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Title	Reconsidering the body genre: rape-revenge and postfeminist softcore as biocultural phenomena
Authors	Andrews, David
Publication date	2014-06-01
Original Citation	Andrews, D. (2014) 'Reconsidering the body genre: rape-revenge and postfeminist softcore as biocultural phenomena', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 7. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.7.04
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.7.04
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Download date	2026-11-04 20:43:59
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5845



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alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Reconsidering the Body Genre: Rape-Revenge and Postfeminist Softcore as Biocultural Phenomena

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***Abstract**: Body genres represent ideal candidates for biocultural theorisation due to their almost universal effects on audiences. However, not all body genres can be interpreted at the formal level through a direct application of biological ideas; some require an indirect approach that emphasises cultural information as much as biological information. The article pursues this thesis by applying an understanding of heterosexual rape drawn from evolutionary psychology to the motifs of sexual coercion that structure two body genres: rape-revenge and postfeminist softcore. The biocultural approach may be applied in a direct way to rape-revenge, which has often been deemed offensive despite its critiques of male sexual coercion. This direct analysis may then be used as the foundation for a more indirect analysis of postfeminist softcore, a genre that stylises rape to remain inoffensive to women but in the process sacrifices its ability to critique the male aggression predicted by feminists and evolutionists alike.*

Introduction

Some time ago, I began adapting the ideas of literary Darwinists such as Joseph Carroll to the needs of film theory. I was no longer satisfied with *Soft in the Middle*, my study of American softcore cinema, which used overly complicated, almost counterintuitive social-constructionist methods to theorise the genre's presentation of the body. Constructionist approaches, from humanities theories like structuralism to methods in the social sciences, stress the human and ideological fabric of art and society. Such "blank slate" methods view the mind as a product of learning and environment that lacks innate traits (Pinker 73–101). These approaches typically neglect the place of the human world in the broader context of nature. A "biocultural" method, by contrast, holds that humanity, in all its phenomena, is always part of the natural world. With its unifying idea of "human nature", this approach blends biological methods with forms of history, criticism, and theory traditional to the humanities. Although this approach is contested in the humanities and in film studies in particular, it is often more commonsensical and parsimonious than a constructionist approach that would explain the appeal of softcore cinema by invoking ideology more than biology.[1] Indeed, the biocultural approach can offer many straightforward insights into the sex-and-gender biases that structure softcore narrative, spectacle and reception. Naturally, this approach is also useful in the study of other sexualised forms, including art films and rape-revenge films. Like softcore, these forms constitute "body genres".[2] The biocultural approach can illuminate their treatment of the body and their psychosexual appeal to audiences.

For example, recent insights into the biological underpinnings of rape and revenge can help film theorists analyse the narrative format and bodily appeal of the rape-revenge genre, wherein scholars such as Carol Clover, Jacinda Read, and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas have often discerned feminist content. This sort of biocultural interpretation has several benefits. For one thing, it delivers the study of rape-revenge from a theoretical impasse that has grown increasingly pronounced as scholars like Read and Heller-Nicholas have abandoned psychoanalytic tools. In addition, the clarity of this analysis makes it a useful foundation for film theorists who would apply biocultural approaches to more problematic cultural phenomena where the logic may not be immediately apparent.

Postfeminist stylisation is one such phenomenon. A commercially indispensable feature of softcore as it has developed in the post-Code era, this stylisation is a complex aspect of an otherwise straightforward genre. Such complexity can make the phenomenon appear ill suited to biocultural theorisation. However, it is possible to preempt objections to this application of the approach by edging into the indirect, evolutionary meanings of the term "postfeminist" after first drawing more direct evolutionary insights from rape-revenge. The focus of this article's analysis of postfeminist stylisation is Zalman King, a softcore pioneer who relied on postfeminist tactics to guarantee the distribution of his erotic films and serials. Film theorists may discern the indirect, biocultural meanings of postfeminist stylisation by comparing motifs of sexual coercion present in softcore after King to coercion motifs available across rape-revenge.

The Evolutionary-Feminist Implications of Rape-Revenge

Rape-revenge implies a basic, causal, and even primal narrative format. In the standard heterosexual pattern, a woman is raped by a man or men, a horrific crime that spurs an act of vengeance carried out by a cast of characters that most often includes the victim's family, the victim's allies, or the victim herself (Heller-Nicholas 3). Given that the victim can be a man, a child, or an LGBTQ person of any gender, variation is always possible in this format. Still, the heterosexual model accounts for the large majority of rape-revenge films, from canonical exploitation texts like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) to mainstream Hollywood successes like *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) and European art films like *Irreversible* (*Irréversible*, Gaspar Noé, 2002). The genre's most consistent, evolutionarily meaningful motifs are the idea of rape as a special crime warranting revenge; the use of flashbacks to convey rape trauma; and the depiction of castration and torture in revenge scenes, which has fostered overlap between rape-revenge and the newer body genre known as "torture porn" (see Jones).

What makes rape-revenge an ideal candidate for biocultural theorisation is that evolutionary psychologists have recently developed an account of heterosexual rape that is contested but whose parameters are clear; they have also developed a theory of the human instinct for revenge that is less contentious and whose parameters are equally clear. To explain rape, biologists have started with natural selection and its variants, especially sexual selection. First conceived by Charles Darwin, these processes of selection indicate that traits proliferate in a species if they enhance reproduction and survival. According to evolutionary psychologists, heterosexual rape is caused by differences in "male and female evolved sexuality. It can either be an adaptation, which means it was favoured by selection because it increased male reproductive

success, or it was a byproduct of other dispositions adaptive in ancestral times" (Vandermassen 732). In *A Natural History of Rape*, Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer have contributed a landmark account of this theory that is in pointed conflict with the feminist orthodoxy dominant in the humanities. According to Susan Brownmiller and other second-wave feminists, rape is an expression of patriarchal power rooted in culture, not an expression of sexual desire rooted in nature. Thornhill and Palmer contest this account by ruling out nonsexual motives for rape like anger and a need for control (124–28). However, as a historian of science and a gender scholar, Griet Vandermassen discerns flaws in their approach. Thus, she synthesises an "evolutionary feminist" theory fusing the most defensible parts of the Thornhill and Palmer account with the ideas of feminist biologists such as Barbara Smuts and Sarah Mesnick, who interpret the need to control female sexuality as an evolved component of male coercive behaviour. Vandermassen's use of Smuts and Mesnick is apt, for these biologists perceive their own research as part of the feminist critique of patriarchal power. Indeed, Smuts specifies that

> evolutionary theory not only considers *how* men exercise power over women, as feminist theory does, but also investigates the deeper question of *why* males want power over females in the first place, which feminists tend to take as a given. ("Evolutionary Origins" 2; emphasis in original)

Because males across species make a smaller parental investment than females, they are on average the more promiscuous sex, more interested in mate quantity than mate quality. Thus, males are often in jealous competition for mates, resulting in what Vandermassen calls the "male coercive repertoire" (738). Vandermassen applies this notion to humans, arguing that men unconsciously "want power over women because they have an evolved desire to control female sexuality and the offspring women produce (in order to ensure paternity)" (738). To achieve such control, some men choose violence.

This Darwinian account of heterosexual rape may be connected to the emerging Darwinian account of the human instinct for revenge to create a balanced evolutionary theory of rape-revenge. In *Beyond Revenge* the evolutionary psychologist Michael McCullough offers a theory of the revenge instinct, which he calls "a built-in feature of human nature" (xvii). According to McCullough, the "*desire for revenge isn't a disease to which certain unfortunate people fall prey. Instead, it's a universal trait of human nature, crafted by natural selection"* (10; emphasis in original). As an adaptive trait, the revenge instinct was initially a problem-solver whose main function was to deter aggressors from harming people more than once (49). McCullough hypothesises that this instinct spurred the rise of social cooperation, which in turn led to third-party justice. Avengers use violence to punish "free riders", who take but do not give (58). By enforcing an "altruistic punishment", avengers work for the common good "at some metabolic cost" to themselves (58).

McCullough's ideas may be coupled with those of other evolutionary theorists. Susan Jacoby sees revenge not as a disorder but as a social problem in civilisations where third-party institutions provide the benefits of revenge while moving its costs from the individual to society (1–7). Tamler Sommers draws on cultural evolutionists to illustrate how "altruistic punishment" works in groups, suggesting revenge evolved culturally as well as genetically (37). Sommers cites this research to buttress the now-common explanation of revenge as "fitness enhancing"

(36). The difficulty is to explain how it evolved given costs that might lower individual fitness. Thus he points to Robert Trivers, who describes how retributive emotions motivate reciprocal altruistic behaviour, enhancing "the adaptive functioning of individuals" (Sommers 36–7).

What makes these accounts applicable to rape-revenge is that they present rape as a reliable trigger of the revenge instinct. "Rape", Jacoby asserts, is "the most powerful example of a violent act uniting possessiveness and vengeance" (193). In a study of American adults cited by McCullough, only the murder of a child was more likely to trigger vengeful thoughts than the rape of a family member or oneself (23). As Sommers notes, revenge works in honour cultures to deter offences that include the rape of wives (44). The evolution of revenge may be linked to the development of the patriarchal practices critiqued by second-wave feminism that evolved as part of the male coercive repertoire. These phenomena may have had adaptive benefits in early cultures, but today they seem maladaptive, regressive, given Western society's current reliance on third-party justice and its embrace of women's rights.

A biocultural reading of rape-revenge would present the genre not as an arbitrary and artificial construct but one whose main motifs express evolved human drives. The very naturalness of "rape-revenge" may be a byproduct of the human revenge instinct, which is triggered by an evolved sense of rape as a special crime that justifies revenge. This biocultural reading can account for the recurrence of themes like trauma, for the pain of rape is predicted by selection theory. Rape deprives women of the choosiness that is their birthright due to differences in parental investment.[3] This loss of agency has post-traumatic-stress effects, like flashbacks that predispose victims to view rape as a crime on par with murder. Thus the flashback is a common rape-revenge technique that has driven stylistic innovation; for instance, in *Straw Dogs* (1971), Sam Peckinpah improvised editing methods to capture the anxiety and psychic fractures experienced by the heroine (Susan George) when she attends a village social after being raped (Prince 80–6).



Figure 1: Amy at the village social reliving her rapes through heavily edited and stylised flashbacks. *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971). Fremantle, 2002. Screenshot.

This biocultural reading also explains the recurrence of images of castration and torture in the genre, motifs that reinforce the sense of rape as a special crime. The most iconic revenge

for rape is castration. In rape-revenge, avengers deprive rapists of their offending organs by biting them off—sometimes after an avenger feigns attraction to a rapist, as in the original *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972)—or by hacking or snipping them off, as in the original and remade *I Spit on Your Grave*. Like rape, castration robs its victim of reproductive fitness. It avenges one sexual trauma through another, offering male viewers a visceral analogue for rape that Peter Lehman calls a "masochistic" pleasure (106–09, 113–16). If castration is the motif best equipped to convey the instinctual horror of rape to men, torture is best equipped to tell the feminist story of rape as a crime of power, not sex. In the feminist account, heterosexual rape is a form of male dominance. In this respect, there is gendered significance in the genre's turn toward torture porn in the revenge scenes of independent films such as *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007) and in those of the remakes of classics such as *The Last House on the Left* (Dennis Iliadis, 2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven Monroe, 2010).



Figure 2: Jennifer Hills preparing to castrate her main tormentor in Steven Monroe's remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010). Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011. Screenshot.

The biocultural approach offers clues to the instinctual motives driving victims, victimisers and avengers. These clues can help theorists to distinguish avenger motive based on the avenger's relationship to the victim. If heterosexual rape is a violent assertion of male control over female sexuality by an aggressive man, revenge for rape can be a reassertion of male control over female sexuality by a different man (a father, a boyfriend, etc.). When enacted by the victim or by her female allies, revenge violence suggests different drives, like the need to assert a female-centred control, the desire to deter future male aggression, and the altruistic willingness to punish a "free rider".

The latter motives touch on the feminist critique that is the subtext of many rape-revenge films, from *I Spit on Your Grave* to *Hannie Caulder* (Burt Kennedy, 1971), *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (*Thriller—en grym film*, Bo Arne Vibenius, 1973), *Rape Squad* (Bob Kelljan, 1974), *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976), *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981), *Extremities* (Robert Young, 1986) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (*Män som hatar kvinnor*, Niels Arden Oplev, 2009). Clearly, heterosexual rape-revenge, with its themes of sexual control and victimisation, is fertile ground for feminist critique—and the empowerment themes evident in revenge scenes across the genre realise that potential. Thus the closing shots of the original *I Spit on Your Grave*, in which the heroine (Camille Keaton) calmly turns her boat upriver after bearing down on a rapist with a raised axe, represent some of cinema's most visceral feminist images. The heroine not only empowers herself in spectacular fashion to eliminate another attacker but has the self-possession

to then return to her original identity as an independent woman confidently steering her own vehicle into the future.



Figure 3: One of the most visceral feminist images in film history: in this frame capture, Jennifer Hills bears down on a rapist with a raised axe. *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978). Screen Entertainment, 2006. Screenshot.

Paradoxically, the genre's explicitness both enables such content and frustrates its transmission. *I Spit on Your Grave*'s twenty-five minutes of rape violence is crucial to the film's critique of macho-male posturing and its culmination in gang rape, but that violence led many critics to misread, condemn, and even ban the film as a "video nasty". Rape-revenge is willing to offend all audiences through graphic acts of revenge and rape scenes that feature an attractive heroine whose body is on display.[4] The explosive, often contradictory nature of the conversations around this explicitness reflects the centrality of reproduction and sexual agency to human fitness.

Besides its interpretive power, the biocultural approach has the virtue of breaking a theoretical impasse. In abandoning the psychoanalytic methods that informed early research on the genre, feminists such as Read and Heller-Nicholas have seemingly abandoned any attempt to discover an overarching theory that makes sense of the genre.[5] Though Heller-Nicholas has, for example, impressively documented the virtual universality of this genre across film history, global industries, and high-low boundaries, her analysis cannot account for the genre's repetitive structures, universality, and feminism. Fortunately, the biocultural approach can interpret all these features of rape-revenge. Both the biocultural and the psychoanalytic approaches perceive the genre's repetitive structures as speaking to universal drives that are inarticulate or unconscious. Unlike psychoanalysis, however, the biocultural approach posits that rape-revenge motifs are rooted in human instincts formed through thousands of generations of Darwinian selection.

Three Ways of Conceiving "The Postfeminist"

The value of the biocultural approach is clear in the context of rape-revenge, where its logic may be applied directly. For this interpretive approach to have a broader value, though, film theorists must also be able to apply it to cultural phenomena where its logic is not so direct. An examination of postfeminist phenomena like King's softcore oeuvre suggests that the biocultural approach has this potential. An evolutionary logic, albeit an indirect one, informs postfeminist softcore, which is stylised to avoid the controversy that seems so natural in the context of rape-revenge reception.

Before pursuing this claim, it helps to define the postfeminist clearly. In its basic usage, the postfeminist is a period term referring to the decades after the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s (Tasker and Negra 1–22; Projansky 66–89). This usage varies depending on whether postfeminism is seen as replacing an active feminism or whether the period is merely seen as coming after the second wave. The term's usage also depends on its valuation of "feminism". After 1991, when Susan Faludi published *Backlash*, it was typical to view postfeminism as a time of antifeminist backlash against the rights (of equality and choice) and protections (against workplace harassment, sex discrimination, etc.) secured through second-wave advocacy. However, at that same time, a more optimistic idea of the period—as one in which those rights and protections became so entrenched in society that they could almost be taken for granted by rising generations of women—was also available (Projansky 72–9).

The postfeminist era was thus marked by an ambivalence toward the feminist activism that generated it, which was reflected in the artefacts of the period. Producers of postfeminist-era film and television "feminised" their work to appeal to women and disarm feminist criticism. The most egregious cases of male chauvinism faded from view as empowered women achieved a new visibility. At the same time, backlash postfeminist films such as *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994)—which not only portrayed feminism's successes but also vilified powerful, sexually liberated women—were highly popular, suggesting an ongoing antifeminist current in the mainstream (Williams 182–6, 189–94; Andrews, "Sex is Dangerous" 63–5).

Ultimately, feminisation has been a broader artefactual function of postfeminism than backlash. Feminisation may be defined as any narrative or audiovisual effect that is aimed, first, at attracting female viewers and, second, at preempting feminist critiques. In the work of postfeminist filmmakers such as King, these forms of feminisation can entail everything from strong heroines and female-centred narratives in which the moral high ground is occupied by women to an array of soft-focus, romance-inflected effects steeped in feminine stereotypes (see Martin, *Sexy* 27–35; Martin "*Red Shoe*" 44–57). Such effects qualify as historically distinct distribution phenomena. They are industrial tools that ease the flow of movies and serials through the mainstream markets impacted by feminism. These tactics are particularly striking in sexualised body genres such as softcore. One reason for this distinction is feminism's critique of pornography and its treatment of women as exploited workers and as sexual objects. The most widely distributed pornographies—like the postfeminist softcore of the 1990s and 2000s, which in the U.S. was popular on premium cable channels like Showtime and in home-video outlets like Blockbuster—successfully disarmed feminist critics by appealing to female consumers

through feminisation tactics that presumed to know what women "really" wanted and what they were "really" like (Andrews, *Soft* 12–13, 167–8).



Figure 4: An example of postfeminist feminisation from *Wild Orchid*: a depiction of playful gender inversion, a favourite King motif. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. Screenshot.

The most traditional ways of defining the postfeminist are, then, as a period term with ambivalent ideological resonance and as an artefactual concept with industrial functions. It is also possible to reimagine the postfeminist in a nontraditional way as a biocultural concept. This approach does not fit the postfeminist as readily as it fits rape-revenge, whose format can be explained through direct evolutionary inquiry, but there are indirect paths to follow here simply because the term depends on gender-based ideas that suggest concepts of human nature and a "war of the sexes".

For example, theorists might consider the evolutionary basis of feminism. Like Smuts, Thornhill and Palmer have noted the resemblance of feminist activism to female alliances in other primate species (103).[6] Postfeminism may be rooted in feminism's reaction to a liberated society that threatened an evolutionarily derived female interest in choosiness and in the parental investment of male partners. Another way to approach postfeminism is through the idea of natural psychological differences between the sexes. Evolutionary psychologists such as Donald Symons and David Buss have long been theorising such differences, which they predict would occur in areas where men and women faced different adaptive problems over their evolutionary history. According to Buss, women who failed to solve the problems of child-rearing and resource allocation failed to perpetuate their genetic lineage—but those who did solve those problems, in part by securing a partner, were more likely to reproduce successfully (164–5). These ideas are relevant insofar as postfeminist producers and distributors have typically assumed stable differences between the sexes. The industrial stereotyping that presents women as more interested than men in stories of romance and pair-bonding, and less interested than men in fantasies of liberation that objectify women and idealise unfettered promiscuity, could be rooted in the evolutionary differences described by Buss.

A third biocultural approach focuses on sexual coercion. It draws on evolutionary accounts of rape and revenge to infer the indirect, biocultural logic of postfeminist texts that

obscure the evolutionary norm of male aggression. Especially late in the postfeminist era, producers of feminised softcore relied on tactics of inversion and evasion to please female viewers—or at least to avoid alienating them—for that audience was crucial to their distribution strategy. Thus, a "high" postfeminist rape depiction of the sort pioneered by King uses postfeminist stylisation to avoid, minimise, or invert the male aggression predicted by feminists and evolutionists.

The Indirect Evolutionary Logic of Postfeminist Stylisation

It is tempting to interpret King's postfeminist stylisation as "only" cultural. On one hand, this suite of effects is the product of complex cultural circumstances; on the other, it is removed from the predictions about heterosexual rape and coercion offered by both feminist and evolutionary theory. Hence, film theorists cannot use evolutionary psychology to read the mannered coercion motifs of postfeminist softcore in the direct way that they may use it to read the primal coercion motifs of rape-revenge. But it is possible to infer the indirect biocultural logic of such motifs by considering them in context to perceive how and why cultural pressures systematically moulded them away from evolutionary norms. In other words, to theorise the biocultural logic of King's postfeminist practice, theorists must have a firm understanding of its historical milieu.

As a creator of erotic film and television, King feminised his oeuvre to ensure its circulation through mainstream outlets. By itself, this distribution strategy is not what distinguishes him from his precursors, for high-gloss producers of porno-chic-era erotic films like Just Jaeckin and Radley Metzger feminised their work to similar ends decades before King did. What makes King's work distinctive is not the fact of feminisation but the manner of feminisation. One aspect of King's work that stands out is its feminisation of heterosexual coercion. For example, unlike Jaeckin, King avoided using rape as spectacle and limited his depiction of male coercion through stories that celebrate female agency. In this regard, King's tactics represent high postfeminist practice.

King is remembered for his Showtime serial *Red Shoe Diaries* (1992–1999), which proved that softcore could win high ratings for cable. But King first developed the confessional, fantasy-oriented plot lines of this serial through his contributions to feature films such as *Nine ½ Weeks* (Adrian Lyne, 1986), *Two Moon Junction* (King, 1988), *Wild Orchid* (King, 1989), *Wild Orchid 2* (King, 1991), *Lake Consequence* (Rafael Eisenman, 1993) and *Delta of Venus* (King, 1995). The feminised style of these films indicates that they were aimed at women, an inference King has confirmed (Andrews, *Soft* 112). King's success with this audience signalled that women would not only accept movies that flirted with the pornographic but actively desired such content (Bellafante 76; Backstein 308–10). Because women have always been a crucial cable demographic, their approval influenced programming choices (Juffer 200; Jaehne 15; Andrews, *Soft* 85–7). Later producers paid careful attention to King, who taught them how to circumvent obstacles to sexual content.

In some respects, this historical phenomenon recapitulated a process that had played out in the 1960s and 1970s. Early in that period, foreign and domestic producers of high-gloss

sexploitation scored crossover successes by crafting films that appealed to women and men, allowing those films to play adventurous art houses as well as the grindhouses and drive-ins that were their typical exhibition sites (Schaefer 331–7; Gorfinkel 26–30). The result was a series of box-office successes such as *I, a Woman* (*Jeg—en kvinde*, Mac Ahlberg, 1965) and *Inga* (*Jag—en oskuld*, Joseph W. Sarno, 1968). Later, the soft-focus import *Emmanuelle* (Jaeckin, 1974) attracted a huge mixed-sex audience and seemed to prove that softcore with the "right" ideological contours might enjoy considerable success.

Between the mid-1970s, when *Emmanuelle* had its theatrical release, and the late 1980s, when films such as *Nine ½ Weeks* and *Wild Orchid* achieved commercial success, the U.S. film industry changed greatly. Producers of softcore initially had to depend on the theatrical exploitation circuit to break even, but later they had to determine how to distribute their films through the new distribution schemes associated with domestic technologies like cable and video (Andrews, *Soft* 79–88). Further complicating matters was the fact that the late 1980s were not as sexually open as the mid-1970s. At the earlier time, sexual liberation and porno chic were in vogue and second-wave feminism was just leaving its mark on American consciousness. But as many critics have noted, there was a decided shift in the Reagan era (Kendrick 228–39; Frug 254–63; Williams 16–23; Segal 59–70; Stadel 67–72). The advent of the AIDS crisis, along with the publicity raised by feminists such as Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon around issues of rape and pornography, restricted the cultural space occupied by sex films. As a result of these new constraints, the kind of feminisation that had helped softcore flourish in the mid-1970s could not have that effect in the 1980s.

King's success in this remade environment was rooted in a feminisation strategy that registers at three levels. This strategy is manifest in the highly polished aesthetic; in the diegesis, which revolves around a heroine's sexual journey; and in the spectacle, which focuses on stylised female bodies but objectifies enough male bodies to suggest that the King heroine takes an active pleasure in "the gaze" (Andrews, *Soft* 125–7). Crucial to King's success with feminist critics is the narrative component of his strategy (e.g. Martin, "*Red Shoe*" 49–50). This feminist approval is due to the fact that King avoids scenarios in which female consent is violated, preferring to foreground heroines in charge of their own erotic experience. Though the King hero is aggressive (see Perry [Richard Tyson] in *Two Moon Junction*) and the atmosphere of the King film is one of sexual menace, the filmmaker never lets those elements collapse into outright coercion. Indeed, in King, the "low hero" becomes an emotional support for the heroine as the narrative unfolds. She gains confidence and takes sexual control as he becomes less aggressive, less menacing (Andrews, *Soft* 116–24).

King's precursors showed no such compunction. Nonconsensual scenes abound in even the most feminised films of Jaeckin. Those films predate the feminist critique of rape that gained momentum through the publication of Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* in 1975 and was further propelled by the anti-porn campaigns of Dworkin and Women Against Pornography (first formed in 1976). It is therefore predictable that the Jaeckin films do not take the issue of male coercion as seriously as the later films. Indeed, even when the Jaeckin films do accent the gravity of coercion, they do so in a spirit of male sexual liberation impossible to justify from feminist perspectives.

Consider Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* and *The Story of O* (*Histoire d'O*, 1975). On the surface, these films foreshadow the King paradigm in their soft-focus cinematography, female-centred narrative, and ample female spectacle (Martin, *Sexy* 22, 26; Williams 391, 394, 399). However, the similarities to King end there. This point is clear when it comes to sexual coercion. Near the end of *Emmanuelle*, the heroine (Sylvia Kristel) is gang-raped under the paternalistic scrutiny of Mario (Alain Cuny), who does not intervene; his inaction implies that Emmanuelle's rape is part of the "education" he is giving her with her husband's consent. Though Emmanuelle resists her assailants, her rape appears to have no legal or psychological repercussions (Andrews, *Soft* 43–4). Clearly, the film has no interest in feminist ideas of rape and no understanding of what actually happens in its aftermath. Instead, rape is presented as a path to sexual enlightenment, something that Mario refers to euphemistically as a "step into a forbidden land of eroticism", where "the couple [is] outlawed". *The Story of O* offers a similar liberationism. The film's male authorities inform O (Corinne Cléry) that submission to their sexual dictates yields a spiritual reward. Because these men, in accord with BDSM ritual, regularly remind O that she is free to refuse them sex, the film does acknowledge the issue of consent and therefore offers no unambiguous case of nonconsensual sex. Still, the plot is almost entirely structured by coercion, for in it men control women, passing them back and forth by manipulating their assumed "female need" to lose themselves in love.

As an expression of a postfeminist sensibility, King's work is different. It is not that King's heroines bear no resemblance to Jaeckin's. After all, in *Nine ½ Weeks* and *Wild Orchid*, the heroines (played by Kim Basinger and Carré Otis, respectively) fall for men (both played by Mickey Rourke) who initially seem to resemble the heroes of the Jaeckin films. But the King heroines will not do *anything* for love. In having his heroines say "enough", King treats the issue of female consent more seriously than Jaeckin. This seriousness is reflected in the fact that King never uses a nonconsensual scene as spectacle. In King, actual rape exists only as a traumatic threat or a traumatic memory. Thus in *Wild Orchid 2*, the heroine (Nina Siemaszko) is threatened with rape while working as a prostitute but is rescued by a bodyguard before it happens. In *Lake Consequence*—which King wrote and produced and his frequent collaborator, Rafael Eisenman, directed[7]—the thirtysomething heroine (Joan Severance) pieces together a memory of her teenage gang-rape, which is the backstory of the crisis disrupting her marriage. King's empathy for women suffering sexual trauma is evidence of his high postfeminist sensibility. By contrast, Jaeckin operates from an early postfeminist mindset that privileges a male-centred idea of sexual liberation over such trauma. It is crucial to the biocultural analysis of King's work, however, that the filmmaker does not simply abandon rape-and-coercion motifs. Instead, he redeploys them in nontraditional ways, often placing women in coercive roles. King retains the imagery of rape and coercion for commercial value, narrative intrigue, and thematic impact but still manages to resist the antifeminist implications that might accrue to such motifs.

To explore King's unconventional use of rape-and-coercion motifs, it helps to focus on *Delta of Venus*, which King has called a "feminist movie" (qtd. in Andrews, *Soft* 128). Adapted from the Anaïs Nin book, *Delta of Venus* is about Elena (Audie England), a young American writer in pre–Second World War Paris. At the start of the film, Elena has an affair with another expatriate named Lawrence (Costas Mandylor) before pursuing what King calls "her own sexual liberation" apart from monogamous romance (qtd. Andrews, *Soft* 128). By the end, Elena comes to enjoy men more impersonally, which in King's view is to treat men the way that men treat

women. The film is replete with the imagery of ravishment, which parallels the impending Nazi invasion of France. Still, it is crucial that no analogous ravishment occurs among the characters. Indeed, the only hint of the nonconsensual is manifest in the character of Luc (Marek Vasut), the fascist who stalks Elena. As a rape fantasy, Luc titillates Elena, but it is not until she watches Bijou (Markéta Hrubesová), a confident woman who is a universal object of male desire, control a mutually satisfying encounter with an exotic African clairvoyant (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje) that Elena learns to "play" with Luc: she lets him sodomise her on the streets.

Therefore, one of the movie's postfeminist rape motifs is its fully consensual, female-controlled rape fantasy. Another is its female-dominated, semiconsensual sexual encounter. A semiconsensual scene is one in which one sex partner says "no" only to be ignored; later, the nonconsenting party is converted into a consenting party through coerced arousal (Andrews, *Soft* 63). Before the elimination of the Production Code in 1968, these scenes, which have traditionally cast the man as the aggressor, were common in sexploitation films (e.g. *Lorna* [Russ Meyer, 1964]) and subsequently proliferated in mainstream films (see the first rape in Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*). Though these male-dominated scenes became less frequent after the advent of feminism's critique of rape in the mid-1970s, they never went away—and one postfeminist variation has been to place a woman in the role of the aggressor. This is the type of motif that King supplies at the end of *Delta of Venus*: in a mild semiconsensual encounter in a church stairwell, Elena forces herself on Lawrence, whose arousal she quickly coerces.



Figure 5: Elena forces herself on Lawrence in a mild semiconsensual encounter near the end of *Delta of Venus* (1995). Eiv, 2004. Screenshot.

The inversion of traditional gender roles evident in these motifs follows King's quintessentially postfeminist pattern, which is to stress female empowerment—even in situations where such empowerment is hardly positive. Indeed, some sexually aggressive women in King are coercive characters who try to live out their own fantasies through the heroines (see Lani [England] in *Shame, Shame, Shame* [King, 1999]) or who are driven by financial imperative to force the heroines into sex (see Elle [Wendy Hughes] in *Wild Orchid 2*). Jaeckin reserved this

sort of coercive role for men, but in a postfeminist climate in which the imagery of male coercion might draw criticism, King gave such roles to women instead.

In King's work, heroines are not raped to further their "education", as in *Emmanuelle*, nor are they raped to titillate the viewer. The King heroine is an independent agent in charge of her own experience. When nonconsensual encounters are present in the plot, King depicts them with sympathy. Though he retains rape-and-coercion motifs, he resists antifeminist content by remoulding those motifs to stress female empowerment. A biocultural approach cannot be directly applied to these examples of high postfeminist practice. It is easier to apply that approach to early postfeminist practice, which leans toward male liberation. For example, in Jaeckin's films, neither Emmanuelle nor O has control of her own sexuality, which is ceded to men. Smuts's belief that male coercion is undergirded by an evolved male drive to control female sexuality—a drive that operates through ideology as well as through force—is useful in the context of *The Story of O*, where Sir Stephen (Anthony Steel) jealously guards O (see Vandermassen 739).

Though King's high postfeminist practice challenges the biocultural approach, his work contains some motifs that do seem receptive to direct applications. Consider, for instance, the scene in *Wild Orchid 2* in which the heroine is rescued from rape by a man, or the one in *Shame, Shame, Shame* wherein the heroine calls on a boyfriend to remove coercive visitors. These scenes may be read in terms of Mesnick's "bodyguard hypothesis". As Mesnick argues, in some species, including humans,

> sexual aggression is an important factor constraining female behavior and … protection may be a primary criterion of female mate choice. I call this the "bodyguard" hypothesis of female mate choice. Because protective males defend their own reproductive interests as well as augment a female's ability to survive and reproduce, protective mating alliances may be the best way for certain individuals of both sexes to maximize their fitness, given the prevailing constraints. (208)

However, these protective alliances have potential costs for human females (Mesnick 219–20), including the fact that "women become vulnerable to sexual aggression from their partners" (Vandermassen 741). Though the King motifs referenced above seem to match Mesnick's hypothesis, it is notable that they are feminised in a postfeminist manner. The King bodyguard figure is too passive, too civilised, to assert his own sexual interests. King's feminised "low heroes" do not use the physical strength that makes them useful to the heroines to exploit those same women; that is, they never subject the women under their care to the potential costs of the heterosexual pair bond. This feature of the King hero is in keeping with the chivalric codes attached to such figures in softcore romance, where producers are typically aiming to please female viewers.



Figure 6: The heroine of *Wild Orchid 2* (1991) is rescued from a violent sexual assault by a "low" bodyguard figure. MGM, 1992. Screenshot.

The last point offers a vital clue as to why the evolutionary implications of King's stylisation are indirect and must be interpreted through their cultural context. Postfeminist stylisation is a commercial tool as well as a stylistic and diegetic one. This tool is used to ensure circulation by sidestepping distribution obstacles; it does this by not giving offense to particular audiences. For example, in *Lake Consequence*, the heroine's memories of her gang-rape as a teenager motivate the mental crisis that drives her from her adult home. These memories reverberate through stylised flashes that begin early in the film and continue until its end, when their root in rape trauma is revealed. But this revelation is not at all clear, for King's dense stylisation, with its rapid cuts, shimmering surfaces and droning soundtrack, never relents, obscuring the heroine's gang-rape and sad punishment by her father. Viewers must pay close attention if they are to discern the cause of the heroine's crisis—which is probably why there is no mention of this fraught narrative event in feminist appraisals of King. The filmmaker's postfeminist strategy disguises the rape so entirely that it becomes all but invisible in a plot that nonetheless relies on it to make sense. Yet the stylisation is not entirely unrealistic. As in the village-social scene in the original *Straw Dogs*, the baroque editing reflects the post-traumatic stress and near-breakdown of King's heroine. However, given that her rape is revealed to the heroine as well as to the viewer, the critic may well wonder why it is not revealed in a way the viewer can easily understand, as it would be in rape-revenge.

One potential explanation is that in 1993, the year of the film's release, heterosexual rape was still an explosive, politicised issue. When depicted in a highly sexualised film made in the aftermath of feminism's critique of rape, a nonconsensual encounter could be expected to alarm censors and unnerve distributors. Furthermore, this kind of scene might seem more likely to offend than to titillate female viewers, no matter how friendly it was to feminist values in the context of the diegesis. King's postfeminist stylisation could minimise such concerns, easing the film's mainstream circulation. Examined in this light, the biocultural logic of postfeminist stylisation is clear: it is not that postfeminist products have no relation to human nature but that they have been moulded by complex cultural conditions to avoid the gendered responses that might interfere with their flow.

In other words, postfeminist auteurs like King learned to treat heterosexual rape, which is so devastating for women, in aestheticised and elliptical ways when cultivating female audiences and mainstream distribution. It is likely that female sensitivity to the issue of rape is rooted in part in an evolved female psychology (Thornhill and Palmer 84–104; McKibbin 343–9), just as it is likely that male coercion is rooted in an evolved male psychology. If film theorists accept these assumptions, they will find it easier to interpret the tendency of postfeminist producers like King to obscure rape through stylisation, as in *Lake Consequence*. This account of the indirect, biocultural connections between postfeminist feminisation and evolutionary process can also clarify King's use of female-controlled rape fantasies and semi-consensual scenes in films such as *Delta of Venus*. By inverting the conventional axes of control and aggression through an emphasis on female agency, postfeminist filmmakers could drain their films of terror and trauma while filling them with empowerment rhetoric. But the price of this strategy is the critical edge that comes from the unvarnished realism of rape-revenge. The stylisation of a postfeminist softcore film like *Delta of Venus* yields a playful fantasy of female liberation that is progressive and safe. In the process, the film loses the opportunity for a direct critique of the male sexual aggression predicted by feminist theory and evolutionary psychology.

It is intriguing to imagine that this sacrifice has come to represent a genre marker that differentiates the distinctive ways that rape has been depicted in contemporary body genres. Postfeminist softcore has for over twenty years implied female-controlled sexual-questing and female-controlled gender inversion, where women play with promiscuous fantasies traditionally assigned to men. Unlike rape-revenge, this fantasy cinema does not depict sexual coercion so as to depict a real male behaviour rooted in the logic of sexual selection; nor does it depict coercion to critique a real male behaviour with devastating effects on women. It is instead playing a sanitised game of make-believe in which gender roles are fluid, negotiable, and ultimately harmless. These aspects of postfeminist softcore are a departure from the early postfeminist era, when films like *Emmanuelle* and *The Story of O* fantasised about rape from male perspectives but still managed to secure a place in the mainstream. In contemporary American cinema, if a film is openly attempting to titillate its audience while also seeking mainstream distribution, it can only fantasise about rape in the female-friendly, high-postfeminist way pioneered by King. And it must *fantasise*—it cannot, in other words, combine an open intention to titillate the viewer's body with an open intention to depict heterosexual rape realistically.[8]

Conclusion

A central assumption of the body genre concept is that certain movie genres stimulate a more visceral affective response from audiences than others. Such body genres include rape-revenge and softcore, whose post-Code popularity has proven durable. The reliable presence of these genres in the postfeminist era is based on the commercial expectation that audiences will have active, embodied reactions to the images of sex and violence that these genres provide. Such reactions—like sexual arousal at the sight of a heroine's nude body, or fear, disgust, and outrage during her rape—are relatively universal and may be counted on to market films across different audiences.

The biocultural approach assumes that this universality indicates that the body genre is linked to a human nature that has evolved through Darwinian selection. It is predictable, then, that evolutionary psychology has generated insights into human behaviour that may be used to interpret rape-revenge. Performing this direct analysis allows film theorists to move on to indirect analyses. After all, from a biocultural vantage, the question is not *whether* a cultural product is linked to human nature but *how* it is linked to that nature. Pursuing that question can lead theorists to perceive that postfeminist softcore stylises rape so as to remain inoffensive to women but in so doing sacrifices its capacity for critique. This dynamic differentiates softcore from rape-revenge, which has often been deemed offensive despite its regular critiques of heterosexual coercion.

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to the readers and editors at Alphaville, especially Gwenda Young and Ian Murphy. Thanks also to Chuck Kleinhans and Griet Vandermassen.

Notes

[1] Outside the cognitive methods that rely on biological premises, biocultural approaches are unknown in film studies. For a treatment of this subject, see Andrews and Andrews. For an account of the difficulties that literary Darwinism has faced in the humanities, see Carroll ix–xiv, 3–54, 271–77.

[2] I use the body genre concept as a practical tool but am aware of its limitations. Its mind-body division is insupportable—and without that division, the utility of the concept is threatened, for what becomes clear is that all genres are body genres.

[3] In using the word "choosiness", I am drawing on a broad biological concept that is *not* identical to individual sexual "pickiness". I want to be clear on this, because such language could give offense, especially in the context of heterosexual rape.

[4] Rape-revenge is both controversial and feminist in part because it exploits images of rape even as it moralises over them, telling a feminist story. Sexual violence in this genre emphasises ugliness, pain and realism, yet its victim can be presented in a sexually alluring manner. Thus the rape of Monica Bellucci in *Irreversible* has the potential for an equivocal affect, whereby it attempts to simultaneously horrify and titillate the viewer. This leads to the "signature dilemma" of rape-revenge reception: *whether* and *how* to police one's bodily responses to such scenes. For an account of this dilemma, see Barker 217–38; see also Andrews, "Rape-Revenge".

[5] Carol Clover discerns a type of feminism in 1970s and 1980s rape-revenge films (114–65). Clover uses these films as one basis for her theory of cross-gender identification, which is

steeped in psychoanalysis. In *The New Avengers*, Jacinda Read proposes that rape-revenge is not a genre but instead a narrative structure mapped across genres that is best understood through its dialectic with the second wave (25). She critiques Clover's use of psychoanalysis, which does not account for historical change. In *Rape-Revenge Films*, Heller-Nicholas extends Read's move away from psychoanalysis while claiming that Read committed some of the same errors as Clover (8–13).

[6] If it is logical to identify the evolutionary roots of male ideology and patriarchy, as Smuts has done, it is also logical to identify the evolutionary roots of female ideology and feminism. Thus, Thornhill and Palmer hypothesise that the "female-female alliances against male coercion" that resulted from second-wave activism were not fundamentally different from gender-based alliances in other primates (103).

[7] King gave Eisenman a similar role on the *Red Shoe Diaries* franchise, where he directed episodes that were written and produced by King—and that were stylised in accord with the King aesthetic. Given that King is credited as the prime mover of *Red Shoe Diaries*, it is reasonable to credit him as such for *Lake Consequence*.

[8] Though the genre's titillation of viewers through its rape scenes has been implicit to its commercial success, that titillation has almost never been an open intention.

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Suggested Citation

Andrews, David. "Reconsidering the Body Genre: Rape-Revenge and Postfeminist Softcore as Biocultural Phenomena". *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 7 (Summer 2014). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

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