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Rape Education Videos: Presenting Mean Women Instead of Dangerous Men

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Abstract: This paper examines two ways to use visual images while teaching about sexual violence. We first present and critique the conventional approach, which employs images of men doing violence to women. We then discuss our approach, which employs images of women confronting and violently attacking men. We discuss our success in using these images in our rape prevention lectures over the past three years. Our analysis of students' reactions to the presentations reveals that showing images of aggressive women radically destabilizes men's sense of physical power over women.

As University Instructors committed to education for rape prevention, we offer a critique of conventional approaches to this topic, which usually employ images of women as helpless victims of dangerous¹ men. We argue that these "dangerous men" videos inadvertently perpetuate the very myths that support rape culture because they fail to offer a fantasy of women's resistance. In doing so, they naturalize both men's physical power to rape and women's vulnerability. In effect, they scare women too much and men not enough. As an alternative to this approach, for the past three years, we

¹ Both the analysis and the prevalence of male-on-female rape differ from those of male-on-male rape. Like conventional approaches to rape education, this concerns the former. Also like those conventional approaches, our approach rests on research which shows that in general, men are culturally and legally permitted to wreak havoc on women's bodies in ways that women either do not attempt or cannot do with impunity. We regard research which strips data on violent acts of their context and uses them to claim that women and men are equally dangerous (e.g., Strauss and Gelles 1990) as less credible than other research (see Bobash et al. 1992).

lectured on sexual violence to college undergraduates at a large western university, using a "mean women" video. We produced this tape by splicing together scenes from popular movies of women confronting, beating, and killing men. Together in one video these images offer a powerful and provocative new fantasy for men and women in which women are not "nice girls" and men get away with nothing. In this paper, we review traditional approaches to rape education, present the theory behind our critique and subsequent development of an alternative, describe the Mean Women video, interpret students' re-actions (collected in undergraduate courses and rape awareness programs), and discuss the possible consequences of the new fantasy as a part of rape education/prevention programs.

"DANGEROUS MEN"

Rape educators who show videos often use examples of the exploitation of women in popular culture. They aim to convince viewers both that women are horribly abused and that such images legitimate the abuse by representing as sexy the violence that many men, but few women, seek in their sex lives. These videos paint a picture of men as dangerous and women as victims with much to fear. Because many men do attack women, women in fact have much to fear and loathe (Dworkin 1981; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987; MacKinnon 1989; Russell 1984). We do not dispute the theoretical or political commitments of feminists such as MacKinnon and Dworkin; many rape educators, including us, rely on their perspectives. Nor do we dispute the argument that images which depict women enjoying rape must be criticized for their tendency to support a popular sense of male hetero-sexual entitlement. Rather, we take issue with the following assumptions, which seem to underlie the repeated showing of "dangerous men" videos: that images of men's eroticized brutality, when decon-

structed by the educator, will help validate women's experiences and make men feel guilty enough to stop rape and to support feminism; that alternative images from which one could construct a new fantasy about male-female relations do not exist in popular culture; that establishing females as victims and as morally superior is the route to "empowerment"; and that men's ability to rape does not depend on the popular fantasy of their physical power.

The use of rape images and images depicting women as sexual objects in general was popularized in the late 1970s by Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media (WAVPM). They claimed a causal connection between popular representations of eroticized images of sexual violence and actual incidents of it (Russell and Lederer 1980). WAVPM stated in effect, that the popular fantasy in which men sexually degrade women contributes appreciably to the large-scale degradation of women in our society.

Take Back the Night events and rape awareness education began to incorporate these images in order to raise awareness of the abuse of women by men. Indeed, a recent Take Back the Night march at our own campus ended with a video of brutal rape scenes strung together from various Hollywood movies. Many educators employ their own homemade "dangerous men" videos, and *Killing Us Softly* (Kilbourne, Vitagliano, and Stallone 1979), its sequel *Still Killing Us Softly* (Kilbourne and Lazarus 1987), and the Canadian production *Not a Love Story* (Klein and Henaut 1981) are popular. The newest and perhaps most widely used video is Sut Jhally's (1990) *Dreamworlds: Desire/Sex/ Power in Rock Video*. Hence we focus on *Dreamworlds* as an example of the "dangerous men" approach.

Dreamworlds consists of clips from rock music videos in which women are depicted as scantily clad objects who always enjoy sexual attention from the men in the videos and the viewing audience. *Dreamworlds* attempts to show, as Jhally's narrative explicitly argues, that women in men's "dream-world" always mean "yes" even when they say "no" and that such a popular fantasy has implications, however difficult to specify, for the prevalence of sexual violence. Jhally makes this point by cutting back and forth from rock music videos to the gang-rape scene from the movie *The Accused* (which, unlike the rock videos, presents rape as a harrowing experience), to remind his audience that women actually do not enjoy this treatment from men. The rape scene's soundtrack, which is horrifying by itself, plays repeatedly over the intercutting of the rape with the music video clips.

Dreamworlds was designed to be shocking. Audiences have strong reactions, and women have reported feeling frightened. Four of the women quoted by Jhally say "I don't know if it made me as mad as it scared me" (p.161); "I felt like a victim.... It was rather frightening and numbing" (p. 160); "I felt vulnerable. It was frightening" (p.161); "The video seemed more concerned with scaring me instead of teaching me" (p. 161).

What good does it do a woman to know that a man might rape her, and that MTV helps make him feel better about it? Most women already live with the awareness that they are potential victims of rape, and already are more critical than men of many rape myths (Fonow, Richardson, and Wemmerus 1992:114-15). Whatever they could learn from a critical analysis of sexist patterns in MTV, the point of rape education certainly should not be to terrorize women.

We are not the first to criticize videos such as *Dreamworlds* for confirming women's victimization. Jhally (1994) himself has acknowledged and responded to this charge. In his defense he notes that *Dreamworlds* is meant to disturb audiences with the grotesque, repeated display of women as sex objects. To argue that the grueling experience of watching the video brings about constructive change, Jhally quotes (in both his essay and the brochure promoting the video) a woman who said that she threw

away all her cosmetics after seeing *Dream-worlds* (p.160). Jhally is not alone in emphasizing this approach to rape education. For instance, Gray et al. (1990:217) state explicitly that their goal for rape prevention education programs is to increase women's perceptions of vulnerability and to change women's "risk-taking" behavior.

We do not believe, however, that making women feel responsible for men's interest in raping them is a useful outcome of rape education. Our analysis of rape as a means by which men confirm women's second-class citizenship, and therefore their own greater status, leads us to reject this traditional idea that women both incite rape by being sexually attractive and can stop rape by removing themselves from risk-taking in public or private life. Makeup does not cause rape, and women who have what men want are not the problem.

We believe that women's fear of rape and sense of responsibility for rape are already too great; indeed, women's fear and resulting self-restriction are yet another part of rape culture. Thus we feel that rape education should be directed toward making men reflect on gender inequality, take responsibility for sexual violence, and ensure that the sex they have is consensual. Jhally says he also intended to make men re-examine their sexuality and expectations of women, but his essay and the promotional brochure pay far less attention to the potential impact of the video on men than to its effect on women. Thus we suspect that this particular "dangerous men" approach may do little to unsettle the popular fantasy of superior strength that men bring to their interactions with women. Even if this approach reaches men, it mobilizes them through guilt or empathy for "the weaker sex," not through the kind of respect that prevents men from raping other men.

Our sociological analysis of rape suggests that it arises largely from the fact that women are constructed as a class of humans who do not deserve such respect because they cannot exercise the physical agency characteristic of first-class citizens. We use the *Mean Women* video to supplement a lecture in which we tell our students that rape is both a product of gender inequality and a contributor to that inequality (Brown-miller 1975; MacKinnon 1989:245; see Sanday [1981] for a cross-cultural indication). Specifically, rape arises from the creation of women as a category of persons desirable to men, unable to resist men's sexual advances, and therefore available as objects with which men can satisfy a variety of

desires, including the desire to prove their manhood. This analysis directly challenges a view of rape as based in an unchanging biological destiny².² In her treatise on rape prevention, Marcus describes the situation:

² Though many sociologists of gender construction still tip their theoretical hats to the possibility of a "biological sex" supposedly beyond the reach of cultural construction, we do not believe that biology is destiny in anyway. Humans show remarkable imagination in overcoming unwanted strictures; even Brownmiller (1975), who theorizes a basis for rape in the difference between male and female genitalia, argues that humans must transcend any constraint

A rapist's ability to accost a woman verbally, to demand her attention, and even to attack her physically depends more on how he positions himself relative to her socially than it does on his allegedly superior physical strength. His belief that he has more strength than a woman and that he can use it to rape her merits more analysis than the putative fact of that strength, because that belief often produces as an effect the male power that appears to be rape's cause (1992:390).

A popular belief in men's physical superiority and women's passivity, then, under-lies the general practice of rape.

Marcus offers an instructive distinction between "subject-subject" violence, in which equals in status engage in combat, and violence between women and men, in which the point of the violence against women is to reaffirm that they are incapable of responding: "Rape engenders a sexualized female body defined as a wound, a body excluded from subject-subject violence, from the ability to engage in a fair fight. Rapists do not beat women at the game of violence, but aim to exclude us from playing it altogether"(p . 397). Men are able to initiate assaults because of the collective assurance that women will not fight back as men would. In fact, this cultivated inability to defend bodily boundaries maybe the very basis of women's

attractiveness for heterosexual men (MacKinnon 1989). Women's second-class citizenship is not simply a contributing factor, but part of the motivation for rape. Men assault women as a ritual demonstration of their superiority over a group whose lesser status inheres partly in being unable to defend themselves. Femininity, like youth or immaturity, is defined in part as the inability to protect oneself. Although women and children are protected against assault in many situations by the sympathy of their social superiors and by various formal codes, the frequency with which they are attacked suggests that sympathy and law are insufficient bases for the kind of citizenship that many women want.

"MEAN WOMEN"

Although all rape educators show that standard rape fantasies are contestable "dream-worlds" with terrible consequences, the "dangerous men" approach has become so

impelling the abuse of women, however" natural "it may appear to be. Whereas many people accuse Dworkin and MacKinnon of "essentialism," we understand them to be relentless constructionists. (See, e.g., Dworkin 1974:174-93, 1981:14-15; MacKinnon 1987:117-19, 1989:90-93, 112-14 for their explicit statements about the political construction of sex categories in a system of compulsory heterosexuality.) MacKinnon and Dworkin insist that sexuality is a social construction in a social system of gender inequality and therefore no man's sexuality can ever be pure or free from such power relations.

prevalent, in and out of the classroom, that people often take it for granted and forget that it is a construction. It is a stale story that men rape because of their strength and appetite. Women, according to that logic, suffer because "by nature" they are passive, weak, and deeply considerate of men's feelings. Yet the common images of a rape culture are problematic not only because they represent rape as enjoyable and not really coercive (as traditional rape educators point out), but also because they construct a myth of male physical power and female vulnerability. Standard rape education tries to ex-pose the fantasy of women's enjoyment of vulnerability and male power as sexist, but it does little to challenge the fantasy of women's vulnerability or "rapability." It is precisely this fantasy-that women's size, temperament, or physical ability make them unable to repel assaults with physical force-that the Mean Women video disputes.

We too formerly used "dangerous men" images, including Jhally's Dreamworlds, in hopes of both validating women's feelings of being exploited and making men and women regard their popular culture more skeptically. We found, however, that many women were disturbed, even terrified, by the images, while many men simply sat back and enjoyed the display of eroticized female submission. A man in one audience sighed "Ooh baby" when we showed slides of violent pornography and similar but subtler advertisements. The enterprise seemed counterproductive in many ways; thus we were motivated to create a stirring, powerful fantasy that would simultaneously unsettle men and bring a sense of pleasure and validation to women.

By "fantasy" we mean a perception of possibility leading not to any specific acts, but rather to a range of related perceptions and behaviors. The point of any fantasy is not so much that people immediately engage in the specific behaviors depicted therein (there is no reliable evidence that people do this) as that they manage their behavior with the depicted possibilities in mind. A man's fantasy of his own physical power, for instance, may never propel him into physical combat, but instead may simply add to the confidence with which he engages in other aggressive behaviors. Similarly, a predominant cultural fantasy that women love nonconsensual sex may inform a man's view that his date "really wants it." We are critical of rape fantasies in the media not because we think men see those images and then imitate them directly, but rather because we think such fantasies fuel in men a sense of sexual entitlement and imperceptiveness toward women. Thus both "dangerous men" videos and our "mean women" video offer sets of assumptions about male and female natures, each of which can shape behavior in complex ways. They differ mainly in that one is a male dreamworld and the other is a male nightmare.

Our use of images of aggressive women as an alternative rape education strategy was motivated by our concern that female students have been denied the pleasure and reassurance which they could find in images of themselves as powerful. (Male students can enjoy such images every day, even when they are being educated about sexual

violence.) We believe that the hegemony of the "dangerous men" image is part of the reproduction of rape culture. If men were routinely

exposed to a fantasy in which sexual imposition and assault brought them violent consequences rather than affection and esteem, then the privileged ignorance with which so many of them rape-an ignorance cultivated by their collective dream-world might turn into a healthy respect born of caution. Thus, in absorbing a fantasy of women's mean, angry, and sometimes self-defensive violence, men would understand women as potential agents of physical force rather than as boundariless playthings who enjoy forced sex.

The "mean women" approach is de-signed to challenge as bluntly as possible the aspect of women's second class citizenship which disallows their verbal and physical aggression. By promoting as a fantasy the ideal of such aggression, we enable women and men in the classroom both to see how limited their views of women's and men's abilities have been and to envision very different possibilities. In Marcus's terms, we hope that "we can begin to imagine the female body as subject to change, as a potential agent of violence and object of fear. Conversely, we do not have to imagine the penis as an indestructible weapon which cannot help but rape..." (1992:400). Because, as Marcus (1992:396-97) suggests, "directed physical action is as significant a criterion of humanity in our culture as words are," any move toward presenting women as agents of such action should appreciably increase men's respect toward women.

In any treatment of the "dangerous men" fantasy as a "reality," of which peoples imply ought to be made more "aware" through education, the educator risks establishing in students' minds a bedrock myth of rape culture and precluding any vision of alternative futures other than that in which men benevolently restrain themselves toward "the weaker sex." Mean Women is designed to expose this reification of sex difference. This video is not a prescription for female behavior, nor is it a statement that "all men" are violent or need a good beating; rather, it is a consequential fantasy about male-female relations. Our approach is designed to counter the popular and essentialist attributions of the "unstoppable attacker" role to men and the "disempowered victim" role to women. Men who are accustomed to viewing women in this way may be shocked into a different realization by absorbing the "mean women" fantasy. By presenting images of women's violence toward men, we provide an alternative to the "dangerous men" fantasy. We hope this alternative will make men too respectful of women to commit rape rather than making women more "responsible" about their appearances, more certain of their powerlessness, or more afraid of men.

THE MEAN WOMEN VIDEO

To construct our alternative fantasy, we strung together scenes we liked from (mostly) contemporary movies. (See the appendix for a list of the movies we used.) We rented home videos from neighborhood video stores and transcribed the desired scenes on to a videotape, which we can screen easily for a class or workshop.

Initially, we featured scenes in which women are clearly "innocent" and defend themselves from obviously unwarranted assaults, but gradually we came to include a few scenes of women doing violence to men with no obvious motive. We did this for two reasons. First, these latter scenes, removed from their context in movies and placed in our Mean Women video, assume (and bolster) the women-against-attackers message. Second, we eventually wanted to include a few female characters who were simply "bad guys" engaged in gratuitous, senseless violence. Such scenes of women's violence throw into sharp relief, and hence enable students to criticize, the far more common gratuitous violence by men in film. Because of the extent to which men in this culture can celebrate male villains and vigilantes, the sight of female villains, especially when fighting patriarchal establishment such as the military, the police or the government, is all the more piquant.

The video opens with women preparing for physical action---chinning, and pumping iron, and cleaning and loading guns. These scenes cut to Louise stopping the rape of Thelma in *Thelma and Louise*. The sight of her gun

appearing below the rapist's chin and the sound of her command, "You let her go, you fuckin' asshole or I'm gonna splatter your ugly face all over this nice car," bring cheers from the women in the audience.

Among the scenes that follow we include a string of quick shots of women beating men with fists, feet, and clubs, which segues into another half-dozen scenes of women shooting men. Interspersed with these are longer scenes in which women verbally confront men who harass or rape them, from movies such as *Blue Steel*, *Switch*, and *Thelma and Louise*. Megan, the cop in *Blue Steel*, arrests her own father for spouse abuse. Students gasp as she resists his bullying with "Shut up, Dad!" The many shots of violence strung together pack a remarkable visceral punch, and the dialogue sandwiched between them provides a narrative context of (at least proto-) feminist entitlement to ethical and physical boundaries.

Toward the end, the machine gun fire pauses for a moment as yet another male character calls yet another woman a "bitch." By this point in the video, viewers can guess what will happen to him; they laugh as Eve, of *Eve of Destruction*, pulls a

machine gun from her coat and blows him away. Finally, the video cuts to the whimpering cop from *Thelma and Louise*, held at gun point by the heroines.

"Please," he sobs, "I have a wife and kids."

"You do?" mocks Thelma. "Well, you're lucky. You be sweet to them. My husband wasn't sweet to me and look how I turned out."

The video then ends with a quick scene of a harasser being maced in *The Simpsons*.

Men in *Mean Women* perpetrate acts along the "continuum of sexual violence against women" (theorized by feminists in the early 1970s), from verbal harassment to sexual objectification to (attempted) rape and murder. The point of the video is not that all men rape, that all acts along the continuum of sexual violence are of equal moral status, or that all men's actions along this continuum deserve the same, violent response. The point is that men often act along this continuum (and that women often endure such action), and that a fantasy of women's verbal and physical aggression is one of several strategies which could rearrange the assumptions about masculinity and femininity that support such actions. *Mean Women* is not partial to any particular fighting fantasy: characters respond to men with voices, fists, feet, clubs, knives, and firearms. We purposely include this variety of fight scenes to appeal to the heterogeneous group of women and men in our classrooms.³

Because aggressive women make only limited appearances in Hollywood movies, scenes of women's violence, when strung together into a 15-minute video, have a new meaning and a powerful effect. We intentionally harness this new meaning in order to challenge students to consider how different their thoughts about women, men, sex, and entitlement might be if they shared these fantasies more often (or as often as they watch common fantasies of male power). We use these clips to make a strong impact on an audience to whom we have just lectured on both the macro picture of gender inequality and our analysis of sexual violence and rape culture.

In that lecture we suggest that some of the impact of the media representations of rape culture is that they provide a fantasy of brute male strength and the accompanying

³ Some people have encouraged us to omit firearms from the video, but because images of male heroism so often involve the mastery of weapons, *Mean Women* without images of armed women would not be so successful in accomplishing one of our consciousness-raising goals. Furthermore, although *Mean Women* is not a crusade to arm American women, we include firearms because we do not wish to imply that women cannot or should not have the option to own them for self-defense. Space limitations forbid a lengthy debate about gun control or, more specifically, about whether women who own guns for self-defense are more or less at risk of being raped or killed. but see Kleck (1991) for a sociological investigation of guns and violence in America and Kates (1989) for an evaluation of pro- and anti-gun claims, including whether guns endanger more than they protect those who own them for self-protection.

fantasy of innate female disadvantage against this strength--which many people conceive and experience as real and natural. We suggest that these myths of male invulnerability, female vulnerability, and the naturalized gender dichotomy itself both result from and perpetuate rape culture. Thus we suggest not that men be more

careful about their natural physical power over women, but rather that such power is another "rape myth," made somewhat true by the circulation of images in rape culture (including those in standard rape education videos!). Mean Women, then, as part of a presentation on sexual violence, serves a number of important functions in rape education. It denaturalizes popular ideas of women's and men's relative physical abilities; it reminds viewers of the rarity of images of women as verbally or physically assertive; it reminds viewers of the frequency with which women are assaulted by men; and it provides women and men with an occasion for celebrating the possibility of ending rape.

STUDENTS' REACTIONS

Students' reactions support our hypothesis that the images in Mean Women have a very different effect than traditional rape education videos. We have asked hundreds of students (identified only by their gender) for their written reactions immediately after the video. In this discussion we review women's and men's reactions in turn. Women often cheer and clap as their favorite scenes come up. They laugh at the male characters; perhaps they feel validated to see men finally portrayed as they often appear to women. The following sentiments were fairly common:

Women know they must defend themselves. They cannot rely on men for protection because many times they [the men] are the ones causing the harm.

I think watching females take action and defend themselves is a good thing. In a way it empowers women, makes them feel more competent.

Sometimes I feel weak and scared. This (seeing women fight) gave me inspiration that women can be tough and not always feel oppressed.

Some women take these images as indicating a new female awareness of self-defense. As one student remarked, "It is obvious that females are more aware of how to defend themselves against males-self-defense with guns and other useful objects. It's a new age and women are taking on a new role, the female 'macho' ego." Others, like the following female students, simply revel in the Mean Women fantasy:

I thought these clips were great. It means that women are finally taking their place as violent, bloodthirsty, savage, testosterone-fueled egomaniacs next to the men. I love women with guns!

Women are still not taken seriously in general except by the person that is getting beat up by them as in those clips. They're getting their butt kicked and it's a woman and they're scared and we watch and it is funny. Only when everyone gets beat up by a woman will they see us as a force to reckon with.

These images reversed the roles that men and women are typically expected to hold. I think or I hope it scares men a lot. Maybe they'll get the message that we're not here to be used and abused and if we are we'll do some of the abusing.

This last woman, whose view represented many others, placed responsibility for sexual violence with men as she described her reactions. This suggests that the video affirms the analysis that men, not women, are responsible for rape. Rather than making women "see" how they "play into" rape culture (by wearing makeup, for an erroneous example), Mean Women solidifies women's sense of revulsion and resistance to rape.

Watching women put men in their places, then, reminds women that men should not be so entitled and that such men can be knocked off their high horses. Perhaps this is the reason for female students' concern with the realism of the images. They express strong approval when they can imagine themselves executing the actions they see, and condemn as absurd those moves which they believe most women could never learn.

Whatever their reactions to particular scenes, however, women do not report being terrified, numbed, or depressed by this video. On the contrary, virtually all the women surveyed reported feeling excited and happy after seeing Mean Women. One woman, identifying herself as "female (and proud of it!)," said, "Right on! We need more films like that!" Another expressed her own fantasy of aggression against sexist men: "That was great! Seeing some of the ways the males treated the females made me want to kill them myself."

Overall, the men seem to be more impressed than anything else. Most express surprise that women could fight their way out of difficult situations, and are willing to celebrate the women's heroic action:

Great senseless violence. Showed women kicking men's butts and that they are fed up with men's crap.

Shocking, the video's whole theme seemed to be opposite of what is considered normal. I think it is good women are being portrayed as more tough, but it is still new and surprising.

Like I've told my little brothers, "NEVER underestimate the power of women." I'll bet this film offended/scared a lot of guys, but that's good.

It's good to see women portrayed in films as being aggressive and fighting back! All people should become aware that women should not be taken advantage of and should be treated with respect! A good collection of films; keep showing it!!

These reactions suggest to us that images of women's violence and men's victimization tend to subvert widely held ideals of femininity and masculinity, respectively, and come as a welcome surprise to most students when presented in the context of rape education. If these responses to the video indicate any more general sentiment, it may be that men can be made to accept women as equals in this way, as part of their enjoyment of popular culture. We suspect that presenting women's violence against men in scenes from movies popular with male audiences makes the larger message more acceptable to them.

Unlike the violence between men in movies, to which most men respond with steady, strong approval, Mean Women draws a more sober response. Many men are struck by its violence; a few describe it as "unnecessary." For instance:

The images to me show how violent this world is becoming. ...

it made me feel a little squeamish. It bothers me to see any kind of unnecessary violence on screen, whether it be female or male.... The films depict a certain stereotype of men as jerks... I do not think images of violence are the answer.... [T]he images trouble me because I feel that I am being indirectly accused of things that disgust me.

Of course the purpose of showing Mean Women is to disrupt men's sense of security and invulnerability, but this effort demands that men question their own gender's violence, not only women's. Thus we follow the video with the statement that their viewing of Mean Women should be a consciousness-raising lesson which enables them to imagine how women feel about being depicted in demeaning ways more routinely. Men who watch this video thus seem to learn what women have known since the beginning of cinema: what it is to see unflattering versions of themselves on screen.

Other men who were dissatisfied expressed their concern for the rise in violence or the "reverse sexism":

I feel this video is totally against men. I think it's overall biased. Had the roles been reversed the reaction would have been one of disgust. Only male viewers regard the "mean women" fantasy as a danger to be avoided. Women do not express fears about making the world a more violent place because they already know too well that the world is violent.

Some of the men, like some of the women, express reservations about the "realism" of the fantasy. Many observe that only a few women act this way. Further, male students tend to remark, perhaps to reassure themselves, that a woman couldn't possibly hurt a man.

I have to admit I found many of [the scenes] ridiculous because it's hard to believe that women have that much spunk!

These examples are entertaining at best. Scenes such as these are highly unrealistic- women lack the bravery to stand up to a man. If they do have the bravery, it is extremely rare that a woman could physically defend herself against a man.

In fact, many men laughed during scenes in which well-trained women performed complex fighting moves. (One actor, Cynthia Rothrock, has been a world karate champion. In our movie going experience, male viewers do not laugh at the same unrealistic moves when made by male actors.) Yet even if some male students defensively maintain that strength and aggression are male territory and thus still

believe that a man's assault of a woman would have no consequences, the experience of watching the video among enthusiastic female students at least challenges the privileged, ignorant view that women enjoy rape. The very sound of female students cheering as mean women on screen set boundaries with encroaching men is a consciousness-raising lesson in its own right. Men are offered the lesson that women do not like assault, that many are angry about it, and that women might appreciate a different kind of culture, in which they were heroized as much as men currently are.

Mean Women, then, works both for men who are already somewhat gender-aware (they appreciate the images of mean women, and women's celebration of those images) and men who have not previously been critical of gender arrangements. Indeed, men's reactions, whether positive and approving or anxious and defensive, suggest that the video may be unsettling the sense of confidence and invincibility with which men so often approach women:

Although some may think that women are easy targets for violence, these clips show that this isn't the case.

I think these clips show the true nature of women and how all women are really bitches in disguise.

It looks like women are starting to fight back. They still look innocent but prove themselves in these movies that they can kick some ass.

Men come to the front of the auditorium after the program and offer their services as activists for feminism much less often now than when we offered traditional rape

education. We take this as a sign that the Mean Women video and the accompanying lecture do not reaffirm their sense of power. Although we regret the loss of any charitable activist enthusiasm, we would rather see men impressed with women's potential as a political force than see them reassured about their own strength. As one suitably impressed man put it, "These movie clips make me not want to mess with the wrong female. The fact that women have been perceived as a weaker sex is obviously not true. Just ask any guy whose met that blond ninja (from the video)."

DISCUSSION

Mean Women is not a perfect solution to the problems of traditional rape education videos. In this section, we present our misgivings about the approach, and respond to the skepticism we anticipate from colleagues.

IDENTIFICATION

One of our misgivings about the video involves the white, young, thin appearance of most of the women. Though no students have expressed dissatisfaction with this aspect, the selectivity of the fantasy could affect different women's abilities to identify and enjoy. Most women, who are not young, thin, and white, may feel no closer to Linda Hamilton or Jamie Lee Curtis than to Wesley Snipes or Arnold Schwarzenegger. On the other hand, these women-young, thin, and white-have always been the objects of sexual aggression in movies; thus it may be particularly powerful to see them get mean. In any case, the range of physical characteristics of the women in the Mean Women video is slightly broader than that in Dreamworlds. Some of the mean women, for instance, in contrast to the women in Dreamworlds, have larger, more muscular bodies, are fully clothed, or wear no makeup. It may be that Dreamworlds does not offend on these grounds because the women in the audience become disgusted with the depictions of the young, thin, white women in the "dangerous men" videos but are encouraged to celebrate them in Mean Women. The dis-gust may stem from women's resentment toward young, thin, white women, and/or toward the men who expect women to look that way. Such disdain for these characteristics among the mean women might also be based on the concern that male viewers are objectifying the characters rather than fearing them.

EROTICIZATION

A related danger is that the power of Mean Women to frighten men is blunted by their ability to get off on it. One male viewer may have represented the experiences of others when he said, "I like watching females beating up ignorant males. For some reason it excites me." Perhaps these mean women are

too sexy to put fear or respect into men. But though we wish to distinguish Mean Women from straight men's sadomasochistic porn (indeed, our whole critique of traditional rape education is premised on such a distinction), we believe it might be a good idea to allow men to eroticize their own weakness and women's strength. As MacKinnon (1989) and Dworkin (1981) have pointed out, straight men tend to eroticize women no matter what; as a result, it is impossible for any rape-education images to escape uneroticized. Thus we argue, on the basis of students' responses, that Mean Women is a better risk. Eroticizing men's punishment is surely more constructive than eroticizing women's.

LAUGHTER

In some scenes, women fight with more skill than most people think women could ever have, and/or men are actually at the mercy of powerful women. The laughter that such scenes inspire might undermine our goal of impressing men with women's competence. Perhaps men can laugh off and dismiss as inconsequential Hollywood make-believe the lesson we want them to learn. This is a genuine concern, to which we have responded by removing some of the more fantastic-seeming scenes. On the other hand, we believe it may not be so bad for men, when confronted for the first time with compelling images of their vulnerability, to vent some nervousness through humor. As Davis (1992:237) says, in her discussion of teaching about inequality, "Such humor draws in students in a light-hearted manner but usually ends by pulling no punches and making an important observation about stratified societies." Also, for many of the women who are already aware of aggression against them, laughter probably serves a cathartic purpose as they vent some emotion of their own.

Nonetheless, many female viewers complained of the laughter among men, and we are wary of men's ability to sidestep an important lesson by simply laughing at the idea that women could ever be powerful. Women who complained about men's laughter may have sensed those men's defensive attempts to keep the rape myth intact. We can only hope that the message arrives by the end of the lecture hour, or through discussions that the video might stimulate. The men's laughter, if nothing else, is a consciousness-raising lesson for the other students.

GENDER HOSTILITY

Many men also may react to the possibility of effective resistance by women with even nastier behavior than they exhibit now, either dissociating from women or attacking them with greater force. For instance, the male student's remark that "all women are really bitches in disguise" could be read as a sign that Mean Women fuels men's contempt for women. We read that statement, however, as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment that even women who do not look tough or "manly" might strike back when attacked. Thus, at least at this point, we think Mean Women is less likely than the traditional approach to intensify men's attacks.

Our analysis of rape suggests that men victimize women in part because women have been made the weaker sex. Therefore, any change in popular conceptions of femininity and masculinity could decrease the frequency of men's attempts at sexual assault. (Cross-cultural study shows that societies in which women have greater influence over men's behavior report lower rates of sexual violence; see Sanday [1981].) In any case, we created the alternative video precisely because we feared that the "dangerous men" approach confirmed, rather than undermined, men's sense of physical and symbolic power over women.

Colleagues have also expressed concern that Mean Women might intensify women's hostility: specifically that female viewers might alter their moral outlook and begin to attack men. This misgiving about the "mean women" approach rests on the unsupported idea that such a popular fantasy provides material for imitative behavior: women may be moved so strongly by the fantasy that they attack men unprovoked. For instance, the student who said that "seeing some of the ways that the males treated the females made me want to kill them myself" could be interpreted as a commitment to go kill men—not the men in the video but men in real life, and not

in self-defense but in a crazed fury or a brainwashed Hollywood daze. We read the student's comment, however, as an expression of an aggressive fantasy under her control.

The aggressive fantasies that women can entertain while watching the much-discussed film *Thelma and Louise*, and the dangers of women's inappropriate imitation of the title characters, are similar to those offered by Mean Women. The pleasure felt by women (and men) in watching Louise shoot Harlan after he rapes Thelma—even though, legally, the shot is not fired in self-defense—is not usually taken to indicate or cause a willingness to shoot assailants unjustifiably. In the same way, we are not alarmed by students' enjoyment of women's aggression (self-defensive or retaliatory) in Mean Women.

If no one is worried that traditional rape education videos lead women to enjoy victimization, why would anyone worry that "mean women" videos will lead women to commit legally unjustifiable violence against men? It seems that no one thinks people imitate characters in movies indiscriminately; rather, many assume that people only imitate the characters in videos who seem to be having all the violent fun. We, however, do not fear that the potential for imitation or oppressive imperceptiveness, which men experience after routinely viewing images of other men as glamorously powerful and heroic, will be identical or equal for women, who rarely see themselves represented as violent, heroic, or even physically capable. Fifteen minutes of "mean women" will not erase 20 years of socialization to femininity, make women inappropriately violent, or desensitize them to this greater degree of violence.

Another objection seems to spring from a view of women as occupying a moral high ground. According to this logic, if women resort to the strategies that men currently employ to preserve their boundaries, then women will have demeaned themselves and increased the strife tearing apart an already too-violent world. As we have stated already, our analysis of rape suggests that most men assault women precisely because they do not expect effective resistance. Even so, some may resist Mean Women on the grounds that violence is a "masculine game." We agree with Robin Morgan (1989) that the sexiness of violence inheres in its connection with masculinity; this is precisely why we think representations of women's violence might pollute the enterprise, removing the fun for men to whom it currently appeals. Men who observe women engaging in physical assertion may come to dissociate such assertion from masculinity, and may thus be left with one less motive to pursue it themselves. In other words, our approach does not assume a cultural feminist stance that posits the moral superiority of female pacifism as a point from which women should resist male domination (i.e., Morgan 1989:334); nor does our approach reify the connection between masculinity and violence. Rather, it blurs these gender distinctions. In this way, Mean Women both releases women from obligation to the very traits that make them easy targets for aggressive men (MacKinnon 1989:51), and releases men from the identity constructions that make assaults against women so attractive an option. This is one reason why we embrace even images of women's violence that are not strictly self-defense, such as Louise's violence in *Thelma and Louise*.

RAPE SURVIVORS

Some people may worry that rape survivors who did not fight back against their assailants will feel bad while watching Mean Women. Because our concern for women's feelings was an impetus for constructing our alternative rape education video, we hold fast to a basic principle in the accompanying lecture: rape is not women's fault or

responsibility. This point keeps students from misconstruing the video as an indication that survivors who did not defend themselves during an assault somehow "deserved it."

Several rape survivors complained that they felt fear and disgust while watching the rape scene in Dreamworlds. This was precisely why we stopped using "dangerous men" videos. No survivors have complained to us about Mean Women. Thus, although we have no indication that survivors are affected any differently than nonsurvivors, seeing Mean Women might benefit survivors,

Particularly by prompting them to consider taking a self-defense class and beginning their healing process.

In fact, women who have been assaulted often take up self-defense, with a feeling of anger that they did not know what to do to fend off an assailant (McCaughey 1995). One study found that rape survivors have a lower sense of self-efficacy for coping with interpersonal threats or engaging in activities that may contain some risk, that they feel more vulnerable to assault, and that they exhibit more avoidant behavior than women who have not been raped-and that their feelings of self-efficacy increase to the same level as those of nonsurvivors after they take the self-defense course called "Model Mugging" (Ozer and Bandura 1990). Still, we use Mean Women not only because of the potential positive long-term effect, but also because female students report feeling more, not less upbeat immediately afterward.

MISLEADING WOMEN

It is also possible that Mean Women could produce a "false sense of security" in women, encouraging them to attempt violent defense they cannot sustain, and thus leading to their further endangerment. Women are already endangered in a rape culture, however, and any sense of themselves as entitled and powerful could help them escape an assault. Bart and O'Brien's (1985) research shows that the great majority of women who yell or fight back manage to thwart a rape attempt (although the point of showing the video is not to give women a self-defense lesson). The belief that one cannot defend oneself might be more dangerous than the reverse.

One last dilemma presented by Mean Women should serve as a cautionary note: the work we do to make straight men fear the violence depicted in this video could mislead women into believing that our legal system will support their self-defense. For instance, one woman said, "I think it is good to see women fighting back, especially in Thelma and Louise. As a single woman I keep a loaded gun in my house and if need be know how to use it. Women need to feel it's OK to fight back." Usually, however, such violent action by women is not "OK" in the eyes of the law. A woman who defends her-self

against men's sexual aggression bears the same legal burden as women who accuse men of rape: she must prove that the man at least tried to rape her. Then, she must justify her violent, "un feminine" behavior, or face often severe consequences.

CONCLUSION

Images of "mean women" in film are uncommon. Thus the experience of seeing these images collected reminds many viewers of their rarity, and has the same effect as traditional consciousness raising about the aggression faced by women. The man's reaction quoted here represents that of many viewers surveyed:" [Seeing the video] made me realize that it is not often that women are perpetrators of violence in film. I thought it was cool that they reversed the normal roles. The girls in the audience seemed very enthusiastic. The boys were uncomfortable."

We hope that new images of women and their capabilities, particularly when used by rape prevention educators, will affect women's self-confidence and, more significantly, men's perceptions of their own social power and physical vulnerability. As consumers of popular culture, as teachers who use it in the classroom, and as antirape activists, we would like to see more of these movies, with more scenes of female heroism and a greater diversity of actors and plots. We anxiously await a "mean woman" movie that will do to straight men what *Jaws* did to beachgoers everywhere.

Our primary concerns now are the rarity of "mean women" images in popular culture, the consequences of that rarity for women, the status of women, and for the ease with which men attack, our desire to celebrate and circulate such images as widely as possible, and the effectiveness of these images for transforming a culture bent on abusing women. We use the Mean Women video in our otherwise quite standard lectures on gender inequality and sexual violence to make students think about the consequences of the hegemonic fantasy, to question a naturalized gender polarity revolving around strength and aggressiveness, and to celebrate the less common cultural narratives.

This celebration is not a self-defense lesson.⁴ Women who wish to learn to use violence in their own defense have many options, but our classroom is not one of them. We provide students with an analysis of the ways in which popular fantasies are presently structured, the ways in which they can be reworked, and the respective consequences

⁴ Thus, like other rape educators, we do not discuss with students what women "should" do to avoid or stop rape, whether women who learn karate can "re-ally" beat up a man, or whether women should (or should have the right to) bear arms. Besides, our focus in rape education is primarily the transformation of men's' consciousness and behavior.

of those different fantasies. In case some students interpret the video as a sign of the times rather than as a useful fantasy or deconstruction device, we take care to remind them that these scenes do not reflect current changes in women's or men's behaviors. Certainly they do not reflect any indulgence on the part of the law. In the classroom we explicitly situate *Mean Women* as a fantasy of resistance, as a basis for exposing "dangerous men" as another fantasy, and as a vehicle for positing new identities for men and for women.

We do not use *Mean Women* to "show" that aggressive self-defense is the way to challenge rape culture. Just as "dangerous men" videos do not necessarily suggest that sexual objectification is the only cause of rape, our *Mean Women* presentations do not suggest that women's aggression is the only solution. We have stated already that "dangerous men" images shape men's consciousness in ways that have little relation to women's real reactions or wishes. In the same way, "mean women" images might shape men's consciousness independent of women's real reactions. By analogy, the fear inspired by *Jaws* does not depend on an increase in actual shark attacks. Men may assault women because they believe they will get away with it or because they believe women really want it; men may respect women because they believe that they won't get away with it or that women would actually become very angry.

The promise of the "mean women" fantasy, then, is not that women may be driven to oppressive violence but rather that men may gain a different sense of women's responses to assault. Not only would it be unrealistic (and illegal) to frame a fantasy (and actual behavior) involving women's violence as the solution to rape; it would still assume that changing rape culture is women's responsibility—an assumption we set out to challenge by creating an alternative video. We have argued that the traditional "dangerous men" videos fail to dispute the gender ideologies which support individual men's felonious behaviors and rape culture more broadly. The power and the usefulness of a "mean women" video for rape educators lie in its validation of women's desires to be treated respectfully and, most important, in its transformative effect on men. We hope to make men a little more afraid as they enter the water.

APPENDIX SOURCES FOR THE MEAN WOMEN VIDEO

These movies are available at most video rental outlets, and can be excerpted easily by anyone with two video player/recorders patched together. Instructors using these for educational purposes should have no copyright problems.

Aces: Iron Eagle III. 1992. Written by Kevin Elders. Directed by John Glenn. Produced by Ron Samuels. Carolco.

Aliens. 1986. Written and directed by James Cameron. Produced by Gale Anne Hurd. 20th Century-Fox

Batman Returns. 1992. Written by Daniel Waters. Directed by Tim Burton. Produced by Denise Di Novi and Tim Burton. Warner.

Blue Steel. 1990. Written by Kathryn Bigelow and Eric Red. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Produced by Edward R Pressman and Oliver Stone. MGM.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer 1992. Written by Joss Wheldon. Directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui. Produced by Kaz Kuzui and Howard Roseman. 20th Century- Fox.

Conan the Destroyer. 1984. Written by Stanley Mann. Directed by Richard Fleischer. Produced by Raffaella de Laurentis. Universal.

Double Impact. 1991. Written by Sheldon Lettich and Jean-Claude Van Damme. Directed by Sheldon Lettich. Produced by Ashok Amritra and Jean- Claude Van Damme. Columbia.

Eve of Destruction. 1991. Written by Duncan Gibbons and Yale Udoff. Directed by Duncan Gibbons. Produced by Dave Madden. Orion.

Fatal Beauty. 1988. Written by Hilary Henkin and Paul Reisner. Directed by Tom Holland. Produced by Leonard Knoll. MGM/UA.

La Femme Nikita. 1991. Written, directed, and produced by Luc Besson. Gaumont/Goldwyn.

Foxy Brown. 1974. Written and directed by Jack Hill. Produced by Buzz Fietshans. API.

Gone with the Wind. 1939. Written by Sidney Howard. Directed by Victor Fleming. Produced by David O. Selznick. MGM.

Hard Target. 1993. Written by Chuck Pfarrer. Directed by John Woo. Produced by James Jacks and Sean Daniel. Universal.

Lethal Weapon 3. 1992. Written by Jeffrey Boam and Robert Mark Kamen. Directed by Richard Donner. Produced by Joel Silver. Warner Brothers.

Martial Law 2: Undercover. 1992. Written by Richard Brandes and Jiles Fitzgerald. Directed by Kurt Anderson. Produced by Steve Cohen. MCA/Universal.

Point Break. 1991. Written by W Peter Iliff. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Produced by Peter Abrams and Robert Levy. 20th Century-Fox.

The Simpsons. 1991. Episode 7 F20. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Produced by Richard Sakai and Larina Jean Adamson. 20th Century-Fox Television.

Switch. 1991. Written and directed by Blake Edwards. Produced by Tony Adams. HBO.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day. 1991. Written by James Cameron and William Wisher. Directed and produced by James Cameron. Carolco.

Thelma and Louise. 1991. Written by Callie Khouri. Directed by Ridley Scott. Produced by Ridley Scott and Mimi Polk. MGM.

Total Recall. 1990. Written by Ronald Shusett, Dan O'Bannon, and Gary Goldman. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. Produced by Buzz Feitshans and Ronald Shusett. Carolco.

True Romance. 1993. Written by Quentin Tarantino. Directed by Tony Scott. Produced by Samuel Hadida, Steve Perry, and Bill Unger. Warner.

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