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Reframing Sexual Violence

The Female Gaze and the Reimagining of Female Sexual Trauma in Post- #MeToo Feature Films

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ABSTRACT

Deze thesis onderzoekt hoe post-#MeToo-films via een vrouwelijke blik (*female gaze*) alternatieve representaties van seksueel geweld en het daaruit voortvloeiende trauma creëren. Hierbij wordt gebruikgemaakt van een interdisciplinair theoretisch kader dat feministische filmtheorie, traumastudies, het post-#MeToo-discours en theorieën over handelingsvermogen en identiteit combineert. Aan de hand van visuele, narratieve en thematische analyses van *The Tale* (Jennifer Fox, 2018) en *How To Have Sex* (Molly Manning Walker, 2023), onderzoekt deze thesis hoe deze theorieën in praktijk worden toegepast. De analyses tonen aan dat representaties van seksueel geweld, gevormd door de female gaze en beïnvloed door #MeToo, kunnen leiden tot realistischer en genuanceerdere representaties. Bovendien brengen deze films noodzakelijke discussies over seksueel geweld op gang. Door vrouwelijke subjectiviteit en handelingsvermogen centraal te plaatsen, contrasteren ze met eerdere representaties die gevormd werden door patriarchale opvattingen en de male gaze. Uiteindelijk beargumenteert deze thesis dat post-#MeToo-films over trauma als gevolg van seksueel geweld die een female gaze hanteren, het potentieel hebben om kijkers bewust te maken van de diepgaande identiteitsgerelateerde gevolgen van seksueel geweld.

KEY WORDS: Female Gaze; Sexual Violence; Post-#MeToo Cinema; Trauma; Film Representation; Female Subjectivity

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Introduction

Some psychologists argue that trauma is fundamentally unrepresentable, while filmmakers claim their films represent precisely that. Does the cinematic representation of sexual violence reproduce harm, or does it instead spread awareness and understanding? Is it worth the risk, just to try?

Sexual violence is a pervasive social issue that shapes women's lives worldwide. The well-known statistic affirms that one in three women have experienced a form of sexual violence during their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2025). Additionally, several sources show that well over ninety percent of the perpetrators are men (United States Commission, 2021, p. 1; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022, para. 2; Rape Crisis England and Wales, 2024; p. 9). Cinema can function as a mirror that, through fiction, gives meaning to reality and reflects, represents, and shapes our identity (Carrillo & Echevarría-Navarro, 2026, p. 1). Moreover, it holds a unique power to alter our perceptions of violence (Carrillo & Echevarría-Navarro 2026, p. 49). As a result, cinematic representations of sexual violence carry a significant responsibility. For decades, such depictions were shaped by patriarchal views. Although feminist film scholars have been cautioning for the impacts, it took the worldwide #MeToo movement to finally bring much-needed attention to these issues. Media representations of female trauma have been shifting in recent years, but a long way to go remains.

This thesis focuses on how female-directed post-#MeToo feature films represent women's trauma through a female gaze and articulate new forms of agency and identity. It does so by using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines feminist film theory, trauma studies, post-#MeToo discourse, and theories of agency and identity. In combination with a close textual analysis of selected films, it explores how these theories help the reshaping of depictions of sexual violence and the resulting trauma. Because of the interdisciplinary and sensitive nature of this thesis, I exceeded the word count in consultation with my supervisor. The additional space was required to provide sufficient contextualisation, clarification and appropriate disclaimers.

Chapter one opens with the conceptualization of a male gaze, coined by Laura Mulvey. Chronicling developments and debates, this leads into an exploration of the concept of the "female gaze". This concept is mostly examined through scholars such as Iris Brey, Alicia Malone, Lisa French and Joey Soloway. Placing their different yet overlapping definitions next to each other creates a new way to understand and view film for anyone different than a white,

cis male. Next is the introduction of #MeToo as an important framework, by highlighting its impact both on society and cinema. This chapter ends with the cinematic strategies of the female gaze, which forms the primary analytical tool for the film analyses.

The second chapter begins with a brief exploration of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, two key figures in trauma studies. The chapter continues with a more recent model, the Pluralistic Trauma Theory, conceptualised by Michelle Balaev. Here the connections to the #MeToo movement and representation of sexual violence start to become apparent. This is followed by a section centring the beginnings of sexual violence as a recognised trauma. Guiding this section is Judith Lewis Herman, along with pioneer Ann C. Wolbert Burgess' explanation of The Rape Trauma Syndrome. Building on this understanding of the psychological aspects of sexual violence, the chapter then explores the intersection between media and trauma. It begins with a critical examination of the narratives and representations of sexual violence shaped by patriarchal views. Through the critiques of scholars such as Amanda Spallacci, Iris Brey, Olivier Kenny, and Alison Young, new approaches to representing sexual violence are articulated. While the major impacts of #MeToo have been discussed in chapter one, chapter two focuses specifically on the movement's impact on the depictions of sexual violence and how it serves as a catalyst for the female gaze.

The theoretical framework created in the first two chapters forms the basis for chapter three. In this chapter, two films are analysed through three aspects: (1) visual strategies, (2) narrative strategies, and (3) themes and discourse. A corpus of 20+ films was established by selecting films that: (1) are female directed, (2) are Post-#MeToo (released after 2017), (3) represent sexual violence as a central narrative element. The choice to use female-directed films stems from the historical lack of acknowledgement of female directors in the industry. *The Tale* (Jennifer Fox, 2018) and *How To Have Sex* (Molly Manning Walker, 2023) were selected as the main focus. Both films are spoken in English, with the former produced in the United States, and the latter in the United Kingdom. They share a consistent psychological and realistic tone and are strongly connected to the #Me-Too shifts. However, each offers a distinct portrayal of sexual violence, its resulting trauma, and its relation to broader discourses.

Personal Motivation

On September 30th, 2024, I watched Sarah Polley's *Women Talking*. I felt a strange connection to it, although the film's context is unfamiliar to me. The film centres on women deciding whether to leave their religious colony and the men due to the extensive abuse they experience.

They decide that the boys younger than fifteen are safe to take with them, because they can unlearn potential harmful behaviour. I stared at the screen and felt as though my personal experiences were being undermined. Every experience I had was carried out by someone under that age. So, began the search for stories that represented mine, but I could not find them. In this process, I learned about numerous experiences of sexual violence through women around me and through cinema. It was no longer my own issue but a collective one. Through this I became interested in the ways media can both positively and negatively impact women in the understanding and processing of their trauma stemming from sexual violence.

Disclaimers

I begin by acknowledging my positionality as a white (Belgian), heterosexual, cisgender woman from the middle class. My upbringing inevitably shapes how I approach questions of identity, sexual violence, and representation. For this reason, I chose to analyse films centred on protagonists with a similar profile. I recognise that this thesis can therefore be part of the problem in underrepresenting non-white and non-cis women. I seek to situate this thesis' limitations clearly and responsibly, without suggesting a hierarchy of feminist film practices. I do not aim to universalise these representations, as experiences of sexual violence are immensely different across racial, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. That is to say, I encourage further research from diverse positionalities, across all ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, class, and sexual backgrounds.

Next, I would like to clarify the usage of the word “sexual violence”. I chose this broader term to include as many experiences as possible. It is defined as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, and other non-contact forms. (World Health Organization, 2024, para. 3)

However, some of my sources specifically focus on rape; if this is the case, I noted it as such. When possible, the broader term is used. Through this, I want to emphasise that all forms of sexual violence are worthy of being taken seriously.

Furthermore, sexual violence is not restricted to the female sex. Male and intersex people also experience sexual violence, and it is often an even larger taboo. Here I want to take the opportunity to state that men experience sexual assault mostly in their childhood, and they are less likely to seek help (AL-Asadi, 2021, p. 15; Wicky, 2025, p. 1). Additionally, intersex people have been experiencing such violence and harassment in increasing numbers in the last few years (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025, p. 15). However, the focus of this thesis is on sexual violence against women, given that they still form the largest group affected by it.

Last, this thesis focuses on the representation of trauma from sexual violence. It does not (or minimally) address the spectatorship and audience reception. While some of the real-world implications are discussed, the research remains primarily textual. That is to say, this thesis can provide an interesting starting point for further research, particularly in relation to reception and spectatorship studies. Such research would preferably involve surveys and quantitative methods.

Chapter 1: Female Gaze in Post-#MeToo Cinema

Influenced by the 1960s feminist movements, feminist film theory developed alongside film theory as an academic field in the 1970s (Hollinger, 2012: 7). Without this, many of the concepts, such as the male and female gaze, used here would not have existed. In the United States, their focus laid on the “stereotyped images of women dominant in patriarchal culture” (Mayne, 1985, p. 84). In the beginning there were two main strands within feminist film theory. Strand one believed film to reflect social reality and simultaneously critiqued Hollywood films for presenting distorted images of women’s real lives rather than correct reflections (Hollinger, 2012, p. 8). The second strand saw film as a construction that reflects and projects male fantasies and desires onto female figures on screen (Hollinger, 2012, p. 10). Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze emerged in this latter strand.

1.1 Defining the Female Gaze

1.1.1 A Response to the Male Gaze?

In 1972, John Berger made the statement “men act and women appear”, in his book *Ways of seeing* (Berger, 1972/2008, p. 47). In this book, he explained how women in art are depicted differently because of men. The image of women was created to flatter the ‘ideal’ spectator,

which was always assumed to be male (Berger, 1972/2008, p. 64). This statement became fundamental to understanding how women are looked at in art.

Three years later, Laura Mulvey, theorised the male gaze in cinema. She drew on Freud's psychoanalytic theory and the idea that "women evoke castration anxiety" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6). Through this, she explained how patriarchal society influenced and shaped film form. Additionally, Mulvey referred to Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage". What is important in this concept for her is the image as the "matrix of the imaginary" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 10). This includes processes of recognition/misrecognition, identification, and the first articulation of the 'I', or subjectivity (Mulvey, 1975, p. 10).

Mulvey (1975, p. 11) argued that women are looked at and are displayed as sexual objects on two levels. The first level is the woman as an erotic object for the characters within the screen. The second level is the woman displayed for the spectators in the auditorium. E. Ann Kaplan (1983, p. 15) added a third level, namely the camera's original gaze which influences the very act of filming. In line with Berger, Mulvey (1975, p. 12) also noted that the man acts and controls the progression of the story. Through this, the spectator is forced to identify with the man.

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze has served as a foundational concept that has been adapted and criticised in the recent decades. One key critique is the lack of room for the female spectator or even for a "female gaze" (Smelik, 2016, p. 2). For example, bell hooks (1992, p. 123) called her out on the lack of acknowledgement of black representation and spectatorship, proposing an "oppositional gaze". Similarly, broader critiques of psychoanalytic film theory (Hollinger, 2012, p. 12), argued that it overlooks differences in relation to class, race, age, and sexual preference (Smelik, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, it reinforces the dichotomy of male/female (Smelik, 2016, p. 3).

However, scholars like Kaplan and Mayne have argued that psychoanalytical approaches might be limiting but are still productive and useful in feminist film theory (Hollinger, 2012, p. 12). As a result, feminist scholars such as Brey, French and Soloway, build on the concept of the male gaze to argue for the necessity of a "female gaze". Brey and French note that the female gaze is not the inverse of the male gaze (2020, p. 2; 2021, p. 53). It is not the mirror concept but a new way of understanding images (Brey, 2020, p. 2). Similar to the male gaze, the female gaze is debated for many of the same reasons. Staying critical remains important, but the many definitions of the female gaze indicate that the concept is more inclusive than maybe expected.

1.1.2 Definitions

According to Brey, her own work *Le regard féminin: Une révolution à l'écran*, was the first book to clearly define what the female gaze is. She defined the female gaze as a way of seeing which invites the viewer to engage with and share the lived experience of a female character on screen (Brey, 2020, p. 1). The focus is on giving subjectivity and agency to the female character (Brey, 2020, p. 24; Dhar, 2024, p. 385).

In order to avoid confusion, this thesis follows Dominique Chateau's definition of subjectivity, which is based on three distinct meanings (2011, p. 12). First, subjectivity can be defined as a consciousness. It is our awareness of our own existence, world, thoughts, and feelings. Second, it can indicate an internal representation of for instance "sensations, perceptions, feelings, mental images, dreams, ideas" (Chateau, 2011, p. 12). Third, subjectivity can represent a position of the subject, defined as "the identity of the human being as a unified source of external and internal representations, and of self-representation (and self-consciousness)" (Chateau, 2011, p. 12). These meanings are often mixed in film studies (Chateau, 2011, p. 12).

Within this subjectivity, agency becomes a key aspect. Hanmer and Klugman (2016, p. 237) defined agency as the ability to overcome barriers, challenge oppression and deprivation, exert influence individually or collectively, and be heard in society. For Judith Butler (1988, p. 519-520), agency lies in the possibility to subvert the stylised repetitions of the acts someone performs to create their gender. This makes gender in itself performative, and not a stable identity or locus of agency (Butler, 1988, p. 519). In other words, you cannot deny a woman agency on the basis of her being a woman. Thus, for this thesis, agency is understood as the capacity to speak out and reclaim narrative control in both an individual and collective context.

While defining the female gaze, Brey referred to *The Female Gaze: Essential Movies Made by Women* by Alicia Malone. In this book, the term was already used but not clearly defined. Malone (2018, p. 12) pointed out that perhaps the female gaze cannot exist, because society is not structured that way. She continued by stating that she uses the term but is not ignorant of the structure of our world or the narrow view of gender it implies. Simply put, the phrase opened conversations about viewing film and being represented on screen for anyone other than white, cis, and male viewers (Malone, 2018, p. 12).

However, Brey (2020, p. 23) admonished Malone for only using films directed by women, arguing this might lead to the summarization of the female gaze to the gaze of a female director. This, she suggested, can essentialise the work of women and overlook "the richness

of femininity, that obviously cannot be reduced to a person's biological sex or gender” (Brey, 2020, p. 23). According to Brey, the female gaze is the perspective produced by the film and not linked to the identity of the creator. A female director can also resort to a male gaze (Brey, 2020, p. 23). I argue that viewing only works by women can be an active choice to platform historically silenced voices and is therefore not inherently problematic. However, it is required to understand that the female gaze is something different. From this perspective, I chose to analyse two female-directed films.

Lisa French (2021) offers another approach to defining the female gaze through her extensive research on documentary film. She notes that the key marker of this gaze is the “communication or expression of female subjectivity” (French, 2021, p. 54). The focus is on female agency, which is created through a female perspective, look, and voice. In this, she stressed that the female gaze is not singular. It will take many forms since it is influenced by the intersecting identity factors such as gender, but also race, sexuality, culture, and class (French, 2021, pp. 53-4). Thus, French highlights a more intersectional approach.

Similarly, in their master class given at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Soloway (2016, 41:40) argued that the female gaze encapsulates all gazes. This includes, but is not limited to, the other gaze, queer gaze, and the intersectional gaze. Soloway explained the female gaze through three parts. The first, “feeling seen”, focuses on trying to make the viewer feel rather than just look (TIFF, 2016, 17:32). The second part, the “gazed gaze”, explores the feeling of being looked at (TIFF, 2016, 21:14). The third part, called the “returning of the gaze”, asserts awareness and agency. Soloway defined it as: “I see you seeing me” and “I don’t want to be the object any longer” (TIFF, 2016, 22:54).

Sex and gender being only two aspects of an individual’s identity, does not cancel out the impact they have on your experience of the world. French (2021, p. 30) emphasises that women’s experience of the world is shaped by their sex and gender, which then influences subjectivity. So, although sex and gender are difficult to separate from other aspects of identity, it remains valuable to analyse how they shape identity and the lived experience within the social constructions around that identity (French, 2021, p. 72).

To sum up, through all these definitions it becomes clear that the female gaze is closely connected to female subjectivity, agency, and identity. Female characters are “not merely objects of desire but are depicted with emotional depth and multifaceted identities” (Shreyoshi Dhar, 2024, p. 385). This gaze is argued to be much more inclusive than exclusive, stressing an intersectional approach. Nonetheless, sex and gender inevitably impact women’s experience and thus representation of the world. With this new gaze, a need for the invention and

reinvention of filmic forms emerges (Brey, 2020, p. 1). These cinematographic strategies will be further explored in the last part of this chapter.

1.1.3 #MeToo Shifts

The sometimes-overlooked activist Tarana Burke started a grassroots campaign in 2006 using the words “me too” (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 105). This campaign promoted the “healing among women of colour who had experienced sexual violence or exploitation” (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 105). However, it was more than a decade later that those words would evolve into the #MeToo movement. Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019, p. 3) explain how in October 2017 *New York Times* journalists Meghan Twohey and Jodi Kantor published seventy allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein. This prompted actress Alyssa Milano to post: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 3). The post gained massive traction, showcasing the pervasiveness of the issue. As a result, #MeToo was adapted locally, and evolved into more tangible activist movements such as #TimesUp (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, pp. 3-5).

Together, Burke and Milano shaped the start of this growing movement (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 105). However, Burke noted the media’s favouring of the stories by celebrities and white women (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 105). Instead, she put her focus on amplifying the voices of the LGBTQIA+ community and women of colour (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 105). The tendency, in which non-white and non-cis women are pushed towards the backlines after playing essential roles in initiating movements, has also occurred in other movements. In relation to sexual violence, it is crucial to stress that women from these minorities are even more disproportionately affected (Blackburn et al., 2024, p. 2; OCRCC, 2024; UN Women, 2025). In other words, suppressing their stories would be silencing a substantial amount of victims.

The understanding and representation of sexual violence was majorly impacted by #MeToo. The hashtag became a vehicle for women all over the world to share their own experiences of sexual violence (Sezen et al., 2020, p. 2). This increased both the visibility and voices of women who spoke out (Garraio & Adak, 2025, p. 358). As a result, the movement helped shift the public responses to accounts of sexual violence, going from doubting all to believing some (Gilmore, 2023, p. 2). Through these shifts, new voices that challenged dominant discourses at the time emerged (Gilmore, 2023, p. 8). This is the #MeToo effect: “the gelling of millions of diverse accounts into a collective voice that exposed systemic bias” (Gilmore, 2023, p. 4).

Because the movement began within the entertainment industry, the sector’s toxicity

was quickly exposed and targeted (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 69). The Time's Up movement, for instance, successfully lobbied for changes in "laws, policies and workplace cultures" (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 69). Among others, anti-harassment training, codes of conduct, effective reporting mechanisms, inclusions of moral clauses were implemented. Additionally, the pressure from the #MeToo and Time's Up movements partly contributed to the increase in the demand for female writers and directors in 2018 (Hillstrom, 2019, p. 70).

Stylistically and narratively, #MeToo also impacted cinema. Most importantly for this thesis is that the movement can be seen as a catalyst to spread the female gaze in cinema (Brey, 2020, p. 2). Sezen, Çiçekoğlu, Tunç and Diken (2020, p. 2) stated how the #MeToo movement created a new focus of scriptwriters on strong women characters, controversial themes and marginalised stories. As a result, life writing became a signature form of writing in the movement, focusing on the perspective of the survivor (Gilmore, 2023, p. 13). For example, through autobiographical narratives, the survivors take the narrative into their own hands and reframe themselves as authoritative and credible (Gilmore, 2023, p. 4). All together, they noted changes in cinema as a direct result of the #MeToo movement. Brey beautifully summarised:

The liberation of the camera gaze theorised by Mulvey is reminiscent of the liberation of victims' voices within the MeToo movement. In both cases, there is a desire to break away from traditional conventions. The women who used the hashtag used a new medium to make themselves heard. (Brey, 2020, p. 21)

Thus, #MeToo opened a space for conversations about sexual violence and its effects. In cinema, the movement is tied to the idea that film can "challenge, renegotiate, and reconceptualise understandings of gender-based violence and sexual violence" (Garraio & Adak, 2025, p. 359). By engaging with this subject, films can generate wider public discourse. This ongoing expansion is not only interesting but necessary in a society where sexual violence remains prevalent.

1.2 Cinematic Strategies of the Female Gaze

1.2.1 Visual Components

The division between: (1) space and motion, (2) light and colour, and (3) sound is based on the course *Visual aesthetics and analyses* taught by professor Maarten Coëgnarts in the Film Studies and Visual Culture master's programme (UA). Each section focuses on visual strategies

that can be specifically connected to the female gaze based on my research findings. That is to say, only a few elements of a much broader field are discussed to keep the focus of this thesis.

1.2.1.1 Space and Motion

The first reoccurring idea is that of the subjective camera, which takes the point of view (pov) of the female character (Brey, 2020, p. 5). More specifically, Uğuz (2024, p. 126) refers to pov-shots that both show where the protagonist is looking and their reflection, for example in a window. This is tied to Soloway's "returning of the gaze", because these shots make it impossible to objectify the character, because she is aware of her own gaze (Uğuz, 2024, p. 127).

Next is the close-up (Uğuz, 2024, p. 128; Brey, 2020, p. 6; Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). This technique is often used to show the facial expressions and the emotions of the characters, in order to convey their internal states (Uğuz, 2024, p. 128; Carrillo & Echevarría-Navarro, 2026, p. 48). This can also include close-ups of the character's body, which shares the heroine's desire and gives the impression the viewer can touch these bodies (Brey, 2020, p. 6). As a result, the desire is based on equality and reciprocity, rather than asymmetrical power relations (Brey, 2020, p. 6). However, scholars like Young and Spallacci critically observed close-ups when it comes to using them to represent sexual violence. This will be explained in chapter two.

In relation to the framings, the composition of the shot may also reflect dynamics and help visualise subjectivity or agency. For instance, when multiple female characters (two or in group) are face-to-face or side-to-side within a single frame, it can "emphasise the connections and relationships among them (Uğuz, 2024, p. 128). This corresponds with theories of mise-en-scène developed by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. They examine how composition and staging are central to communicating character relationships and guiding the viewer's interpretation of them (David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson, 2010, p. 249).

Following this, long takes are similarly debated in relation to the representation of sexual violence, which is also discussed in chapter two. However, through the female gaze, the long take is argued to make the viewer observe the frame for a longer time, which makes them practice patience and could lead to more empathic viewing (French, 2021, p. 87). An empathetic viewing can also be created through camera movements. Uğuz (2024, p. 128) argues that (slow) tracking, dolly shots, and pan and tilt shots can all help approach and understand the characters, their behaviours, and their world more closely.

1.2.1.2 Light and Colour

For both categories of light and colour, no specific reoccurring elements were found. Nonetheless, other theories can be explored on the basis of underscoring subjectivity, emotions or mental states. Each colour can have multiple meanings; for example, “red signifies passion, love, danger, and anger; yellow gives off a carefree, playful, happy, whimsical, and childlike quality; and blue communicates sadness, depression, calm, and coldness” (Kashaka, 2025, p. 29). More in-depth analyses can, for instance, be found in Natalie M. Kalmus’s *Colour Consciousness* (see Figure 1 for detail). Additionally, artists such as Wassily Kandinsky have spoken about the impact of colour, noting that colour has a psychic power that can cause an emotional vibration (Kandinsky, 1946/2011, pp. 41-43). In other words, “colour is a means of exercising direct influence upon the soul” (Kandinsky, 1946/2011, p. 43). That is to say, these elements can help engage the viewer with the story of the female protagonist.

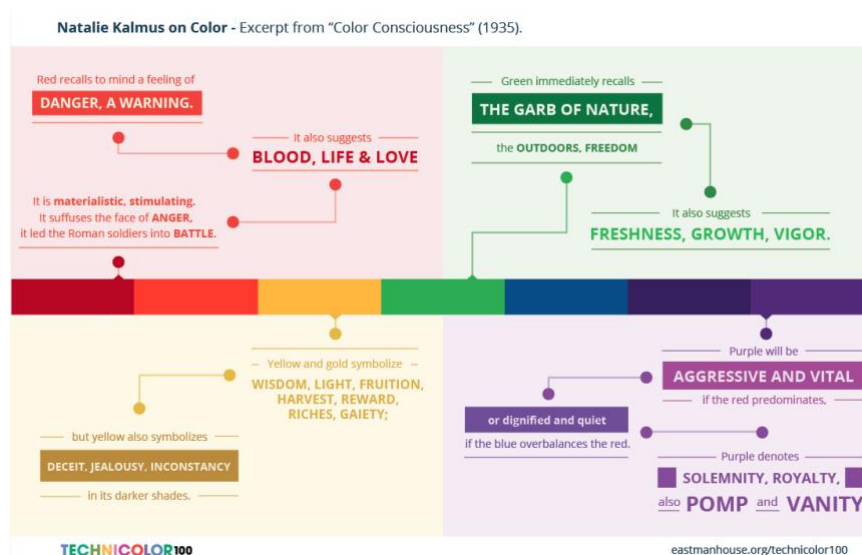


Figure 1: overview from *Colour Consciousness* (1935)

1.2.1.3 Sound

The examination of sound is mostly to see how it elicits emotion and empathy, and focuses on the personal experience of the character. Sound can strongly shape a viewer’s perception and “impact the emotional engagement of the audience” (Kashaka, 2025, p. 30). In 1994, the book *Audio-Vision* by Michel Chion theorised different layers of sound within film. The most relevant for the female gaze is the internal sound, more specifically, the subjective-internal or mental-internal sounds (Chion, 2019, p. 76). This includes mental voices and memories, for example (Chion, 2019, p. 76). Uğuz (2024, p. 127) also notes that dynamic uses of sound can

help immerse the audience in the character's environment. This makes them engage more directly with the experience of the character.

1.2.2 Narrative Strategies

Uğuz distinguishes between two focalizations, namely the internal and spectatorial focalisation (2024, pp. 127-128). For the latter, Uğuz (2024, p. 128) argues that the other characters' thoughts can also offer insight into the female character. However, the internal focalisation is the more popular and effective approach. In this, the audience directly enters "the female character's frame of mind" (Uğuz, 2024, p. 127), for instance through a voice-over by the female protagonist (Uğuz, p. 127; Brey, p. 5). This technique conveys the character's experience and emotions directly, and it can help create an intimacy with the subject (French, 2021, p. 134).

Another example is the direct address. This concept originally derived from the field of narratology but is now also applied to cinema in works such as *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema* (2012) by Tom Brown. In the female gaze, a direct address "creates a process of distancing that can block processes of seduction and emotional investment between a viewer and the heroine" (Brey, 2020, p. 5). Brey points out that a direct address can be used by the male gaze as a sexual act or a way to seduce the viewer. This is in contrast with its use by the female gaze, which can instead emphasise that the character is not an object but an autonomous subject (Brey, 2020, p. 5). This again is connected to Soloway's "returning of the gaze" (TIFF, 2016, 22:54).

The female gaze favours narratives that are more process-oriented (Uğuz, p. 129). As a result, they often end in circularity or a lack of closure (French, p. 82). The focus is not where the character ends up, but rather on her journey. In addition, Brey notes the usage of dreams and visions. She explains that "dreams and visions can interrupt the narrative sequence of events and plunge the viewer into the character's unconscious" (Brey, 2020, pp. 5-6). This and using flashbacks (Spallacci, 2019, p. 7), are directly tied to trauma. Here, the intersection between the female gaze and the representation of trauma starts to become evident.

1.2.3 Themes and Discourse

The thematic issues illustrated in Malone's *The Female Gaze* include "female friendship, female intersubjectivity, women's independence, societal challenges faced by women, motherhood, gender norms, the female body, desire, and resistance against patriarchal

structures” (Uğuz, 2024, p. 125).

Similar themes are also identified in other sources. For example, French has a section dedicated to resonant themes in the work of women documentarians. Based on her own comments of using feature films and applying it to documentaries, this thesis reverses that approach. She highlights a range of themes centred on women’s experiences and perspectives. These include issues that particularly affect women, struggles for agency and social positioning, as well as a focus on psychological perspectives and emotion, personal stories, and a strong interest in familial spheres (French, 2021, pp. 65-67, 79, 81, 83-4).

Lastly, both Brey and Soloway comment on the active efforts of the female gaze. Brey (2020, p. 22) argues the main difference between the male gaze and female gaze lies in the shift from a “patriarchal unconscious gaze” to a consciously created gaze. Soloway (2016, 28:27) reiterates the conscious effort of the female gaze to create empathy as a political tool. For Soloway, the female gaze is a cultural critic that can be used to call out “story lines and procedurals that are meant to work as public service, meant to educate us about rape but are actually just more rape” (TIFF, 2016, 35:00). In other words, discourses in these films are chosen consciously in an effort to actively engage and educate the audience on this specific topic.

Chapter 2: Trauma Theory and the Representation of Sexual Violence

2.1 Trauma (Theory) Explained

2.1.1 Foundations of Trauma Theory

Chronicling the field of trauma studies, the explanation starts with Freud, an unavoidable but highly contested figure by feminists. As explained by Ruth T. Hannon (2024, para. 6, 9), Freud believed that the penis envy (the chronic wish for the superior male organ) was central to the female development. Contemporaries like Freud’s own granddaughter Miriam S. Freud, and Karen Horney critiqued him. They pointed to the impact of culture, society’s structure, and gender roles in Freud’s theories (Hannon, 2024, para. 9). Ultimately, his theories relating to the female psyche were dismissed in the twenty-first century (Hannon, 2024, para. 17).

Nonetheless, Freud is regarded as the founder of psychoanalysis, which shaped many developments in trauma studies and other modern theories (Balaev, 2018, p. 361; Dudihalli & Kumar, 2022, p. 5110; Lee, 2025, p. 7; Hannon, para. 17). His key claims include that “traumatic experiences are repeated compulsively, divide the psyche, influence memory

differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past” (Balaev, 2018, p. 363). Their influence extended far beyond trauma studies. For instance, Mulvey drew on psychoanalysis in her conceptualization of the male gaze.

Further developments in trauma studies began to examine how trauma influences memory and identity (Balaev, 2018, p. 363), for example, within literary trauma theory. Prominent scholar Cathy Caruth described trauma as a “response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 91). Her model suggests that the suffering caused by an external event leads to internal changes in an individual’s mind, fundamentally changing their identity and life (Dudihalli & Kumar 2022, p. 5110). Within the traditional Freudian-Caruthian model, trauma was understood as “an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation” (Balaev, 2018, p. 363).

This traditional model has been debated over the years, particularly regarding its limitations. One of the new approaches, theorised by Michelle Balaev, is the Pluralistic Trauma Theory (Balaev, 2018, p. 366; Dudihalli & Kumar, 2022, p. 5110). This model challenges the notion that trauma is inherently unrepresentable, as proposed by the Freudian-Caruthian model (Balaev, 2018, p. 366). It looks at the psychological effects as well as the cultural and social context in which the trauma happens. As a result, this model “creates a broader appreciation for the links between the singular and collective traumatic experience” (Balaev, 2018, p. 366). This perspective is interesting when it comes to experiences of sexual violence, because these are individual traumatic experiences situated within a broader societal and collective problem.

Within the Pluralistic Trauma Theory, memory became a key element in depicting trauma’s impact (Balaev, 2018, p. 366). Kirmayer argued that “each collective act of remembering makes it more possible for individuals to recollect and tell their personal stories” (1996, p. 25). He tied it to social movements that empower ‘victims’, noting these can enable recollection (Kirmayer 1996, p. 29). These movements can validate narrative forms through, for example, media presentations and can create shifts in public attitudes and juridical practices (Kirmayer, 1996 p. 29). This directly connects to the efforts of #MeToo in validating new narratives around victims, opening discourses and impacting laws. Besides, this also shows a belief in the responsibility of media representations when it comes to trauma and its impacts. Similarly, Kaplan (2013, p. 54) stated that trauma is not something naturally existing, but it is something constructed by society, especially through the media.

2.1.2 Trauma from Sexual Violence

For a long time, sexual violence was not seen as a traumatic event; the physical pain could be acknowledged, but not its consequential psychological suffering (Bourke, 2012, p. 1). According to Judith L. Herman (2022, p. 17), the question of whether a systematic study of psychological trauma can be pursued or debated in public, depends on the support of a political movement. Herman (2022, p. 18) noted three separate lines of research that form the contemporary understanding of psychological trauma – first, the study of hysteria, second, that of shell shock or combat neurosis, and last, the trauma from sexual and domestic violence – which all flourished because of their connection to a political movement. This thesis focuses on the latter and its political context, namely the feminist movements emerging in North America and Western Europe in the 1970s.

During the early 1970s, American feminists successfully pressured the National Institute of Mental Health to open a research centre focused on rape (Herman, 2022, p. 45). Initial investigations confirmed the reality of women's experiences – previously dismissed by Freud as fantasies – and revealed the pervasiveness of sexual violence against women and children in our culture (Herman, 2022, p. 45). As a result, continuing research exposed the impact of sexual violence.

In 1972, Burgess and Holmstrom discovered the pattern which they coined as the “Rape Trauma Syndrome” (Herman, 2022, p. 46). They recognised a clear connection between response patterns of rape victims and the diagnostic criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Burgess, 1983, p. 100; Herman, 2022, p. 43). Burgess (1983, p. 100) argued all features or diagnostic criteria of PTSD are visible in victims of rape. These include: (1) the stressor is significant enough to evoke symptoms, (2) the trauma is frequently re-experienced, and (3) there is a reduced involvement with the environment or even numbing responsiveness to it (Burgess, 1983, pp. 101-3). As a fourth feature, she cautions against the appearing of any of these symptoms after the rape: exaggerated startle response or hyper-alertness; disturbance in sleep pattern; guilt about surviving or behaviour employed during the rape; impairment of memory and/or power of concentration; avoidance of activities that arouse recollection; increased symptoms to the event that symbolise or resemble it (Burgess, 1983, pp. 104-5).

Burgess concluded by discussing unresolved sexual trauma. This is a delayed response to the rape trauma, which often occurs when a victim has not told anyone of the rape (Burgess, 1983, p. 108). She described it as “carrying a tremendous psychological burden” because the survivor has not fully processed it or integrated the experience of rape into their thought,

feelings or behaviours. The reaction to the prior experience is then often reactivated through a second sexual trauma, crisis or flashback (Burgess, 1983, p. 108).

In conclusion, the women's movement of the 1970s heavily raised public awareness for sexual violence and initiated new responses to victims within the mental health sector (Herman, 2022, p. 46). Many of their efforts were rewarded and extensive studies led to better understandings of the actual impact it had on women's psyche. However, within broader society and media the understanding and representation of sexual violence still had a long way to go.

2.2 Countering Patriarchal Representations of Sexual Violence

2.2.1 Sexual Violence Through Patriarchal Modes of Seeing and the Male Gaze

Media representations of violence against women and girls are poor. Even if they do not explicitly blame victims, the media often objectify, sensationalise, stigmatise, or cast doubt on their credibility. (True, 2021, p. 73)

Trying to understand these poor representations is done through the narratives surrounding sexual violence. One thing is certain: these narratives have shifted significantly throughout time. McMahon (2011, p. 2) provided a comprehensive historical overview regarding the definition and perceptions of sexual violence, victims, and perpetrators. The main insight from these shifts is that the ways in which rape is narrated affect all women, not only victims (Bourke, 2012, p. 19). Bourke further emphasised that "rape narratives don't simply represent experience, but help to constitute it" (Bourke, 2012, p. 19). Similarly, Projansky (2001b, p. 3) argued that rape discourses can shape and enable future actions, including physical ones.

In the 1990s, feminist scholars, such as Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, introduced the term "rape culture" to better understand the relationship between media and rape (Buchwald, et al., 1995/2012, preamble). The term is defined as a complex belief system that encourages male sexual aggression and sustains violence against women. They emphasise how popular culture, in combination with other factors, has reinforced this rape culture (Buchwald, et al., 1995/2012, editor's preface). In order to transform it, a revision of the demeaning and sexualised images of women in popular media is necessary (Buchwald, et al., 1995/2012, editor's preface).

Many cinematic representations of violence against women have been widely criticised by feminist scholars. The male gaze demonstrated how patriarchal views are embedded into

the structure of film, positioning women as sexual and erotic objects (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). Although Mulvey does not directly address representations of sexual violence, her framework helps explain why such portrayals are often objectifying. Jacqui True (2021, p. 74) pointed out that the media's objectification of women and the normalisation of violence against them are connected. If cinema structurally reduces women to objects, it becomes difficult to represent female victims and the violence inflicted upon them with the necessary sensitivity.

Over the past decades, more specific criticisms have emerged. For instance, in many films rape is solely used as a “lazy narrative device to spice up a plot” (Brey, 2020, p. 77). As a result, the event is “either eroticised or shown in a brutal manner, and its consequences are erased from the victim's life” (Brey, 2020, p. 77). The long-lasting traumatic effects of these horrific events are completely glazed over.

Amanda Spallacci (2019, p. 3) argued that the erotization could for example be done through the overt sexualization of the victims by highlighting their nudity during the rape scenes, which can titillate some viewers. She further emphasised that in a culture that already fetishises traumatic events, especially violence against women, graphic rape scenes only further perpetuate the discourses that sustain these acts.

According to Spallacci (2019, p. 1), the focus on the traumatic event rather than its effects – such as traumatic memory – can be explained through the traditional trauma studies. It reflects their belief that trauma cannot be represented. So, the focus is on the event itself which is representable (Spallacci, 2019, p. 1). Additionally, these depictions of rape over the representation of rape trauma reinforce a link between visualisation and proof (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3; Kenny, 2020, p. 173; Young, 2009, pp. 70-1). In real-life most rapes occur without a witness, meaning often the only evidence is the testimony of the survivor (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). By foregrounding the rape, the viewer knows it took place not because they belief in the testimony but because they were explicitly shown proof (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). This leads to viewers occupying a voyeuristic position (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3) and perpetuating a denigration of the experience of sexual violence for the woman (Kenny, 2020, p. 173). Because of this, Young (2009, p. 73) argues that until filmmakers develop a new ethical approach to depicting sexual violence, the potential harms should outweigh any claims that explicit rape scenes are necessary.

2.2.2 Female Gaze and Post-#MeToo Shifts in Representing Sexual Violence

Broader academic shifts from trauma studies to psychological memory studies, along with increased public discussions of sexual violence through social media activism such as #MeToo, have influenced discussions regarding the inclusion of rape scenes (Spallacci, 2019, p. 2). For example, the choice to not include a rape scene at all but only focus on its traumatic consequences (Spallacci, 2019, p. 2).

However, the complete omission of sexual violence from representation is also contested. For instance, Kenny (2020, p. 174) argued that developing a cinematic ethics or grammar for acceptable depictions of rape requires attempting them, even if those attempts fail. Projansky (2001b, p. 19) identified it as a feminist paradox between wanting to end rape and a need to represent it in order to challenge it, while potentially reinforcing it.

In relation to this, Brey (2020, p. 61) argued the female gaze can be used as an alternative approach in depicting sexual violence. She stressed that “by representing rape through a female gaze, by placing oneself in the perspective of a subject body, only then does the ‘experience’ of rape become watchable and defensible” (Brey, 2020, p. 61). Whereas the male gaze makes sexual violence a spectacle, the female gaze makes it “an experience that leaves a mark on the flesh” (Brey, 2020, p. 61). This thesis follows the idea that the female gaze enables the sensitivity required to represent sexual violence and its trauma. The experience becomes central, and the victims are portrayed as people with agency and subjectivity. As already noted in chapter one, certain cinematic strategies of the female gaze parallel trauma. For example, the usage of flashbacks mirrors the flashbacks as a reactivation of the victim’s trauma. Through this, the traumatic consequences of sexual violence become much harder to ignore.

Two visual and stylistic choices of the female gaze must be nuanced. First, close-ups of the victim’s face are often used to foreground their emotional response and generate empathy (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). Additionally, close-ups of the victim’s body parts emphasise the physical violence of the assault (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). These are often combined with close-ups of the rapist’s face to elicit disgust (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). However, such extreme close-ups can also lead to the victim becoming “a conglomeration of objectified body parts” (Young, 2009, p. 71). In other words, it can contribute to the objectification of the victim.

Second, the long take, which has become popular for depicting rape (Young, 2009, p. 54). Young (2009, p. 54) explained that it makes the audience member either a witness to a crime, thus someone who can testify, or a spectator that can find entertainment in the depiction.

As a result, she remained critical of the idea that this creates continuous discomfort in the viewer that mirrors the victim's experience (Young, 2009, p. 54). Alternatively, Kenny (2020, pp. 166, 175) argued that because of the processive duration (moment-by-moment playing out of the time), it inevitably evokes an empathetic experience of the time passing and it interpellates what he calls an 'ethical witness'. He defines this 'ethical witness' as a spectator that is both "complicit in the cinematic pleasure of the image and productively reflective on that complicity" (Kenny, 2020, p. 175).

In conclusion, what remains most important in depicting violence against women through the female gaze is the constant focus on the survivor's perspective. Besides this, the film's discourse also becomes important. These films should reiterate and showcase the real psychological effects of these traumatic experiences on a victim. Brey beautifully concluded by stating:

The female gaze allows us to stop treating rape as entertainment and to show it as an experience that leaves scars on our flesh. If our screens were flooded with representations of rape through a female gaze, I dare to imagine that our rape culture would crumble. If men and women watching their screens could feel in their bodies the dehumanisation that this act engenders, its devastating violence, the disfigurement it causes, then perhaps men—since 98% of rapists are men—would think twice before penetrating a body without the consent of the human being in front of them. (Brey, 2020, p. 78)

Chapter 3: Film Analyses

In this chapter, *The Tale* and *How To Have Sex* are analysed through the cinematic strategies of the female gaze in relation to the representation of sexual violence and trauma. In both films, numerous examples were found across the three categories: visual strategies, narrative strategies, and themes and discourse. I address and discuss the elements I consider most interesting for this thesis. Throughout the analyses, timestamps are included to help locate the scenes.

3.1 The Tale (Jennifer Fox, 2018)

The Tale explores Jennifer Fox (based on the director's biography) trying to make sense of her memories regarding her "first relationship" with her forty-year-old coach Bill Allens, and the

women that introduced them Mrs. G (Jane Gramercy). After finding Jennifer's story, her mom calls in a panic, asking what happened between her and Bill. This sets off an investigation into her own memories. She realises she was groomed and assaulted multiple times by a person she idolised and trusted. The film is a good example of an autobiographical narrative, in which life-writing and fictionalised elements are mixed. To make this analysis clearer, Jenny will be used when talking about the thirteen-year-old version of the protagonist, and Jennifer when talking about the eighty-four-year-old version.

3.1.1 Visual Strategies

First, the subjective camera or point-of-view shot as discussed by Brey and Uğuz appears a few times. Notably, we see a shot from Jennifer's point-of-view looking into a restaurant. She hallucinates Bill sitting by the window, meanwhile we see her reflection in that window. Through this, the film allows us to view both her perspective and her emotions whilst she imagines seeing her abuser again (24:06; see Figure 2 for detail of sequence).



Figure 2: Fox, 2018, 24:14

This increases immersion with Jennifer's journey.

Second, the film explicitly depicts the assaults happening to Jenny. Jennifer Fox (the director) states how it was a dealbreaker for her to take it out, although this need for inclusion made finding financiers much more difficult (Galuppo, 2018, para. 6). Most shots depicting the assault are close-ups, both of Jenny's face and Bill's face. For this, I point back to chapter two in which the debate around using close ups in depicting rape, was explained. The shots seem to foreground Jenny's emotional response, emphasising the experience clearly hurts her physically (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3; Fox, 2018, 58:40; see Figure 3 for detail of sequence). By contrasting this with close-ups of Bill's face, disgust can be evoked (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). This interplay between empathy and disgust is further accentuated throughout the film, as the viewer follows Jennifer's evolving understanding of the situation. Long before Jennifer explicitly states it, the trauma is already leaving a mark on her body. For instance, the film shows Jenny throwing up after the assault (1:19:21; see Figure 4 for detail of sequence). Then, later in the film, she feels sick when she is supposed to meet Bill and states: "my body had told

me what my mind refused to accept” (1:31:15). Thus, it can be argued that these depictions employ the female gaze both in filming the actual assaults and in contextualising them.



Figure 3: Fox, 2018, 58:45



Figure 4: Fox, 2018, 1:19:28

Third, I want to point to the composition of Jenny in relation to Mrs. G and Bill. Throughout the film, Jenny is often placed below the two adults. When she is standing next to them, she is notably shorter (18:32; 44:57) or when she is lying on the floor, they are seated (44:21; see Figures 5 for detail of sequences). Even in sequences where she sits face-to-face, she remains slightly lower (36:41; see Figure 6 for detail of sequence). This happens for instance when Bill and Mrs. G tell Jenny about their affair. Bill states he wants them to be equals, trying to gain her trust, but this is visually undercut by the composition. She literally keeps looking up to them throughout the film. This mirrors her psychological looking up to them and idolising them. It is only at the end she is slightly hovering over Bill. She confronts him by stating the things she felt and shames him for being an adult doing that to a child (1:40:46; see Figure 7 for detail of sequence). Making clear to the audience that she has understood he was abusing her and she is no longer justifying it. The power dynamic has shifted, at least for herself.



Figure 5: Fox, 2018, 44:21



Figure 6: Fox, 2018, 31:41



Figure 7: Fox, 2018, 1:42:49

Last, much of the film is done through internal sounds, more specifically mental internals in the form of voice-overs. This alternates between Jenny's thoughts and Jennifer's thoughts. Sometimes, these merge into each other, for example when asking herself why she was trusted by Mrs. G and Bill to know about their affair (35:06). Jenny's thoughts often expose the wrapped reality she once believed in. In my interpretation, the merging of these into Jennifer's thoughts, where she now questions those same narratives, can be understood as a form of agency. As explained in chapter one, agency is the capacity to speak out and reclaim narrative control, which Jennifer enacts by reflecting on the story constructed by her younger self.

3.1.2 Narrative Strategies

The narrative revolves around Jennifer piecing together what happened to her at age thirteen, guided by the story she wrote for class. The film is made up of the alternation between the present and flashbacks. The scenes depicting the assault are spread throughout the film and appear as flashbacks (or dreams), for example in her car (58:14) or a lecture (1:17:56). This mirrors Burgess' explanation on unresolved sexual trauma. Because Jennifer never told anyone what happened, she carries the psychological burden of never fully processing and integrating the traumatic event (Burgess, 1983, p. 108). It is then through flashbacks, as seen in the film, that the experiences are reactivated (Burgess, 1983, p. 108). The clear depictions of the multiple assaults are not the main focus of the film. It is the effects and mostly the coming to term with them that makes up the narrative. As Michelle Orange states:

It is a work of storytelling above all. The framing of what happened to Jenny is flexible, expansive, interested in complication; the perspective is enigmatic, deeply personal, at once singular and manifold, insular and diffuse. (Orange, 2018, p. 218)

In relation to this, the film clarifies that her memories are clouded by her subjectivity. In a sequence of flashbacks, Jennifer pictures herself in a certain way (11:33; see Figure 8 for detail of sequence). However, after speaking to Becky, another girl at the camp, and her mom, Jennifer finds out she actually looked a lot younger than she first imagined (15:16). The first sequence of flashbacks is shown again, but this time with the alternate and much younger looking Jenny (16:42; see Figure 9 for detail of sequence). From that point onwards, she remains this version. This happens again when she remembers Iris Rose, a college student that was a lover of Bill. Iris then gets inserted into that same sequence of memories (1:10:00). It

reflects Jennifer slowly putting the pieces together, but also how trauma can alter your memory. If Jennifer looked the way she first imagined, it might have been easier for her to justify her relationship with Bill. In her memory it looked a little less unsettling, ignoring that the situation remained illegal and unsettling whichever way you turn it.



Figure 8: Fox, 2018, 11:43



Figure 9: Fox, 2018, 17:06

The film stresses Jennifer's agency in the recollection of her memories and the present retelling of her story. She interviews her younger version, Mrs. G and Bill. Through these metalepses, Jennifer goes into her memory to talk to them and ask questions (examples: 10:25; 54:40; 1:34:54; 1:37:12). Fox explained in an interview that "*The Tale* is a larger examination of how women use memory as a means to protect themselves from trauma" (Galuppo, 2018, para. 14). She further notes that while surviving the trauma is important, hopefully one day the victim can engage with the truth and different narratives (Galuppo, 2018, para. 14). Jennifer enacts this process through these shifting memory sequences and interviews-like structures. She allows herself to rework and reclaim her narrative.

Lastly, just like the female gaze favours, the film lacks closure. Orange argues, "Fox offers no moral, no answers, and no closure" (2018, p. 219). Alternatively, it can be argued that Jennifer confronting Bill is a form of closure, she clearly came to some realizations. But the film remains open-ended. This is made even more apparent by the circularity of the film. The final shot is Jennifer and Jenny sitting next to each other, while a voice-over starts reading the story again (1:43:48; see Figure 10 for detail of sequence).



Figure 10: Fox, 2018, 1:44:14

3.1.3 Themes and Discourse

On a thematic level, *The Tale* deals with the issue of child sexual abuse, more specifically that of a coach towards a young athlete. In the past decade, several similar films have been produced, differing in context, but all centring coach-athlete abuse. Again, #MeToo helped expose the many real cases within this industry. For instance, Larry Nassar, who was the United States Women's national gymnastics' team doctor, and abused hundreds of girls (see for example the documentary *At The Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal* by Erin Lee Carr, 2019). When translating these narratives into cinema, "Western cinema has long contributed to normalising sexual violence in sports, depicting it as romantic play, educational or a harmless joke" (Lin, 2025, p. 952).

Through the female gaze, alternate representations are emerging. Next to *The Tale*, another good example is the French film *Slalom* by Charlène Favier (2020). This film places the coach-athlete abuse in a competitive ski program. In both films, the female protagonist claims to be in love with their coach and thus consequently their abuser. In *The Tale*, when the first depiction of the assault takes place, Jenny states: "I find that I trust him so much, I never realise where he's leading me. Once we are that far I don't know how to say no. I love him, he loves me" (58:23). This opens the conversation to grooming, a process in which the offender(s) build a connection with and gain the trust of a child in order to manipulate them into doing things (Metropolitan Police). Along with casting a nice-looking man into the role of the coach, these films try to challenge "the stereotype of a cold-blooded molester" (Lin, 2025, p. 955; see Figure 11 for illustration).



Figure 11: Fox, 2028, 55:36

Second, the film brings up the discourse around not wanting to be called a victim. This is often tied to the argument of "it was the seventies" and "people didn't talk about it like that" (52:06). Martin (her fiancée) rightfully answers: "I don't want you to justify this" (52:14). But when he calls her a victim, Jennifer becomes extremely defensive and states she is not a victim, she says "I don't need you, or anybody to call me a victim" (52:57). The shame associated with being called a victim in this moment of the film may stem from her not yet having come to terms with what happened. It may also be linked to the long history of victim-blaming and shaming which attached a negative connotation to the term. In this interaction, the impact of

#MeToo becomes evident. The movement has actively worked on changing harmful narratives surrounding victims of sexual violence.

3.2 How To Have Sex (Molly Manning Walker, 2023)

The film follows Tara, a sixteen-year-old girl on a party vacation in Malia with her two best friends Em and Skye. In the first 20 minutes of the film, they meet their resort neighbours Paige, Badger, and Paddy. On two separate occasions – once on the beach and once in bed – Paddy takes advantage of Tara. The narrative then shifts to focus on the impact of these events on her. Walker states it is a more fictionalised story but on the grounds of a personal yet very different experience from when she was sixteen (Cleary, 2024, para. 10). Again, leaning into the autobiographical aspect.

3.2.1 Visual Strategies

The film has a few mirror shots, mostly of Tara looking at her reflection or simply standing in front of the mirror while talking to someone else (some examples: 17:15, 1:03:17, 1:22:55; see Figures 12-14 for detail of the sequences). This last example is particularly interesting. Tara's reflection is created through two different make-up mirrors, distorting the reflection. It is the moment she admits to Em what has happened (1:22:55; again see Figure 14 for detail of sequence). Understanding the meaning of a mirror in cinema can be tied to Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage". Based on my understanding of this theory, a character looking into a mirror can reflect recognition but also misrecognition and impacts their self-identification. This might apply to the first mirror shots in which Tara could be searching for her sense of self. However, in the scene with Em at the end, Tara does not look directly into the mirror. We see her through her fractured reflection. I interpret this as showing how this experience has fractured her sense of self. But by not having her look directly into the mirror, she seems not yet at the point of being able to recognise and come to terms with that for herself. Going even broader, this utilization of actual mirrors can also be connected to the larger idea that cinema can function as a mirror "that reflects and shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world around us" (Carrillo & Echevarría-Navarro, 2026, p. 44).



Figure 12: Walker, 2023, 17:20



Figure 13: Walker, 2023, 1:03:17



Figure 14: Walker, 2023, 1:23:08

The film also works with a lot of close-ups of Tara's face, each foregrounding her emotional reactions. In combination with long takes, the changes in her facial expressions become clear. For example, when she is crying in the bathroom after the second assault (1:15:41; see Figure 15 for detail of sequence). Or when she is in the car to the airport, and the camera remains on her for almost three minutes (1:19:46; see Figure 16 for detail of sequence). This forces the viewer to watch her try and make sense of what she is feeling, which elicits engagement and empathy.

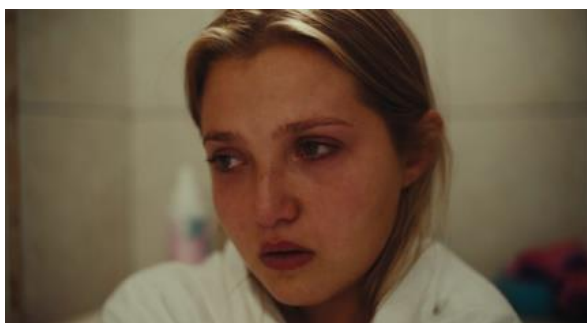


Figure 15: Walker, 2023, 1:15:46



Figure 16: Walker, 2023, 1:19:56

The scene immediately after the first assault shows Tara in a neon yellowish green dress against a dark blue and purple background with magenta accents (46:27; see Figures 17 and 18 for details of sequence). From a colour analysis perspective, this is particularly interesting. I interpret the bright dress as playful and vigorous, which encapsulates Tara when she put this dress on. She is talkative and full of excitement when the trip starts. This stands in stark contrast

with the background, which can be read as melancholy, aggressive and vain, based on the blue, purple and magenta (Kalmus, 1935 p. 144). From that point onwards she is not the same, she seems uncomfortable when talking and all the light she had is extinguished.



Figure 17: Walker, 2023, 46:38



Figure 18: Walker, 2023, 47:09

Last, the sound in the film creates an immersive experience of what Tara is going through. The sounds are distorted, in combination with the visual distortion caused by fast spinning, cuts, and flashing lights (47:12). Sometimes the music slowly fades to the point where all the viewer hears is her breathing and a static sound (1:03:19). Without any words, the viewer gets immersed in her experience of trying to get through the parties, while her mental state deteriorates.

3.2.2 Narrative Strategies

The film follows Tara trying to understand and cope with what happened, focusing on the process. It does not offer a proper closure. Tara has admitted to Em what happened and with tears in her eyes tries to convince Em it is fine (1:23:30). Em does two important things. First, she says: “no it is not”, signalling to Tara her feelings are valid (1:23:58). Second, when Tara stops running to the gate, Em turns around and takes her hand saying: “we got this” (1:24:42). With this, she reassures Tara she is not alone and they will get through it together, tying the individual trauma to a collective effort to heal it.

Notably, the film has no voice-overs and is solely based on the dialogues and looks between the characters. The viewer has to read the facial expressions of Tara, which often stand in contrast with what she says. This allows for interpretative openness, because Tara does not explicitly express what she is feeling or thinking. It can be considered a risky choice, as it can lead to people interpreting your film differently than maybe intended. However, I argue that this makes the viewer engage deeper with what Tara could be feeling. In a sense, the viewer is placed in a similar position as Tara, as both have to navigate her emotional state without explicit verbal articulation. Despite this interpretative openness, the film continuously foregrounds a

visibly distressed version of Tara, making it difficult for the viewer to stay ignorant to the impact of the assaults on her.

Lastly, it is notable that the first assault is only shown through two separate flashbacks. The first flashback starts off with the distorted view and sound following Tara trying to leave the crowd. She calms down when she bumps into Paddy. He proposes to go to the beach and there he initiates intimate proximity (42:45). In this flashback, we get the leading up to the assault and a very small instance of it happening (45:21). The second time the assault is shown, is after Tara goes into the bathroom during predrinks to recollect herself (1:02:53). In an interview, Walker states that they made the beach scene a flashback, because early viewers were not shocked and found it normal (Cleary, 2024, para. 14). Walker therefore emphasises that the interaction should not be interpreted as a normal sexual encounter, as Tara continues to be affected by it afterwards. The use of a flashback reframes the scene and now reflects how a trauma can return to a victim in the form of flashbacks, bringing the film closer to the real experience of trauma.

3.2.3 Themes and Discourse

The first time I watched this movie, my friend and I thought it was going to be a fun coming-of-age film. What followed was a far more realistic portrayal of a girl growing up than we would have hoped to admit. That is the power this title has. It lures in unknowing viewers who, even after reading the brief synopsis, will watch a film that is probably not what they expected.

The film deals with consent and the blurring lines of it caused through peer pressure, insecurities and alcohol. Central to the story are the relationships between the three teen girls, all with their own insecurities, fears, and dreams. Skye is clearly extremely insecure, which at times turns her into a mean and hurtful “friend” towards Tara. Additionally, she is one of the main people pressuring Tara into losing her virginity. Through this, it poses the question how much of these desires – for example Tara’s desire to lose her virginity – are actually personal and not the result of peer or even societal pressure. The film includes little comments to almost shame Tara for being inexperienced. For instance, Paddy saying, “come on we are not twelve” after Skye asks, “never have I ever had sex” (19:10). This gets combined with her already existing insecurities. I interpreted Tara as wanting to be liked and valuing the validation she receives from her friends, which she may also seek from the boys. For instance, she looks disappointed and insecure when Paddy initially rejects her subtle advance (24:30). Add alcohol in the mix, and Tara’s struggles with knowing and verbalising her boundaries becomes nothing

but relatable for many teen girls.

However, through the film's subjective power, it is difficult (but unfortunately not unseen) to read these experiences as anything but sexual violence. Leading up to the first assault on the beach, she very clearly says “no” twice. First on the question whether or not she is going to strip and second on the question to skinny-dip (42:13). Paddy completely disrespects her clear boundary, picks her up and jumps in the water, even though she continues to say “no” and “put me down” (43:38). Then he starts initiating touch, and she again verbally asks him to stop two times (44:14). When Paddy comments he will not touch her, she pauses and asks him to come closer because she is cold (44:33). Her initiation stops there, and he starts complaining she is being unfair (44:37). She gets out of the water, followed by Paddy slapping her butt and saying she cannot wiggle it like that in front of him, making her visibly even more annoyed (44:57). Paddy continues, calling her uptight and saying, “I thought you were the fun one” (45:09; see Figure 19 for detail of sequence). This is the context in which Paddy pins her to the sand, and in which she reluctantly answers “yeah” when Paddy asks “yeah?” (45:55). It is here, people argue, she gave consent. However, it does not stop here. In the lead-up to the second assault, she clearly states her boundary both verbally and physically: she says she is asleep (1:13:25) and physically shows that she does not want him to touch her (1:14:04; see Figure 20 for detail of sequence). Again, he completely disrespects those boundaries, and he starts initiating sex while she is still half-asleep (1:14:29).

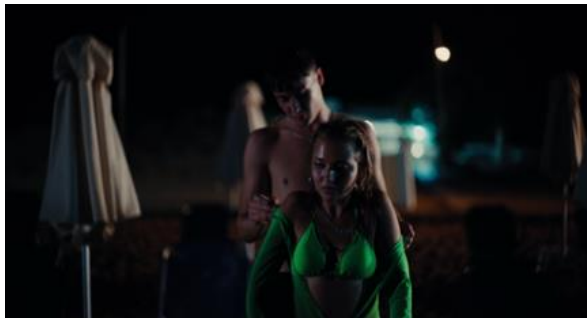


Figure 19: Walker, 2023, 45:22



Figure 20: Walker, 2023, 1:14:04

Walker speaks about how both scenes are “hotly debated and deconstructed among audiences, with some viewers failing to recognise either scenario as assault” (Cleary, 2024, para. 3). This is exactly why Walker wanted to make the film (Cleary, 2024, para. 3). As a result of its discourse, the film has been taken up in The Schools Consent Project, in which they use it as a tool to discuss consent. So, along with opening the conversations around consent, the film also proved its educational values. This is further reiterated by McKenna-Bruce (Tara), saying that many women felt seen by the movie, and how the film gave them the capacity to talk about these situations, whether themselves or a friend had experienced it (Yuan,

2024, para. 13). This again shows the collectiveness behind this individual traumatic experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis explored new approaches to representing sexual violence against women and girls, and the trauma that follows. First, the necessary theoretical frameworks were explained, namely that of feminist film studies, the male/ female gaze, #MeToo and trauma studies. These frameworks are then used to illustrate the problems, challenges, and new approaches to representing sexual violence in cinema. Once established, *The Tale* and *How To Have Sex*, two #Post-MeToo films, were analysed. These two films demonstrate how new approaches to depicting sexual violence, shaped by the female gaze and influenced by #MeToo, can create more realistic and thoughtful representations. Additionally, they can successfully open the much-needed discourses around sexual violence. *The Tale* mainly focuses on the psychological impact of unresolved trauma on a victim's memory. Simultaneously, the film questions what it means to be a victim, and more specifically what it means to come to term with accepting that identity. *How to Have Sex* explores the immediate aftermath of sexual violence. At the same time, it raises questions whether consent can be considered valid under conditions of peer pressure and alcohol. Both films centre female subjectivity and agency, positioning the victims as the authors of their own stories. This stands in contrast to, and critiques, representations of sexual violence against women and girls shaped by patriarchal views and the male gaze. Such depictions often objectify, sensationalise, and eroticise both the violence and the victim, reinforcing harmful narratives. Ultimately, this thesis argues that post-#MeToo films that employ the female gaze to portray trauma stemming from sexual violence, have a possibility to educate viewers and shape new narratives around sexual violence. They possess a power to reveal the deep identity-related impacts of this pervasive issue, which has affected and continuously affects millions of women.

Discussions around these depictions should remain ongoing. Furthermore, exclusionary tendencies within social movements and representation in both media and research addressing sexual violence should be foregrounded. This thesis acknowledges its limitations in this regard and encourages further research into more diverse victim profiles, encompassing a range of sexes, genders, sexualities, races, and classes. Additionally, for further research audience reception and spectatorship theories can offer valuable insights but were now mostly excluded to honour the focus of this work. Taken together, this thesis contributes to a deeper

understanding of sexual violence against women and girls, its trauma, and the challenges surrounding its representation, while simultaneously opening avenues for further research.

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