

# **RACHAEL & TOM**

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## Abstract

*Rachael & Tom* is a twenty-five minute narrative short film about a teenage girl with a crush on her church youth pastor, who leaves her small town to experience hook-up culture at university in the big city, resulting in a painful coming-of-age moment. Rachael is a shy, inexperienced girl who does not understand the difference between sex and romantic love. She has lived most of her life sheltered in her rural, religious community, and the sex-positive environment she encounters at university is quite a culture-shock for her. Not only is everyone talking about sex when she arrives on campus, but casual sex seems to be encouraged at an almost institutional level as a form of female empowerment. Through assimilating into this new world, Rachael embarks on her first real education concerning relationships; her newfound knowledge and desperate desire to become a woman ultimately leading her to a crucible she never anticipated having to endure.

Through the process of making this film and writing the accompanying thesis paper, I have attempted to explore the inner emotional lives of young women in modernity and the confusion and emptiness some experience when participating in hook-up culture as a form of ‘female empowerment’. By juxtaposing these two different worlds: the sheltered church community and the sexually-liberated college campus, I hoped to hypothesize different scenarios that could result from a sheltered young woman taking her newfound knowledge home with her. Through making this film and reading about the emotional experiences of young women on college campuses today, I attempt to convey in this paper my personal thesis on what I believe to be a very large phenomenon that is simultaneously gravely understudied by contemporary scholars.

## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to acknowledge the graduate film department at York University for providing the structure and funding wherein it was possible to make this film. The existence of this program has helped me force myself to make another movie after undergraduate school and given me greater confidence to continue along the path of training to become an independent filmmaker. I think it is often very hard for young people to find the community and funding support to continue making films once they leave undergrad film school, and I personally feel the existence of this program has given me more hope and maturity to continue doing this.

I am also extremely grateful to my undergraduate professors Matthew Miller and Matt Johnson, who encouraged me to apply for grad school back in 2020 and gave invaluable input throughout the creation process anytime I needed to ask for advice.

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overwhelming during COVID lockdowns but they both helped provide a great amount of stability and mentorship support that got me through it.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	v
 Introduction .....	 1
Conceptualizing .....	3
Digging Myself out of the Hole .....	4
Inspiration/Source Films .....	6
Aesthetic Choices .....	10
Production Design .....	11
Writing .....	13
Casting .....	15
Rachael .....	15
Tom .....	15
Supporting Characters .....	16
Background Actors .....	16
Personal Background .....	18
Connection to Previous Work .....	19
Modern Attitudes Toward Sexuality I Wanted to Explore .....	21
Conclusion .....	26
 Bibliography .....	 27
Filmography .....	28

## Introduction

Most of the stories I have made into films in the past have felt very personal—but this project, along with this supporting paper, is definitely the most intimate one I have worked on to date, largely because of the two different worlds I wanted to explore. All of my past films have been about naïve young female protagonists in fish-out-of-water scenarios. This one has more of an autobiographical feel to it as I have been a part of both of the differing subcultures in the film: the small town church youth group and the big city college frosh week environment. I have attempted with this project to expand my typical fish-out-of-water situation, with one where greater consequences result based on the young woman's actions. I tried to explore a situation where the character leaves home, learns a new set of codes than the ones she grew up with, and brings them back to her home to try and upset the equilibrium in her favour.

In this paper I am also going to explain and support the aesthetic, story and casting choices I made with the film. I will also speak about this film as it relates to my larger creative practice as a whole, referencing its similarities to my past film ventures and the ways in which it is a departure from my previous filmmaking efforts. I will also write a little bit about how the making of this film has made me think about what path I want to take in the future creatively.

Finally as this is an academic paper I would also like to reference and speak about some of my interests in certain modern cultural phenomenon that inspired themes in this film, and some of my particular perspectives on the world around me I was trying to express here. I will do this with the aid of Marios Varga Llosa's book *Notes on the Death of Culture*, with particular reference to the chapter 'The Disappearance of Eroticism'. I will not attempt to make any

specific conclusions about these broad topics in this paper, but rather by my inclusion of it I hope to aid me in communicating certain things that inspired me to embark on making this film.

## Conceptualizing

This film had the longest gestation period of any I have made so far. In part, this may have been due to a struggle to find inspiration and stimulation during multiple COVID lockdowns in my MFA1 year. I also took a while to adjust to the new and more independent structure of graduate school. During undergrad film school, deadlines were much more rigid and imposed. At the master's level however almost everything is completely self-driven and there is no one there to hold your hand. With COVID lockdowns making filming more difficult in general, I had more difficulty adjusting to this independent style of working than I anticipated.

I have always found throughout undergraduate film school as well, and really any time I have ever embarked on making a film, that the most difficult and painful part is getting started and coming up with the story. I seemed to struggle a lot more than my peers in undergrad each year when it came to coming up with story ideas easily. I would conceive multiple fruitless ideas that were essentially non-stories and be sent back to the drawing board by my professors to write something completely new. It was not usually until everyone else was onto the fourth draft of their own scripts, months into the process, that I would finally have my breakthrough moment and come up with a successful story idea—usually a mere few days before not having anything became a really serious problem for me academically. These breakthroughs happened often in the midst of panic-stricken all-nighters at the eleventh hour when it felt like all hope was lost and I would have to drop out of the class. Somehow though despite the intense desperation I experienced each time I would always have that eureka moment, and surprisingly the story was always something that felt very personal and unique to how I wanted to express myself as an artist.



During my time in undergrad I was regrettably not much of a cinephile, but I had since spent the entire summer of 2020 discovering many new filmmakers I fell in love with such as Noah Baumbach, Kieslowski, Kelly Reichardt and Terry Zwigoff. I felt this would surely help my agonizing lack of inspiration I used to suffer from so much.

Unfortunately once in grad school, on top of having no new in-person experiences and all online classes I also now had no strict upcoming deadlines as I was used to. The panic-stricken all-nighters came, but were never consummated once my brain realized there was no real penalty for not having a draft in on time for class. The 2020-2021 school year was truly the hardest year of my academic career for this reason: my seeming inability to help myself out of my situation, and the emotional and spiritual purgatory I found myself in because of it. In the beginning I took comfort in the 2002 film *Adaptation*, where the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman personifies his own struggles with writing. After a while I realized that the main character in that film only had his ‘writer’s block’ for five months, and I had been past the five months mark for a while at that point.

### **Digging Myself out of the Hole**

In May 2022, I got out of my apartment for a couple months and went back to my parents’ house in rural Ontario to work on writing for the summer. I had been working on a story in the fiction class about a teenage girl who has an affair with an older man in her church, but the story seemed so horribly cliché to me that I was rejecting it with every fibre of my being for quite a long time, even though it was all that I had. I wanted to find any other story that worked that was not that, but eventually gave in and decided to commit to it. After talking with my supervisors and some trusted peers and friends I was able to take the idea from its

embryonic form and finesse it into something that felt more unique and like my own. Once the church youth group setting was suggested to me I felt much more at peace with the story as that subculture felt more specific. It was also much more personal to me as I had actually experienced growing up in that environment.

My professors in undergraduate school told us that it was ok for a story to be ‘cliché’ as long as it was also ‘specific’. That seems like very counterintuitive advice as all writers want to avoid their stories being cliché, but I think I understand now that a familiar-seeming story can be made totally fresh if the details of the situation feel very real. Perhaps things that happen in real life sometimes would seem cliché if they were dramatized into a movie, but that does not stop them from happening. I think there are also many stories that might seem cliché on the surface but are actually able to hold great emotional truths for the characters. However silly the circumstances might seem to an outsider perspective, if the storyteller can convince the audience that what the character is going through is very real emotionally for them, I think the audience will be more accepting.

## Inspiration/Source Films

I had been watching a lot of coming-of-age films about young people that I have taken reference from when making this movie. Most of the films were about young women exploring sexuality for the first time, most of the protagonists feeling very lost regarding their identities. This identity crisis experienced by some of the female protagonists in these films often expresses itself through her searching for some kind of spiritual fulfillment, or sense of belonging—not always in the right places.

In *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (dir. Sean Durkin, 2011), the main character, Martha, is searching for some kind of community or home that will fill the void inside her. Her insecurities and vulnerabilities make her easy prey for the manipulative and charming cult leader, Patrick. I will speak about this more in a later section where I reference the specific aesthetic choices in my film, but there is a specific scene in *Martha Marcy May Marlene* that I was directly inspired by while writing my own film and one of the scenes in my film is intentionally shot and framed almost exactly like a scene from *MMMM*. Near the beginning of Martha's stay with the cult, Patrick writes a song for her and sings it to her in front of everyone while playing guitar. I was deeply moved by this scene because of the way I felt the filmmaker was able to create such psychological intimacy with the main character. There are only a couple shots in the scene, it is really very simple—Patrick playing the guitar in front of everyone, and Martha sitting on the ground with the others watching him. The acting by Elizabeth Olsen in this scene is very potent, and conveyed only by her facial expression as there is no dialogue. Pairing this with the seductive sound of the music and the shot-reverse shot, especially him being elevated at higher level above everyone else and her sitting on the ground looking up at him—it is very easy to access her mental state and create an emotionally intimate moment. I wanted to create this same

feel to show the powerful effect that the youth pastor in my film had on the main character Rachael. This kind of scene felt to me to be a very economical and effective way to show his effect on her, because the dynamics of it are very visual, rather than being conveyed by dialogue or having Rachael tell another girl that she has a crush on him for instance.

Another important reference film for me in creating my thesis was the short film *Not Worth Mentioning* (Dir. Martin Kessler, 2011) which played at the TIFF student showcase in 2011. I was shown this film by my supervisor, Tereza, and it provided a lot of the visual inspiration for the protagonist's first sexual encounter. In *Not Worth Mentioning*, the young woman has a very awkward and unenjoyable time losing her virginity. It is played to a comedic effect and many of the shots put the viewer right in her perspective, such as the point-of-view shot of the ceiling fan, something I tried to replicate in my own film with a shot of the ceiling light. I feel it was a fairly straightforward choice for me to present Rachael's first hookup in this way, in order to contrast it with the end of the film where she believes she's obtained everything she wanted and it feels much more 'romantic' to her.

The last film that inspired me regarding specific aesthetic choices was another Canadian short called *Chubby* (dir. Madeleine Sims-Fewer, Dusty Mancinelli, 2019). This film is similar to mine and showcased the relationship between a young girl and an older male authority figure.

Another big similarity our films have in common is that they both have the same actor, Jesse Lavercombe, playing the male lead. I first saw Jesse in Madeleine and Dusty's films, where he frequently plays some variation on a rapist/pedophile/male abuser. It seemed that regarding my project and the types of roles that Jesse has found himself to be well-suited to, he was a great match artistically for the project. I thought it would be an interesting twist to for him to play a youth pastor with a squeaky clean character who ends up being the one getting ambushed at the

end of the film. The cinematography in this film was also composed of very beautiful hand-held close up shots, something my director of photography and I wanted to lean into.

To conclude this section on my source films I would also like to mention the names of a few other films that had more thematic rather than aesthetic influence on this film. Several coming-of-age films about awkward young women I found to be insightful and discovered that I gravitated towards those with a more comedic and slightly darker tone. One example is the film *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (dir. Todd Solondz, 1995). I find films such as this and *Matilda* (dir. Danny Devito, 1996) to be very interesting in that the protagonist, usually a quiet more subdued young woman, is very overstimulated and overwhelmed by her environment. In both films the people and world around the main character feel so bizarre to her they take on a more circus-like feel. I do not know if I have fully achieved this exact feel with my film, but it did influence me a lot when writing and filming the scenes where Rachael is exposed to a totally new environment at university.

I always find myself drawn to fish-out-of-water stories, and one I found particularly relevant to this film was *Nancy Drew* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 2007). In this film, Nancy is actually pretty cool and beloved in her small rural American town for solving mysteries. Her social status completely changes however once her father gets a job in Los Angeles and she is forced to attend a new school there. With her vintage clothes and quaint manner she does not fit in at all. While in my film Rachael is a bit of a loner in her home environment as well as the new one, I do find this concept of taking a character from a quaint, safe, seemingly “backwards” environment, and throwing them in the deep end to watch them try to survive in a world totally alien to them, very enthralling. It is a pattern that has emerged throughout the last few films I have made, and I am interested to keep pursuing it in different forms in my future work.

A couple other films that influenced me to smaller extents while making ‘Rachael and Tom’ include *Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1995) and *Thirteen* (dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2003). The film *Clueless* inspired me when writing a very specific scene in the film. In Heckerling’s film, the protagonist is very nervous for her date to come over and gets dressed up in a sensual short red dress and also gets very stressed out making dinner. I also tried to dress Rachael in a similar style of red dress and I was inspired by this scene in *Clueless* to have her prepare for the date cooking something intense in a frantic frazzled manner.

The film *Thirteen* was recommended to me by my cinematographer as there are so many obvious similarities to the themes in my film. This film I felt really portrayed the chaos that is becoming a young woman and it also had scenes of the girls getting lots of piercings, so it was a helpful reference point for this film.

## Aesthetic Choices

In regards to the visual language of this film, I felt relatively confident in how I wanted to tell the story based on discoveries I had made while working on my previous films. As most of my films so far have followed protagonists who are not extremely vocal people who will tell you exactly what they feel, but are rather more reserved and shy, most of the story is told through the expression on the actress's face. My protagonists usually also live in their own world and feel a sense of alienation from their environments and separation from the people around them. Thankfully, this thematic throughline in my work so far is extremely well-suited to low-budget independent filmmaking as I try to stay in close-up shots on the main character as much as possible and only leave it when necessary or to show what it is they are looking at. In this way I feel the camera is able to create more psychological intimacy with the protagonist, especially if they are a person of few words.

I shot most of this film on a 50mm lens, giving me a tighter frame. This was much better suited to the emotional story-telling than a wider lens would have been. I believe also that shooting with wide lenses a lot can make things very difficult for low-budget filmmakers, as it is so much more difficult to hide things that you do not want to be seen in the frame. Unless you have immaculate production design and a lot of resources, it is easier to show as little as possible and give the audience's imaginations just enough to fill in the rest for themselves.

Often times while watching indie films that are filmed mostly in wide shots, the lack of resources the film was working with becomes apparent to me in a way that I think can take the viewer out of it.

## Production Design

My main inspiration for the production design of this film when attempting to create the different ‘worlds’, was the tv series *The Wire* (2002-2008). While I was watching that show I was so amazed at the realism of the world and all of the ‘sets’. After doing some research I realized that the sets looked so real because they weren’t sets, but rather to make things feel as authentic as possible, the production filmed right on the streets of Baltimore and used the homes of real people instead of recreating them.

Of course this is the most fantastic strategy for a filmmaker with minimal budget and I adopted this same ethos when location scouting for ‘Rachael and Tom’. It was a very exhausting and at times overwhelming task as we were searching for these locations during COVID restrictions when people were less interested to have a group of filmmakers come in to their buildings. Thankfully we were able to make friends with an extremely empathetic pastor of a church in the east end of Toronto who graciously let us use his church. This made it much easier to create the old church basement feel in the film without us having to work as hard as we were filming it in the real thing.

Other locations such as the piercing salon and others required extensive effort and time to find, but ultimately were already fully ‘dressed’ when we got there which was exactly what I had wanted. I hope that this has helped the film feel more like it takes place in the real world rather than on some kind of sound stage at a university.

Before moving on I will make a brief note about the use of colour in the film as well. I wanted to contrast the hometown warmth of the church with the alienating experience at college and therefore decided to have the colour palette at the beginning of the film to consist of warmer



earthier tones. I specifically wanted the church to have some seventies' era brown in it and tried to stay with warmer colours like orange yellow and light green.

At college I wanted the palette to feel brighter, as Rachael is experimenting with a lot of things that feel exciting and therefore clothing, parties and dances would be very colourful. But I also wanted the colours to feel generally a bit colder to contrast with the environment she came from.

## Writing

This film was the most difficult one I have ever written and I relied a lot on discussions with and feedback from my supervisors as I felt very lost at times. I knew my general focus of the story was about a young girl coming of age who does not understand the difference between sex and romantic love and must go through a painful process to untangle the two in her mind.

One of the main difficulties during the writing process was my desire not to make Tom's character out to be a predator. I had seen lots of films before about innocent young women being preyed upon by evil men, and I felt strongly that I was not interested to make this kind of story. I did not think it would be empowering to my protagonist or give her a very good character arc, if in the end she turns out to be the victim of a creepy guy who takes advantage of the situation. I wanted the final consequences that Rachael experiences to be brought upon her solely as the result of her own actions.

In earlier drafts Tom was really coming across as more of a nefarious character. There originally was a scene where he was flirting a lot with the pretty blonde female youth leader outside the church in a way that spoke to him perhaps having a darker past. I also received some comments when I presented at grad symposium last fall that it would be very difficult to keep his character intact if he took Rachael up on her invite to come over for dinner. At the time in the script there was no mention of the parents being there so her proposition was that it would just be the two of them alone at her house. I subsequently changed the script to show that Tom thought her parents were going to be there, and therefore instead of him coming over already thinking it would be just the two of them, which would perhaps not be as realistic given his profession, I made it a surprise to him when he comes over that Rachael's parents would not be attending. I

figured if in this way she springs it on him it would put him in a more uncomfortable situation but I would have already succeeded in getting him to the house without compromising his character before he even sets foot in the door.

My biggest difficulty in writing this film was exactly how Rachael was to effectively seduce her youth pastor without making him seem like a predator himself. My goal with the film is to show that he rather succumbs to the pressure from her and gives in to a moment of weakness. There were differing opinions on this with some saying that Rachael needed to be more aggressive and manipulative in order for it to seem believable that someone with a squeaky clean character such as Tom would do something like that. I shot some footage of her grabbing him more aggressively as well but ultimately decided to just go with her undressing herself after kissing him.

It was a struggle for me to figure out Tom's reaction after they sleep together in previous drafts. In some drafts he was upset at Rachael for 'tricking' him into something he did not want to do, but ultimately I decided that he would be freaking out more than anything and (because he is supposed to have moral character) would not take it out on Rachael but accept responsibility for his actions.

## **Casting**

Casting for this film was the most difficult part about making it after the writing. Not only were there lots of different characters and extras needed for the movie to make the worlds feel real, but the two leads had to be able to convey some very specific and nuanced emotions.

### **Rachael**

As I mentioned when speaking about the visual style of the film, the camera was going to be close on the protagonist as much as possible so I needed an actress who could emote very well on camera. Alex, the actress who played Rachael, I had actually met on another graduate film set and had also seen her act in an undergraduate film where I was very impressed with her range. The difficult part about casting Rachael was that the actress needed to come across as believably naïve on screen for the first half of the film, but it was also important that the actress have a bit of an edge to her where it would play realistically the way she acted when she came back home. Finding someone who could balance both those things: the naivete and the edge proved difficult, and I was thankful ultimately to find Alex through the undergrad community of students and professors I was already acquainted with at York from my BFA degree.

### **Tom**

Tom was the hardest character to cast and I had more difficulty finding an actor to embody him than any of the roles in any film I have ever made. Finding someone who is a little older, genuinely charming, musical and also comfortable with the sexual content of the

film felt like an almost impossible task for a while, especially for a student filmmaker with a low budget. The actor Jesse, who I ended up casting I had actually seen in a few Canadian films already and really admired his work. It did not seem feasible that I would be able to work with someone at that level as a student filmmaker, but luckily one of my classmates, Pranay, had met Jesse and was working with him on for his thesis film, making my introduction much easier. As I touched on earlier in this paper, Jesse ended up being the perfect choice for the role of Tom as his previous work centered around some similar themes of dysfunctional sexual dynamics and he had a great comfort level with the material.

### **Supporting Characters**

Characters such as Samantha, the blonde female youth leader of whom Rachael is jealous near the beginning of the film, as well as Ashley the Residence RA, were actresses I had already worked with on previous films and in very similar roles.

### **Background Actors**

The key to making the different worlds of this film believable, aside from the locations was having people who really felt like they belonged there. I was most concerned with recreating a realistic youth group and was worried the actors would feel awkward around each other just meeting for the first time. Having them play foosball definitely helped, but in general the actors playing the ‘youth group students’ all bonded quite quickly and let their natural personalities out. It also turns out that theatre kids and former theatre kids translate quite well

to summer church youth group students and youth leaders. The energy of these two demographics of people really is almost exactly the same, especially when playing icebreaker games.

## **Personal Background**

In a lot of ways this film feels very close to me as I come from a small town and also attended a church youth group in my teen years. I think a church youth group for teenagers is a more unique and specific subculture as opposed to a high school, and one that I have not seen explored in film almost at all. Even after doing research and talking to lots of peers it was very difficult for me to find many films that took place in a church youth group. I find this to be an interesting gap in our culture's cinematic lexicon, as I know that this experience has been very common to a lot of people growing up. I think it is also a very fertile environment to explore simply because it is not in a high school, and there have been thousands upon thousands of high school movies made, yet it has all of the same dynamics of a high school. So many things that people watch high school drama films for can easily be found in this church youth environment as well, as the kids are dealing with all the same emotions, sexual tensions and awkwardness of growing up. Perhaps filmmakers have overlooked this environment because kids in religious environments are stereotyped to be all freaks or squares who do not go through the same struggles as regular teens. When I attended my church youth group, aside from different beliefs about the world I found nothing markedly different about anyone there. They were really the most hormonal group of teenagers I had ever met.

I also found adjusting to university in a new, much bigger city to be pretty overwhelming at times and I thought the emotional journey a person goes on as they leave one place for the other would be interesting to explore in a more psychologically intimate way.

## Connection to Previous Work

I have mentioned this a few times now, but I have found many patterns that emerge in the last few films I have made. Before this project I had only really made a couple more serious short films in undergraduate film school, but both had protagonists that were very similar and even situations that were quite analogous.

The first film I made out of this sort of strange ‘trilogy’ I now have created was about an Amish girl who goes to stay with a modern family in suburbia for a week, experiencing lots of culture shock. It was a similar fish-out-of-water story like this one and also at a time in a young woman’s life where she is ‘coming of age’. The title of the film was ‘Rumspringa’, which is the name of the Amish tradition where they let young people go into the modern world to experience what it is like, before they decide if they want to come back home and live that way for the rest of their lives. The protagonist is quite literally alienated visually in the film as she has a gigantic oversized bonnet on her head at all times that makes her look like some kind of extra-terrestrial.

My last film was also about a very awkward and timid young woman who works as a background actor on movie sets for a living. She is thrown into a ‘new’ environment where she feels very uncomfortable when she is set for a Victorian ballroom scene one day and is forced to mime flirting with a man she finds attractive. Like this film I have just completed, she is taken out of her normal daily life and immersed in a new world that is visually more overwhelming where she does not quite fit in with the social mores.

I fully intend to continue with some of these similar themes in my future work, partly because I enjoy so much to see a character explore a world that is completely foreign to them as I feel like I get to go on the adventure with them and live through them. I also have felt the fish-



out-of-water sentiment has applied to me for most of my life and I have not found a completely authentic way to tell stories without referencing that trope in some way. In future I hope that the protagonists in my films would embark on adventures that are more of their own design and have greater ambitions of their own going in. I also really enjoyed the way my thesis film differed from my last two films by creating an age gap dynamic between the two leads. I found this to be cinematically much more fulfilling and I think there are so many interesting tensions to explore in relationship dynamics such as this that are already so loaded. This gave me a lot more to chew on thematically than I had with my previous two protagonists falling for guys their own age.

## Modern Attitudes Toward Sexuality I Wanted to Explore

Recently I have become more interested in the effects that changing attitudes towards sex are having on people my age, particularly young women. Originally I had never thought about how eroticism has changed in modernity with much interest. It was only after I discovered Mario Varga Llosa's book *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*, that I was introduced to this topic through a more critical scrutiny. There was a specific chapter in the book titled 'The Disappearance of Eroticism' where Llosa laid out his observations about the way we talk about sex is changing. The chapter opened with a story about a masturbation workshop for teenagers which had been running in Spain since 2014. The specific political party responsible for creating this workshop was hoping to destigmatize sex for young people, to take away the shame and taboo that surrounded it. While an admirable goal, the existence of the workshop prompted certain questions about the western world's most progressive ideas regarding the function of eroticism in our culture. We have come a long way societally from the way people used to be shamed and forbidden from conversing about sex at all (women being shamed the most), and a lot of the old patriarchal values are being eroded for good reason.

The question Llosa posed was 'Is it possible to go too far in destigmatizing sex?' This question intrigued me a lot because I did not understand why in this case he thought that too much of a good thing could be a bad thing, especially when it involved progressive values.

It seems to make a lot of sense, that sexuality and eroticism needs some form of privacy and even a small degree of taboo in order to truly humanize it. Eroticism (ie the sophistication that sex has evolved to in human society) is what Llosa says separates humans from animals and pure animal instincts devoid of emotion.

What I took away from this the most, especially after reading about experiences of different young women with hook-up culture and talking with my friends, is that there seems to have been a separation in the public mind of sex and emotions.

The main character in my film is a person who is very confused by all of this and is not able to separate sex and emotions. I first thought to create a character like this after reading the masturbation workshop story. I was thinking it would be interesting to throw a person who has been extremely sheltered her entire life growing up in an environment where sex is very taboo, into a new world where sex is the only thing that everyone is talking about, and she is being encouraged from everywhere to accept her freedom to have casual sex as much as she wants and empower herself as a woman.

I think this is especially true for women, but what I really believe is that the story we are telling ourselves culturally about sexual liberation and freedom, does not always lead to greater fulfillment, and I think many people are left feeling very empty by hook-up culture. It does not seem right to say anything against it, because it is all about liberation and freedom to have casual sex all the time with no strings attached. I believe the truth of the matter however is that sex can never be completely separated from emotions in such a cold clinical sense. I really do think this affects women the most, as we are being told that in order to be good feminists we must exercise our freedoms to have as much casual sex as we want. I have read many stories from college-aged girls about how the emptiness of hook-up culture is leaving them feel very emotionally desperate and completely unfulfilled. Many of them hope that 'casual' hook-ups with no strings attached will lead to an emotional relationship down the line, even though that is often not the case at all. It is true there are certain people who really do enjoy just having tons of casual sex with no strings attached, but the issue starts when people who naively start believing casual sex

will lead them to a relationship try to use casual sex to fulfill an emotional need in themselves for love and connection. I think there are many more women than those who let on that secretly feel a desire to be connected in a more emotionally intimate way with their ‘casual’ sexual partner. I also think that this new strain of feminism has made them afraid to ask for what they want, because going against hook-up culture would be anti-feminist.

So many wonderful things have happened because of the sexual revolution, but I do believe that the pressure women put on themselves to have only casual sexual attachments with ‘no feelings involved’, in a sense to act more like men in this way and thereby achieve “platinum-level feminism” status, has left many feeling lonelier than ever and unfulfilled. A very intriguing article I read about this matter was written by a young female college student after doing a very large anonymous poll for the female college students at her school. The article, titled “Playing the Game” (Fessler, 2016) reviewed a lot of the same conclusions in its findings that I have mentioned above. In the article the author, Leah Fessler, stated of her experience with relationships at college:

“I soon came to believe that real relationships were impossible at Midd. I convinced myself I didn’t want one anyway. It wasn’t just the social pressure that drove me to buy into the commitment-free hook-up lifestyle, but my own identity as a feminist. The idea that sexual liberation is fundamental to female agency dominates progressive media. True feminists, I believed, not only wanted but also thrived on emotionless, non-committal sexual engagements” (Fessler, 2016).

The author then goes on to detail how she and all of her high-powered feminist friends, who were top students at school, felt completely disempowered in their relationships because anything that showed more commitment than casually hooking up with a guy would show some

kind of weakness or anti-feminism on their part. It was very saddening for me to read this girl speak about the experience of sleeping with a guy casually whom she had a crush on for a long period of time, but never feeling confident enough to speak up for what she wanted emotionally. She spoke about how her and other women she surveyed would inevitably get attached emotionally over time during these ‘casual hook-ups’ and would feel great shame and emptiness as a result of it.

I found this survey really astounding and hearing about these experiences that people who so desperately were longing for emotional intimacy, and becoming emotionally attached to the people they were casually hooking up with, were too afraid to go against the dominant ‘hook-up culture’ and ask for what they truly wanted deep down. She stated that out of the three hundred online surveys she conducted, it was very clear that 100% of female respondents had a stronger preference for committed relationships, and only 8% were happy with the pseudo-relationships they engaged in hooking up with guys (Fessler, 2016).

I found it to be very interesting that still so many women continually engage in hook-ups that do not fulfill them and tell themselves it does not matter to them emotionally when this is clearly often not the case.

Thinking about all of this is what inspired me to write the character of Rachael, an overly naïve young woman who fully believes that sexual intimacy equals emotional intimacy, and engages in hookup culture in a studious and clinical way, believing that there will be a reward at the end of it all and all of this will lead to the emotional fulfillment she actually wants so desperately.

I know a lot of what I have discussed in the last few pages in regards to these sociological conditions does not really all come across in the film, and I was really just touching the surface

of exploring what I have been speaking about at best, but I thought it would be appropriate to speak a bit more at length regarding what inspired me to make this film, regardless of how successful the result was.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried as best as I can to give a much clearer portrait of my intentions and desires with my thesis film, *Rachael and Tom*, and to lend support to back up all my creative decisions with the film as the writer and director.

Making this film has been the greatest learning experience for me in filmmaking so far, as it is the most ambitious project I have ever attempted. I learned a lot about my strengths and weaknesses as a filmmaker and what I want to work on in the future. Writing seems to be the absolute most difficult thing about the process for me at this stage, and it is certainly the area I have most room for improvement in when it comes to filmmaking.

I feel that after making this film I have a stronger sense of the kinds of stories I want to tell and the characters and worlds I want to explore, but at the same time I am really wanting to push many of these common themes I like to work with into newer territory so as to exercise my writing and directing muscles in ways I have not been able to yet.

Mostly I hope I may be able to commit to ideas earlier on even if they still need a lot of work and have not taken full form yet. I definitely learned from my graduate school experience that sometimes you have got to commit to what you have at some point if you ever want to get anywhere. I am really grateful I have been able to participate in this program, and I look forward to using all that I have learned the past two years making my thesis in my future work.

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