Video Review of 'The Line' and 'Asking For It: The Ethics and Erotics of Sexual Consent'

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I regularly teach about sexual assault and rape in several of my undergraduate classes. While this is a difficult subject to teach on many levels, I have found that the topic of consent is a particularly thorny issue. For the most part, my students seem quick to deem particular types of rape—those in which it seems clear that the victim did not give consent—wrong and problematic. Thus, they are most sympathetic to victims of assaults who are committed by people the victims do not know, that involve the use of weapons and/or physical violence, and in which the victims do not engage in any behavior that might taint their credibility (e.g., dressing provocatively, drinking, or doing drugs). However, students often withdraw their sympathy and delve into victim blaming when discussing situations in which they perceive women’s behavior and actions make them less believable and more culpable.

The Line and Asking for It: The Ethics and Erotics of Sexual Consent are two films that address precisely these types of issues surrounding sex, consent, and assault, albeit in very different manners. The Line, produced by Nancy Schwartzman, is an autobiographical documentary about a date rape she experienced while living in Jerusalem. Asking for It features Dr. Harry Brod, a professor of philosophy and humanities at the University of Northern Iowa and leader in the profeminist men’s movement, delivering a 35-minute lecture to students about what he calls the “ethics” and “erotics” of sexual consent. While both films address a number of important matters, the contrast between the approaches of the two could not be greater.


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DOI: 10.1177/0092055X11420398

In The Line, with Schwartzman narrating, we learn that one night when she was very lonely after her boyfriend broke up with her, she flirted with a man she knew from work while at a party. She went home with him, where they had several drinks and ended up having sex in his bedroom. However, in the middle of their encounter and without warning, the man flipped Schwartzman over and sodomized her while she screamed and cried. Afterward he told her that he is “always doing bad things” and showed her pictures of his son. Several days after this incident, Schwartzman quit her job and moved back to New York, where she struggled to make sense of the ordeal.

Much of the film focuses on Schwartzman’s conversations with various stakeholders whose voices help to shape dominant cultural conversations surrounding sexual assault in the United States. At one point we hear clips of different voices, presumably representing some of Schwartzman’s friends and acquaintances, reacting to her story. All seem to question whether her encounter actually constitutes assault. One male voice tells her, “Just because it hurts doesn’t mean it was force.” Another female friend tells her, “I don’t know what to think. I’ve had a lot of those kinds of situations, too, but they weren’t rape.” Still another person reminds Schwartzman that she and her attacker were both drinking, insinuating that this may have affected Schwartzman’s understanding of the situation. We also watch as Schwartzman visits a lawyer who tells her that in sexual assault cases, the burden of proof always rests with the victim. When Schwartzman asks the lawyer, a woman, if she would go to the police if faced with a similar situation, the lawyer answers “No” because she does not think the criminal justice system really solves anything in these types of cases.

The most useful conversations that Schwartzman has are with an attorney who specializes in sexual assault cases and with Don McPherson, a former National Football League quarterback turned social activist who regularly speaks at college campuses about gendered violence and masculinity. The sexual assault attorney tells her that our jury system “permits a rape-prone society” because it is impossible to have 12 people unravel what happened in a he said/she said assault scenario when they were not there. Importantly, the
attorney states that if a woman has done anything to make herself less than a “perfect” victim (such as drinking, flirting, and/or having sex with her assaulter previously) then she will not have a successful prosecution. The attorney assures Schwartzman that just because a woman consents to one form of sexual activity with a person does not mean she is consenting to all other forms of sexual activity with that person. In a similar vein, McPherson tells Schwartzman that we raise women to survive in a rape culture but we do nothing to talk to men about not raping. The consequence of this is that we blame women when they are sexually assaulted.

A unique perspective that Schwartzman solicits is from sex workers working at a brothel in Nevada—in Schwartzman’s words, women who are “professional negotiators” and agree on everything they are willing to do sexually before they get started. Schwartzman learns that even some of these women have trouble drawing clear sexual boundaries. While speaking with one of the women at the brothel, Schwartzman shares that she blames herself for her assault. She says that her attacker made an interesting point in that they did many things without asking each other, so why was anal penetration different? The sex worker tells her that many sexual acts (e.g., kissing and fondling) are fairly commonly accepted behaviors, but anal penetration is not.

Still another voice we are introduced to is that of Schwartzman’s assaulter. In one of the final scenes of the film, Schwartzman returns to Jerusalem to confront her attacker; they meet at a coffee shop while she is wired with a hidden camera. He assures her that he is not a bad person; he tells her that they were making really “hot love” the night they were together, and everything that occurred happened out of passion and free will. She ends up telling him that he raped her. Surprisingly, we do not see his response. Schwartzman, however, does state that she did not get any answers from him but felt stronger having confronted him. She hopes he will think twice about his actions in future sexual encounters.

A useful strategy Schwartzman uses in her film is to contrast her experiences with those of a friend of hers who recently had been raped by a stranger in New York. Schwartzman’s friend’s case is presented as that of a “perfect victim,” and we learn that her rapist was sentenced to more than 20 years in prison. At the end of the film, Schwartzman states that most cases of sexual abuse fall somewhere between the experiences of her friend and her own. She asks, “How do we make sure we respect the line?”

Asking for It takes a very different approach in addressing the same issue of sexual consent. The film opens with Dr. Harry Brod at his lectern, posing several questions to the students in his audience about whether they believe there are any situations wherein yes does not really mean yes and no does not really mean no. He also asks them to share their opinions about what the default mode should be in any situation where there is not a clear yes or no given. In such circumstances, should we assume a green light or a red light? What should the ethical standard or norm of interactions be? Brod then suggests that our ethical standard should center on the notion that the only thing that means yes is a clear yes. The absence of no should never be taken to mean yes. Brod refers to this idea as the “affirmative consent standard.” He does an excellent job making clear the importance of this practice when he argues that if you do not endorse the affirmative consent standard, then you are endorsing a world in which other people have right of access to your body without expressively asking your permission to have that access. This is a very powerful message.

Brod then discusses the importance of explicit verbal consent and why it is problematic to rely on body language as an indicator of consent, given that it can too easily be misinterpreted. He employs the idea of “epistemological responsibility” and argues that a person who initiates sexual activity has an epistemological responsibility to know that the person did obtain explicit consent. At this point, he begins to use gendered language when referring to hypothetical sexual encounters, explaining that the majority of sexual assault cases involve a male perpetrator and a female victim. He argues that men should always be able to answer the question of what they, themselves, did to obtain consent during a sexual encounter, stating, “If you can’t answer the question of what you did to obtain consent then there is a problem.”

Perhaps Brod’s most striking argument is that anti-sexual assault messages are not antiseex messages (as they are often portrayed and perceived)
but actually serve to promote eroticism. He says that heterosexual young men may be surprised to find that if they communicate to their female partners that they will not engage in any sexual behaviors without receiving verbal consent, their partners may feel safe enough to more freely express themselves sexually (although he warns the men to be prepared not to be believed at first, given that this asks women to violate the safety practices that they have had to learn in this society). He is quick to clarify that he does not promote the affirmative consent standard simply because it may lead to “hotter sex,” but he does think it is a prosex practice because it promotes safety in erotic situations.

Brod ends his lecture by discussing the role of alcohol and drugs in sexual encounters. He tells the students that if they have initiated sexual activity when they were too drunk or high to know if they obtained consent, then they have not been responsible and safe sexual partners, and they cannot honestly say that they know they have not raped or sexually assaulted someone. This is a potent claim that, judging by the camera shot of the students in the audience, seems to be quite effective. His final message to the students is that men have an obligation to other men to stop them when they see them going off drunk with women for the purposes of having sexual encounters. He says that men would not want their friends, peers, teammates, and so forth to be unable to answer the question the next morning of whether or not they had raped or assaulted someone. Brod acknowledges that this will require a change in the culture of masculinity but argues that it is certainly doable.

Throughout his lecture, Brod employs a number of useful analogies to help illuminate his points. For example, when discussing the importance of adopting the affirmative consent standard, he uses a driving analogy. He states that the right of way is not something you automatically have as a driver but instead is something another driver must give to you. If the other driver does not give you the right of way, you simply do not have it, no matter what you believe you are entitled to. Brod says that consent functions in the same manner—you have consent only when it is explicitly verbally communicated to you. If the other person does not give you consent then you unequivocally do not have it.

Asking for It could not be more different stylistically from The Line. While Professor Brod does an excellent job laying out his argument and clarifying some of the philosophical terminology that he uses, Asking for It is a much drier and less visually appealing film than The Line. The camera primarily focuses on Brod at his lectern; the only break from this involves fairly brief cuts to students sitting in the audience. Some students might have a difficult time staying engaged during the entire film. In contrast, The Line is overly artsy and abstract. I found Schwartzman’s stringing together of film clips, the use of unidentified voice-overs, and the nonlinear style in which she tells her story somewhat distracting. For example, as previously noted, at one point in the film we hear sound clips that presumably characterize reactions Schwartzman received to the story of her assault from friends and acquaintances. There is no introduction to these clips and no context provided. It was only after listening to them in full that I was able to discern what they represented. I think students might have a difficult time understanding to whom these voices belong.

Another major critique I have of The Line is that we do not actually learn all of the details of Schwartzman’s assault until more than halfway into the film. Up until that point, we know that she believes she was sexually violated in some way, but it is not clear exactly what happened. Schwartzman’s questioning and blaming of herself, her friends’ responses, and her discussions with the two lawyers and the gender activist all take place before we learn about what transpired. This dilutes the power of the important messages that Schwartzman is attempting to convey in the first half of the film. The context of what happened to her is important to understand at the beginning of the film as it could serve as better framing for her actions and conversations. A way to address this issue if showing the film to students would be to tell them about what happened to Schwartzman before even starting the film. It might even be useful to pause the film at different points to check in with students about their perceptions and understandings of whose viewpoint the film is presenting.

The two films also seem aimed to different audiences. The Line is likely better geared to young women who might be questioning whether a particular sexual encounter they have had
constitutes assault. Asking for It, in contrast, is an excellent film to bring men into the conversation. As a graying professor, Brod lacks the ability to connect to young men on a peer level like the men featured in other popular academic films addressing issues of masculinity and sexuality (e.g., Jackson Katz in Tough Guise and Byron Hurt in Beyond Beats and Rhymes). However, Brod comes off as wise, nonjudgmental, and almost fatherly when giving advice to the male students in his audience. The way in which he sets up his line of argument about the importance of adopting an affirmative consent standard would make it very difficult, I think, for anyone not to seriously consider what he is advocating.

Ultimately, both films address important issues surrounding sexual boundaries, ethics, and issues of consent, and both men and women would benefit from viewing either of these films. Acquaintance rape is a serious issue on college campuses, yet students often misperceive the issues surrounding this problem. Both of these films provide an excellent means of introducing these topics into a course and would no doubt spark lively and intense discussion among students. Instructors might actually want to use both films in their courses, particularly if they include a longer unit on sexual assault. I would recommend showing The Line first, as it helps to define the issue at hand and raises some important questions (e.g., what constitutes sexual assault? What qualifies as consent? Why are some rape victims taken more seriously than others?). Asking for It then could be used to help answer some of these questions, particularly the issue of what we should use as a cultural norm or standard for consent. The film provides some concrete solutions and a way to move forward. Particularly refreshing is Brod’s insistence that men’s actions are an important part of addressing the problem of acquaintance rape.

Note a final word of caution: Both films may bring up emotional issues for students who either have been victimized sexually or wonder if they ever have sexually assaulted anyone. I would recommend both warning students about the content of these videos before showing them (particularly The Line, which uses much more graphic and sexually explicit language and imagery) and having resources on hand to provide to students if necessary (e.g., contact information for a local rape crisis center or counseling center on campus).


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DOI: 10.1177/0092055X11420389

The emergence of “megamalls,” vast commercial spaces dedicated to support the national ritual of shopping, has fed America’s seemingly insatiable appetite to consume and have transformed the American landscape in the process. Coupled with the big-box-style chain development that drives them, these massive and self-contained “cathedrals of consumption” (Ritzer 1999) have become ground zero in the grassroots struggle for community identity, vitality, and autonomy in locations across the country.

Megamall, a documentary film about “money, power, and politics in the age of sprawl,” examines this phenomenon as a flashpoint for community conflict. The film tells the story of David versus Goliath: a small community seeking to protect its mom-and-pop businesses and unique neighborhood feel from out-of-town developers who see the community for its “untapped” potential for expansive commercial development. Out of this struggle of people versus profits, a grassroots movement to protect the town’s quality of life emerges to fend off a powerful and well-organized corporate campaign to win the hearts (and wallets) of local residents.

Megamall begins by introducing the community and people of Nyack, a collection of small hamlets on the Hudson River in Rockland County, New York. The documentary is set primarily in the late 1980s to late 1990s and narrates the development struggles of residents living in the small suburban village. Although only 12 miles north of Manhattan, the quaint, sleepy town was home to approximately 6,500 residents and maintained a largely autonomous existence, including a vibrant historic downtown district filled with independent shops, cafes, and restaurants.