

CINEMATIC RESISTANCE IN *THE NIGHTINGALE* AND *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN*: CHALLENGING NORMS AND EXPOSING VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of cinematic resistance through a comparative analysis of *The Nightingale* (2018) directed by Jennifer Kent and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) directed by Emerald Fennell. *The Nightingale* situates its resistance within a colonial and racialized landscape, exposing the brutal intersection of imperialism and misogyny. *Promising Young Woman* employs subversive aesthetics and genre-bending techniques to critique contemporary rape culture and systemic complicity. Together, these films demonstrate how cinema can serve as a form of resistance, not only by exposing entrenched violence but also by reshaping the audience's understanding of justice and accountability. This study situates both works within feminist film theory and postcolonial critique, emphasizing their role in redefining how violence and resistance are represented on screen.

Keywords: *Cinematic Resistance, Gendered Violence, Feminist Film Theory, Patriarchy, Justice*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has historically served as a platform for both resistance and amusement. Movies have the power to subvert cultural clichés, question prevailing beliefs, and elevate under represented voices. Filmmakers have been using the screen as a platform for feminist intervention more and more in recent years, challenging how women are portrayed in movies and the structural violence they face. *The Nightingale* (2018) by Jennifer Kent and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) by Emerald Fennell are two notable examples of cinematic resistance.

The Nightingale is a 2018 Australian historical psychological thriller film written and directed by Jennifer Kent, set in colonial Tasmania, explores the intersection of imperialism, gender, and race through the brutal story of Clare, an Irish convict seeking justice after being subjected to sexual violence by British soldiers. The film refuses to whitewash or glorify violence, instead confronting spectators with its raw and disturbing facts. Kent demonstrates how resistance must be viewed via various axes of power by combining women's oppression with colonial cruelty. In contrast, Emerald Fennell's feature directorial debut, *Promising Young Woman*, was written, directed, and co-produced in 2020. Its critique is set in the modern day, negotiating the landscape of rape culture, systemic complicity, and institutional failures of justice. The film challenges preconceptions of the "rape-revenge" genre by following Cassie, a woman who resists predatory males and the mechanisms that protect them. Its acute use of irony, black comedy, and color-coded aesthetics disrupts traditional storytelling, compelling us to reexamine our ideas about justice and closure.

By upending established narrative patterns, elevating marginalized voices, and redefining the possibilities of justice on screen, these films collectively demonstrate how cinema can challenge deeply ingrained systems of violence. The audience's need for catharsis is resisted in both films.

Instead of bringing about victorious retribution, they leave behind unresolved trauma. Cassie's passing highlights the futility of individual resistance to institutional brutality, and Clare's grief endures. The films subvert the conventional expectation of narrative resolution by refusing closure, substituting discomfort and introspection for satisfaction. "Representation is the politics of looking," as Bell Hooks reminds us (*Black Looks: Race and Representation*). These pieces challenge the way women are viewed, remembered, and retaliated against in movies in addition to their substance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative film analysis, focusing on textual, thematic, and theoretical readings of *The Nightingale* and *Promising Young Woman*. Using feminist film theory (particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze") and postcolonial critique, the films are examined for how they represent gender, violence, and justice. Narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and genre conventions are closely analyzed to determine how these cinematic techniques embody resistance. The methodology prioritizes interpretive analysis over audience reception, aiming to reveal how these films intervene in cultural narratives around violence and female agency.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study is to demonstrate how these films serve as resistant texts, challenging narrative traditions and exposing systemic brutality. They demonstrate that cinema may resist by rejecting spectacle, reinventing justice, and upsetting audiences rather than soothing them. Both films satirize the rape-revenge trope. Traditionally, this genre has used women's suffering as a justification for dramatic violence or male-driven retribution. Both *The Nightingale* and *Promising Young Woman* are marked by a deliberate rejection of conventional cinematic rules, notably those associated with the revenge genre. These films challenge profoundly rooted patriarchal assumptions about how violence is depicted, who has the right to speak, and what justice entails. Rather than rewarding the viewer with typical storylines of revenge or redemption, Kent and Fennell focus on trauma, culpability, and discomfort. In doing so, they build cinematic resistance: films that not only convey stories but actively undermine the representational institutions that have traditionally silenced or objectified women.

The Nightingale most directly disrupts standards by refusing to aestheticize violence. From the start, the picture avoids the common cinematic vocabulary of the rape-revenge story, in which trauma is frequently utilized as a plot device leading to violent catharsis. Instead, Kent depicts Clare's anguish in unvarnished detail, free of stylization or voyeurism. The camera does not linger to eroticize or cut away to soften. This stylistic choice contradicts Laura Mulvey's argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which states that mainstream cinema frequently caters to the "male gaze," portraying women as passive objects of desire. "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 11); hence, By declining to present Clare as a fantasy object, Kent recovers female subjectivity from conventional film exploitation.

Additionally, the movie reveals the multi-layered horrors of colonial patriarchy. Billy's racial oppression and Clare's gendered subjugation are inextricably linked as both characters deal with

the cruelty of British imperial authority. This intersectional framing subverts cinematic conventions that frequently separate women's problems from more general racial or historical backgrounds. Here, Kent shows how patriarchy and empire feed off one another by situating gendered violence within the framework of structural authority. By doing this, the movie avoids oversimplified portrayals of victimization and instead emphasizes structural criticism, transforming cinema into a site of historical resistance. Additionally, its aesthetic language is infused with cinematic resistance. The movie defies the dominant cinematic rhythm, which aims to pace trauma for viewer comfort, with its use of quiet, unadulterated natural surroundings, and extended, continuous takes. The audience is forced to watch violence unfold while feeling uneasy and unable to leave. By defying cinematic norms, watching becomes an ethical act in which viewers are forced to face the lingering effects of past violence rather than merely enjoying the narrative. By shifting the focus away from voyeuristic enjoyment and toward empathy and responsibility, Kent subverts the very conventions of movie viewing.

On the other hand, *Promising Young Woman* uses subversion and sarcasm to resist. Fennell uses the aesthetics of romantic comedy and pop culture to cover up a terrible indictment of rape culture. The story's serious tone is starkly contrasted with a surface of lightness created by the pastel color scheme, lively pop soundtrack, and clever dialogue. Sexual violence is typically framed as either brutal reality or melodrama, but this aesthetic dissonance defies convention. Instead, Fennell demonstrates how, hidden behind charm, comedy, and denial, rape culture flourishes beneath the surface of everyday normalcy. The movie challenges the societal tendency to downplay violence against women by disturbing basic expectations. Additionally, Cassie's fictitious meetings with predatory males reveal accepted patterns of violence. By feigning intoxication and then confronting guys who try to use her, she exposes behaviors that are frequently written off as normal or innocuous. By bringing attention to the ways that predation is accepted, justified, and encouraged, these encounters challenge the invisible nature of rape culture. Additionally, Fennell mobilizes that politics by bringing to light things that society would rather keep buried. Exposure provides resistance in this situation, making what is typically invisible or disregarded indisputable.

So *The Nightingale* and *the Promising Young Woman* deprive us of the satisfaction of cathartic conclusion. Cassie's purpose comes to an end with her death, rather than triumphant revenge. Her sacrifice demonstrates patriarchy's systemic weight: one woman's resistance cannot shatter entrenched complicity institutions. However, the film concludes with exposure, the release of evidence, and the arrest of criminals. Fennell defies easy conclusion by renouncing both traditional vengeance and legal triumph, leaving spectators perplexed about the continuance of rape culture. This lack of closure defies cinematic and societal traditions that favor comfort over conflict. As a result, these films demonstrate cinematic resistance by rejecting spectacle, resisting closure, and demanding critical spectatorship. Kent challenges norms through realism and historical depth, whereas Fennell uses irony and genre subversion. They reveal violence as a systemic phenomenon, intertwined with patriarchy, colonialism, and institutional complicity. Their resistance is rooted not just in their storylines, but also in how they transform the act of viewing itself, pushing viewers beyond passive consumption and into introspection and discomfort.

These pieces introduce cultural conversation into the realm of cinematic resistance. In Australia, discussions concerning colonial history and the suppression of Indigenous suffering were

rekindled by the *Nightingale*. *Promising Young Woman* sparked diverse reactions regarding feminist ire, accountability, and complicity. Both films demonstrated that cinema can be used as a medium for both artistic expression and political activism by transcending the screen to challenge cultural narratives. These films pave the way for a reinvention of justice, representation, and social accountability by defying cultural and cinematic conventions.

CONCLUSION

The *Nightingale* and *Promising Young Woman* both show how movies may resist entrenched violence by breaking mainstream narratives, opposing patriarchal structures, and emphasizing women's agency. Their different approaches—historical realism in Kent's work and genre subversion in Fennell's—show that resistance may take many shapes in cinema.

By refusing to aestheticize violence or provide easy closure, these films force viewers to confront the ugly reality of gendered oppression. As resistance texts, they change how justice and survival might be envisaged on film, establishing cinema as a place of feminist and cultural reform. Finally, they remind us that film can be a tool for both contemplation and resistance—challenging norms, exposing brutality, and envisioning alternative futures.

Furthermore, these films are significant beyond their immediate narratives: they contribute to cultural discussions about accountability, justice, and institutional reform. As a result, they serve as more than just films; they are acts of cultural criticism and activism. The *Nightingale* and *Promising Young Woman* illustrate the power of cinema to fight not just via representation, but also by influencing public perception.

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