

THE CONVERSATION

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Broadchurch was a fightback against many rape cliches in TV drama

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David Tennant and Olivia Colman (foreground) and Julie Hesmondhalgh. ITV

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This article contains spoilers

I held my breath from the moment Julie Hesmondhalgh began her searing portrayal of Trish Winterman in the opening episode of Broadchurch's third series. The drama saw the harrowing aftermath of rape depicted on primetime British television. I really hoped the production would not mess up the opportunity.

On the whole, I'm pleased to say it did not. In the show's final-ever episode eight weeks later, the rapist was revealed to be 16-year-old Michael Lucas. The stepson of dodgy cabbie Clive, he had been suspended from school in the opening episode for viewing porn but had otherwise received little attention. His unmasking was unexpected but neatly explained: he had been groomed by serial rapist Leo Humphries, aka the "swaggering young shit" from the rope warehouse.

While it was satisfying to know that Olivia Colman's detective Ellie Miller was right in her instant dislike of Humphries, making Winterman's rapist an unrepentant, arrogant and wholly unlikeable young man who attacked strangers was a more conservative outcome than I'd hoped for. Still, the series did much to address the problems that crop up with rape on television with depressing regularity.

Portrayal problems

Rape on television is easy to get wrong, whether it's gratuitous sexual violence in *Game of Thrones* or crime dramas in which rape is merely used to add shock value to a story about something else. It attracts incisive criticism, but mishandling remains all too common. This matters greatly. Stories about sexual violence against women are opportunities to let survivors know they are not alone and to challenge attitudes – including among future jurors, bystanders and potential perpetrators.

Television has historically been better at dealing with rape than other media forms. Long-running series like soaps provide space to explore the long-term effects, and allow survivors to not always be defined by the crime. With less space, *Broadchurch* worked hard over its eight episodes to humanise Trish and explore victim-blaming myths.

Trish was believable and complex. She wasn't always likeable. But while doubts about women's testimonies are disproportionately common in this genre, there was never any doubt that the detective duo believed Trish – and that the audience were supposed to as well. Crucially, *Broadchurch* made this demand without showing us the rape itself.



Julie Hesmondhalgh as Trish Winterman. ITV

Yet if television drama has often been impressive in showing rape survivors, rapists have been more one-dimensional. In soaps, there was a period when it seemed like the only men to abuse women were occasional characters called Trevor. The perpetrator had to be clearly marked as an outsider, a deviant, a monster.

Broadchurch partially challenged this. In the opening episode, David Tennant's detective, Alec Hardy, asked Miller: "When was the last stranger rape round here?". Miller pointed out that just because Trish didn't know who her attacker was didn't mean it was a stranger. Research consistently

demonstrates that most rapists are known to their victims. This early exchange set the tone for the series.

So many of the men known to Trish became credible suspects. That this largely depended upon evidence of previous misogynist abuse did much to establish that “abusers” are “normal” men, and that women’s experiences of different kinds of male abuse are connected.

Not only was Lenny Henry’s Ed Burnett stalking Trish, he also had a history of domestic abuse. Trish’s husband had installed spyware on her computer and was watching her through the camera. Meanwhile, boys at school had stolen and shared intimate images of Hardy’s daughter, as well as hardcore porn. And the released sex offender portrayed in the series as a possible suspect was someone who had known his victim. Despite the exceptional nature of the attack on Trish, it was impressively grounded in the more mundane realities of men’s abuse of women and girls.

Contrast this with the disappointing decision to make chief perpetrator Leo the most recognisably monstrous of the suspects. Hardy felt able to reassure Miller: “He is not what men are, he is an aberration.” At least it rang pretty hollow in light of what had gone before.



Broadchurch: many plausible suspects. ITV

No men to the rescue

Broadchurch is also to be congratulated for challenging other rape myths. Every time they appeared to fall into cliché, one of the characters – usually a brilliantly withering Miller – was on hand to put things right.

As she memorably said at one point: “A woman gets attacked and all the men go around butting horns making it about them.” Quite. Hardy was a passionate and angry advocate for Trish, but Colman’s warm yet caustic performance at the heart of the police work steered the show clear of the



“mansplaining” trend in crime and legal dramas where male saviours explain rape to sceptical women and save the day. At times, the series seemed like a meta-commentary on rape on television.

There were still some missteps. A sexual assault counsellor angrily confronting a woman who didn’t want to report rape to the police was particularly ill-judged and unrealistic.

But set against that was the moving display of solidarity in the impromptu women’s march organised by Trish’s daughter. This spoke to a long history of reclaim the night marches in Britain – as well as to more recent women’s marches against Donald Trump in the US.

The finale also made clear that masculinity, and misogyny, are at the heart of rape. The unrepentant Leo appeared to have formed his views about women and sex from porn and didn’t know the difference between sex and rape – or didn’t care. We saw how he was also able to groom Michael as an accomplice, having witnessed Michael’s stepfather physically abusing him. And while Michael was portrayed credibly as a victim, there was never any question of his criminal responsibility.

Trish didn’t have much screen time in the final episode, but that was inevitable when the resolution of the crime has to be the priority at this stage in a drama. Yet in Hesmondhalgh’s performance, and the show’s willingness to tackle at least some rape myths and cliches head on, Broadchurch reminded us that genre television can present rape in complex and sensitive ways.

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