



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

This is a repository copy of *From Surveillance to Witnessing: Revanche, Red Road, and the Anti-Revenge Film*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/129410/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

DeFalco, A [orcid.org/0000-0003-2021-5714](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2021-5714) (2018) *From Surveillance to Witnessing: Revanche, Red Road, and the Anti-Revenge Film*. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 35 (7). pp. 692-705. ISSN 1050-9208

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2018.1460997>

---

(c) 2018 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* on 5 June 2018, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2018.1460997>

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## **From Surveillance to Witnessing:**

### **Revanche, Red Road and the Anti-Revenge Film**

In twenty-first century cinema the revenge plot is alive and kicking, a robust performer at the box office.<sup>1</sup> Revenge narratives provide reliable means for energetic, violent films in a variety of genres, including horror and Westerns, in which retribution appears justified and satisfying, if not exactly ethical. As far back as D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation (1915), in which the "heroic" clansmen make the mulatto, Gus, pay for his licentious, deadly pursuit of the virtuous Flora, one finds in popular film the trope of vengeance meted out in response to a heinous crime, effectively transmuted violence, often racialized, sexualized violence, into justice. As John Rieder explains, "[m]et[ing] out violent retributive 'justice' to a criminalised or vilified individual or group has been a typical and enduring feature of much mass cinema, as in the shootouts that have brought closure to so many Westerns and crime and police dramas over the decades" (42). This relationship between representations of violence and revenge narratives is part of a dramatic tradition dating back to the sixteenth century when gruesome revenge tragedies like Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (c.1591) gained popularity. Elizabethan revenge plays introduced their audiences to violent spectacle, a new form of titillation that is omnipresent in today's theatre, film, and television. Indeed, critics have drawn explicit parallels between the violence of early modern revenge tragedy and violent spectacle in twenty-first-century film, suggesting that, "early modern audiences, like contemporary horror film audiences, were keenly interested in the violence and approved of the playwright's imaginative attempts to outdo each other" (Castaldo 50).<sup>2</sup> And yet, as Annalisa Castaldo argues, the violence in both early modern revenge tragedies and

contemporary revenge horror films can implicitly undermine, or at least interrogate the legitimacy of retributive violence in their graphic depictions of gruesome suffering. In this essay, I examine recent European art films that, I argue, move beyond an implicit interrogation of the revenge tradition to reinterpret the tradition itself in ways that radically challenge the possibility of legitimized violence. I argue that what I term “anti-revenge” films, in particular Andrea Arnold’s Red Road (2006), and Götz Spielmann’s Revanche (2008),<sup>3</sup> frustrate the desire for vengeance (both the protagonist’s and the spectator’s), replacing violent spectacle with uneasy engagement that inhibits revenge, gesturing instead toward the possibility, however remote, of forgiveness.

The preponderance of recent revenge film remakes, including Carrie (Kimberly Peirce 2013), I Spit on your Grave (Steven Monroe 2010), Straw Dogs (Rod Lurie 2010), The Last House on the Left (Dennis Iliadis 2009), and Get Carter (Stephen Kay 2000), speaks to the enduring popularity of the traditional, conservative revenge plot.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these and other conventional narratives of retaliation like Kill Bill (Quentin Tarantino 2003) or Harry Brown (Daniel Barber 2009) that depend on the legitimacy of retribution, some filmmakers have attempted to revise the vengeance plot in ways that implicitly challenge the gratification that comes with retribution. Films such as Unforgiven (Clint Eastwood 1992), Memento (Christopher Nolan 2000), and Old Boy (2003), for example, give their audiences a glimpse of the risks of vengeance, depicting the ease with which the desire for revenge transforms into Nietzsche’s obsessive ressentiment, the overwhelming resentment and vengefulness that transforms men into “cellar rats full of revenge and hatred” (Genealogy of Morals 28). The hatred characteristic of ressentiment transforms the desire for justice into a sadistic, solipsistic

drive for domination since “the man of ressentiment is neither upright nor naïve, nor honest and straight with himself. His soul squints; his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being his world, his security, his comfort; he knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself” (emphasis in original 21). In their analyses of ressentiment in recent films by Park Chan-wook and Christopher Nolan, film scholars Steve Choe and Diran Lyons argue that such films expose the inevitable impotence of revenge as merely violence that begets further violence. As Choe explains, in Park’s films, “Each performance of revenge participates in the one-upmanship that is a part and parcel of everyday political discourse, and in this each act perpetuates, to quote Park . . . the ‘endless circle of evil, going around and around until the chain breaks.’ This radical critique of vengeance shows that its intended goal, purification and atonement, will be impossible, for the act of revenge only leads to its perpetuation” (Choe 42). Choe goes on to argue that Park’s films implicitly critique the logic of vengeance without actually challenging it or offering alternatives. Though Park’s films fail to offer solutions to the perpetual violence of revenge, Choe’s reading of the profound inadequacy and disappointment of “successful” revenge in Park’s films imply that the revenge plot is not exclusively conservative.<sup>5</sup>

Like Park, many contemporary directors employ the revenge plot self-consciously, casting doubt on the moral legitimacy of vengeful violence, implying that revenge may actually re-open wounds rather than heal them. One finds this kind of implicit commentary in the work of Park, Eastwood, and Nicolas Winding Refn. Yet, however regrettable and disappointing revenge may be in films such as Old Boy,

Unforgiven, Gran Torino (Clint Eastwood 2008), and Drive (Nicolas Winding Refn 2011), and *Only God Forgives* (Refn 2013), the climactic spectacle of violent retribution remains central to each film's narrative resolution. Park's films self-consciously reflect on what he calls the "total stupidity" of revenge (qtd. in Choe 35). As he has explained in interview, "Revenge is something that makes you happy and invigorates you only when it is in your imagination, but when it comes to actually realizing this it is never happy and never gives you pleasure" (qtd. in Choe 35). Nonetheless, his films depend on the realization of revenge, however stupid and unsatisfying, implicitly affirming the unavailability of vengeance while bemoaning its destructive cruelty.<sup>6</sup> Such films, I would argue, do little to challenge cycles of violence and retribution.

The anti-revenge films I examine below are not merely self-conscious adaptations of the revenge narrative tradition that, like the rape revenge film, maintain the revenge film's reliance on spectacular violence, embodying the very conventions they appear to critique. Instead, these films manipulate and challenge viewers' expectations in ways that provoke audience awareness and reflection. Unlike the revenge critiques provided by Old Boy or Unforgiven, which convey a distaste for revenge even as they revel in its uneasy satisfactions, the anti-revenge film dismantles the genre altogether, thwarting the protagonist's, and by extension, the spectator's desire for violent retribution. In their failure to conform to generic conventions and their depiction of the collapse of the retributive drive, these films challenge the moral legitimacy of revenge, substituting uneasy, often inconclusive moments of potential forgiveness for violent spectacle. Anti-revenge films inspire, or more accurately provoke and challenge us to engage with their

protagonist's obsessive desire for revenge, only to deny characters and audiences alike the satisfaction of vengeance.

In both Red Road and Revanche wronged protagonists become consumed with tracking their offenders and plotting their downfall, plots the protagonists eventually abandon despite opportunities for fulfillment. There are a number of compelling parallels between the two films. Most significant for my own analysis is their shared preoccupation with spying and surveillance, secret observation that eventually inhibits and even transforms the obsessive desire for revenge. In both films prolonged surveillance, surveillance ostensibly in the service of retribution, becomes a means for ethical engagement that actually prohibits violence.<sup>7</sup> These films draw attention to the gaze as an apparatus of power, tracing the unlikely convergence of polarized modes of observation, namely surveillance and witnessing. More provocatively, they intimate that surveillance and voyeurism can inadvertently convert into a form of witnessing that disrupts the desire for revenge and, perhaps, even inspires forgiveness, suggesting a new and exciting perspective on the transformative power of the gaze.

Red Road and Revanche depict uncanny slippages between surveillance and witnessing, modes of looking that typically function on opposite ends of an ethical continuum of the gaze. Surveillance, long associated with domination, oppression, and even terrorism by philosophers like Foucault and surveillance studies scholars like David Lyon, is a far cry from witnessing. According to testimony and witnessing studies scholars, including Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, and Kelly Oliver, witnessing is a deeply ethical act that demands an openness to the otherness of the other, and a willingness to listen to the other's often incomprehensible, inassimilable testimony.

If surveillance functions to objectify and subjugate the other, witnessing seeks to reverse this process, restoring subjectivity and affirming humanity. Despite the theoretically antithetical relationship between surveillance and witnessing, Red Road and Revanche incorporate the two modes in ways that suggest they might be connected, occasionally even converging. In these films surveillance inadvertently produces the kind of poststructuralist ethical engagement theorized by Derek Attridge, Emmanuel Levinas, Kelly Oliver, and Jacques Derrida when wronged protagonists become, however inadvertently, witnesses to an offending other, a process of awakening that interrupts, foils, and even transforms their vengeful crusades.

Director Andrea Arnold's Red Road concerns a young female CCTV operator. Vickie works at "City Eye Control Room" in Glasgow where she is responsible for monitoring blocks of CCTV cameras scattered across the city. Vickie, we learn, is in mourning for her husband and young child, the circumstances of whose deaths remain murky, though their absence is clearly linked to the arresting image of a man, Clyde, whose sudden appearance on Vickie's surveillance monitors provokes great interest and concern. Later we watch Vickie rifle through old newspaper clippings featuring Clyde's photograph and a box of children's clothes, clues that Vickie and Clyde's lives once (violently) intersected. However, the details of his transgression remain mysterious. All we know is that Vickie is disturbed by his appearance, that he has been released early from prison, that she becomes dangerously preoccupied with his whereabouts and actions. Indeed, her obsessive surveillance of Clyde distracts her from promptly recognizing and preventing, or at least gathering useful images of, the stabbing of a

young woman at a bus stop. Initially she limits herself to tracking Clyde's movements across her bank of monitors, but before long she begins spying on him in person, tracking his movements around his apartment block, the eponymous Red Road towers. Eventually, her surveillance progresses to contact; she insinuates herself into his apartment, and, eventually, his bed, where, after what appears to be consensual sex, she accuses him of rape. However, the next morning she revokes the charges and returns to confront Clyde in the street about his involvement in the death of her husband and child.

In its depiction of a female surveillance operator, Red Road reverses the traditional gendered structure of the gaze described by Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and others, implicitly responding to the early feminist film query, "what happens when a woman looks?" In Arnold's film, Vickie is a secret spectator. Like Jeffries in what is perhaps the quintessential surveillance drama, Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window (1954),<sup>8</sup> Vickie spies on a quasi-neighbour, an obsessive surveillance that eventually progresses to home invasion. While Jeffries sends his doting girlfriend Lisa to investigate Thorwald's apartment in his stead, Vickie insinuates herself into Clyde's life, crashing the party he throws for his friends, following him to a bar, eventually even initiating sex as part of her revenge ploy. Media law scholar, Jessica Lake terms Vickie's surveillance a variety of "sub-veillance," a term she uses "to describe scenarios where the watching is done from below, by those traditionally positioned in social and political relations as subordinate" (235).<sup>9</sup> While Lake focuses on the multiple reversals indicated by "sub-veillance" narratives, which "question the traditional tenets of how surveillance is conceived, understood and theorized" (236), my own investigation stresses a particular aspect of this unconventional surveilling gaze; that is, its function within these unusual revenge



narratives in which watching inhibits, rather than facilitates vengeance. Lake suggests that “sub-veillance,” unlike “surveillance,” “is represented as a corporeal, haptic, close experience of inhabiting spaces and transgressing boundaries” (236), and it is this closeness, this escalating intimacy with the target of revenge, that is central to the transformation of surveillance into witnessing. Both Red Road and Revanche chart how the diminishment of distance between the vengeful protagonist and his or her target disrupts the vengeance drive.

Red Road opens with grainy surveillance images, close ups of monitors accompanied by an eerie ambient noise soundtrack that lends the film a sinister mood, preparing its audience for a somber thriller. Our first glimpse of the protagonist, Jackie, is of her hands silhouetted against a big, colourful bank of CCTVs. Close ups of Jackie’s face, of her eye and hand doing the work of surveillance, are intercut with the images she monitors. She is the voyeuristic spectator of others’ bodies and lives, amused by a man and his dog out for a walk or a cleaning woman dancing as she toils. There are no opportunities for interaction. Indeed, her invisibility is the point since as Foucault (reprising Bentham) explains, surveillance must be at once invisible yet probable to be effective. In other words, the possibility of constant observation inspires the object of surveillance to self regulate his or her behaviour.

Early scenes of Vickie in her control booth, monitoring her many screens, using a joystick to direct cameras toward suspicious activities, evoke the power afforded by her role. Vickie is not merely amused by the people she watches. Concerned about a woman huddled alone on a dark street, Vickie calls the police to intervene. However, on another occasion, she quickly transforms from protective surveyor to aroused voyeur. Tracking a

young woman's movements across an abandoned lot, she picks up the phone to call the police as a man enters the frame. However, the encounter turns out to be visibly consensual; "false alarm," she says into the phone, before proceeding to watch the couple have sex. In medium shot, Vickie leans back, her gaze trained on the screen before her, her hand flexing in her lap. The film cuts to an eyeline match of the figures onscreen, the man's back to the camera, the woman only visible as a pair of legs hitched around his hips, a hand on the back of his head. The intercutting continues, alternating between close ups of Vickie, her hand tensing, her fingers stroking the joystick, and the couple on the grainy monitor, her physical reactions alerting us to her visceral visual pleasure. In this moment, Vickie is the Peeping Tom conjured by film theory, luxuriating in a privileged, secret, one-way gaze that treats onscreen bodies as objects of voyeuristic pleasure. The moment inverts Mulvey's famous gendered constellation of gazes and bodies, revising her famous formulation to Man as Image, Woman as Bearer of the Look (Mulvey 33). However, this moment of titillating objectification is short lived. Once the sex is over, the man turns to face the camera and, the intercutting continuing, we see Vickie's eye in extreme close up widening in, what one assumes, is the shock of recognition. The soundtrack also alerts us to her discomfort with a high, slicing sound. In the next instant the man is no longer visible on the surveillance images and as a result, Vickie quickly becomes the primary object of the spectatorial gaze. Though we may be unsure of the implications of her reaction, her discomfort, even fright, is apparent and her position as voyeur is quickly revoked. Indeed, the film's visuals imply that Vickie is now the one at risk. From watching Vickie's indulgence in a visual pleasure dependent on objectifying distance, a pleasure that we, in turn, have enjoyed via fracturing close ups of her body,

we now see her troubled recognition of the body that she sought to objectify. This body has become a particular man, one that poses some mysterious threat.

I describe this transition from voyeuristic thrill into threatening recognition in such detail in order to introduce the problem of proximity in both Red Road and Revanche. Doane famously theorized how cultural associations between women and their bodies impede female spectators from obtaining the “distance so necessary for an adequate reading of the image”: “for the female spectator, there is a certain over-presence of the image – she is the image” (22). According to Doane, “The body so close, so excessive, prevents the woman from assuming a position similar to the man’s in relation to signifying systems” (23). The problem of proximity is central to both Red Road and Revanche in ways that include, but extend beyond the gender politics Doane describes. Doane suggests that the excessive closeness of the image impedes a woman’s ability to assume a voyeuristic position. Red Road and Revanche present intriguing elaborations on Doane’s theorization of the inhibitions produced by excessive closeness in their depictions of protagonists who fail to maintain an objectifying distance from the targets of their vengeance and, consequently, spoil the voyeurism of their surveillance, eventually engaging into to a witnessing that precludes violence, both the symbolic violence of objectification, and the literal violence of retribution.

In Red Road, Vickie’s increasing proximity to the man whose surveillance screen image was so arresting has an inverse relationship to her vengeful conviction. After her initial shock at seeing the man we eventually know as Clyde, Vickie begins to spend her time at work tracking his movements, using the surveillance cameras to watch him scavenging items from a dumpster, leaving and entering his apartment building, walking

to the pub with friends. Eventually she abandons this mediated surveillance for in-person monitoring. She travels to his neighbourhood and follows him from a Laundromat to a dingy café where she sits at a nearby table to watch as he eats and flirts with the waitress. These scenes in which Vickie stalks Clyde are often shot with a hand held camera positioned a short distance behind Vickie. Consequently, though we approximate Vickie's point of view, we are also positioned as additional surveyors, spies spying on the spy.<sup>10</sup> Though Vickie's nearness to Clyde is increasing, our closeness to Vickie fluctuates as we are afforded an omniscient perspective that encourages distanced appraisal.

Eventually Vickie eliminates even this small distance between herself and her target by making contact with Clyde. Insinuating herself into his apartment during a party, the final, physical gap between their body closes during a tense, erotic dance scene. Clyde spots her across the shadowy, red-lit room and asks if they've met before. "C'mon," he says, drawing her away from the wall and closer to him. The two dance face to face, rotating in a slow circle as the camera rotates and rocks, resulting in a series of disorienting close ups. They look at one another's faces and touch each other's bodies, abolishing/violating the distance necessary for surveillance. She's visibly shaken by the intimacy and suddenly breaks away from the embrace and flees the party. This moment (and others) evokes Levinas's discussion of the power of the human face, which, in its nakedness and destitution "forbids us to kill" (86). "The face is signification," he claims, "and signification without context. . . the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not 'seen.' It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond. . . . Vision, to the contrary is a search for adequation; it is what par excellence absorbs being. But the

relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: ‘thou shalt not kill.’ (emphasis in original 86-87). Both Red Road and Revanche include such encounters with the Levinasian face, with the uncontainable you-ness of the other that thwarts the adequating force of vision fostered by surveillance. As Oliver concurs, witnessing has little to do with sight per se, instead it is about acknowledging, if not necessarily comprehending, what cannot be seen or known. Hence the notion of “bearing witness,” essential for ethical relations: “The double meaning of witnessing—eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and bearing witness to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other—is the heart of subjectivity. The tension between eyewitness testimony and bearing witness both position the subject in finite history and necessitates the infinite response-ability of subjectivity” (emphasis in original *Witnessing* 16). Witnessing is the experience of encountering another person as a subject, an encounter that cannot sustain the drive for vengeance.

From the grainy images of Clyde on a surveillance monitor, to his unmediated presence within the shared environment of the coffee shop, to his tactile proximity on the dance floor, the distance between Vickie and the object of her obsession diminishes and eventually disappears. After this tactile encounter on the dance floor, the relationship between Vickie and Clyde becomes increasingly intimate: later she orchestrates a rendezvous at a local pub and accompanies Clyde back to his apartment where the two have sex. After their tense, seemingly pleasurable and consensual sexual encounter, Jackie bashes her face with a rock, tears her clothes, and runs from his apartment. As she flees, she pauses to look up at a surveillance camera near the building’s entrance,

positioning herself as the object of the surveilling gaze in order to implement her revenge: framing Clyde with sexual assault in order to return him to prison.

Not long after, Jackie reviews her own CCTV tape, watching her flight from the Red Road towers, Clyde's ensuing arrest, and, later, his estranged daughter's attempt to visit him at his apartment. However, the objectifying gaze of the CCTV cameras no longer serves her longing for vengeance; she has progressed from optic surveillance to haptic intimacy, an intimacy that cannot accommodate revenge. She has encountered Clyde as a subject, becoming his inadvertent witness. She has witnessed the face of the other, his demanding, irreducible otherness that precludes violence, and demands responsibility. Whereas the distance provided by surveillance cameras allowed for vengeful voyeurism, the loss of that mediation introduced a new closeness, an embodied witnessing that interrupted Vickie's vengeance drive.

Once she drops the charges against Clyde she travels back to the Red Road neighbourhood to confront him on the street. She accuses him in person, demanding that he tell her the story of her family's death. Transformed into Clyde's involuntary witness, she seeks further testimony, both his and her own, confessing that she told her husband and daughter to leave the house the day they died, that parenting had exhausted her and their final parting was angry. She confesses her sense of guilt and asks for his in exchange. Clyde explains that he was high on crack and lost control of the car he was driving:

“Did they know?” Vickie asks.

“They died instantly, they must of done.” Clyde tries to take her hand, but she rejects his touch.

“What do you want? I’m sorry. What can I say?”

“It’s not alright,” Vickie says, before telling him the names of her husband and daughter.

“You shouted at your little girl the day she died,” Clyde responds, “but at least she was loved. Some people don’t get that.” He pauses before dismissing Vickie, “Fuck this,” he says, and begins to walk away, but Jackie calls to him and tells him his own daughter called for him at his apartment, an offering of the possibility of connection, even love, that hints at the possibility of forgiveness.

The exchange evokes Charles Griswold’s premise that forgiveness relies on narrative and the possibility of shifting perspectives that afford new interpretations and knowledges (100).<sup>11</sup> As Griswold explains, according to his “paradigm sense of forgiveness” the narrative of forgiveness is dialogic as the narratives of the offender and injured develop in tandem (104–105). In other words, forgiveness typically depends on moving from discrete, disengaged individuals to a new dialogic perspective achieved via narrative. Arnold’s film dramatizes this transition from distant voyeur to intimate witness, conjuring the possibility, if not the manifestation of forgiveness.

Like Red Road, Revanche is structured around retributive surveillance. In Spielmann’s film, the protagonist, Alex, loses his girlfriend, Tamara, to a police gunshot during their flight from a robbery. The pair is desperate for money to fund their escape from the brothel where Tamara, a Ukrainian immigrant, has been enslaved. Overcome with grief and anger, Alex holes up at his grandfather’s cottage, which, coincidentally, is not far from the house of the policeman, Robert, who killed Tamara. Upon discovering this proximity, Alex begins to spy on Robert from the woods around his house, and,

eventually, to track his weekly jogs along local wooded trails. In the meantime, Alex begins an affair with Robert's wife, Susanne, who, we later learn, hopes to become pregnant after repeated failures at conceiving with her husband following a miscarriage. Despite several opportunities, including a moment in which he aims his gun at Robert as he runs through the woods, Alex declines to deliver violent retribution.

Like Vickie, once Alex has accidentally discovered that the man responsible for the death of his loved one is living nearby, he begins a surveillance campaign, lurking in the bushes outside Robert's house night after night. These scenes of surveillance are conveyed in long shot and in long takes that keep the viewer at a remove from the characters and events. Unlike more conventional depictions of spying, such as those in Rear Window, which follow traditional editing patterns, using eyeline matches to suture spectators into the narrative via our identification with the spying protagonist, Revanche eschews such continuity editing techniques. Rear Window offers viewers no opportunities for omniscience, for distanced, critical spectatorship. Indeed, the film's thrilling effects are largely the result of our intense identification with Jeffries, our belief in his convictions, our shared frustration at his limited point of view, our terror when Thorwold corners him in his apartment. Rather than employing point of view shots, Revanche uses long takes that fail to privilege Alex's surveilling perspective. By positioning the audience outside of the diegetic constellation of gazes, spectators maintain an omniscient perspective. As a result, Revanche's viewer is implicated in the film's voyeurism and objectification in very different ways from the viewer of a classical film like Rear Window, or even Red Road, for that matter. While Rear Window forces us share to Jeffries's pastime as a Peeping Tom, Revanche invites a critical estimation of



surveillance, presenting the subject and objects of the gaze in equal measure. We witness Robert as a subject traumatized by his accidentally fatal attempt to stop a robbery suspect from fleeing, and at the same time, see Alex as a subject traumatized by the grief and rage of watching his lover die.

The film refuses to indulge the spectator's desire to share Alex's gaze, to see what he sees when he watches Robert and Susanne. In fact, in the rare occurrence that the spectator is afforded a point of view shot, it is more likely to disturb than to indulge the viewer's desires. One of the few point of view shots in the film occurs early in the narrative when Tamara is still working as a prostitute. From her point of view we see a john demand that she "show pussy." Here the point of view forces the viewer to share the position of the subjugated woman, crudely exposing the violence of sexual objectification, of being the dominated site of visual pleasure. This dehumanizing world is where Alex works at the film's start and an early scene shows him dragging a truant sex worker from her bed as she repeatedly cries out in protest, "I not work today." These initial scenes involving the brothel and its employees expose the brutality of processes of sexual objectification and the violent repercussions when sex workers' attempt to deny others access to their bodies. Alex tries to help Tamara escape this space of dehumanization, but her death thrusts him into yet another objectifying ritual as he adopts the practice of obsessive, vengeful surveillance.

As in Red Road, Alex's vengeful surveillance eventually progresses to actual involvement in the life of its object. Like Vickie, Alex transgresses the distance between surveillor and surveilled, entering Robert's home, having sex with Susanne, and, inadvertently becoming a witness to Robert's trauma. As in Red Road, the revenge plot

cannot withstand the adoption of this new role of witness since the goal of revenge -- punishing the guilty – is at odds with the role of the witness who receives the other’s testimony and affirms his or her subjectivity and suffering. Witnessing involves “listening with an openness that allows us to get ‘out of ourselves.’ With this kind of openness we can learn about another’s perspective even if we cannot adopt it or even imagine it as our own” (Oliver, Witnessing 55).<sup>12</sup> The sparing use of point of view shots in Revanche provides opportunities for responsible listening that doesn’t presume identification. By keeping their audiences at a distance from the vengeful point of view, these films allow for a degree of critical spectatorship that avoids the pitfalls of identification with a vengeful protagonist, as is typically the case in revenge films like Kill Bill or Old Boy. In this sense, the viewer’s experience mirrors the protagonist’s: we are distant observers who become increasingly implicated in the lives we watch.

In their exploration of surveillance transformed into witnessing these two films gesture toward a Derridean vision of pure forgiveness, forgiveness of the unforgivable. For Derrida, “Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality” (emphasis in original 32). Instead, “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself” (32-33). This impossibility precludes representation, an impossibility Red Road and Revanche circumvent by invoking the potential of forgiveness, rather than its actuality. Though both protagonists

abandon violent revenge as a viable solution to their suffering, the films end without any clear resolution between the protagonist victims and their offenders. The films, particularly Revanche, which concludes with a long, silent take of Alex collecting apples, remain open ended, leaving room for the idea of forgiveness, but not its direct representation. As Vickie and Alex close the gap between themselves and the objects of their vengeance they inadvertently transform from vengeful spies into ethically engaged witnesses unable to indulge their fantasies of punishment, offering provocative counterpoints to the cinema of revenge. As Derek Attridge explains, “because other is a relation, there is no other without responsibility” (Attridge28). As a result, “The world is premised on an obligation to the other” (28). These films dramatize this unending, unavoidable obligation. As the protagonists encounter and relate to their despised perpetrators, they become reluctant witnesses unable to violate the demands of ethical obligation.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> A cursory list of successful and critically-acclaimed films of the last decade and a half includes the revenge films Memento (Christopher Nolan 2000), Kill Bill volumes 1 and 2 (Quentin Tarantino 2003; 2004), V for Vendetta (James McTeigue 2006), not to mention Park Chan-wook’s vengeance trilogy (Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance 2002, Oldboy 2003, and Lady Vengeance 2005), The Brave One (Neil Jordan 2007), and True Grit (Ethan and Joel Coen 2010), Django Unchained (Quentin Tarantino 2012). In fact, one of the first major blockbusters of the new millennium was a revenge-driven film, the multiple Oscar

---

winning Gladiator (Ridley Scott 2000), which grossed \$457 million worldwide. Furious 7 (James Wan 2015), which features a revenge plot, was one of the highest grossing films of the new millennium, earning \$1.516 billion worldwide. In addition, the Taken franchise (2008-2014), featuring Liam Neeson as a vengeful father seeking redress for his daughter's sexual enslavement, has made nearly \$1 billion worldwide since the release of the first installment in 2008. And the trend continues. In 2016, the superhero revenge film Deadpool (Tim Miller) made \$783.1 million at the box office worldwide, the eighth-highest grossing film of the year (McClintock).

<sup>2</sup> Castaldo suggests that the gratuitousness of revenge tragedy violence has made literary critics reluctant to study the genre. According to Castaldo, literary critics “seem embarrassed” by the genre's excess and spectacle (49).

<sup>3</sup> The highly acclaimed, award-winning arthouse films Caché (Michael Haneke 2005) and The Lives of Others (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck 2006) could share this “anti-revenge” categorization. Both films depict the complications and consequences of extended retributive surveillance, surreptitious watching that leads to an unexpected, and often problematic attachment to the one surveilled. However, unlike Red Road and Revanche, the individual surveillance relationships in Caché and The Lives of Others are more directly produced by historical injustices that further complicate the film's ethical dilemmas. For an astute, concise analysis of Caché's difficult postcolonial ethics, see Max Silverman. For an in-depth analysis of the operations of identification and empathy in The Lives of Others, see Diana Diamond.

<sup>4</sup> According to film critics Thomas Sobchack and Judith Hess Wright genre films are inevitably reactionary. As Sobchack explains, “Genre film, like all classical art, is

---

basically conservative, both aesthetically and politically. To embody a radical tenor or romantic temper in a classical form is to violate that form at its heart” (112). Yet genres are shifting “sets of cultural conventions”; “Genre is what we collectively believe it to be” (Tudor 6-7), and this shared familiarity with the conventions of particular film genres allows filmmakers to breach those conventions in ways that might challenge a genre’s conservatism. Sobchack and Wright’s evaluations are based on the “classical” or “pulp” character of genre films, which were and are necessarily conservative, unoriginal. In other words, conventions must be familiar to be defined as such; however, many filmmakers manage to pervert generic conventions and expectations to varying degrees.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, some film critics have argued in favour of progressive revenge plots. For example, some argue that the so-called rape revenge film (*Clover*, Franco) offers the viewer a narrative of transgressive female empowerment, while others have suggested that racialized revenge narratives seek to redress social inequalities by punishing “white men in positions of power and authority” (Rieder 42).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Park’s protagonists find little pleasure in the enactment of revenge; however, for his film’s audiences retributive violence remains perpetually imaginary, however, powerful our identification with the film’s characters.

<sup>7</sup> *Caché* and *The Lives of Others* are further examples of unusual revenge plots in which vengeful surveillance has unpredicted effects that upset that the conventional roles of perpetrator and victim and upend the possibility of violent justice.

<sup>8</sup> In her analysis of the film, Jessica Lake remarks on the recurrent comparisons to *Rear Window* made by *Red Road*’s reviewers (235).

---

<sup>9</sup> As Lake elaborates, “Whereas ‘sur’ designates surveillance from above, the prefix ‘sub’ derives from Latin and means ‘below, under . . . used in the sense of “from below.””

Thus, the watching done by children, by women, by prisoners, by the poor, by coloured [sic] and colonized peoples can be considered as scenarios of ‘sub-veillance’ and thus subversion” (235).

<sup>10</sup> I recognize that such shots are still technically point of view shots. For example, in her analysis Lake stresses the intimacy of Vickie’s surveillance in this scene afforded by the recurring point of view shots: “The ultra-subjective street view is contrasted to the previous and subsequent scenes of the more ‘objective’ CCTV camera view” (236).

Though the scene may use “point of view,” giving the viewer a sense of what Jackie sees, the camera is most often positioned behind her, providing the viewer with a simultaneous view of surveyor and surveyed. As a result, the viewer often adopts a view of Jackie that echoes her own view of Clyde: that of secret observer. The spectator has both Jackie and Clyde under surveillance.

<sup>11</sup> “The idea of narrative helps to explain just how the past can nonetheless change without pretence to undoing it, or ignoring, avoiding, rationalizing, or forgetting it. One may adopt a different perspective on it, attach a different meaning to it, responded to it in a different way, adapt to one's evolving life ‘story’ (as we say, using the term loosely).” (Griswold 100)

<sup>12</sup> Oliver uses “witnessing to describe the subject’s absolute dependence on another or others for its very sense of itself as a subject and an agent. Acknowledging the witnessing structure of subjectivity means acknowledging that dependence” (“Subjectivity” 325). In other words, subjects are dependent on their addressees and interlocutors, whom they

---

cannot possess. They are dependent on their witnesses for their subjectivity: “This acknowledgment is the moment of ethical self-consciousness for the witnessing subject. It is the moment in which the subject realizes that an ethical obligation to others is built into the conditions of possibility for subjectivity” (325).

### Works Cited

- Attridge, Derek. “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other.” *PMLA* 114 (1999): 20-31.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Castaldo, Annalisa. “‘These Were Spectacles to Please My Soul’: Inventive Violence in the Renaissance Revenge Tragedy.” *Staging Pain, 1580-1800: Violence and Trauma in British Theater*. Ed. James Robert Allard, Mathew Martin. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. 49-56.
- Choe, Steve. “Love Your Enemies: Revenge and Forgiveness in Films by Park Chan-wook.” *Korean Studies* 33 (2009): 29-51.
- Clover, Carol. “Getting Even: Rape and Revenge in *I Spit on Your Grave* and *The Accused*.” *Sight and Sound* 2.1 (1992): 16-18.
- Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. New York: Routledge: 2001.
- Diamond, Diana. “Empathy and Identification in von Donnersmarck’s *The Lives of*

- 
- Others.*” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 58.3 (2008): 811-832.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House, 1995.
- Franco, Judith. “Gender, Genre and Female Pleasure in the Contemporary Revenge Narrative: *Baise moi* and *What It Feels Like For A Girl*.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21.1 (2003): 1-10.
- Griswold, Charles. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Lake, Jessica. “*Red Road* (2006) and Emerging Narratives of ‘Sub-veillance.’” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 24.2 (2010): 231-240.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985.
- Lyon, David. *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*. Malden, MA: Polity, 2007.
- Lyons, Diran. “Vengeance, the Powers of the False, and the Time-Image in Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*.” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 11.1 (1006): 127-135.
- McClintock, Pamela. “Box Office: *Captain America: Civil War* Leads 2016 with



- 
- \$1.15B.” *Hollywood Reporter* 1 May 2017. Accessed 20 August 2017.
- <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/top-grossing-movies-2016-20-best-box-office-earners-960788/item/legend-tarzan-box-office-top-grossing-films-960789>
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990. 28-40.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. “*On the Genealogy of Morality*” and *Other Writings*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson. Trans. Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Oliver, Kelly. “Subjectivity as Responsivity: The Ethical Implications of Dependency.” *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*. Ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 322-333.
- . *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Rieder, John. “Race and Revenge Fantasies in *Avatar*, *District 9*, and *Inglorious Basterds*.” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4.1 (2011): 41-56.
- Silverman, Max. “The Empire Looks Back.” *Screen* 48.2 (2007): 245-249.