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## A Woman's Rage

A comparative analysis of *Carrie* (de Palma 1976)  
and *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell 2020)

Bachelor's thesis in Film Studies

Supervisor: Aleksander Koren

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## Abstract

The goal of this dissertation is to compare the films *Carrie* (de Palma 1976) and *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell 2020) and explore and discuss how the filmmakers portray female rage through a male and female perspective using aesthetics. Feminist cinema and the amount of research and theory on female spectatorship grew significantly between the releases of the two films. The theoretical texts of Laura Mulvey, Dianna Taylor and Hilary Neroni are central to the analysis of the two films, which is done from a feminist perspective.

I attempted to analyze what choices the filmmakers made in relation to a portrayal of female rage, and if these portrayals are representative of the rage of real women. Some of the findings include colors and genre-expectations being used to mislead the audience, cinematography portraying power dynamics and religious themes, and feminist history enhancing the effect of the female rage. In instances, *Carrie* is sexualized and kept feminine through the spectacle of the climax, as opposed to *Cassie* who deliberately uses her sexuality and femininity to her own advantage.

## Sammendrag

Målet med denne oppgaven er å sammenligne filmene *Carrie* (de Palma 1976) og *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell 2020) og utforske og diskutere hvordan filmskaperne fremstiller kvinnelig raseri gjennom et mannlig og kvinnelig perspektiv ved hjelp av estetikk. Feministisk film og mengden forskning og teori om kvinnelig tilskuerskap vokste betydelig mellom utgivelsene av de to filmene. De teoretiske tekstene til Laura Mulvey, Dianna Taylor og Hilary Neroni er sentrale i analysen av de to filmene, som er gjort fra et feministisk perspektiv.

Jeg forsøkte å analysere hvilke valg filmskaperne tok i sammenheng med fremstillingen av kvinnelig raseri, og om disse skildringene er representative for raseriet til ekte kvinner. Noen av funnene inkluderer farger og sjangerforventninger som brukes til å villedde publikum, kinematografi som skildrer maktdynamikk og religiøse temaer, og feministisk historie som forsterker effekten av kvinnelig raseri. I tilfeller blir *Carrie* seksualisert og beholdt feminin gjennom klimakset, i motsetning til *Cassie* som bevisst bruker sin seksualitet og femininitet til sin egen fordel.

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## 1. Introduction

For centuries, women have been criticized for their anger, and diagnosed with “hysteria” (origin: Greek word for uterus) when they expressed their emotions. This is only one example where women were defined by or reduced to their sexual organs. Sexual violence, against women by men, is a way of reducing a woman to her sexual capacity. As Dianna Taylor (2021) suggests in her essay “Feminist Rage: Countering Sexual Violence and Sexual Humiliation”: “simply to be embodied as a woman is to be sexualized” (84). In history, men were supposed to be angry and strong, while women ‘should’ be emotional, of course without expressing their emotions with volume and words.

In this dissertation I want to explore how filmmakers have tackled the topic of female rage and revenge. The two films I have chosen to focus on are *Carrie* (de Palma 1976) and *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell 2020). The films are very different, both in the sense of the time in which they were made, their plots/stories and their creators. The former was written and directed by men with a mostly male crew, while the latter was made by mostly women. This affects the aesthetics and visuals of the films like color choices, costumes, and sets. While *Promising Young Woman* is more explicitly centered around the concept of revenge, both films explore the element of revenge, and ends with the main characters taking (or attempting to take) revenge. Therefore, these two films will be the objects of my analysis.

My research question is: “How does *Carrie* and *Promising Young Woman* portray female rage from a male and female perspective through aesthetics?”. I will do an analysis comparing the two films and look at how different filmmakers explore similar topics. I will focus on female rage, which can be seen in thrillers like *Gone Girl* (Fincher 2014) and horror films such as *Midsommar* (Aster 2019) where the female main character has had enough of how she’s treated, leading to some kind of revenge. *Promising Young Woman* is a spin on the rape-revenge genre, which includes films like *The Virgin Spring* (Bergman 1960), *The Last House on the Left* (Craven 1972), and *M.F.A.* (Leite 2017).

### 1.1. Presenting the objects of analysis: *Carrie* and *Promising Young Woman*

As women have gotten more opportunities to write and make films, stories about female rage have started emerging, perhaps because of a need to express the rage and emotions many have felt the

need to suppress for a long time. I knew I wanted to analyze *Promising Young Woman*, because it's a film I've thought a lot about since seeing it the first time. Something that stuck with me was the honesty, ruthlessness, and anger of the main character, as well as the topics discussed and how they were discussed. I wanted to compare this film to another film; one that was different in some ways, like the gender of the filmmakers and the story, but one that had an element of female rage. I concluded that *Carrie* fit these criteria and would be an interesting comparison to *Promising Young Woman* because of this.

### **Carrie**

In 1976 Brian de Palma directed an adaptation of Stephen King's "Carrie" by the same title, with screenplay written by Lawrence D. Cohen. The film mostly stays true to the original material, which is about a teenage girl named Carrie who gets bullied for being "weird". She's dangerously naive because of her religious and abusive mother and is bullied by the other girls in school. Throughout the film we see her develop telekinetic powers, leading to a climax where she kills everyone at the prom before going home killing her mother.

### **Promising Young Woman**

*Promising Young Woman* was written and directed by Emerald Fennell and released in 2020. In this film, a woman named Cassie tricks "nice guys" to take her home when pretending to be drunk, only to catch them off guard when they try to take advantage of her. She started doing this after her best friend, Nina, was raped by Al Monroe in college, which led to her suicide. Cassie evolves from punishing strangers to taking revenge on the people who were directly or indirectly involved in Nina's rape. This includes Ryan, who she starts seeing romantically, but later learns were present during the rape.



## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. Female Rage

Women have for a long time been shamed and silenced for expressing anger. Even now, it's normalized and common to belittle and disregard a woman's expression of rage by responding to it with: "Are you on your period?" or "You look cute when you're angry!" or similar unserious and degrading responses. Here we again see an example of reducing a woman to her reproductive organ. These types of responses are most common to hear from cis-gendered men, though not exclusively. Most women have experienced this many times, and when your anger becomes a joke – at one point you stop speaking up when something makes you angry or upset, even when that anger is justified.

Dianna Taylor (2021) discusses feminist rage as a response to injustice committed against women. On suppression of women's anger, she writes: "[...] the framing of women's rage as at least unfeminine and at worst pathological, characterizations that result in women viewing rage as a purely negative affect we ought not to experience, let alone express." (82). In both films, the main characters – in significantly different ways – reclaim their rage and power. They are also trapped in some way.

Carrie can be said to be trapped in her *mise-en-scène* (from French: "putting into the scene) – which is the term used to refer to what the filmmakers have chosen to appear in the frame (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2020, 113). *Carrie* mostly takes place at the high school and in her home – where she's trapped both emotionally and physically by her very religious mother, Margaret. It's a dark and unwelcoming house, filled with religious items. Margaret hits her daughter and literally traps her in a closet to pray.

In *Carrie*, the titular character has had enough of how she's being treated by her classmates and authorities in her life. After pigs-blood is dumped on her at prom, she takes control of the situation and kills everyone without moving or saying a word. This mass-murder represents how Carrie breaks out from her submissive position and releases her rage, using telekinesis which lets her stay still and feminine while inflicting the violence.

This is a point that Hilary Neroni (2005) discusses in "The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema"; when talking about the 'femme fatale' in film

noir. The femme fatale is both a fantasy and a threat to the patriarchy (22). She is dangerous and violent, and often an object of attraction for the male main character. Most femme fatales use guns which are distanced from the violence as opposed to for instance a knife. This lets the femme fatale stay beautiful and sweatless. This translates to Carrie using telekinesis, which keeps her feminine by refraining from getting blood on her hands, while in a somewhat revealing dress, standing still. While de Palma's portrayal of female rage is very violent and extreme, the woman who is expressing it is slightly in the background. The spectacle gets more space than she does, and this scene could work without her present, telling us how much her person is valued.

In *Promising Young Woman* Fennell gives Cassie space to be violent, rough, and clever. Cassie has several different styles, or personas, that she changes into when 'hunting' to fit the 'hunting-ground' and preys. In the first scene she wears a skirt suit to a bar full of businesspeople, who appear to be coming from work. Another time, she's wearing a short strapless dress, high heels, and dark eyeshadow. When she's working in the coffee shop, she's usually wearing colorful, pastel clothing and natural makeup. Cassie deliberately uses her femininity and sexuality for her own advantage when "hunting" the predatory men, and she takes this to an extreme at the climax of the film. We first see Cassie in her final outfit when she arrives at Al Monroe's bachelor party (1:19:10): she is sitting in her car, putting on lipstick (fig.1). She's wearing a multicolored wig, a "sexy nurse"-costume, thigh-high socks and red high heels. As she's walking up to the cabin she is accompanied (non-diegetically) by an instrumental, scary version of Britney Spears' "Toxic", which could be a reference to the toxic masculinity we've seen throughout the film, while indicating that something big is about to happen.



Fig. 1. Emerald Fennell, *Promising Young Woman*, 2020 (1:19:10 – 1:20:24)

The reason she's wearing a nurse costume is probably that she, and the people she's going to see, studied medicine; she's giving them several hints about who she is and why she's there – she's also wearing a necklace engraved with "Nina". Another reason why she is wearing a nurse-

costume (that's obviously supposed to be sexy) is because she wants them to assume right away that she's a stripper, knowing that these men view "[...] women as inherently inferior on the basis of their sexed embodiment [...] fixing them as merely sexualized bodies [...]" (Taylor 2021, 85), and she uses this to her own advantage. Because of this she can drug the guests with laced alcohol and get Al alone – he is the root of her rage. The use of a 'sexy' costume/disguise to lure sexual offenders is also used in the rape-revenge film *M.F.A.* (Leite 2017).

Cassie confronts Al, brings out a scalpel, and is about to cut Nina's name into his torso when he breaks loose and pushes her off. He ultimately kills her by suffocating her with a pillow, and this happens in one uninterrupted long take that lasts two and a half minutes because Fennell learned that's how long it would take to suffocate someone in this way (Cohen 2020). Although Cassie is killed before inflicting any violence, she has the knife and is about to use it. The end of the film is much discussed because of how the protagonist dies and many people dislike how the matter is put into the police's hands when there are endless stories of that not helping<sup>1</sup>. People are always going to experience films differently because of circumstances, values, and experiences.

Fennell has talked about how she considered ending the film with Cassie carving Nina all over Al and her 'winning', but that simply isn't realistic. She mentions in an interview how "There are reasons that the weapon is introduced in a room with a man and a woman in it, that the woman doesn't win. And I don't think it's fair. It may be very cathartic — and very, very, very pleasurable — to say things are simple, but they're not." (Bastián 2021). The film consistently proves the point that society values men's futures more than women's, and similarly to Nina's situation (which is something that happens every day in the world), Cassie loses the struggle because of an imbalanced power-dynamic; Al is physically stronger than her.

Carrie and her mother's power dynamic changes throughout the film, and it shifts in the scene where Carrie and her mother are eating (00:45:08). The cinematography – tonality, camera movements, angles, framing etc. - is used to add to the story and enhance power dynamics and themes (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2020, 159). The scene starts with a tapestry of "The Last Supper" filling up most of the frame, along with candles and a photo of Jesus. Religion is a

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<sup>1</sup> On Letterboxd, several users critique how the film doesn't end in cathartic victory for Cassie, and the matter was left in the hands of the police, while others applaud the choice. Some users share their perspective on how the film perfectly captures the experience of a rape-victim, and their loved ones, as well as losing someone to suicide (Hannahsinnamon 2021).

prominent theme in the film, primarily coming from Carrie's mother, who is extremely religious and lives very cut off from the world, keeping Carrie away from the world as much as she can. The camera tracks backwards to reveal Margaret and Carrie sitting on opposite ends of the table with the candles and picture between them. The shot is very dark, because they don't have any overhead lights, and the candlelight give the room an ominous look.

Carrie is trying to convince her mother to let her go to prom, and the lightning strikes just as Margaret asks: "Prom?" (00:45:41). The lightning intensifies Margaret's rage and builds up to Carrie's rage. As Carrie is pleading, Margaret throws the contents of her cup at Carrie which extinguishes the candles, leaving the shot even darker. This makes the strikes of lightning more powerful as they light up the room while they're arguing. For the first time, Carrie is standing up to her mother, but as Margaret is standing and Carrie is sitting, the shot-reverse-shots are angled to show Margaret's higher status and Carrie's lack of power. There are several instances where the camera is angled up towards Margaret to symbolize power in the household, but also to further the religious themes.



Fig. 2. Brian de Palma, *Carrie*, 1976 (00:46:16)

Carrie demonstrates her powers by closing the windows with telekinesis, and her mother thinks it's the work of Satan. After this, their dynamic changes and Carrie goes from pleading and

subservient to unleashing the rage that she's been suppressing. She uses her powers to force her mother to sit still and she goes to the prom. After the prom, Margaret stabs Carrie because she thinks she's a witch possessed by Satan. Carrie tries to get away from her, and again the camera is angled upwards to Margaret from Carrie's point of view from the floor. To protect herself, Carrie moves several knives and sharp object to stab her mother. As the camera reveals her whole body, with her hands attached to the walls by knives, she looks exactly like the Jesus-figurine that's in Carrie's praying-closet (fig.3.). These two moments are also framed very similarly. It's no coincidence that when killing her mother, her mind thought of the thing she had to look at every time she was punished by her mother.



Fig.3. Brian de Palma, *Carrie*, 1976 (00:16:33, 01:31:21)

The lighting in *Carrie* is also quite specific and is a big part of the film's aesthetic, especially in the climax: at the prom. The gym has been decorated very colorfully, and the lights change through most of the colors. The strong colorful lights are very typical for the 1970s, and create a beautiful, festive atmosphere. However, when she starts using her powers to lock everyone in, she changes all the lights to red, which creates a much more intense and ominous look.

Similarly, in *Promising Young Women* the filmmakers use both religious symbolism, and angles to portray power dynamics. When Cassie arrives at the bachelor party, she makes the men kneel so that she can give them shots. Here the camera is pointing down at the men, and upwards to Cassie as she's pouring the liquor in their mouths. In this situation she has all the power. Other examples of religious imageries in the film are two instances where Cassie's given halos. First, at lunch with Madison a low angle shot frames Cassie under a red, circular lamp making her look more devil-like than God-like. This is directly before doing something immoral— making Madison think she was sexually assaulted. We see a similar use of angle and color in the climax of *Carrie*,

giving her an antagonistic look. Another example of a halo is in the coffeeshop where Cassie is standing in front of an art piece on the wall (fig. 4). This does resemble Jesus more, because of the innocent colors and the tilt of her head.



Fig. 4. Emerald Fennell, *Promising Young Woman*, 2020 (01:03:01)

Between the former and the latter moment, Cassie goes through a slight transformation in terms of morals. When confronting Al's former lawyer, he is sick with guilt and Cassie ends up saying she forgives him and gives up the plan to punish Al. She is then forgiven by Ryan, after he caught her 'hunting' at a club. This moment (fig.4) symbolizes Cassie's decision to forgive and move on, going from a red halo to a blue halo. These aesthetic choices bring out new emotions and intentions and add to how we experience films.

## 2.2. Feminist cinema

Feminism is the "belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" (Merriam-Webster). For most of modern civilization, women have had a subordinate position to men. It is considered that Mary Wollstonecraft - an English author, philosopher, and advocate for women's rights - wrote the first text on feminism in 1792 titled "A Vindication of the Rights for Women".

The term “feminism” was coined around the late 1800s, and the feminist movement consists of four major waves: the early 1900s, the 1960s-80s, the 1990s-2000s, and ‘New Feminism’ which was post 9/11 (Doughty and Etherington-Wright 2022, 173-174). In the second wave Laura Mulvey published her essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” - starting the conversation of where women stand as spectators and subjects on film. Mulvey, along with other feminist filmmakers and scholars started using psychoanalysis to theorize that women have been defined as the ‘other’ in masculine culture (Pribram 1988, 1). The woman on screen was not a subject herself, she was an object that the male character could define himself by. Women were also not considered as spectators, in that the content of the films were there to be pleasurable for male spectators.

### 2.3. The Gaze

Mulvey’s essay is central to the concept of the gaze. She uses psychoanalysis to investigate the fascination of the male spectator (Mulvey 1975, 1). She looks at “erotic ways of looking”, women as the other, how patriarchal society structures film, and more. Mulvey discusses how the act of looking itself becomes pleasurable, just as there is pleasure in being looked at. Films like *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954) and *Peeping Tom* (Powell 1960) give the audience the feeling of looking into a secret world. Note that these, like other films on the topic of voyeurism, are made by men.

Mulvey introduces the term “male gaze”, which has become a central term in, not only feminist film theory, but cultural discussion on films. The primary argument here is that male=active and female=passive. Typical examples of the male gaze are women’s butts filling up the frame, or impractical and revealing clothes. Very often in the superhero-genre (mostly when directed by men) the female hero or villain wears a tight suit, high heels and with loose hair. Some examples are Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad* (Ayer 2016) and Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan 2012).

There are a few tests one can do while watching a film to gauge if the female character(s) have a function, or if they’re simply there as the other. The first is called “The Bechdel Test”, created by Alison Bechdel in 1985. To pass the Bechdel test, a film must (1) have at least two named women in it, (2) the women must talk to each other, and (3) they must talk about something other than a

man (Doughty and Etherington-Wright 2022, 189-190). The other test is “the sexy lamp test”, created by Kelly Sue DeConnick in the 2010s. This test entails seeing if “[...] you can take a female character out and replace her with a sexy lamp, and your plot still functions [...]” (U 2016). This test focuses more on individual films, and specifically if the female characters are exclusively an object for male pleasure. Luckily, both films discussed in this dissertation pass these tests because they are centered around a female main character who is, in her own way, taking action and standing up for herself. They are women who (to different degrees) feel like authentic human beings with emotions.

An example of the female gaze is how *Black Widow* is treated in the female-written and -directed film *Black Widow* (Shortland 2021) where she’s wearing practical clothes and flat shoes, while also talking about relevant issues that affect women. The concept of a female gaze has emerged in the last years, and is still being debated, but Dalia Ayala defines it as “[...] the way that women are portrayed through the eyes of a woman instead of a man. Through the eyes of a woman, women are seen as people with feelings and intelligence.” (Ayala). In much of film history, men have gotten more opportunities to make films and often the female characters (if there are any) are sexualized for the pleasure of the male spectator. This is also a result of the film industry having been male-gaze-centric for a long time, with women’s participation as spectators not being considered (Pribram 1988, 1). This is not exclusive to male film makers. As more women get to make and distribute films, they get a chance to portray real women, and this is often done with more empathy and respect. This is both about acknowledging women as spectators and working to show authentic women on screen.

In *Promising Young Woman*, Fennell both challenges the male gaze and uses her female gaze to get her points across and tell us about the characters. The film starts with slow motion shots of middle-aged men in suits dancing at a club with the song “Boys” by Charlie XCX over it. The camera focuses mainly on their hip-area and chests while they’re dancing. This could be a satire of how films show women dancing like this, as a way of sexualizing them. Fennell turns the tables and makes a point of both sexualizing the people who often sexualize women and ridiculing them with the comedic timing of stopping the slow motion and switching the frame from a medium close-up to a long shot. With the volume of the music in the club being a little too low, and



everyone dancing being in business attire and over 40, the situation becomes embarrassing for them because they obviously think they look very appealing.

One of the first scenes in *Carrie* is a good comparison to the opening in *Promising Young Woman*. It starts with a slow-motion tracking shot of the girl's locker room after their gym-class. In this shot the girls range from fully dressed to completely naked, and they're running around, throwing clothes, and hitting each other with towels. First, these girls are supposed to be around 15-18 years old – showing naked teenagers does not contribute to the story of the film. Second, most women who have been in locker rooms as teenagers will agree that nobody runs around and plays with each other like this. This scene is a clear example of the male gaze, and of this film being made with (heterosexual) male spectators in mind.

The camera moves to Carrie, who's alone in the shower, and the way she's cleaning herself is very dramatic and much too sensual for the situation. As Mulvey (1975) writes: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure [...]" (808). This whole scene is a good example of how the male gaze of the film maker makes the female characters "[...] erotic objects(s) for the spectator within the auditorium [...]" (809). Having the girls naked and sensual doesn't further the narrative in any way. It only sexualizes and demeans these women. For young girls watching, this objectifying portrayal of their gender could make them think they're nothing more than their body and sexuality.

#### 2.4. Color

Since the start of the film-medium color has been central, even when the pictures were in black and white. Color is used to portray a realistic visualization of the world around us, but also to enhance and contrast certain elements. The use of color in the two films are both similar and different. It's used to express and explore the topic of revenge and symbolism, while also expressing the main character's feelings and rage. They both use primarily red and blue for these purposes, where (often) red symbolizes danger, passion and antagonism, and blue symbolizes innocence, wisdom, and friendliness etc. (color-meanings.com). However, it's important to remember that no one color has one universal meaning, and our understanding of the symbolism and codes of colors lie in our having a cultural awareness (Everett 2007, 14). The color meanings

presented above are simply some interpretations of the colors, and how they fit with the characters and course of action in the films discussed.

The colors are also used to mislead the audience. An example of this is with the character Ryan in *Promising Young Woman*. Ryan wears almost exclusively blue shirts, and his manner and personality indicate that he's kind, funny and caring. He respects Cassie's boundaries, but never addresses what happened to Nina even though she comes up in conversation. Him wearing blue makes the audience subconsciously trust him more, because of the associations we have with blue. It's an innocent color that is also often associated with childhood – especially light blue like Ryan wears. After Cassie finds out that he was present when Nina was raped (and didn't intervene) and she threatens to expose him, his demeanor changes completely. He becomes hostile and defensive, saying: "I didn't even do anything! [...] And then we both won't be doctors, you fucking failure." (*Promising Young Woman* 2020, 1:18:44-1:19:03). His true values emerges when he's threatened – his priority is his own reputation and life<sup>2</sup>.

In *Carrie*, we see a similar use of blue. However, there is a significant difference; in *Promising Young Woman*, blue is worn by an antagonist, in *Carrie* it is worn by the protagonist. Carrie wears several light blue clothes throughout the first half of the film, with her first personal outfit being a blue dress. Carrie comes across as timid, careful, kind, and very un-threatening. This is turned around when she, at the prom, is covered in (red) blood, and she becomes completely merciless and violent. The use of color in *Carrie* is not as straightforward as in *Promising Young Woman*, for instance because the gym teacher, Miss Collins, and Sue also wears blue. These two characters are of the few who are on Carrie's side and want to help her, so, unlike dressing Carrie in blue to make the climax more surprising - they're dressed in blue to symbolize their kindness and loyalty towards Carrie.

In *Carrie*, the use of red is simple, in that the antagonists wear red hats, clothes, and drive a red car. They are the ones that arrange the prank on Carrie, and they don't get a redemption arc before

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<sup>2</sup> Not only are we misled by the color, but prior impressions of the actors playing the "bad guys" mislead and challenges the audience. Bo Burnham who plays Ryan, is a comedian, Adam Brody and Christopher Mintz-Plasse play the guys she tricks, and they are all known for playing or being nice guys. By choosing these actors they highlight the fact that "nice guys" can be just as predatory as outwardly aggressive and dangerous men.

being killed. The use of red in *Promising Young Woman*, however, is more complex. In our first look of Cassie (fig. 5.) she's sitting (barely upright) on a bright red couch in the nightclub. Considering the circumstances and lack of knowledge about the character, the audience will most likely associate this color and situation with danger. We know that she, as a woman, is in a dangerous position being surrounded by intoxicated men; it's the start of many real-life horror stories. What we, and the men in the club, don't know is that she is the dangerous one there. We're misled for the reveal of her sobriety to be more powerful.

A group of men are looking at her and talking about how pathetic she looks. (*Promising Young Woman* 2020, 00:01:56). The third man of this group, Jerry, says that he'll go over to see if she's okay, and he makes her come home with him despite how drunk she seems. He forces more alcohol down her throat and puts her in his bed when she says she needs to lie down. He starts kissing and touching her, even though she keeps saying "wait, what are you doing?". She then sits up, completely sober and repeats: "I said, what are you doing?" (00:02:45-00:07:27). We get to see her do this one other time, but she has a notebook where she writes down the names of these men and it's clear that she has done this many times.



Fig. 5. Emerald Fennell, *Promising Young Woman*, 2020 (00:01:59)

Following this we see Cassie walking down the street, holding her heels. Then we see something red dripping down her leg and arm, and at first glance it looks like blood – a logic deduction considering how the last scene ended without us seeing what happened to Jerry. However, we quickly learn that she's eating a hotdog with ketchup. This scene (along with the trailer), is used

to make audience believe that Cassie is killing the men she's tricking, using the expectations that lie in the rape-revenge genre. By not having her kill them, the film breaks the genre contract, it stays more down to earth, and many viewers might've missed the serious themes and lessons if the protagonist runs around killing strangers. This is an issue with many rape-revenge films: the main character is (often) killing one or several people, therefore making it difficult to empathize and root for the protagonist even if it feels cathartic to see bad guys punished.

A way in which *Promising Young Woman* deviated from Heller-Nicholas' definition of a rape-revenge film<sup>3</sup> is that the rape isn't showed on screen. It is only talked of as an event from the past, and we hear a soundbite from a video taken of the rape. Despite this, the rape that took place before the film's timeline is central to the story. It is directly and indirectly the cause for most of what happens; Cassie's living situation, her "hunting" for predatory men, and the revenge she takes on those involved. It can be argued that showing the rape isn't necessary (why should we have to see something so gruesome) and there's a fine line between a rape-scene that's crucial to the story to a distasteful and disrespectful one. It is made clear enough what happened and the severity of its consequences without making the audience, or the actors, go through something as horrible as a rape-scene.

Cassie wears more pink clothes than any other color. Similarly to how she moves through some moral grey-areas and is not a straightforward hero, she's not entirely red in her everyday life. By wearing pink, she keeps an innocent and soft impression, as well as staying in touch with her childhood (light pink is associated with young girls). Even though her afterwork-activity of hunting predatory men could be dangerous and immoral, she's not hurting anyone; she's only showing the men that what they do is wrong. Pink is a less extreme version of red - she stays on the safe side. Until she goes for Al, then she's wearing bright red shoes, and a costume with red edges. This is a point for her where she's not holding back, and she knows she's putting herself in a dangerous position, but again she is initially the dangerous one in the room.

Cassie also wears two different blue dresses in the film. First, when she's confronting the lawyer and seeing Nina's mom, these are both moments of honesty and forgiveness. Secondly, she's wearing blue when she gets the video of Nina's rape where she hears Ryan's voice. She's wearing

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<sup>3</sup> This can be found on the next page.

this blue dress from 01:10:05 – which is right after the family dinner and when they say, “I love you”, so she’s adopting his color to show that she trusts him, and they’re connected - to when she confronts Ryan about his betrayal at 01:19:07.

## 2.5. Rape-Revenge films

In her book “Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study”, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2011) defines rape-revenge films as such: “[...] a rape-revenge film must most immediately feature both a rape (or many rapes, or an attempted rape) and an act of revenge” (1). She explains that, as the title suggests, that the act of rape is punished by revenge either by the victim or by an agent, and this is central to the narrative. The genre rose in popularity in the United States in the 70s, in big part because of the lifting of censorship restrictions and increased discussions on sexual politics and acceptance in the feminist movement (Heller-Nicholas 2011, 9).

A typical rape-revenge film starts with the female main character being raped, by someone she knows (and trusts) or strangers. She will usually then go to someone for help, but when she’s not believed or helped, she (or someone close to her) will take matters into her own hands and punish the rapist by for example killing him (then, she will sometimes extend this to people who were involved – directly or indirectly – and other rapists/sexual offenders).

Many of the early, considered classic, rape-revenge films are directed by men and Peter Lehman states that rape-revenge films only act out fantasies for the male audience (Heller-Nicholas 2011, 8). This statement comes from a male gaze point of view, and it disregards women as spectators all together, when in reality many women watch and enjoy rape-revenge films because they can relate to and understand the rage that’s expressed (usually in a more personal way than cis-men can). Heller-Nicholas highlights views on how the rape-revenge film transforms the woman in question from ‘soft’ victims to ‘hard’ avengers (2011, 10). This is somewhat true of *Promising Young Woman*. Instead of the victim undergoing this transformation, her avenger does. She goes from shy and school-focused, to angry and vengeful.

In *Carrie*, Carrie takes revenge against the people at school who bullied her, who didn’t include her, and the teachers that didn’t help her. When reflecting on why punishment is as prominent as it is in fiction, Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2019) points out how humans have a natural response of

anger to wrong-doing, and we think it's pleasurable to see the wrongdoer punished (2). In the case of *Carrie*, we get to see bullies punished by the underdog in a spectacle that is both surprising and entertaining. Carrie is the character we sympathize with, and since most people have experienced some sort of wrongdoing towards themselves, big or small, it's satisfactory to witness someone taking revenge. Revenge in fiction is interesting and entertaining because it can often represent our own fantasies.

### 3. Conclusion

Carrie and Cassie are widely different people, with different upbringings and circumstances. They have both been silenced and oppressed in the past. Carrie by a mother who won't teach her about or let her interact with the world, Cassie by the legal system and university authorities. Although they break out from their oppression, they both die in the end. However, Cassie made sure that Al would be arrested in case she died, and Carrie's tormenting Sue from the dead. They're both strong women who don't give up.

When breaking their silence, they release the rage that's been building in them by taking revenge on the people who wronged them. The research question for this dissertation doesn't have one answer, but I've attempted to reflect on how these films explore the topics of female rage and revenge. *Carrie* was made through the male gaze – sexualizing young girls and making Carrie a femme fatale who stays still while killing. *Promising Young Woman* was made through the female gaze – with a grieving main character who follows only herself. Carrie and Cassie share a rage that's been growing and is released in the climactic act of revenge.

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