

“I SPIT” on Your Movie

Written by Lianne Spiderbaby
Saturday, 26 February 2011 12:20



I have written this article a few times now. I've been writing it and rewriting it ever since I saw the I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE remake in theaters back in October. I'm finally ready to bring it out of the oven so I can lay it to rest and move forward.

This remake really pissed me off, for reasons I will discuss in detail, but what upsets me most, and the reason why it has taken me so long to set this article free is because of the rave reviews the film has received. Many of which were written by women. Let me say, first and foremost, I am quite well read in the realm of exploitation and the representation of women in film. I hold an honors degree in film, with a specialist on the very subject. I've read Laura Mulvey a million times, and Carol Clover a few times more. I also consider myself to be very lenient in terms of female nudity and violence; I have a deep respect for women in exploitation films, especially in the '70s-early '80s. I also enjoy onscreen nudity and sex as much as anyone else. However, Steven R. Monroe's remake of I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE is somethin' else, and I've been shocked to read so many positive reviews of the film.



On the other hand, I recently read a critical essay by Heidi Martinuzzi of Fangirltastic about both the original I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE and the remake, and I spoke with writer and filmmaker Jovanka Vuckovic about her thoughts on the film (she actually didn't rush out to see it—and isn't sure why anyone would want to remake the film in the first place). I feel that now is the perfect time to talk about the redux, thanks to its recent DVD/Blu-ray release.

The original I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE was released in 1978, and it was supposed to be titled DAY OF THE WOMAN. Filmmaker Meir Zarchi wholeheartedly felt as though he had made a film that was pro-female, meaning he truly believed that his film wasn't sexist or exploitative of

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women. However, we all know that the 1970s was a time of exploitation, and everything was coming under the radar in independent filmmaking: Nazis (ILSA, SHE WOLF OF THE SS), sex (DEEP THROAT), the traditional family structure (THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE), social and civil rights (SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSSS SONG) and the feminist movement (CAGED HEAT). Many of these films made in the '70s cannot be separated from their political and social messages—they are a crucial part of the film and its contextualization.

At the beginning of the '70s, President Nixon proved to be popular with the American people; he sent the last American troops home from Vietnam and took some steps forward in normalizing relations with China and Russia. However, due to the war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, there was a sudden lack of confidence in authoritative establishments. The obvious monstrosity of the war undermined the credibility of the system and this questioning of authority spread logically to a questioning of the structure that validated it and ultimately to patriarchy itself. Feminism in the '70s largely focused on eliminating gender inequality and promoted women's rights in society. Women were working outside of the home, branching out of the stereotypical nuclear family setting with the dominant male father figure. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey published her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975 and according to Mulvey's paradigm, the threat of castration (absence and lack) posed by the image of women in cinema is contained through a sexualized objectification of that form, whether fetishistic-scopophilic (woman displayed as erotic pieces, unthreatening by the control of the male gaze) or sadistic-voyeuristic (woman investigated and eventually controlled through punishment) in nature. This articulation of punishment is at the heart of both the original I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE and Monroe's redo, whether either filmmaker was aware of it or not.



Why remake a film like I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE? As mentioned, films in the '70s had a critical function, fueled by political and social issues. Horror and exploitation films in the 1970s had a critical function. The films demonstrated and depicted what Gregory Waller, author of AMERICAN HORRORS, calls "America's public debates." The films would engage with current events such as Watergate, the prolonged withdrawal from Vietnam, the destruction of patriarchy and the nuclear family. Whether he was successful or not, this was what Zarchi had intended when he made I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE. Monroe's intentions were not quite as profound; he remade the film because: "We live in a world of remakes, and we will continue to as long as people buy tickets to go see them, so I think that if we are careful in what we remake, and how we remake, I think it could be a good thing. I felt like it was one of those films that could be redone today, content wise."

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What?

Sorry, but there are some horror films that shouldn't be remade, some films are better left the way they were and better left alone. Monroe states no political or social reasons as to why he wanted to redo the film in the present day, and I'm hard pressed to find one myself.

Of course, watching detailed rape and torture is uncomfortable for anyone, regardless of gender, but female spectators have a different experience watching this brand of brutality on screen. Being raped is a woman's biggest fear, her worst nightmare. Monroe wanted to make right some of the wrongs he believed Zarchi committed; in Zarchi's original, protagonist Jennifer Hills uses her sexuality after she is raped to lure her rapists to their death. Monroe thought this was repulsive and wanted to eliminate that aspect in his version. He aimed to change this, and he did with great success; Jennifer does not lure any of the men with her body after she is raped—she kills them brutally and unmercifully—no sugar coating involved. However, just before the killings, Jennifer disappears from the movie, leaving spectators without their protagonist, leaving us to wonder—*What the hell happened to Jennifer?*



From the very beginning, we are with Jennifer, and I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE is undoubtedly her story. During the copious rape sequences, Monroe employs several POV shots to further our alignment with Jennifer and the suffering she is experiencing. But after her rape, she disappears, and the rapists take over the film, making it theirs. At least in Zarchi's version, we stay with Jennifer the entire film; we understand what she goes through after she is raped, and how she reinvents herself into a rancorous killer. This continual alliance with Jennifer is important, especially after being visually and unnervingly sexually assaulted with her as a spectator.

Monroe's remake involves a woman's redemption by her own accord, but that is stifled behind an abundant use of violent rape scenes, torture, unnecessary pre-rape nudity and the sexualization of the leading female character. Sarah Butler did an amazing acting job, and she deserves all the praise she has received for her performance as Jennifer, but she was poorly

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cast in Monroe’s *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*. Are we supposed to believe that this barely-legal-looking-lady is out in the middle of nowhere working on her second novel, as if she wrote her first while in junior high? She doesn’t look old enough to drink the liquor she buys at the store. Butler has no curves—her body is almost childlike, which adds another dimension of creepiness to the rape sequences. Monroe also has Butler prancing around half-naked during several scenes in the film prior to her rape: while out for a run, while cleaning, trying to fish her cell phone out of the toilet, etc. This pre-rape sexualization of our protagonist is difficult to watch, especially when we are aware of what is yet to come. Imagine what David Slade’s *HARD CANDY* would have been if viewers were subjected to a lengthy sexual assault on a child, prior to Ellen Page’s character taking revenge. It will never be OK to show sexual assault toward a child, but why are women fair game?

Monroe’s film also cost \$1.5 million to make. Yep, \$1.5 million was spent to show 30-plus minutes of brutal sexual assault. Butler signed on to the project, it was consensual, but that doesn’t make it any less disturbing for me, she was still sexually assaulted—verbally and physically—on screen for a long duration of time.

In an interview with FearNet.com, Monroe states: “To me, it doesn’t matter the gender; this movie is about something horrific happening to one person—gender doesn’t matter—it’s just something awful that happened, and it changed her.”



Maybe gender doesn’t matter to Monroe, but no one can deny that on-screen rape is often exclusive to female situations, and of course traumatic situations change people. Jason Voorhees, for example, starts killing after witnessing his mother’s decapitation. But why audiences need to watch Jennifer suffer for so long is puzzling. And yet, I’ve read reviews stating that the remake’s rape scene was tame, and it could have been even more brutal. As a female spectator, the opposite is true—nothing is worse than watching a woman being raped, gagged and tormented by a pack of ruthless, revolting men and a lengthy rape scene is simply not necessary.

The last issue involving this remake for me is, who is watching this film? Who filled the seats in the theaters? Fans of Zarchi’s original, no doubt, but more than likely boys/men between the ages of 18-25 held the majority, as they do with most horror film audiences. Again, there is nothing wrong with this, except that violence against women is still very much a problem in our

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society, and if films and television influence society at all, I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE is lending itself to some potentially hardcore problems. Some men *will* see Monroe’s pre-rape sexualization of Butler as justification for the rape. If she was prancing around half naked, she was “asking for it.” As frightening as it seems, there are people out there who will read the film that way, whether we think it is likely or not.

Some readers will disagree with me, but I believe there are a few things that need to be taken into consideration when making a film with ANY rape scene (and I’m a strong believer that any depiction of rape should be very, very short in length):

1. Do your research. Read film theory on the subject of women, rape and representation. Although time consuming for a director, it can’t hurt, at the very least.
2. Consider your audience. You don’t need to censor your work, just consider who will be watching your movie. It’s one thing to show a nice set of breasts, or a hot consensual sex scene, but it’s another to completely attack and violate a woman’s body sexually on-screen, especially if she looks underage.
3. Realize that when push comes to shove, it’s always about gender, (despite what Monroe thinks). You can’t make a film about a white male that goes on a killing spree of only black men and expect no one to call the film racist.

To give Monroe some credit, the revenge sequences were well done; the FX and makeup were horrific, and he crafted a very realistic portrayal of fear on behalf of every character in the film. However, as a whole, I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE failed miserably in my opinion, and I hope to see in the future much more equal and nondiscriminatory portrayal of women in film.

{comments on}