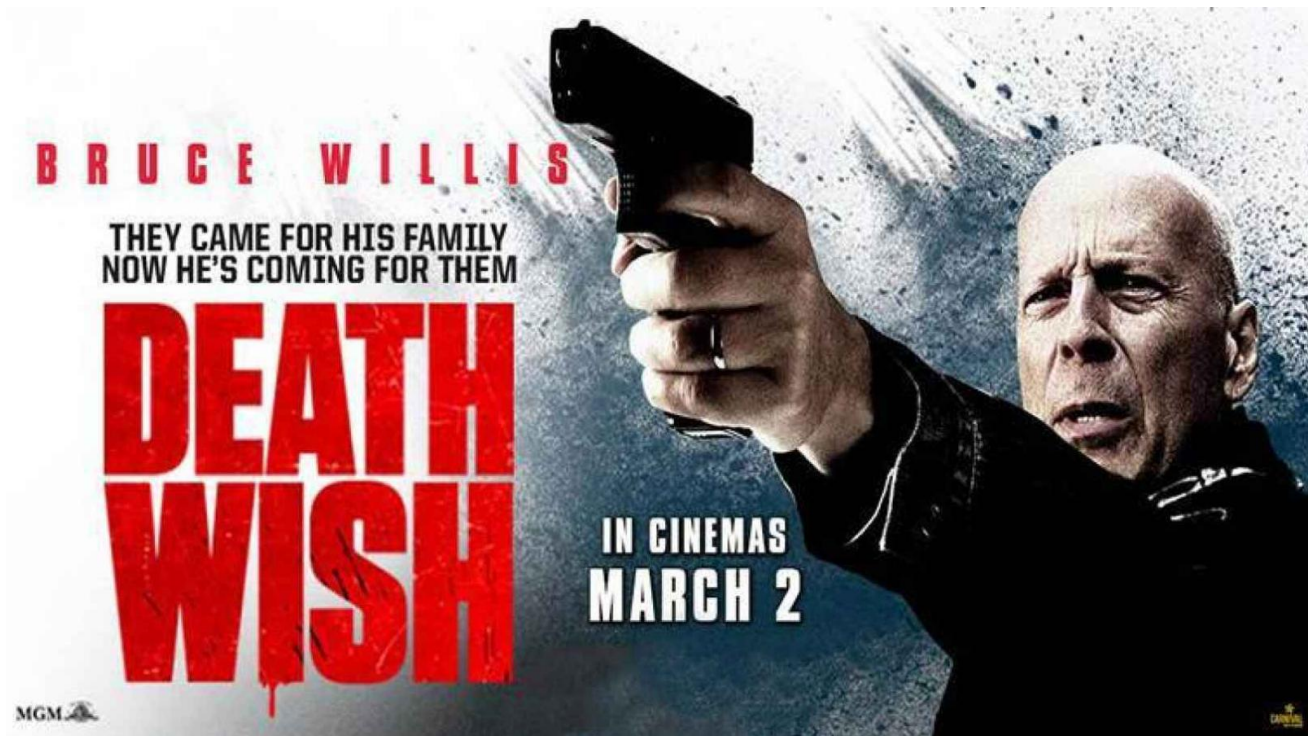


The Death Wish Remake – and the Rage of Leftist Reviewers

by Bruce Bawer



The other night, finding myself awake at 3 AM, I poked around Netflix looking for something to fall asleep to, and eventually settled on Eli Roth's 2018 remake of *Death Wish*, starring Bruce Willis. I'd watched the classic 1974 original, starring Charles Bronson, several times – in fact I think I saw it, at seventeen, at the time of its movie-theater debut – but I'd never seen the remake, and I assumed it would be a poor copy that would send me off to dreamland quickly enough. In fact I stayed awake to the end. I liked it quite a bit, all in all, and I thought the major changes in the story were good ones: in the new version, for example, the main character, Paul Kersey, is a trauma surgeon instead of an architect, which actually turns out to work much better, plotwise.

Death Wish – on the off chance you don't already know – tells

the tale of a civilized, affluent liberal who, after his home is invaded by thugs who kill his wife and severely wound his daughter, becomes a vigilante, taking to the city at night (New York in the original, Chicago in the remake) and gunning down bad guys. In the original, Kersey's killing spree is depicted in such a way as to make audiences cheer. I remember being surprised, three years ago, when I first heard about the remake: in these politically correct times, how could you redo *Death Wish* without totally defanging it? Who in Hollywood today would even green-light such a thing? Watching the reboot, I kept expecting it to pull punches. But it didn't. When it was over, my first thought was: I'll bet this got terrible reviews – and very positive audience reaction. I was right.

Such disparities, of course, are nothing new. It used to be that you could easily explain the gulf between the responses of critics and audiences to certain movies by saying that the former prefer art and the latter prefer entertainment. *Citizen Kane*, widely considered the greatest picture of all time, came out in 1941, but the top-grossing movies that year were *Sergeant York* (OK, that one's a classic, too), *Honky Tonk* (a minor Clark Gable Western), *Louisiana Purchase* (one of Bob Hope's lousiest comedies), *How Green Was My Valley* (another classic), and *Caught in the Draft* (more third-tier Bob Hope). Nowadays, however, the difference between critics and audiences is usually ideological. Looking at the top 100 all-time audience favorites on imdb.com, I noticed that *Fight Club* (1999) snagged tenth place – this for a movie that critics widely savaged as macho and violent and that holds a just-over-middling Metacritics score of 66/100.

So it was, indeed, with the *Death Wish* remake. While audiences rated it B+, reviewers tended to agree with Barry Hertz of the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, who [denounced](#) it as “ultra-right-wing dog whistling,” condemned its “sickeningly sincere gun fetishization,” and, in sum, called it “one of the most ill-

timed, ill-conceived, ill-executed, and just plain ill – as in sick, diseased, rotten – films to grace the big screen in recent memory.” Well, put it this way: the film doesn’t pull punches. In one scene, Kersey walks into the hospital room of his comatose daughter, Jordan (Camila Morrone), to find a friend of hers reading aloud from the works of Milton Friedman, so Jordan won’t fall behind at school. I laughed aloud: I could imagine at least one left-wing reviewer’s head exploding at that conservative dog whistle. (Why not, after all, have the friend reading Howard Zinn or Noam Chomsky, as would be the case in any self-respecting Hollywood flick?) Sure enough, Stephen Whitty in the *New York Daily News* was suitably outraged by this detail: this film, he complained, was so reactionary that it “even name-drops right-wing economist Milton Friedman”! Full points there, Mr. Roth.

To be sure, a couple of the reviewers who joined the AV Club’s A.A. Dowd in [deriding](#) “the movie’s fucked-up politics” – which, in Dowd’s view, amounted to the obviously primitive belief “that more guns, not less, will make us all safe” – were honest enough to acknowledge at least some of its merits: Dowd, for example, conceded that “[b]y most metrics, this *Death Wish* is a better movie than the first one. The acting is stronger, and it’s much more confidently, dynamically directed.” In the *Guardian*, an otherwise hostile Amy Nicholson [admitted](#) that “in my screening, *Death Wish* got plenty of applause.”

I’m not surprised. This remake might not be the most extreme case of a relatively recent movie loved by audiences and loathed by critics, but it’s pretty damn close – close enough to provide a textbook example of the gulf between the way ordinary Americans (i.e., the deplorables) think and the way the official guardians of our culture (i.e., the people who call us deplorables) think. Almost consistently, the reviewers of *Death Wish* mock the idea that there’s really a major urban crime problem (or suggest that actually paying attention to

that problem is somehow offensive); they mock the idea that owning a gun is anything other than barbaric; they're offended that hard-working, law-abiding suburbanites think they have a right to feel safe in their homes; they're offended at anything that so much as hints at the fact that most murders in a city like Chicago are black-on-black, and gang-related; and they're offended by men who think that part of their role, as men, is to protect "their" women.

In the *Death Wish* remake, the grieving Kersey visits the office of the cop (Dean Norris) who's investigating his wife's murder. On the wall he sees a multitude of index cards, each indicating a different murder that's currently on the cop's plate. The cop assures him that most of those cases are gang killings – "trash killing trash" – and that the murder of Kersey's wife is, for him, a special case, in a separate category from the others. Several of the reviewers of *Death Wish* were outraged by this line. Of course they were: these are the kind of people who can spend a year weeping crocodile tears over the death of George Floyd but who don't give a moment's thought to the countless decent citizens whose lives have been damaged or destroyed by Floyd and creeps of his ilk.

In fact they're even worse than this: they seem to be repelled by the very spectacle of people mourning loved ones who've been mowed down by monsters. You get the impression that, in their view, those survivors – if only they were more evolved! – would recognize the perpetrators as the *real* victims, and themselves and their beloved dead as the truly guilty parties. Needless to say, these reviewers' views on crime and punishment, law and order, violence and vigilantism – and, for that matter, on any moral question whatsoever – are utterly worthless, informed almost entirely by vile ideologies picked up in classrooms (and reinforced daily by establishment-media groupthink) and bearing virtually no trace of wisdom born of lived experience. Hence their opinions on films, such as *Death Wish*, that address such themes – whether in a way that's

serious, sensational, or somewhere in between – are utterly worthless, too.

But I guess those of us with any sense knew that already.

First published in