

Male Rape Victimisation on Screen

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Male Rape Victimisation on Screen

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

Alright, I'll admit it.

I laughed during *Wedding Crashers*.

In fact, it was from watching that film that this book sprung. In *Wedding Crashers*, we see two men, who have made it their hobby to crash weddings, decide to crash the high-society wedding of the season. Their pastime unravels as one (John) instantly falls in love, while the other (Jeremy) soon finds himself in hot water with a woman (Gloria). Both have been flippant about women, and while they have never been sexually violent or coercive, they have eschewed monogamy for one-night stands which they secured by lying about who they are. It's funny because these formerly confident men, who used their charm to bed women, find themselves in situations that eventually make them see the error of their ways. Now, the way in which Jeremy is taught a lesson escalates. Case in point: Jeremy, after being tied to a bed and first forced to penetrate Gloria and then sexually harassed by her brother, comes downstairs the next morning to declare to his friend that he had been raped during the night. John's response: offer his friend a breakfast scone to take his mind off it.

The film is, as one IMDB user notes, a 'shut-down your brain and laugh' comedy. It is not nuanced or asking its audience to read deeper into the plot, characters, or situations. The comedy is often physical slapstick, along with the witty and loud comedy that the co-leads Vince Vaughan and Owen Wilson are known. That the audience is not being asked to think more deeply about male sexual victimisation is no surprise. As a feminist, notwithstanding one with a bad taste in comedies, I did not go into *Wedding Crashers* with an aim to analyse its depictions of sexual assault and gender relations. It is a funny film, albeit with jokes that don't hit the mark (i.e. anything homophobic or 'rapey'). I did, however, 'turn my brain on' when Jeremy is offered a scone the morning after his rape. It raised a question: How often do films gloss over the sexual assault or rape of men?

At a time of heightened attention on sexual violence, it is necessary to consider male victims of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. In this book, I argue that popular film and television representations of male sexual assault victimisation reinforce male rape myths. This silences male victims as heteropatriarchal values are upheld. As I unpack throughout this book, oftentimes these same rape myths negatively impact on female victims therefore making male sexual violence victimisation crucial to any discussion of sexual violence prevention.

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I have enjoyed my fair share of raunchy, out-there comedies. *The Hangover* was funny. I will happily tap into *Family Guy* or *Archer* if I am in the mood for something animated. *21 Jump Street* is a firm favourite. I have watched *Bad Neighbours*, *Bad Moms*, and *South Park*. And I'll happily share *30 Rock* memes and rewatch clips till the cows come home. What they, and many other comedies, share is, if not a plot line, then certainly a scene that humorously depicts or jokes about the rape or sexual harassment of boys and men. Some are just a throwaway line (the rape joke from *21 Jump Street*: 'You know what happens to a handsome guy like me in jail? It rhymes with grape'). Others are more insidious. Adult animation such as *Family Guy*, *Archer* and *South Park*, alongside films like *The Hangover* franchise include sexist, homophobic, and transphobic humour as well, and in some cases, making female characters the victims of the sexual violence of male characters. This has been highlighted and critiqued as problematic (Keith, 2017) but the male violence enacted against male bodies has been under examined.

But what about rape and sexual violence without the humour? *Oz* is not a television show known for its comedic elements but there was definitely a lot of male rape across the show's run. Consider *American History X*, numerous episodes of *Law & Order* and *Law & Order: SVU*, *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds*, or even *The X-Files*. Police procedurals, film, and television about prisons, action and adventure, dramas, and children's animation all contain male characters joking about, fearing, or actually becoming victims of sexual violence. However, these shows are often not flagged as containing male sexual harassment or violence. The male victims and their experiences are not recognised or referred to outside of the screen visual; it does not seem to register in the collective viewing consciousness that a man or boy has been sexually victimised.

As I demonstrate in the forthcoming chapters, there has been a decades-long fascination with male rape and sexual assault in a variety of genres in film and television, and these representations often recreate and reinforce male rape victimisation myths. While feminist activists and violence against women practitioners have made massive in-roads in our comprehension of sexual violence, and feminist scholars have explored among other things how women's experiences of sexual violence as presented on screen may have resultant effects on socio-cultural understandings of these topics, a similar attempt to rectify the situation facing male victims is not quite present. As I argue, feminist theorisation can support this work. But there are obstacles to overcome.

Socio-legal discussions of rape and sexual assault tend to revolve around the female victim/male offender dichotomy. This is understandable given that the overwhelming number of victims are female, and the majority of perpetrators are male. This, however, is severely limited to male victims. Australian estimates suggest that 8% of men have experienced sexual victimisation since the age of 15, of whom 18% experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15 (ABS Personal Safety Survey, 2021). Similar statistics exist for the USA (1.2% of men have been victims of sexual assault in either child or adulthood or both) and UK (sexual assault offence reporting for men went up ten-fold in 2018 to account for roughly 4% of men) (Rape Crisis England & Wales, n.d.). It is estimated that up to 90% of sexual assaults committed against men are unreported (Easton, 2013). The #MeToo

movement, which took off in 2017, has shed light on the extent of sexual harassment, assaults, and violence going unreported. Several male celebrities have over the past five or six years come forward and disclosed the sexual assaults they experienced, yet, there is still a lot of silence from male victims due to a variety of societal, cultural, and criminal justice barriers to understanding and responding to male sexual victimisation. Scholarly research and sexual assault stakeholders have established that men do not report their victimisation out of feelings of embarrassment, shame, fear, and emasculation (Chan, 2014; Duncanson, 2013).

Recent domestic violence research indicates that among young people there is a move away from gendered understandings of violence in the name of being 'fair', and focussing on individual violence and abuse rather than on structures that promote inequalities associated with the greater number of women experiencing domestic violence and abuse than men (Carlisle et al., 2022). As noted by Carlisle et al. (2022), discussions about women's victimisation and the structural nature of violence against women has fallen by the wayside so as to be inclusive of male victims.

This is a point I would like to come back to: recognising men as victims of sexual violence does not require ignoring or downplaying women's victimisation. Nor does it mean that the structural nature of gendered violence should be ignored for an individualistic answer to sexual violence. Rather discussions and attempts to prevent it is about gender transformation (Our Watch, 2021) as much for sexual violence as it is for domestic violence. It is about challenging and addressing gender stereotypes. And it is doing so through the systems that perpetuate and continue to inflict harms on all but the most privileged in societies, including in this book's case through film and television.

For example, rape of men by women and the apparent unproblematic humour in this trauma are the other side of the coin that reinforce stereotypes about sexual violence against women. McKeever (2019) unpacks the various ways in which criminal laws which diminish the idea of male rape victimisation by women also coincidentally negatively impact female victims, arguing that the cultural stereotypes that underpin these laws (that men are always up for sex, women's sexual purity is more important than men's, and that sex is something that men do to women) continue to reinforce gendered stereotypes about rape, women, and sex. Likewise, male rape victimisation at the hands of other men is based on ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Stanko (1990) has argued that male rape victimisation when at the hands of other men is underpinned by the same power and control dynamics that are reasons for women's victimisation. Male perpetrators wish to exert their power and control over their male victims to preserve their own hegemonic masculinity and strip away the masculinity of their victim, in effect rendering them powerless (Stanko, 1990). Thus, gender stereotypes are still as relevant and require examination when discussing male victimisation as female victimisation.

If we are to counter these stereotypes and genuinely endeavour to prevent sexual violence then it requires rethinking how sexual violence and consent are legislated, discussed, taught, and presented in cultural artefacts. However, this also requires the examination of male experiences of sexual violence victimisation (Javaid, 2015a, 2015b, 2018). This does not mean, and I cannot emphasise

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this enough, suggesting that gender does not have a role to play in sexual harm or that gender be ignored in favour of presenting a neutral position about sexual violence. Arguments that take this route [see Cohen (2014) for an example of this] tend to be anti-feminist and suggest that attention to female victims of any sort is an element of misandry willing to keep men and male victims downtrodden, which is certainly not what feminist scholarship of the 20th and now 21st centuries has done in the face of centuries of silence around sexual victimisation. With the opening of our discussions about sexual violence of women and children, room has been made for men to also come forward and disclose. However, reigning ideals about masculinity continue to silence many male victims which needs tackling, both the silence and the reigning dominant masculinities that are supported by societies the world over that do not give space to male victimisation.

A lot of academic and practitioner work has focussed on dismantling rape myths targeting women and calling out sexist language, culture, and humour. This has led to a shift in how rape, sexual harassment, and sexism against female victims are presented in popular culture (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). This does not solve the issue wholesale, but it has certainly engaged the public to better understand how detrimental rape myths about female victimisation can be. While scholarly attempts have been made to research societal rape myths about male victims (Turchik & Edwards, 2012), representations in popular culture have not been examined or discussed and consequently have not shifted.

From an academic standpoint, women as victims/men as avengers relegate women to plot devices or props that act as the impetus for action (and thus the whole film) to take place, whereas women as victims/women as avengers have been read as feminist narratives where women take control of their bodies and their stories (Porjansky, 2001). Although as Heller-Nicholas (2011, p. 4) argues, many of the films that are about women retaliating against their rapists are 'undeniably sensational attempts to profit from the ugly desire to watch sexual violence'. These films will often have as many female viewers as male ones. There has been feminist discussion about rape on screen and what this means to our changing understandings of rape and women, as well as its intersection with society and culture throughout the decades especially in instances where women seek control for themselves [for instance *Brownmiller* or Read (2000) or Porjansky, 2001]. But there has not been a similar unpacking of what it means on screen for male victims (or their agents who are acting on their behalf) to regain control of their bodies following a sexual assault. Porjansky (2001) argued that the viewing of these films about women's victimisation is mired in contradiction: on the one hand, these films can play a role in representing sexual violence to challenge rape myths in society, on the other hand, there is a desire from feminists to see rape ended not just in reality but as a plot device for countless films. Perhaps most importantly, Porjansky identifies that the representations of rape and discourses about post-feminism have an important role to play in how popular culture defines feminism which has, according to some feminists, led to the transformation of rape as a consumable that permeates more of society than just film or television. In order to bypass this tension Porjansky (2001) chose not to describe the rape scenes of any of the media they analysed so that they and the readers could get relieve

from the ‘pervasiveness of depictions of rape in our everyday lives’ (p. 19). As Heller-Nicholas (2011), in my opinion, rightly points out, films with rape in them are used to not only sell products but perpetuate myths about rape which need to be countered and it is not possible, nor in the best interest of communities and women, to turn a blind eye. They must be examined and analysed.

There is evidence that popular culture plays a role in shaping societal ideas about social behaviour and crimes (Brookshier, 2019; Caster, 2008). Not wanting to rehash the decades-long debate about whether popular representations of crime cause violence (Hetsroni, 2007), it is established that extremely violent video games, for instance, will raise aggression in children (Bushman, 2016) but research is inconclusive as to whether it translates to violent behaviour. The content I focus on in the coming chapters is not asking if viewing these media will lead to viewers becoming sexual aggressors or victims but rather what messages viewers might be taking from portrayals of male sexual violence victimisation especially in instances where the effects of sexual violence are downplayed or riffed on. As Helfgott (2015, p. 50) notes there is plenty of evidence to show that television and film violence ‘cultivates a “mean view” of the world, and negatively impacts real-world behavior’. This means that people become more fearful, believe that crime is going to happen to them (and the crime type will be serious and violent), and that crime is rising (Gerbner, 1994). But as Jowett (2009) argues representations of rape that are anchored in realism are not able to address gender, sexuality, and rape with freedom, thus falling back onto tropes and conventions including gender stereotypes, gendered power dynamics, and traditional popular determinants of what femininity, feminism, and post-feminism entail (Horeck, 2004; Jowett, 2009). I would argue that this should include popular ideas about masculinity, especially in Western media. Wlodarz (2001) has attempted to explore how postfeminist masculinity is a new masculinity in the face of the traditional, hegemonic kind. Postfeminist masculinity is not about passivity or homosexuality but is about softness (that is, kindness, less aggression, a more nuanced engagement with work and friends) in heterosexual men (Wlodarz, 2001). Earlier research has identified that it is possible for men to straddle both a “softer” masculinity while perpetuating hegemonically masculine behaviours, for example, through the playing of violent sports or cultivating muscular masculine bodies (Donaldson, 1987). Thus, a newer form of masculinity does not guarantee a move away from traditional, potentially toxic forms of masculinity but picking and choosing elements of masculinity that still benefit men, especially those perpetrating aggression against others, including other men. This plays out in popular culture though falling back onto stereotypes about masculinity; when realism is the goal with dramas, action or adventure television and film then men coded as passive, gay, or ‘soft’ are ridiculed. In the case of representations of sexual violence, these are the men who then become the victims on screen (Wlodarz, 2001).

The gendered representation of male and female characters starts in childhood entertainment. Children’s media portrayals can not only promote hegemonic heteronormativity (Hentges & Case, 2012) but male characters are shown displaying more aggressive behaviours (Luther & Legg, 2010). This behaviour is coded as being more desirable in males than females. Although we cannot consider viewers

(children or adults) as empty vessels who are filled with media messaging, both cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) and social learning theory (Bandura, 2002) point out that the audience receives messaging and social information about what society values and how it esteems people displaying these specific social behaviours. Gerbner (1999, p. ix) articulates the three roles of stories in our social environments: to reveal how things work, to describe what things are and to tell us what to do about them. These stories tell us the 'fact' of the story and the underlying themes that explain how we should behave and respond to certain actions, convey information about crime and deviance, and can give insight into the price someone has to pay (e.g. as a law or cautionary tale) (Gerbner, 1999, pp. ix–x). Television, film, and other media offer a way for people to understand not only mainstream society but also themselves throughout the years. It is an ongoing series of messages and productions of identity and place in the world that an individual responds to, meaning that film and television media messaging is but one way that people's cultural beliefs are created and pushed to shift (Gorlewski et al., 2017).

Cultivation theory has been applied by media scholars to questions of how television viewers form their views about crime and the criminal justice system with some research demonstrating a correlation between television news consumption and linking Black individuals with law breaking (Pollock et al., 2021). From a criminological standpoint, Carrabine (2008) has contended the media can promote stereotypes, especially to younger viewers, that uphold the status quo rather than seeking to challenge it especially with regard to crime and deviance. While causation cannot be identified between television and film violence and crime, the nuance of the matter is that there is some, marginal, effect on consumption of popular culture that promotes violent behaviour and if not actually leading to violent/criminal behaviour then certainly an acceptance of this type of behaviour taking place (Phillips, 2017a).

The position I take throughout the following chapters is that while television and film viewers are not blank canvases accepting of any and all media messaging, we do (at least those of us in majority English-speaking, but also many other societies globally) inhabit communities and consume media that are relatively homogenous when it comes to topics of rape, sexual violence, masculinity, and male experiences of sexual violence victimisation. Therefore, the message in film and television, which perpetuate male rape myths, has not been interrogated and challenged via the visual medium in a meaningful way to bring about change, which arguably leads to viewers with skewed understanding of male rape, and potentially having an adverse effect on male victim/survivors who may be watching. As Gerbner (1999, p. ix) notes 'most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell'. Most male viewers will not have experienced or perpetrated sexual harm – what they know about it comes from stories that are told in popular culture and news media. The viewing of a large amount of television and movies is unlikely to make someone believe in rape myths. Rather, it is in conjunction with cultural scripts that individuals use to define what consensual and non-consensual sex looks like, including who the victims and who those perpetrators

may be that creates the ideal environment for rape myths to continue to be perpetuated (Hendrick, 2021; Ryan, 2011).

Not all representations of male sexual violence victimisation are done in a confronting, violent, or dramatised way. In fact, as evidenced by my opening example, a lot of the time the use of male rape and sexual victimisation is done to shock and make light of male experiences, if they are even recognised as sexual assault or rape in the first place. Rape humour, according to some comics, is taboo and hence the draw for the illicit and shock value. Rather than wanting to perpetuate rape culture, comedians sometimes argue that the use of rape jokes is to be politically incorrect and to cross the bounds of acceptability (Keith, 2017). These rape jokes typically presume a male perpetrator and a female victim. For example, Seth MacFarlane, the creator of *Family Guy*, argued that when Peter Griffin (the titular family guy) bemoans his inability to have sex with numerous women and jokes about the rape of college women ‘you’re not laughing at rape; you’re laughing at him being an idiot’ (Solomon, 2009). Rape humour is about maintaining and reinforcing gendered power differentials between men and women (Strain et al., 2016) and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and power between men. There is evidence to suggest that rape humour reinforces tolerance for sexist behaviour (Ford, 2000; Lockyer & Savigny, 2019) and that in cases of heterosexual relationships, men who enjoy sexist jokes are positively correlated with their self-reported rape proclivities (Romaro-Sanchez et al., 2017). Benign sexism towards men and acceptance of interpersonal violence are predictors of male rape myth acceptance by both women and men, with male rape myth acceptance overall being higher among men than women (Chapleau et al. 2008). In comedic films male rape jokes are utilised to punish deviant men (read: those not exhibiting hegemonic masculine traits) (Gustafsson-Wood, 2019). Thus, rape humour not only negatively affects women – it harms men too.

This Book

Among the branches of criminology that feed into my conceptualisation and analysis in the coming chapters are popular criminology, and of course feminist criminology. Popular criminology was coined by Rafter (2007) who argued that crime films are integral to our understanding of crime, criminology, and culture itself as crime films offer insight into what the popular discourse is about the nature of crime (Rafter & Browne, 2011). Similar to feminist criminology, popular criminology is interested in how societal thinking about crime and justice is translated into policy, albeit with more of a focus on sex and gender. Although feminist criminology has tended to focus most on the dichotomy of women as victims and men as perpetrators of not only crimes but also the regulation of women and their bodies in society and the criminal justice system, what I consider throughout the various chapters is how on the one hand we as feminists cannot tackle violence against women and eradicate sexual violence if we do not also consider how patriarchy enacts the same sexual violence on male bodies, causing harm and suffering for very similar reasons. On the other hand, the continued misrepresentation of the sexual assault of men harms societal understandings of

sexual violence which ultimately is preventing the obliteration of rape myths that also harm female victims.

Rather than attempt to undertake an in-depth coverage of all films with male rape as either jokes, plot lines, or allusions in cinema and television I have put some fences around what I analysed and present in the coming chapters. Firstly, there is no film or television show pre-1990. Thus, there is no analysis of *Deliverance* (1972; dir.: John Boorman) nor discussion of how *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962; dir.: David Lean) hints at T. E. Lawrence's rape. I have also only chosen films and television shows from the comedy, action, drama, and police procedural genres. Sci-fi, fantasy, and horror have been left to the side in part due to not having the time or capacity to cover it all and partly because as I would need to watch the visual media on at least one occasion I wished to choose content that I would be happy to watch. The benefit of this is that there is so much still there for others to engage with and explore. I have also chosen examples that are not about domestic violence but clearly sexual assault. Films or television shows about men being victims of domestic violence and sexual assault most likely exist somewhere (probably in very small numbers) but I did not search for these for inclusion. Although I collected and watched over 300 examples (television episodes as well as films), I have also examined mostly US cinema and television with a smattering of UK, Australian, Korean, Japanese, French, and Hungarian examples to break up the analysis. There is plenty available for further research. Even though I collected over 300 examples, it is a small subset of these that are analysed in-depth as I have attempted to focus on common themes and where those themes are better represented over several episodes of a television show, or where a film has engaged with the topic of male sexual violence in greater detail than a single joke.

I use many terms throughout from sexual coercion to sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual violence, and rape. With the exception of rape, that in most jurisdictions requires the penetration of a person's body with another's body part or an object, the terms are used to delineate different behaviours – for example, forcing a man to penetrate a woman can be sexual coercion or sexual assault dependent upon the context within which it is being shown on screen, while the anal or oral unwanted penetration of a male character is termed rape or sexual violence. In order to make this accessible to as many readers as possible I have not taken a specific legal definition as there are various definitions within one country such as the USA or Australia let alone across jurisdictions. I hope that with the added context with each example it will be clear why certain terms are being used at certain points. The confusion about the terminology exists across various legislations, academic and practitioner sources as there is no single definition of any of the acts mentioned here and therefore I apologise in advance if there is confusion. I do attempt to give various definitions throughout as they may be used for specific actions or how these may be recognised by readers.

The first chapter considers how prison rape is represented in film and television. Prisoners are often overlooked by the non-incarcerated citizenry in most communities and yet mention male rape and prisoners are the first to jump to people's minds. Years of police procedurals and crime dramas have utilised the idea of prison rape to drive home messages of why crime does not pay – prison rape