



Still from the film *Women Talking*, written and directed by Sarah Polley, 2022.

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## Portrayal of Rape of Women In Hollywood Fiction Films

The definition of rape varies by time period, place, and gender. A common perception of rape is that it involves the nonconsensual penile penetration of the vagina —*per vim stuprum*, or “intercourse by force,” as the ancient Romans termed it. Many countries define rape as such.

Merril D. Smith, *Encyclopedia of Rape*<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, the word “rape” began occupying an uncharacteristically prominent place in U.S. media. Why? We can trace it to a renewed outpouring of rage at the silence imposed on victims of sexual violence, which gathered strength in the context of protests that preceded Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States that very year.

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At that time, a large number of women, and some men, started breaking the silence surrounding their own victimization. Testimonies, disseminated mainly over the Internet as part of the #MeToo movement, started to gain mass exposure and coverage in various institutional spaces.

This wave of accusations quickly produced a powerful impact in Hollywood, especially after October 5, 2017, when *The New York Times* published the report “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades” by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey. Later, in 2019, the same two journalists published their investigation in book form:

We are witnessing a moment in which female directors and some of their male counterparts, especially in the United States, seek to transform, not just reproduce, our collective notion of sexual violence, and in particular of rape, through its portrayal in film.

*She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement.*<sup>2</sup> In other news, on October 10, 2017, *The New Yorker* published an article by investigative journalist Ronan Farrow entitled “From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein’s Accusers Tell Their Stories.”

It was practically impossible for the U.S. film industry not to react given the magnitude of the problem revealed involving its internal workings, exposing a figure like Weinstein, a top Hollywood producer, as a sexual assailant of young actresses and female employees of his company Miramax.

Just a few years after the maelstrom of victims’ accusations and testimonies broke, the Australian filmmaker Kitty Green wrote and directed the U.S.-made film *The Assistant* (2019), based broadly on the *modus operandi* Harvey Weinstein used to sexually prey on young women. That same year saw the premiere of the film *Bombshell* (2019), directed by U.S. Americans Jay Roach and written by Charles Randolph, which tells the story of a group of women working for Fox News who decide to denounce CEO Roger Ailes for sexual harassment. Finally, the British-U.S. production *Promising Young Woman* (2020) was released. Written and directed by English filmmaker Emerald Fennell, the film questions the insistence on blaming rape victims and making excuses for aggressors, especially in the context of college campuses. In addition, the film earned Fennell an Oscar for best original screenplay.

Films like these marked an emerging trend in some sectors of the U.S. film industry to get involved in this intense renewed debate (since it was not the first time women had spoken out against sexual aggression in the U.S.) regarding sexual violence, especially against girls and women.

Although the industry is not just now discovering this issue, a visible effort is underway to gain a fuller understanding of how and from where portrayals of events of sexual violence—and of rape in particular—are projected. This is especially important if we reflect carefully on the words of Merrill D. Smith, who affirms that rape is a

category, like all others, of a variable and changing nature, simply because it is defined by diverse subjects, with different motivations and from different spaces of power. Thus, these very elements are what filmmakers are starting to confront head on in fashioning their cinematographic portrayals, focusing on them as the primary factors without which it is impossible to understand or contextualize sexual violence against girls and women, with men as their most common aggressors.

In this sense, it is also noteworthy that, for the most part, it has been female directors, writers, and producers that have decided to bring these stories to the screen, in some cases adapting literary works by other women, as in the case of the U.S. film *She Said* (2022), written by British screenwriter Rebecca Lenkiewicz and directed by Maria Schrader of Germany, as an adaptation of the book by journalists Kantor and Twohey.

Another example is the U.S. production *Women Talking* (2022), written and directed by Canadian Sarah Polley, who earned her second Oscar nomination, and won her first academy award for the film, in the category of best adapted screenplay. Polley adapted the novel of the same name published in 2020 by Canadian author Miriam Toews.

It is notable, moreover, that these materials have been brought to the big screen within only three and two years from the publication of the books on which they were based; in other words, one might think there is an impetus on the part of some women to write stories about women who have been victims of rape and on the part of screenwriters and directors to ensure that their narratives reach a wider audience through film.

There is a third case of film adaptation of a book focused on the rape of a woman that I find especially compelling. I refer here to *The Last Duel* (2021), a U.S.-made film written by Nicole Holofcener, Matt Damon, and Ben Affleck (all U.S. Americans) and directed by Englishman Ridley Scott. It was produced by U.S. filmmaker Jennifer Fox, herself a rape survivor, who had previously brought her own story to the screen with the film *The Tale* (2018).

*The Last Duel* (2021) is based on the novel *The Last Duel: A True Story of Crime, Scandal and Trial by Combat in Medieval France* (2004), by writer Eric Jager. Although there is seventeen-year gap between the book’s publication and its film adaptation, it may well be one of the best attempts, from a certain sector of the U.S. film industry, to address these stories from a perspective centered on the victims,

seeking to vindicate their point of view. We can understand this moment in filmmaking as influenced by the #MeToo movement.

I believe it is possible—for lack of a better way to describe it—to detect this influence in the tone or intentionality from which this film was adapted. While it is true that Jager reconstructs the events surrounding the rape of Lady Marguerite, the second wife of Sir Jean de Carrouges, by squire Jacques LeGris “using original sources,” he maintains that the documentary evidence suggests that it is highly likely that the rape was actually committed, with which he lends credibility to Lady Marguerite’s testimony, although the main focus then shifts to the trial and subsequent duel to the death; however, one of the opening sentences of his book states that “No one really knew the truth of the matter,” words uttered, apparently, by LeGris’s own attorney.

In contrast, the film adaptation leaves no room for uncertainty regarding the events of interest, presenting Lady Marguerite’s version as the truth of what happened, and in consequence the other versions, advanced by both her husband, Jean de Carrouges, and her rapist, Jacques LeGris, are exposed as falsehoods. In this sense, the film adaptation modifies the structure of the book to present the sto-

ry divided between the three perspectives, starting with Jean’s, followed by Jacques’s, to conclude with that of Lady Marguerite.

In my view, this fragmentation was intended to emphasize that the legitimacy or credibility of the relevant events is completely intersected by the clash of these three conflicting perspectives; in other words, it reveals how, for something to be called and recognized as rape, it requires a social, personal, and political struggle, waged in both public and private spaces, that places women who denounce rapists in positions of great vulnerability where they are savagely discredited. The film depicts this struggle, making clear to the viewer that, because Lady Marguerite has truth on her side, the rape was in fact committed exactly as she reported it.

What I find especially interesting is the perspective, or the context, from which it was even possible for this story to be adapted for the screen, since it narrates a series of

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events that happened in medieval France; however, it offers us a cinematographic vision or perspective created in the United States, which in the present historical context is influenced and possibly shaped by the narratives driven by the mass movement to denounce sexual violence, #MeToo, and in my view that is what we increasingly are finding in films that grapple with the issues in question.

In this sense, I believe that we can note important transformations in the ways stories involving sexual violence, including rape, have been narrated in film recently, compared with other historical periods, and especially since the 1970s, when critic and writer Molly Haskell detected a spike in the portrayal of rape of women in U.S. films written and directed in their majority by men. Haskell affirms that this intense surge of rapes on the big screen was triggered by a kind of patriarchal reaction to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

However, it is also relevant to bear in mind that this deeply masculine perspective on rape did not—and does not—go unchallenged; on the contrary, it has been constantly questioned. Referring specifically to the 1970s, the writer Maya Montañez Smukler describes it as a period in which U.S. film (especially independent cinema) saw growing participation by women filmmakers, creating what we can describe as a kind of counterweight to masculinization.

In any case, I believe it is important and necessary to elaborate on the context of these periods (the early 1970s, on the one hand, through the explosion of #MeToo in 2017), which I consider fundamental for understanding how portrayals of rape in Hollywood fiction films have evolved, given that at times a certain confrontation and resistance to the male gaze in film can be detected, especially when portraying rapes of women; however, a deeper contextualization of these moments is needed to more accurately materialize this initial approach.

Thus, I would venture to affirm that we are witnessing a narrative and cinematographic shift in relation to the ways acts of violence committed by men against women are being portrayed and constructed, a shift that has been largely facilitated by the context in which the #MeToo movement arose in the United States, thinking, moreover, that this cinematographic *oeuvre*, created primarily by women, has contributed to the continuation of the movement.

We are witnessing the creation of a cinematographic *corpus* focused on narrating and denouncing sexual violence, above all the rape of girls and women, which may well be

the product of the effervescence inspired by the #MeToo movement directed, particularly, toward the Hollywood industry, as the continuation of what exploded in 2017.

In addition to its continued growth, this body of work is being replicated in other forms and means of communication, like streaming services that produce and include in their catalogues series, documentaries, or feature films centered on similar stories that present girls, adolescents, and/or adults as their protagonists, because they are the true creators of the narratives and it is from their perspective that we learn of and find meaning in the events narrated in such materials.

Consequently, I can confidently affirm that we are witnessing a moment in which female directors and some of their male counterparts, especially in the United States, seek to transform, not just reproduce, our collective notion of sexual violence, and in particular of rape, through its portrayal in film. In addition, it is the victims themselves who are taking an active part in the construction of these narratives and images, ensuring that the focus remains firmly on the systemic nature of rape, to remove it from a purely personal or individual context. This notion is being diversified to reveal how transversal and all-encompassing this kind of violence can be in practically all times and spaces where women have led our lives. **MM**

## Further Reading

Haskell, Molly, *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Jager, Eric, *The Last Duel. A True Story of Crime, Scandal, and Trial by Combat in Medieval France* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

Montañez Smukler, Maya, *Liberating Hollywood. Women Directors and the Feminist Reform of the 1970s American Cinema* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

## Notes

1 See Merrill D. Smith, ed., *Encyclopedia of Rape* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 2004). [Editor's Note.]

2 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story that Helped Ignite a Movement* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019). [Editor's Note.]