later, during the car chase following the encounter in Tobe’s Bar,⁴³ the locals shout out remarks like “We’re gonna run right up their ass!” and “We’re gonna run right up their butts!” Word nearly becomes flesh when, in the woods that night, the poachers start unzipping their pants and choosing up the city men (“He’s a pretty one, ain’t he?”); the scene breaks off when Mason and David return and scatter the poachers. The rather ambitious standing-pecker theory of *Hunter's Blood* thus links the stalking and shooting of (preferably male) deer with the stalking and raping of (preferably male) humans—all of which is further linked to ingestion. When David has been caught and strung up from a tree (in the same way that deer are strung up for gutting and that Melanie is later strung up for raping), the poachers remark that he “looks tasty”: “You know what we do to bucks, don’t you?” But after all these exchanges between males, the person who comes closest to being explicitly raped is Melanie. It is as though she is imported for the purpose; her role in the film as a whole consists of little more than a brief appearance in the opening scene (when she sees David off) and then, midway through the film, a few brief and sketchy glances at her drive to the country, her capture, and (with David looking on) near-rape, and (with David) escape.⁴⁴

We could hardly ask for a more paradigmatic case of the confusion,

⁴² Ironically, the one deer they stalk and attempt to shoot, and call a buck, is clearly a doe. Whether the misidentification is intended or accidental is not clear, but given the thematics of the film, it is in either case marvelously telling.

⁴³ Presumably a reference to director Tobe Hooper, whose *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is a benchmark in the urbanoia tradition.

⁴⁴ The near-rape of Melanie answers the humiliation of the “redneck” barmaid in the early beer-drinking scene.

or confusability, of male and female bodies. Not even in the rape-revenge film, it seems, is gender clear-cut. One reason the slasher film can go as far as it does in playing with gender is that it deals with genital behavior only indirectly, through the metaphor of violence; thus women as well as men can come by knives or power drills, and men as well as women can have holes drilled or bored into them. The slasher film is in this respect rather like the vampire film, which, through its symbolic displacement of “real” or genital sex onto mouths and necks, with which women and men are equally well endowed, allows for a full set of transgressive gender exchanges.⁴⁵ The rape-revenge film, however, would seem to require the use of a real penis and a real orifice.⁴⁶ Anchored in the literal, it cannot engage in the obvious kinds of gender play that characterize the more symbolic or fantastic forms of modern horror. And yet even this most body-based of genres manages to complicate the sex/gender system—especially on the side of the victim-hero, whose gender is clearly coded feminine (at least in the first phase of the story) but whose sex, it seems, is up for grabs. *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Deliverance*, and *Hunter's Blood* all tell the same story; but where one puts a vagina, the second puts a male anus, and the third equivocates. The equivocation of *Hunter's Blood* is particularly telling, for it suggests that the (male) anus and the vagina are, in certain social matters, one and the same thing. Nor is the gender of the rapist as secure as it might seem. At least in the rape-revenge films that operate on the city/country axis, the rapist’s masculinity is typically compromised by his economic victimization. In *Deliverance*, that victimization is specifically figured as itself a “rape,” and equivalent notions of cultural or economic emasculation sound loudly throughout the tradition.⁴⁷ Paradoxically enough—and the generalization extends beyond the rape-revenge film—it is the man who is deprived of the phallus who must live by the penis.

But let us stick to the status of the raped person, the victim-hero

⁴⁵ See especially Christopher Craft, “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips.’”

⁴⁶ Although several of the rape scenes also involve at least the threat of forced fellatio, that act is typically presented as following on, and secondary to, vaginal/anal rape. The standard hierarchy is: vagina, then anus, then mouth in the case of a woman (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Rape of Love*) and, in the case of *Deliverance*, anus and then mouth. For this reason I have focused on vaginal and anal rape. On the symbolic relation between vagina and mouth, see chapter 2, above.

⁴⁷ *Demon Seed*, a rape narrative with practically no revenge, makes much of the tit-for-tat logic. “I refuse to assist you in the rape of the earth,” Proteus (the all-powerful computer-camera) tells the scientist who designed him for precisely an earth-raping project. Instead, Proteus rapes and impregnates the scientist’s wife.

whose experience the rape-revenge film is all about. In the previous two chapters, I have discussed "one-sex" logic as it has been elaborated by Thomas Laqueur—the notion, dominant in medical literature until the late eighteenth century (and recurrent in popular forms since then), that male and female are merely inside versus outside versions of a single genital system, differing in degree of warmth or coolness but essentially the same in form and function. One-sex reasoning thus rests on "systems of analogues" whereby male parts are thought to have their counterparts in the female and (to a lesser extent) vice versa. The "system of analogues" that underwrites the possession film, I suggested, is one that repeatedly associates vagina with (male) anus, and the question now is whether the same "system" underwrites the rape-revenge films as well. It clearly underwrites *Hunter's Blood*, and it provides a ready explanation for the relation between the heterosexual rape of *I Spit on Your Grave* and the homosexual rape of the film—*Deliverance*—that stood as its immediate model. Viewed as a group, these three films present a universe in which men are sodomizable in much the same way that women are rapable and with much the same meaning and consequences. They suggest a universe, that is, in which vagina and anus are indeed for all practical purposes the same thing and a universe in which that thing has no specific relation to male or female bodies.⁴⁸

Again, the world of one-sex reasoning is one in which gender is primary and sex secondary—a world, that is, in which gender precedes and determines sex. It is not that the abject terror of the slasher film—screaming, pleading, sobbing—proceeds from the femaleness of the victim, but that the femaleness of the victim proceeds from the fact that abject terror, the slasher film's *raison d'être*, is gendered feminine (though not so completely so that *all* victims are female). Likewise the rape-revenge film, of course, the femaleness of whose rape victim proceeds from the quintessential femininity of being raped (though again not so quintessentially feminine that *all* victims are female).⁴⁹ In both cases, the gender of the "victim" part of the

⁴⁸ *Vagina*, meaning "sword sheath," could also refer to the anus in Latin sources. The female sheath had no separate name (construed, as it was, as an inverted penis) until relatively late—according to Laqueur, around 1700 in the European vernaculars (*Making Sex*, pp. 159 and 270 n. 60).

⁴⁹ In fact, in their focus on a girl victim-hero who survives near-death to rise and kill her assailant, the rape-revenge and slasher films share the same general plot. The difference (apart from the fact that one inhabits a world of violence including sex and the other a world without sex) is one of proportions: in the slasher film, the girl defeats the killer only at the end and almost in spite of herself, whereas in the rape-revenge film, the girl spends at least half the film calculating and taking revenge.

story (the rape sequence in the rape-revenge film, the flight-and-pursuit sequence in the slasher) overrides the gender of the "hero" part of the story as far as the fixing of the main character's sex is concerned. In chapter 1, I proposed that the willingness of the slasher film to re-represent the traditionally male hero as an anatomical female suggests that at least one traditionally heroic act, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine. The rape-revenge film is a similar case, only more so; it is not just triumphant self-rescue in the final moments of the film that the woman achieves, but calculated, lengthy, and violent revenge of a sort that would do Rambo proud.⁵⁰ (Paradoxically, it is the experience of being brutally raped that makes a "man" of a woman.) What I am suggesting, once again, is that rape-revenge films too operate on the basis of a one-sex body, the maleness or femaleness of which is performatively determined by the social gendering of the acts it undergoes or undertakes.⁵¹

The advantage of thinking about the rape-revenge genre in terms of the one-sex model is that it obviates the two-sex question of which body, male or female, is *really* at stake, and which of the films in question, therefore, tells the truth and which lies. If the body in question is experienced as neither strictly male nor strictly female, but as a common body with a penetrable "sheath" figurably variously as anus and vagina, then *Deliverance* is telling one part of the truth, *I Spit on Your Grave* another, and *Hunter's Blood* both. This is not to say that the male spectator will have identical reactions to Bobby's and Jennifer's rapes. Representation does matter, and the rape of Bobby, because he is figured as a male, is accorded a level of dishonor that the rape of Jennifer is not, and hers, because she is female, is accorded a level of danger that his is not—differences in code that must affect the spectator's unconscious response as well. 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.

⁵⁰ It is worth remembering, however, that the weapon-wielding female avenger of modern popular culture does have her antecedents in Greek myth and, in Germanic heroic legend, in such figures as Brynhild and Kriemhild/Gudrun and the Norse women of, for example, *Laxdaela Saga*. Historically speaking, it is the splitting of the functions of suffering and revenge (especially between female and male) that is the innovation, and the all-in-one form that is prior.

⁵¹ The formulation is Judith Butler's (*Gender Trouble*).

CITY GIRLS AND
REDNECK RAPISTS

YOU KNOW I LOVE WESTERNS BECAUSE I
DISGUISE A LOT OF MY FILMS. THEY'RE
REALLY WESTERNS UNDERNEATH.

—Horror director John Carpenter

In what I have called the hybrid film—the rape-revenge film staged on the city/country axis—two sets of politics come into play and are played off against one another: the politics of gender and the politics of urban/rural social class.

I Spit on Your Grave (1977) is one of the first films to stage the female self-revenge drama in city/country terms. On one hand a film like *Ms. 45*, *Positive I.D.*, or *Lipstick*, in which a woman virtually annihilated by a rape mends and rises to annihilate her attackers, *Spit* sets a woman against men and makes overt gestures toward feminism. On the other, it draws on the venerable urbanoid themes of B movies, working to justify the annihilation of country people by their guilty city cousins. It is to the politics of this combination, which associates the city with the woman and the country with the man, that I now turn.

If Jennifer is raped because she is a woman, she is also, according to the logic of popular culture, a woman because she is raped. Although sex need not always follow gender (as *Deliverance* demonstrates), rape stories traditionally want female victims. She is likewise a woman because she is from the city. There has always been a strong hint of the unmasculine in the attributes ascribed to urban folk in a country setting. Even when they are tall and healthy, city men are seen as appearance-concerned, trinket-laden, physically weak and incompetent, queasy about the hard facts of rural life (animal slaughter, for example), unfamiliar with weapons and fearful of them, overly dependent on the buyable services of others, and even, under duress, given to tears (so Marty in *Hunter's Blood*). Certainly the city men of *Deliverance*, with the exception of Lewis, are less than masculine specimens. From such a man to an actual woman—from Bobby in *Deliverance* to Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave*—is but a short step. Add high heels and you have the hypercivilized urbanite incarnate. The sense of effeminacy that has always attended the worry about hypercivilization is now manifest in a “naturally” rapable female body.

Although their function as rapists would in itself seem sufficient to guarantee the maleness of Johnny and his fellows in *I Spit on Your*

Grave,⁵² it is worth remembering that even in the larger city-revenge tradition, country folks are conspicuously male even when they are not rapists and even when the targets of their aggression are not women. There are, in other words, reasons beyond the simple possession of the “offending weapon” that country folk are, by virtual definition, menfolk. Their maleness also proceeds from their command of the manly skills (fixing cars, loading guns, skinning animals) whereby they intimidate their city visitors, and it must also proceed from the narrative need for a worthy opponent. The demonizing impulse that underwrites these films depends on the fiction that country folk always pose an immediate threat of brute force, and for that threat to be sufficiently credible to justify their annihilation, it must be male. The maleness of the country, in other words, is even more overdetermined than the femaleness of the city.

But the picture is, of course, not so simple. Jennifer'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 difference is that whereas the Final Girl answers a stabbing with a stabbing in a narrative that explicitly equates the knife with the penis, Jennifer answers an explicit rape with a castration, a hanging, an ax blow, and a propeller mutilation, and although we may wish to understand those acts as symbolic rapes, the closest a penis-less person can get to the real thing, the film itself draws the equation only vaguely if at all. Nor do other rape-revenge films play up the potential analogy. It is an available meaning, but the fact that it is not particularly exploited suggests that it is not particularly central.

What is exploited, and what is central, is the gender snarl around the figure of the “redneck” rapist. I remarked earlier on the lengths to which these films go to establish right from the outset the disenfranchisement, recent or imminent, of rural folk; even before we meet them, we know that they have been (or are about to be) driven off their land, have been (or are about to be) deprived of their traditional livelihood, and so on. And although fixing cars, loading guns, and skinning animals are indeed coded as masculine behaviors that will be put to threatening use in the film's present, they are also understood to be short-run and last-ditch skills employed in an equally short-run and last-ditch act of resistance against what the locals of *Deliverance* call—and the term has some allegorical force—the “power

⁵² A counterexample of sorts, though not from a rape-revenge film proper, is the supernatural rapist in *The Incubus* who turns out to be a beautiful woman transformed into a monstrous incubus and whose “ejaculate” is hence part semen and part menstrual blood.

company." This is an economic story; but it is one that is repeatedly told as a gender story and even, indirectly or directly, as a "rape" story. *Deliverance* may not be the first film to figure land seizure and economic exploitation in explicitly sexual terms ("We're gonna rape this whole goddamn landscape"), and it is certainly not the last. In one urbanoid film after another, the local people are presented as "fucked" by city interests even before real city people arrive on the scene. Country men may be male, in other words, but they are symbolically feminized, and as any viewer of horror knows, where feminized males are, violent trouble is soon to follow.

Despite their differences, particularly where the characteristics of the female victim-hero are concerned, the rape-revenge film and the slasher film tell similar gender stories. In both a feminine/feminized male or males (the slasher killer, it should be remembered, is typically figured as a mama's boy, a transvestite, or genitally defective) squares off against and is finally overpowered by a strong, young woman. As in the slasher film, the losing combination is the feminine male (he who is deprived of the phallus must live by the penis) and the winning combination is the masculine female. If the city raped the country metaphorically (raping the landscape, fucking up the only "unfucked-up" river in the South), the country responds in literal, carnal kind. Thus in the double-axis film, the (metaphorically) raped are pitted against the (literally) raped. And the question is no longer whether the city can sink to the barbarous levels of the country, but whether the urban female can sink to the barbarous standards set by the rural male. I have speculated in chapter 1 on the current appeal of this configuration and will not rehearse the arguments here beyond noting again that the figure of the self-saving Final Girl and the self-avenging rape victim may, for better or worse, be the main contribution to popular culture of the women's movement and the "new family." In either case, urbanoia is well served by its female victim-hero.

In the effort to account for the double-axis film's success, it might be useful to take it one axis at a time—to see, that is, what advantages accrue to the "class" story by its being told in connection with a gender story, and then to see what advantages accrue to the gender story by its attachment to a "class" story.

The first scenario assumes that the real story, the prior and primary story, is the economic and racial drama that looms so large in our national consciousness. The urbanoia films of the sixties and seventies and the settler-versus-Indian films of the thirties and forties bear an astonishing resemblance to one another—not only in plot structure and in political and economic sensibility, but in fine details

of appearance, character, and behavior. The difference, of course, is that the redskins have become rednecks, the white settlers city vacationers, and the cavalry the corporation—the "power company." The new story of land plunder is a story of dam building, lumbering, mining, oil drilling, nuclear testing, toxic dumping—all of which work, in the same way that frontier settlement earlier worked, to enrich the haves at the expense of the have-nots. The justification for that process—how to acknowledge the guilt so as to allow ourselves (the films' "ourselves": city people) to get on with business—lies ready at hand in the traditional story of an Indian atrocity repaid with genocide and a land grab. I do not mean to suggest that urbanoia films are retelling the Indian story for its original purpose only (although I suspect that there remains some of that original purpose in the retelling); I am suggesting, rather, that in telling a new story, essentially a class story, about real estate plunder, we fall back on the terms of the older, ordinary story that haunts our national consciousness.

That older story, of course, is no longer tellable in its original terms. What makes it tellable in modern terms is precisely its hybridization. The updating is perversely brilliant: by making the representative of urban interests (what would normally be taken as the white male elite) a woman, and the representatives of the country (what would in the western have been Native Americans) white males, these films exactly reverse the usual system of victim sympathies. That is, with a member of the gender underclass (a woman) representing the economic overclass (the urban rich) and members of the gender overclass (males) representing the economic underclass (the rural poor), a feminist politics of rape has been deployed in the service of class and racial guilt. Raped and battered, the haves can rise to annihilate the have-nots—all in the name of feminism.⁵³

Let us now reverse the terms and give priority to the rape story. To assume that the rape drama is primary is to assume that the real work of these films is psychosexual and turns on the deep excitement generated by the vicarious living-through of violation, humiliation, and sadistic redemption—feelings that must be carefully concealed in their conscious expression—and that the class or economic/ethnic dimension plays a supporting role. The success among young male audiences of single-axis films like *Ms. 45* makes it clear that narrative and cinematic positioning can in themselves go a long way in insur-

⁵³ A woman, in other words, has been inserted into the "regeneration through violence" myth that Richard Slotkin finds characteristic of the frontier (Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*).

ing sympathy with the humiliation and rage of a raped person. But by coding the raped person as a "white settler" and the rapists "Indians," the hybrid film seals the guarantee. For the "white settler" role is an immediately familiar one in our cultural unconscious; it is one we have inhabited repeatedly, and one whose terms and outcome are secure. At some level, when we hear Johnny and his friends (in *I Spit on Your Grave*) whooping in the forest outside Jennifer's house at night, we must recognize the trope of the restless natives, and when we see Matthew deliver groceries and rush back to report to his companions, we must recognize the trope of the Indian who comes to trade and reconnoiter. To the psychosexual story of sweet victimization and sweet revenge, the "white settler" resonances add a kind of surplus mechanism, designed to suture us even more firmly into the underdog position.

The "white settler" resonances suture us into a familiar guilt-revenge dynamic as well. I suggested earlier that the city approaches the country guilty in the same way that the whites approach Indians guilty, and that the urbanoia plot works to resolve that guilt by justifying the annihilation of the guilt-inducing party. At first glance, the formula would seem not to apply to the rape-revenge films, for women hardly approach men bearing the same kind of exploitation-or abuse-guilt with which whites approach Indians or city approaches country. But if we understand the story in psychosexual terms, even the guilt dynamic may make a kind of sense. In chapter 4 I shall consider in some psychoanalytic detail the male viewer's stake in the kind of masochistic scenario—the adoption of the "feminine" position—that the rape-revenge film offers. (The centrality of *Deliverance* in the tradition guarantees that the "feminine" position knows no sex.) For the moment suffice it to say that, as a psychosexual document, *I Spit On Your Grave* may play on two powerful moments of the male oedipal drama: the fantasy of being "beaten" (sexually penetrated) by the father (a fantasy well accommodated and at the same time well distanced by its enactment in female form) and the fantasy of killing the father. Although the fantasy of parricide is not normally so tightly joined with the "child is being beaten" fantasy, it seems to me plausible that the circumstances of the rape-revenge plot may work to bring them together.⁵⁴ In either case, the revenge phase must be funded by punitive desires; in much the way the Greeks are said to have killed the bearer of bad news, the guilty masochist may be prompted to expunge, in the course of disavowal,

⁵⁴ For an extended analysis, adapted from the Freudian paradigm, of the patricidal tendencies of horror, see Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures*, pp. 93–104.

the agent of his unacceptable pleasure. If the agent of his pleasure happens to be his father, so much the better. And if that paternal agent can be coded in such a way as to make him necessarily or deservedly killed, as the Indian is necessarily or deservedly killed in order to clear the way for the subject to establish his own claim (to the land, to the mother), better yet. Raped and battered, the boy rises to exterminate his paternal aggressor—all in the name of justice.

There is indeed, as John Carpenter suggests in the remark that heads this section, a remarkable fit between horror and the western (or at least a certain kind of horror and a certain kind of western). And although his language suggests that he gives priority to the western ("I disguise a lot of my films. They're really westerns underneath"), the case could also be made that westerns are really horror "underneath," for the terms of violation and revenge in the western seem often to slide beyond an economic analysis into a psychosexual register.⁵⁵ In fact, of course, if the two genres really do stand in the kind of reciprocal relationship that I have suggested, then it must be that both things are true—that each is the other "underneath," that the terms of the one are inherent, if not manifest, in the terms of the other, and that each enables the other to be told. *Deliverance* is an object lesson on just how the demonizing mechanism of the urbanoia or white settler plot enables the telling of a rape-revenge story, and at the same time how a rape-revenge story enables the rehearsal of the old story whereby the have-nots are exterminated with impunity by the haves.

To that combination, *I Spit on Your Grave* added a sex change and feminism. In retrospect, there is something inevitable about *Spit's* revision. Both of its stories have turned from the outset on "femininity"—of city folks, of rape victims—and once the social changes of the sixties and seventies made credible the image of a self-avenging female, Jennifer had to happen. And with her appearance, the syncretism was complete. Her femaleness allowed the "body" story to be told with far greater relish, and her feminist rage pumped new energy into the "social" story. Horror is built on exploitation and appropriation, and *I Spit on Your Grave's* exploitation and appropriation of feminism are no cause for surprise. What interests me here is what this particular instance reveals about the male viewer's investment in the tormented female body that appears before him on-screen, and how that relation in turn invites us to read with new eyes backward and outward in the literature of suffering and revenge.

⁵⁵ John Carpenter, as quoted by Cumbow, *Order in the Universe*, p. 191. Carpenter's psychoanalytic speculations elsewhere indicate that he has a more complex notion of "underneath" than his remark about westerns suggests.