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Squirming in the Classroom

Fat Girl and the Ethical Value of Extreme Discomfort

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ

This essay sets up a parallel between two (by now) widespread ways to call for or claim unwatchability: censorship and so-called trigger warnings. My starting point is that the refusal or the prohibition to watch might sometimes not protect at all from what it is meant to protect from. Paradoxically, the gesture of averting one's eyes or covering one's ears can reproduce or even enforce a traumatic reaction. Just ask yourself: have you ever been haunted by what you have *not* seen, or only caught a glimpse of before looking away? A refusal to watch—whether planned and intentional, or a gut reaction in the moment—means to already be deeply affected by the image. And unless you also succeed in closing out the sounds, they may conjure terrifying images in your mind's eye. What is at stake is not actually the image itself but one's fantasy of it, possibly worse than what actual viewing would be. As queer film theorist Patricia MacCormack has noted in relation to extreme horror, "Even if the eyes are shut, the body is reacting."[1]

Indeed, there can be great ethical value in enduring and staying with extreme discomfort, to keep engaging, even when and sometimes especially when that discomfort derives from portrayals of gendered, sexualized, and/or racialized abuse and violence—rather than take such discomfort as a sign of an ethical need to *not* engage. I am not categorically against or for censorship or trigger warnings but see them as serving various purposes in various contexts.[2] In this essay, however, I ask if a refusal, a ban, or otherwise denied engagement based on a (potential) affective reaction can actually dramatize that reaction and obscure other issues that should require attention.

This question concretized in my experience of teaching the film *Fat Girl* (*À ma soeur!*, 2001), directed by Catherine Breillat. I screened the film for a course on theorizing the relations between media and the body that I taught in Finland in the spring of 2015. The course syllabus included trigger warnings—however, not as warnings about course content, but as a topic. The students read blog posts for and against trigger warnings, as well as the main points of an

empirical study by Martin Barker and his research group, who had been commissioned by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) to study audience reactions to five films that included sexually violent content.[3] One of those films was *Fat Girl*. The students were then asked to compare their own reactions and reflections to those of Barker and his group's respondents, as well as to form an opinion of whether trigger warnings or censorship were necessary in relation to the film.

Most of the students had not heard of trigger warnings before. However, the debates about depicting rape on film and television were a topic familiar to many of them, with TV series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–, HBO) attracting attention for "excessive" or "gratuitous" use of rape scenes as a narrative device. Also, *Fat Girl* ends in a notorious rape scene that has been the film's most debated feature and was censored in some countries.[4] In this scene, a twelve-year-old girl, Anaïs (Anaïs Reboux), is raped in the woods by a nameless male attacker after he has brutally killed her sister with an axe and strangled her mother at a rest stop by a highway. Afterward, Anaïs claims to the police that she was not raped, and the film ends in a long freeze frame of her face, while cheerful guitar music starts playing and continues in the background of the credits. Otherwise, the murder and rape scene has only the sounds of struggle and eerie ambient sounds of highway traffic. The scene can be interpreted to promote the deeply sexist idea that women who are raped actually "want it," but as Catherine Wheatley has suggested, it also alludes to broader problems in distinguishing between coercion and seduction within normative heterosexuality.[5]

In the course, the students were given access to the censored version of the film, and separately to the rape scene (which is about five minutes long). I did not require them to watch the rape scene, but all of them chose to do so. They were, however, required to reflect on what kind of an ethical engagement a refusal to watch could and could not be. Most students articulated their extreme discomfort while watching the film, but they also claimed that this was exactly how it should be, since sexual abuse and violence on-screen should make the viewer squirm—that is how the body reacts ethically. Since they viewed the rape scene after having seen the censored film, they were in agreement that the scene was "not as bad" as they had imagined it might be.

Instead of the rape scene, many of the students wanted to discuss the more insidious sexual abuse elsewhere in the film, particularly a lengthy scene earlier in the film where a young

man (Libero De Rienzo) pressures Anaïs' fifteen-year-old sister Elena (Roxane Mesquida) to have sex with him, with Anaïs in the room. To the students, it seemed hypocritical that the scene that directly portrayed rape was censored while the scene about blurry consent was not even an issue, as the two scenes seemed purposefully parallel to each other. They also echo each other audiovisually: both feature a prolonged medium close-up shot of the "couple," with the unmoving camera on their right side, without any non-diegetic sound, as if the scene was unfolding in real time in front of the frozen viewer. The very long scene (about twenty-five minutes) with Elena, where sexual persuasion gradually turns into coercion, allows only a brief moment of apparent release when the camera moves to Anaïs's face as the young man presumably penetrates Elena. The viewer sees Anaïs's blank face but hears the sounds of Elena's screams, shortly replaced by the man's moans of pleasure. In my own viewing experience, however, the shift in the camera's view only opened up space for even more disturbing images, memories of similar dynamics perhaps having been played out on my body at some point in my life, instead of making the viewing experience any easier. Many of the students expressed that the viewer had to see both of the two scenes in order to understand the juxtaposition, and I wholeheartedly agreed.

We also discussed how censorship as well as trigger or content warnings seem to address only relatively easily identifiable things represented in an easily identifiable way, like rape depicted as a shocking act of violence by a stranger in the woods, but not more subtle scenes or structures of abuse. At least the rape scene in *Fat Girl* was clearly about rape and the coercion scene was clearly meant to make viewers squirm. In contrast, a lot of films and TV series have scenarios where a male hero forcefully kisses a woman who, after struggling for a bit, "melts" into the kiss and the "seduction"—one classic example being the kiss that Han Solo forces on Princess Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), disregarding her requests to stop, with romantic music swelling in the background. In these much more common instances, the framing is that of a sweet encounter and audience is even expected to go "awww." In *Fat Girl*, we all agreed, there were absolutely no "awww" moments.

The comparisons with other viewers' reactions, obtained through Barker et al.'s empirical research, made it easier to take some distance from one's own affective reactions, think through their background and potential effects, and avoid the trap of elevating singular personal experiences to anecdotal evidence of how the "audience" perceives the film. This brings us back

to the trigger warning debate: how both the pro–trigger warning side and the anti–trigger warning side have been accused of an overemphasis on interiority and the personal, a me-me-me attitude. The pro–trigger warning side has been criticized for idealization and overemphasis of individual victimhood; the possibility of some individuals being traumatized overrides a broader possibility of discussing difficult and hurtful matters in a productive way.[6] The anti–trigger warning side, however, has also been seen to demand individual responsibility for the ability to cope with offensive or disturbing material, and to learn enough tools to deal.[7] Without drawing on empirical studies of how different viewers actually react to and reflect on media products, it is too easy to make policies and claim injury based on *figures* of traumatized audiences. Barker et al.'s study showed, for example, the BBFC had made its censorship or "unwatchability" decisions based solely on "Refuser" responses, ignoring "Embracers" who saw transformative ethical value in extreme discomfort.[8]

The language of trigger warnings, just like the language of prohibition, should be seen as performative. Through the circulation and repetitive framing of certain kinds of scenes as triggering, traumatizing, or "unwatchable," they also become *experienced* as traumatizing. This is not to say that the experiences are not real, deeply felt, and worth taking seriously. But this short reflection on teaching in a context where trigger warnings were *not* (yet) an issue raises uncomfortable questions about the degree to which the very discourse of triggering can produce figures of (potentially) traumatized audiences, and specific kinds of scenes as traumatizing, while ignoring the simultaneous coercion and seduction in others.

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[1]. Patricia MacCormack, "Pleasure, Perversion and Death: Three Lines of Flight for the Viewing Body" (PhD diss., Monash University, 2000), 140.

[2]. For more discussion on why an against-or-for approach is not productive in my view, see Katariina Kyrölä, "Toward a Contextual Pedagogy of Pain. Trigger Warnings and the Value of Sometimes Feeling Really, Really Bad," *Lambda Nordica: Nordic Journal on LGBTQ Studies* 1 (2015): 131–144, www.lambdanordica.se/wp-content/uploads/were-here2.pdf.

[3]. Martin Barker et al., *Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales, 2007); Jack Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me! The Neoliberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma," *BullyBloggers*, July 5, 2014,

https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/; Valéria M. Souza, "Triggernometry," *It's Complicated*, May 21, 2014, http://valeriamsouza.wordpress.com/2014/05/21/triggernometry/.

[4]. For a summary of the academic discussion around *Fat Girl* and its depiction of rape, see Catherine Wheatley, "Contested Interactions: Watching Catherine Breillat's Scenes of Sexual Violence," *Journal of Cultural Research* 14, no. 1 (2010): 27–41.

[5]. Ibid., 28.

[6]. E.g., Halberstam, "You Are Triggering Me!"

[7]. E.g., Natalia Cecire, "On the 'Neoliberal Rhetoric of Harm,'" July 7, 2014, http://nataliacecire.blogspot.fi/2014/07/on-neoliberal-rhetoric-of-harm.html.

[8]. See also Martin Barker, "The Challenge of Censorship: 'Figuring' Out the Audience," *Velvet Light Trap* 63 (2009): 58–60.