

DEATH WISH

Directed by Michael Winner
Produced by Hal Landers and Bobby Roberts
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1974

Some films are not enjoyable. And then some are frustrating because they can obviously be better. *Death Wish* is one such film. It's a revenge fantasy, which is nothing new to cinema, but not exactly old hat in 1974. Charles Bronson plays an aggrieved widower with great conviction—he's not expressive, but refreshingly realistic in his acting. And he makes a very convincing killer. The story takes unconventional turns, like the detour to Tucson, the revelation of our hero's pacifistic mother, the joy he takes in following media accounts of his exploits, and his need to be defiantly optimistic about life, in contrast to his defeatist son-in-law.

It seems obvious where the film is headed—the drama will culminate in our hero taking down his wife's killers. Would that the film was so obvious. Instead, they are never found and the police run Kersey out of town after one too many successes. Sure, maybe it's not realistic that our hero would find those hopped-up freakos. But a big draw of cinema is the escape, and the film is supposed to be a revenge *fantasy*, meaning a scenario we'd like to see played out in our own lives—revenge on those criminals who bring us fear and suffering.

So let Paul find them. But how to go about it?

At first Paul isn't thinking much of the marauders. He's trying to move on with his life, but his new Tucson friend gives him a handgun. Why not carry it for protection and prove to these punks (and himself?) that he's not afraid?

So he goes out that first night, an erring creepo pulls a knife, and Paul is able to get the jump on him. He likes the feeling, and decides to keep testing fate. He'll keep looking for trouble. But being a principled man, he realizes he must have a code. Thus, he will not commit murder. Any killing he commits will be a killing in self-defense.

As Paul makes his nightly rounds, we (aided by a roving camera) begin to notice various walls and what-not tagged by red paint, and we think of the jester with the spray can who couldn't help leaving his calling card in the apartment. But at this point Paul isn't making the connection. Only the audience knows that Paul will find not just empowerment, but vengeance.

Meanwhile, the rape-victim daughter continues her slide into oblivion. But reports of the vigilante killings, soothingly related to her by our hero, begin to produce upon her vacant expression fleeting smiles; her mind is coming closer to reality with each subsequent death.

The cops finally catch up with Mr. Kersey. But he refuses to go until he's finished the job. He's now made the connection with the red paint at the apartment and the tags he's noticing around the city. He's getting closer to his wife's killers. And he's hoping that with their deaths his daughter will regain her sanity. The bedraggled cop, Frank Ochoa, biding his time, growing in his admiration for this extraordinary man, grants him a reprieve.

So finally Paul tracks them down. His reputation proceeds him, and these anarchical maniacs are reduced to sniveling, scatter-brained hulks in his presence. What to do? These are the first guys he can't goad into doing something stupid! They are scared and desperate to

escape. Will Paul cross the line and commit murder? The climactic moment is nigh...and out of nowhere, the cop charges in.

And that's why *Death Wish* is so frustrating. Greatness is in its grasp, but instead it opts to be a formulaic revenge fantasy sans revenge. What a pity.