

Rape in Hollywood: How The Portrayal of Sexual Violence Against Women on screen has changed with the development of the #MeToo movement

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) Television DL844. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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A special thank you to all the women out there who bravely keep standing up and keep fighting for our rights every day in the face of danger and growing injustice, to all those who spread love and joy and refuse to stay silent, so that our daughters might have a safe, peaceful future.

Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to all survivors of sexual assault and abuse. Nobody should have to live in fear.

Shame must change sides.

#MeToo

Abstract

Almost a decade after the peak of the #MeToo movement in 2016, the concept of postfeminism has re-emerged in the mainstream rape discourse, putting into question the relevance of the movement in contemporary times. This thesis analyses to what extent the development of the MeToo movement, has influenced the portrayal of sexual violence against women in the media, and provides an examination of the current rape discourse and media representation from a postfeminist perspective.

The last extensive research on this argument was conducted by film theorists Lisa Cuklanz and Sarah Projansky in the early 2000s, who studied different rape scenes in popular media of the 20th century, and developed a formulaic pattern to categorise the types of rape representation prevalent at the time.

Using a similar methodology to Cuklanz and Projansky, this thesis analyses rape scenes from popular US-American and British films and television series of the 21st century, such as *Game of Thrones*, *Outlander* and *I May Destroy You*, and formulates a pattern of rape narratives prevalent in the media today. Using feminist film theory, concepts of trauma psychology and sociology, the thesis examines the correlation between society and media culture, and studies the defining role of internet technology in the development of feminist movements in the world.

This thesis provides useful, current data for the modern academic discourse surrounding rape, and documents both the progression and onsetting regression of female sexual violence representation in conjunction with the development of the MeToo movement in contemporary times.

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Introduction

That #MeToo is a thing of the past is a phrase often encountered in the online media discourse nowadays, surrounding the topic of awareness of sexual violence against women¹.

Ever since the first #MeToo² hashtag was tweeted by Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano in 2016, the conversation surrounding sexual violence both in the real world and on screen has changed significantly.

The discourse about rape culture in the film industry is less of a taboo: there has been a promotion of more measures to ensure the safety of women from sexual harassment and violence on set³, it has encouraged more women working in the industry to step forward about their experiences, and it has launched a re-examination of the treatment of female survivors depicted on screen.

Most importantly, though, it exposed many of Hollywood's biggest sexual predators, including Harvey Weinstein, and helped bring them to justice.

From this global movement, many new narratives have emerged about survivors in the media and film and tv shows, such as *I May Destroy You*⁴ or *Broadchurch*⁵, which have highlighted different aspects of rape culture in different ways.

Because of these new narratives, higher rape awareness and change in societal attitude towards the subject, though, more and more people have started questioning whether the #MeToo movement is still relevant today, especially in Western countries.

The last extensive research on this argument was made by feminist film theorists Lisa Cuklanz⁶ and Sarah Projansky⁷ in the early 2000s, who studied several rape narratives

¹ Shepherd, Jack. "Lionel Shriver says it is time to end the #MeToo movement", *Independent*, 15 Oct. 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/lionel-shriver-metoo-movement-times-up-cheltenham-literature-festival-a8584321.html>

² Burke, Tarana. "What 'Me Too' Made Possible" *Time*, 12 Oct. 2022, <https://time.com/6221110/tarana-burke-me-too-anniversary/>

³ Webley-Adler, Kayla. "What #MeToo Changed in Hollywood—and What It Didn't" *Elle*, Oct 27. 2022, <https://www.elle.com/culture/a41539940/hollywood-five-years-after-harvey-weinstein-metoo/>

⁴ *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, Various Artists Limited, FALKNA Productions, 2020.

⁵ *Broadchurch*. Created by Chris Chibnall, ITV, 2017.

⁶ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3441506>.

⁷ Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York University Press, 2001. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865827>.

of the 20th century through a postfeminist lens - the idea that popular support for feminism has decreased, as it is assumed that all women have gained independence - in the aftermath of the rape reform revolution in the 1970s.

Now, a decade after the peak of MeToo - a new rape reform movement - the question of postfeminism arises again, but no extensive research has been made into the subject to discuss the issue this time.

This thesis will offer a ground for discussing postfeminism in the MeToo era, by performing a similar analysis to Projansky and previous feminist theorists on contemporary media containing sexual violence against women, in order to bring extensive and current research data into the general rape discourse.

How does the portrayal of sexual violence on screen reflect our attitudes towards rape and our relationship with rape culture in the real world? To what extent has the portrayal of sexual violence against women on screen changed since the start of the MeToo movement? How has the MeToo movement influenced this change?

And - most importantly - have we come so far as a society that the MeToo era can be deemed as complete, in terms of how we tackle sexual violence against women on screen?

The thesis will look into the new attitudes towards and narratives of rape emerging from the new discourse sparked by the #MeToo movement, and examine to what extent these narratives are reflected in contemporary media.

By critically viewing an array of rape scenes from US and British film and television shows between the 2000s and the present, the text will analyse the development of portrayals of sexual violence against women before, throughout and after the peak of #MeToo in 2016, by examining the characterisation of the female survivors, the use of rape in the plot and the *mise-en-scène* used to visually transmit the narrative.

Drawing on experts from different fields, the thesis will try to demonstrate a link between portrayals of rape and rape in the real world, by delving into the system and culture behind the act of rape itself, in order to find out to what extent the system of patriarchy still has power over the narrative of rape survivors in the media, despite all the progress made with #MeToo.

Since the subject matter of the thesis relies heavily on the interpretation of visual elements and narratives depicted on screen, the research will be focused primarily on collecting qualitative data from different fields of the humanities.

The thesis will consist of three analysis chapters which will be structured to show a development timeline of the portrayal of rape on screen, mirroring the development of the MeToo movement over time in the real world.

Chapter one will focus on establishing the rape narratives prevalent in the media before MeToo, and examine the influence of patriarchy, androcentrism and the male gaze in rape scenes in film and television series of the 2000s to early-2010s.

To do so, the thesis will carry out a content and compositional analysis of ten rape scenes from different film & TV series from the 2000s-2010s, looking both at the treatment of female rape survivors in the narrative and mise-en-scène of the act itself onscreen. Additionally, it will analyse qualitative data collected through psychological academic studies and statistics on the audience reception of scenes of sexual violence from that time period, in order to study the effects these had on the general public.

The data collected from this analysis chapter will help establish a formulaic pattern of portrayal of sexual violence for the pre-MeToo era and the effects thereof, which will then be used as a comparison argument in future chapters, when analysing post-MeToo rape scenes.

In chapter two, the thesis will delve into discussing the new rape narratives emerging from #MeToo, critically comparing them to the old androcentric narratives, and analysing to what extent they have been translated to the screen in scenes of sexual violence post-MeToo. It will attempt to establish a link between the development of the MeToo movement in the real world and the development of portrayal of rape on screen, and analyse the structural barriers imposed by patriarchy that have prevented female survivors to control the narrative of their own stories up until #MeToo.

The text will carry out an intertextual analysis within a long-running television series tackling rape that has run from before all throughout the MeToo era until long after, such as *Outlander*⁸.

The analysis will examine the representation of rape narratives in an older episode of the series (pre-#MeToo) and compare it to a more recent one (post-#MeToo), in an attempt to observe whether there has been a development in terms of how the series tackles rape and treats rape survivors.

By drawing on interviews with the show's creators, the thesis will try to show to what extent the new rape narratives that came out of MeToo have influenced said development, and by using feminist & psychoanalyst theory, will argue whether the traditional rape narratives are truly defied within the series.

⁸ *Outlander*. Created by Ronald D. Moore, Sony Pictures Television, 2014.

The third and final analysis chapter will study films & TV shows starring female survivors of sexual violence after #MeToo and examine to what extent they defy the concept of the male gaze. It will analyse how prevalent the influence of the patriarchy and androcentrism still remains in rape scenes post-MeToo, despite all the advancements made, and will discuss the concept of postfeminism through these findings.

This part of the research will first draw upon feminist theory and have a psychoanalytic approach, in order to define the key ideas of postfeminism, and use both the formula of androcentrism and the male gaze to examine the rape narratives in survivor-centred stories. It will put these concepts to the test by making a content and compositional analysis of the two different survivor-centred series *Liar*⁹ and *I May Destroy You*¹⁰, which will look at both the portrayal of the survivors and rape narrative in this genre of storytelling, as well as the social environment - such as the cast and crew - that the shows were created in.

The findings of this analysis will be essential in order to determine how many of these patriarchal concepts still have influence on media tackling rape after #MeToo - even in media where survivor protagonists are the ones narrating the story - and establish whether these new rape narratives can be considered postfeminist.

Ultimately, the conclusion chapter will draw from the findings of each analysis chapter, and give a summary of how the portrayal of rape scenes has changed over time, both positively and negatively, through the influence of social movements such as #MeToo.

It will discuss what this change says about the current patriarchal status of our society, give an outlook into the future of rape on screen, and try to answer the question that is asked over and over again in the rape discourse online: Is the MeToo era truly over?

What this thesis will do is bring a new perspective to the general rape discourse in the media and give a modern take on the discussion of to what extent sexual violence on screen contributes to the persistence of sexual violence in the real world.

By giving an overview of the development of sexual violence on screen from the 2000s up until today, the text will provide useful, current data for the modern academic discourse surrounding rape, which has been lacking in updated data since the early 2000s.

⁹ *Liar*. Created by Harry and Jack Williams, Two Brothers Pictures, 2017.

¹⁰ *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, FALKNA Productions, HBO, 2020.

Through testing pre-MeToo feminist theories about androcentrism¹¹ on contemporary media, the research will reveal how prevalent the patriarchy continues to be in the media in present time, and undermine the importance of social movements in real life as means to deconstruct it, by examining the impact of the #MeToo movement on depictions of rape on screen.

All in all, this thesis aims to question the culture behind the system, the power of the media and how it can have influence in the real world. It aims to highlight the systems of oppression that still exist, raise awareness on the way they continue to limit survivors from sharing their own narratives, and make us reflect about the state of our society today.

¹¹ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Chapter One:
The Old Narratives - Rape Myths and Social Taboo

Chapter One analyses the prevalence of the old rape narratives formulated by Lisa Cuklanz¹² and Sarah Projansky¹³ in popular media of the 21st century pre-MeToo and studies the rape myths they are based on.

Whether it is scenes graphically depicting sexual violence, showing attempted rape or including narratives implying rape, the subject has become a common plot device in popular media and appears even in the most globally celebrated television series and films of the 21st century.

From the successful development of the rape reform movement of the 1970s¹⁴, where US-American women protested for the redefinition of rape from a sexual crime to an act of violence, several rape narratives emerged that dominated popular media since then.

Feminist film theorists Lisa Cuklanz and Sarah Projansky documented these narratives in their respective books *Rape on Prime Time* and *Watching Rape*, by viewing and analysing more than one hundred scenes of rape in popular films and TV episodes of the 20th century, and analysing them through a feminist lens.

From their findings, they were able to categorise these narratives into categories and formulate a pattern of how rape was represented and used on screen in that time period:

(1) Rape used as a way to punish female characters who attempt to defy patriarchal norms or structures. (2) Rape used as a way to activate passive female characters. (3) Rape used as a shock or comedic factor in the narrative. (4) Female rape is used as a plot device to develop the male characters.

Their conjuncted formula has become a foundational basis used in the feminist academic discourse about rape in popular media, and will be used as the basis of the intertextual analysis of rape scenes conducted in this chapter.

As psychologist Veronique N. Valliere discusses in her 2019 book *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence*¹⁵, these media rape narratives are informed by cultural and social perceptions of rape in the real world, which have been influenced by rape myths that have been socially accepted over time. The concept of rape myths

¹² Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

¹³ Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York University Press, 2001.

¹⁴ Ness, Immanuel. *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3569966>.

¹⁵ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5983038>.

first emerged in the book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*¹⁶ written by feminist activist and journalist Susan Brownmiller during the rape reform movement of the 1970s, and was later officially defined by sociologist Martha R. Burt as a set of false, prejudiced beliefs about rape upheld in society used to minimise or justify male sexual violence against women¹⁷.

From psychological reports she has collected of female survivors of sexual violence she has worked with, Valliere draws out four recurring rape myths that her patients continuously mentioned in their statements¹⁸:

The myth that rape is only committed by strangers, that rape is always violent, that women lie about being raped in order to hurt the reputation of men, and that victims have fault in being raped - either because they didn't fight back hard enough or because their behaviour implied given consent.

The phenomenon of social rape myth acceptance before MeToo was facilitated by the symbiosis of internalised patriarchal beliefs and the “two-step flow media communication model¹⁹” installed at the time.

As theorised by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz in the 1940s, the two-step flow theory suggests a communication model where the general public has access to information only via opinion leaders, such as news reporters, activists or even high-profile film directors, who first interpret information and then pass it onto the public.

Before the extensive development of internet technology in the 2010s, most people were dependent on opinion leaders to get information about sexual violence, but because of the gender bias and internalised rape myth beliefs of these leaders, the public could only access biased information shaped according to the leaders' views.

This enhanced the spread of misinformation surrounding rape, facilitated the social acceptance of rape myths in society, and subsequently allowed rape myth-informed narratives to be absorbed in the media, since these leaders controlled the narrative.

In order to establish the rape narratives prevalent in popular media in the 2000-2010s, before the peak of the MeToo movement in 2016, this chapter will use Cuklanz²⁰ and

¹⁶ Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will : Men, Women and Rape*, Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1975. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1799676>.

¹⁷ Burt, Martha R.. *Cultural myths and supports for rape*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1980.

¹⁸ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

¹⁹ Katz, Elihu. “The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1957, pp. 61–78. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746790>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2026.

²⁰ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Projansky's²¹ research methodology to analyse female rape scenes within popular British and US films and television series of that era.

By viewing more than twenty episodes and feature films that include rape scenes, narratives or threats, the chapter will assort rape representation into three categories discussed in each sub-chapter, based on analysis of mise-en-scène, positioning of the rape within the narrative and characterisation of the female victims. Each rape narrative will be examined through a psychoanalytical and feminist lens, as well as draw on theories from trauma psychology to back up the argumentation.

The analysis will also look behind the scenes of these texts and include insight from directors, producers, actors and writers, in order to study the socio-cultural background the analysed scenes were created and played out in.

The data collected in this chapter will serve as a basis and enable a comparative analysis with rape scenes in post-MeToo media in future chapters, in order to demonstrate to what extent the portrayal of sexual violence has developed over the course of time.

RAPE AND THE MALE GAZE

*Game of Thrones*²² is considered one of the most successful US prime time television series of the 21st century, having garnered more than thirty-million viewers in the United States only, over the course of the show's entire runtime from 2010 to 2019²³.

The show is mainly known for its explicit nudity and recurrent graphic portrayal of violence, especially sexual violence against its female characters, which is why it has been widely criticised by feminist viewers and accused of promoting the male gaze and normalising sexual violence against women on screen²⁴.

The concept of the male gaze was first developed by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*²⁵ and describes the objectification of women on screen to appease a voyeuristic male audience. It does so by turning them into a passive object within the narrative, either via sexualization through the mise-en-scène or passive characterisation, that the male characters can own or desire.

By implementing Mulvey's theory to the data collected from her media analysis in *Rape on Prime Time*²⁶, Lisa Cuklanz was able to develop her androcentric rape

²¹ Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York University Press, 2001.

²² *Game of Thrones*. Created by David Benioff, D. B. Weiss, HBO Entertainment, 2011.

²³ Koblin, John. "Game of Thrones Finale Sets Ratings Record" *The New York Times*, 28 Aug. 2017.

²⁴ Itzkoff, Dave. "More Outrage at Latest Depiction of Rape on 'Game of Thrones'" *The New York Times*, 19. May 2015, <https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/game-of-thrones-sansa-rape-outrage/?ref=hyperallergic.com>

²⁵ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen, Autumn 1975.

²⁶ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

narrative formula: a pattern of rape representation that puts men narratively at the centre of female rape storylines, despite not being the victims of the crime.

Through the lens of these two concepts, this subchapter will analyse one of *Game of Thrones*'s most famous rape scenes - Sansa Stark's wedding night scene in the show's fifth season.

The scene takes place after Sansa Stark, one of the main female protagonists, is given away in marriage to Ramsay Bolton, the major villain of the season, against her will.

In the scene he takes her up to the bedroom to consummate their marriage, and forces Theon Greyjoy, a former childhood friend of Sansa's, to watch.

Sansa remains completely clothed throughout the scene, and while we do catch a quick glimpse of her bare back when he rips her dress, the scene cuts away before we can see anything more. Despite the lack of nudity, though, the scene is still rendered graphic by Theon's emotional response to witnessing the rape, which is narratively placed at the centre of the scene. In fact, after we cut away from Sansa's face (Fig.1), we cut to a shot of Theon standing by the door, watching and fighting through tears, which is also the final shot of the scene (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Sansa on her wedding night

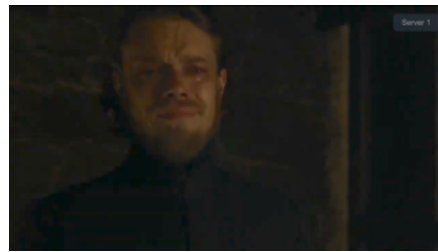


Fig. 2: Theon watches Sansa's rape

With this edit, the viewer is encouraged to view the scene from Theon's perspective, so much so that the fact he is not able to do anything to stop the rape from happening is what makes the scene brutal, rather than the act of rape itself.

The scene shifts the focus onto his feelings and the dynamic between him and Ramsay, while completely losing track of the actual victim - Sansa, thus using her assault as a plot device to push the development of the male characters forward.

While she is not rendered passive by sexualisation and voyeurism over her body, she is rendered passive by the imposing dynamic between the male characters and their sense of ownership towards her, playing into the male gaze²⁷ and perfectly demonstrating the androcentric rape narrative²⁸ persistent in the series.

Similarly, the third season of the US television series *The Walking Dead*²⁹ loses track of Maggie, one of the main female protagonists of the series, when she is sexually assaulted by The Governor, the villain of the season.

²⁷ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen, Autumn 1975.

²⁸ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

²⁹ *The Walking Dead*. Created by Frank Darabont, Idiot Box Productions, season 3, 2010.

After the assault happens, The Governor takes Maggie to see her boyfriend Glenn in his cell and mocks him by touching and kissing her inappropriately in front of him (Fig. 3). Maggie is half-naked in this scene, so next to being visually sexualised, she is rendered passive by the camera lingering on Glenn's face (Fig. 4), shifting our focus onto his feelings and how the rape affects him, rather than her.



Fig.3: The Governor uses Maggie to mock Glenn



Fig.4: Glenn watches The Governor touch Maggie

This is meant to appease and speak to a male audience that has a similar inherent sense of ownership towards women³⁰, which is taught by patriarchy, and empower them by showing them how the male characters will get revenge.

Besides the two aforementioned TV shows analysed, the androcentric³¹ formula is also often used as a trope in revenge thrillers, such as *Nocturnal Animals*³² and *Memento*³³, where the rape and murder of the male protagonist's wife is used as his motivation to get revenge.

It is the most common rape narrative in popular media, and while the mise-en-scène and story behind each of these scenes is different, they all have the same habit of keeping men at the centre of female rape narratives, despite not being the victims of the crime.

MINIMISATION OF RAPE

Ross Poldark is the male protagonist of the popular BBC series *Poldark*³⁴ and is considered one of the most beloved male leads in contemporary period dramas, due to his good looks and passionate romance with his wife Demelza.

Despite this, he has been the subject of criticism after an ambiguous intimate scene with his ex-fiancee Elizabeth in the second season of the show, where the audience was left unsure about whether their encounter was consensual or not, so much so that the BBC received several complaints on the day the episode aired³⁵.

³⁰ Manne, Kate. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*, Crown Publishing Group, 2020.

³¹ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

³² *Nocturnal Animals*. Directed by Tom Ford, Fade to Black Productions, Artina Films, 2016.

³³ *Memento*. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Summit Entertainment, Team Todd, 2000.

³⁴ *Poldark*. Created by Debbie Horsfield, Mammoth Screen, Masterpiece, 2015.

³⁵ "Poldark 'rape' scene sparks controversy" *BBC News*, 24 Oct. 2016.

Showrunner Debbie Horsfield, as well as Aidan Turner and Heida Reed, the main actors in the scene, have described it as a consensual encounter stemming from the characters' long-simmering passion for each other³⁶, but how does it read on screen? In the scene, Ross bursts into Elizabeth's room after finding out she is to marry his enemy, and physically forces himself on her despite her initial several pleas to stop. Despite the action being violent and clearly non-consensual up until this point, the constant close-ups of the camera and warm lighting create a visually heated and intimate ambient, setting up the scene to have a sexual tone rather than a violent one³⁷ (Fig.5). This sense of ambiguity is only accentuated when halfway through the encounter Elizabeth starts responding to Ross's touch (Fig.6).



Fig.5: Ross violently grabs Elizabeth



Fig.6: Elizabeth responds to Ross's touch

By portraying this second part as a passionate sex scene, rather than the violent rape scene it started out to be, the narrative minimises the act of rape, and plays both into the rape myth that Elizabeth "secretly wanted it all along"³⁸, as well as the myth that "intimate partners cannot commit rape"³⁹.

Additionally, the scene plays into the androcentric narrative⁴⁰, as it portrays the rape ambiguously in order to keep the reputation of the male lead intact.

Since Ross is the lead of the series, his character must remain morally intact for the audience to keep watching⁴¹, which is why the writers needed to find a way to let him get away with the crime.

³⁶ "Poldark 'rape' scene sparks controversy" *BBC News*, 24 Oct. 2016.

³⁷ *Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema : Explicit Sex, Performance and Cinematic Technique*, edited by Lindsay Coleman, I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4749981>.

³⁸ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

³⁹ Tellis, Katharine. *Rape as a Part of Domestic Violence : A Qualitative Analysis of Case Narratives and Official Reports*, LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=837760>.

⁴⁰ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

⁴¹ Pelican, Kira-Anne. *The Science of Writing Characters : Using Psychology to Create Compelling Fictional Characters*, Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2020.

In fact, the rest of the season continues to play into the idea that the encounter was consensual, and while Ross does get punished for cheating on his wife, he never gets punished for committing rape.

Similarly, in the teen drama series *Gossip Girl*⁴², one of the male characters, Chuck, commits a series of attempted rapes throughout the first season of the show, but he is never punished for his actions and by the end of the series has become one of the most beloved characters in the show. His complex relationship with one of the female protagonists, Blair, is used as a way to give him a redemption arc, by painting him as a romantic man capable of being good to women, and he even becomes friends with his victims, all of which is meant to overshadow his despicable actions and make the audience more welcome to forgiving him.

Lastly, sexual assault is also minimised through comedy and played for laughs, as for example in season 1 of the BBC sci-fi series *Torchwood*⁴³, where Owen, one of the male lead characters, uses a magic love potion to manipulate a woman into going back to his apartment. The woman initially does not give him consent to touch her, but when he sprays the potion on her, she exaggeratedly throws herself at him and pulls him to get a cab. This scene is rendered comedic by playing on Owen being a womaniser, and the rape myth of “women secretly wanting it all along” is used as a punchline. This downplays the fact she never gives consent out of her own free will and covers up the fact that Owen is actually ready to rape her, so that his reputation remains intact.

All in all, by doing this, the act of rape is not just minimised in these shows, but also romanticised on screen, and the understanding of consent is blurred, which, as Valliere argues in her book⁴⁴, fuels the already existing rape misconceptions in the real world.

RAPE AND STRONG WOMEN

Another prevalent rape narrative in 2000-2010s popular media, which echoes the data collected by Sarah Projansky in *Watching Rape*⁴⁵, is that rape is used as a way to punish assertive female characters for trying to defy male dominance or patriarchal norms.

An example thereof is the character of Sue in Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino*⁴⁶, who starts out as an active, three-dimensional female character, but after being sexually assaulted by a gang, ends up a completely passive character by the end of the film.

⁴² *Gossip Girl*. Created by Josh Schwartz, Stephanie Savage, Warner Bros Television, 2007.

⁴³ *Torchwood*. Created by Russell T. Davies, BBC Wales, season 1, 2006.

⁴⁴ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

⁴⁵ Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York University Press, 2001.

⁴⁶ *Gran Torino*. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros Pictures, 2008.

Sue is the new Hmong neighbour of the film's main character, Walt, and from the beginning, she shows an active, assertive characterisation, independent positioning within the plot, and is never sexualised or beautified by the mise-en-scène.

Sue is as a fully fleshed-out female character in the story, who does not depend on any of the male characters to function within the plot and defies Mulvey's male gaze in every regard⁴⁷.

When she is subjected to a brutal rape by a gang at the climax of the film, though, her characterisation changes entirely, she becomes a completely passive character and her initial assertiveness is even used against her.

There are multiple occasions in the film where the gang threatens Sue with violence, but she always stands her ground, so much so that Walt warns her to be careful not to be too assertive. Thus, when in the end she is raped, her assertiveness subconsciously becomes the reason she is victimised in the viewers' eyes, which plays into the rape myth of victim blaming. She also loses her independence within the narrative, which is best reflected in the scene where Sue returns home covered in blood after the rape (Fig.7), and Walt sees her (Fig.8).



Fig.7: Sue returns home after the attack



Fig.8: Walt sees Sue beaten up

During the entire scene, Sue is immobile and speechless, while the camera slowly pans over her bloodied legs, body, and lingers on her bruised face, until finally cutting to Walt's shocked face. The choice of framing and camera movement shows that the scene is shot from Walt's perspective, and through that, Sue is turned into an object that is looked at by him and he has to avenge, despite her being the victim of the rape - reinforcing the male gaze.

Not only do the gang members use rape to punish her for being an assertive female character, the narrative itself punishes her, too, by taking away her independence - a loss which is then used to fuel Walt's character development.

Once again, female rape is used as a way to push the development of the male characters forwards⁴⁸, but in addition to that, it is also used to punish the female characters for trying to defy male dominance.

⁴⁷ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen, Autumn 1975.

⁴⁸ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

From the data collected in this chapter, we can draw that Cuklanz and Projansky's⁴⁹ rape narratives have remained prevalent in 2000-2010s popular media, and rape myths continued to shape the representation of sexual violence against women on screen in the 21st century, before the peak of the #MeToo movement.

Most of these representations were androcentric, putting men at the centre of female rape narratives, and shot for a male gaze, thus demonstrating the persistence of patriarchal influence in the media before MeToo.

Having established the state of rape representation before the rise of the MeToo movement in 2017, the text can use this data to conduct comparative analyses in the next chapters, in order to establish to what extent rape representation has changed through the influence of the MeToo movement.

⁴⁹ Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York University Press, 2001.

Chapter Two:
The Rise of Technology and the New Narratives

Chapter Two studies the structural and systemic changes enabled by the development of the MeToo movement in real life and analyses their influence on the representation of rape on screen.

In 2017, the hashtag #MeToo took the world by storm, and set a before and after in the discourse of sexual violence in Hollywood.

Founded by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the MeToo movement was created to raise awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault in society and give voice to survivors of sexual violence.⁵⁰

It was only in October 2017, though, that the movement exploded globally, when Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano tweeted the hashtag “#MeToo” on Twitter and called for people to share the hashtag if they had experienced sexual assault or rape themselves.

Milano’s tweet followed ten days after the publication of “*Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades*”,⁵¹ a New York Times article written by journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey that laid out their investigation into the sexual assault allegations against powerful Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

Using testimonies from several Hollywood actresses and assistants - including Ashley Judd and Gwyneth Paltrow - Kantor and Twohey exposed Weinstein’s actions and outlined the different ways he used his position as a powerful producer in the industry to coerce young women into engaging sexually with him.

In response to the article, Milano used her tweet to try and elevate the conversation around Weinstein as well as raise awareness on how many people are affected by sexual violence in their lives. In the first 24 hours alone following Milano’s initial tweet, the hashtag was shared across social media more than 53.000 times, and in the following weeks more than 80 women stepped forward sharing their own experiences with Weinstein, accusing him of sexual misconduct.

Among the people who shared the hashtag were also some of Weinstein’s male former colleagues - including Colin Firth⁵² and Quentin Tarantino⁵³ - who spoke up about their awareness of Weinstein’s misconduct and saw their part in enabling his behaviour by not speaking up about it at the time.

⁵⁰ Burke, Tarana. *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*. Flatiron Books, 2021.

⁵¹ Kantor, Jodi, and Twohey, Megan. “Harvey Weinstein Paid off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades.” *The New York Times*, 5 Oct. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html.

⁵² O’Carroll, Lisa. “Colin Firth expresses shame at failing to act on Weinstein allegation” *The Guardian*, 13 Oct. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/13/colin-firth-expresses-shame-at-failing-to-act-on-weinstein-allegation>

⁵³ Kantor, Jodi. “Tarantino on Weinstein: ‘I Knew Enough To Do More Than I Did’” *The New York Times*, 19 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/movies/tarantino-weinstein.html>

This raised awareness on the role of men in the discourse about sexual violence against women, in how they can serve as enablers of rapists despite not exerting violence themselves, and helped paint a picture of the culture Weinstein thrived in.

Similarly to the rape reform movement of the 1970s, the #MeToo movement sparked a conversation about sexual violence, consent and rape culture in contemporary times, and specifically in the workplace.

A research article by JAMA Internal Medicine revealed that in the two months following Milano's tweet, Google searches for sexual harassment awareness, reporting and training in the United States spiked, so much that more than 1000 searches per 10 million Google searches were about sexual assault awareness.⁵⁴

This higher awareness served as the foundation for the implementation of several measures in the workplace, to prevent abuses of power, support survivors when speaking out against abuse and to promote a safer working environment.

In 2017, SAG-AFTRA, Hollywood's primary union, published a code of conduct⁵⁵ including policies to help reduce sexual harassment in the industry, such as the barring of using hotels or residences as audition spots and safety protocols within contracts between actors and producers.

One of the most prevalent changes, though, was the introduction of intimacy coordinators on film and TV sets, which was implemented to ensure that intimate scenes, including rape scenes, are executed ethically and safely with the consent of all parties⁵⁶.

Next to these structural policy changes in the industry, the rise in sexual violence awareness and education helped bust the socially accepted rape myths and rape narratives discussed in Chapter One.

While the factual evidence disproving these rape myths has been publicly accessible long before 2017, it was with the rise in awareness caused by the #MeToo online movement that it entered the mainstream rape discourse.

The development of the Internet throughout the 2000-2010s and systemic integration of social media in our everyday life has played a major role in allowing the MeToo movement to thrive and have the outreach it had.

As William H. Dutton, professor of Internet Studies at the University of Oxford, theorised in his 2009 paper "The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of

⁵⁴ Caputi, Theodor L, Nobles, Alicia L, Ayers, John W. "Internet Searches for Sexual Harassment and Assault, Reporting, and Training Since the #MeToo Movement." *JAMA internal medicine* vol. 179,2 (2019): 258-259. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2018.5094

⁵⁵ Miller, Daniel. "SAG-AFTRA Establishes Code of Conduct to Combat Sexual Harassment." *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Feb. 2018, www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-sag-aftra-code-20180210-story.html.

⁵⁶ Otero, Lia Keeble. "It's Not Just a Kiss: How Intimacy Coordinators Are Redefining Safety and Creativity in Hollywood." *PAC MAG*, 23 Mar. 2025, mccs-journalism.gold.ac.uk/wp/pacmag/its-not-just-a-kiss-how-intimacy-coordinators-are-redefining-safety-and-creativity-in-hollywood/.

Networks”⁵⁷, the Internet has become the ‘Fifth Estate’ in our society - an independent institution, serving as a new way of holding officials and high-profile people accountable, by giving the individual person direct access to information, rather than it being mediated to them first.

This emerging “one-step flow of communication”⁵⁸, as originally theorised by W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim, did not just enable media users to access information on sexual violence much faster, it also gave them access to the information directly. Information that was not interpreted by potentially biased mediators, not pre-selected or shaped according to the mediator’s prejudice or misconceptions about rape and even came directly from survivors themselves. This gave people the freedom to interpret information independently and a chance to challenge their own internalised prejudice and accepted rape myths.

In fact, a study conducted by Dr. Sarah Beshers and Dr. Margaret Divita, professors in the Health department at SUNY-Cortland⁵⁹, revealed that the rate of rape myth acceptance amongst college undergraduate students from different US-American universities decreased significantly between 2010 and 2017, showing the successful impact of the MeToo movement on sexual violence awareness.

Whether this new information and rape awareness have been picked up in mass media as well, though, will be analysed in the following subchapters.

The chapter will look at a long-running, popular television series that has aired from before until after the peak of the MeToo movement in 2016 and is known for its extensive inclusion of rape scenes and rape storylines: *Outlander*⁶⁰.

It will conduct a comparative analysis of two different rape scenes of the show - one that aired before the peak of MeToo in 2016, and one that aired after - and analyse them by the characterisation of victim and perpetrator, the position of the rape within the plot, as well as the mise-en-scène of each scene.

The data from the analysis will help establish whether the structural social changes, awareness and rape narratives emerging from the MeToo movement have had an influence on rape representation in mass media.

BEFORE #METOO

Similarly to *Game of Thrones*⁶¹, the Starz television series *Outlander* by Robert Moore is known for its graphic portrayals of violence - specifically sexual violence.

⁵⁷ Dutton, William H. “The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks.” *Prometheus*, Vol. 27, No. 1, March 2009. *PROMETHEUS JOURNAL*, <http://www.prometheusjournal.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/08109020802657453.pdf>

⁵⁸ Bennett, W. L., & Manheim, J. B. “The One-Step Flow of Communication.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 608, No.1, pp. 213-232, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206292266>

⁵⁹ *Changes in Rape Myth Acceptance Among Undergraduates: 2010 to 2017*. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Aug. 2019.

⁶⁰ *Outlander*. Created by Ronald Moore, Sony Pictures Television, 2014.

⁶¹ *Game of Thrones*. Created by David Benioff, D. B. Weiss, HBO Entertainment, 2011.

The show is about Claire Beauchamp, a 20th century war nurse, who is transported back in time to 18th century Scotland where she falls in love with Jamie Fraser, a Scottish Highlander, and experiences the difficulties of being a woman living in that time. The show has been airing since 2013 and has continued to run all throughout the course of the MeToo movement.

This subchapter will compare two major rape scenes in the series: Claire's attempted rape at the hands of Jack Randall in season 1 episode 8, *Both Sides Now*⁶² (2014), and Brianna's rape by Stephen Bonnet in season 4 episode 8, *Wilmington*⁶³ (2018).

In *Both Sides Now*, Claire finds the opportunity to go back to her time, but is arrested by British officers and brought in for questioning at Jack Randall's garrison - the main villain of the show's first two seasons. That is where, following a brief interrogation, Randall attempts to rape Claire, until Jamie arrives to stop him.

Just like Sansa's rape scene, Claire's rape scene repeats the androcentric rape narrative discussed in Chapter One⁶⁴. Despite being the victim here, Claire is decentered from the narrative both by the mise-en-scène and the relationship between Jamie and Randall, and reduced to a mere plot device used to develop the male characters. Like in *Poldark*, the cinematography heavily sexualises the rape, despite it being an act of violence. The use of warm firelight, the slow camera movements and lingering close-ups on sections of Claire's naked body, the positioning of Claire bent over the desk with Randall standing behind her, all of this adds a sadomasochistic, sexual tone to the scene⁶⁵ (Fig.9). It reduces Claire to an object to be desired and looked at and invites the viewer to see her body through Randall's voyeuristic gaze, rather than hers⁶⁶. Jamie's entrance amplifies this perspective shift, as the camera cuts between shots of Randall and Jamie, leaving out any shots of Claire for a while (Fig.10).



Fig.9: Claire is attacked by Randall

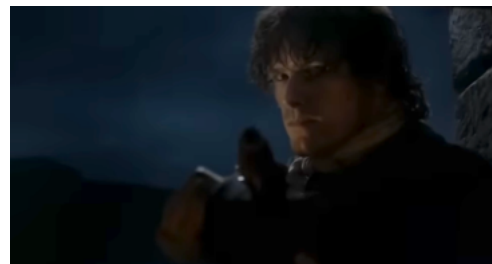


Fig.10: Jamie saves Claire

⁶² "Both Sides Now." *Outlander*, created by Ronald Moore, season 1, episode 8, Sony Pictures Television, 2014.

⁶³ "Wilmington." *Outlander*, created by Ronald Moore, season 4, episode 8, Sony Pictures Television, 2018.

⁶⁴ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

⁶⁵ *Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema : Explicit Sex, Performance and Cinematic Technique*, edited by Lindsay Coleman, I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016.

⁶⁶ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen, Autumn 1975.

This creates a visual distance towards Claire and renders her passive, as the focus of the audience is directed to the exchange between the two men. With the dialogue line “I’ll thank ye, to take yer hands off my wife!”, Jamie establishes himself as the subject in the scene, by turning Claire’s attack into an attack on his own sense of ownership towards her, which is challenged by Randall here⁶⁷. Jamie’s gaze is projected through the lens of the camera, in order to speak to both a male audience who might identify themselves with Jamie’s feelings, and a female audience who romanticises Jamie as a character in the show⁶⁸.

The narrative loses sight of Claire, the rape is not discussed again and Claire is never shown to process what happened, despite the psychological effects rape has on victims⁶⁹. The scene does not move the understanding of sexual violence forward in any way and reduces it to a mere plot device.

AFTER #METOO

In the episode *Wilmington*⁷⁰, Brianna - Claire and Jamie’s adult daughter - experiences a similar fate as her mother, when she is raped by Stephen Bonnet, but unlike Claire, her rape is explored more extensively in the series.

Soon after landing in the 18th century, Brianna meets Bonnet in the busy tavern she is staying at. Brianna follows him into his office, as she tries to make a deal with him, and that is where Bonnet rapes her.

Unlike in Claire’s scene, the *mise-en-scène* emphasises the violence exerted. We see Bonnet beating Brianna (Fig.11), and before we can see any of the rape happen, we cut away from the office to a shot of the tavern. We see Bonnet close the office door and then the camera stays on the unbothered, smirking faces of Bonnet’s crewmen playing cards for the rest of the scene (Fig.12), as we hear Brianna crying in the background.

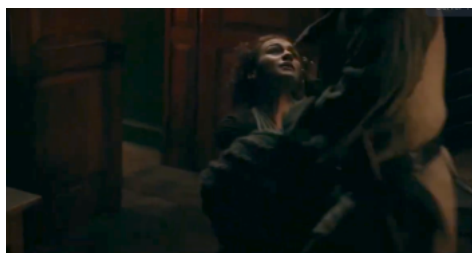


Fig.11: Bonnet hits Brianna



Fig.12: The crewmen play cards unbothered

⁶⁷ Manne, Kate. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*, Crown Publishing Group, 2020.

⁶⁸ Byrne, Katherine, Taddeo, Julie Anne, Leggott, James. *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2018. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5739286>.

⁶⁹ *Sexual Assault: Prevalence, Health Effects and Coping Strategies*, edited by Sheila Miller, Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4775077>.

⁷⁰ “Wilmington.” *Outlander*, created by Ronald Moore, season 4, episode 8, Sony Pictures Television, 2018.

While this cutaway visually distances us from Brianna, it keeps her rape at the core of the scene, and pushes the understanding of sexual violence forwards by showing how men can serve as enablers of rape culture⁷¹. The crewmen's lack of action shows that sexual violence is normalised within their circle and cultivates the environment that gives Bonnet power and immunity to get away with raping Brianna.

All of this mirrors the normalisation of sexual violence amongst men in the real world⁷², and portrays the narrative of men's complicity in sexual violence, which was informed by the MeToo movement. In fact, in an interview for *Vanity Fair*, series executive producer Maril Davis revealed that the scene was originally shot explicitly, showing the rape in great detail, but was later cut down in the editing room, in order to stay sensitive to the times the episode aired in and highlight the aspect of bystanders in rape culture.⁷³

Next to portraying a male complicity narrative, the scene also depicts the effect of tonic immobility on victims of sexual violence. In trauma psychology, tonic immobility is defined as the automatic shut down mechanism of the human body in response to trauma⁷⁴. After the initial freezing response, the body essentially shuts down and stop responding, so much that victims report feeling numb and disassociated from their body.

In the *Vanity Fair* article, Sophie Skelton - the actress who plays Brianna in the series - explains she put much research into the preparation for the scene and played tonic immobility in the uncut version of the scene she filmed.

While we do not see Brianna actively in that state, we can see her waking up from it when the episode cuts back to her after the attack (Fig.13).



Fig.13: Brianna wakes up from tonic immobility

⁷¹ *Men, Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence*, edited by Lucas Gottzén, et al., Taylor & Francis Group, 2020. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6342011>.

⁷² O'Carroll, Lisa. "Colin Firth expresses shame at failing to act on Weinstein allegation" *The Guardian*, 13 Oct. 2017.

⁷³ Robinson, Joanna. "Outlander's Sophie Skelton Wishes the Show Handled Brianna's Rape Differently." *Vanity Fair*, 23 Dec. 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/12/outlander-brianna-rape-season-4-episode-8-how-does-it-happen-in-the-books-sophie-skelton-interview?srsltid=AfmBOop0TAWSzadxVkJT2a5vpBPXWZ6H_qBCYkwhqdUXPGnf0dsA2ZlaQ

⁷⁴ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

As she sits up from the desk to pick up her clothes, her movements are slow and catatonic, and even though Bonnet talks to her throughout the scene, Brianna stays silent. These symptoms are amplified by the cinematography and sound in the sense, as the camera stays tight on a close-up of her face, her surroundings are blurred, and the audio slowly fades from muffled to normal, as she comes back to the present. Unlike with Claire, the narrative never loses sight of Brianna here and visually depicts the psychological effects the rape has on her, as seen through her own eyes. This shows how the heightened sexual violence awareness emerging from MeToo influenced the portrayal of rape in the series.

The aftermath of Brianna's rape is also explored extensively throughout the rest of the fourth season. We see scenes of Brianna experiencing episodes of PTSD, battling thoughts of self-blame and low self-worth, as well as going through an unwanted pregnancy and, ultimately, finding healing. All of these scenes explore many of the psychological and physical aspects of sexual violence that mirror the reported experiences of victims in the real world⁷⁵, while keeping the victim at the centre of the narrative.

Comparing the two scenes of rape from before and after the peak of MeToo in 2017, it becomes apparent how the heightened sexual violence awareness heavily influenced the development of the representation of sexual violence in *Outlander*.

It did not just encourage the directors to find cinematography techniques and aspects of mise-en-scène that sway away from the male gaze⁷⁶, but also to question their intention behind and the purpose of portraying rape in the series in the first place⁷⁷.

As opinion leaders in the media, the MeToo development helped challenge their own bias surrounding rape and reframe the narrative they put out to the public accordingly.

⁷⁵ *Sexual Assault: Prevalence, Health Effects and Coping Strategies*, edited by Sheila Miller, Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2016.

⁷⁶ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen, Autumn 1975.

⁷⁷ Robinson, Joanna. "Outlander's Sophie Skelton Wishes the Show Handled Brianna's Rape Differently." *Vanity Fair*, 23 Dec. 2018.

Chapter Three:
Postfeminism in Hollywood and the Aftermath of MeToo

This chapter investigates to what extent the MeToo movement has reached a postfeminist status, by analysing the representation of sexual violence against women on screen a decade after the peak of MeToo.

“The movement has been important to begin with, having exposed some of the real malefactors such as Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. (...) I think the movement has run its course and we can pretty much call time on it now.”⁷⁸.

This quote by Lionel Shriver, author of the popular novel ‘We Need To Talk About Kevin’, echoes the sentiment of many people in the era following the peak of the MeToo movement. In fact, a 2018 online study for the IPSOS/NPR revealed that in a group of 1003 US-American people from different political parties, 51% of men and 36% of women believe that the MeToo movement “has gone too far”⁷⁹.

Respondents stated that a rush to judgement could encourage women to use unproven accusations to take down men and ruin their reputation.

This data shows that there is a re-emergence of postfeminist backlash and sentiment towards sexual violence in Western society, since the aftermath of the rape reform movement in the 1970s. But why is that so?

The term ‘Postfeminism’ first started appearing in the media in the 1980s and describes the belief that women have achieved full equality in society, thus that feminism has run its course⁸⁰. The concept rose in popularity within feminist communities and academic spaces during that time, because the rape reform movement had been successful in bringing legislative, structural and social improvements to the system.

Several prominent feminist authors at the time, such as Camille Paglia and Naomi Wolfe, argued that with all these improvements, women had reached a state of agency, ‘choice’ and full equality, able to achieve empowerment with their own drive and self-confidence.

Studies conducted in 2004 by feminist theorists Emma Rich⁸¹ and Dr. Joanne Baker⁸², in the United Kingdom and Australia respectively, revealed that within groups of women from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, the majority of them expressed

⁷⁸ Shepherd, Jack. “Lionel Shriver says it is time to end the #MeToo movement”, *Independent*, 15 Oct. 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/lionel-shriver-metoo-movement-times-up-cheltenham-literature-festival-a8584321.html>

⁷⁹ *Ipsos/NPR Examine Views on Sexual Harassment and Assault*. IPSOS/NPR, 31 Oct. 2018. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/NPR-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault>

⁸⁰ Anderson, Kristin J.. *Modern Misogyny : Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4083141>.

⁸¹ Rich, Emma. “Young women, feminist identities and neo-liberalism.”, *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2005, pp. 495-508. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2005.09.006>

⁸² Baker, Joanne. “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: PostFeminist Obligations for Young Women.”, *Feminism & Psychology - FEM PSYCHOL*, 2010. pp.186-204.

these postfeminist sentiments, claiming there were a lot of opportunities for women now and that they had a sense of agency over their own lives.

Feminist theorists Susan Paludi⁸³ and Dr. Joanne Baker⁸⁴ argued against this, explaining that postfeminism is rooted in anti-feminism and used as a way for women to psychologically escape victimhood and vulnerability in feminist discourse.

While postfeminism does recognise the accomplishments of feminism, it also contextualises feminist issues in a rhetoric of individual responsibility and overlooks the systems of oppression that influence and limit the ‘choice’ and rights of women.

By reducing the experience of sexual assault, for example, to a personal, individual issue, instead of seeing it as a consequence of the patriarchal system and rape culture it is actually rooted in, women avoid victimisation in the narrative, especially since they are statistically most likely to be victims of gendered violence⁸⁵.

Subsequently, this privatisation of sexual assault fuels the patriarchal rape narrative of victim blaming⁸⁶, because responsibility for the assault is placed on the victims themselves, rather than the culture that enabled it.

For these reasons, Baker categorises postfeminism as inherently anti-feminist, since by avoiding to acknowledge the patriarchal structures of society feminists want to dismantle, it plays into those same structures.

At the time of writing, a decade after the peak of MeToo, we are experiencing a similar rise in postfeminist rhetoric and backlash against feminism.

The arrest of Weinstein, the new informed rape narratives, the structural changes implemented and the rise of online sexual violence awareness discussed in Chapter Two have brought back that sense of freedom, individualism and agency experienced in the 1990s, as shown by the interview with Lionel Shriver⁸⁷ and the IPSOS study.⁸⁸

The way postfeminism is used as an argumentative rhetoric today, though, has expanded from Baker’s notion of people wanting to escape victimhood, to people also wanting to escape being accused of victimising other people.

⁸³ Paludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*,

⁸⁴ Baker, Joanne. “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: PostFeminist Obligations for Young Women.”, *Feminism & Psychology - FEM PSYCHOL*, 2010. pp.186-204.

⁸⁵ *The facts behind the #metoo movement: A national study on sexual harassment and assault*. National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018.

⁸⁶ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

⁸⁷ Shepherd, Jack. “Lionel Shriver says it is time to end the #MeToo movement”, *Independent*, 15 Oct. 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/lionel-shriver-metoo-movement-times-up-cheltenham-literature-festival-a8584321.html>

⁸⁸ *Ipsos/NPR Examine Views on Sexual Harassment and Assault*. IPSOS/NPR, 31 Oct. 2018. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/NPR-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault>

Particularly, with the new informed rape narratives on male complicity and ramifications of toxic masculinity in rape culture, people - but especially men - have become more and more expressive of anti-feminist sentiments. This is visible in the high percentage of men criticising the state of the MeToo movement in the IPSOS study, as well as in the rising popularity of the online hashtag #NotAllMen. A study conducted by sociology professors in 2024 in the framework of the European large-scale project ALL-INTERACT, analyses the use of the hashtag #NotAllMen in Twitter and Reddit discourses and messages, and revealed that it is primarily used as a defence tool by men in response to women sharing their experiences with sexual violence.⁸⁹

Since women's sexual assault experiences involve men to a great extent, as we have concluded in previous chapters, individual men feel attacked and therefore use the hashtag to deny any personal involvement in the issue.

In popular media, postfeminism has manifested itself most notably through the higher amount of empowered female protagonists of films and television series, as well as higher number of female writers and directors behind the camera. In fact, a statistic by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative reveals that between 2017 and 2024 there was an increase of 6% for women sitting in the director's chair in major Hollywood blockbusters.⁹⁰ Alongside this, there has also been an increase in media starring survivors of sexual violence and storylines tackling sexual violence from a female survivor's perspective.

Applying postfeminist rhetoric to the matter, the existence of survivor-centred stories on screen would suggest there has been a successful and complete implementation of the new rape narratives discussed in Chapter Two within popular media.

Have we truly come so far as a society, that the male gaze, androcentrism and rape myths are no longer prevalent in rape scenes?

The following two subchapters will analyse two genres of popular television series that came out after 2017, and are either written or directed by a female survivor of sexual violence, have a survivor as the series's protagonist or include a rape storyline shot from the survivor's perspective.

The chapters will analyse each show by looking at the characterisation and positioning of the victim in the story, how rape is treated in the narrative, and, occasionally, how the rape is depicted on screen, in order to make a comparative analysis with the old representations of rape of the 2000-2010s.

The data collected from this research will demonstrate whether the old rape narratives continue to persist in the media today, despite all the advancements made through MeToo, and establish to what extent the current postfeminist rhetoric of freedom, agency and equality can be applied to the current rape representation on screen.

⁸⁹ *Not all men: the debates in social networks on masculinities and consent*. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, vol. 11, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02569-y>

⁹⁰ *Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender & Race/Ethnicity Across 1,800 Top Films from 2007 to 2024*. USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, Jan. 2025.

SURVIVOR-BASED STORYTELLING IN COMEDY-DRAMA

The HBO series *I May Destroy You*⁹¹ is perhaps the most notable survivor-based television series of the 21st century. Written and starred by Michaela Coel, the series follows the story of Arabella, a Black British woman who navigates the aftermath of being raped by a stranger at a bar.

The show is based on Michaela Coel's own experience with sexual assault, so the story is extremely personal and explores the subject of consent using a mix of drama and black comedy.

Looking at the depiction of rape in the show, not much emphasis is placed on the act of violence itself. In fact, the rape occurs in the pilot episode⁹², but is not visually shown until much later in the season, when Arabella starts recounting the attack in her therapy sessions. Even then, the rape scene is only a few seconds long. It is shot from her first-person point-of-view, looking up at the attacker, so her body is not visible in the scene (Fig. 14).



Fig.14: Arabella sees her attacker

The image is out-of-focus, with barely any movement, and we can only see a glimpse of the man looking down at her before cutting away, which shifts the focus entirely onto the attacker and does not sexualise her in any way.

Coel writes her characters extremely flawed, so much that her subplots defy the concept of the “perfect victim”⁹³, and subverts the postfeminist mentality of individualism⁹⁴, as she introduces Arabella as an independent character who believes she could not be victimised until the development of the narrative shows that sexual violence is so systemised in our society it can affect anyone.

Arabella defies objectification from the male gaze⁹⁵, as she remains the subject in each scene, telling the story from her perspective, and is not reduced to a plot device.

⁹¹ *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, Various Artists Limited, FALKNA Productions, 2020.

⁹² “Eyes, Eyes, Eyes, Eyes.” *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, Various Artists Limited, FALKNA Productions, season 1, 2020.

⁹³ Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

⁹⁴ Baker, Joanne. “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: PostFeminist Obligations for Young Women.”, *Feminism & Psychology - FEM PSYCHOL*, 2010. pp.186-204.

⁹⁵ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen, Autumn 1975.

This is best shown in the final episode of the series “Ego Death”⁹⁶, where in a sort of *Groundhog Day* fashion we see different versions of the same night play out, reflecting how Arabella re-imagines the night of the attack, had she acted in different ways. This not only visually represents the experience of survivors reliving their trauma in their head⁹⁷, it also subverts the concept of victim-blaming, rendering it powerless, and gives Arabella the power to rewrite her own narrative, which survivors viewing the series can feel empowered by.

Journalist Rhiannon Evans, who works with survivors of sexual violence for her interview platform, wrote in an article for *Grazia*⁹⁸ that following the release of the series several survivors got in touch with her about it, who stated feeling represented and praised the the show for depicting all the consequences of trauma in a profound and accurate way.

In order to tackle such a complex and sensitive topic behind the scenes, Coel fought to have full creative control shooting the series and refused a deal with Netflix that would have taken it away from her.⁹⁹ She also employed an intimacy coordinator Ita O’Brien to help choreograph all intimate scenes and ensure safety and balanced power dynamics on set, since Coel was both the showrunner and star of the show.

SURVIVOR-BASED STORYTELLING IN CRIME & THRILLER

*Liar*¹⁰⁰ is an ITV British thriller series that follows the story of Laura Nielsen as she accuses surgeon Andrew Earlham of drugging and raping her on a date.

The act of rape is never visually shown in the series, so much so that at the beginning of the series the viewer is forced into a position of having to believe her word.

The lack of visual representation of the rape not only shifts the focus onto the effects of the assault she experiences the days after, such as PTSD episodes and struggling with feelings of self-blame¹⁰¹, but also highlights the topic of date rape drugging.

Nonetheless, Laura does not manage to defy the male gaze, as she does not remain the only subject telling this story in the course of the series.

⁹⁶ “Ego Death.” *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, Various Artists Limited, FALKNA Productions, season 1, 2020.

⁹⁷ *Sexual Assault: Prevalence, Health Effects and Coping Strategies*, edited by Sheila Miller, Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2016.

⁹⁸ Evan, Rhiannon. “‘It’s Rare And Refreshing’: Why So Many Rape Survivors Rate I May Destroy You” *Grazia*, 18 Jun. 2020, <https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/tv-and-film/i-may-destroy-you-rape-sexual-violence/>

⁹⁹ Wilson, Josh. “I May Destroy You’s Michaela Coel Rejected Netflix’s \$1 Million Offer In Favor Of The BBC Because Of Ownership”, *Forbes*, 7 Jul. 2010, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshwilson/2020/07/07/i-may-destroy-yous-michaela-coel-rejected-netflixs-1-million-offer-in-favor-of-the-bbc-because-of-ownership/>

¹⁰⁰ *Liar*. Created by Jack and Harry Williams, ITV, 2017.

¹⁰¹ *Sexual Assault: Prevalence, Health Effects and Coping Strategies*, edited by Sheila Miller, Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2016.

Following the scene of Laura recovering from the assault in the pilot episode, we cut to Andrew and are introduced to his life, establishing him as a secondary protagonist. By doing this, the series highlights the fact that he is just another regular man loved by his community, which busts the myth that rape is only committed by strangers¹⁰², but at the same time, though, it gives him an active voice in the story despite being the attacker.

The plot also uses Laura's flawed characterisation and her confused recollection of the attack to destabilise her on various occasions, so much that the viewer is made to question her reality. With this, the series encourages the viewer to look at the story from both perspectives and turns a story of sexual trauma into an investigation drama, where the viewer is supposed to figure out who of the two is lying, since the assault has never been shown. By discrediting Laura's word and rendering her an unreliable narrator, the series turns her rape into a plot device used to create thriller tension in the story, thus diverting the focus away from the victim and playing into the misconceptions of sexual trauma discussed in Chapter One.

The British crime drama TV series *Broadchurch*¹⁰³, written by Chris Chibnall, tackles a similar rape investigation but never diverts the focus away from the victim.

The third season of the series features the story of Trish Winterman, a woman who is raped at a friend's party, and follows Detectives Tom Hardy and Ellie Miller in their investigation to find the culprit.

While Trish is not the protagonist of the series itself, her storyline is central to the plot and the rape narrative is tackled from her perspective. Similarly to Brianna in *Outlander*¹⁰⁴, we follow Trish on her journey from reporting the rape to healing from the attack, all while taking on an active role in the narrative. Despite it being a crime show, the season avoids showing much of the scene of the act of violence itself and puts emphasis on scenes that depict the effects of sexual violence instead. In the pilot episode¹⁰⁵ alone, we watch Trish as she goes through the process of a rape test kit (Fig.15), experiences episodes of PTSD, and discloses to her daughter that she has been assaulted.



Fig.15: Trish takes a rape test kit

¹⁰² Valliere, Veronique N.. *Understanding Victims of Interpersonal Violence : A Guide for Investigators and Prosecutors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

¹⁰³ *Broadchurch*. Created by Chris Chibnall, ITV, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ *Outlander*. Created by Ronald D. Moore, Sony Pictures Television, 2013.

¹⁰⁵ "Episode 3.1." *Broadchurch*. Created by Chris Chibnall, ITV, season 3, 2017.

The cinematography supports this narrative by never sexualising her body and staying close on her face, so that the viewer is never visually distanced from her.

Similarly to Laura in *Liar*, the characterisation of Trish herself is three-dimensional, as she is portrayed as a flawed and quite problematic character. But unlike *Liar*, *Broadchurch* does not question Trish's reality, and narratively forces the viewer to root for Trish to get justice in the end, regardless of their opinion of her character.

Since the viewer is so engaged in the investigation that they want to see it solved, the viewer is led to confront their own prejudice against rape survivors and individualist view of gendered violence¹⁰⁶.

The season also explores the topic of consent amongst young people, as well as the influence of toxic masculinity and pornography in modern misogyny¹⁰⁷, via a subplot that centres the male schoolmates of Hardy's daughter.

In doing so, the series pushes the understanding of sexual violence forward and sends a strong message in support of survivors, without playing into *Liar*'s "he said-she said" narrative.

The 2019 Netflix mini-series *Unbelievable*¹⁰⁸ is another example of a survivor-centred story that subverts the concept of the "perfect victim". The series follows Marie Adler, a teenager who was raped by a stranger inside her home, as she attempts to report her assault to the police, but is not believed due to lack of evidence.

The series puts the "he said-she said" narrative on its head by showing us how Marie is coerced by the police into confessing to having lied about being assaulted over the course of episodes, despite us clearly seeing the scene of the assault in the pilot episode.

Like in *Broadchurch*, the viewer is placed in a position of believing the victim from the start and acknowledging the fact that mental confusion can be part of sexual trauma¹⁰⁹. They are encouraged to confront internalised rape myths and current postfeminist sentiments, such as that women use unproven accusations to take down other people.¹¹⁰

Unfortunately, though, despite having such a strong rape survivor representation, *Broadchurch* does eventually deviate from fully facing the structural problem of sexual violence.

¹⁰⁶ Anderson, Kristin J.. *Modern Misogyny : Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Keyser, Amber J.. *No More Excuses : Dismantling Rape Culture*, Lerner Publishing Group, 2019. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5607181>.

¹⁰⁸ *Unbelievable*. Created by Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman and Michael Chabon, Timberman/Beverly Productions and CBS Television Studios, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ *Sexual Assault: Prevalence, Health Effects and Coping Strategies*, edited by Sheila Miller, Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2016.

¹¹⁰ *Ipsos/NPR Examine Views on Sexual Harassment and Assault*. IPSOS/NPR, 31 Oct. 2018. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/NPR-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault>

In one of final scenes of the third season¹¹¹, after the culprit is caught, Hardy and Miller have a conversation about the case and Miller is upset that a young man is capable of committing rape. Hardy responds to this with saying that the man does not represent all men and that he should be considered an exception.

Hardy's response mirrors the contemporary, postfeminist #NotAllMen sentiment of men, who distance themselves from the discourse of gendered violence, since they do not see any personal responsibility or involvement in the matter¹¹².

The hashtag gives men a way to escape being accused of victimising other women and diverts the discussion away from not just the systemic nature of gendered violence and men's evidenced complicity in upholding that system, but also discredits the victim's experience, and shifts the focus onto the feelings of men.

This shows that #NotAllMen is rooted in anti-feminism and androcentrism¹¹³, it fuels the stigma surrounding sexual violence that enabled it in the first place and augments the anti-feminist backlash against the MeToo movement.

Despite bringing to the screen an empowering representation of rape survivors, Broadchurch eventually falls short in confronting the problem fully and chooses to give the male viewer a way to evade responsibility through postfeminist rhetoric, instead of encouraging them to reflect on their own potential complicity.¹¹⁴

The data collected from the analysis of these television series reveals that survivor-based stories in the 2020s have definitely diverted away from old rape myths persistent in the post-MeToo era, but have not, as postfeminist rhetoric suggests, reached a point of full equality and ideal representation yet.

Patriarchy and rape culture not only continue to persist in rape narratives in popular media, despite the fact that there have been a lot of structural improvements made to combat them, but have also evolved into new narratives that are disguised under the helm of postfeminism. These "empowering new narratives" have survivors as protagonists, powerful storylines exploring trauma, and yet fall flat, because they continue to be modelled to appease a male audience and entertaining them.

Until this is changed, and films and TV series containing rape include survivors in their demographic, like *I May Destroy You*¹¹⁵ does, we cannot say that rape representation in popular media has reached a postfeminist status.

¹¹¹ "Episode 3.8." *Broadchurch*. Written by Chris Chibnall, directed by Paul Andrew Williams, season 3, ITV, 2017.

¹¹² *Not all men: the debates in social networks on masculinities and consent*. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, vol. 11, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02569-y>

¹¹³ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

¹¹⁴ Baker, Joanne. "Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: PostFeminist Obligations for Young Women.", *Feminism & Psychology - FEM PSYCHOL*, 2010, pp.186-204.

¹¹⁵ *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, Various Artists Limited, FALKNA Productions, 2020.

Conclusion

The portrayal of sexual violence against women on screen has changed significantly since the 2000s through the development of the MeToo movement.

In Chapter One, we studied the rape narratives formulated by Cuklanz¹¹⁶ and Projansky's¹¹⁷ on rape scenes of media from the 20th century, and used the data to analyse to what extent the rape myths they are based on have remained present in rape portrayals of the 21st century. By looking at rape scenes from popular television shows and films of the 2000-2010s, such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, *Gossip Girl*, *Poldark*, *Torchwood* and *Gran Torino*, we were able to draw out three categories of rape representation for that time period: (1) rape depicted through the male gaze, (2) minimisation of rape, and (3) rape used as a way to punish active female characters for defying male dominance. We examined why these myth-based rape narratives were able to persist in the media, by analysing the “two-step” communication model¹¹⁸ of society at the time, and were able to draw the conclusion that social rape myth acceptance was enabled by the limited access to information due to biased mediators, which subsequently fuelled the misrepresentation of rape in popular media.

In Chapter Two, we examined how the development of internet technology in the 2010s enabled direct access to information, by looking at the theory of the “one-step” communication model¹¹⁹. With this model, we were able to explain the effectiveness of the MeToo movement in bringing structural change in regards to rape prevention in society, as well as the subsequent rise in rape awareness. In order to analyse whether these perception changes have been taken over in media rape narratives, we looked at the long-running television series *Outlander* and conducted an intertextual analysis of two scenes of sexual assault in the show, one that aired pre- and the other post-MeToo. The data from this analysis revealed that the new informed rape narratives have in fact been injected in the media, both through the structural changes implemented in the Hollywood industry itself¹²⁰ and through the lower rate of rape myth acceptance in society. This successfully demonstrated a connecting link between the development of rape movements in real life and the portrayals of rape on screen, showing that one does indeed influence the other, giving a modern take on the academic discussion of to what extent sexual violence on screen contributes to the persistence of sexual violence in the real world and vice versa.

¹¹⁶ Cuklanz, Lisa M.. *Rape on Prime Time : Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

¹¹⁷ Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York University Press, 2001.

¹¹⁸ Katz, Elihu. “The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1957, pp. 61–78. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746790>.

¹¹⁹ Bennett, W. L., & Manheim, J. B. “The One-Step Flow of Communication.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 608, No.1, pp. 213-232, 2006.

¹²⁰ Otero, Lia Keeble. “It’s Not Just a Kiss: How Intimacy Coordinators Are Redefining Safety and Creativity in Hollywood.” *PAC MAG*, 23 Mar. 2025.

Lastly, in Chapter Three we studied the concept of postfeminism in society and examined the prevalence of postfeminist sentiment by looking at the rape discourse in online spaces today, such as Reddit and Twitter. We were able to draw the conclusion that postfeminist sentiment has re-emerged since the rape reform movement, a decade after the peak of MeToo, and that men identify themselves the most with these beliefs. In order to analyse whether these postfeminist sentiments could be applied to the state of rape representation on screen today, we looked at different television series that centred female survivors of sexual assault, such as *I May Destroy You*, *Liar*, *Broadchurch* and *Unbelievable*, and analysed to what extent these show still contain the old rape narratives or myths. The data collected revealed that while in theory survivor-based storytelling defies the norms of patriarchy and male gaze, in practice contemporary rape representation still contains echoes of rape myths and has even adapted postfeminist rape narratives. By applying anti-postfeminist theory to our data, we examined to what extent postfeminist beliefs are inherently rooted in patriarchy and androcentrism, and analysed the prevalence of the #NotAllMen hashtag in online spaces. We were able to show how postfeminist sentiment has expanded from being rooted in fear of being victimised, to fear of being accused of victimising someone else, how this unconsciously reinforces the anti-feminist rape myths of victim-blaming and women being labeled as liars, and how it creates a repetitive cycle of rape culture that contributes to the existence of sexual violence against women both in the real world and on screen.

This thesis is definitely a stepping-stone for deeper analysis into the subject, as it documents a phenomenon in progress, and more developments on the topic will follow in the near future. Since it limits itself to analysing only US-American and British texts, this paper could be expanded by researching into rape representation in non-Western countries, that could offer new approaches as to how rape could be represented better, or delve into the intersections with other systems of oppression that can influence how rape is represented in popular media - such as racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and more.

All in all, though, this thesis provides a solid, insightful look into the progression of rape representation over the course of the 21st century, and documents how that progression went hand in hand with the development of the MeToo movement.

While we can look at TV shows like *I May Destroy You*¹²¹ and pride ourselves in how far we have come as a society that television series like that are now able to exist, we must also be mindful that this progress is not something we can take for granted and continues to be in jeopardy, now more than ever. Especially in today's political climate, where the people in office are able to take away the constitutional rights of women with ease¹²², images of women are manipulated with AI and distributed online

¹²¹ *I May Destroy You*. Created by Michaela Coel, Various Artists Limited, FALKNA Productions, 2020.

¹²² Totenberg, Nina, McCammon, Sarah. "Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, ending right to abortion upheld for decades" *NPR*, 24 Jun. 2022.

without their consent¹²³, red-pill incel culture is growing¹²⁴, and where social media has become a way to spread propaganda and extremist views¹²⁵, the postfeminist concept of women's agency can easily be taken advantage of to push an anti-feminist agenda.

The fight for ethical rape representation has only just started, and we still have a long way to go.

¹²³ Murphy Kelly, Samantha. "Explicit, AI-generated Taylor Swift images spread quickly on social media" *CNN*, 25 Jan. 2024.

¹²⁴ Antinori, Arije. "The Incel Phenomenon: Structures, Narratives, and Interactions", *The European Commission*, 29 Jan. 2026.

¹²⁵ Landers, Liz. "Trump administration's posts echo rhetoric linked to extremist groups" *PBS News*, 12 Jan. 2026.

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