

RAPE CARD

NATHAN HUGHES-BERRY

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Abstract

Rape Card is a fifteen-minute narrative film that attempts to explore the terrifying rise of apathetic attitudes towards sexual assault that are plaguing societies and being perpetuated through the entertainment industry all over the world. The film was shot on location in Toronto - initially for three days at the end of June 2016, then reshoots, totaling another four days, happened between August and October 2016. The film was completed on the 13th January 2017.

Here is the 'official' log line and short synopsis that will be used for festivals and press:

A dystopian fable set in a world where apathy towards sexual assault has become legislation.

Frances is a young woman living in a rape apathetic society, which has resulted in a card system that entitles men to one legal rape and ensures each woman can only be legally raped once. In a haphazard attempt to take control, Frances decides to initiate her own sexual assault. The perfect opportunity presents itself when she meets Eric, who has just received his freshly printed rape card.

Acknowledgements

Dedicated to Mary Parkinson - though I'm not sure she would have wanted to be associated with a film that has 'rape' in the title.

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About This Support Paper

In these academic papers it can be difficult to really put down what it is you want to say. It has to fit a certain format in order for me to graduate but I also want to truthfully get across my reasons for making the film without pretentious guff. I suppose if I could put down clearly everything that I wanted to say on paper, the film wouldn't need to exist. After too much worrying about format and style, I am deciding to go with a conversational approach, which I hope is a better way of connecting with fellow filmmakers and anyone else interested in reading about the film.

Of course this style can easily become incredibly pretentious and it can often read like some guy with a massive ego just jerking off about how he did something – why should we give a damn? I'm reminded of Karl Ove Knausgaard's personal diary approach to his six autobiographical novels, very provocatively titled *My Struggle*. Here he presents the daily routine of his life in rather poetic, often humorous and arguably indulgent fashion. In talking about himself doing exercise when alone on an island he asks "how desperate do you have to be to start doing push-ups to solve your problems¹?"

¹ Knausgaard, Karl Ove, *My Struggle: Book 2: A Man in Love*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Tra edition, June 3, 2014, p496.

He receives both criticism and acclaim for his approach, some citing it as the highest form of egotism and others praising the openness and the way it helps them unpack their own experiences in life. With this I am also reminded of David Mamet's *On Directing Film* – with his almost autistic logical breakdown of filmmaking (“The work of a director is the work of constructing the shot list from the script²”) that is often criticised for being ‘narrow sighted with no practical advice³’ but which I find refreshingly straightforward and unpretentious in its approach and thus very useful and insightful.

All I can say is that a personal style is important for me to properly discuss the making of *Rape Card*. It is (hopefully) a very contentious film but perhaps somewhat surprisingly an incredibly personal one, with many personal stories tied into the filmmaking process itself. With that in mind, this paper is an attempt to best portray what happened and why; and is for both fellow filmmakers and those interested in the film because of its socially challenging message. At the same time it is a straight forward account of how the film was made, avoiding the mystical bullshit that director's usually tack on afterwards.

² Mamet, David, *On Directing Film*, Penguin Books; Reprint edition, Jan. 1 1992, p.5.

³ Ines Häufler, VeDra (Association for film and TV script consultants), Newsletter No.25, February 2013, p.11

It is a difficult process to analyze your own work but then again Jung says “Man's task is to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious⁴” so maybe this will be a healing process. In any case this style feels more honest than third person...and I can't really write like that anyway.

I completely understand people reading this and thinking– I don't care – you're not famous – why am I reading about this? But understand this is about the film and everything I discuss will relate to that – it's not a rambling diary of stuff that happened – everything discussed here goes right back to the film. Trust me, I hate reading self indulgent journals as much as anyone...a good point to just get on with it now then...apologies and all excuses aside...here it is...

⁴ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage, April 23 1989, p391

The Cast List

Throughout I'm going to refer to people using their first names; so to avoid confusion I will introduce key people up front. I'll also add reminders as we go but for now here is the core team...

Coral Aiken – Producer/Marriage counsellor

Madeleine Sims-Fewer – Ex-Wife/writer/co-director/Lead Actress
(Frances)

Emma Wardle – Associate Producer

Vale Abbott – Girlfriend/Co-Editor/Life Support

Greg Biskup - Cinematographer

John Greyson – Professor/Supervisor/Guardian Angel

Tereza Barta – Professor/Reader/Antagonist

Rafferty Blumberg – Lead Actor (Eric)



Image 1: Still from *Rape Card* - Madeleine, Rafferty and Steven.
Photo credit — Greg Biskup

Getting It Off My Chest

Since I started making films at The Drama Centre in London, I have worked with Madeleine Sims-Fewer. How it goes is we come up with an idea and then argue about it until it starts to take shape. Then she writes a script and we knock that around until it resembles something like a decent sort of film. Then I direct that film; usually she acts in the leading role and then we edit together. Until just over a year ago Madeleine was (still is legally) my wife. The breakup happened during the pre-production of this film - a film about rape, written by and starring in the leading role...you guessed it – Madeleine.



Image 2: Nathan, Madeleine and Rafferty on set.
Photo Credit — Kip Harrop

This way of working together changed with the break down of our marriage and understandably made parts of the process incredible difficult and emotional. I cannot write this paper without discussing the breakup but please understand it's incredibly complicated to put down such personal details on a public document. What I'll do is stick to how it affected key parts of the filmmaking process. It will be tough but I'm sure it will be somehow therapeutic to get through. Here goes...

During pre-production it was incredibly difficult, as we had to meet alone to try and devise ways of getting funding for the film and we had split up just a couple of months before. At that stage we had decided we would make the film no matter what shape we were in financially but had figured that to make it the way we wanted, we would need around \$20,000. I remember meeting Madeleine in a coffee shop out at The Beaches (East Toronto) and we were having a huge row about how we would make the film without any money (at that stage we had been rejected from every fund we had applied for) and it turned very personal, with us screaming at each other about not caring and giving up on the relationship. At the height of the argument my iPod (I still don't have a phone) pinged an email through from SSHRC saying that I had been successful in my application and was awarded \$18,000. We stopped and both laughed hysterically for about an hour. We could finally get

moving. Maybe that's the best kind of marriage counselling – giving out money.

That's kind of the way it was throughout. Work became caught up in the personal but weirdly separated when it needed to. In many ways it was easier to work together than when we were in a relationship. Everything ended once a meeting or shooting day was over and we were able to go home, vent and move on. It wasn't all consuming, sitting down to have dinner and still figuring out a costume detail or how to get an actor to set the next day. Everyone on the crew was amazed at how well we worked during the shoot. Coral (Producer) said she was surprised how well it worked. It didn't surprise me because we just had to get on with it and that involved pushing away personal feelings, which as an English man I am an expert at (until later when it all hits you like a truck).

It was easiest during the shoot because everything is so chaotic and fast that you really don't have time for feelings anyway. There was one incredibly tense moment where Madeleine was having some still shots taken with Cynthia Amsden (the publicist) and she then came back on set and was co-directing a scene I was already shooting. I got pissed off because I felt like it was all for show. Looking back it's just how we're different. I don't care about PR and marketing...in many ways to my detriment I suppose. I just want to

do the work. But again this was easier being separated as I went and had a few gins with Vale (girlfriend) afterwards, vented a little and moved on (therapy speak).

The way it affected the production process was that we had much more clearly defined roles than ever before. We both worked in pre-production on getting everything done and on making decisions because that's the way it had to be. I worked on the shot list and more typical direction because Madeleine had to act in the film. Then on set I was the director, with Madeleine offering advice and giving her opinion on shots. During post-production I edited with Vale, with the agreement that every cut would get notes from Coral, Emma (associate producer) and Madeleine.

That was the way it worked and for the most part it worked well. The break up saw a new level of respect actually – whereby we each stuck to our roles and kept it professional – probably because if we didn't it would have brought out too much emotion to deal with whilst making a film – and probably because we both realized we cared more about the film than our feelings about the breakup. That might sound crazy...it might be crazy, I'm not sure. But that's how it was.

Because I work in a way where the film is all I care about until it's finished, Vale became a part of the process. During the edit she sat with me and gave opinions and tried things out and gave a much-needed objective viewpoint. Of course this was difficult for Madeleine, who was used to being there when I was editing the film and she understandably felt somewhat replaced. I remember one day we went back to the underpass location we shot the tunnel sequence in, with the idea that we would shoot some stills. Vale is a photographer and agreed to shoot stills on film. We turned up and did the shoot. It was awkward as hell and difficult for Vale and perhaps more so for Madeleine. I remember some time afterwards I went to meet Madeleine at the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario) to talk about the cut. She told me about that day – and that what was so hard was looking back at a life that would have been hers.

In my opinion the film is better because of the break up. Like a child; the film itself became the centre of attention rather than our relationship. There were difficult moments but it forced us to always do things that were best for the film – we were both incredibly aware of our personal situation not affecting things negatively. We also questioned everything – every scene, every word, every cut...everything. And questioning things in a film always brings better results. That's what I'm sticking with anyway; it's what I've experienced – the more you question something, the more you justify it being there or not.

We have since decided not to work with each other again. We were scheduled to work on another film but I told Madeleine I couldn't do it. It didn't feel right anymore and this film feels like a good farewell to an intense and tumultuous but very productive working partnership (and marriage). The one scene that will always stick in my mind was shooting the rape scene itself. It wasn't in the original script and was therefore a re-shoot. We setup in Greg's (cinematographer) garage with just a skeleton crew of the three of us. It was his car, one light and the camera. He shot through the front door whilst I knelt down outside the car and held Madeleine by the ankles – repeatedly slamming her against the side of the car door to simulate the assault. I'm sure my therapist would have an absolute field day with that.

The Inspired Nightmare

Back in the summer of 2014 I was walking along the canal that runs from Camden Town to Kings Cross (London, UK) and I met Madeleine coming back from work. We were deep into the editing of our then recent short film *The Substitute* and I was happy for the break away from the screen. As I walked with her she seemed to be off in her own world so I asked what was wrong.

She told me she had the most disturbing dream of her life the night before about being in the middle of the city in broad daylight, running away from an unknown man who was trying to rape her. She explained that in the dream she would run up to strangers in the street and beg for their help but nobody would do anything. Then as she continued on she saw women walking around with a single tattoo of a fingerprint on different parts of their bodies - on the neck, the forearm, and their ankles. As she tried to escape the man following her she jumped a garden fence and walked in on a horrific scene of a man zipping up his trousers next to a woman he had just sexually assaulted. She saw him remove a card from his trouser pocket and stamp the card onto the woman, who was lying there terrified.

Needless to say this dream, or nightmare, was absolutely terrifying and left me feeling pretty disturbed as we continued to walk along the canal in the

spring sunshine. But following my initial shock, and slight concern for Madeleine's state of mind, we started to talk more. I found myself wanting details about the dream – what were people wearing, what city was she in, how did the card work, was it legal – all of these of course were mostly unanswerable as it was a dream and had its own internal logic.

If they are truly the mind bringing into consciousness what is subconscious, this dream of Madeleine's must have sprung from her deep fear of sexual assault, and perhaps then latched onto her strong will to think of an idea for our next film. We had just finished shooting *The Substitute*, which was an explicit attack on the way misogyny is encouraged through socialisation and this led to many conversations with friends about the way in which they had been objectified and terrified in their own lives - so these ideas were floating around a lot at that time.

We quickly realized this was the idea for the next film. It was big enough to start getting stuck into and we set about finding a story within the bigger idea of this society that had legalized rape. After much thought and many arguments we realized the interesting question was why this woman was running away scared, and not complicit in what was happening around her. This became the basis we worked off – creating a character that did not want to accept the rules of the society she was living in.

The first draft of the script told the story of a woman (Frances) living in this world where rape had been legalized, who wanted to somehow control her own fate. She had managed to avoid being raped by never going out alone and by taking careful precautions, but was now sick of living her life in fear. So she decided that she could take some kind of control by finding her own rapist, and by choosing how and where it happened and where the tattoo was put on her body. I remember a three-hour car journey down to my Grandfather's eightieth birthday in which Madeleine banned me from talking to her so that she could figure out an ending to the film.

The problem we realized very early on was going to be in correctly showing the viewer the protagonist's motivation for taking such a drastic action and in economically setting up the rules of this alternate world. Both Madeleine and I abhorred the kinds of films that are set in dystopian futures where everyone walks around in white clothes with hover cars and swipe cards. We also felt the impact of the idea was in it's current setting. That nightmare vision of Madeleine's was just set in a city, with people looking like they do now. It made the premise even scarier than something set in a completely alien alternate reality. It is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which she herself refers to as speculative fiction. The difference between that and science fiction being that these things could

actually happen. This was the same with *Rape Card* – with the script Madeleine was taking the twisted logic of modern day rape culture to its logical conclusion.

So that was the starting point and following that we committed to making the film and that was no easy commitment to make. In deciding to make a film about sexual assault and rape culture you are immediately told you have a huge responsibility. It's not an easy topic to tackle but we knew we had something important to say. We both worked hard researching rape culture and victim blaming, beginning with the historical context and moving into present day issues. Then we moved onto the films that depicted rape and sexual assault culture – looking at the positive and negative aspects and thinking about our own approach. The results of that research and its impact on the film you can read about in the latter half of this paper. First I will delve into the filmmaking process; how we made the film and what inspired it. It is important to remember that above all we are artists making a film and our concern was focused on effectively getting our viewpoint across on the awful way sexual assault is currently dealt with. We were confident in our viewpoint and in the knowledge that we would never make a stupid film, void of any relevance or research - but we were also keen to avoid a preachy essay type film. There are enough of those already, on every subject you could imagine.

From Dream to (Filmed) Reality

Madeleine had written a first draft. We had this controversial and rousing concept. We were putting together the story. What we needed to do was really think about what we were saying with this film and how we could best portray that. Every film needs a message and a film taking on rape culture and the general apathy shown towards sexual assault certainly needs to have a very clear message. We were aware that this film could be taken the wrong way as some kind of pro-rape film, so it was incredibly important that we hit the right tone.

We were both sick of the victim blaming, of the way there are no repercussions for many rapists, of the way people talk negatively about women that had been raped or assaulted; using phrases like “she asked for it” or “she shouldn’t have been out late at night wearing that⁵”. I remember Madeleine recounting a story of a friend at a sleepover who said that if you slept in your underwear with your boyfriend then he has every right to expect sex with you. This sounds ridiculous to me but think about how many men justify forced coercion by saying that she was naked or seemed to be into it.

So the message was simple; that rape is always horrific and unacceptable and that society is putting too much responsibility on the victim to avoid sexual

⁵ Kate Harding, *Asking for It*, Da Capo Lifelong Books, Aug. 25 2015, p11.

assault. The responsibility should lie with the rapist and not the victim; who has absolutely no control whatsoever. Of course many people know that already but societally we are still not doing enough and many victims are still too scared to report acts of sexual violence. 'Ultimately, only a tiny handful of rapists ever serve time for rape, a shocking outcome given that we view rape as close kin to murder in the taxonomy of violent crime.'⁶

⁶ David Lisak, *Understanding the Predatory Nature of Sexual Violence*, Ph.D, 2008, p 1.

The Rules of Engagement

With the clarity of our condemnation of rape culture set and the method of an alternate reality in place, we needed to figure out the best way of presenting this to an audience. We spent weeks determining the intricacies of the card system and how the card itself would work. Then we took more time to figure out what people's attitudes (in the world of the film) would be to the rule, since we decided it had been in place for over ten years. Here is an overview of what we worked out:

- Every man can register for a 'rape card' when they turn 16 years old
- Men register their details at a rape registration centre
- Details are stored on a system and linked to the individual's card - which contains their photograph, basic info and fingerprint
- The fingerprint transfers as a tattoo when it makes contact with skin
- The card is 'activated' by peeling off the top layer of protective plastic
- The tattoo can be scanned at any rape confirmation office to bring up the information of the rapist
- Every man is entitled to use his card just once but is not obliged to use it at all
- Every woman can only be raped once, after that she is 'off limits'
- It is the man's responsibility to ensure the woman he rapes is 'clean'
- It is the woman's responsibility to ensure that her tattoo is visible to men

- A woman can contact the 'rape registration centre' to receive confirmation and details about her assault

We liked the idea of the card and the way it can be 'tapped' onto the skin as it links to the way card technology works right now. Tapping your debit card to pay...or tapping Oyster cards (Presto in Toronto) to get on public transport. It seemed to be perfect for hammering home that apathetic attitude towards rape in this world – it's just a card that you tap onto the victim – it's a form of consumption.

The reason we chose the rule to be only one rape per man is because it seems to say; "look, we are doing something, only one rape per person". With no legislation whatsoever the world would become a free for all and the viewer would not relate as easily. This rule created some sense of order – making it easier to think about the inadequacy of the legislation that is in place now to prevent assault in the real world. It also added an interesting and disturbing layer of choice for the men in the world; whom do they use their card on? Do they save it for 'someone special' or use it straight away? It also made interesting parallels between virginity – with most people keen to lose their virginity as quickly as possible.

The idea of the rape confirmation centre came later and was the result of wanting to add a layer of humiliation for the victim that is level with the

humiliation of having to report a rape and not being believed. So we created this phone system with an automated message and inappropriately upbeat holding music as an attempt to further show the way sexual assault is being marginalized as something that just happens – the treatment of it in the film being compared to something like reporting a faulty washing machine.

What You Need to Show

These rules were essential to us building the world and figuring out the logistics of the alternate society, but the next stage was figuring out what was important to show the audience. The difficulty with a film like this is that you can spend so long setting it all up that people are bored by the time the story actually kicks in. Another concern is that you set up things too obviously so people feel patronized or preached to. So the balance was figuring out the essentials of what we need the audience to see in order to understand that world and subsequently the story.

1. You need to know there is a card and that it is used to 'legalise' an act of rape for the perpetrator.
2. That a victim is left with a stamp somewhere on their body that marks them as 'raped'.
3. Men can only use their cards once.
4. Women can only be raped once.
5. This world completely accepts the legislated card system and is openly apathetic to rape.

These became the important elements that needed to be communicated to the viewer – before considering the story itself. Without this information the world would cause confusion and break the viewer's concentration. The goal was simplicity of Robert Bresson proportions - a filmmaker renowned for showing the audience only the essential elements of a scene with 'each

sequence has been though through down to the smallest detail. It is stripped of everything superfluous⁷.

So these key factors were what I repeatedly went back to when figuring out shots and sections that were important. Creating the film required always having the presence of mind on two levels – is the story working (emotionally and on a human level – does it make sense) and is the logic of the world holding up (rationally and based on the expectations set out).

We decided very early on that we did not want to have a film that started with exposition about the world. It would have been very easy to start the film with some kind of ‘educational video’ type segment that showed all of the rules (I’m thinking of something like Kurt Wimmer’s opening to *Equilibrium* that sets up the state of the dystopian future) – but this becomes incredibly boring. Instead we wanted each scene to progress the story whilst simultaneously providing more information about the proposed world. It became – what do people actually need to know here - instead of showing everything.

The partial exception to that is the opening scene. This we deliberately wanted to remove from the main narrative in order to demonstrate the card in use. It shows the end of an assault that has happened – one which the

⁷ Rainer Werner Fassbinder - James Quandt, *Robert Bresson (Revised): Revised and Expanded Edition*, Toronto International Film Festival; 2 edition, Feb. 1 2012, p550

narrative is not concerned with – echoing the problem of every rape being an horrific event, whether it is told or untold – this anonymous rape that prequels the narrative of the film is still just as horrific with the same awful consequences.

The shooting of the opening scene provided it's own drama. One of Madeleine's close friends had agreed to play the part of the woman. The scene entailed partial nudity (in the way it was shot there was no nudity in the end) and is a very sensitive scene because it involved simulating sexual assault. The morning of the shoot (day two) we received word that she had dropped out. We were completely panicked about who could step in and do the scene and also completely perplexed as to why she had backed out at the last minute. Obviously we assumed she was not fully comfortable with the scene after all –understandably so.

What we found out later was that her husband had read the script the night before and had actually forbidden her from acting in the scene. How ironic – we're making a film about rape culture and female subjugation and a husband won't let his wife act in it because – in his words – “you're a Mother”. We were all completely mortified. Luckily for the film's sake Coral went beyond her role as Producer and stepped in to play the part.

Interestingly as a side note – the male actor in the opening scene did not want to be credited in the final film. He works as a male model (one reason he was chosen actually – as an archetypal handsome man) and worried that his association with the film could damage his chances of getting work. The sad truth is that it probably would – not for the reason that people are concerned with rape culture and it’s portrayal in the media but because rape is still a word that provokes strange reactions where people shut down. He was aware that people would just see the word ‘rape’ listed in his credits and somehow associate that with something negative, without questioning what the film is about or anything like that. They just see the word and make negative associations.



Image 3: Still from *Rape Card* - the card.
Photo Credit — Greg Biskup

Building a Story

We decided the most interesting story within the confines of this alternate world was that of a woman who decides to try and somehow rebel against the situation in an attempt at control. This of course is drawing a parallel to the way the world works now, where women are trapped in a system primarily run by men and where attempts to take control often seem to end in frustration. How does one escape the control of people that control everything? So within the confines of our established backdrop of legislated sexual assault, we came up with the story of a woman who trying to control her own sexual assault in order to have some agency. She accepts it will happen and has to happen but thinks she can at least control when, how and who.

It's not the easiest story but that was the point – it's the story that will get the audience to think and ask themselves questions; about what she is doing, why she is doing it, whether it is right or wrong. These are the important questions we need to be asking about everything surrounding rape culture. Through questioning the motives of the character in the film, the audience is also questioning the real things that are happening. I'm reminded of the moment in the script where Frances (protagonist) is negotiating the terms of her assault with Eric and he says:

“It’s not really rape if you want it is it?”

Frances replies; “who says I want it?”

The argument that this section of the film brings up is about the context of consent. In this world, rape has been legislated so that she could be legally raped once. Her consenting to allow the rape to happen is not the same as consenting to sex. The complication this brings up doesn’t have an answer within the film itself. It is the question I want to leave the viewer with. Is it still rape even if she is literally asking to be raped? That sparks a whole debate around the notion of consent and the context surrounding consent. In the film it is very deliberately extreme; with the hope being that the viewer will reflect on the notion of consent in the real world and those awful excuses that we hear time and time again.

If It's a Man's World Then They Really Fucked It Up

How can a man make a film about rape? How can a man make a legitimate film concerning the entire culture surrounding rape? And one-step further – how can a man make a film about a woman who is trying to control her own rape? The difficulty I faced in directing this film is that I am a man making a film about rape culture – and for some people that brings up huge concerns. I was fully aware of the shit storm that would be stirred up as soon as I decided to make this film and that because of the controversial and explosive nature of the film, there would be people looking for any reason to discredit it.

I would argue that sexual assault is a human rights issue that both men and women need to talk about and the way it is treated societally is something that deeply concerns me. As American academic Camille Paglia stated in a playboy interview almost twelve years ago; “we have allowed the sexual debate to be defined by women, and that’s not right. Men must speak, and speak in their own voices, not voices coerced by feminist moralists.”⁸ We shouldn’t allow the responsibility of change to fall solely on victims or solely on women for that matter. I completely understand a film about rape, with rape in the title, is likely to cause even more controversy if a man directs it

⁸ Camille Paglia, Playboy Interview, May 1995, p.2

but that doesn't mean it needs to be justified any more than if a woman made the film.

Though I directed the film I worked very closely with Madeleine. We are credited as co-directors because the work we both do falls outside of the traditional boundaries of the credited roles; so it felt right we should be credited as co-creators. I cannot and will never know what it is like to be a woman and to be scared of being raped. That's not within my power. But in making a film about the culture surrounding sexual assault, I am attempting to get discussion going on a deeper level than just – rape is bad – yes I agree it is bad. The shows that we're all part of the problem and can all be part of a solution. Of course I have no idea what the solution would be, there are people that know a lot more than I do on the subject. I am a filmmaker and as such can only make a film about it - but the hope is that the film encourages people to think about the larger issues.

The reality of this film is that at every stage of production I was working alongside my female collaborators (Madeleine, Coral, Emma and Vale) and working out the best decisions for the film we wanted to make together. We were all on the same page the whole way through – this was a film condemning rape culture and the pathetic support there is for victims. We were all concerned with ensuring the film had the right tone that showed how

serious the issue is. But aside from those factors, me being a man makes no difference. I'm a filmmaker making a film about a very serious issue that concerns me deeply. That is the right of any artist. To me, anyone who discredits the film on the basis of a man directing it, is incredibly small minded and is part of the problem of making human issues the responsibility and concern of only one gender.

If you follow the notion of only making films about things you can experience you would end up with a whole heap of terribly boring stories. Think about Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*; is it informed by the real experience of the director traveling to space?

Potential For Explosions

When I first pitched the idea as my Masters Thesis Film at York - the reactions were vehemently mixed but one thing that seemed consistent was that there was an extreme reaction. I've talked about film ideas before, plenty of them, some of which I've then shot, where people kind of just nod and say "yeah that sounds good" or just nod and say nothing. This was definitely not one of those films. People cared and whether they loved or hated it – they had a very strong opinion on why. What I didn't fully realise at the time was the truly explosive nature of the material. I remember my Film Production Professor Phil Hoffman using that word: 'explosive'. I kind of did that thing of nodding but only after shooting did I fully understand the extreme reactions that would come with the sharing the film and actually even just the idea.

Of course life isn't simple and I'm certainly not a simple human being. That's not to say that it's better to be complicated or smarter. I wish for nothing more than simplicity. That's Zen, Buddhism, enlightenment – simplicity of living. With that in mind I had a problem - how do I get the message across without it just feeling like I was upsetting an audience or being controversial for the sake of it? I'm supposing you would want an answer to that. I don't know entirely and hopefully this paper will provide the answer as it goes along – maybe that's too optimistic. But that was the problem that I worked through - how do I show something that is happening in society that is awful

and inhumane without simply preaching to people? And then how do I not just upset and alienate viewers or everyone who has a personal experience of sexual assault?

I guess part of the answer was to try and connect to that gut feeling. Does it feel right? That is what guided many decisions on the shoot, on the script, on the edit, throughout the last leg of post-production. Does this feel right? No? Then let's work on it until it does.

I'm not sure the final film is all that controversial in terms of what the viewer is shown and for sure far worse is seen in popular television shows but I am aware that controversy may be sparked because the protagonist is seen asking if men want to rape her. This of course is provocative, and deliberately so - it fits with the context of the world and her action is the direct result of her circumstances and her relationship to her social surrounding and the legislation that exists there. It is a bold statement against rape culture that is intended to make people think. Not everyone wants to think about these things and that's fine and for those who watch the film and think it is offensive, then I welcome the chance to talk with them about why.

The Title Itself

As soon as we hit on *Rape Card* it stuck. We were aware it is an incredibly provocative title that will make a lot of people uncomfortable – that’s why it is perfect for this film. The title itself is the first step in breaking down barriers of communication about rape – the word itself is right there in the title – there is no illusion as to what this film is taking on and we are not shying away from that.

It also addresses one of the elements of rape culture itself; the myth of women ‘playing the rape card’ to destroy a man’s career or reputation and in reality becomes something that is used to assuage women from reporting cases of rape and puts a massive pressure on victims to either prove their case or remain silent. Part of this is the awful perpetuation of the ‘grey areas’ of sexual assault, which are essentially excuses for rapists who don’t want to actually face up to what they have done.

There was a moment when we were applying for funding from Bravofact! (unsuccessfully) where we sat down and thought about the title. Specifically whether it would lessen our chances to secure funding. This consideration led us back to our original intention with the film; to provoke thought and debate about rape culture. This title was part of blowing that open and needed to be strong and bold. If we weren’t going to use the word rape in a film denouncing

rape culture then why would we even make this film? This was the start of a solid process of sticking to our intention and upholding our own moral beliefs whilst battling with the difficulties of making the film and securing finance and support (made even more difficult with a male director attached). This doesn't mean not thinking about anything or anyone else's opinion during the process, but rather thinking about everything and ensuring we are routing everything back to the original purpose of the film.

A girl I met at the coffee shop I was working at during production started talking to me about the film and asked me what it was about. I told her and she became very clearly upset, not really saying much. The next day she came back and had a whole slew of questions, about the film and the intention and about whether a man can be involved in making a film like that. So in that way we started a conversation on the topic. I don't believe this kind of questioning of rape culture would really happen in as much depth if we were making a film that simply told people how bad rape is, through a series of scenes that show things that are wrong. The incendiary nature of the alternate world where rape has been legislated provides a fantastic springboard for reflection and conversation. If people are initially outraged, they then begin to think about why they are outraged. That's what happened with this girl. She went home and thought about it and then wanted to talk

about the issue more. Of course I didn't have the answers but we talked and that is a good start to anything.

The title also created conflict during post-production at Redlab, where there was a lot of contention surrounding the film's premise and purpose. Myself, Coral, Emma and Madeleine all met with Ahmad Ismael who is the head of new business at Redlab and whom organized all of the post-production for the film. The meeting went well and we agreed on a price and explained what the film was about – then we sent a cut to Ahmad and everything was perfectly fine.

A few weeks later when post-production was due to start I received this email from Ahmad:

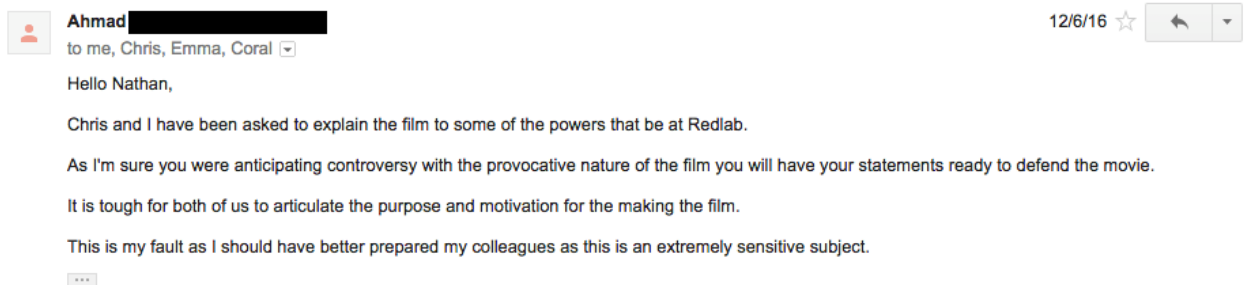


Image 4: Email from Ahmad at Redlab Toronto - on subject matter

Coral then replied with this:

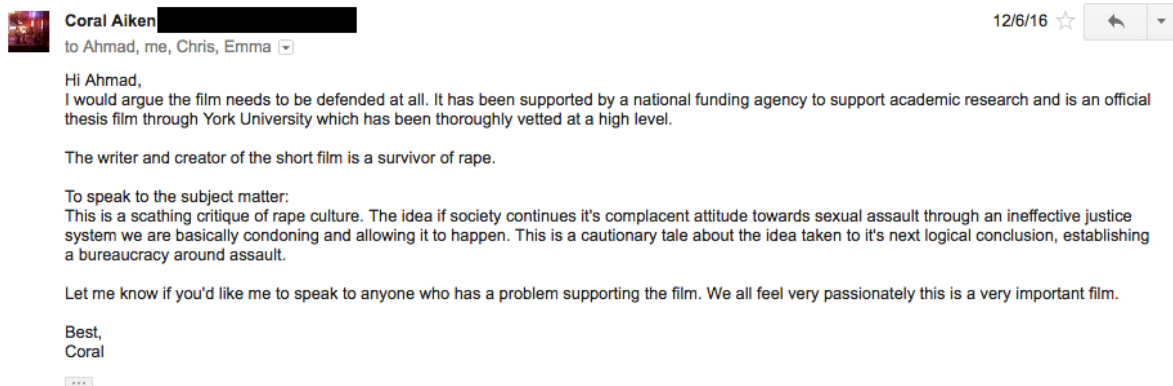


Image 5: Email response from Coral Aiken to the Redlab Toronto team
- response to subject matter

And Ahmad with:

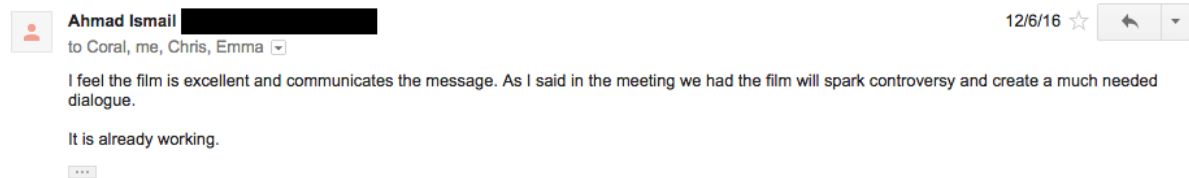


Image 6: Email response from Ahmad at Redlab Toronto
- response to Coral Aiken.

It was the start of what was to come – having to explain what the film was about. But Ahmad was right – it was already working – it was already creating a debate. Once we were at Redlab working the colourist AJ told us that it was interesting because they worked on films and TV shows that contained violent scenes of sexual assault as storyline points, with absolutely no questions from anyone. So how interesting that when a film arrives that is

tackling the whole culture surrounding sexual assault as entertainment,
that's when people apparently become scared.

Making the Film: A Quick Note on the Visuals

I completely did away with anything purely aesthetic – and actively fought against the film being aesthetically beautiful – or what would be considered as such anyway. I wanted it to feel slightly off and to make the audience feel unsettled – the reason being to focus the viewer on what was happening – what the information is – not how things look or how the camera moves.



Image 7: Nathan, Greg and Madeleine on set.
Photo Credit — Kip Harrop

There was a phone conversation with Greg a week before we shot where we said we would “make the film look ugly”. That was our clumsy mantra for the shoot. Shooting primarily handheld helped - and allowed us to move around

locations very quickly and piece together the story in a more believable way than if we were constrained to two or three locations because of massive setups. The character was in transition so the film needed to move with her through the world.

The film is not one of those short films where people will say “oh my God it’s beautiful” and that is very important because of the subject matter. To beautify the film would be tantamount to sensationalising rape itself. Instead the look of the film is cold, brutal and harsh. I think of the inspirational French filmmaker Robert Bresson talking about cinematography as a form of “writing with images in movement and with sounds.”⁹ It’s about simplicity and the essentials in story telling. Nothing added for the sake of a style or look.

⁹ Robert Bresson, Notes on the Cinematographer, Green Integer, May 1 1997, p34.

Casting

According to the Polish Master Filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski, “casting is one of the three most important moments in the process of making a film.¹⁰” For this film we had the dual task of finding excellent actors that were willing to be involved in such an explosive film, and who understood the message. It was already agreed that Madeleine would play Frances when she wrote the script – that was the way we had always worked together. Following that Madeleine was open to auditioning other actresses if necessary – it was never an issue. That is not because she was the writer; it was because she was right for the character and it was the right decision for the film.

As an actress she was an interesting choice because of her physical appearance and her apparent self-confidence. These are two traits that juxtapose the position the character finds herself in. As an attractive woman we thought it could be assumed by the viewer that it would be difficult for her to avoid being raped. That adds a layer where the viewer starts making judgments. Because of her self-confidence, her plan could come across as manipulative and the viewer may start to question her intention and integrity.

¹⁰Krzysztof Kieslowski, *A Masterclass for Young Directors*, 1994

These judgments we set up in the audiences mind are completely shattered when they see her suffering during the brutal rape scene and in the humiliating sequence that follows – where she calls to confirm the rape. That’s where Madeleine’s characteristics as an actress (sometimes coming across as frankly rather unlikeable) help to turn the audiences gaze inwards at the climax of the film. The idea is that the audience would find it easier to judge her – so at the end they subsequently feel awful for judging her.

If you think of the opposite type of actress (in the shallowest sense) – someone who is not considered typically attractive – who is unsure of herself and awkward – the viewer would immediately sympathize with her – but then where is the shift? Added to that, the audience would feel manipulated when presented with such an overtly sympathetic character. With Madeleine – the viewer judges her more thus making the shift even stronger at the end. Casting her added more fuel to the rape culture myths – attractive women, dressed provocatively on a night out should somehow expect to be assaulted.

Rafferty Blumberg (Eric) was more difficult to cast. We held auditions in Toronto and saw around twenty boys – many dropped out close to their audition time and said they were uncomfortable with the subject matter. After the first day I was set on Dakota Taylor (who subsequently played a smaller role as Eric’s friend). He had a naive quality that I thought would

bring something interesting. The audience would feel sorry for him and then wonder how they can feel sorry for someone who is mulling over whether to rape a woman.

So after the first day I thought Dakota would be it. Then on day two Rafferty showed up. He was only fourteen, which is much younger than we had imagined casting Eric - but a naiveté similar to Dakota but it was very much hidden behind bravado. This immediately made the character more interesting to watch. It also added this element of Eric being unsure but not wanting to seem weak.

Coral, Emma (associate producer) and I then auditioned Rafferty alongside Madeleine – using the scene where they meet in the alleyway and it completely fell into place. There was an awkward chemistry that made their scenes particularly uncomfortable. It was the combination of her manipulating this young boy for her plan, with his reluctance to appear like he was naive, which in turn made her manipulation even more compelling.

The Edit

I have never worked with an editor. This isn't through an insecurity or lack of trust; it's mainly based on not having enough money left in the budget.

Usually to work with a good editor on a short film, the compromise is time.

We had someone in place as we began shooting but it just didn't feel quite right. So I looked for someone else. We found another editor but again something didn't seem right - she didn't have the time to dedicate herself fully.

Whilst stressing over beginning the cut I decided to edit the film myself. That of course was a difficult decision because I directed and it is harder to maintain a sense of objectivity in the editing process. That's what people always say anyway - but I also worry about everything and am completely my own harshest critic. So I made an agreement with Coral (Producer), Emma (Assoc. Producer) and Madeleine that I would show them every edit and take notes and try everything that was suggested. That was the deal and we stuck to it very well.

With such a complicated world to setup in a very short time, a large part of the editing process was going back and forth with cuts, working out if there was enough information for the viewer to understand how everything worked. Once we worked that out the difficulty was in correctly and

efficiently establishing Frances' existing world and motivation for wanting to find her own rapist. The club section onwards is a large portion of the film and we wanted to get through the setup whilst the viewer was still interested in what was going on.

It was stripped back to the essentials of the script and involved changing the order and cutting dialogue and reshooting three key sections.

1. See the card being used
2. Eric gets his card - more specific rules
3. Frances sees a woman who has the stamp
4. Eric is picked up by his Dad
5. Frances walks home through a tunnel - thinks she will be assaulted
6. Frances - multiple locks on door as she gets home
7. Frances getting ready in the mirror - forming her plan

Within these sections are all of the beats that then become important and they are then subsequently broken down; as in - what do we need to see within that section then. For example:

1. How the card works, that it's used by a man after a sexual assault, that it's normal in this world (daylight - no police sirens or shocked onlookers), that it leaves a thumbprint tattoo
2. Eric is nervous about using his card (he asks questions and looks uneasy), his friends treat it lightly (laughing and joking at the

- window), women are conditioned to accept these rules (the registrar is a woman)
3. Frances is not okay with this rule (slows down and looks at the woman), this is something that just happens in this world and women have to get on with life (she is just on the platform - heading to work/home) - she is not emotional
 4. Eric is still a kid - his Dad picks him up, his Dad might have an influence over him, it's akin to talking about sex - awkward - Eric feels ashamed about his card
 5. Frances is scared, she doesn't want to be scared forever, she cannot live her life like this, in this world - the fear is constant - it could happen anywhere and anytime, she hasn't been assaulted yet
 6. She has a system in place, her house is secure through fear, she has been used to locking herself away
 7. She is tired of living in fear, she isn't sure about whether she would rather just have it over with so she can stop worrying about it

Once the story worked we were into figuring out the rhythm of the edit – how the film flowed. A lot of the opening parts of the film are without dialogue – or with little dialogue – so the images and sounds started to take on this kind of sectional feeling – like with music. We worked on cutting the images in that way – what feels right here – how would this progress into that? For

example the busy subway section where she sees a woman with a fresh tattoo on her neck then cuts to the relative quiet and calm of Eric being driven home by his Dad. It was compare and contrast and we created a natural flow to the film. These sections became more distinct with the sound design – well it strengthened it I suppose – improving what was already emerging.

After beginning the edit on my own I realised I needed someone there with me to actually sit and talk through everything. Vale had already started doing that and I asked her to be involved more formally and thankfully she agreed to help. How it worked was Vale and I would cut and then watch the whole thing and then every time we watched a cut, we just scribbled down anything that didn't feel right. This involved us writing notes like 'it seems too fast on Rafferty' and 'that feels out of place there'. Then you go back into the footage and try other options. In this way the pacing is built as you go. There was never a single moment where we just said "that works as best as it can so let's move on". We either recut or reshot and then recut until we were satisfied with everything. Once we had that rhythm in place it started to feel right. Then you are cutting based on what the audience needs to know. That's the way we did away with self-indulgence - by focusing the decisions on what was best for the audience.

I talk about the opening sections of the film being difficult but the ending was challenging in a whole other way. This goes back to the script and that notion that sometimes something works on paper but completely fails once you shoot it. Originally in the script (see appendix) the ending was a kind of montage of discovery that entailed the audience discovering that Frances was raped by Eric's Dad. Then we see Frances at a bus stop reporting her rape and feeling numb. This didn't work at all. The issue was the halfway point of revealing the rapist was the Father and sticking with our protagonist and how she feels about it. There was a scene in which we showed Eric look at his 'clean' card and then we see the Dad put his 'used' card in the car, whilst looking guiltily back up at the house. Then we go back to Frances at the bus stop for her moment of realization about having no control. It was too confusing and convoluted and the notes we got back (part of the deal remember) were about the confusion over who raped Frances.

I was at a complete loss at times and with Vale, kept re-cutting the ending, it must have gone through at least twelve entirely different versions. The first attempt was to cut the ending to reveal more than we had shot. That is - to cut as to see the Dad going into the car once Eric had left - in some kind of flashback type scenes at the end. This was even more confusing. We screened a cut at York and Tereza Barta (prof) said "we want to stay with her, she is

important. See the rape, her reaction and the call, then the shot of the Dad and that's it, bye bye".

Vale and I realised it was in taking away shots that we were able to answer the confusion. In not showing Eric with his card, you lose any confusion about him using it or not. In removing anything but Frances' experience, we are with her. Then when you show the Dad at the end, the audience can fill in the blanks. That way the sexual assault isn't about the Dad and we simply show him putting his card into the visor as a complete anti-climax. He just sexually assaulted a woman and his only concern is where he puts his 'used' card so his wife and son don't find out.

Reshoots

At Cineseige I met with John Greyson. The plan was to show him a cut of the film and get his feedback and guidance (the cut was incredibly rough at that time - and even further from the finished film than I realised). We went to Aroma and he watched it on his laptop. He looked up and pulled out the headphones. "You're not going to like this..."

I believed and probably deep down still do believe, that with careful planning and thought, you can shoot what you need within the time frame and come away with the shots needed for the film you intend to make. *Rape Card* was always a very tight shooting schedule because of the ambition of the film on the budget we were making it. Three days for a fifteen page script that contained around ten different locations.

There was a moment outside the club (Cinecycle) in the alleyway where we had not yet shot a close up of Madeleine (the protagonist and essential person in the scene) and the first assistant director was wrapping us. We argued about it and in the end I just shot whilst the fight continued. In theory these problems could have been avoided with more thought and planning or maybe with an acceptance of another day being needed – but theory is not practice and things always come up...or maybe it's that you always think you can work faster than you can.

But beyond this is the problem of what to do if you reach the editing stage and feel that sick feeling in your stomach when you're looking at footage that just isn't going to cut it. Worse still when you're looking at footage that doesn't tell the story in the way you need it to.

Well this is what we arrived at as we started cutting. Following the panic and despair phase I thought back to a York Film Department secret (not really) screening of Matt Johnson's second feature film *Operation Avalanche*.

Talking to him afterwards he told me that they had to reshoot a lot and that he was in fact still reshooting scenes and still re-cutting. At the stage, with a final cut, of course he was exaggerating for dramatic effect - it worked - but what stuck with me was the truth of him initially reshooting parts that didn't work. What dedication, what commitment, what a work ethic, this is the sign of a great filmmaker; someone who works until the film is great. That seed was planted in my mind - to be a great filmmaker you have to care about one thing above all; the film itself. At any cost you have to make the film in the best way you can. That doesn't necessarily mean doing it right the first time and it certainly does not mean giving up if it doesn't work. It does mean making sure it works in the end.

We were stuck with several major sections that for different reasons just didn't work at all:

1. The Tunnel Scene: where Frances is followed by a man she thinks will attack her.
2. Inside Frances' Apartment: She opens the package of Rohypnol and checks an ad she had put up about seeking a rapist.
3. Inside the Subway: Frances has a conversation with her friends about why she hasn't been carded yet.

I will break down each section here and talk about why it didn't work and what we did to fix that in the re-shoots. As a suggestion to anyone who is reading this as a filmmaker - spend the time to think about everything you can plan before you start shooting. Try and work out every part of the story properly and then you may avoid having to re-shoot. But also, if you end up having stuff that doesn't really work, just go and re-shoot it; it's a lot easier than you think when you are in that initial panic. And believe me, I was very panicked.

The Tunnel

The issue with what we had shot was that it didn't make sense. It was too complicated. It didn't give the audience a clear idea of what Frances felt or what she was doing. In fact it made it even more confusing for the viewer.

The solution was to sit and think about why that scene was in the script originally. It was there to show the audience part of the reason why Frances felt desperate enough to come up with this outrageous plan to orchestrate her own rape. The scene we originally shot (you can read it in the shooting script) was more confusing as it had Frances walk ahead in order to try and seduce the man following her, then when he didn't attack her she turned and berated him. When we watched what we had shot we realised this didn't give the right tone for the start of the film.

We needed to show the way her world worked and what she hated about it and what drove her to take desperate action. We needed the viewer to sympathize with her situation. They didn't necessarily have to agree with the way she deals with it, but they need to relate to her in that moment and understand why she would do those things later on.

So we went back to the underpass with a camera (Panavision kindly agreeing to loan us the Alexa for one more day) and we shot a simplified version. Frances walks through the tunnel - a man follows her closely, she panics as she prepares herself for the worst, the man get closer but then walks past her and her panic turns to relief. Then the crucial last moment - her relief turns to despair - very briefly a moment of 'I can't live my life in fear like this'.

I remember my direction to Madeleine was just walk – and then less, less, still less. It became about just being real. For what it's worth I think it's her best acting in the film.

The Apartment

This was a scene in the script where Frances comes home, locks multiple bolts on her bedroom door and then checks her laptop to see if she has had any reply to an advert she put out seeking a rapist. Then she opens a package containing Rohypnol.

Once again we went back to what this scene originally did in the script.

It was to show her fear and paranoia - the locks. She has been protecting herself for a long time with these rituals. Then the Rohypnol is to show the start of the plan; it may be something she has had in mind for a while but now she is desperate enough to execute it.

So we stripped the scene back to these things, and we made it in sections. We reshot a lot of options in the apartment and kept only the section of her locking her door. Three locks in quick succession with quick cuts. Then we cut

to the bathroom and that scene plays out. The other reshoot was pickups of the package being opened and the Rohypnol being taken out. These we placed after the bathroom scene - she has made the plan and in taking the Rohypnol out of the package she is committing to it. But crucially the viewer is not yet sure what her plan is.

These images when cut together seemed to suggest her need for and obsession with safety - the multiple locks, but also the shift between the Frances in the external world (the subway, the tunnel) and the Frances we see in the bathroom (her apartment). It was an effective way of switching between internal and external. The scenes that follow (the bathroom, the club, etc) are now showing a different side of Frances. The locks are the first stage of that. It brings her (and the viewer) into the other more private part of herself.

So this reshoot was again about stripping the scene back to what was essential for the viewer in order to tell the story effectively. In this case it was the best way to show what was happening without making a 'scene out of it' - the locks said what the whole scripted scene was saying - the Rohypnol bottle said everything about what she might do. It leaves questions for the audience - why all the locks on her door? What is she doing with the Rohypnol?

The Subway

Vale and I had hacked together this section in the subway of Frances listening to two friends talk about how they were carded and asking how she had avoided it for so long. The idea of the scene was to provide impetus and show why she was so keen to undertake such a desperate and dangerous plan at this moment. It worked on paper but in the cut it seemed strange. It didn't fit with the film. It was telling the audience what she was feeling rather than showing it.

So we had to think of reshooting the scene. And whilst we were at it, we should think of a better way of showing what the scene intended. We went back to the start and thought about what the scene needed to show the audience:

- Firstly that this legislation was completely normal in that world.
- Secondly that our protagonist was effected by it and was scared of it. She didn't conform.

Many ideas were thrown around and something began to emerge where Frances would be sitting on the subway and see a girl sitting nearby who has obvious signs of being attacked. Then the girl tries to cover up her tattoo stamp. We then show Frances looking perturbed and not doing anything to help.

This started to feel like it was getting there but it also seemed too complicated. There was too much going on again and that was our initial problem - clarity. So again we went back - what does this scene need to do? We hit on the idea of Frances as a witness - she feels frustrated with this legislation - with this world that she lives in - which leaves her feeling disengaged and distant.

That's something that immediately struck a chord with me. It was how many people feel now; frustrated with no real belief that any change can come about. So then, how to show this?

We hit on showing her on the subway - this is the first time the audience see the protagonist so we will let them see her for a moment, watch her as she is thinking, as she is traveling home from work. She seems anxious but we don't know why. Then we show her getting off the subway and passing a girl on the platform. The girl is trying to hold back tears and Frances notices the tattoo stamp on the girl's neck. Frances walks past and crucially slows down and then looks back over her shoulder before walking away.

This scene said everything we wanted it to, without the use of dialogue or anything too obvious. We simply show what the world is like for our protagonist. She sees these things that scare her and she wants to interact

with this girl, but cannot. She cannot face the reality of the world and attempts to separate herself from it. So this reshoot helped shape the opening. It was one of four reshoots that helped massively in shaping the opening of the film. The opening was by far the most difficult section to get right. The pacing needed to be fast but a lot had to be established in order for the later sections to make sense. We had to setup why Frances felt that arranging her own assault was the only solution she had.

The Rape Scene

This was understandably the most difficult scene of all the reshoots, of the entire shoot actually. Not only the shooting of the scene itself; but the decision as to whether to shoot it or not. We had thought about this a lot whilst we were scripting and decided the best approach was to show the events leading to and following the rape. It was the kind of Hitchcock reasoning of the imagination being far worse than what you can show.

However when we got into editing the film, we quickly realised that without seeing the scene we were losing a vital part of the story. The viewer needed to see the horrific reality of rape in order to understand the apathetic way in which it is dealt with as entertainment and as a reflection of the ridiculous views of rape culture and victim blaming. We needed to show the horrific reality. So despite the character wanting to orchestrate her own assault, the reality of it is absolutely terrifying and horrendous. It was essential to show

the audience this. At a screening of a rough cut at York, as I was rushing out on my way to a reshoot, Tereza stopped me and said “you need to see the rape. Think of *Irreversible*. We need to see her pain in that moment.”

She was right. I could feel that. We had to shoot this scene we had been avoiding. We used the same car from the original shoot and set it up in Greg’s (DP) garage and setup similar lighting to the existing night footage. It was of course a completely closed set - at the reshoot time we were a skeleton crew anyway - and we shot the scene as few times as possible in order to get the performance right. The difficulty was in portraying the protagonist’s drugged state, mixed with the horror she is experiencing. We decided she would come in and out of consciousness - having no control over her body but at moments being completely aware of what is happening - an experience concurrent with many accounts of women being date raped. The footage was absolutely horrific; even though we were there and completely aware it was entirely fake. This was of course a good thing. This scene needed to feel horrible and be almost traumatic to watch so that the audience will understand the horrific reality of rape and not the glorified sexualized versions used as entertainment.

The decision to show the rape helped tell the story and deliver the message. It provided the second turning point for Frances; remember the first being

the locks on her apartment shifting her to a new space. Well this scene shifts her, and the viewer, to another section, another moment of realisation. It's showing the reality of sexual assault so that the moments of Frances that follow put the audience into her shoes. They understand what she has gone through and start to think of the horror of that and how it would affect a human being. Then they understand her complete numbness when she confirms the rape on the phone at the end. It is her realization that rape is horrific no matter what the circumstances. The viewer will hopefully start to question then how rape is treated as anything but that. ¹¹

¹¹ * One side note about re-shoots - for filmmakers - just use the best camera you can get your hands on but don't worry too much. It doesn't matter. If it's the difference between being able to shoot something and not, then use whatever you can get your hands on. That's what we did. Though we got the same Alexa for one day - there were three days where we had to use a different camera and lenses. Another side note - lenses make a big difference. But again - it's the story that people care most about. If an audience is so disengaged as to be noticing the small differences in camera and lens choices then something is wrong with the story.

Finishing & Releasing the Film

This film is certainly not for everyone and it is definitely not what I would call a crowd pleaser or festival darling. It's incredibly contentious and provocative and we are aware that we need to pick the right festivals. Coral and I had a discussion recently about the festival strategy where we realised that it would either be picked up by one of the top tier festivals and have a run from there – or we would be pushing it into smaller festivals and building up an audience that way.

We were always aware we were making an incredibly difficult film to watch and that this could result in it being a difficult film to market; but I'm not sure how it will be taken at this stage. I'm too close to it to really know.

Cynthia Amsden (publicist) is working with us and has been since before the shoot. She absolutely loves the film and what it stands for – she is not surprisingly an ardent feminist and human rights activist. She's helping us properly promote the film and the key focus is on making sure the message is set out right from the outset.

As a team we all believe the film speaks for itself but in terms of festivals and marketing the film, you have to somewhat play the game. I fully admit it is my weakest point – marketing and promotion. I tend to fall apart when I have to write something about a film I've made or attempt to 'sell' it to

someone or something. With that in mind the strategy for festival promotion is being put firmly out of my control – on my insistence that it is not what's best for the film.

I'm incredibly happy with the film and proud at what we achieved. It's not easy to make a film like this and it took a lot of work to get it off the ground and shot, and even more work to finish it. I want people to see it and to know what they think of it but that's mostly out of my control now. The festival Gods...or programmers...will have to decide whether they are brave enough to screen the film. One thing I realise is that it is a great feeling to finish something in the way you set out to make it. Of course there are the little doubts about whether I could have done parts better...but overall I'm incredibly pleased with the film and proud of what it stands for. I hope it will find an audience but that is the next part of the process...

In a way of giving myself practical advice for my next film I go back to Krystof Kieslowski and his thoughts on the positive outcome of censorship in films:

“The best thing is to be constantly forced to think of the film as a complete entity. That is through writing the outline, the treatment, the script, the shot list. At every stage he had to consider the whole film.¹²”

¹² Krzysztof Kieslowski, Interview: Censorship in Poland, 1994

We All Know What Rape Culture Is

The term was coined in the 1970's by a group of American feminists and seems now more relevant than ever. It is used to describe the normalisation of sexual violence in society – and it's this normalisation that makes it an incredibly tough thing to explain. "Rape culture doesn't so much actively encourage rape as passively condone it. You can't pin it down to one particular thing; rather it's the accumulation of a number of social norms that perpetuate the idea that women are sexual objects, and that sexual objectification is simply a fact of life.¹³"

As a society we have reached a crisis point where issues surrounding the treatment of sexual assault victims and the way in which rape is portrayed and discussed are being debated and protested across the world.

Organizations such as Slutwalk and Reclaim the Night are planning mass marches where they are protesting against apathetic cultural attitudes towards sexual assault, such as victim blaming and slut shaming.

At the same time there is still a debate as to whether any society currently meets the criteria of a rape culture. Yet at the same time the United States elect a President who is recorded bragging about how he "grabs women by the pussy."

¹³ Arwa Mahdawi, This is what rape culture looks like, The Guardian, 15th October 2016.

Some Examples of Rape Culture in Everyday Life:

1. Rape jokes – never funny
2. “Boys will be Boys” – as a justification
3. Songs with lyrics implying non –consensual sex (Blurred Lines the most obvious)
4. Victim Blaming – what she was wearing/how late it was/she was drunk
5. Sympathy for Convicted Rapists – it ruined their career/their still an artists (Polanski)

This list is a sort of compilation from books and online articles. If you google ‘rape culture examples’ you will be inundated (thankfully) with lists similar to this. Fortunately people everywhere are becoming more aware of rape culture and the way in which these aspects of culture are completely unacceptable and incredibly dangerous. Unfortunately there is still a debate over whether a real problem exists, with people wanting to hide it all behind ‘political correctness gone mad’ and other such bullshit. If you google ‘rape culture’ you can find many articles promoting an awareness of the problem and defining what the issues are. The problem is that we are still inundated with advertisements that sexualize women, music that promotes sexually aggressive behaviour and people that excuse sexual assault on every level.

There is a growing concern and awareness surrounding the language of sexual assault, specifically with the way the word rape is being used out of context and the seriousness that can have on devaluing a very serious word. There is a very real danger to using the word ‘rape’ out of context, in our current society where we ‘systematically desensitize people to the severity of sexual violence through their language, the way victims are treated publicly, and the ways in which media repeatedly depict sexual violence in a graphic manner.¹⁴’ The inappropriate use of language is particularly prevalent with many people commonly using ‘rape’ to refer to anything their sports team being beaten to having a tough day at work.

In dehumanizing women as mere sexual objects and decriminalizing acts of sexual assault by removing the words associated, the acts of rape are lessened in the eyes of the perpetrators. This use of apathetic and sexually aggressive language is a huge part of what keeps a rape culture alive. In the most extreme cases the removal of words and the use of language can lead to a complete misunderstanding around what even constitutes as rape.

On exploring this lack of understanding in young men, Sarah Edwards conducted a survey, which showed that ‘almost a third of the men (31.7 percent) said that in a consequence-free situation, they’d force a woman to

¹⁴ Amelia Shroyer, Stop Saying Rape out of Context, Huffington Post, 16th April 2014.

have sexual intercourse, while 13.6 percent said they would rape a woman.¹⁵ These results hint at the importance of language in discerning what rape is. Many men of course would not admit to wanting to rape a woman but when it is described differently, as forceful sex, they are more open to the idea - which is rather terrifying.

The same report goes on to say that ‘specifically, when survey items describe behaviours (i.e., “Have you ever coerced somebody to intercourse by holding them down?”) instead of simply label them (i.e., “Have you ever raped somebody?”), more men will admit to sexually coercive behaviours in the past and more women will self-report past victimization.’ This suggests that education around rape needs to be more thorough and that legislation needs to be much stronger in addressing these instances.

People may not want to admit to the word but they have to understand that rape is rape. It doesn’t matter how you word it. Men have to understand that any form of coercion is rape, any form of pressure - including putting women in a position of fear where sex is an expectation. Equally, Women need a safer environment for talking out about acts of rape and one where they are positive that it will be taken seriously.

¹⁵ Edwards Sarah R., Bradshaw Kathryn A., and Hinsz Verlin B.. Violence and Gender. December 2014, 1(4): 188-193.

Slutwalk and Ghomeshi

One of the largest movements protesting for an end to rape culture is *Slutwalk*, which actually began in Toronto in 2011 as a reaction to outrageous comments made by Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti, whom suggested women can avoid sexual assault by not dressing like “sluts”. The protests have since grown into a transnational movement with marches across Europe and Asia that specifically target change against rape being excused because of an aspect of the victim’s appearance.

This movement is turning prejudice and stereotypes about women who dress in a certain way completely on their head and forcing people to think about the ridiculous excuses made for sexual assault. They are demonstrating that women should be able to dress however they like with no assumptions about their desire to engage in sexual activity. The word slut is used with negative connotations and these marches are an attempt to raise awareness of the danger in using these words with no thought. The title *Slutwalk* is an essential part of provocatively raising awareness by throwing the negative word back at the people using it and making them think about why there should be any excuse given to people that commit acts of violent sexual assault.

But even such a pro-active and positive movement such as *Slutwalk* doesn't go uncriticised, with Professor of Women's Studies Gail Dines believing that being called a slut is in no way a positive influence on women and can in fact have negative effects on mental health, and that embracing this term further degrades women and does not change the attitudes of men who accept the use of the word slut (Dines, 2011). I understand what Gail Dines is getting at here; trying to make sure women don't become tied to a male led culture, even by protesting the word 'slut' they could be in danger of still being bound to it. But the difficulty is that change is needed and that part of these protests empowerment lies with the reclamation of negative words like 'slut'. I guess it falls back to the issue requiring both men and women to recognize the damage these words can cause and to stop the use of them together.

Another huge story in Toronto was the trial of Canadian radio host Jian Ghomeshi, for sexual assault. More than a dozen women came forward to report allegations of sexual violence against Ghomeshi and in the week long trial in February 2016, three women testified. The allegations and the trial were a huge story sparking debate across the web, with people both condemning and defending the former Q-Radio host.

Despite overwhelming testimony, the result of the trial saw Ghomeshi walk free. Rather than get into the argument of whether he was guilty or not, what

I will focus on here is the outcry this case caused and the way it has been used to highlight a very prevalent rape culture. This case brought to light many issues surrounding the treatment of victims in sexual assault cases. The table below shows the inadequacy of the Canadian legal system in dealing with sexual assault cases.



Image 8: Source: 'Limits of a Criminal Justice Response,' Holly Johnson

These kinds of statistics show the difficulty victims face when deciding whether to speak out against sexual assault. The likelihood of it making any difference is statistically very low. Another aspect of rape culture that was brought to light in the trial itself was the report from Judge William B. Horkins who said “Ghomeshi had to be acquitted mainly due to "inconsistencies" in the testimonies of the alleged victims.”

In making his case against the victims allegations, ‘he used rape culture’s greatest hits¹⁶; discrediting one complainant who could not remember exactly how long the choking lasted before describing another victim’s behaviour following the assault as ‘certainly odd’. This completely disregards studies and evidence that demonstrate that ‘there are misinterpretations of victim behaviour because of stereotypes about how genuine victims act; and stereotypical definitions of rape prevail’¹⁷. The judge concluded his case by stating that the “the twists and turns of the complainants evidence in this trial illustrates the need to be vigilant in avoiding the equally dangerous false assumption that sex assault complainants are always truthful.”¹⁸”

This is a classic part of rape culture; where people say that we cannot go around assuming that every reported sexual assault is true. The reality is that very few sexual assaults are even reported and that of those, even fewer are believed and the likelihood of false allegations is incredibly low. The *Review of the Investigation of Sexual Assaults - Toronto Police Services*¹⁹ found that ‘among many other problems, police continued to deploy myths of so-called “false allegations” to unfound women’s rape reports’.

¹⁶ Kate Somers-Dawes, Ghomeshi verdict shows rape culture in action, Mashable, 24th March 2016.

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Sheehy, Sexual Assault in Canada, University of Ottawa Press, 2012, p54.

¹⁸ Court Report, Ontario Court of Justice, 24th March 2016 pp 22-25.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Griffiths, Review of the Investigation of Sexual Assaults — Toronto Police Service (Toronto: Toronto Audit Services, 1999).

One of the positive things to come out of the Jian Ghomeshi case is that it kept rape culture firmly in the public limelight. It was a very publicized case and trial that sparked urgent and much needed debates and conversations surrounding victim blaming - across television, online, in the press and in everyday conversation.

Donald Trump and *Game of Thrones*

The ascension of Donald Trump to the President of the United States, a man who openly light heartedly jokes about being able to “grab women by the pussy”, seemed to make this film (set in a world where the kind of behaviour he endorses would be completely accepted) even more timely.

It would require a whole paper to include even a small fraction of the ridiculous and disgusting things Donald Trump has said about women and sexual assault. I include his reference to the military here as one example that highlights the most pertinent issue - the normalization of rape through an excuse that men simply cannot help themselves.

“26,000 unreported sexual assaults [sic] in the military-only 238 convictions. What did these geniuses expect when they put men & women together?”²⁰
(Donald Trump on Twitter)

This is an idiotic and crazy statement and would simply be deplored as an offensive and ignorant outburst if it came from one of the many twitter trolls out there. But this comes from a man who is in charge of one of the world's superpowers and ‘most influential countries in the world’ (Brett Ziegler for USN&WR). What is even more terrifying is that there are people that excuse

²⁰ Claire Cohen, Donald Trump Sexism Tracker, The Independent, 10th Jan 2017.

his behaviour as nothing more than 'locker room banter'. This harks back to the whole 'boys will be boys' bullshit. He's running a campaign of authoritarian fear and people are either too scared to speak out or are simply laughing at how ridiculous he is.

However it is important to remember that Donald Trump is just the mascot for these outdated and despicable views and was voted in, which takes people to agree with what he is saying or at the very least be apathetic to it. What greater sign do we need that larger issues need to change? A biblical bush burning somewhere in the desert?

There are at least many positive reactions to Trump's constant stream of sexual aggression and these reactions are raising awareness of rape culture with people speaking out and linking his views back to larger societal issues; as well as organizing rallies and marches such as the Women's March on Washington (January 21-22, 2017) which drew at least 500,000 people²¹. Already there is a backlash to Trump's open disrespect for women and sexual assault victims and to his stupidity, which is heralded by equally stupid people as openness, and will hopefully lead to more people speaking out

²¹ Tim Wallace and Alicia Parlapiano, Women's March in Washington, NY Times, Jan 22nd 2017.

against him and his views. 'If we are to learn anything from Trump's masterclass in rape culture it's that none of us should keep quiet.'²²

Despite open and fervent protests the popular media industry is still absolutely drenched in apathetic portrayals of sexual assault. Rape is currently being wheeled out again and again as a form of entertainment in television and film and is often used as an entertaining plot point or storyline, with no exploration of the reality of rape or the culture that surrounds it. The result is that it is no longer a shocking and disturbing thing to see on screens and most importantly, it is not being dealt with responsibly.

Right now HBO's *Game of Thrones* is surely the most controversial hot topic when it comes to its graphic and extreme portrayal of violence and sexual assault; often deployed as a source of titillation and entertainment. Having only previously seen the first episode (I didn't continue as it was completely uninteresting) I sat down with the latest three seasons (6,7 and 8) so that I could see what all the outrage was about. As an introduction I have to say this is a large topic and there could be (and probably will be if there isn't already) an entire thesis about the portrayal of violence and sexuality in this show.

²² Arwa Mahdawi, 15th October 2016.

What I will stick to are a couple of key sections that came up in my research. The first being the most recent controversial scene, in which the character Sansa Stark was brutally raped on her wedding night. This scene was so gratuitously violent and distasteful in its portrayal of sexual assault that it caused huge uproar – even with fans of the show – and ‘the audience outcry was so strong that *G.O.T.*’s show-runners are reportedly changing their approach towards the upcoming sixth season²³’.

The episode’s director (Toronto film and Television director Jeremy Podeswa) and show creators went on to defend the scene, arguing that they were depicting the reality of the world and characters they are portraying in the show. The positive effect of this disturbing scene is that people are speaking out against these meaningless and gratuitous portrayals of sexual violence and that it seems to be making some kind of impact.

In a post comparing the rape scenes in George R.R Martin’s books to the HBO television series, blogger Tafkar found the following (* ASOIAF - *A Song of Ice and Fire – the series that incorporates GOT*):

²³ Julie Miller, *Game of Thrones Explains*, Vanity Fair, February 19th 2016

Rape acts in Game of Thrones the TV series (to date): 50

Rape victims in Game of Thrones (to date): 29

Rape acts in ASOIAF the book series (to date): 214

Rape victims in ASOIAF (to date): 117

The books contain **over 4 times as much rape** as the show (and probably even more; the method of analysis likely underestimates the rape in the books - see below).

Image 9: Source: <http://tafkarfanfic.tumblr.com/post/119770640640/rape-in-asoiaf-vs-game-of-thrones-a-statistical>

This table reveals that there are far more instances of rape in the books than there are on the show. But the statistics are not as simple as that. Firstly there is the notion that showing rape on screen is much more difficult than writing about it in a book. Secondly the acts of rape are still handled in the same misogynist fashion as the books, where women are treated as objects that are to serve the narrative of the male characters. The rape is never explored beyond the act itself which leads to revenge and even more violence.

Despite fervent protests over certain scenes, the surprising fact still remains – this is a popular show driven by HBO that has a significant viewership and cultural impact. Many young men and women seeing these brutal scenes have no real grounding in rape culture and it simply isn't good enough for the makers of *Game of Thrones* to hide behind the easy notion that they are just recreating the world of the books. This show exists and its popularity is obvious so we should be asking why a show like this is popular and what the

reasons are for people watching it. That way we are able to understand the larger issues.

Actress Sophie Turner, who plays Sansa Stark, has recently come out in support of the show saying that ‘the depiction of her character’s brutal rape has turned her into a women’s rights activist.’²⁴ On the same day her article on International Women’s Day was released for the Huffington Post in which she states that she is ‘proud to be part of a show that won’t give unproblematic accounts of being a woman in a patriarchal society.’²⁵

Turner’s response is typical of the misunderstanding surrounding the issue of portraying sexual violence in films and television; the argument is not that it should not be shown, but it is about how it is shown. The creators of *Game of Thrones* are not portraying these brutal scenes in a way that puts the attention on the larger issues of female subjugation or even in a way that makes viewer’s think about what they are seeing. Instead they are shown as a means of gratuitous entertainment. The defence used by the shows creators that they are staying true to the ‘reality of this particular world’ seems like an attempt to backtrack out of something they did not realize would stir up so much negative criticism.

²⁴ Alyssa Bailey, Game of Thrones Rape Scene Made Me an Activist, Elle, March 8th 2017

²⁵ Sophie Turner, Join the Global Sisterhood, Huffington Post, March 8th 2017

For me, there has to be a point. Not just for extreme violence, but for anything in a TV show or film. There is nothing wrong with depicting brutal sexual violence in a show or film but it should mean more than just entertainment. Like with the Trump debacle; the outcry against the show sparked by this scene is generating a lot of interest in women's rights and over rape culture but this prompt towards awareness was never the intention of the show's creators.

We've all seen violence in films and on television but *Game of Thrones* seems to lack any point of view on the issue and the extreme violence is used to garner interest through the controversy. The boundary they are pushing is simply boring - how graphic can we be, how extreme, how shocking? It becomes flat and one dimensional in it's use of violence throughout the show. Yes that world they are depicting may be violent... but so what? What is the point of that? What does that mean for the story or the characters? What are they giving the viewer that they haven't already seen? What questions is the viewer being left with? To me the problem of the show is in its stupidity and it's complete lack of awareness or perspective. There is no point of view about the world they present, or a further reflection of anything happening right now.

The articles in support of women's rights seems like nothing more than a calculated move to ensure the show's future popularity - to stem the potential loss through going too far. If we have learnt anything about rape culture at all, it is that we must not blame Sophie Turner for that.

Polanski and *Last Tango in Paris*

The film industry itself faces many controversial incidents of rapists being excused because of their artistic merit; I'm thinking here of Roman Polanski and the more recent accusations against Woody Allen. In March 1977, Roman Polanski was 'arrested and charged in Los Angeles with five offences against Samantha Bailey a 13-year-old girl – rape by use of drugs, perversion, sodomy, lewd and lascivious act upon a child under 14, and furnishing a controlled substance to a minor.'

I'm aware the Polanski issue is a very large topic and would need more time to delve into fully. For the purposes of this paper I bring it up in reference to the excuses given for rapists and in support of how terrifying it is to report acts of rape - when even (as in this case) there is overwhelming evidence and charges - a man still walks free - primarily because of his wealth, power and notoriety. Following a guilty plea to having unlawful sexual intercourse with 13-year-old Samantha Geimer - Polanski fled to England and then France when he realised he could face a fifty year jail sentence. Since then he has made over fifteen feature films - with his latest - *Based on a True Story* being released in 2017.

In 2009 a host of famous filmmakers (funnily enough including Woody Allen), actors and actresses signed a petition for Polanski to be released following his

arrest in Switzerland upon attempting to attend a festival to receive an award. The issue is not whether it was right he was arrested in Switzerland or not, but rather the way that his notoriety is used to garner sympathy from fellow artists. Do we see anybody signing petitions for fleeing rapists that work at the local supermarket? It comes back to the issue of the man in power being excused for his crimes and that sexual assault is simply not taken seriously enough. In a 1979 interview with novelist Martin Amis, Polanski himself, on discussing his conviction, said "If I had killed somebody, it wouldn't have had so much appeal to the press, you see? But... fucking, you see, and the young girls. Judges want to fuck young girls. Juries want to fuck young girls. Everyone wants to fuck young girls!²⁶"

In the recent Bill Cosby sexual assault case 'it took over 50 women to come forward for the world to believe that Bill Cosby might have been sexually assaulting women for decades. People (even supposedly feminist actresses) still have no problem working with Roman Polanski or Woody Allen, and others whom the world knows have multiple issues with women.²⁷ So where does that leave victims? Hollywood seems to represent a microcosm of the problematic societal views to sexual assault - complete apathy and a laser focus on the victims proving themselves.

²⁶ Deacon, Michael, "Roman Polanski: 'Everyone else fancies little girls too'", The Daily Telegraph, London 29th September 2009.

²⁷ Melissa Silverstein, Hollywood's rape culture is a reflection of our culture, The Guardian, 4th Dec 2016

Even on the professional working level there are issues in the ways films are made. On speaking up about her infamous scene in *Last Tango in Paris*, actress Maria Schneider said that she “felt humiliated and, to be honest, I felt a little raped, both by Marlon and by Bertolucci”. Although the rape scene was simulated, stories differ as to what Schneider was told in advance of the shoot. What is not in doubt is that a 19-year-old was blindsided by a bunch of older men who, according to Bertolucci, “wanted her reaction as a girl, not as an actress.”

Of course Hollywood is not to blame for the rape culture but they do have a large stake in the circulation of films that reach large audiences. With such difficulty in the industry itself, can they really be trusted to provide films that are going to challenge the way sexual assault is viewed and dealt with? ‘The so-called progressive community of Hollywood hides behind its liberal values while paying men more, not hiring women in equal numbers, sexualizing women, kicking women out when they are no longer “fuckable” and, yes, raping them.’ (Silverstein)

Again, there is outrage and voices are starting to be heard. Dylan Farrow’s open letter detailing the way in which Woody Allen sexually abused her was published in the New York Times in 2014 and received support from many

artists including *Girls* creator Lena Dunham. In her letter, Farrow keenly observes that ‘others (victims) are still scared, vulnerable, and struggling for the courage to tell the truth. The message that Hollywood sends, matters for them.’²⁸ Despite the bravery of her public letter, actors, actresses, filmmakers and the general public still question the truth behind her allegations. Woody Allen is not only still making films, but is still doing so at the very highest level.

²⁸ Dylan Farrow, An Open Letter from Dylan Farrow, New York Times, 1st February 2014

An Irreversible Orange Scream From Elle

Whilst at this years TIFF I went to see Paul Verhoeven's latest film *Elle*. It was a film that received a fair amount of coverage and was talked about as a controversial film dealing with rape and victimization. Of course I had to see it.

The film focuses on the victim of a sexual assault who seeks revenge whilst simultaneously dealing with the erotic arousal she feels surrounding the rape itself. It has become an absolute critic favourite, most citing it as brave and daring. Gutsy French actress Isabelle Huppert (who plays the lead) describes her character as "post-feminist". I'm not entirely sure what that really means; it feels like one of those statements in support of why feminism doesn't need to exist anymore; kind of like saying your character is post-human.

I bring the film up here because it sparks an interesting point of debate in the issues of rape being used as controversial material for filmmakers. The film should have made me feel outraged or moved or...anything at all. But instead I felt detached... and not that kind of 'Michael Haneke detached' that allows you to think.

Within the current social climate, wouldn't a story about rape and victimization have all of the markings of a controversial film that divided opinion and sparked much needed debate? Film critic Owen Gleiberman suggests that the film doesn't work because it is not dealing with the issue with any sense of realism and is 'weirdly, almost fetishistically detached from the emotions of its own scenario.' He goes on to explain that 'it's hard to be outraged by (or feel fully connected to) anything that's going on, since the characters, especially Huppert's, act like the life they're living is a movie they're watching.'²⁹ This highlights the importance of realism, which is a marked feature in the distinction between a film that is simply using a popular subject as entertainment and a film that is exploring something with the seriousness and intellectual intensity it deserves.

In an interview with Pacific Standard magazine, Huppert comments on the film's resonance with contemporary women. When asked 'directly what she hoped viewers would talk about in today's American context, Huppert highlighted the value in the film's unremitting violence. "I think the film is very clear about that," she said. "A rape is a rape, and it's very brutal. And Verhoeven shows it as something very, very brutal that shouldn't be excused in any case."³⁰ Interestingly in the same article Huppert also talks about how

²⁹ Owen Gleiberman, The Demented Caveman Feminism of Paul Verhoeven's 'Elle', Variety, 11th Dec 2016

³⁰ Katie Kilkenny, Is It a Problem When a Movie About a Woman's Rape Is Made by Men, Pacific Standard, 18th Nov 2016

she brings her own personality to the character and that her reactions to events in her own world are just “OK - big deal”. She does later go on to explain that “Of course, not everybody even who has been through what she has been through would react in the same way.”

Perhaps that is the issue with the film; it is presenting a post-rape culture portrait of the world in a time where society is starting to speak out against such a culture. Further than that the film does not have any clear set intention behind it and does not do enough to provoke thought and discussion over the very important topic of victimization. It sits in an unclear no man’s land between films that promote misogyny through the constant barrage of known rape culture tropes (such as “she was asking for it” or “she probably wanted it anyway”) and a thought provoking piece asking us to question whether rape is a personal issue, with every victim entitled to respond as they see fit, or whether it is a larger societal issue. The problem with *Elle* is that Verhoeven explores the personal effects of rape on one individual victim, who has a completely shocking response to her attack, without much more depth or explanation of the culture that surrounds the larger issue.

Another well known film depicting a brutal rape scene that garnered much controversy upon its release is Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible*. The film became infamous for the brutality of the nine minute rape scene in which Monica Bellucci is horrifically sexually assaulted by a man in an underpass tunnel.

On first viewing Noé's visceral film I felt incredibly uncomfortable and walked out several times before returning to the film on DVD. Even now I'm not sure I could sit through an entire viewing. For a long time I wasn't sure about the purpose of a nine minute rape sequence shown with such brutality and wasn't sure whether it was gratuitous or important.

Only whilst making *Rape Card* did I finally understand the point of that scene. The film is about rape and it's about showing rape for what it is; a horrific, disgusting and disturbing act of violence.

When talking about the film, Director Gaspar Noé said "because the subject of the movie was a rape, I said it has to be as powerful as it can be, to be disgusting enough, to be useful," says Noé. "If you do a movie with a rape and don't show it, you hide the point . . . the thing is that if you show it in a disgusting way, you help people to avoid that kind of situation. Like in *Clockwork Orange*, when they show images of terror to Malcolm McDowell to stop him doing those kinds of things, it is useful that it is shown.³¹"

So in terms of addressing the severity of rape, this film joins a whole host of films and television shows that are trying to do the same thing. In the way in which sexual violence is dealt with through the filter of an alternate society, the two films (both adapted from novels) that come to mind are Stanley

³¹ Geoffrey Macnab, 'The rape had to be disgusting to be useful', *The Guardian*, 2nd Aug 2002

Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Volker Schlöndorff's *The Handmaid's Tale* (based on Margaret Atwood's incredibly powerful novel). Interestingly *The Handmaid's Tale* has just been adapted again as a television series, starting Elizabeth Moss – perhaps a sign of the relevance of a story about subjugated women struggling to find any agency.

With *A Clockwork Orange* Kubrick explores the issues of sexual violence and male aggression by presenting a character in a futuristic world where they have developed a cure for such behaviour. The film was heavily criticised for its depiction of sexual violence, with many concluding the film itself was misogynist. This may be due to the fact that Kubrick presents the rapist as the protagonist, whom we are at times felt to sympathize with. The power of the film comes from the fact that at times the viewer sympathises with Alex (the protagonist) and then remembers the crimes he has committed. It presents a more complex version of the violent rapists we are used to seeing in film and television; the creepy character with a moustache hiding out in parks. Much of the controversy may have been over the misunderstanding that by showing a character committing these crimes with no remorse, Kubrick was saying sexual violence was acceptable. I always read this as the opposite, he is challenging the viewer to watch these scenes and to feel outraged with what happens. Unfortunately many viewer's don't understand

the message, which in a way only strengthen's Kubrick's point of the change in attitude to sexual violence being needed.

The alternate future society is used excellently as a way of providing the space for the audience to reflect on the way sexual violence was being treated in their own society. Something I was certainly aware of when making *Rape Card*. With the film being such a go to for any film with an alternate reality – I was incredibly keen not to become overly influenced – and remember many times during production, particularly with production design, saying that things were looking a bit “too Clockwork Orange.”

The Handmaid's Tale similarly uses an alternate dystopian society, however it brooches sexual subjugation through a female protagonist attempting to gain agency in a completely repressed world. Margaret Atwood creates a fantastic extreme society in which she takes casually held attitudes towards women to their logical end. She does this by creating a world in which, for example, women are viewed and used as objects for breeding and for sexual pleasure. What Atwood does so well is create what she calls ‘speculative fiction’ – which basically means she presents an extreme version of things that are already happening. This had a huge impact on me and undoubtedly on *Rape Card* – it was so scary to read a futuristic novel that presents terrifying ideas that could actually happen.

In a very recent essay for the New York Times, Atwood discusses the book in terms of serving as a ‘warning for the Trump era’ and directly addressed how the recent social climate has seen “fears and anxieties proliferate. Where basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades, and indeed the past centuries.³²” This shows that the issue of female subjugation is as important as ever, and that the fight for women’s rights is not over yet.

Volker Schlöndorff’s adaptation, released in 1990, lost something in translation and failed to deliver the subtle realism that the novel does. It seemed to make too much of the alternate world and on setting that up and in many ways glamourising it with lavish sets and over the top production values. It became too entrenched in its own satire to allow enough thought on the part of the viewer. The film adaptation served as a warning to me during production; of giving excess to production design and in presenting too much to the viewer.

A Canadian film that was put on my radar by my supervisor John Greyson was Anne Claire Poirier’s 1979 feature *Mourir à tue-tête*. Note that it is one of the few films about rape that is directed by a woman. In this provocative and

³² Margaret Atwood, What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump, NY Times, 10th March 2017

brutal film Poirier tells the story of Suzanne, a nurse who is dragged into a truck when walking home from work and brutally beaten and raped by a woman hating stranger. Within the film Poirier weaves another narrative in which a filmmaker and editor are discussing the film they are making about Suzanne.

The film depicts the levels of misogyny entrenched in many areas of society and received praise for its daring and frank approach to the problem of sexual violence against women. However the film certainly had its critiques with conservative critic Léo Bonneville chastised Poirier because the film's "violent images, obscene gestures and trivial words all contribute to turn the work into an exercise in feminist demagoguery."³³ Even feminist commentator Carole Zucker accused Poirier of verging on sensationalism. Other critics like Penelope Hynam, however, argued that "it is important that we must sit through these painful scenes in order to feel in our gut some of the victim's terror when confronted with an armed, obscenity-spouting, violent psychotic, who may kill her if driven to it." (Loiselle, 1999)

What the film presents is a razor sharp satire of the way violence towards women is viewed throughout society and certain elements were intended as a reflection back towards the viewer who may be used to being fed certain

³³ André Loiselle, *Melodrama and Counter-Cinema in Anne Claire Poirier's "Mourir à tue-tête"*, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Autumn 1999, pp21 - 43.

myths about rape. For example there is nothing revealed about the motivation of the rapist – and he is shown simply as a bad person who hates women. This is the kind of myth that is still perpetuated about rapists; that they are somehow an anomaly; those people that just spring out of nowhere. Poirier seems to be throwing that back at the audience, challenging them to think more by showing not just the rape story itself but also how that story is treated when being adapted into a film. This approach gives the audience more to think about than if the film only stuck with the main narrative, by showing the larger world that surrounds sexual assault; drawing parallels to rape and the way it is linked to the culture that surrounds it.

Some Kind of Conclusion

We currently sit at a strange crossroads, on the one hand there are people all over the world protesting sexual assault issues and voicing concerns over a growing rape culture, whilst on the other we have people voting for Donald Trump as President and still defending known sexual predators such as Roman Polanski.

The film and television culture is a reflection of these opposing sets of views; with gratuitous shows such as *Game of Thrones* as popular as ever whilst *The Handmaid's Tale*; Margaret Atwood's seminal piece on female subjugation is finding a new voice in Hulu's latest television series.

There are people desperately clinging to outdated and frankly disturbing views on sexual assault and female sexualization but for every one of those people, there seem to be ten that are willing to speak out against them.

Donald Trump's ascension to power was terrifying but we are starting to see a strong backlash and the disgusting views that remained hidden in society are now at least fully out in the open; with people protesting for change.

If recognition is the first step to change, then these extreme views are at least forcing people into recognizing that change is in fact needed. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend these issues are not relevant anymore.

The issue of a growing rape culture is a big deal and the portrayal of sexual violence as entertainment is completely empowering those dangerous views that women are nothing more than sexual objects.

Rape Card joins a growing cacophony of voices that want change in the way we deal with rape culture and in the way we all sexualize women. It's about human beings being treated as human beings regardless of their gender or sexuality. Hopefully this fictional film, set in an alternate reality, will join others out there now in raising awareness and getting people to question what the real horrors they see around them everyday. It's not an attempt at telling people what to think and we all know rape is a horrific and terrifying act. It's about showing people aspects of the existing rape culture, in an extreme way that hopefully raises questions and gets viewers thinking.

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