

TV Must Change!!

Reducing Toxic Sexual Depictions in Pop Media

Whether during “Netflix and Chill” or a debrief after a long day at work, Canadians spend an average of over 30 hours watching both television and movies each week¹. While most watch for entertainment purposes, many do not realize the subverted messages that both television shows and movies are conveying. Certain situations that are shown, depict an offense but are often portrayed in a way that makes us forget that it is actually criminal. Rather than normalizing and romanticizing sexual assault and harassment, television shows and movies must alter the way certain characters act to instead condemn actions of a criminal sexual nature.

Television shows and movies have chosen to romanticize sexual assault rather than condemn it, which causes viewers to often overlook the true nature of the character’s actions. Section 265 of the Criminal Code defines assault as “without the consent of another person intentionally to

¹ Andrew Ryan, “30 hours a week and then some: When did Canada become a nation of TV-watching zombies?”, *Globe and Mail* (2018 May 11) <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/30-hours-a-week-and-then-some-when-did-canada-become-a-nation-of-tv-watching-zombies/article11558785/> [perma.cc/3BB4-VAL5].

that other person directly” where one attempts or threatens by an act or gesture or indirectly or causes one to believe he has the ability². Assault is considered sexual assault when it becomes sexual in nature and is done without consent. While sexual assault is prevalent in many forms of entertainment, most viewers do not even recognize that it is taking place. As an example, while an audience is mesmerized by the sci-fi theatrics of *Blade Runner*, audience members neglect to realize that Deckard and Rachael’s romantic relationship began with sexual assault. The movie pans out and shows that while in Deckard’s home, he leans in to kiss Rachael who immediately pulls away and darts towards the door. Instead of letting her leave, Deckard becomes violent, pushes her onto the door and forces her to kiss him. Upon further analysis it seems that the producers intentionally changed the background music from foreboding to romantic forcing viewers to simultaneously change their perceptions and concluding that Rachael wanted to be kissed. By definition outlined in the *Criminal Code*, Deckard is liable for sexual assault as he intentionally applied force

² *Criminal Code*, RSC 1985, c. C-46, s. 265.

without Rachel's consent and the act was sexual in nature. In reality, instead of being rewarded with a new girlfriend, his only reward should have been up to ten years in prison.

In addition to the love story in *Blade Runner*, *16 Candles* is a movie about a boy who meets a girl during a birthday gone wrong. While their relationship grows, their actions provide a warped sense of what constitutes consent. Consent is defined in Canada's *Criminal Code* in s. 273.1(1), as the voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity in question³. The law focuses on what the person was thinking and feeling at the time of the sexual activity. Touching individuals in a sexual manner is only lawful if a person through their words, communicated consent. Put simply, the law states that a person can only consent for themselves and one must always be in a position to give consent meaning that a person must be awake, conscious, and sober enough to make a clear decision. People in positions of trust, power or authority cannot abuse their position to get sexual activity. In *16 Candles*, Caroline, the popular girl in school, is too drunk to understand her surroundings and needs to go home. Instead

³ *Ibid* at 273.1(1)

of protecting her, Ryan, the protagonist sends her home with a stranger and remarks “have fun with her”. Viewers later find out that she was sexually assaulted. Once again, the perpetrator gets away with the crime, and Ryan, who one could argue is an accessory to the crime, is rewarded with a relationship. The underlining message sent to viewers is that consent is implied when one is unable to say otherwise. From a very young age, children and teens are bombarded with the slogan ‘no means no’ and ‘anything but yes means no’, however, what is one supposed to believe when TV and movies often distort reality?

Disney films, specifically marketed towards children, often shape dreams of becoming beautiful princesses and princes. However, many parents are unaware of the messages their young children receive from these Disney character role models. Angelina Jolie, after starring in the film *Maleficent*, has outwardly stated that the storyline is a metaphor for rape. The scene in question is where Stefan drugs Maleficent and removes Maleficent’s wings, so she is unable to escape. While most children may be too young to understand this metaphor, it is the lack of understanding that prevents them from realizing that certain actions are criminal offenses.

Even though Disney condemned the character of Stefan with death, one could argue that it also distorts the proportionality of punishment for sexual offenses. Rather than killing him, locking him up in Rapunzel's tower would have conveyed the proper message.

While the concept of sexual assault is usually between humans, it is a criminal offense to engage in bestiality, sexual intercourse with an animal. The series Black Mirror is considered ground breaking as it changes the way individuals interact with cell phones and social media. In the first episode, 'National Anthem', a princess is kidnapped, and her release is dependant upon the president having sex with a pig on live television. Rather than condemning the President, many viewers empathize with him as he must engage in an embarrassing and ridiculous act on live television. What most do not understand is that he is succumbing to the demands of a criminal offense by completing another criminal offense. The TV show normalizes bestiality because once again the President is not punished but rather compensated for his actions when the princess is released. If Donald Trump, the current President of the United States, had committed the same act, he would be spending 14 years in the 'big house' rather than the

White House. Due to the vulnerability and nescience of today's society, one would not be surprised if naïve teenagers replaced the 'tide pod challenge' with 'the national anthem challenge'.

Much needs to be done about the portrayal of sexual assault in the media. One step towards remedying the rampant mis messaging in movies and television has been the creation and advancement of the #METOO movement. While the movement began much earlier, it's crescendo occurred when high profile celebrity silence breakers such as Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd accused Harvey Weinstein in 2017 of sexual assault. These women have been credited with the #METOO movement becoming a worldwide phenomenon. According to the #METOO website, the purpose of the movement is to give people a voice and seek a cultural transformation by encouraging millions of people to speak out about sexual violence and harassment⁴. In addition to speaking out against assault and harassment in movies, there have been accusations against

⁴ Metoomvmt, "About" (2018), online: *me too* <<https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>> [perma.cc/XX94-VW5W]

those who produce and star in the movies themselves including Morgan Freeman and Sylvester Stallone.

Society today is very dependent on various forms of media for entertainment as well as for news. Often, these various outlets also supply information that is deemed factual and all knowing. Consequently, viewers are unable to decipher what actions are acceptable and what are criminal. Although reform has commenced, television must now decide whether to preserve its ways in order to attract viewers, or change their storylines which would diminish from the drama.

Table of Authorities

Legislation

Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c. C-46.

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