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How to Cite: Cooper, H 2017 Alice Lowe's *Prevenge: A Response*. *Studies in the Maternal*, 9(1): 9, pp. 1–6, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.249>

Published: 01 August 2017

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW**Alice Lowe's *Prevenge*: A Response**

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Alice Lowe's *Prevenge* (2016) – a black-comedic slasher film about a pregnant woman turned serial killer working on the instructions of her fetus – explores the status of the mother-to-be in twenty-first century British culture with a marvellous and hilarious directness. As a pregnant viewer, *Prevenge* struck me as a daring contribution to cultural representations of pregnancy. If it shocks the viewer, it does so in order to call attention to problematic stereotypes or under-explored social issues.¹ It succeeds by engaging with some contemporary mantras of pregnancy and child-rearing, and then by playfully exploring what happens when these commonplaces are taken very literally – far too literally, in fact. Thus, the notion that 'baby knows best' and that the mother-to-be is no longer fully in control of her body or actions – as well as the idea that it is a 'cut-throat world out there' for a 'working mother' – all take on new meanings when the working mother in question is on a mission, directed by her 'evil' fetus, to undertake a series of extremely bloody murders. Even the concept of 'having to make cuts', a phrase that resonates in Austerity Britain – voiced in the film by a business executive who is rationalising her decision to refuse the protagonist a job – is literalised in a brutal act whose senselessness seems designed to call attention to the brutal effects of the political and economic status quo on single mothers. As I will be suggesting in this review, the multivalent concept of the 'cut' is deployed in the film to explore both the cultural, and the experiential, tensions that pregnancy seems to evoke.

Before examining the significance of metaphorical and literal cuts in the film, I will briefly describe how the film thematises one of the major contradictions at the

¹ See 'Prevenge Interview Special', *Film4 interview* (2017) <<http://www.film4.com/special-features/interviews/prevenge-interview-special>> (accessed March 2017), further references are given in the text.

heart of the pregnancy industry, which relates to the question of agency. A number of encounters in the film dramatise this contradiction, whereby the expectant woman is simultaneously placed centre-stage as wholly responsible for the fetus' wellbeing, and told continuously that there is absolutely nothing she can do – that the fetus' life is out of her hands and that the baby will thrive if it is going to thrive. Maternal choice-making is at once reified as *the* single most important feature of the success of the whole enterprise, and in the same breath rejected as irrelevant, or even seen as having been replaced by the fetus' own agency or by the ruthlessness of the 'reproductive urge' which renders the fetus almost parasitic upon the mother's passive body. This is illustrated in *Prevenge* by the midwife's contradictory utterances. According to her, 'you have absolutely no control over your mind or body any more' and 'you've got this force of nature inside you', but at the same time, 'it's all about your choices - nobody is going to take this baby away from you if you make the right choices'. Illusory 'right choices' are also, of course, the foundation upon which the ideological edifice of austerity cuts can be built. The choices *you* make as a liberal subject can apparently liberate you from being reliant on the state, which is liable to *cut you off*.² The 'cut' is, in this way, the perfect image for a film seeking to probe the myth of the autonomous, choosing subject.

The uncertainty in the film surrounding the location of agency (who is in control: mother or baby?) supplies a tension which, we feel, must - or at least ought to be – resolved during the course of the film in order to secure some kind of stability of meaning going forward, which will also put an end to the series of gruesome murders whose victims initially seem randomly chosen. Yet, in life, this is a tension for the (pre)maternal subject that is perhaps never wholly resolved: questions about identity, agency and autonomy are raised by the 'two-in-one-body' experience of pregnancy,³ and there is no closure – for pregnancy is arguably just the beginning

² See R. Salecl, *The Tyranny of Choice* (London: Profile Books, 2011), further references are given in the text.

³ J. Raphael-Leff, "'Two-in-One-Body': Unconscious Representations and Ethical Dimensions of Intercorporeality in childbearing', in Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith (eds.), *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Södertorn Philosophical Studies 18 (Huddinge, Sweden: Södertorn University, 2016), further references are given in the text.

of a different kind of subjectivity.⁴ The film brilliantly acknowledges this dilemma by teasing us with hints of a post-partum resolution, in which Ruth appears (finally) to be in what a mental capacity assessment would surely identify as her 'right mind', with her somewhat remorseful observation to the midwife, 'I've done some really terrible things'. The midwife (not knowing what Ruth is referring to) identifies this acknowledgement as a psychic achievement, reassuring her that 'look, we all get it wrong all the time'. Yet – without wanting to give too much away – this scene is definitely not the end of the film.

The film's deliberate lack of closure, then, mirrors the sense in which pregnancy and childbirth are unfinished business as far as maternal identity is concerned. Indeed, the film can be read and experienced as a piece of art that unflinchingly probes the identity shift precipitated by pregnancy, as well as the duality engendered by it. Questions about femininity, the body, career success, social status and indeed 'right-mindedness', are all bound up in this process, and are all in the mix of the film. With regard to this, it is no coincidence that the theme of cutting – with its connotations of violent separation, as opposed to an idealised two-in-one 'unity' of pregnancy (Raphael-Leff, 2016) – reverberates throughout the film, highlighted at certain points in the dialogue, as previously noted. It is present very obviously in the murders, which are mostly carried out with kitchen knives, as if to offer a jarring commentary on the ambivalence that an ambitious and creative woman might feel about the impending shift towards domesticity. It is also apparent cinematographically in the recurring image of the red climbing rope, whose severance is supposed to have led to the death of Ruth's partner. Later, the 'cut' of the caesarean section and of the umbilical cord separate Ruth and her daughter, with the midwife observing that 'when it's life or death, we have to make that cut': her turn of phrase echoes several other references earlier in the film, to deathly cuts which are conceptualised as 'life or death' scenarios.

⁴ On the subjectivity of motherhood, see Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), further references are given in the text.

The cutting of the umbilical cord which ends pregnancy is also the cut that is impossible during pregnancy if it is to be preserved. Yet the mother may fantasise about such a cut in moments of ambivalence towards the fetus which takes up residence inside her body. While Ruth does not appear to fantasise straightforwardly about killing her baby, the film dramatises an ongoing struggle for power between herself and her fetus. Indeed, Ruth experiences her own body not as the fecund female life force of pregnancy yoga but as a 'crap banged-out car', and as 'just the vehicle'; the maternal body is figured here as shell, an empty space that must give itself up in the service of reproduction, making way for the next generation, permitting something to live through it and beyond it. The protagonist proceeds, furthermore, to tell the midwife that 'it's a hostile takeover', in an image that recalls horror films about a feared, agentic fetus, such as *Alien* and *Rosemary's Baby*. A little later in the film, as if to confirm the protagonist's sense of being held hostage by an unseen force, the baby's voice insists, 'you can't shake me. . . I'm fury. . . I'm in you'; the image of anger recurs when a knife-wielding Ruth, clad in a deep red dress and with a skull painted threateningly on her face, yells at the climbing instructor (who has just informed her, 'you're grieving'): 'I'm not grieving, I'm gestating. . . fucking rage'. This rage cannot entirely be explained away with reference to the internal rationality of the narrative. It is also surely a reaction to the constrictions of the identity Ruth is now expected to embody as a pregnant woman, as well as a rejection of continuous attempts to pathologise her as a single mother-to-be. Indeed, in what seems to be a very deliberate comment on the stereotype of the smug, financially stable, middle-class pregnant couple, the film portrays Ruth as impossible to place in terms of social class, occupation and home address (she appears to live in a hotel while undertaking most of the murders, but this detail is never explained).

'The cut' is perhaps also a significant concept in relation to the wider context of the film's making, given its meaning in the lexicon of film, in terms such as 'the director's cut'. The film was shot in eleven days in the latter stages of director and actor Alice Lowe's pregnancy. Lowe alludes in an interview to the sense of urgency she felt to make her first feature film – to make a mark as a filmmaker – before the onset of motherhood which might interfere with the progression of her career (see

'*Prevenge* Interview Special'). The pace of the film, as well as its feverish light-scape and its soundtrack of eerie and rhythmic electronic music, like a heartbeat, seem to gesture towards this sense of the shortness of time. As a (pregnant) viewer, knowing of the director's sense of urgency, I found myself feeling that it is precisely this which gives the film its intensity and its sense of a focussed directorial mind, driving towards that final cut with the ruthless creativity that perhaps only a firm boundary or deadline can bring about. Indeed, ruthlessness is a quality that is much prized by the fetus in *Prevenge*, who defiantly seeks to instil this characteristic in her mother (ironically named Ruth – or perhaps not so ironically, in those moments when she seems to rue the very conception of her baby). The fetus is determined that her mother must 'finish the job' of the revenge murders: 'Kill him, or I kill you' she orders as Ruth looks down to see specks of blood that perhaps augur the onset of labour. In this sense, the film dramatises the mother-to-be's fear of being deprived by the baby's arrival of her potential to work on other creative projects, and even of the very identity she has developed through her career. There may be a very real need to 'finish the job' quickly in order that ambition is not simply 'killed off' and subsumed into domestic drudgery.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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