Make America Hate Again

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Make America Hate Again?: The politics of vigilante geriaction

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Abstract

The article explores the politics of the vigilante geriaction film, with specific focus on the remake of *Death Wish* (Eli Roth, 2018). In its construction of a nation under mortal threat from within and without, the subgenre speaks to ways in which Donald Trump has galvanised support from older white men by appealing to their sense of marginalisation, precarity and obsolescence. Through close attention to *Death Wish*'s visual style, representation of masculinity, and its ageing star (Bruce Willis), this article will demonstrate how the subgenre attempts to resuscitate a form of authoritarian heroism considered outmoded in the contemporary cultural landscape.

Keywords

Vigilante, geriaction, Donald Trump, Bruce Willis, *Death Wish*, masculinity, 'aggrieved entitlement'

Geriaction films can be understood as 'backlash' texts, seeking in a nostalgic fashion to restore a model of masculinity being left behind by social, economic and political change (Donnar 2016). The genre is characterised by a mournful tone regarding the obsolescence of this form of heroic masculinity, with many of the films linking its fate to that of a nation in seemingly inevitable decline (Modleski 2010; Evans 2015). Arguably, the vigilante geriaction films centred on narratives of rescue and revenge that emerged following the success of *Taken* (Pierre Morel, 2008) articulate even more aggressive demands for masculinity in its most conventionally violent, individualistic and authoritarian form as an apparently necessary buttress against social decay and collapse. Through their calls to violence as a means to rescue loved ones, restore order, exact retribution and expunge enemies, vigilante geriaction films look to return the individual older male to his previously unchallenged position of rescuer, protector and defender of a nation constructed around the ideological shibboleths of childhood innocence and female chastity. The subgenre reflects anxieties about masculinity and nationhood that have animated contemporary American politics and, specifically, the rhetoric of Donald Trump.

This article will discuss a variety of examples, although the analysis will focus on the remake of *Death Wish* (Eli Roth, 2018). The original *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) courted controversy at the time of its release regarding its right-wing politics, which some argued tipped into a fascist endorsement of extralegal violence at a time of political crisis and widespread urban crime (Ryan and Kellner 1988). Indeed, Trump spoke in favour of the

original film in relation to his defence of second amendment rights at a rally in 2015 (Kreps 2015). The remake has been chosen as this article's principal case study because it prompted similar debates to the original, but in a context of even more widespread gun ownership, an epidemic of mass shootings, and the seemingly routine deaths of black people at the hands of racist police officers and white supremacists (Rivera 2017; Dowd 2018). In starring Bruce Willis as Paul Kersey, *Death Wish* also positions itself firmly within the realm of geriaction, as all Willis's action roles since *Die Hard 4.0* (Len Wiseman, 2007) have incorporated his advancing age into the fabric of the narrative. This article will therefore demonstrate how the film (and the genre) seeks to establish an image of an imperilled nation that can only be rescued by a model of masculinity previously considered obsolete.

The vigilante film has long been understood as a reactionary response to the perception that the supremacy of white men in American society is under threat. In films like *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) and *Death Wish* – and their many sequels – urban development, liberal reform and social progress become explanations for waves of violent crime that beset American cities and, concomitantly, scapegoats for national decline. The cure to these maladies prescribed by the genre was a violent, authoritarian one; a restoration of individualistic, 'frontier' masculinity to defend the nation. As Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence (1977) argue of Winner's *Death Wish*, it 'explicitly offers an "Old West" prescription for understanding and dealing with modern crime.' (43) Christopher Sharrett suggests that the vigilante film is entirely dismissive of social institutions as 'effete and worthless … validat[ing] … the bourgeois subject's right to strike out at a dysfunctional system whose key role is to protect the middle-class and its property rights' (2010, 35). In this sense, the vigilante film forms part of Robert B. Ray's definition of the 'right-wing' cycle of American cinema: 'problems had sources in particular individuals with names and faces, who could be located, tracked down, and eliminated so that society could return to normal' (1985, 307).

The contemporary vigilante film prescribes a very similar solution to the problems facing the United States, looking to the harness the rage of the emotionally wounded white male to return the nation to stability. As sociologist Michael Kimmel suggests, men in the contemporary moment feel a sense of 'aggrieved entitlement', a state of permanent dysfunction whereby they resist an inevitable future of racial and gender equality (2017, 18). The structure and style of these films arguably speak to men who perceive themselves as besieged victims, 'protecting white women and the traditional family from rapacious sexual predators and protecting a distinctly American vision of masculinity – the Self-Made Man.' (Kimmel 2012,

254). It is these men who formed the base of Trump's support during his run for the presidency in 2016: middle-class, Republican white men who feel 'disenfranchised' and 'cut out of the American Dream.' (Thompson 2016) The rhetoric Trump employed through his campaign and during his presidency to date speaks to the fears and concerns of this group, playing on their feelings of insecurity and marginalisation due to the changes brought about by social reform, globalisation and deindustrialisation. This involves rhetorical flourishes that invoke 'disturbing concepts and images, such as death, destruction, humiliation, submission, and rape, appeal[ing] to the audience's fascination with threatened marginalization, or abjection, and figures life itself as intrinsically precarious' (Johnson 2017, 236). This was a feature of Trump's inaugural address in January 2017, in which he described the United States as beleaguered by 'American Carnage', in conjunction with a lament its best days are perhaps, in an economic sense, are behind it – 'rusted out factories, scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation' (2017). He frequently invokes fear of racialized others crossing the American border, 'bringing crime [and] drugs', and made fear of the impending arrival of a 'caravan' of South American asylum seekers the rhetorical centrepiece of the Republican Party's platform for the 2018 midterm elections (*Sky News*, 2018). By conjuring this kind of nightmarish imagery, Trump's rhetoric was and is designed to appeal to a perceived sense of precarity and victimhood among white people, especially older men, who perceive their birthright to supremacy and prosperity to have been taken from them.

In keeping with Trump's simplistic, hyperbolic rhetoric, vigilante films consistently adopt a Manichean worldview: there are 'good' people and 'bad' people, and it is the old vigilante's job to protect the young, vulnerable and innocent – particularly women and children - from the forces of evil. *Taken* established this pattern explicitly: to travel to Europe is to venture into the 'heart of darkness', as the continent is plagued by immigrant criminal gangs who feed on the naivety of travelling young (white) women. Subsequent films that set their action entirely in the United States do not deviate substantively from this template, and are at pains to construct an image of the country as plagued by violent criminal activity, with many of the crises plucked from the deadlines: crystal meth and prescription drug addiction, gang and gun violence and, in keeping with the genre's tendency to melodramatise the vulnerability of women, sex trafficking. In its contemporary iterations, vigilante films reinforce the rhetoric of the alt-right, which has constructed an image of a fearful, innocent white community facing existential threats to its safety with little hope of protecting itself (Brigley Thompson, 2). In alt-right lore, this state of affairs has been brought about by the marginalisation of white,

militaristic, authoritarian masculinity as a vital bulwark against these dangers (Johnson 2017, 230), a shift driven by apparently misguided 'political correctness', and a perception that this form of masculinity is entirely obsolete in a society characterised by pluralism and diversity. These films paint this kind of figure as essential to the nation's protection. As Ghassan Hage (2000) argues, vigilantism is ordinarily pursued when the state's monopolistic grasp on violence begins to fray, and the failure to protect and defend the nation and its citizens against adversaries leads to individuals taking matters into their own hands (69). As Hage suggests, 'the violent nationalist act is not merely the act of any disempowered person, but also the movement of someone who in addition feels they *ought* to be more empowered.' (ibid.) By telling tales of white heroes rescuing damsels in distress from the clutches of evil, or avenging their deaths, the vigilante genre reinforces this worldview consistently and obsessively.

The contemporary vigilante film speaks to these concerns of male marginalisation and obsolescence specifically: unlike his predecessors, the new vigilante is an older, retired man. He emerges from a law enforcement (*Vengeance: A Love Story* [Johnny Martin, 2017], *Recoil* [Jack Nasser, 2011], *Reprisal* [Brian A. Miller, 2018]), military (*Security* [Alain Desrochers, 2017], *Acts of Violence* [Brett Donowho, 2018], *Code of Honor* [Michael Winnick, 2016], *Rambo: Last Blood* [Adrian Grunberg, 2019]), special forces (*I Am Wrath* [Chuck Russell, 2016], *Taken* and its two sequels [Olivier Megaton 2012, 2014], *The Equalizer* and its sequel [Antoine Fuqua, 2014; 2018], *A Good Man* [Keoni Waxman, 2014]) or even criminal (*John Wick* and its sequels [Chad Stahelski, 2014; 2017; 2019], *Rage* [Paco Cabezas, 2014], *Stolen* [Simon West, 2012], *A Score to Settle* [Shawn Ku, 2019], *The Prince* [Brian A. Miller, 2014], *Cold Blood* [Frédéric Petitjean, 2019]) background. Less often, the vigilante is an older middle-class working professional driven to violence by the failures of the police and criminal justice system as in *Acts of Vengeance* (Isaac Florentine, 2017), *Death Wish* and *Cold Pursuit* (Hans Petter Moland, 2019), or a hard-drinking detective with a troubled past like *Eye for an Eye* (George Gallo and Luca Giliberto, 2019) or *A Walk Among the Tombstones* (Scott Frank, 2014).

The vigilante is given the opportunity to reassert his centrality when he is pressed into service to exact violent retribution for the murder or kidnap of a loved one, usually a spouse and/or child. This is very much in keeping with the trope of 'paternal payback' of the contemporary vigilante film which, according to Hannah Hamad, 'offset[s] the troubling dimensions of violent vigilantism' by making 'affective appeals to the protagonist's paternity' (2014, 63). As a consequence of his troubled past, the vigilante may have alienated the very

loves he will then need to rescue or avenge (as in *Taken*), but has to take action because, in keeping with the vigilante's mistrust of the established authorities, there is nobody else capable of doing so. In their concern with rescue of, or revenge for, wives and daughters, most of these films could be understood as a direct riposte to the sense that the traditional male role as father, protector and provider have been 'increasingly viewed as regressive manifestations of an outmoded patriarchy' (Parker 2008, ix). The violent action necessary to avenge the death of a loved one (or effect their rescue) enables the protagonist to reassert the centrality of his role as protective husband and father, challenging pervasive discourses of obsolescence. The subgenre conforms to Casey Ryan Kelly's suggestion that 'recuperative logics of male trauma discourse are often allegories for national trauma, where the martyrdom of the suffering male subject operates as a kind of heroic salve that makes the nation whole again.' (2018, 165) The contemporary vigilante film therefore reinforces Trump's rhetoric regarding the sense that the nation has lost control, and must act uncompromisingly to take it back.

The films often begin with montages that characterise the urban milieu in which the film is set as hellishly violent and chaotic. Police and law enforcement agencies are overrun by a tide of criminality, with the visual and aural construction of these sequences designed to convey a similar sense of crisis to the audience: *I Am Wrath*, set in Columbus, Ohio (starring John Travolta), employs a montage of security camera and news media images of urban violence, cutting rapidly between police body camera footage, to news anchors addressing the 'unsettling spike in violent crime', to security cameras of criminals attacking and killing convenience store workers. The sequence makes the chaos seem overwhelming, featuring colourful and rapid news media graphics one might associate with cable news, overlapping dialogue, and a reasonably consistent point-of-view perspective that places the viewer in the line of fire. Indeed, the credits sequence concludes with security camera footage of a criminal nonchalantly executing a convenience store customer before firing the gun directly at the camera. *Vengeance* (starring Nicolas Cage) opens with a shot from the perspective of a camera mounted on a police car careening towards a crime scene with sirens blaring, before dissolving into newspaper headlines that proclaim Niagara Falls to be the 'most dangerous city in New York', burn victims linked to meth labs, an epidemic of rape, superimposed over images of fire, sirens, and criminals being hauled away by police. These hysterical sequences of violence, chaos and death in the opening stanzas of the contemporary vigilante thriller suggest urban crime is rampant, and the institutions in which we once trusted to protect us are ineffectual. The genre therefore functions as part of what Henry Giroux describes as the 'action-oriented

mode of fascist ideology in which all thoughtfulness, critical thinking and dissent are subordinated if not cancelled out by the pleasure quotient and hyped-up sensationalism produced in the fog and fantasy of moral panics, a culture of fear, and the spectacle of violence.' (2017, 890) In the lurid, dime novel logic of vigilante geriaction therefore, the feckless establishment has failed, and an old-fashioned, authoritarian solution is necessary.

Death Wish

In Willis, *Death Wish* features an action star who enjoyed his moment of greatest prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, and has since declined in his significance and centrality within mainstream genre cinema. As rogue cop John McClane in the *Die Hard* series (1988-2013), Willis is very much identified with vigilantism. *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) should be understood as part of Ray's 'right cycle' of American cinema, as it valorises a tough, independent, cowboy-style masculinity, and celebrates the individual's 'gut instincts about right and wrong' over society's laws and procedures (Cohen 2011; Parshall 1991, 135-6). Crucially, however, Willis is also representative of the moment that the 'hard bodied' reactionary discourses of the Reagan era gave way to a kinder, softer manhood predicated on successfully performing the duties of a husband and father (Jeffords 1993; Morrison 2010). In keeping with the focus of the contemporary vigilante film, Willis's heroism has been more consistently and explicitly defined by his role as a father to daughters (Hamad 2014, 76), which is also a prominent feature of his roles in *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005), *Hostage* (Florent Emilio Siri, 2005) and *Die Hard 4.0*. His overprotectiveness played to humorous effect in a recurring role as the father of Ross's girlfriend in sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004).

It is apparent on close inspection of Willis's filmography that his significance as an action star has diminished, with several of his films going directly to video-on-demand. In recent years, he has featured in films explicitly identified with the 'geriaction' genre, starring as a CIA agent in the first two instalments in *The Expendables* series (Sylvester Stallone, 2010; Simon West, 2012), and a retired special operative in *RED* (Robert Schwentke, 2010) and its sequel (Dean Parisot, 2013). Both series and the later *Die Hard* films are somewhat parodic treatments of hegemonic masculinity, poking fun at technological ignorance and diminished physical prowess (any concerns about the latter are at least partially allayed over the course of the films). *Die Hard 4.0* and *A Good Day to Die Hard* (John Moore, 2013) positioned Willis's

masculinity as initially archaic and obsolete, before proceeding with a 'narrative of paternal recuperation' (Hamad 2014, 77). Outside of these larger action franchises, he has also featured in smaller, supporting roles as retired special operatives or law enforcement (*Extraction* [Steven C. Miller, 2015], *Acts of Violence, Reprisal*). As Donnar suggests, the geriaction film supposedly offers 'fantasies of ascendance and returned white masculine vitality and narrative centrality', but judging by Willis's recent action films, he is an increasingly marginal, diminished figure (2016, 8-9).

In *Death Wish*, Willis plays Paul Kersey, a middle-class, suburban surgeon whose comfortable prosperity is disturbed when his home is invaded by criminals, his wife (Elisabeth Shue) murdered and daughter (Camilla Morrone) assaulted. In keeping with the picture of the contemporary vigilante thriller outlined earlier, *Death Wish* reinforces alt-right rhetoric about the United States as overcome by a seemingly unstoppable wave of violent crime, whether that emerges from within urban criminal gangs, or from across the border. In this, it relies upon the relationship between the vigilante film and the Western, identifying this form of violent masculinity as necessary to the protection of the nation. While the original *Death Wish* series featured a Western star in Charles Bronson and Willis is not identified with the genre in its traditional form, the remake no doubt relies upon Willis's close association with McClane in the *Die Hard* series and his construction as an urban cowboy. Rather than looking to overcome effete, sophisticated European terrorists, however, *Death Wish* places Willis at the vanguard of Trump-era anxieties about crime and immigration as disruptive forces to white male hegemony. The film plays specifically on two rhetorical favourites of Trump's: violence in the inner city (particularly, in this case, Chicago) and immigration from non-white countries. These issues activate nostalgic yearnings for the brand of extralegal justice that characterised the frontier. In doing so, *Death Wish* finds a pathway for its white male hero who, having gone soft in his suburban enclave, rediscovers an apparently outmoded ideal of masculinity to avenge and protect the nation.

While the original 1974 version played on fears of crime and urban decay following white flight of the postwar period (Sorrentino 2010, 12), by shifting the action from New York to Chicago, the remake focuses more explicitly on contemporary right-wing discourses about race, gangs, drugs and crime in inner cities (*Fox News* 2014). *Death Wish* therefore reinforces the ways in which Chicago has become a synecdoche for the right-wing's fears and fantasies of broader social maladies of urban decay and decline, and its desire for an authoritarian response underpinned by racist attitudes towards the city's large African-American population.

In the early months of his presidency Trump was highly critical Chicago's failure to deal with its crime and murder rates, advocating an aggressive federal intervention in the city. In his first White House interview in January 2017, Trump claimed violence in Chicago was 'very easily fixable', but efforts to halt the crimewave were hamstrung by political correctness (Berman 2017), and an unwillingness to 'denigrate racial minorities as a violent, criminal element' (Blades 2017). Chicago has the most murders in the country, although it is often ignored that, as the country's third-largest city, its murders per capita are actually lower than other smaller cities (ibid.). The fact it is also one of the United States' most segregated cities, and has endured corrupt policing, racist housing discrimination and drug policies, a lack of investment in education and infrastructure that has disproportionately affected the city's black residents, is routinely ignored (ibid.) The rhetoric used by Trump and his associates is in keeping with the tendency in right-wing discourse to blame systemic problems like crime on individual failings, here reliant primarily on racist stereotypes about black people being inherently criminal and violent. It is the tendency to construct crime in this fashion that lays the groundwork for the simplistic, violent, conservative solutions offered by the vigilante genre (Kellner and Ryan, 1988, 95).

Death Wish's construction of Chicago as lawless is, as is conventional for the contemporary vigilante film, the preoccupation of the film's opening sequence, which establishes the city's chaos and disorder through a visual and aural montage: overlapping news reports about a wave of gun crime and murder that has swept the city establishes the sense of chaos and disorder ('762 murders, more than 3500 shootings' – these are actual statistics from 2016), while simultaneously laying the groundwork for a vigilante response by referring to a lack of care and attention from governmental authorities. Snippets of talk radio warn that 'they don't care about us' and 'the government ain't comin' for ya'. As the aerial shot of the city moves closer to the street, a speeding police car with its sirens blaring becomes the focus: the gunshot victim in the front passenger seat is a police officer. We cut to street-level shots that track the car's rapid journey, the vehicle coming towards the camera and the sirens on the soundtrack from police car and fire engine creating an overwhelming cacophony. Upon arrival at the emergency room, the Steadicam shots reinforce this sense of urgency and chaos, as Kersey's presence is sought to rescue the doomed police officer. When Kersey relays news of the man's death to the officer's partner, his dispassionate tone suggests this sadly a common occurrence. In emphasising a police officer as the victim, *Death Wish* rather blunders into contemporary debates about the actions of the police, perhaps justifying a brutal,

uncompromising response to the city's criminal element who are referred to here as 'animals'. In a few short minutes, *Death Wish* has confirmed right-wing discourses about inner-city Chicago as being chaotic, crime-ridden and dangerous.

A hyperbolic contrast is drawn with the quiet, suburban, middle-class tranquillity and prosperity which Kersey enjoys with his family, the introduction of which is accompanied by a smooth pop song ('Don't Worry Baby' by The Beach Boys), a downward tilting camera which shows blue skies, leafy trees, and a kid riding his bicycle along the pavement outside the Kersey family home. The Kerseys enjoy breakfast in the bright kitchen diner with large windows, as their daughter, Jordan, learns she has earned a place at New York University (Kersey expresses some anxiety about his daughter's departure for the big city, as well as some frustration that she should learn about her acceptance over the internet rather than an old-fashioned letter). The visual and aural register establishes the Kersey neighbourhood as a safe, prosperous space, far from the violence and death in the city itself. That Kersey's tranquil, loving family life could be so easily and randomly destroyed speaks clearly to Trump's rhetorical construction of the white male's safety and prosperity as precarious.

Like the original film, *Death Wish* is concerned primarily with the transformation of an 'average', middle-aged, middle-class professional into a righteous, violent avenger. The initial scenes in the film, before his family is attacked, are at pains to construct Kersey as unconfrontational, and distinct from the angry men (of all races) who abound in the film. When Kersey gently chastises a soccer dad who curses on the sidelines of his daughter's game, the man seeks a physical altercation with him, which Kersey's wife attempts to defuse (and leads to Kersey being accused of being a 'pussy', a misogynistic insult that attempts to suggest in his refusal to engage in violence Paul is somehow less of a man). The soccer dad's bug-eyed, foul-mouthed theatrics are viewed as decidedly peculiar and inappropriate, but Kersey's failure to properly challenge him suggests that as he has grown older in his suburban comfort and wealth, he has become perhaps complacent, lacking in rugged masculine virtues. Kimmel discusses this discourse at some length, arguing that the settling of the West and the industrial revolution caused a 'crisis of masculinity', as the 'loss of hardy manly virtues' were bemoaned (2017, 46). The vigilante genre generally suggests that soft liberalism has caused a social decay and a decline in traditional values, with a drive to return to a more authoritarian masculinity necessary to restoring order (Street 2016). *Death Wish* establishes a similar perspective here: the genteel, middle-class suburban life Kersey has secured for himself is potentially under threat from characters like this, and action should be taken.

Kersey's older, white middle-class suburban masculinity becomes the default against which all other identities in the film are measured. This contrast is established throughout: from the angry soccer dad, to the young, racialized criminals responsible for the city's crime wave who loiter menacingly on street corners, the white underclass desperately trying to survive on the city's streets for whom Kersey has barely concealed contempt, and the black and Latino hoodlums Kersey confronts during his initially tentative attempts to 'clean up the streets'. While criminals in the film are of all races, it seems pointed that the Hispanic background of Miguel Javier, the young valet who parks Kersey's car and alerts his criminal associates to the location of their family home, is emphasised. The film seems to reinforce Trump's racist rhetoric that the country is being overrun by hordes of criminal immigrants. It also therefore positions Kersey's masculinity – native-born, white Protestant – against 'the dehumanized masculinity of others, who are variously depicted as either too masculine (rapacious beasts, avariciously cunning, voracious) or not masculine enough (feminine, dependent, effeminate).' (2012, 255) This is a common strategy among white supremacists, who seek to establish their masculinity as 'just right' in relation to other racial and ethnic groups who are either too aggressive or too weak (Kimmel 2017, 51). Kersey's white, middle-class, professional masculinity is, in contrast to the 'others' portrayed in the film, is idealised, and righteous.

The attack on his family precipitates this conversion in Kersey. He travels to Texas to his wife's family's ranch for her funeral. As the original film stages Kersey's trip to Tucson, Arizona as decisive in his transition from soft liberal to gun-toting vigilante, so too does the remake construct a journey to the frontier as fundamental to this transformation. Here, however, it is an encounter with his father-in-law that proves critical, an even older white male who defends his land against poachers with a shotgun and whose perspective is clear: 'If a man really wants to protect what's his, he has to do it himself.' Kersey is shocked as his father-in-law fires a shotgun at fleeing poachers before putting the wounded deer out of its misery at close range. The older man speaks to a yearning, typical of revisionist Westerns, for a return to a brand of frontier justice, characterised by a 'timeless moral order… when strong, white men enforced a clear, unquestioned morality.' (Saxton and Cole 2012, 101) Where Tucson's Wild West show embodies this in the original film, here rural Texas becomes representative of this regressive approach. It is a landscape where 'the aggrieved white man might cease "to be a victim" and instead become "avenger, exorcising and destroying utterly all demons"' (Slotkin 1971, 51, qtd. in Johnson 2017, 18).

The film's attitude to what kind of masculinity is necessary in this situation is fairly explicitly demonstrated in its approach to Kersey's therapy and grief counselling. There are two scenes in which Kersey seeks 'the talking cure', one before he has begun his vigilante spree, and one after: in the first scene, he talks about his childhood traumas, saying he rode the trains in the city to avoid his abusive father. The scene is intercut with him reading CS Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* to his 18-year-old daughter as she lies in a coma (a book that surely skews too young for her, but is part of the film's, and the genre's, tendency to infantilise women. Kersey calls both his wife and his daughter 'Baby', even referring to his wife, who has a PhD, as 'Dr Baby'), playing baseball (America's pastime, a manly pursuit), before stating that he 'failed at the most important things a man does', and then donning a green jacket in the mould of Travis Bickle, seemingly a harbinger of his campaign of vengeance against his family's assailants. The reference to Bickle might suggest *Death Wish* is looking to pathologise Kersey's violence, but it is not. Kersey's anger at his own failures, which he equates with masculine inadequacy, and the fact he has become a victim despite doing the 'right things' all his life (something he rails against when confronted by his brother for his vigilantism), speaks to the perception among older white men that their previously iron grip on stability and prosperity has been rendered precarious, as they have become marginalised and discarded by a rapidly changing society (Hochschild 2016).

Indeed, Kersey could be viewed as akin to Trump's populist figuration of the 'forgotten man', albeit one who has not been cheated out of the American Dream, but has had the happy, apparently secure life he worked for taken from him because of the inadequacies of the protection offered by the state (Kelly 2018, 172) In this, *Death Wish* operates fairly clearly within the discourse of 'aggrieved entitlement' outlined by Kimmel. Indeed, Kersey's plight speaks to another vigilante film, *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), in which D-FENS (Michael Douglas) embarks on a crime spree following the break-up of his marriage and the loss of his job (experiences manifestly less traumatic than those Kersey endures). *Falling Down* sparked earnest debates about whether the film legitimated or pathologised white male violence as a response to perceived social marginalisation. As Jude Davies suggests, D-FENS embodies the crisis of men who, 'having worked hard at the normative forms of masculinity … find that instead of obtaining the expected economic and social rewards, [they are] cast aside from the workplace and excluded from the home.' (2013, 64) Where *Falling Down* was ambivalent about D-FENS's violent response to these perceived injustices, there is little doubt about the perspective of *Death Wish*.

This is confirmed by Kersey's return for a second session *after* beginning his vigilante crime spree, where he is relaxed, joking with the therapist and making light (without explicitly mentioning them) of the violent acts he has committed. When the therapist says of Kersey's improved condition, 'Well, keep doing what you're doing', he laughs and says 'I will.' There is an immediate and abrupt cut to Kersey firing a pistol at a target, striding purposefully towards it as he blows it to smithereens. Restoration of masculine self-confidence and sound mental health, it seems, come primarily from (gun) violence. While the talkshow segments that pepper *Death Wish* attempt a faux balanced debate as to whether Kersey is a hero or a villain, it is quite clear from his demeanour and attitude that violence has proven restorative. He laughs when the news speculates that the vigilante is in his mid-30s, suggesting his violent spree has returned his youthful swagger. The soundtrack, featuring AC/DC's 'Back in Black', a rhapsody to the restoration of confident, carefree, pleasure-seeking masculinity, affirms as much. The film's attitude towards 'the talking cure' is reasonably consistent with the suggestion that it is somehow unmasculine, in keeping with the common association of masculine strength with silence (Rutherford 1993, 177).

Kersey's actions also receive official institutional approval. When he exterminates the last of his family's assailants, Detective Raines (Dean Norris), the police officer who has been working to solve Kersey's wife's murder, and pursued him as the mysterious vigilante, accepts Kersey's version of events even though it is obvious he is lying. In his rebellion against healthy eating, and casual disregard for the wellbeing of Chicago's homeless (saying Kersey could 'run them over' with his car and it would not be a crime), Raines himself demonstrates a dissatisfaction with a liberal, nannyish approach that prevents him from acting as he sees fit. In casting Dean Norris as Raines, *Death Wish* aligns itself with another cultural product that celebrates white male criminality as a response to perceived grievances: Norris played Walter White's brother-in-law and chief pursuer in *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008-13). As ageing white men frustrated by the rotting urban environment in which they find themselves, Kersey and Raines ultimately conspire to rebel against the moral, legal and institutional framework that they perceive to be constraining their masculinity from doing what is necessary. *Death Wish* therefore rejects the contemporary, idealised model of gentle, caring, breadwinning fatherhood as ineffectual: a violent, authoritarian white masculinity that breaks the shackles of permissive liberalism is essential to protect a polity rendered vulnerable by mass immigration and violent crime.

Conclusion

As a genre, the vigilante geriaction film is comparatively marginalised in discussions of contemporary mainstream cinema. As mentioned previously, many of the films are released to streaming services after very brief theatrical runs (although there have been a few notable hits, such as *Taken*, *The Equalizer* and *John Wick*, which have all generated sequels). Nevertheless, the vigilante genre as a whole is thriving, but in the guise of the superhero film. Presenting the defeat of mortal threats to humanity and the resolution of social and environmental catastrophes as contingent on the benign intervention of (super)heroic individuals, these films have become the more family-friendly, acceptable face of the vigilante movie: more cooperative (*The Avengers* [Joss Whedon 2012]), increasingly inclusive (*Black Panther* [Ryan Coogler, 2018], *Captain Marvel* [Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019]), and taken far more seriously by critics (Christopher Nolan's *Batman* films). By comparison, the middle-aged (and older) white male vigilante film seems out-of-step with the contemporary politics of race and gender, unaware that #BlackLivesMatter, and oblivious to #MeToo. The controversy surrounding Liam Neeson's revenge thriller, *Cold Pursuit*, is emblematic of this. Neeson admitted in an interview to promote the film in *The Independent* that he had come close to committing acts of racially-motivated violence after his friend was raped by a black man (Michallon, 2019). Neeson's admission of something entirely unacceptable was met with appropriate levels of criticism. The politics of the vigilante genre were always questionable. Now, it seems they have become simply unacceptable.

Death Wish's valorisation of guns is particularly pointed in the context of a series of mass shootings perpetrated by men who claimed to be expressing any number of racial and sexual grievances against their victims. The shootings in San Diego (April 2019) and El Paso (August 2019) were driven by racist ideology, though it should be argued that a toxic masculinity - where men perceive themselves to be marginalised and persecuted by social, economic and demographic change - was at least as culpable (Hewitt and Sethna, 2019). As demonstrated by its attitude towards violence, vigilantism and manhood, *Death Wish* aligns itself with their 'aggrieved entitlement'. As demonstrated by the ways in which *Death Wish* constructs inner-city Chicago as a hellish, violent, postindustrial wasteland, transforms a white, middle-class, middle-aged suburban doctor into a brutally violent, sadistic avenger, and casually tosses aside the rule of law and due process in its endorsement of the vigilante's actions, the genre speaks precisely to the groups of men (and women) seduced by nightmarish Trumpian rhetoric about a nation in inevitable and terminal decline. It confirms the beliefs of

white men who see themselves as persecuted, no longer in possession of automatic control and authority over society, and justifies their recourse to violence. We may laugh at how seemingly obsolete and irrelevant these geriactioners are, but given the toxicity of the discourses these films espouse, perhaps the joke is no longer funny.

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