

Portraying rape recovery of a female protagonist on screen

This paper will analyse the textual and directorial choices (mise en scene, cinematography, audio) made when depicting the rape of a female protagonist and her recovery in two films: Paul Verhoeven's *Elle* (2016) and Sean Durkin's *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011). I watched a variety of films – 24 in total – as part of this project, but these two stayed with me because of their understanding of the recovery journey in correlation to the literature. They portray the recovery process as one of difficulty, both physically and mentally, especially when the attacker is known to the victim. However, my findings revolve around the differences in outlook on the feasibility of recovery; *Elle* is ultimately a redemptive story, offering hope, whereas *Martha Marcy May Marlene* depicts the declining mental state of its protagonist and leaves her hopeless by the end. Both are certainly possibilities in reality.

Three elements of these films are key in analysing their depictions of rape recovery: the identity of the protagonist, the situation of the rape and the journey of recovery. *Martha Marcy May Marlene* depicts an impressionable young woman who is raped by a member of the cult she has joined, and whose mental state declines when she tries to re-integrate with society. *Elle* concerns a toughened middle-aged woman, Michèle, who is attacked in her own home by a masked man, who turns out to be a neighbour she fancies, and has to confront the extent of her indulgence in order to reconcile the relationships that matter to her. The details vary greatly, but both films are studies of complex characters and ultimately show truthful, progressive and important depictions of responses to rape and the recovery process.

Michèle and Martha are opposites as characters, and this enables them to respond differently to their sexual traumas. Schnicke and Resick define the two extremes of response to rape: accommodation and assimilation. In the first instance, the victim adjusts their perception of the circumstances under which rape takes place to match their own experience, enabling them to protect themselves further – although this can result in overaccommodation and paranoia. In the second, the victim adjusts their view of their own circumstances to match those of their idea of rape – this often results in the victim blaming themselves, or convincing themselves that the incident was not in fact rape (1996, pp.10-12). The differences in our protagonists' identities mean that Michèle accommodates while Martha assimilates.

Michèle Leblanc co-owns a video game company and is not afraid to speak her mind, both with her employees – “The fact is, the boss here is me. And we're six months behind.” (*Elle*, 2016) – and with her family – “So how much do you need for the apartment?” “I didn't ask for money.” “No, it was me, hearing voices.” She has grown up having to deal with abuse from members of the public because her father murdered a street-full of people when she was young and involved her in the proceedings. She has since developed a thick skin in order to continue her life productively. This pragmatic nature means that Michèle's natural response to her attack is to pick herself up and continue with her life. She accommodates by sleeping with a hammer in her hand that night, having an STI test the next day, having the locks changed and buying pepper spray and an axe. There are times when she overaccommodates, such as pepper spraying her ex-husband when he comes (unannounced) to watch over her house, and suspecting her employees of being her attacker, but she also considers that it may be a response to her father's retrial, accommodating by lowering her opinion of the general public rather than thinking it was her own fault.

Martha, on the other hand, is a young woman who has run away from her family. The little we discover about her past is that she drank alcohol for a time and her father abandoned her (Martha Marcy May Marlene, 2011). Most of Martha's identity, as revealed to the audience, is moulded by her time within the cult. This means that her character is less specific than Michèle, which allows her to represent a broader experience of the systematic rape of women. She represents all the young women there, who end up in that situation because they are vulnerable and lost, so are taken advantage of. The effect of structuring the film to alternate between the present (as she runs away from the cult and stays with her sister) and flashbacks to her time spent there is to emphasise how those experiences have impacted upon her. For example, we are shown that the group would swim naked together but when Martha swims naked in the resident's lake at her sister Lucy's holiday house, Lucy chastises her: "What is wrong with you? ... We don't do that kind of thing." The cult also perpetuates the idea that sex is functional and that to be chosen by Patrick, their leader, is "so lucky". After a new girl is 'chosen', one of the others will sit with her and reassure her, telling her it's "a good thing", forcing assimilation through the culture. Eventually, Martha – or Marcy May, as she is renamed by Patrick – performs this duty, showing she has convinced herself of the mindset.

The environment Martha is surrounded by is very cut off from the rest of the world; the opening shots of the film show the quiet, isolated, self-sufficient setup of their lodgings (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Martha Marcy May Marlene, 2011. Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox.

They have one landline phone, don't use technology, and have their own hierarchy where the men eat first. Their isolation allows them freedom from the rules of the real world. There's still part of Martha that knows that this way of life is not

right; that's what drives her to run away, and what stops her telling Lucy what happened as she knows Lucy will be shocked, or at least won't understand why she stayed so long. However, she does absorb the values which suit her; when Ted, Lucy's husband, asks her if she's looking for a job, Martha tries to explain the cult's work ethic – "people should just exist... It's not your fault but you learned that success is measured by money and possessions. It's just not the right way to live." The simplicity of that way of life appeals to Martha in her young, scared state to the extent that she suffered abuse in order to partake.

Michèle is much more immersed in the real world, which makes it much easier for her to react with conviction when she is in danger. The attack itself takes place in her otherwise empty house. When she opens the door to let her cat in, her attacker grabs the door and forces his way into both her home and her body. It's a very personal, calculated attack and is carried out with brute force, unlike Martha's which is given the guise of affection. Both situations are experienced by many women in reality, but Michèle's is closer to the media-perpetuated view of rape – unpredictable and violent. This perception may be true of a number of reported cases, but many more go unreported, often when committed by someone known to the victim due to the inclination towards assimilation.

The textual situation is not the only factor in sensitively portraying sexual abuse. The filmmakers' choices in filming the scene say a lot about their perceptions of the characters and their

predicament, and each element – mise en scene, framing, diegetic sound, soundtrack – influences how the audience will interpret the scene.

In *Elle*, we hear the event before seeing it. It opens the film, throwing the audience in at the deep end as a warning that this is what this film is about: if you can't handle it now, it's probably not for you. The orchestral strings of the opening credits are cut off by the shattering of glass and Michèle's pained cries. All sound remains purely diegetic until her attacker leaves. This gives the audience a visceral idea of what Michèle experiences. The first image we see is her cat looking on, apathetic, then leaving: Michèle is truly on her own. We see the attacker over Michèle in a wide shot (Figure 2): distant and observational, seeing as the cat would have seen. This is our introduction to Michèle, as a victim, but this perception is soon subverted as we watch her continuation of life. The wide framing also reflects the out-of-body experience recalled by many victims, the brain's way of distancing itself from the intensity of the fear and shock of the situation. Half the frame is filled with the event, the other with the wall and doorframe through which we are observing, a voyeuristic implication but utilised to make the audience unwitting observers rather than peeping toms. We see only the aftermath, none of the act itself, giving Michèle some privacy even from the audience.



Figure 3: *Elle*, 2016. Courtesy of Lionsgate



Figure 2: *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, 2011. Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox

Martha's experience of rape comes later in the runtime of *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, and once we are reasonably acquainted with Martha. The framing is a mid-shot of Martha lying face-down on a bed, seemingly asleep at first. All the audience sees of the act is Martha's motions – similarly to *Elle*, the character is given the dignity of their reaction being the focus rather than biological details. We are shown enough to know what is happening. The only audible sounds are, again, the victim's noises of pain, here seen with the screwing up of her face and fists (Figure 3).

Both films have more than one scene where the protagonist is raped, but they differ in their purpose; the second of two scenes in *Martha Marcy May Marlene* is much the same as the first, showing her continued submission to Patrick. *Elle*, on the other hand, complicates the situation – at first, we are shown the same incident with varying outcomes: Michèle's fantasies of overcoming her attacker. The second real-time attack takes place in her house again and Michèle is fully equipped to defend herself, managing to pull the mask from her attacker and discover who he is. She has been preparing for this moment, and the satisfaction of her getting the better of a physically imposing attacker is dramatically enhanced by the reveal that the attacker is her neighbour, Patrick. Our involvement with Michèle as a character means

we see more of the attack at this point, and it is shot as an action sequence. The third encounter Michèle has is initiated by her. It's the low-point of the film; she knows Patrick is her attacker, enters his house of her own accord, engages him in suggestive behaviour and willingly goes to his basement. Her lust and selfishness allows her to convince herself that it's worth endangering herself to be intimate with him, and so when she shows signs of enjoying herself and Patrick tells her, "It doesn't work like that. Not for me", she engages him in violence, endangering herself further so that she can fulfil her fantasy. This is when it is most difficult to watch as Michèle is taking actions directly against society's morals and it is initially hard to understand why she is doing it. However, it does act as a turning point, triggering her into redemption. It is the point when Michèle realises how low she has sunk and resolves to turn her life around.

Michèle's journey is ultimately a positive one. She learns from her experiences with Patrick, her affair with her best friend's husband, her turbulent relationships with her ex-husband and her son. Accepting responsibility by admitting her trespasses to her friend and fixing her relationship with her son acts as a cleanse and she is able to rebuild her life. Without this redemption, Michèle – a character who is not universally likeable, but who is compelling because of her drive and complexity – would leave the audience disappointed and hopeless. By overcoming her flaws, and her attacker, she shows that survival and recovery are possible.

Martha, in contrast, sinks gradually into paranoia and self-destruction endlessly. On repeat viewing of the film, it becomes clear that the things that trigger her fear – the sound of pinecones falling on the roof, a familiar face at a party, the man running across the road on the way to the hospital – are never confirmed or denied as what she suspects them to be. The cult could be tracking her down, but it could all be her mind jumping to conclusions. This boils down the core purpose of the film: to show the damage such groups can do to people's minds. Martha never recovers, as far as we see, and the final shot is bleak: she sits in the back of the car, isolated, on her way to a mental hospital, about to be abandoned by the only family she has left and pursued, physically or mentally, by an organisation she fears. This inescapable fear is suffered by so many victims of rape, with the majority having little or no change to their recovery from a month after the event (Resick and Schnicke, 1996). Durkin utilises *Martha Marcy May Marlene* to immerse the audience in that mindset and understand how such victims feel. Even the title is focussed on her, with the different stages of her indoctrination represented through her change in name.

Paul Verhoeven has a far less empathetic purpose in making *Elle* – 'provocative' is the word most commonly used in reviews, and provocation drives the film. The title, French for 'she', indicates its interest in exploring feminine identity and stereotypes. Its British trailer consisted of images and music only, with a heavy emphasis on sexuality and the male gaze. With such topics in constant discussion, it drew audiences in by displaying its current-ness. As challenging as Michèle can be, she suits the film's purpose perfectly and makes audiences think about their preconceptions of rape victims and the innocent personality inherently associated.

Elle and *Martha Marcy May Marlene* are two excellent examples of films featuring female protagonists recovering from rape who are complex, and representative of evidenced responses to sexual trauma. Although the films have different outlooks and purposes, this only goes in their favour; every victim reacts differently in one way or another, but these films make significant contributions to the representation of these responses on screen. Michèle is a strong-willed personality who accommodates her attack to her perception of the world and ultimately confronts her flaws and rebuilds her life following involvement with her attacker. Martha is vulnerable and impressionable,

easily taken in by the ideals of a cult who systematically rape her and the other girls drawn in and though Martha escapes the cult, she is never able to overcome what she experienced.

This study is limited by only considering textual and filmmaking elements to evaluate the success of the portrayal of rape recovery, and has not delved into audience reception of the films, especially the views of victims dealing with such experiences themselves. This could be an avenue for further research, as well as investigation into the commercial viability and success of such films compared to their social importance.

A key thing I have learnt from this project is that there is no way to present every variation of an issue in one character. There are endless situations and endless responses to trauma, all of which depends on who the victim is and what they have experienced. In both the films I studied, rape was only a small part of what shaped the protagonists. However, it is important to keep in mind that such traumas do have a large impact on victims.

There also came a point where I felt that the trauma had to be the focus of my script otherwise my protagonist would be inaccessible to the audience. It has such an impact on my protagonist and as it takes place in the past, it needs to be revealed to the audience at some point or we will not understand her motivations. Words are also less impactful than images, and a visual depiction where the filmmaker is in control of the tone of the scene means there is less room for fantasy and fetishisation on the part of the audience than if it were spoken about, as discussed by Horeck (2013, p.3).

Triggers and paranoia are present in both films, common effects from being a victim of rape. This is something which I worked throughout my script – they can result in an apparent preoccupation of the victim and can be the first clue to an outsider that something is wrong.

I also carried over the desire for secrecy from the films I studied – Michèle does not wish to tell the police, with justification from past experiences with them in the case of her father, and only tells her friends when she thinks she could be in danger of further victimisation by the perpetrator. Martha never tells her sister the extent of what happened out of shame and fear, both of what she has done and what she 'let happen' to her.

In my interviews with writers, one of the questions I asked was how to approach writing about a sensitive subject with which you have no personal experience. The overwhelming response was: RESEARCH. The more I researched psychological and sociological attitudes towards rape and experiences of victims, the more I understood the topic. It helped me to go from a state of mind where I felt I had no right to write a story featuring a rape victim, to a confidence on the topic and in my ability to accurately and sensitively portray the story.

By focusing on one project for the whole 8 weeks, I learnt a lot about how I work. I tried different scheduling methods, working in different spaces and discovered that I am best motivated if I completed a task before lunchtime, otherwise I lack motivation the rest of the day. Meeting weekly with Maxine gave me clear deadlines and forced me to step back and look at what was working and not working in my script more broadly. It helped me to challenge my instinct that everything I do needs to be 'right' the first time around, and gave me a safe space to discuss ideas.

This funding has also enabled me to gain insight and contacts in the industry; I have attended and participated in three international academic conferences, asking questions and engaging with attendees during networking breaks. The most recent of these was WomenBeing, 11th October 2017, which focused on gender studies across a variety of disciplines. I hope to present my research there next year.

I have built my network through my interviews, too; I was fortunate enough to interview prominent screenwriter Lisa Holdsworth in person, and she is willing to give feedback on my script once a suitable draft is completed. She is also involved in the Writer's Guild of Great Britain, and I will keep in touch and get involved in their events over the next two years which I plan to spend studying a Masters in Leeds where Lisa is located. I also interviewed via email Jimmy McGovern, who took great interest in my research and who I aim to meet in person to discuss it.

Maxine introduced me to a local screenwriter's guild and I am now a member, meeting fortnightly to discuss our latest writing and ideas. It helps me to keep producing work and both give and receive feedback from a group of experienced writers.

I also discussed my research in a 10-minute radio interview for Manx Radio as part of the coverage of their annual film festival. I interviewed some Manx writers and directors for my project and have a strong network on the Isle of Man, and have since been commissioned to produce testimonial videos for the Arts Council.

I will be continuing my research in a series of blog posts conducted as part of my final year. This may continue beyond the assessment as I aim to learn more and stay up-to-date with the development of the depiction of rape recovery in the film and television industry. This project has been very insightful for me and has given me a great advantage heading into the world of work and further study.

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