

**Not Another True Crime:
Creative Practice,
Survivor Collaboration,
and the Challenges of Representation.**

by Blue Lucine

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of Rachel Landers and Bettina Frankham

University of Technology Sydney
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

July 2025

Certificate of original authorship

I, Blue Lucine, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Date: 4 July 2025

Acknowledgements

To Niki Wilkie, the film's subject and my enduring inspiration, I am profoundly thankful for your trust and courage in sharing your story. Your strength has been the heart of this project. This is what we train for, my friend.

I express my deepest gratitude to my principal supervisor, Rachel Landers, for your guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support throughout this journey. Thank you for making me do the hard things. To my co-supervisor, Bettina Frankham, thank you for your thoughtful and dedicated mentorship. Your attention to detail and accountability for my writing were invaluable, and you have enriched this work immeasurably.

To Lynette Wallworth and Larissa Behrendt, thank you for your feedback on the film; your insights helped shape the work in important ways.

Finally, to my loves, Willian, Raphaella, and my baby boy on the way, you are my greatest motivators—thank you for your endless love, patience, and belief in me. You have been my anchor and my inspiration every step of the way.

Copy-editing services were provided by Peter Blamey.

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Abstract

The relationship between a documentary's subject and its maker is critical in shaping the film that emerges. This relationship impacts the way a subject is represented on screen and determines the subject's agency; however, it is mostly invisible to those outside the project. This creative practice PhD investigates the relationship between documentary makers and subjects in a sub-genre of true crime films, focusing on individuals who have experienced sexual assault and abuse. Since the #MeToo movement gained significant attention in June 2017, there has been exponential growth in this subsection of the documentary field. In this context, risks arising from power imbalances between maker and subject and the need to ensure informed consent are heightened. My research interrogates my practice and relationship with the documentary subject, Niki Wilkie. The accompanying film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, combines footage from our projects and explores methods of representation, informed consent, and the relationship between maker and subject. My written thesis critically analyses prominent works in the genre of true crime sexual assault films within a conceptual framework that combines critical analysis and creative practice. The feature film offers a distinct perspective on the evolution of our maker-subject relationship. It acts as a longitudinal examination of our filmmaking partnership spanning over ten years and multiple projects, while also shedding light on innovative strategies for consent negotiations. Additionally, it provides insight into the subject's personal experience during the filming process and the lasting effects of having key events documented on camera.

Keywords: creative practice, documentary, film theory, modes of address, survivor stories

Chapter 1. Introduction

The Research Landscape

Context

Since 2010, I have actively engaged in documentary filmmaking, navigating the intricate and evolving landscape of factual storytelling. As a female filmmaker, my viewpoint is influenced by my experiences and the challenges and opportunities present in a field traditionally dominated by male voices. My research is informed by over a decade of experience in documentary work, particularly within the ethically complex world of true crime documentaries. Although true crime has emerged as a cultural phenomenon, especially in the digital era, it remains highly controversial regarding how it handles victims, their narratives, and their traumas.

This research is by creative practice, driven by a critical questions that guided my approach:

Can you make a true crime documentary without causing harm to the victim?

I also developed focus questions that my research aims to engage with:

1. In what ways can a long-term collaborative process with a survivor reshape the ethical and aesthetic framework of a true crime documentary?
2. How can true crime be reimagined through a survivor-centred, creative practice approach to documentary filmmaking?

3. What are the ethical and creative implications of documenting a sexual assault survivor's story over a decade-long collaboration?

These questions arose through the practical and ethical challenges I encountered while creating my creative practice output film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, a documentary that spans ten years of storytelling and collaboration with Niki Wilkie, a survivor of a sexual crime. This extended timeframe allowed for a deep engagement with the ethical, relational, and creative complexities inherent when representing trauma¹ on screen.

Ethical dilemmas of filmmaking in a true crime setting

My work is situated within a rising subgenre of true crime: sexual assault and abuse films. I am defining true crime documentary to be a non-fiction film about a crime that has happened in the world. My work is defined as true crime as my main character experiences a crime and undergoes two Supreme Court trials. Phoebe Morton addresses the question of what is a true crime documentary, in her article “Stylistic choices in true-crime documentaries: the duty of responsibility between filmmaker and audience” where she uses definitions from Regina Austin and establishes “A true-crime documentary is a law-genre documentary,” defined as “‘true’ or ‘real’ stories or narratives, to which the law is a point of departure, a central organizing theme”(Morton, 2021, p. 240). Morton uses this in conjunction with the stance from Cynthia Bond that “the recognition of a documentary comes from the viewer’s ‘knowledge’ that what they are watching is a law documentary, rather than by the application of certain criteria; the viewer’s understanding that what they are watching falls within their own definition of a documentary is essential to the documentary form” (Morton, 2021, p. 241). I

¹ For this thesis will define trauma as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience” causing significant impact after a crime.

Detailed examination and unpicking's of the term are outside the scope of this thesis.

am not looking at the style or approach to define something as true crime, and my practice subverts many of the traditional true crime techniques. True crime has become a supergenre and there has been excellent exploration of its evolution, including the rise of what Cassandra Dana calls 'radical true crime'. Dana explores these ideas in her 2025 dissertation "Radical True Crime: The Formation of Entertainment as Resistance". "Unlike dominant true crime, which reinforces carceral logic and state-sanctioned definitions of crime, Radical True Crime interrogates the systems that produce criminality and questions whose narratives and evidence are deemed legitimate." (Dana, 2025, p. 8)

The true crime genre, while immensely popular, is often critiqued for its exploitative tendencies; sensationalising violence, prioritising narrative entertainment over ethical responsibility, and silencing the voices of those most affected by the crimes depicted. Academics like Stella Bruzzi and Vivian Sobchack have explored the appeal of true crime, noting its blend of fact and drama, which keeps viewers engaged while delving into criminal psychology and justice (Bruzzi, 2006; Sobchack, 1999). However, the genre also faces ethical scrutiny, particularly concerning re-enactments and the potential for sensationalism. Critics like Brian Winston (2000) argue that dramatisations can compromise documentary authenticity, while others, including Bruzzi, point out the dangers of commodifying real-life trauma (Bruzzi, 2006). Bruzzi's work emphasises the constructed nature of documentaries, challenging their claim to objectivity. In her analysis of works like *The Staircase* (2004) and *Making a Murderer* (2015), she identifies a core concern with the portrayal of law, evidence, and miscarriages of justice. Scholars such as Patricia Aufderheide and Marissa Woods critique the oversimplification and dramatisation of evidence in the genre, arguing that it sensationalises content merely for audience appeal. This has the potential to oversimplify complex realities. They contend that these practices can shift documentaries toward entertainment rather than education, raising ethical questions about truth and audience

manipulation (Aufderheide & Woods, 2021). Elizabeth Walters (2021) has argued that the genre frequently reinforces harmful power dynamics, positioning victims as passive subjects rather than as active agents in their own stories. Stella Bruzzi explores how documentaries depict trauma and addresses the ethical challenges of recounting actual tragedies. She contends that presenting traumatic events in true crime documentaries can, at times, cause further trauma to both victims and their families, rendering the impact of the genre a sensitive ethical issue (Bruzzi, 2020). Although my film departs from many of the formal and thematic conventions typically associated with true crime, particularly its historical fixation on perpetrators, forensic detail, and narrative suspense, it remains deeply embedded within the genre's discursive framework. Drawing on Rick Altman's (1999) genre theory, which conceptualises genre as a fluid system of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements negotiated among text, audience, and industry, I argue that the film constitutes a generically legible intervention. By re-centring the narrative around the victim's subjectivity and positioning her not as a passive object of violence but as the story's emotional and moral centre, the film reorients the genre toward a more ethical mode of storytelling. This shift does not disqualify it as a true crime text; rather, following Jason Mittell's (2004) understanding of genre as a cultural category shaped by critical discourse and audience engagement, the film participates in the genre by expanding its representational possibilities. In privileging the victim's voice and resisting the genre's historical tendencies toward sensationalism or voyeurism, the film reconfigures true crime not through negation but through ethical rearticulation. My creative practice engages deeply with feminist theory and trauma studies, aligning its narrative strategies with an ethics of care and a trauma-informed² approach to

² The term trauma-informed is used by Natalie Bullock Brown and other practitioners and scholars, so I have adopted this term, as meaning aware of how the participant has already experienced trauma, and conscious of treating it with care, describing an approach that places the needs of the participant ahead of the needs of the film.

representation, which will be explored in Chapter 2, my literature review. Following feminist documentary traditions that foreground female subjectivity and agency (French, 2018), the film reinscribes the victim not as a passive witness but as an active moral and political agent. The work fosters an intersubjective witnessing wherein care, responsibility, and compassion structure the spectator's engagement. The film's handling of trauma consciously invokes psychoanalytic and cultural approaches to memory and testimony (Caruth, 1995), attending to the ethical difficulties of articulating traumatic experience without exploiting its affective power. By situating the victim's voice at the centre and embracing the ethical responsibilities of representation (Piotrowska, 2023), the film attempts to critique true crime's dominant paradigms, not through sensational spectacle but through feminist-ethical and trauma-informed storytelling practice.

Since #MeToo went viral in 2017, there has been a rising focus on the issue of sexual abuse and assault in society. Many survivors have come forward to share their stories, and a new genre wave of crime documentaries has inundated our screens. In these stories, the victim is still alive, compared to the majority of true crime, which features deceased victims of crime. This distinction highlights a gap in the existing scholarship about victim representation in crime documentaries.

Research Aims

Framing the central research question

My research aims to address this gap by exploring the representation of living victims in true crime documentaries in the subgenre of films about sexual crimes. I am interested in how the relationship between the maker and the subject of the documentary may impact this representation. I also engage with consent practices, questions of autonomy, and the

participant experience. My research challenges dominant paradigms present in documentary, aiming instead to privilege the victim's voice and experience respectfully and with empowerment.

By foregrounding Niki's perspective and collaborating closely with her throughout the filmmaking process, I sought to subvert traditional hierarchies of power in documentary production. This approach is grounded in feminist ethics, which advocate for participatory and reflexive methodologies to address imbalances of power and representation. Feminist scholars, including Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991), highlight the dangers of a voyeuristic gaze, wherein filmmakers assume the position of an external observer, wielding interpretive authority over the subject's life and experiences. It also aligns with trauma-informed principles championed by Atkinson (2023), Bowie (2013), Kezelman and Stavropoulos (2012), and Sunderland et al. (2023), who emphasise the importance of agency, consent, and sensitivity when working with survivors of sexual violence. I explore what trauma-informed means more deeply in the Ethical Framework section of my Research Design and Approach in Chapter Three, Methodology. This, and the other principles will be explored in detail later in the thesis.

Making documentaries about victims of crime often involves navigating a delicate tension between the need to engage audiences and the ethical imperative to protect and prioritise the well-being of the victims depicted. This is particularly salient in cases involving participants in recovery from trauma from sexual abuse and assault, where the risks of re-traumatisation, misrepresentation, or exploitation are significant. My project situates itself within this contested territory, exploring how creative practice might serve as a mode of inquiry into these ethical dilemmas. The process of creating *Niki! Shot by Blue* became both an artistic endeavour and an

opportunity to critically interrogate the role of the filmmaker in shaping, mediating, and sharing traumatic stories on screen.

Research goals

Through this research, I aim to contribute to ongoing conversations about ethics in documentary practice, offering a potential model for how filmmakers can adopt a trauma-informed and feminist approach to storytelling. By engaging critically with questions of power, representation, and agency, my work aims to provide insights relevant to this subgenre of true crime filmmaking and to broader practices of ethical storytelling and creative research. My film also offers a unique chance to examine the relationship between the maker and subject of a documentary, which is rarely revealed to the audience.

The project aims to:

1. Develop new knowledge around negotiating consent practices in the context of documentary film that seeks to optimise the experience and outcome for the participant.
2. Function as a tool for best practice in the field, especially in the case of victims of crime.
3. Produce findings that can form the basis for a prospective white paper for funding bodies and broadcasters in developing guidelines for working with victims of crime.
4. Be adaptable to different contexts in terms of creative output.

The case for my research: why it matters

The case for this research lies at the intersection of ethical storytelling, feminist creative practice, and the social responsibility of true crime media. True crime documentaries have

surged in popularity, captivating audiences with their exploration of justice, morality, and human behaviour (Bruzzi, 2016; Walters, 2021). However, this genre has faced significant criticism for its tendency to exploit trauma, sensationalise victimhood, and perpetuate harmful stereotypes (Mellins & Moore, 2021). These critiques raise urgent questions about the ethical frameworks guiding true crime storytelling and highlight a need for methodologies that prioritise the dignity, agency, and well-being of survivors.

This research matters because it addresses these ethical challenges by proposing innovative approaches to documentary filmmaking within true crime narratives. By integrating feminist principles, trauma-informed practices, and reflexive³ methods, this research seeks to contribute to a more responsible and equitable way of representing individuals whose stories intersect with sexual crimes. Beyond its academic contributions, this research might also offer practical insights for filmmakers and media professionals, and may help empower them to reimagine their creative processes in ways that centre collaboration and respect. The film *Niki! Shot by Blue* tacitly demonstrates that a documentary can be made in collaboration with a victim, privilege her voice, and also be an engaging story. Respecting the victim does not mean a compromise for the audience.

The work resonates within broader societal discourses on media accountability. As documentaries play an increasingly prominent role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice, the ethical implications of their production become critical. By foregrounding issues of agency, consent, and representation, this

³ By reflexive, I mean a critical, ongoing awareness of my own role, perspective, assumptions and influence within the creative and research processes. It involves reflecting on and within the practice, acknowledging I am not a neutral observer, I am an active agent shaping the work, the knowledge it produces and how that knowledge is interpreted.

research challenges dominant paradigms and contributes to a larger cultural shift toward ethical media practices.

The warrant for inquiry

The warrant for this inquiry is founded on the gaps in both practice and scholarship that this research seeks to address. In the realm of true crime media, current practices often fail to foreground the voices of survivors or consider the long-term impact of media representation on individuals and communities, which I will examine in more detail in Chapter Three. The urgency of these issues is amplified by the cultural reach of true crime narratives, which frequently inform societal attitudes about victims, perpetrators, and justice systems.

Academically, there is limited scholarship that bridges creative practice, ethics, and feminist theory in the specific context of this subsection of true crime documentaries. This research contributes to filling that gap by offering a methodology that not only critiques existing practices but also provides an alternative model grounded in lived experience and relational ethics.

Additionally, the warrant for inquiry extends to the field of creative practice research. This study demonstrates how practice-led approaches could generate new knowledge, not only in filmmaking but also in the ethical representation of survivors of sexual crimes. The reflexive process of co-creating meaning with participants highlights the potential for creative research to serve as a vehicle for ethical and theoretical advancement. Overall, this research is warranted by its potential to contribute meaningful advancements to the fields of documentary ethics, creative practice research, and true crime documentary while also addressing urgent societal and cultural concerns about the ethical responsibilities of media creators.

The Narrative of My Research

Personal motivation and research journey

Ever since I can remember, I have been passionate about telling stories, but I could never decide on which way to tell them. I started in the world of fiction, writing plays, novellas, and poems. I moved on to travelling circuses and sideshows, then to hard news in commercial newsrooms; I also pursued traditional and experimental theatre, fiction, and nonfiction films. I undertook my Bachelor of Arts in Communications (Theatre/Media) in Bathurst, where I studied circus arts, mumming, filmmaking, and journalism. I also spent a semester abroad at the State University of New York, focusing on film direction. After graduation, I travelled through Europe to attend clown school in Spain. Later, I pursued a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Technology, Sydney, where I developed an interest in true crime writing.

During this time, I also worked as a story producer and broadcast news editor at Channel Nine. After becoming disheartened by the state of commercial newsrooms, the lack of diverse stories, and the questionable ethics I encountered, I resigned and accepted a place at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, specialising in documentary. The year was 2013; Malcolm Turnbull was the Minister for Technology, and Edward Snowden leaked NSA wiretapping information. My storytelling focus turned solely to documentary film, and for the next decade, I filmed, edited, produced, and directed documentaries. Documentary encouraged me to utilise all my skills: cinematography, editing, directing, clowning, producing, and research. After eight years of work and study searching for the right mix of mediums, I felt I had finally found my creative home and the search was over. Or so I thought.

Reflections on a decade of documentary practice

As my career progressed and I worked on projects with a larger backing, I faced complicated ethical conundrums. Well-funded projects were often attached to stakeholders who had vested interests. The creative team had to adhere to obligations placed on the project by the production house, which then reported to the broadcaster. Within the broadcaster itself, another hierarchy needed to be appeased. When engaging with real individuals sharing their personal stories, a substantial amount of time is devoted to the ‘getting to know you’ phase. A key difference I observed was the time pressure that pervaded the filmmaking process. This urgency affected how long you could dedicate to ‘getting to know’ the participants, as well as their ability to completely grasp the project and consent to the filming.

The notion of emotional labour in documentary filmmaking has been researched by Grindstaff (2002) and Melzer (2019), especially regarding the ethical and psychological hurdles filmmakers encounter and the relationships between filmmakers and subjects. Laura Grindstaff (2002) notes that the emotional labour involved in documentaries results from the interactions between creators and subjects. This labour often requires handling one’s emotions and those of others to maintain a constructive and ethically responsible working environment. Her analysis builds on Arlie Hochschild’s (2002) original idea of emotional labour, initially developed within the service industry, and extends it to the creative and cultural sectors, where effectively managing emotional dynamics is crucial for storytelling.

Kym Melzer (2019) expands upon this understanding specifically within the context of documentary filmmaking, emphasising the emotional toll experienced by filmmakers who engage deeply with traumatic or sensitive content. This research highlights that emotional labour in documentary filmmaking transcends mere relationship management; it also involves navigating ethical dilemmas and personal vulnerabilities, particularly when addressing trauma or sensitive topics. These insights bear significant implications for my research, as my

focus is on ethical storytelling and the representation of a victim's trauma in true crime documentaries. Filmmaker and scholar Emily Coleman has been researching the long-term damage caused by broadcasters' lack of recognition of emotional labour and how that negatively impacts both filmmakers and their participants. Her research reveals that without support from broadcasters, filmmakers are unable to adequately support their subjects after the release of the production, which is when most issues tend to arise (E. R. Coleman, 2023). Coleman reported that this would often be in the form of a salacious title that the subjects felt did them a disservice and misrepresented their story, or a marketing strategy that selected the most emotional and distressing or controversial moments and used them without context to advertise the program. Her research also highlights the risks to participants when the filmmakers they are working with do not have any training or experience in dealing with trauma.

When I was working for production houses as an associate producer in the early years of my career, I was often thrust into complex situations with participants, holding a fistful of release forms and strict instructions to obtain a signature. The projects that caused me the most inner conflict included participants who were abusing substances and/or experiencing domestic abuse or experiencing homelessness. In my opinion, the participants were vulnerable, often lonely and enjoyed speaking with me because it made them feel heard and important. There were a lot of times when I did not want to ask for a signature, as the circumstances did not feel fair. I was concerned that the participants may not have fully comprehended what they were agreeing to and might have signed the release form just to please me.

In one particular instance, I was instructed to enter a hospital room where a young woman, who had been brought in while under the influence of methamphetamine, was sleeping after medical sedation. My role was to wait for her to

awaken and then seek her consent to be filmed for the documentation of the intake process for the mental health ward, which would commence once the doctors entered the room. The series director was adamant about obtaining her consent early on to avoid expending resources on filming individuals who might ultimately not be included in the project due to consent issues. The challenges of budgetary constraints and time pressures led to instances where the project's objectives conflicted with the needs of the participants. On another occasion, the production team needed to wait outside a participant's home to obtain a signature. My ability to fulfil my role depended on gaining the consent of potential participants, which sometimes put my professional goals at odds with the participants' needs. The realisation that the documentary industry was not exempt from the same ethical concerns that had led me to leave Channel Nine was disheartening. For years, I worked in the documentary television and film industry, continually grappling with ethical dilemmas as I navigated the conflicting requirements of directors, production houses, broadcasters, and the needs of participants.

Origins of the project

In 2020, I was disheartened by my experiences in my career and considered a permanent exit from the documentary industry to retrain as a police officer. Instead, I initiated this research project with the goal of discovering more ethical approaches to working. My research was initially concerned with the imbalance of privilege and power in observational documentaries, my favourite style of cinematography and documentary storytelling. The aforementioned experiences with vulnerable participants from the television programs I had worked with over the years still haunted me. I decided to undertake creative practice-based research. Over time, the research evolved to focus on how to create films with people who

were vulnerable and, more specifically, how to make a film with a victim of sexual abuse in the context of a true crime documentary.

I first met Niki Wilkie in 2014, when she was one of three participants in the documentary *Skimpy* (Thomas, 2014), and I was hired as a camera operator. Following my Graduate Diploma in Documentary from AFTRS the previous year, this marked my first major camera role. The broadcast of the film on the ABC resulted in Niki being fired from her representation, for appearing topless in pubs where it was not legal to do so. Without support from the company, Niki found it extremely difficult to find work at reputable pubs and bars. She moved to Darwin in 2017 and in June she was sexually assaulted during a job at a Buck's party. Niki and I made four additional films exploring her experiences with the aftermath of sexual assault and the justice system from 2018-2021. I have provided a timeline of events in the Appendix of this thesis for a detailed sequence of events. The connection Niki and I formed during this period served as valuable research material and provided me with immeasurable insight, a valuable underpinning to my filmmaking and wider relationship.

Due to legal issues, only one film was released as originally intended. As a result, I had a decade's worth of footage, much of it unseen. I took on the task of editing this unused footage, aiming to tell a bigger story: how to create a true crime documentary that privileged the voice of the victim. This process also allowed me to reflect on my craft and its evolution over the years, examining how my cinematic perspective and approach shifted from 2014 to 2024. I aimed to explore how vulnerable participants are represented, how audience allyship is fostered, the experiences of participants during filmmaking, their autonomy, and the consent practices essential when working with vulnerable individuals. My creative research

film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, subtly examines representation through various narrative styles and factual storytelling modes. It encourages viewers to reflect on the relationship between documentary filmmakers and their subjects, highlighting the film's distinctive impact on both.

My stance

My perspective is rooted in a constructivist ontology and a relational epistemology, which shape my methods in documentary filmmaking and academic research. My stance is that documentary seeks to balance factual, legal, and emotional truths while ethically portraying sensitive issues. In my research, this implies recognising that the narrative formed in my documentary is collaboration between me as the filmmaker and Niki as the subject. This viewpoint is consistent with feminist and reflexive approaches to knowledge production, highlighting the connection between personal experiences, power dynamics, and storytelling.

This approach is realised through my methodology, which adopts creative practice as research, both as a theoretical foundation and as a means of investigation. My documentary is not merely a completed artefact; it acts as an evolving platform to examine how relational ethics, reflexivity, and trauma-informed methods influence true-crime storytelling. A key element is my ethical commitment to minimise exploitation or harm, embodying the feminist principles of shared authority and mutual respect in both research and creative practice endeavours.

Research Structure

Chapter 2 is a literature review, which examines scholarship surrounding the interactions between documentary filmmakers and their subjects, focusing on crucial ethical

considerations such as changing consent practices and privacy issues. It will investigate the true crime genre and subgenre of films focusing on sexual crimes, noting its associated risks, challenges, and effects on victims. Additionally, the review will explore observational and hybrid documentary modes, looking into how they influence the relationship between filmmakers and subjects, as well as the subject's on-screen representation. It will also address recent research on consent practices, revised guidelines, and the current state of documentary studies related to the filmmaker-subject dynamic. Furthermore, the review will present innovative and contemporary approaches for engaging with vulnerable subjects in the documentary practice.

The third chapter establishes my methods and explains how I used creative practice and critical analysis. It establishes my stance in relation to the methodology. This project's creative practice component involved producing a documentary that adopts an embodied and respectful approach to storytelling. The film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, strives to balance the need for factual accuracy with the necessity of enabling the victim to act as the authoritative voice of her own story. This documentary serves as both a creative project and an exploration of ethical storytelling practices regarding the portrayal of sexual assault. Moreover, it is essential for the film to both engage and captivate its viewers. The methods employed in the filmmaking process are influenced by my viewpoint and insights gleaned from the critical examination of existing true crime documentaries.

In Chapter 4, I conduct a critical analysis of other true crime documentaries that address sexual assault and abuse. This analysis identifies prevalent ethical challenges in the genre, including backlash against participants, consent issues, and the marginalisation of victims' voices through various representational tropes and narratives, spotlighting how these works either perpetuate or combat harmful

depictions of victims, particularly women and children. Drawing on the identified tropes from my critical analysis, I explored ways to avoid using them, particularly the “rescue” and “protector” narratives. The analysis also provides a insightful framework for evaluating and enhancing my creative choices. By critically engaging with the work of other filmmakers, I demonstrate how my documentary seeks to avoid these ethical missteps, aiming for a trauma-informed approach that empowers the victim.

Chapter 5 explores insights from my creative practice research film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*. I recommend you watch the film (duration: 71 minutes) before reading this chapter. It is at a rough-cut stage, which means it is not ready for industry-standard release. The findings are grounded in the practical challenges and ethical questions that emerged during this project. They reflect my technical and artistic growth, as well as my critical engagement with feminist theory and documentary ethics. These themes are explored in three areas: I examine the evolution of my cinematography, noting how my perspective has shifted in relation to Niki. I analyse my editing strategies, on-screen representation, and documentary modes to understand audience engagement and subjects’ experiences. I also explore informed consent through consultation and collaboration with Niki and how negotiating informed consent involves securing initial agreement and maintaining communication to respond to legal changes and her mental health. This chapter reflects on these choices and their related ethical considerations, balancing artistic expression with responsibility toward Niki.

The conclusion integrates insights from the literature review with my critical analysis and findings from creative practice I reflect on my dual role as a filmmaker and researcher, highlighting how these roles have evolved throughout this project. Together, my work demonstrates how a multifaceted ethical framework might help filmmakers responsibly depict victims and trauma while fostering empowering narratives that connect with audiences. By synthesising the research, I hope to provide relevant insights into ethical

practices pertinent to documentary filmmaking, enhancing dialogues about creative research methodologies and documentary ethics.

Scope and Limitations

Defining the boundaries of the research

This research focuses on the production and analysis of the documentary *Niki! Shot by Blue*, which chronicles one subject's experiences over ten years. The study is geographically limited to the locations significant to the subject's narrative and excludes external contexts unrelated to her story. This research adopts a creative practice approach, using reflexive filmmaking as both a methodological and theoretical lens. The study does not engage in quantitative analyses or attempt to compare multiple documentary genres but instead seeks depth in a single case study. While the research explores trauma-informed filmmaking and feminist ethics, it does not provide a comprehensive survey of broader documentary genres and practices or represent all victim-centred narratives in true crime media.

Acknowledging challenges and ethical complexities

I encountered constraints and obstacles during the research process, and I acknowledge they may have influenced the findings. I faced significant ethical dilemmas while working with a trauma survivor, particularly regarding power dynamics, consent, and representation. Given the subject's evolving emotional and legal circumstances, a significant ethical complexity was the continuous negotiation of informed consent. This required balancing the subject's agency with the narrative demands of the documentary and monitoring her well-being throughout. As a filmmaker employing reflexive methods, my subjectivity inevitably influenced the narrative structure and interpretation of the events. While this allowed for a

more empathetic and feminist perspective, it also posed challenges in maintaining a balance between creative expression and scholarly rigour.

Another challenge was the subject matter of the critical analysis and literature review. I spent a lot of time watching and reading descriptions of sexual assault and abuse and researching how the legal system disproportionately served perpetrators rather than victims. Over time, this negatively impacted my mental health. At many times during the project, I felt despondent and overwhelmed by the state of injustice in the world, and the research was depressing. This required me to space out working on the critical analysis, as the topic was becoming too confronting and distressing.

The decade-long timespan of the project introduced logistical challenges, such as changes in equipment, which meant the film had to use six different film codecs for editing and lacked a cohesive aesthetic. I incorporated this into the story and leaned into the evolving nature of the project and its visual style.

Limitations

I did not have funding to complete the film and have not yet finished it to a publishable standard. Niki has commenced working as a Pilot truck driver in Western Australia, and I wish to have this scene as the closing part of the film. However, I gave birth to a daughter in December 2023 and have not been able to travel to film Niki before submission. I have booked a crew and will be shooting the final scenes of her working with trucks at the mines in September 2025. The creative practice film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, is being presented for examination at the rough-cut stage due to these financial and logistical constraints. I am seeking finishing funds, and my goal is to complete the film to a publishable standard by the end of 2026. As the film has not yet been publicly released, I am unable to assess audience reception or document Niki's response to its public circulation. Consequently, these elements

fall outside the scope of this thesis. However, this does not undermine the project's contribution to knowledge. My research centres on the *process* of making the film, which generated significant insights into my creative practice; the production itself became a mode of inquiry. While the film functions as both an artefact and a record of that learning, it is the creative process, such as the encounters, decisions, and ethical negotiations, that constitutes the core of my investigation. Although future release and audience engagement will enrich the project further, they are not its primary locus of meaning. My inquiry is grounded in practice-based methodologies that privilege the epistemic value of making. This involved developing ways of working ethically with a participant navigating the aftermath of a sexual assault court trial. The research is confined to Niki's experience during filming, post-production, and reflective discussion. Nevertheless, I draw on her responses to prior film's publications and distribution—*Skimpy*, *Judged*, and *Asking For It*—to contextualise her evolving relationship with narrative exposure and identity. These references, explored further in Chapter 5 **Consent Practices** offer additional insight into the dynamics of representation and participant agency. Despite the absence of public reception data, I argue that the project's creative practice retains its value by contributing an in-depth, process-driven exploration of ethics, authorship, and storytelling within the true crime genre.

While the research provides insights into trauma-informed documentary practices with the victim featured in a true crime documentary, its findings are specific to the narrative and experiences of one subject. Therefore, it should be approached with caution regarding generalisability to broader contexts in true crime filmmaking.

These limitations do not undermine the value of my research but rather position it as part of a nuanced and situated approach to creative practice. Although the scope of this study is necessarily narrow, focusing on a single subject and documentary process, its contribution lies in providing an in-depth exploration of

ethical filmmaking practices that foreground the subject's voice. These limitations highlight the contextual nature of this research and its role in advancing discussions around feminist and trauma-informed methodologies.

Significance of the Research

Implications for creative practice research

This research may play a role in the field of creative practice research by showcasing how documentary filmmaking can serve as a valuable methodological tool for investigating ethical dilemmas in storytelling. Utilising a reflexive approach alongside feminist perspectives, this study presents a framework that combines practice-based inquiry with theoretical analysis. It illustrates how creative works like the documentary *Niki! Shot by Blue* can act not just as a storytelling instrument but also as a key contributor to the development of new insights into ethical media production and representation. This project highlights the ability of creative practitioners to critically analyse and innovate in their art form, thus enhancing methodologies within practice-led research areas.

Reimagining ethics in media representation

Through its emphasis on trauma-informed and feminist approaches to filmmaking, this research aims to challenge existing paradigms in true crime and documentary ethics. It advocates for greater attention to subjects' agency and collaborative frameworks, seeking to address the pervasive risks of exploitation and re-traumatisation in media practices. This research explores how media professionals can ethically engage with survivors of sexual crimes offering guidelines for prioritising subject agency, transparency, and sustained dialogue. Such practices can contribute to a more responsible and empathetic mode of

storytelling that counters traditional tropes that objectify or silence subjects, especially in the context of true crime genres.

Influence on true crime storytelling

The research aims to challenge the true crime genre by critiquing its entrenched reliance on sensationalism and patriarchal narrative tropes. By highlighting how ethical storytelling practices can coexist with compelling narratives, this research encourages filmmakers to reconsider their representational strategies. Ultimately, this work offers an example of ethical representation in true crime media, urging filmmakers to craft ethically grounded and narratively engaging stories, hoping for a more inclusive and equitable representation. These contributions highlight the significance of this research for creative practice, documentary ethics, and true crime storytelling, and the potential impact across academic, creative, and social spheres.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The Maker and Subject

Most scholars and documentary filmmakers concur that films ought to avoid harming their subjects. However, this viewpoint is not universal; situations involving accountability for those in power, probes into corruption and systemic cover-ups, or the examination of crime perpetrators present differing perspectives. For those who strive to protect their subjects, the methods to accomplish this are still a topic of discussion. Although many scholars assert that films should seek to minimise harm (Alamouti, 2020; Barry, 2021; Butchart, 2006; Nash, 2011, 2012; Nichols, 2016; Thomas, 2012; Winston, 1991, 2000), there is less discussion on how to achieve this goal. This literature review will examine scholarship concerning the relationship between documentary filmmaker and their subjects, focusing on core ethical considerations, including the evolutions of approaches to consent and the issue of privacy.

My creative practice output is a true crime documentary in the sexual assault subgenre about one woman's journey dealing with the justice system. The review will investigate the true crime genre, addressing its pitfalls, challenges, and consequences for the victims. It will also explore the observational and hybrid modes of documentary practice, analysing their

impact on the subject-maker relationship and how they influence the on-screen representation of subjects. It will discuss emerging scholarship surrounding consent practices, updated guidelines and principles, and the current state of documentary scholarship on the relationship between the subject and the filmmaker. Finally, the review will present innovative and contemporary approaches to creative practice around working with subjects.

Evolution of scholarship on maker-subject relationships

The relationship between the filmmaker and the subject has become an increasingly urgent issue in documentary scholarship. This emphasis is relatively recent. In the 1930s and 1940s, documentary theory primarily concerned itself with realism, propaganda, and nationalism, reflecting the genre's role in shaping national identities and political messaging (Nichols, 2017; Winston, 1991). By the 1950s and 1960s, attention shifted to Direct Cinema and Cinéma Verité, raising ethical questions about the filmmaker's responsibility in portraying reality and balancing observation with intrusion (Renov, 1993). During this period, debates around notions of truth and reality dominated discourse. The 1970s saw the emergence of reflexivity as filmmakers became more conscious of their role in constructing narratives. This led to documentaries engaging with political issues such as feminism, class struggles, and identity politics, often influenced by Marxist and critical theory (Nichols, 2001). In the 1980s, postmodernism brought critiques of traditional power dynamics and introduced feminist and postcolonial perspectives, questioning who controls representation and how marginalised groups are portrayed (Renov, 1993; Trinh, 1989; Winston, 1995). By the 1990s, the advent of digital technology democratised filmmaking, making it more accessible and sparking debates around authenticity and the ethics of representation (Nichols, 2001; Winston, 1995).

Since the 2000s, digital technology and new media have transformed documentary production, distribution, and audience engagement. By the 2010s, attention shifted towards hybrid forms of documentary, examining the blurring of genres and the ethical challenges this posed for representation and truth (Bruzzi, 2006; Nichols, 2016). In the 2020s, there has been increasing emphasis on the role of documentaries in activism and social movements, with scholars analysing how they function as tools for political advocacy and social change. The rise of global perspectives through online platforms such as streaming services has further transformed the landscape (Andersson Schwarz et al., 2015; Nash, 2014). Over these decades, core themes in documentary theory have evolved to include ethics, digital technology, and the changing nature of global documentary filmmaking.

Many scholars have written directives for filmmakers on how to minimise the risks and navigate these issues when working with real people. Brian Winston proposed four questions for filmmakers to ask themselves to help identify the risks to their participants (Winston, 2000, p. 158). The questions covered the type of person, how socially deviant the action was, the location, and how widely distributed. David Alamouti built upon Winston's four questions and developed a 12-question ethical checklist in 2020. This checklist aimed to encompass the changes the internet and distribution platforms brought about in the two decades following Winston's original publication (Alamouti, 2020, pp. 117–118). Kate Nash identified four fundamental principles that should underpin ethics in documentary filmmaking: beneficence, respect for autonomy, honesty, and non-maleficence (Nash, 2012, p. 321). Rebecca Barry produced eight recommendations for filmmakers, specifically on informed consent practices (Barry, 2021, p. 123). These scholars and practitioners have varied approaches to the ethical issues that arise during production. There is more criticism in documentary scholarship for filmmakers who have behaved badly toward their subjects, including instances of deception, uninformed consent, and betrayal, for example in Brian

Winston's book *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries* (2000b), yet there are not as many examples of best practices celebrated in scholarship.

The realities of agency

When a project extends over a prolonged period, the filmmaker and subject will significantly influence each other's lives in enduring ways. My years as a practitioner and my experience in the industry have shown me that filmmakers are inherently intertwined with the story and that pure objectivity does not indeed exist. Irrespective of their intentions, filming approach, or the project's duration, there will always be an influence. It is essential to acknowledge and navigate this influence. However, the relationship does not exist in a vacuum; it is a part of an ecosystem with different stakeholders, including but not limited to the crew, production team, funders, broadcasters, and other distribution teams. All of these people, institutions, and stakeholders will impact and influence the relationship.

These ideas are echoed by other Australian documentary filmmakers, including Steve Thomas, who reported that "industrial constraints and pressures can impinge on a documentary maker's ability to behave ethically towards participants" (Thomas, 2012, p. 332). Thomas felt that these limitations stemmed from the demands and controls applied to his project by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). He then rightly asks *how* these institutional priorities could be navigated to place the participant's needs at the forefront. His documentary, *Hope* (Thomas, 2008), about asylum seekers, was made without any broadcaster influence, giving him the chance to explore his own ethical filmmaking practices in depth. His research by creative practice allowed him to experience the process of reflection and enabled him to prioritise his participant's consent procedures. In his article "Collaboration and Ethics in Documentary Filmmaking—A Case Study" (2012) Thomas

called for documentary filmmakers to re-examine their storytelling processes, rethink consent, and put more challenges and defences against the institutions making the demands.

Achieving this balance is more challenging than it appears, especially when funding hinges on broadcaster executive approval. Filmmakers who work outside these constraints can take the time to reflect, approach consent thoughtfully and patiently, and engage in a continuous conversation. I have had the opportunity to produce my creative practice feature film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, in this way. If I had not spent 10 years compiling footage for this project, I likely would not have enjoyed the freedom to experiment and explore various representation and consent methods. Broadcasters work to a tight deadline. Deliveries are often non-negotiable. Targets need to be met, and projects must be on track. This is an environment where reflection, process, and autonomy for participants are not (always) top priorities. It should be. If institutions decided they valued participants' contributions to the project and appreciated this in the form of flexibility we might see a shift in participant treatment and management.

Contemporary trends and future directions

Since starting this research project in August 2020, there has been a substantial uptick in scholarly research focused on the contemporary dynamics complicating the relationships between subjects and creators. Emily Coleman conducted an extensive study over four years on long-term relationships in nonfiction films, exploring the emotional efforts invested by individuals and the influence of broadcasters on the ties and their impact on both parties (Coleman, 2023). Coleman concludes that the relationship is multidimensional, with many stages and facets complicated further by restrictions of budgets and time enforced by the broadcaster. The intimacy created within the relationship with the subject is often short-lived, and makers are forced to rush the beginning phase when they are required to secure consent

and ensure participation in the program. Many filmmakers report this to be an essential stage that cannot be expedited lest it create an unfair dynamic and pressurised environment for the subject (Bullock Brown, 2021; Faden et al., 2010; Nash, 2011a; Piotrowska, 2023; Winston, 2000a). Filmmakers struggle to please contributors, employers, and the audience whilst maintaining their fidelity to the truth.

The Office of Communications (Ofcom) serves as the UK's communications regulator and supervises the broadcasting, telecommunications, and postal sectors. Its primary role is to ensure that communications are managed to benefit both consumers and the public. In April 2021, Ofcom set Broadcast Standards that provided more robust protections for people depicted in factual television. Some, like Coleman, suggest that while this is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough. She suggests that one key element that requires dramatic change is the support (both financial and emotional) from the broadcaster and production company to the filmmaker so they can adequately support the subject through the screening or broadcast period.

When participants conclude the filming stage of a project, it can significantly impact their well-being and emotional state. In my practice, I have noticed that subjects tend to express fear and uncertainty about what will happen next. For many, the relationship takes up space in the subject's life; they have connection and attention, someone hanging on their every word. When filming stops, so does the warmth that comes with human connection. Daisy Asquith, a documentary filmmaker and academic, equates it to subjects struggling to return to everyday lives: "It is possible that the damage done to those filmed is done when filming stops, when the attention is withdrawn and life returns to banal ordinariness" (Asquith, 2019, p. 15). Asquith turned interviews with documentary subjects into an exhibition titled "This is not us" in 2018, as a part of her creative practice research project, which explored the impact filmmaking has on the participant, and the intersection of

performance, relationships and shame in documentary filmmaking (Asquith, 2025). Coleman attributes the loss as a hole left by the intensity and manufactured intimacy in the subject–maker relationship that Piotrowska labels “slightly inappropriate and yet necessary” (Piotrowska, 2023, p. 87). Navigating that removal depends on a great many factors. The repercussions of participant withdrawal have been noted to have a substantial influence on their emotional and psychological well-being: “Relationships of dependency and the opening of new horizons created by the filmmaking have undoubtedly affected some film subjects deeply, for better or for worse” (MacDougall, 1995, p. 246).

An examination within my own practice has revealed that individuals often experience heightened vulnerability during public experiences such as broadcast, release, and festival screenings. They feel emotionally exposed and their confidence around their story can fade as they realise that the reception and reaction of the audience are not within their control. These events mark moments when the subject is directly facing their audience, which can be a deeply personal and emotive experience for them, and without the filmmaker’s support and guidance, can be harmful and contain risks of negative exposure. Coleman suggests this comes down to the lack of funding for filmmakers to work through the period when the film is being first broadcast or screened. Her research also stresses the complications that can arise from subject and maker relationships when the maker has not been trained to manage complex and multileveled trauma: “Without proper training, regulation and support systems in place, contributors are being asked to put their emotional wellbeing in the hands of people who may not have the time or skills to care for them responsibly” (E. Coleman, 2023, p. 15).

Coleman’s research points to a systemic issue compounded by budget restraints, broadcaster requirements, and a lack of respect for the emotional labour a documentary filmmaker must undertake, which is part of the production. She recommends that the industry

recognises the relationship as work and a part of creative labour in order to “understand the benefits and risks it brings to the workplace and consider how the wellbeing of both filmmakers and their subjects could be better protected” (E. Coleman, 2023, p. 16). David Alamouti’s (2020) research adds meaningful concerns to this discussion in his warning that filmmakers need to understand the local contexts of the participants in their own countries as well as any international complexities. A filmmaker must care about these issues to investigate how to approach them, and it begins with consent.

Informed consent: the illusion of choice in an ethical minefield

In documentary theory, informed consent has been described as a myth (Anderson & Benson, 1991), a dark grey zone (Barry, 2021), and explored in terms of relationships of power and exploitation (Nash, 2012). The landscape of documentary filmmaking is constantly changing, and the issue of consent is increasingly complex. The concept of consent encompasses various aspects that require individual consideration and discussion.

The term *participant consent* (Butchart, 2006; Gross et al., 2003; Pryluck, 1976) refers to a subject agreeing to participate in making a documentary. The term *informed consent* refers to the subject having a clear understanding of what they are agreeing to rather than simply signing a release form. The concept of informed consent and its foundations are based on four main principles (Anderson & Benson, 1991; Faden et al., 2010; Nichols, 2001): ensuring that the person decides without being coerced, that they have been given all the information and are not deceived, that they have full knowledge of the procedures and expected effects, and that they have the competence to consent. The foundations for informed consent in documentary relationships still present challenges as they continue to rely on subjective variables determined by the filmmaker. Nichols explains most acutely when he identifies the

biggest issue with a subjective framework: “to what extent can filmmakers honestly reveal their intentions or foretell the actual effects of a film when some intentions are *unconscious*, and some effects are *unpredictable*?” [emphasis added] (Nichols & Baron, 2024, p. 50).

Indeed, the events once a film is completed cannot be foreseen. Yet, when getting involved in the lives of real people, most scholars agree that it is ethically responsible to try to mitigate the risks as much as possible. When the participants of the documentary have experienced crime, sexual abuse or assault and their lives have been placed in jeopardy, the stakes of consent and responsibility are raised. Jennifer Huang’s documentary *The Long Rescue* (2021) tells the story of girls recovering from sex trafficking in the Philippines. Huang described their consent as a ‘gift’ from her participants, one that she needed to guard and respect with honour. She recognised the power their consent gave her over their stories and described how she felt the burden of this responsibility. She comments that challenges often arise when the direction of the project shifts, impacting the dynamics between the filmmaker and the subjects. In such cases, participants may experience a sense of obligation to the filmmaker, making it difficult for them to disengage from the project without feelings of guilt. Problems arise in situations where a participant anticipates that the film will raise awareness about a cause they are personally invested in, such as addressing an injustice. They may perceive the filmmaker as their sole avenue for effecting change, thus compelling them to remain involved in the project against their inclinations.

Considering the participants have given up their time and provided access to their personalities, and without them there would be no film, the filmmaker should evaluate the risks and attempt to remove them. Peace is Loud partnered with DocuMentality to conduct a study with 22 documentary participants to create *Beyond the Lens: The State of Participant Care in Documentary Film*. This document, published in August 2024, establishes what they deem to be critical issues with the subject and maker relationship in the documentary

landscape. The case study participants experience a spectrum of consent, from no consent, uninformed consent, and then ongoing informed consent. I incorporated ongoing informed consent into my creative practice.

The Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG), established in 2019, published *From Reflection to Release: A Framework for Values, Ethics, and Accountability in Nonfiction Filmmaking* in 2022, providing a framework for filmmakers to use in their practice. Filmmakers are free to decide whether to adhere to these guidelines, principles, and recommendations, as no regulation mandates their compliance. Nichols asserts that while other industries that use informed consent, such as medicine, journalism, and law, also must meet strict regulations, there is no standard ethical practice for documentaries because what places it aside is that documentary filmmaking is art. He claims:

documentary is an expressive art open to experimentation and change, resistant to rules and regulations, distinguishes it from objective instruction or factual reporting and thereby differentiates it from institutionally regulated practices where an explicit ethical code of conduct can be introduced...Documentary cannot be regulated the way more institutionalised and codified practices can be. (Nichols & Baron, 2024, p. 43)

For Nichols, what distinguishes documentary from journalism is the subjectivity and personalisation in the content that reflects the filmmaker's vision, which he suggests cannot be formally regulated. Yet broadcasters and streaming services impose regulations and responsibilities on filmmakers. For instance, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation mandates strict fact-checking, and documentaries must adhere to legal standards concerning slander and liability (ABC, 2011). However, this does not cover films that are independently

released or screened. Nichols argues that the evolving documentary landscape, along with the diverse forms documentaries can take, suggests that a single ethical code would be ineffective for all practitioners, and there would be no way in governing or enforcing compliance even if one existed. I disagree. There could be a set of guidelines regarding the treatment of subjects that documentaries should follow, which could be embraced by film festivals and streaming platforms. Rather than focusing solely on legal implications, broadcasters, streamers, and other distributors should invest in the subject's experience beyond merely obtaining their consent as a legal formality. For this to happen, there would need to be a dramatic reshuffle of values within broadcasting and streaming hierarchies. Documentary subjects, from whom institutions directly profit, should be regarded as valuable.

Projects that address issues of incarceration or involve murder accusations tend to face a heightened risk of backlash from participants. Some individuals may agree to be involved in the film, hoping that they will be portrayed favourably. There have been numerous cases of significant backlash for filmmakers from participants who had begun filming willingly and with enthusiasm, such as Cara in *Cunnamulla* (O'Rourke, 2000), David Seigel in *The Queen of Versailles* (Greenfield, 2012), and Carole Baskin in the *Tiger King* series (Goode, 2020), which resulted in court cases. The filmmaker's responsibilities include aftercare and managing consent through those processes. An example of significant participant rejection was when the main subject, Fetim, denounced the veracity of the film *Stolen* (Ayala & Fallshaw, 2009) at its premiere (Peacock, 2012). Others may anticipate compensation for their contributions; such as the case of Randall Adams in *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris, 1988) who, upon release from death row and receipt of a pardon of the crime the documentary depicted, attempted to sue Errol Morris for the profits of the documentary. Not all of these issues could have been solved, and some projects may be so complicated that

some kind of fallout is inevitable. But do we still pursue these stories? How much is too much of a risk?

Complicating consent in a brave new world of TikDocs

Over the past fifteen years, web-based technologies have significantly expanded the film supply chain. The way audiences choose and consume documentary content is rapidly evolving. This international expansion means that the issue of informed consent has numerous layers and can change with shifts in the geopolitical climate. These advancements have not been matched with adequate protections and safeguards or guidelines for documentary filmmakers on how to negotiate these new and evolving changes. David Alamouti (2020) highlights the link between web-based technologies and the need for a re-examination of documentary ethics within distribution models, calling for a transnational ethics approach and a re-evaluation of the foundational ethics previously established by Nash (2012), Winston (1991, 2000), and Nichols (2017; Nichols & Baron, 2024).

Distribution and exhibition methods for documentaries have changed irrevocably. Alamouti highlights the disruption caused by web-based platforms like YouTube: “These digital pseudo-borders remain vulnerable to an internet yet to be controlled by copyright agencies and legislation against widespread piracy... the web is now a vast archive of documentary films viewable anytime” (Alamouti, 2020, p. 106). While distribution avenues have evolved, protecting and supporting subjects in these new models has not kept pace. Today, once content is shared online, controlling its dissemination is nearly impossible. Filmmakers previously created various versions for different platforms to maintain control. The rise of platforms like TikTok, the most downloaded app globally from 2020 to 2022, threatens the rights and privacy of documentary subjects (Maheshwari, 2024). As May Crockett states, “the Internet

never forgets,” and “whether we like it or not, we now live in a world where the internet records everything we do” (Crockett, 2016, p. 151). Once uploaded, content can be shared widely, making it expensive and often unfeasible to remove digital footage. This shareability poses serious risks for subjects who may have their identity exposed. The stakes differ significantly; the filmmaker’s career is impacted, but the subject may face life-changing repercussions.

Brian Winston warns that “problems arise from the fact that these texts have nearly indefinite lives” (Winston, 1991, p. 40). Writing in 1991, Winston could hardly foresee how accurate his concerns would prove. Documentaries now exist in a multiplatform space where social media shareability and ‘duetting’ (TikTok Duet allows users to create a split screen of their own video alongside another video already on TikTok, allowing them to provide commentary, sing or dance as a reaction to the original post) place subjects in front of larger audiences than ever before. The risks are varied for the subjects. Some face ridicule, like participants in reality shows, whose worst moments become memes. The victims of R. Kelly’s social media team received death threats and were victims of arson (see Chapter 4). U.S. military minesweepers featured in National Geographic’s *Retrograde*, a documentary that covers the U.S. Army’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s takeover, faced fatal consequences. Directed by Mathew Heineman, the 2022 Oscar-nominated film follows Green Berets and an Afghani commander defending against the Taliban. The Green Berets employed Afghani minesweepers, whose faces were shown on film, despite U.S. Army warnings. Reports indicated the Taliban may have seen clips on TikTok, creating a ‘kill list’ from the film’s footage. Soon after, one featured man, nicknamed Justin Bieber, was kidnapped and murdered by the Taliban. Heineman and producer Caitlin McNally stated that the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban actions led to the deaths of Afghan partners, emphasising that blaming the film is unjust (Roig-Franzia & Seck, 2024). In response to the controversy,

Hulu and Disney removed *Retrograde*, a decision criticised by filmmakers. The Washington Post reported in May 2024 that several Afghans from the film remain in hiding. As of July 7, 2024, *Retrograde* remained available on TikTok in segments, with two parts including the minesweepers receiving 10.4k and 10.3k views, respectively (retrieved from TikTok, July 7, 2024).

The internet has transformed how people access documentary content. Audiences have grown significantly, limiting filmmakers' control over film dissemination. The risks for documentary subjects are considerable, as seen in *Retrograde*, which highlights these dangers. Audience reception often burdens subjects more than filmmakers. Therefore, comprehensive risk assessments are crucial, as the stakes can be life-altering. While responses cannot be predicted, they can be anticipated. Filmmakers and broadcasters need to prepare for potential threats and provide aftercare for subjects and families. I will explore this issue in more depth in Chapter 4.

Cinematic Techniques and Modes of Address

Central to the construction of meaning in documentary film are cinematic techniques; camera principles, shot composition, *mise en scène*, and modes of address. These cinematic techniques work in concert to shape the viewer's interpretive framework, influence their affective response, and mediate the relationship between the subject, filmmaker, and audience. In this context of documentary filmmaking, the camera is not a neutral observer but a deliberate agent in the articulation of perspective and ideology. The selection of shot sizes, angles and camera movements, are both aesthetic choices and discursive tools that cue a viewer's proximity to, or detachment from, the subject in frame. *Mise en scène*, the

arrangement of visual elements within the frame including lighting, location or sets, and the participants, all of which convey meaning and context. The camera has seven basic shot types (Heyward, 2018) enhanced by different camera angles and movements. Shot composition adheres to cinematographic principles like the rule of thirds, balance, and rhythm (Mercado, 2022). Camera angles have been analysed and emotive connotations attached to many of them, such as Giessner et al stating they affect perceived status: a high angle suggests low status, making the subject appear smaller and vulnerable (Giessner et al., 2011). Conversely, Baranowski and Hecht conducted textual analysis that suggested a low angle signifies higher status, making the subject appear larger and more powerful (Baranowski & Hecht, 2018). Documentary directors have all the same tools and techniques available to them as fiction directors, and use this arsenal to persuade their audience.

Bill Nichols, a key figure in documentary theory, introduced documentary modes in his work *Introduction to Documentary* (Nichols, 2001, 2010, 2017, 2024). He identifies six primary modes—expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative, and poetic—each with unique rhetorical strategies. The documentary’s voice conveys information and situates the audience in a specific interpretive relationship with the film. These modes have been taught in film schools around the globe for decades, and a part of documentary theory canon. I am exploring these modes as a part of my unpacking and analysis of my creative practice with a focus on the three that I engaged with in my filmmaking.

Intimate and immediate: the verité and direct cinema movements

The rise of direct cinema and cinéma vérité in the 1960s transformed documentary filmmaking by using portable cameras and synchronous sound to capture events as they happen. However, theorists like Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, and Brian Winston have criticised the idea of objective observation. Winston called it “nonsense” (1978) and in

Claiming the Real (1995) argued that it promotes an illusion of objectivity and highlights the filmmaker's subjective manipulation. Nichols criticised direct cinema's claims of neutrality in *Representing Reality* (1991), stating filming can never be neutral and that direct cinema produced misleading notions of truth by ignoring subjectivity. Similarly, Renov criticised both movements in *Theorizing Documentary* (1993) for suggesting filmmakers are neutral observers. Errol Morris argued that direct cinema regressed documentary filmmaking for decades (Arthur, 1993, p. 127; Bruzzi, 2006); the mode was in stark contrast to his technique of stylised re-enactments in works like *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). In response, Bruzzi notes in *New Documentary* (2006) that documentary filmmaking needed time to overcome direct cinema's rejection of personal perspective in capturing truth.

There is often a gap between the intentions of direct cinema filmmakers like Robert Drew and Richard Leacock, and theorists' interpretations. When James Blue interviewed Leacock in 1965 about the impact of the camera, he acknowledged, "Although we have reduced as much as we can the impact of the filming process, we are affecting them" (Leacock, as quoted in Blue, 1965). David Resha asserts Drew's rhetoric was aimed at promoting direct cinema to television and that his interviews were "more nuanced." Resha cites a National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences interview where Drew stated, "I don't think it's possible to capture actuality without artistic creativity" (Drew, as quoted in Resha, 2018, p. 36). In her essay "The Reality-Based Community" (2017), Erika Balsom offers a fresh perspective on how the concept of truth is constructed and contested in media, contemplating the impact of so-called 'post-truth' politics and how documentaries negotiate fact, fiction, and narrative. Balsom highlights that both the arguments of reality and representation and the discussion around filmmakers and their interventions are cyclical and in an echo chamber. She wonders why this is the case:

What does it accomplish? Perhaps it is just inertia, a repetition of received ideas that stem from a paradigm by now firmly established. Perhaps. Yet it also reconfirms a smug and safe position for maker and viewer alike, guarding both against being caught out as that most sorry of characters: the naive credulist. We all know better than to believe.

Balsom urges us to move past these reductive approaches and instead appreciate the complexity: “Truth is not out there waiting to be captured—but reality is...to believe in reality is to affirm that we live in a shared world that is at once chaotic and unmasterable” (Balsom, 2017, para 22).

The observational mode still faces criticism from documentary theorists. In “Thoughts on Raw Footage, Observational Documentaries and the Cinema” (2020), Bill Nichols criticises the voyeuristic effect he says is often created by using the observational mode.

Unseen, unacknowledged, disengaged, the filmmaker strives to become the Proverbial fly on the wall but risks turning into the voyeur at the window, often mimicking the “accidental” rather than the “helpless” or “interventional” gaze... To what degree do we have a fly, simply curious about what happens, versus a voyeur, whose vision bears the intrusive charge of an erotic or epistephilic gaze looking in on others without being seen in return? (Nichols, 2020, para.7).

I take exception to the way Nichols equates observational footage with disengagement, and I disagree with the premise of his question. As an observational filmmaker, engagement is essential. Disengagement, whether from a teapot or the Taliban, results in out-of-focus images and poor visual grammar. Following action is crucial in observational filmmaking,

which requires skill, practice, and engagement. Jean-Pierre Beauviala discusses this in Mandy Chang's *The Camera That Changed the World* (2011), a documentary about the need to be fluid and flexible: "You have to dance with the camera. With a cat" (00:41:18). Filming in the observational mode is about adapting to unfolding scenes and maintaining laser focus on the action. Founders of observational documentary, like the Drew Associates, emphasised mobility, avoiding tripods and lights so as to follow stories without obstruction. They rejected staging to maintain the authenticity of their subjects. This contrasts Nichols's view that filmmakers are often either flies or voyeurs, suggesting they are disengaged (2020). Drew Associates aimed for unobtrusiveness while still being engaged; as Robert Drew noted, it was the idea that changed the world, not merely the camera (Chang, 2011).

Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* can create an unfiltered, undoctored connection with the audience. On filming the inmates at Bridgewater Correctional Facility in Fred Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), John Marshall described his camera work as emotional and personal and said he was sensitive to the desires of his potential subjects (Anderson & Benson, 1991). Jean Rouch, particularly in *Chronicle of a Summer* (Morin & Rouch, 1961) takes a collaborative approach. Rouch was committed to elevating the subject's opinion, stating he first made films for himself and then prioritised his subjects' perspectives, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies in filmmaking (Blue, 1967). Both *vérité* and direct cinema allow a filmmaker to connect intimately with their subjects. These are characteristics that filmmakers capitalise on when trying to make their audience believe what they are showing is the truth. The style, however, does not guarantee the truth. The style does not guarantee a balanced, respectful, and positive experience for the subject, nor does it guarantee their autonomy. Can another mode of documentary achieve this? The

hybrid documentary employs a range of strategies that bring this ideal within closer reach.

The role of hybrid documentary in the subject's autonomy

Although not officially categorised by Nichols, the hybrid mode draws from multiple modes to create a mixed form that resists easy classification. In *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (2006), Bruzzi critiques the notion that documentaries strive for objective truth, arguing that all documentaries are inherently performative. She views the hybrid form as a manifestation of its performative nature, recognising filmmakers' roles in narrative construction. Bruzzi emphasises how hybrid documentaries engage audiences through self-awareness and subjectivity. In her book *The Hybrid Documentary and Beyond* (2024), Rachel Landers interviews practitioners about hybrid filmmaking. She challenges defining hybrid documentaries as strictly fact and fiction, which she finds reductive, and would make them fiction by definition. Instead, she proposes viewing them as explorations at cinema's frontiers, where innovative combinations of form, content, and praxis articulate profound truths (Landers, 2024, p. 5). Landers characterises hybrid documentary creators as "Explorers" and "Adventurers." They often use participant re-enactments, where subjects represent events without direct footage, exploring poetic realities and complex emotions. The following filmmakers use the hybrid mode to explore true crime and criminal acts in a distinctive way.

Larissa Behrendt's *Clan* (2013) features James Saunders, a young Aboriginal man wrestling with his sexuality and family acceptance. His totem animal is the mopoke owl, and Behrendt films an owl interacting with him, enriching the re-enactment with metaphor. Saunders re-enacts a childhood assault by his uncle, confronting his trauma in a safe space. A decade later, when interviewed by Landers about the experience of making *Clan*, he

remarked on the storytelling power and collaborative approach, and that he felt empowered by this process, and that the film rejected stereotypes of pity or exploitation (Landers, p. 141).

In *The Act of Killing* (2012), Joshua Oppenheimer invites Indonesian death squad leaders to re-enact their 1965–1966 killings. They design scenes in their preferred Hollywood styles, often involving villagers and their own family members, leading to a disturbing exploration of accountability. The subjects openly discuss their actions, reaffirming their crimes during the re-enactments, which provides a self-reflexive experience unavailable in straightforward interviews. This documentary illustrates how hybrid forms compel participants to acknowledge the harm caused, granting them the space to confront their actions. The dynamic approach in hybrid documentaries allows subjects to explore new confrontation and collaboration spaces. By inviting participants to engage in their own stories, filmmakers examine complex realities and ethical dilemmas, inviting audiences to think critically and creatively. This bold method encourages subjects to navigate new terrains of understanding and healing.

Innovative examples of best practice

My research seeks to highlight examples of best practice and innovative ways of working and thinking. Lynette Wallworth is one such practitioner who emphasises authenticity and reflection in her relationships with participants, aiming to create representations that resonate with their self-perception. She explains, “They see themselves not as they are being seen, but as they feel themselves to be” (quoted in Landers, 2024, p. 176). For Wallworth, the key is ensuring her understanding aligns with theirs, offering participants a sense of ownership over the project. This trust is foundational to her work, creating a collaborative atmosphere where

subjects feel their voices and identities are accurately reflected. Wallworth is firm on maintaining professional boundaries and is careful not to blur the lines of the relationship. When working with Indigenous people, Wallworth assigns intellectual property to the group, providing them with ownership of the material. She remains resolved on the limits of each role and does not ask her subjects to approve edits or give final clearance. Her focus is less on pursuing a singular truth and more on the absence of deception, ensuring that what is presented reflects the way her subjects feel they exist in the world.

Verité and representation: from an impossible position

Representation plays a critical role in shaping audience perceptions of individuals in documentaries. Consequently, filmmakers need to be careful to avoid stereotypes and tropes when portraying their subjects. In social justice-oriented documentary filmmaking using the *cinéma vérité* mode, the filmmaker and the subject are often working together to highlight injustices. Typically, subjects depicted are victims, making ethical representation especially important. Indian filmmaker Nandini Sikand presents a novel perspective in *Soma Girls* (2012), her film about children born to sex workers, which stands in contrast to the controversial *Born into Brothels* (Briski & Kauffman, 2004). Sikand, along with critics like Rangan (2011), criticises *Born into Brothels* for depicting children as “powerless and hapless victims,” positioning the filmmaker as their sole rescuer and reinforcing what she describes as the white saviour narrative. Instead, Sikand aimed to portray the children of Kolkata’s Soma House as multifaceted individuals, emphasising their current lives and future aspirations. Her methodology enabled the children to convey their agency and highlight their identities, not just their suffering. She deliberately avoided shock tactics that would frame the girls as mere powerless victims (Sikand, 2015, p. 48).

Brian Winston's critique of documentaries, wherein filmmakers typically wield more power than their subjects, also informed Sikand's approach. Winston notes that filmmakers are often the dominant partners in documentaries (Winston, 1991, p. 43). Sikand sought to balance this by fostering collaboration, ensuring the girls' voices shaped the narrative. She aimed to create a film for the girls at Soma Home that they could take pride in (Sikand, 2015, p. 53). By using a Soma House manager for the backstory instead of an outsider's voice-over, Sikand highlighted the girls as active individuals with dreams, not just victims. She aligns her method with Walter Benjamin's ideas in "The Author as Producer" (1934), which criticises the commodification of suffering in documentaries: "Misery becomes a consumer good" (Benjamin, 1934, p. 7). He describes filmmakers as being in an "impossible position" regarding ideological alignment with their subjects, questioning the utility of their techniques (Benjamin, 1934, p. 6). Sikand reflects on this exploitative dynamic, asking if filmmakers are merely "framing" instead of transforming the process to empower viewers and subjects as co-producers (Sikand, 2015, p. 52). She advocates for breaking down barriers between filmmakers, subjects, and audiences. Although challenging, especially for mainstream projects, this approach can enhance autonomy in storytelling within smaller, collaborative contexts.

This spirit of collaboration and respect for the subject's voice is evident in the work of Larissa Behrendt, Lynette Wallworth, and Nandini Sikand. These filmmakers emphasise clear ethical boundaries and ensure that their subjects maintain a sense of control over how they are represented. Sikand's suggestion of transforming viewers and subjects into co-creators reflects a growing movement towards shared authorship in documentary filmmaking. Such approaches offer innovative models for challenging

traditional power imbalances and provide best-practice examples for working ethically with documentary subjects.

True Crime: Facts and Fascination

The influence of the creator's approach and personal ethos and attitude toward their subject is of great significance in the context of crime. The representational choices made by the creator regarding the perpetrator and the victim have a substantial impact on how the audience perceives them. George S. Larke-Walsh contends that all documentaries tend to promote specific loyalties or animosities towards the individuals involved, and this is amplified in true crime injustice narratives as the subject matter is "focused almost entirely on encouraging audiences to judge the people involved" (Larke-Walsh, 2021, p. 66). My documentary tells the story of one woman's journey with the justice system in the wake of being sexually assaulted. My creative practice film aims to generate new knowledge on collaborating with a victim, potentially from what Benjamin describes as the 'impossible position'.

True crime's allure: why we watch

The popularity of true crime documentaries has significantly increased in the last decade. This rise can be attributed to various social, cultural, and technological factors. The surge in viewership coincides with the expansion of streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu, which have played a key role in this growth, making these documentaries more accessible to the public, and beyond the national boundaries. *Making a Murderer* (Ricciardi & Renos, 2015) was a stand-out serialised documentary that landed on Netflix in 2015. Scholars Bruzzi and Walters point out that the success of *Making a Murderer* set a precedent for true crime as serialised entertainment, leading to a surge in similar productions. Following

the series in 2015, Netflix increased production at a rapid rate and serial true crime documentaries skyrocketed, and from 2017 to 2021 they released 16 ‘Originals’.⁴

True crime documentaries’ rise of popularity has been tracked by analysing the increased viewership on streaming platforms. Between 2018 and 2021, demand for documentary series rose by 142%, and the number of documentary titles available grew by 63% (Parrot Analytics, 2021). Pandemic lockdowns could also have fuelled this sharp rise in interest in 2020–2021 and the need for escapism through engaging narratives like *Tiger King* (Goode, 2020; Parrot Analytics, 2021). *Tiger King* followed an episodic structure and included larger-than-life characters and dramatic twists; the promise that the story was true made it far more attractive to viewers (Baron & Fuhs, 2020).

The true crime genre exists in a landscape of constant change. Louise Wattis suggests that “changes in technology and media consumption are a key factor linked to true crime’s current appeal” (Wattis, 2021, p. 282). There are opportunities for increased audience engagement through the potential for growing social and political activism. Here we have a meeting point between the shareability of media within the transmedia landscape converging with the themes of mystery, secrecy, truth, and lies, which are fertile ground for armchair sleuths and keyboard detectives. The level of audience engagement is remarkably high, presenting an opportunity for creators to capitalise on this for further monetary gain.

⁴ From 2017 to 2021 Netflix released the following ‘Originals’: *The Keepers* (White, 2017), *Evil Genius: The True Story of America’s Most Diabolical Bank Heist* (Borzillieri, 2018), *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Berlinger, 2019), *The Disappearance of Madeleine McCann* (Smith, 2019), *The Family* (Moss, 2019), *The Case Against Adnan Syed* (Berg, 2019), *Lorena* (Berger, Rosenfeld, and Peele, 2019), *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* (Doneen, 2020), *The Trials of Gabriel Fernandez* (Knappenberger, 2020), *Ted Bundy: Falling for a Killer* (Wood, 2020), *The Ripper* (Vile, 2020), *American Murder: The Family Next Door* (Popplewell, 2020), *Cocaine Cowboys: The Kings of Miami* (Corben, 2021), *Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer* (Russell, 2021), and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Berlinger, 2021).

Shaping public understanding and spreading seeds of doubt

Just as truth is paramount in “wrongfully accused” crime documentaries where the audience is encouraged to play jury, the same can be said for the subgenre of sexual abuse and assault documentaries. The verisimilitude of the subject is essential as, traditionally, there is a lack of physical evidence. Even when there is evidence, consent is used as a defence, which is often the victim’s word against the perpetrator. How, then, does the filmmaker’s personal belief impact the victim’s verisimilitude? Fernando Canet notes that it is the “personal dimension that informs the ethical decisions made by filmmakers in their involvement with the subjects” (Canet, 2022, p. 35). What happens when seeds of doubt are laid? In cases of sexual assault and abuse, speaking out is often linked with feelings of blame and shame, making the situation even more difficult. These crimes typically take place in private, without immediate witnesses, and often boil down to whose account of the story you choose to believe. Calvin Pryluck insists that “utter helplessness demands utter protection” (Pryluck, 1976, p. 68). Put simply, this seems paternalistic and may result in other voices being used to tell the victim’s story instead of their own.

Filmmakers Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering have amassed a body of work around sexual assault, including *Twist of Fate* (Dick, 2004), *The Invisible War* (Dick & Ziering, 2012), *The Hunting Ground* (Dick & Ziering, 2015), *On the Record* (Dick & Ziering, 2020), and *Allen v. Farrow* (Dick & Ziering, 2021). As filmmakers they have garnered a lot of support and attention to their films, yet they have also faced controversy. After releasing *The Hunting Ground*, the duo was accused of putting “advocacy ahead of accuracy” (Yoffe, 2015) and not properly portraying the facts of one of the cases. In her article “How the Hunting Ground Blurs the Truth,” Emily Yoffe dissects one case covered in the movie that occurred at Harvard Business School between two friends. She compares the trial transcripts and evidence with

what is said in the documentary and concludes that the movie misrepresents both the victim's account and the school's reaction.

The next film made by Dick and Zeiring, *On the Record*, premiered at Sundance in 2020, and details the allegations of sexual assault against music manager Russell Simmons. There are many voices in the film (most of them African American), but the story centres around Drew Dixon, a music producer and former A&R executive who worked for Simmons. Oprah Winfrey was one of the project's producers and financial backers. In the lead-up to the release, Oprah expressed some concerns about two elements of the film. Firstly, the film had a problematic representation of hip hop and black women, driven by the white producer and director (Lee, 2020). She felt too many voices were merged together and the value of each story was not being heard. Secondly, she had some questions about the validity of Dixon's account after someone unnamed but close to her had highlighted inconsistencies.

Winfrey requested the filmmakers Dick and Ziering hold off on the premiere at Sundance so that more robust fact-checking could take place. Winfrey also felt that "strong and emotionally wrenching elements of the other accusers' stories had been left out" of the film (Sperling, 2020). Their unease about the facts grew as multiple people from outside the film's production called Winfrey to offer conflicting accounts. Winfrey's team stated they were pushing to delay the film's release, not to block it, the aim being to give the filmmakers time to strengthen the documentary (Kaufman, 2020). Dick and Ziering did not concede, arguing that delaying the release could traumatise the women who had chosen to speak out, with Ziering stating, "We were worried about the survivors and what the hell this was going to do to them" (Lee, 2020). When the filmmakers refused to address Winfrey's concerns, she pulled her support for the film. In a *New York Times* interview, Winfrey said she "still believed" Dixon but "thought there were inconsistencies in her account," and that there was

“someone she knew and trusted who cast doubts on Ms Dixon’s story” (Sperling & Sisaro, 2020).

When Winfrey withdrew her financial support and removed herself as producer from the documentary, Apple, the streaming network that had commissioned the film, went with her. Instead, HBO picked up the film, and it premiered at Sundance. The Oprah narrative dominated the media cycle ahead of the premiere, for example, “Dumped by Oprah” on KCRW (Masters, 2020), “Lost Support of Oprah” in the *Guardian* (Lee, 2020), and “Oprah Scandal” in *Variety* (Donnelly, 2020). This has cast doubt on Dixon’s story, and the backlash towards her caused significant distress. In an interview with the Hollywood reporter, Dixon stated, “I feel like I’m experiencing a second crime ... I am being silenced. The broader community is being intimidated. The most powerful black woman in the world is being intimidated” (Keegan & Siegel, 2020). Dixon and the other survivors endured most of the emotional weight upon the release of the documentary, and the stories and characters were dissected in the media. The decision to release the film without revision rather than wait to ensure Winfrey’s concerns were addressed exposed the subjects to additional emotional distress.

Women on screen: has #MeToo made a difference?

Most victims represented in the subgenre of sexual assault and abuse are women, and most perpetrators of crime are men. A long tradition of true crime exists where a man controls the narrative. Yet there is also evidence that suggests since 1984, women consume the majority of true crime (Hoffman & Hobbs, 2021). What impact has the #MeToo movement had on the representational approach to female stories of sexual abuse and assault? Is it the case that female filmmakers can work more effortlessly from a place of empathy and experience, which in turn fosters a better environment for a respectful subject-maker relationship? Or do

the institutional power structures dominate so much that it does not make a difference when it comes to distribution and protection of victims? Megan Hoffman and Simon Hobbs, who have focused on media published by women on #MeToo stories, assert that it has provided a platform that allows “activism that reframes female victimhood by centring women’s voices and experiences and calling attention to pervasive, systemic misogyny in wider culture” (Hoffman and Hobbs, 2021, p. 143). However, their research demonstrated that having women authors alone has not guaranteed that these representations are without issue, nor are they always placing the victim first and avoiding traumatic results.

The film industry remains predominantly male. Research on gender distribution among film directors, especially in documentaries, reveals ongoing disparities. A USC Annenberg School study titled “*Inclusion in the Director’s Chair: Gender, Race and Age across 1200 top films from 2007 to 2018*” by Dr Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Angel Choi and Dr Katherine Pieper. Their report shows persistent gender imbalances in key roles like directors and writers. Of the 1200 films, 4% of directors were female. Of the male directors, the majority were white men, only 6% were African American, and 3% were Asian American. Additionally, the statistics on Netflix’s U.S. original films from 2018–2021 highlights the underrepresentation of women and marginalised groups behind the camera (Smith et al., 2019). Yet, the representation of female directors in both documentary and broader film sectors has improved slowly over decades. The Celluloid Ceiling study has been conducted annually since 1998, and the 2023 edition shows women comprised 16% of directors in the top 250 highest-grossing U.S. films in 2023, up from 9% in 1998 (Lauzen, 2023). This indicates gradual progress yet highlights persistent underrepresentation. In the 2023 statistics, women direct about 30% of documentaries, a higher percentage than in live-action fiction (21%) or animated features (19%) (Lauzen, 2023). Despite these gains, the overall number of women directors remains low, particularly on Netflix, which continues to stream a majority

of male-directed documentaries. Comprehensive gender analyses of Netflix's content remain scarce but existing studies (Smith et al., 2019, Lauzen, 2023) indicate a continued disparity. Streamers such as Netflix often reflect the broader industry trend of male dominance in directorial roles. In Australia, the issue of gender balance behind the camera has been a longstanding issue. In 2015, Screen Australia launched Gender Matters, an initiative with a five-million-dollar plan over three years, including a suite of initiatives in an attempt to address the underrepresentation of women and gender diverse individuals in key creative roles within the Australian Screen Industry (Screen Australia, 2025). The key performance indicator was to have 50% of key creatives, writers, directors and producers be women. They released findings in November 2024, indicating they were on their way to reaching their target. "In 2022/23, across all roles combined, women occupied 46% of all key creative roles, with women representing 55% of all industry-wide **producer** roles, 37% of **director** roles and 47% of **writer** roles" (Screen Australia, 2024, 22nd para). In the documentary category, female directors reached 37%, the year before was 34%, both of which was lower than 2019, at 38%.

Despite the increase in female practitioners, it is undeniable that the majority of power lies with the broadcasters and streamers. As noted in the earlier exploration of research by Coleman, Thomas, and Alamouti in *Contemporary trends and future directions*, the institutional power structures impact core ethical issues like negotiating participant consent and protections upon release. With an inherited bias toward representation and learned attitudes regarding women and their untrustworthiness, #MeToo has not markedly improved the way female victims are represented. In many instances, centring a female voice is not enough when there are tropes and patterns of representation to contend with. I critical analyse this issue in depth in the section "A Little Miss Under-Represented" in Chapter 4.

Psychological impact: the real cost of true crime

In a recent discussion from her chapter “Screen Memories in True Crime Documentary: Trauma, Bodies, and Places in *The Keepers* (2017) and *Casting JonBenet* (2017),” Bonnie Evans (2020) examines how these documentaries represent trauma and navigate the ethical implications of revisiting real-life tragedies. She argues that the retelling of traumatic events through true crime documentaries can sometimes re-traumatise both the victims and their families, making the genre’s impact a matter of ethical concern (Evans, 2020). The concept of re-traumatising is interesting and complex. Practitioners like Natalie Bullock Brown promote the idea of being trauma-informed and the need for this to be incorporated into the way a filmmaker works. This involves being both aware and proactive about the possible trauma that will be inflicted on a subject if they are in a documentary (Bullock Brown 2021). She encourages filmmakers to think through the implications of the project and decide if the potential for damage to the subject and the risk of re-traumatising them could be minimised. Bullock Brown supports the idea of a ‘values informed framework’, which encourages filmmakers to emphasise care, consent and collaboration as a pathway to filmmaking. When Bullock Brown says “trauma-informed,” I take this to mean that filmmakers should be knowledgeable about trauma, its potential impacts, and the ways it can manifest, yet we do not need to be trained psychologists to tell difficult stories. Bullock Brown uses an example from a project she is contemplating: the issue of significant and dangerous racial profiling of young Black school students in the south of the U.S., resulting in incarceration. She applied her trauma-informed process and decided that the inclusion of the students, who had already suffered traumatic experiences at the hands of law enforcement, would subject them to further trauma and exposure if placed at the centre of the story. Bullock Brown proposes that she can still tell the story, however she would use another angle with different participants and approaches so as to avoid placing the already traumatised students in front of a wider

audience where they may experience further vilification. This approach offers filmmakers a new perspective on their craft: rather than choosing the path that could lead to more trauma for individuals who are already suffering, they can tell the story in another way.

There have been interesting new approaches to how to best manage traumatic content, for both the audience and the participants in the documentary. Odessa Impact created “A Trauma Informed approach to Screening” guide for the documentary *We Are All Newtown* (Synder, 2017), a documentary about gun violence, to aid people conduct a screening, and identify the need for ‘holding space’, ‘suffering space’ and ‘the transforming space’ (Swain, 2021). Examples like this demonstrate the approach to making films is undergoing a significant shift.

The personal dimension of both the filmmaker and the victim significantly influences the ethical approach to storytelling in true crime documentaries, particularly those about sexual assault or abuse. Victims who have been on a healing journey or undergone therapy, for example, are coming from a place of recovery, not active hurt. They have existing autonomy and have space between themselves and the crime that was done to them. The role of the interviewer in a true crime documentary about sexual assault or abuse is particularly important. Shoshana Felman says the very act of an interviewer listening and being present provides an opportunity that did not previously exist. This allows the speaker to believe they will be heard. Felman saw the role of the interviewer as one which enabled the participant to tell their story (Felman, 1992), and that being ignored or silenced is common in victim experiences (Felman & Laub, 1992). How can filmmakers best capture victim stories in ways that makes them feel heard, rather than extracting them painfully? In the last five years, there has been a rise in what filmmakers like Jennifer Huang call “survivor-centred” filmmaking practices (Huang, 2021). In *The Long Rescue*, Huang describes her interview technique, asking general questions that allow participants to steer the conversation in a direction they

feel most comfortable. The filmmaker also has a caveat that any questions the subject did not want to answer, they could refuse. As a practitioner, it could be tempting to allow the participant to control the interview. However, there could be a problem with this approach, as victims and survivors of sexual crimes often find it difficult to say no to things after they have been assaulted. They adopt what is described as the “fawn response,” whereby they become eager to please, avoid conflict, and prioritise others' needs over their own (Walker, 2013). With a format that places the onus on the victim to lead the topics of the interview, the subject may attempt to guess what the filmmaker *wanted* to talk about and do it just to please them. In the aftermath, the subject might withdraw their consent as they have shared too much. The interview itself could also suffer as there is no one driving the overarching narrative, and to do a disservice to the content is to do a disservice the subject.

Another approach is to give the interviewee the right to veto questions on the spot. This might work better in theory than in practice, as this again relates to the fawn response. Someone who is vulnerable after suffering a sexual assault is not likely to stand up for their needs and say no to an interviewer, especially if they feel the pressure of helping other victims. An alternative would be to have areas of discussion agreed to ahead of time and the option for the participant to move on if they decide not to answer questions during the interview. These issues of practice and process are essential to my research, which I explicitly explore in my film *Niki! Shot by Blue* and in Chapter 5, “The Making Made the Knowing,” which examines my creative practice and how I employed different questioning methods.

An equally significant question is why people agree to have their most private pain made public. Niki, the subject in my creative practice film, was motivated by the potential impact of her story on other victims, and wanted to make a film in the hope

that another girl might watch the documentary and feel like she also mattered. She often said, “If they can see that a stripper chick like me matters, then they’ll get that they matter too” (N. Wilkie, personal correspondence, September 12, 2022). She also talked about the importance of women reporting their assaults and that she wanted to help change the culture of silence that prevailed in the adult entertainment industry.

The filming process was also significant in that it provided Niki with a witness to her struggle. The very act of me being there and the camera recording meant she was being heard and what she was saying mattered. It was physical proof that someone was listening. As Hosterman et al note, “Victims of sexual violence or harassment feel empowered when others acknowledge it... [it] benefits recovery when positive responses from others are received after disclosure” (2018, p. 85). In *The Long Rescue* the director felt that the survivors of sex trafficking were eager to tell their stories to help other survivors, and that was what motivated them to join the documentary. Huang used what she deemed “survivor-centred” strategies. Her call for interviews was done at a refuge for women and girls recovering from sex trafficking in the Philippines called My Refuge House (MRH). She said she only interviewed those who volunteered. Until the participants were over 20 years old and no longer living at MRH, Huang would not ask them directly to be filmed. She also included some conditions for the distribution of the film, which were developed with MRH and lawyers for the participants. These included waiting until all participants were over 18 years old, waiting until all court cases were complete, concealing all names and faces before the film’s release, encouraging participants to review rough cuts of the film, and the option for participants to withdraw from the project right up until the film was finalised. The film would never be released in the Philippines. Huang noted that her strategies were not considered to match what a funding partner would want, and associates told her to keep those details hidden as it would deter them from investing in the project (Huang, 2020). The project took over six

years to film, with Huang visiting MRH to film six times from 2015 to 2019. One participant withdrew from the project during that time. Huang's methods of working in *The Long Rescue* were featured in a filmmaking series called "Centering Survivor Stories" co-presented by Re-Present Media, The Video Consortium and ART WORKS projects in 2024.

While there are more female-centred stories and more female creators behind the camera, the broadcasters and streamers still hold the power over how subjects of documentaries are treated upon release of the documentary. I question if significant change will happen without a shift in their procedures and attitudes toward participant support and protection. Institutions that profit from the pain of victims should be held accountable and take responsibility for the injury and risk those victims face, and also take steps to safeguard them. Sonya Childress points out that a filmmaker does not need to have ill intent or a lack of self-awareness to cause harm to their participant. Even the most well-intentioned and empathetic practitioner can expose the participant to unwanted effects (Bullock Brown, 2020).

A significant cultural shift is, however, occurring in the global documentary community. Sonya Childress and Natalie Bullock Brown's article "The Documentary Future: A Call for Accountability" (2020) consolidated much of the history of privilege, colonialism, and extractive filmmaking practices that have occurred since Robert Flattery's *Nanook of the North* (1922). The Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG, established in 2019) published *From Reflection to Release: A Framework for Values, Ethics, and Accountability in Nonfiction Filmmaking in 2022*, providing a framework for filmmakers to use in their practice. They crafted six core values for nonfiction filmmakers to use as a framework for creating.

For organisations like DAWG, filmmakers need to move past the concepts of consent and informed consent and reframe their position before making the film. The first stage of the production process should be reflection. The values include (1) integrating anti-oppression practices into your work, (2) transparency in relationships, (3) acknowledging your positionality, (4) respecting the dignity and agency of the people in the film, (5) prioritising the needs and well-being of those in your film, and (6) treating potential audiences with respect, dignity and care and concern. Publications like this signify that the discussions around subject and maker relationships have moved well past consent and are taking a holistic approach to consider the filmmaker's identity, position, imbalance of power, and potential audience. However, unless the guidelines are taken on by streamers and broadcasters there will not be lasting change.

Subjectivity and the Ethics of Looking: The Female Gaze

We have determined that the majority of filmmakers are men, and most crime victims portrayed in documentaries are women, as explored in my previous section *Women on screen: has #MeToo made a difference?* Will including more female filmmaker voices solve the problem? What qualities does a female voice have behind the camera that will impact the representation of women? Is there a particular way that women look or gaze?

Between 1950 and 1995, the largest number of films made by American women were in the cinéma vérité documentary form, which Kaplan described as one of the simplest and cheapest forms of filmmaking (Kaplan, 1997, p. 125). As a style, vérité dominated the growing film industry for women. Why is that the case? Is it because a female filmmaker can work alone without convincing others to join her? Perhaps it is a style that speaks to women, an empathetic style that requires listening and patience. So are these qualities female? It

could be that these are qualities associated with *verité* itself. What is the female gaze, as opposed to the male gaze? The male gaze in modern cinema has been written about at great length since Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." What might constitute a female gaze has been examined in art, feminist filmmaking, and film theory. But documentary film, as opposed to fiction cinema, is more about where the makers choose to look and how they look than the narrative constructions of a script, which is what most film theory examining the female gaze has been concentrated on.

Lisa French (2018) has conducted the most comprehensive and contemporary research into the female gaze as it relates to documentaries. As French explains, "the 'female gaze' is understood as a plural idea that each woman will have her own singular gaze, but a major influence on each woman's creative expression is her female subjectivity—the experience of living as female" (French, 2021, p. 1). From her interviews with documentary filmmakers, she framed the critical markers of the female gaze in documentaries as "tendencies." French's interest lies in the ways one could understand the female gaze and whether gender influences documentary filmmakers: "A key marker of the female gaze is the communication or expression of female subjectivity—a gaze shaped by a female 'look,' voice and perspective—the subjective experience or perspective of someone who lives in a female body" (French, 2018, p. 10).

A common theme from French's interviews was that many female filmmakers associated qualities of patience, sensitivity, and complexity with the female gaze. Many did not like the term *female*; however, they would relate to the concept of femininity. Others, like Gillian Leahy, did not enjoy being called a female filmmaker but could recognise that women and men make films differently. Heddy Honigmann connected the female or feminine gaze with notions of pace, "something where you can feel there is a woman; the length of shot you can feel there is a woman. [She] has more tendency to be patient in looking, time passing"

(French, 2018). I can relate to these notions. Perhaps, for me, understanding a female gaze is more akin to understanding how I look at the world, rather than the gaze I have inherited and learned from mainstream cinema.

Tori Telfer (2018) interviewed female cinematographers whose films were playing at *The Female Gaze*, a survey of 36 films with female cinematographers presented by the Film Society at Lincoln Center, New York. Telfer summarised the female gaze: “It’s emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathize rather than to objectify. (Or not).” In interview, cinematographer Ashley Connor stated that “the ‘male’ gaze seeks to devour and control, and the ‘female’ gaze is more a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful.” Another interview subject, Joan Churchill, connected the female gaze with sensitivity and emotional depth:

We go deep, we drill down, we open people up on an emotional level ... My job is to fit into [my documentary subjects’] world, to be sensitive to what is happening so I can follow their process and re-create it on the screen for others to partake in. This means they have to trust me.

Some cinematographers like Natasha Braier reject entirely the notion of a female gaze. “I don’t think there is such thing ...I think there is such thing as the male gaze... The female gaze, if there is such, never had the opportunity to truly develop and become something we can analyze” (Telfer, 2018).

The concept of the gaze is central to ideas of representation. Yet if the relationship between the maker and subject is not respectful, then the type of framing used does not matter. Nor does the mode matter if the relationship is not built on trust, understanding, and respect. Many films I watched for the critical analysis made by women failed to represent female victims of sexual crimes in an autonomous manner. What does this teach me about my

perspective, approach, and how I perceive things? I will delve into these ideas in the upcoming chapters, examining films and conducting critical analysis. Then, armed with new insights, I will explore the tools and methods I use to analyse and implicitly consider my creative practice.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology that underpins the creation of my creative practice documentary and the broader inquiry into the ethical representation of victims of sexual assault. To address my primary research question, **Can you make a true crime documentary without causing harm to the victim?** I employed a combination of **creative practice** and **critical analysis** as my research methods. The creative practice aspect of this project involved producing a documentary through an embodied and respectful approach to storytelling. My film *Niki! Shot by Blue* aims to balance the demands of factual accuracy with the need to position the victim as a voice of authority on her own story. The production of the documentary functions both as a creative output and a method of inquiry into ethical storytelling practices in the representation of sexual assault. It is also vital that the film is engaging and captivating to audiences.

In parallel, I conducted a critical analysis of other true crime documentaries that focus on sexual assault and abuse. This analysis serves two essential purposes. First, it identifies common ethical challenges within the genre, such as the backlash against participants, issues

of informed consent, and the marginalisation of victims' voices through representation tropes and narrative, with a focus on identifying how these works either perpetuate or challenge harmful representations of victims, particularly women and children.

Second, it offers a framework for assessing and refining my creative decisions. By critically engaging with the work of other filmmakers, I demonstrate how my documentary tries to avoid these ethical pitfalls, aiming instead for a trauma-informed approach that empowers the victim.

Research Design and Approach

My stance and epistemological considerations

The research design is informed by a constructivist stance and interpretivist epistemology, recognising that truth in documentary filmmaking is constructed rather than found. My approach asserts that how reality is represented to an audience is shaped by social, cultural, and political forces; in the case of sexual assault, these forces often work to discredit or marginalise the experiences of victims. This stance is particularly relevant given the historical scepticism toward victims of sexual assault, especially women and children. By approaching my film with an awareness that social and cultural factors shape perceptions of credibility and truth, I aim to disrupt dominant narratives that often disbelieve or marginalise victims and challenges the notion of documentary as an objective or neutral representation of reality. My goal is to privilege Niki's telling and centre her voice as one of authority on her experience. It is important for her voice to be heard without the mediation of other voices.

Documentary filmmaking in this context becomes a tool not just for representation but for knowledge production, allowing for new ways of understanding the lived experiences of sexual assault survivors and new ways of working with them

to tell their stories. The film engages with the question of how victims' stories are received by society, directly confronting the social biases that contribute to disbelief. Drawing from existing literature that highlights the systemic disbelief and scepticism victims face (McElvaney et al., 2012; Temkin & Krahe, 2008; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), my stance recognises that representing victims on screen is not merely a matter of stating facts. Instead, it is bound up in struggles for recognition, credibility, and power. This is especially important given that testimonies of sexual assault are frequently contested and doubted, often reinforcing power structures that silence or invalidate victims (Sleath & Bull, 2017; Whatley, 1996). My role, then, is to create a space in my documentary where the victim's experience—emotional, personal, and legal—can emerge in a way that challenges these dominant narratives.

Additionally, my position acknowledges the importance of complexity in representation. My approach to documentary filmmaking avoids definitive or totalising narratives, instead prioritising individual testimony and a first-person perspective to honour the complexity of Niki's experience. Trinh T. Minh-ha criticises totalising narratives, and in her essay "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning" (1993) she argues that these kinds of narratives reduce complexity, erase differences, and perpetuate systems of domination by privileging the perspectives of dominant cultures while marginalising others. She highlights how representation, when shaped by these frameworks, becomes a tool of power that enforces hierarchical understandings of identity and culture. Trinh (1993) calls for a politics of difference that embraces relationality, contradiction, and the dynamic processes of knowledge and representation, resisting the reductive impulses of totalising systems. I have adopted this approach, which underscores the importance of honouring plurality and the complexity of lived realities. This means that my practice becomes a space for exploration with Niki rather than just resolutions. It places value on the process of engaging with difference rather than

achieving a definitive meaning. This approach enriches the relationship between Niki and me, and also positions the work as a critical response to systems of power and representation. This commitment is reflected in my choices throughout the documentary-making process. As an example, instead of framing Niki as a passive subject or reducing her experience to the specifics of the crime, I focus on her journey in the narrative. In doing so, my film challenges the pervasive societal scepticism around sexual assault by prioritising her voice and treating her testimony as credible and worthy of belief.

Creative practice-based research

I recognise that the stories I tell and how I tell them are the result of a process whereby I engage in co-constructing meaning *with* my subjects. The primary method of inquiry is the creative practice of documentary filmmaking. Batty and Kerrigan emphasise the capacity of creative practice to embody and explore complex questions. *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* (Batty & Kerrigan, 2018) is a foundational text that explores the relationship between creative screen production and academic research. This book establishes a framework for understanding screen production as a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry. It positions creative works like films, screenplays, and media projects not merely as artistic endeavours but as vehicles for generating and communicating new knowledge.

In Australia, organisations such as the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) have emphasised the importance of intrinsic measures like innovation and significance for evaluating creative outputs in research contexts. This approach contrasts with traditional measures, for example, audience reach or industry success, which may not fully encapsulate the intellectual

contribution of the work. By using this method, my film itself serves as a form of research, where the process of producing the documentary becomes a site for investigating ethical issues in victim representation.

The project was designed to be iterative, where the initial stages of filmmaking inform theoretical reflection, shaping subsequent decisions during production and post-production. This reflective process allows for continuous engagement with both the research question and the ethical guidelines established for the film. As both a researcher and filmmaker, my role is not neutral; I acknowledge that my presence, decisions, and biases influence the film's construction. This is a core aspect of reflexive filmmaking, where the filmmaker's subjectivity is part of the research process. This awareness informs my approach to representation, aiming that the subject's voice in my film is prioritised and treated with authority. I explore and discuss the findings from my creative practice in Chapter 5.

Ethical Framework

Central to the design of this research is an ethical framework developed in response to the ethical failures identified through my critical analysis of existing documentary practices. In this project, ethical considerations informed every stage of production — from the formulation of interview questions to the final edit of the documentary. Core principles included a trauma-informed approach, ongoing informed consent, subject-centred storytelling, and researcher reflexivity.

Throughout the project, I engaged with the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Technology Sydney, seeking feedback and oversight regarding my ethical decision-making. I approached the ethics application process with guidance from an experienced Research Office Advisor (ROA), who supported me in identifying and

minimising potential risks. The primary risks identified related to the possibility of emotional discomfort resulting from participation in the documentary. In my ethics application, I described how I assessed the potential risks associated with the project. I explained that I considered the risk magnitude to range from emotional discomfort to more harmful emotional responses, recognising that recounting certain memories during the documentary might be painful for participants and could lead to re-experiencing emotions. I also addressed concerns about post-release risks, particularly related to online visibility and public criticism, noting that participants would be coached on managing their social media accounts to mitigate these risks. My research protocol included hiring therapists to support participants before and after interviews, offering professional assistance in the event of emotional distress. I would engage a social media specialist to advise both the participant and their family on managing digital exposure in the lead-up to the publication and distribution of *Niki! Shot by Blue*. Since the majority of footage had already been filmed prior to the commencement of this PhD, I did not require approval to record scenes involving immediate physical or emotional risk.

This research was conducted under Ethics Approval ID ETH21-6280. While my thesis engages critically with ethical practices within the documentary industry and the evolution of professional standards, it does not seek to reform or critique the university ethics approval system itself.

Trauma-informed approach

There is abundant research that suggests sexual violence has a profound impact on victims, shaping their identities and realities in unique and painful ways. “An Ecological Model of the

Impact of Sexual Assault on Women's Mental Health" (Campbell et al., 2009) discusses how sexual violence affects survivors' mental health, self-perception, and relationships, highlighting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and identity shifts as common outcomes. Ullman and Filipas (2001) examine coping mechanisms and the long-term psychological impact of sexual assault, emphasising how survivors' identities and realities are reshaped. Sexual assault can have a profound impact on the victim, but in many true crime documentaries, their stories can be reduced to the facts of the legal case or the brutality of the crime, which can inadvertently objectify or dehumanise victims further.

For the creation of the film, which included editing and conducting reflexive interviews with Niki, I developed a trauma-informed approach in my practice. Whilst there are no formal guidelines for how to comply with trauma-informed creative practice in documentary filmmaking, I compiled my method from key principles established in the Arts-Health and Community Arts practice spaces. In their article "Trauma Aware and Anti-Oppressive Arts-Health and Community Arts Practice: Guiding Principles for Facilitating Healing, Health and Wellbeing", Sunderland et al. provide a scoping review of existing literature that deals with "trauma-aware and informed practice and its applications in arts-health and community arts" (2023, Abstract). The Blue Knot Foundation is the National Centre for Excellence on Complex Trauma. They identify the key principles of working in a trauma-informed manner: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012). This process showed me that my earlier encounters with Niki, before 2020, did not adhere to the ethical standards recommended by best practice trauma-informed documentary approaches, which I now see as vital to my work. These core principles shaped my storytelling methods, making them more empathetic. My goal was to foster a secure atmosphere for Niki during our time together, allowing her the freedom to pause or halt filming whenever she needed. I maintained transparent communication, assuring Niki that

she could rely on my honesty. It was important to me that Niki had a say in our discussions, the film's content, and our collaborative approach. Ultimately, I aimed for Niki to feel empowered through both the process and the final outcome of the film. Filmmaker and Academic Shannon Walsh suggests in her chapter "Ethics: Representation, Subjectivity, & the Colonized Image" that a trauma-informed approach to filmmaking would "commit to collaborative processes of representation for those whose experiences are being represented, to ensure their voices are accurately and fairly captured. It also means being careful not to sensationalize, exploit, or overly dramatize sensitive or traumatic subject matter" (Walsh, 2023, p. 154). For the interviews conducted in 2022 and 2023 for this creative practice research, I drew on trauma-informed interviewing practices examined in my literature review (Bullock Brown, 2020; Felman & Laub, 1992; Huang, 2021). This included creating a safe and supportive environment during interviews, avoiding repetitive lines of questioning that mimic the courtroom experience, and enabling Niki to do the interviews at her own pace. I focused on avoiding situations that would encourage the fawn response (Walker, 2013) to take over, so I maintained a structure to my interviews instead of inviting Niki to speak without direction. My critical analysis of other documentaries highlights the risk of exploitation in the true crime genre, particularly when filmmakers focus on graphic details or sensationalist portrayals of trauma. To counter this, I actively avoided framing Niki's story in a way that reduced her to the crime, instead focusing on her resilience, recovery, and emotional journey.

This trauma-informed approach challenges the traditional objectivity often associated with true crime, as I seek to engage viewers emotionally while respecting the survivor's autonomy and voice. One key finding of this dissertation is that formal guidelines on trauma-informed practice for documentary filmmakers are necessary.

Informed consent

Informed consent is not a one-time formality but an ongoing dialogue throughout the production process. This is particularly important when dealing with survivors of sexual violence, as the emotional toll of revisiting their experiences can build over time (Bullock Brown, 2021; McElvaney et al., 2012; Temkin & Krahe, 2008). As other scholars have pointed out, informed consent in documentary filmmaking must go beyond standard legal forms to consider the emotional and psychological impact on participants (Barry, 2021; S. Thomas, 2012). A complication to consent in the project is the power imbalance between the filmmaker and the subject, particularly when the subject is a victim (Bullock Brown, 2021; E. R. Coleman, 2023; Day et al., 2024; Nash, 2011).

For each project after *Skimpy*, Niki viewed each short film made at the time of production and provided feedback on her representation. Each time, Niki was updated on the approach of the documentary and given the power to withdraw or withhold certain parts of her story. For example, I asked her if she wanted her suicide attempt to be included. The process of consent lasted for the duration of the project, from film to film. I did not assume that because Niki had been in one film that she automatically consented to being in another one. Over these years, 2018-2021, I developed an understanding of how Niki responded to publication. As the final film has not been released, I do not have data on how Niki reacted to the compilation film *Niki! Shot by Blue*. For more details on how I negotiated consent, see Chapter 5.

Subject-focused storytelling

This project aims to deepen my understanding of ethical practices examining innovative working methods. As I explored in my literature review, some scholars and practitioners like the Documentary Accountability Working Group and directors Nandini Sikand *Soma Girls*

(2012) emphasise collaboration and transparency in the filmmaker-subject relationship to avoid reinforcing power imbalances or perpetuating harm. I adopt this by fostering a collaborative approach to storytelling. Niki is a co-creator of the documentary, with the power to influence how her story is told. It was still my job to write and edit the documentary and my goal was to give her a *feeling* of control over her narrative without handing over the responsibility. This approach is shared by filmmakers such as Lynette Wallworth and Robert Greene (Landers, 2024), who maintain clear boundaries with the participants but encourage them to feel ownership and a sense of control over the film.

My framework emphasises negotiated informed consent, trauma-informed practices, and respect for the victim's directive on content throughout the filmmaking process. In light of the ethical issues highlighted through the critical analysis detailed in Chapter 4, my film avoids editing techniques that diminish the victim's voice, such as the multi-perspective victim narratives frequently found in the films I reviewed. Niki stands as the sole victim in her story, with the narrative focusing entirely on her journey as she evolves into an unexpected hero. I consciously refrained from incorporating other male voices to affirm or enhance Niki's worth. Instead of confining her to a single interview perspective, I ensure Niki has substantial screen time to demonstrate her bodily autonomy and engage in activities unrelated to her assault, such as enjoying time with a friend and participating in domestic chores. This approach allows Niki to be recognised as more than just a victim; she is portrayed as an individual on the path to recovery, gaining strength and resilience.

Reflexive practice

Reflexivity, or the awareness of how my presence and decisions impact the film, is a crucial method in my practice and a key ethics principle. I must remain conscious of my influence

over the story. Batty and Kerrigan emphasise that reflexivity in creative practice research is essential for bridging creative outputs with scholarly frameworks. Reflexivity entails critically reflecting on one's decisions, biases, and positionality during the creative process to foster transparency and accountability. Batty and Kerrigan argue that it strengthens the connection between theory and practice, enhancing research rigour (Batty & Kerrigan, 2018). This awareness helps me maintain a balance between creative storytelling and ethical responsibility. I examine how my role as a filmmaker, researcher, and individual influences the documentary. Ross Gibson describes this as a “cognitive two-step” as the researcher goes back and forth between the theory and the practice of their area of study. Gibson believed “complexity needs to be understood by means of a special, doubled mentality, a means of being fully attentive both inside and outside the unfolding phenomenon” (Gibson, 2017, p. xiii). Reflexivity is critical to practice-based research, particularly in ethically complex fields such as true crime and trauma representation. Documenting the stories of vulnerable individuals, I acknowledge that my own positionality—my background, beliefs, and biases—shapes the documentary. Reflexivity requires me to critically examine how these factors influence my interactions with participants, interview questions, and narrative choices. Rather than striving for an illusion of objectivity, I recognise that my perspective is present in the documentary. In Chapter 5, I reflect on how my worldview, particularly regarding justice and feminist issues, impacts how I tell Niki's story and how my approach shifts over time. Reflexivity also plays a key role in navigating the ethical dilemmas inherent in this subsection of true crime storytelling. My critical analysis of other documentaries reveals the potential for voyeurism and sensationalism (see Chapter 4). By engaging in reflexive practice, I stay attuned to the ethical risks of exploiting Niki's trauma for dramatic effect. I regularly ask myself how my choices—from shot composition to editing techniques—impact the portrayal of Niki. Reflexivity in this context involves recognising the power dynamics at

play in how stories are told and working to amplify the subject's voice rather than diminish or distort her experiences.

Finally, reflexivity prompts me to continually question the role of documentary filmmaking in producing knowledge. I am contributing to the public understanding of sexual assault and its victims, but reflexivity keeps me aware of the ethical implications of this contribution. How does my portrayal of a survivor challenge or reinforce societal attitudes toward sexual assault? How can my documentary encourage empathy and belief in a victim without reducing her experiences to trauma alone? These are important questions I return to throughout my practice.

The ethical framework and key principles outlined above are crucial to ensuring that my documentary adheres to ethical storytelling standards. By prioritising a trauma-informed approach, informed consent, subject-focused storytelling, and ongoing reflexivity, I aimed to create a project that privileges Niki's perspective while critically reflecting on the power dynamics and ethical challenges inherent in the true crime genre.

Practical Aspects of Production and Research

Central to this doctoral project is a practice-led methodology, in which creative production functions not only as an expressive mode but as a primary site of research and knowledge generation. This approach aligns with established understandings of practice-based research, wherein the act of making constitutes a form of inquiry in its own right (Barrett & Bolt, 2010). My creative practice comprises three core areas; cinematography, editing, and storytelling, which collectively form the methodological backbone of this research.

Cinematography, as both a technical and aesthetic practice, serves as the primary means through which I investigate the relationship between visual language and meaning-making in documentary. Through the deliberate use of framing, shot composition, camera movement, depth of field, and lighting, I explore how image construction affects viewer interpretation and emotional engagement. These decisions are guided not only by aesthetic considerations but by their conceptual function within the broader documentary narrative. In line with Mercado's (2010) insights into visual storytelling, the cinematographic approach adopted here is both reflexive and interrogative. Each camera decision is treated as a form of research inquiry into visual rhetoric and its communicative potential.

Editing is akin to a research process, where organising visual and auditory materials serves as a medium for narrative development and ideological expression. The edit suite acts as a space for critical analysis concerning rhythm, pacing, juxtaposition, and the temporal dynamics of documentary storytelling. As Heyward (2008) notes, editing goes beyond mere post-production; it is a discursive practice that shapes audience perceptions, influences emotional responses, and defines the film's knowledge framework. Through a series of editing iterations, I explore how various narrative forms, addressing styles, and representational techniques affect the viewer, treating the timeline as a research instrument instead of a mere framework.

Finally, storytelling serves as the connective tissue between these production processes, anchoring visual and editorial choices within a coherent narrative and ethical framework. This aspect of the practice is influenced by both classical and contemporary approaches to documentary storytelling, including the reflexive and performative dimensions discussed by Bruzzi (2006). In this context, storytelling is not seen as imposing structure onto 'reality', but as a meaning-making practice that navigates the tension between representation and truth, subjectivity and objectivity. Taken together, these practical elements of production create an

integrated methodological approach where the act of making is inseparable from the act of thinking. By deeply engaging with the tools and techniques of documentary filmmaking, this practice-based research provides not only a body of creative work but also a situated, experiential understanding of visual storytelling as both a craft and a critical mode of inquiry. I will explore my findings in Chapter 5, *The Making Made the Knowing*.

Critical Analysis of Existing Documentaries

The second key method in this research design is a critical analysis of existing true crime documentaries that focus on sexual assault. This method provides a crucial contextual framework for understanding how the subgenre has traditionally handled such sensitive subject matter and how my project aims to diverge from problematic patterns. David Bordwell advocates that there is a relationship between film narratives and broader cultural and social contexts. He analyses how narrative structures reflect the values, ideologies, and social issues of the times they are produced in. Films are both mirrors and moulders of cultural discourse (Bordwell, 2022). In Chapter 4, I critically analyse several high-profile true crime documentaries that deal with sexual assault. To conduct the analysis, I watched 34 documentaries and identified the common themes across them, such as whose perspective was privileged, how filmmakers crafted the victims' on-screen representation, and examples of best practices. Through notetaking and cross-referencing common themes, I identified patterns of representation, such as the use of rescue trope narratives and the impact of editing tactics regarding pacing and rhythm. I also conducted research beyond the mechanism of the film and investigated which films had instances of backlash against the participants for speaking out. I have narrowed the focus of my critical analysis to; backlash against

participants, tropes, patterns of on-screen representation, and consent. These traits existed in most of the films I watched, so I selected six films that best exemplified them.

These case studies allow for in-depth discussion and analysis. Through comparing and highlighting the strategies operating in these examples, I assessed how these documentaries either succeed or fail in ethically representing victims, particularly when addressing issues such as consent, trauma, and victimhood. It also highlights instances of best practice in the genre, examining the choices filmmakers made and how that, in turn, impacted the subjects. These findings inform my own creative practice by highlighting what to avoid and guiding me towards more sympathetic narrative techniques. For example, where certain films utilise male voices to validate the victim's claims, my documentary foregrounds the victim's voice and focuses on her determination and agency.

Conclusion

This research design integrates creative practice as a form of inquiry with critical analysis of existing true crime documentaries, creating a dual methodology that allows for both practical and theoretical exploration of ethical storytelling. My reflexive and ethically grounded approach informs all aspects of the filmmaking process, with the hope that the documentary tells the story of sexual assault in a way that protects and empowers the subject involved. My documentary *Niki! Shot by Blue* does not simply 'reveal the truth' of a crime but constructs a sensitive, complex representation of both the factual and emotional realities of a sexual assault survivor. By acknowledging the subjectivity of trauma, the power dynamics in filmmaking, and the ethical responsibility to the victim, my creative practice highlights the care with which I approach both the filmmaking process and the representation of reality in my documentary.

This involves using trauma-informed and empathetic storytelling techniques and incorporating collaborative practices that give Niki agency in her on-screen representation. This approach challenges the traditional notions of objectivity often associated with true crime, as I seek to engage viewers emotionally while respecting the subject's dignity and voice. The film reveals the unique relationship between a maker and their subject, offering the audience an intimate look into how our relationship develops and grows over time.

Chapter 4. Critical Analysis of Films

Introduction

This chapter is a critical analysis of six documentary films. Like fictional films, documentary films move in trends, and a surge of victim stories in the true crime genre is being told in the post-#MeToo era. This phenomenon can be attributed to a domino effect, where more victims come forward after hearing comparable stories, coupled with a cultural shift away from silencing those who have been affected. This transformation in cultural discourse is reflected in an increase in documentary commissions focusing on #MeToo stories. It is this genre of true crime sexual assault documentaries on which I will focus my critical discourse analysis. Key concepts of power and agency are relevant to my critical analysis of the representation of victims in the media landscape. In my literature review, I established the ethical risks and challenges in representation that victims of true crime documentaries face. In this critical analysis, I delve further into this topic and take a more forensic look at structure, representation, bias, and tone.

At the time of submission of this thesis, it has been eight years since the #MeToo movement gained international attention in 2017. Translations of the hashtag emerged in other languages, including #YoTambien (Spain), #BalanceTonPork (France), #QuellaVoltaChe (Italy), #أنا_كمان (Egypt), and #RiceBunny emojis (China). The #MeToo Twitter debut occurred in October 2017, and from October 2017 to September 2018, the hashtag was used

over 19 million times on Twitter, averaging 55,319 uses per day (Anderson & Toor, 2018). This demonstrates how social media became a pivotal platform for sharing personal stories and discussing sexual assault and harassment issues. The #MeToo movement had a significant impact on the documentary film industry, both reflecting and influencing societal changes around issues of sexual harassment and assault. Following the meteoric rise of #MeToo, there was a surge of documentaries focusing on similar themes, aiming to shine a light on previously silenced stories. Films like *Leaving Neverland* (Reed, 2019), *Surviving R. Kelly* (Hampton, 2019), and *On the Record* (Kirk & Ziering, 2020) have drawn attention to high-profile cases and illustrated the complexities of power dynamics in the entertainment industry.

This surge of #MeToo documentaries coincided with the movement's presence in other media forms, such as podcasts, news reports, and social media campaigns. This multi-platform narrative amplified the reach and impact of the stories, fostering a robust transmedia conversation about consent, abuse, and accountability. Documentaries emerged as a vital platform for delving deeply into the issues, frequently incorporating firsthand testimonies and investigative reporting to elevate public understanding and empathy. Often, the publication of these stories led to the downfall of powerful and popular figures, such as rapper R. Kelly and film producer Harvey Weinstein. There are now more stories about sexual assault and abuse in the mediascape than the previous two decades combined.

Analysis

To conduct a critical analysis, I compiled and viewed a list of 34 documentaries of this subgenre—true crime documentaries about sexual abuse and assault—published after 2012

that were widely available on major streaming platforms. The criteria for my selection were (1) it was a documentary single or series, (2) on the topic of sexual assault or abuse, a sex-based crime, and (3) published. I stopped adding films as of May 2024, so titles published after this date have not been included. Whilst viewing the films for the first time, I noted which common themes emerged that warranted investigation. The six films I selected provided the best evidence for the arguments about **patterns of representation, participant backlash** and **consent**. I have observed a stark contrast between films where male victims are involved compared to those focused on female victims. The analysis also identifies examples of best practice, and what impact that has on the subject's experience.

Figure 1. List of films viewed for analysis.

All films have been viewed. *Indicates included in this analysis, listed in the order I viewed them.

	TITLE	YEAR	DIRECTOR
1	<i>Allen v. Farrow</i>	2021	Kirby Dick & Amy Ziering
2	<i>Surviving R. Kelly</i> *	2019	Dream Hampton
3	<i>Athlete A</i> *	2020	Bonni Cohen & Jon Shenk
4	<i>Revelation</i>	2020	Sarah Ferguson
5	<i>On The Record</i>	2020	Kirby Dick & Amy Ziering
6	<i>Silent No More</i>	2019	ABC/Tracy Spicer
7	<i>Surviving R. Kelly Part I The Impact</i>	2019	Dream Hampton
8	<i>Untouchable</i>	2019	Ursula Macfarlane
9	<i>Roll Red Roll</i>	2018	Nancy Schwartzman
10	<i>Slut Or Not</i>	2018	Kelly Showker
11	<i>Tell Me Who I Am</i>	2019	Ed Perkins
12	<i>I am Evidence</i>	2017	Trish Adlesic & Geeta Gandbhir
13	<i>Audrie and Daisy</i> *	2016	Bonni Cohen & Jon Shenk

14	<i>The Hunting Ground</i>	2015	Kirby Dick
15	<i>Surviving R. Kelly Part II The Reckoning</i>	2020	Dream Hampton
16	<i>Cosby: The Women Speak</i>	2015	Jeanmarie Condon
17	<i>It Happened Here</i>	2014	Lisa F. Jackson
18	<i>Anita</i>	2013	Freida Mock
19	<i>Surviving R. Kelly Part III The Final Chapter*</i>	2023	Dream Hampton
20	<i>The Invisible War</i>	2012	Kirby Dick
21	<i>Square One: Michael Jackson</i>	2019	Danny Wu
22	<i>MEA Maxima Culpa: Silence/House of God</i>	2012	Alex Gibney
23	<i>Michael Jackson: Chase the Truth</i>	2019	Jordan Hill
24	<i>Leaving Neverland*</i>	2019	Dan Reed
25	<i>Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich</i>	2020	Lisa Bryant
26	<i>At the Heart of Gold*</i>	2019	Erin Lee Carr
27	<i>Abducted in Plain Sight</i>	2017	Skye Borgman
28	<i>The Keepers</i>	2017	Ryan White
29	<i>We Need to Talk about Cosby</i>	2022	W. Kamau Bell
30	<i>The Most Hated Man on the Internet</i>	2022	Rob Miller
31	<i>Quiet on Set</i>	2022	David Charbonier & Justin Powell
32	<i>Procession*</i>	2021	Robert Greene
33	<i>Victim/Suspect</i>	2023	Nancy Schwartzman
34	<i>Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey</i>	2022	Rachel Cretzin

Staying in frame: representation, visibility, and power

A character's presence on screen allows the audience to absorb the speaker's words and take in accompanying information. The duration of their presence on screen impacts how much information is absorbed. In addition to the words spoken, an audience absorbs information

about the speaker's body language, facial expression, and subtext. Extended screen time allows the audience to understand a character more deeply, leading to a stronger emotional connection and empathy. The more a character is on screen, the more chances the audience has to observe their actions, expressions, and responses. This enhances the character's relatability and humanity, which is essential for building a strong connection. When a subject is in an interview setting, their movements are more limited when compared with a subject involved in unfolding action on screen, which can be observed in all their facets and full expression of their emotion.

Ross Gibson discusses the limitations of interviews in documentaries, particularly focusing on the concept of bodily autonomy and how it intersects with the representation of subjects. In his essay "Acting, Thinking, Breathing" (1999) he critiques the traditional interview format, which often exerts power over the subject, potentially compromising their autonomy. He also highlights how the body is restricted in the interview frame, and the audience cannot see the whole person. Their essence is constrained within the four sides of the frame. Gibson emphasises that interviews can create a dynamic where the interviewer holds authority, thereby shaping the narrative and presentation of the subject's story. When confined to a chair, the interviewee has their breath and blinks, but other rhythms are harder to express. If the person is allocated a longer screen duration, extending their presence on screen, the audience has more access to their emotional expression and can understand them more fully.

Rhythm is an essential tool in the editing. Each shot has the inherent rhythm that exists within it, captured at the time of filming. How that shot is then used in conjunction with others produces another type of rhythm. Karen Pearlman is a renowned theorist and practitioner in the craft of film editing. Her theories unequivocally demonstrate how editing influences a film's narrative flow and shapes the viewer's emotional experience. Pearlman's

theories often intersect with ideas from cognitive science, particularly embodied cognition. She suggests that editing rhythms are not just technical choices; they also evoke physical and emotional responses from the audience (Pearlman, 2012). According to Pearlman, rhythm and pacing in editing can mirror the human body's natural rhythms, such as heartbeat or breathing patterns, which in turn influence the audience's experience of those emotions.

Pearlman's theories suggest that the rhythmic structure of editing profoundly impacts the audience's engagement with the narrative and characters. By aligning or contrasting rhythmic patterns with the scene's content, editors can create harmony or dissonance, influencing the work's emotional tone and thematic depth. When the length of screen duration is reduced, and the storyteller's continuous screen duration is disrupted, the audience does not get to absorb and engage with their rhythm uninterrupted. Quick cuts are often deployed to increase pace, add intensity, and heighten tension. In doing so, blinks and breaths may be removed, taking away another set of clues the audience would otherwise use to gain insight into the emotional state and nuance of the interviewee. A longer, uninterrupted presence on screen allows the audience to connect more deeply with the interview. Reducing this screen duration with quick cuts and interwoven interviews prohibits the extent of this connection.

A Little Miss Under-Represented

Upon reviewing the list of 34 films addressing sexual assault, I discerned recurring **patterns of representation** that failed to adequately serve the interests of the victims. One pattern was the use of multiple victims' voices to tell the story. Many films included such a large number of voices that the names and faces of the victims melded together. This meant that remembering

the details of what they experienced and how their stories differed was challenging. This is a technique employed by Dick and Ziering in *The Hunting Ground*, *The Invisible War*, and *On the Record*. In *The Invisible War*, the sheer number of different faces you need to keep track of is disorientating. By oversupplying the audience with evidence that the crime happened, the filmmakers are depriving the audience of a lasting and impactful connection with the participants and, in turn, depriving the participants of the chance to tell their stories. This was one of the issues Winfrey had with *On the Record* before she withdrew from the project. This pattern of representation was also present in *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey*, *Silent No More*, and *Cosby: The Women Speak*.

I selected *At the Heart of Gold* and *Athlete A* to analyse this issue, as they were exemplars of these **patterns of representation**. I consider two fundamental areas in editing: the time on screen for the victim and the surrounding voices of authority included in the film. Both films revolve around the same criminal, Larry Nassar, providing a unique opportunity to compare how the same factual event can be told in diverse ways. The victim's voices are often overshadowed by what I have named the *Validator*. I observed that filmmakers often prioritise male voices in connection to the story to validate and authenticate the value of the victim. These male voices are often used to introduce a female character before she has herself told the audience what happened to her.

Athlete A and *At the Heart of Gold* are mirrors of one another in many ways. They both follow the trial and conviction of Team USA Olympic gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. Nassar abused an enormous number of victims over many years. 265 victims have formally claimed that he abused them (Buncombe, 2018). At his court case in Michigan, 260 women attended the court room, 156 of whom testified. The disturbing aspect of the crime is the awareness that he was acting in plain view. Many victims tried to complain years *before* the final reckoning began, and USA Gymnastics silenced them. Parents paid him to 'treat' their

children for injuries, and instead, he was abusing their children. Young female athletes paid him to be healed, and he instead assaulted them. The films also look at the gymnastics culture of pressure, competition, and control.

Fragmented narrative: storytelling and survivor voices

The impact of quick cuts and interweaving interviews is demonstrated in *At the Heart of Gold*. The film features 12 victims of Larry Nassar's abuse, who they describe as "sister survivors." The stories are interwoven to demonstrate the similarities in Nassar's predatory behaviour and the patterns of abuse that occurred. Perhaps the filmmakers wanted to impress upon the audience the large number of victims and the feeling of horror that ensues when one comprehends the enormity of Nassar's crimes. Nevertheless, a consequence of having many victims included in the story is the loss of screen time for each victim, as their individual presence on screen is limited. The film has so many voices that it is difficult for the audience to connect and empathise with the individual journey each victim is undertaking. I observed the editor used a common technique of inter-splicing testimonies, so one woman would start a sentence, and another woman would finish it. It was rare for a speaker to be on screen for longer than two seconds. In these two seconds (usually less) it was hard for the viewer to develop a strong connection to the speaker; I did not see the blinks, the breaths, the pauses. The names and faces of the women blend together so much that recalling the details of what they experienced and how their stories differ is challenging.

The fast cuts used to create tension deprived me of really feeling a connection to the speakers. When watching the film, I tried to write down the names of the victims and specific details that might help me to differentiate them and keep track, because without these notes it was impossible to remember who was who. This did not leave me feeling connected or engaged deeply with anyone. I did, however, understand the magnitude of Nassar's crimes

and the insidious nature of his offending. In her book *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (2012), Pearlman introduces a framework for understanding the intuitive and structured aspects of film editing. She argues that rhythm in editing is a way to communicate non-verbally with the audience, using timing, pacing, and the juxtaposition of shots to evoke specific emotional states. Pearlman suggests that editors can develop a “felt sense” of rhythm that guides them in making cuts that feel emotionally resonant (Pearlman, 2012).

I can understand the filmmakers wanting to make the point that there were patterns of abuse and demonstrate Nassar’s coercive behaviour. However, the rhythm of the cut was too fast and did not enable me to resonate emotionally with the individual victims. I felt that in attempting to prove their point, they oversupplied the audience with evidence. The focus of the edit was on building the tension and proving to the audience that the abuse had taken place, which effectively obstructed the audience’s opportunity to develop a lasting and impactful connection with the participants. This, in turn, denies the participants of the chance to tell their story with substantial emotional weight and connection with the audience.

In the third act of the film, *At the Heart of Gold*, the narrative style switches from interconnected interviews to observational footage of the court case. Nassar pleaded guilty to all charges, and many felt this allowed Nassar to escape trial and avoid humiliation. This angered victims and their families as it denied them the chance to give evidence and address Nassar. To allow the victims to express the impact Nassar had on their lives, the judge offered anyone affected the chance to speak. Shot in an observational style, we see a continuous stream of women and girls reading impact statements to Nassar as he stands in the witness box. This last act of the film is heavy viewing. Perhaps the most harrowing is a young neighbour of Nassar’s who was groomed, abused, and then raped by Nassar whilst under his care. Through the testimonies, we come to understand the magnitude of the years of offending in its entirety.

As mentioned earlier, 260 women, most of them victims, presented to the court to watch the sentencing. At this point, we can watch the speakers express themselves for longer periods. The editing technique of weaving the testimonials together is still used, yet the screen duration each speaker is given is longer. We view them in more than just a medium close-up of their head and shoulders and are engaged more deeply in the tempo of their embodied emotion. We see their hands trembling, their voices shaking, and their posture changing from hunched over to standing taller at the end of their testimony. Characters with more screen time are given more opportunities for development, revealing complexities and nuances in their behaviour.

Films can establish a character's arc more effectively through editing choices that prioritise extended scenes or repeated appearances. This contributes to a sense of growth, transformation, or internal conflict, strengthening the emotional connection with the audience. This bodily tempo is what can make a good observational documentary so strong, so immediate, so powerful. The audience breathes with the person on screen, looks where the person looks, and blinks when they blink. Despite being one of many, the individual testimonies are much stronger and have a deeper impact when delivered outside of a formal interview format.

The representation of Athlete A: a central figure in the shadows

Athlete A recounts the Nassar case through the eyes of the first gymnast who lodged an official complaint that set the ball rolling for the criminal investigation that would eventually bring Nassar down. Investigators assigned Maggie Rogers the code name 'Athlete A' when they took her statement in order to maintain her anonymity. She was just the first of many athletes to complain about Nassar formally. After reading the synopsis, I expected to see a stylistically contrasting film to *At the Heart of Gold* that focused on

Maggie’s story. I anticipated seeing more significant screen duration for her interviews and time on screen in general. But when watching the film, I was surprised by how little she appeared on the screen. We did not see Maggie’s face for the introduction, nor did she tell her own story to the camera. It was exceedingly rare that she addressed the camera, so rare that I decided to note the timecodes. I discovered she was on screen for a total of one minute and 10 seconds for the whole 143 minutes of the film.

Figure 2. In and out times for Maggie’s on-screen appearances.

IN	OUT	TIME
00:01:50:00	00:01:53:00	3
00:02:44:00	00:02:47:00	3
00:02:47:00	00:02:58:00	11
00:03:05:00	00:03:15:00	10
00:22:06:00	00:22:09:00	3
00:22:38:00	00:22:43:00	5
00:24:16:00	00:24:31:00	15
00:24:39:00	00:24:44:00	5
00:57:44:00	00:57:49:00	5
00:59:16:00	00:59:24:00	8
01:38:27:00	01:38:29:00	2
Total		70

Despite being the documentary’s focus, Maggie is not awarded longer screen duration, nor does she have more time on camera in observational footage. The documentary used a nostalgic slideshow and home video archive of Maggie as a young aspiring gymnast to provide backstory. The personal archive evokes emotion and does well to endear Maggie to the audience. Yet it is those around her, her parents and friends, who describe the abuse. Experts talk about the lasting impact of what she went through and the damage to her career. Her story is also padded out by other gymnasts who were not abused by Nassar but were treated by him. Maggie herself is far removed as a witness to her own story. The result of this is she becomes a silent victim in the drama. In the next section, I will discuss who fills in the blanks of Maggie’s story when she is not granted the time on screen to tell it herself.

Systemic disbelief and the justice gap

The widespread disbelief of victims in high-profile cases, such as the Larry Nassar and Jeffrey Epstein scandals, demonstrates the systemic tendency to doubt or ignore the testimonies of women and children. In both cases, victims reported abuse for years before any legal action was taken, largely due to the disbelief of authorities and institutions that should have protected them. In the Nassar case, investigative reports revealed in *At the Heart of Gold* and *Athlete A* showed that numerous victims had filed complaints with USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University, yet no immediate action was taken. Investigative failures, disbelief of victims, and institutional cover-ups were later acknowledged.

This disbelief of victims and the role it plays in the justice system is historical (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1985; Kanekar & Vaz, 1983; Krahe, 1988; Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). In their book *Sexual Assault and the Justice Gap: A Questions of Attitude*, Temkin and Krahe (2008) explore the dramatic gap between the number of offences recorded by the police and the number of convictions. Van der Bruggen and Grubb (2014) examine how the characteristics of victims, including gender, sexuality, level of resistance displayed, and the nature of the victim-perpetrator relationship, impact the blame placed on the victim. Their findings suggest that these variables significantly influence the degree of blame assigned to victims of rape. Rape myths (prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, victims, and perpetrators) persist in courtrooms, influencing how judges, juries, and even prosecutors view cases (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Rape myths often lead to the minimisation of the crime, victim-blaming, and the assumption that the victim's behaviour played a role in the assault. A study in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (Sleath & Bull, 2012) found that rape myth acceptance among jurors significantly reduces conviction rates in sexual assault cases. These myths include ideas that women "ask for it" by dressing provocatively or that they are

fabricating stories to gain attention. Sleath and Bull highlight the detrimental impact of these myths, noting that victims who deviate from societal expectations—such as those who knew their attacker or consumed alcohol—are assigned more blame, leading juries to be less likely to convict. Furthermore, Sleath and Bull argue that the harsh cross-examination of women and children exacerbates their trauma, deterring them from seeking further legal action.

Child victims of sexual abuse face additional challenges. McElvaney et al. (2012) found that children are often disbelieved due to their age and perceived lack of credibility. The adversarial nature of courtrooms, coupled with a limited understanding of the effects of trauma on memory, complicates their cases. Campbell and Wasco (2005) found that courts often demand corroborating evidence from children, despite the private nature of most sexual abuse incidents. Trauma-induced memory fragmentation is frequently misinterpreted by legal professionals as dishonesty, further contributing to systemic disbelief. In Australia, recent statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reveal that in the 2021–2022 period, an estimated 737,000 women experienced sexual assault, yet only 20% reported the crime within 12 months. Conviction rates remain extremely low, with fewer than 2% of reported assaults leading to convictions. These figures highlight the failures of a legal system that does not adequately support victims, leading to widespread underreporting and dissatisfaction with outcomes.

The authority of male voices: validating the victim's experience

The disbelief women and children face within the legal system raises broader questions: why should an entertainment audience believe them? Filmmakers often counter the bias against female testimony by employing male voices to lend credibility to victim accounts. This pattern is evident in documentaries such as *At the Heart of Gold* and *Athlete A* (and also found in *The Hunting Ground*, *Allen v. Farrow*, *Audrie and Daisy*, and *The Invisible War*),

where male voices are used to substantiate victims' claims, their authority lending significant weight to the narrative. In *Athlete A*, the filmmakers use male journalists and a male lawyer in this capacity. Although it was initially a female journalist who broke the story and did the majority of reporting, she had a fraction of time on screen compared to her male counterparts. A male lawyer was used to explain and set up the court case and introduce the victim's statements. He is also, interestingly, the one who finally describes Nassar's crimes to camera. None of the victims describe the abuse. When the court revealed Nassar pleaded guilty, the lawyer delivered a heroic speech to an excited press pack outside. He explained how proud he was for being able to stand up for the victims and his long quest for justice. He is presented as the champion for the victims.

In addition to being used to validate the victim, male characters are portrayed as protectors. These tropes are present in fiction films about women and sexual abuse. They often follow the "Rescue Narrative" identified by Barker (2014), where a white male emerges as the saviour, while the female character is reduced to a passive, helpless figure. According to Barker (2014), these narratives reinforce gender hierarchies by portraying women as dependent on male intervention for their salvation. Richard Dyer's *White* (1997) offers insight into how white male characters are frequently depicted as heroic figures, perpetuating the dominance of whiteness in film and reinforcing patriarchal and racial hierarchies. Dissecting Dyer's theories, Eric King Watts suggests "As the Great Protector in this narrative, white masculinity is charged with the moral obligation to confront and conquer dark threats to white purity and innocence"(Watts, 2005, p. 191). This great white male protector trope is rooted in colonial ideologies, where white men were seen as civilisers tasked with rescuing those deemed less capable (Chow, 1993; Hughey, 2014). Professor Casey

Ryan Kelley identifies the trope in popular cinema, analysis in the film *Taken*, which was so popular it is now a trilogy.

“*Taken* articulates a cultural demand for a white male protector to serve as both guardian and avenger of white women’s purity against the violent and sexual impulses of racial “Others.” In the film, the threat of “dark” masculinity from the East summons forth a white hero (Bryan), to slay the enemies of civilization and protect the sexual purity of white women. As a consequence of this cinematic retelling, *Taken* implies that the protection of white feminine purity legitimates both white masculine revenge-seeking and overbearing protection of young women”(Kelly, 2014, p. 404).

Through altruistic and morally superior acts, the white male protagonist’s heroism becomes central, while female characters are sidelined, and their agency is diminished. Staiger (2013) critiques this dynamic in cinema, pointing out that women in such narratives are often cast as emotional or in need of protection, reflecting and reinforcing broader societal attitudes that constrain women within patriarchal expectations.

This great white male protector archetype could be identified in many of the films on the list, most commonly in stories of sexual assault on young women and girls. The following examples exemplify the male protector archetype, and I see it appropriate to apply this term in this context. The use of fathers and brothers was prominent in *The Hunting Ground*, *The Invisible War*, *Audrie and Daisy*, and *Allen v. Farrow*, as well as the two studied films, *Athlete A* and *At the Heart of Gold*. Like the rescue trope, the protagonist’s virginity and virtue are held in high regard. In *Athlete A*, we hear from Maggie’s father, who refers to her as his “little girl.” He articulates his pain and agony, framing the assault as a personal affront to his masculinity. His focus on her innocence is evident as he laments that another man violated her before she could lose her virginity, expressing anguish over what he perceives should have been her ‘first time.’ Notably, Maggie’s father receives more screen time than the victim herself, with the narrative framing her abuse through his guilt.

This tactic is common among filmmakers, who use it to add emotional weight and drama to the editing. In *The Invisible War* (Dick, 2012), a young female recruit's father, who had encouraged her to join the US Army, expresses his grief to the camera: "She called me and said, 'Daddy, I'm not a virgin anymore,' and I said, 'No, you're still a virgin because that man took that from you; you didn't give it freely.'" Although the daughter subsequently recounts her experience, her narrative is introduced and overshadowed by her father's sense of guilt. *The Hunting Ground*, a film about on-campus rape and institutional cover-up of the crimes, uses the overlapping story technique of many victims. Before we meet them in person, the filmmakers Dick and Ziering would frequently introduce the victim through her father or brother.

In sexual assault documentaries, the archetype of the action-hero father transforms; while he cannot physically confront the assailant, he can vocally express his desire for vengeance. Despite this shift in role, the father maintains a central position, as evidenced by the extended screen time allocated to him. Blaming the victims for being naive and taking risks that led to their downfall was common in *The Hunting Ground* and *Audrie and Daisy* films, where alcohol was consumed before the victims were assaulted. In *Audrie and Daisy*, phrases like "If only she had listened to me" were echoed by male family members for both girls. Audrie's father laments that he warned her not to go out drinking and wishes she had listened to him. Daisy's brother curses that she snuck out that night to go drinking and that it was his friends who were there in the basement where she was assaulted.

In the third act of *At the Heart of Gold*, approximately four minutes are dedicated to a hostile encounter in the courtroom between Randall Margraves, father of three victims, and the abuser, Larry Nassar. The father asks to speak, referring to

himself as a “distraught father,” and, once granted permission, asks that as a part of the sentencing, he be granted “five minutes in a locked room with this demon. Would you do that?” The judge replies no, she would not, so the father begs, “Would you give me one minute?” There is a sound of laughter in the courtroom, a nervous chuckle that releases the tension that has built up. The judge again states that she cannot do that, and upon hearing this, the father runs across the room and attempts to breach security to strike Nassar, only to be restrained by bailiffs. It takes three large male bailiffs to contain him. As he runs toward Nassar, we hear his daughters desperately cry, “Dad! Dad!” This violent outburst is entirely focused on the father; the identities of the victims, including his daughters, remain obscured. Even whilst on the ground, the father is shouting, “Leave me one moment with that bastard!” and sounds of female crying can be heard coming from off camera. It takes five court representatives to finally contain and arrest him. The clip has amassed 11.4 million views on YouTube (October 30, 2024). Comments from viewers called the man a hero, expressed the sentiment that he did the right thing, that they would do the same thing, along with many comments like this one from @tony-gb5ub_ “He is an excellent example of an honorable man and a loving protective father. God bless him and his family.”

The scene dominated news coverage of the trial on February 2, 2018, appearing on the BBC, CNN, the *Guardian*, ESPN, both the Australian and American ABCs, and NBC. A GoFundMe was set up for the father, and in under three hours, it had raised US\$8,000 (Miller, 2018). The clip was widely circulated on social media, framed as a relatable moment for all fathers—a man risking his safety to avenge a family member’s suffering. The court did not press charges, and Margraves was released.

This trope of the vengeful male protector is common in popular fiction films like *Rambo: Last Blood* (Grünberg, 2019), and *Gone Baby Gone* (Affleck, 2007) and the aforementioned *Taken* (Morel, 2008). In *Taken*, Bryan Mills (played by Liam Neeson) embarks on

a violent quest to save his daughter, whose rebellion and naivety indirectly lead to her victimisation. Barker (2014) critiques this trope, highlighting how women are often blamed for their circumstances, with their rescue depicted as contingent on male heroism. The repeated use of this trope across genres raises concerns about its impact on societal perceptions of women. The male protagonist's journey of redemption and empowerment often overshadows the female character's depth or narrative complexity, reducing her to a symbol of vulnerability. This dynamic sidelines women's agency, portraying their victimisation as inevitable and their rescue as dependent on male action (Stabile, 2009). Such portrayals reinforce patriarchal norms by positioning men as protectors and leaders while women remain passive recipients of their intervention. Barker (2014) emphasises that these films send a clear message: women need male protectors, and men's redemption comes through acts of protection and violence. While some contemporary films attempt to subvert these conventions, the traditional rescue narrative remains pervasive.

In these narratives, men assume the protector role, ostensibly demonstrating their care for the female victim and validating her pain. However, this dynamic often results in the victim becoming a secondary figure in her own story, risking her agency and autonomy. The audience spends less time engaging with the victim's experience as the focus shifts to the man grappling with his loss. When male figures enter the narrative, women frequently diminish into the background, overshadowed by the male protector's emotional turmoil.

My analysis provides evidence that the media often relies on other voices to confirm and support a woman's story. This is a reaction to the social discourse that female victims are not trusted to tell their own stories and that audiences are not trusted to believe them. The films follow patterns of representation identified in the rescue narrative. It is observable that male voices frequently overshadow the female victim's voice, shifting the focus of a story about a female experience to centre on

male perspectives. This often results in men being portrayed as heroes in the story, employing the great white male protector and validator tropes. Women, by comparison, are allocated extraordinarily little presence on screen despite being the ones most impacted by the crime. They become supporting actors in their own stories.

Repercussions of Visibility: Participant Experiences Post-Film

Does having a longer screen presence without male guardians ensure improved treatment, autonomy, and a stronger voice for victims? How does it change when victims receive more screen time without being overshadowed by a male protector? This section examines the potential backlash and consequences for victims featured in documentaries, as well as the impacts on their lives. By analysing these films, I aim to pinpoint both the advantages and disadvantages for victims who decide to participate. Documentaries like the *Surviving R. Kelly* trilogy serve as cautionary examples for filmmakers working with vulnerable victims of crime, emphasising the serious repercussions of being in the public eye.

Timeline to justice: the impact of victim voices

Recording artist R. Kelly had allegations mounting against him for 25 years before the documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly* (Hampton, 2019) premiered at the beginning of 2019. The six by one-hour episodes included many survivors who were interviewed about allegations of sexual assault against Robert Sylvester Kelly, known professionally as R. Kelly. During those 25 years, there had been his marriage to 15-year-old Aaliyah when he was 27 years old, child exploitation material allegations, reports he was holding women against their will and allegations of sexual assault and abuse (Grady, 2019). Despite this, R. Kelly was largely unaffected by any of the accusations, court case reports, and investigations,

including being acquitted of child exploitation material charges in 2008 (Savage, 2023). His music still played on radio stations; he collaborated with other musicians and held his concerts.

That all changed upon the release of the first episode of *Surviving R. Kelly*. Once the documentary aired on Lifetime on January 3, 2019, the repercussions for Kelly were immediate. Musicians such as Lady Gaga apologised for collaborating with him, and Kelly's record label dropped him. On January 8, 2019 (WGNTV, 2019), the Cook County State Attorney, Kim Foxx, held a press conference calling for any victims or witnesses to come forward and cooperate with the police. She also announced a new criminal investigation to be run by the Fulton County District Attorney, the area where Kelly's mansion was situated and where many of the alleged abuse and assaults took place. As a result of this further investigation, R. Kelly was arrested on February 22, 2019, eight weeks after the documentary's first episode premiered. In May, he faced additional charges of sexual abuse, this time in Chicago. Two separate federal grand juries in Chicago and the Eastern District of New York indicted him by July. In August, Kelly faced more charges, this time in Minnesota. The trial started in New York in August 2021, and he was found guilty in September. In June 2022, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Kelly also stood trial in Chicago in September and was convicted, adding 20 years to his New York sentence. The documentary had a significant impact as it directly led to R. Kelly being brought to justice and held accountable for his crimes. The witness testimonies gathered in the documentary directly correlated with the County Attorney opening investigations into Robert Kelly. Kim Foxx stated, "The allegations against R. Kelly in the Lifetime Documentary series are deeply, deeply, disturbing. It is our job...to investigate claims in the interest of justice and public safety" (ABC7 Chicago, 2019).

Surviving R. Kelly was very powerful. The filmmakers managed to tell the story whilst giving space to all the victims who were abused, assaulted, held captive, and impacted by Robert Kelly. The victims vary in age and background, but they are all African American women. One after the other, they describe meeting the singer at an immature age, commonly 13, 14, or 15, and then explain the grooming process and ensuing abuse. Their testimonials are detailed, specific, heartbreaking, and hard to hear. Unlike *Athlete A* and *At the Heart of Gold*, they are allowed ample time on screen to express themselves and although limited to the interview format, their individuality and personality are portrayed clearly. In an interview with Vox, #MeToo founder Tamara Bourke commented, “After 25 years of hearing growing grumbings, growing accusations, it’s reached a crescendo with the documentary” (Grady, 2019).

Impact of public disclosure on survivors’ lives

Another story unfolded alongside the law’s pursuit of justice. The release of documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly* profoundly impacted the subjects and resulted in aggressive backlash for most. Kelly and his crew pursued a campaign of threats and violence against the subjects in the documentary. At the live premiere of the first episode in January 2019, threats were called in at the cinema where it was screening, and everyone inside had to evacuate onto the street. The victims who appeared in the documentary had to wait unprotected in busy Manhattan while police attended the site. No credible threats were discovered, yet the film could not be screened. However, the television broadcast still went ahead. Two years later, Kelly’s manager, Donnell Russell, was arrested for threatening to shoot up the Manhattan Theatre, charged with “conspiracy and with threatening physical harm by interstate communication” (Neumeister, 2020).

The backlash for the victims who appeared in the series was so severe it formed the basis of a two-part special called *Surviving R. Kelly: The Impact* (2019). Soon to follow was *Surviving R. Kelly Part II: The Reckoning* (2020) and, finally, *Surviving R. Kelly Part III: The Final Chapter* (2023). Women who appeared in the documentaries suffered many forms of harassment, varying in severity. In *Surviving R. Kelly: The Impact*, they describe receiving threatening text messages sent to their parents' phones, letters from lawyers threatening to publish information about their sex lives, and lawsuits from R. Kelly himself. Some were threatened with the publication of nude images. In addition to the physical campaign by Kelly and his associates, the documentary explained how online harassment commenced. A Facebook account called *Surviving Lies*, featuring an image of Pinocchio as its profile picture, sought to defend Kelly and 'expose' his victims (Figures 7 and 8). Some of the things posted on the page included mug shots of the women and posts doxing them by publishing their home addresses and phone numbers, which meant they received harassment through phone calls and threats of phone tapping. The page also published screenshots of text messages to discredit the survivor's allegations.

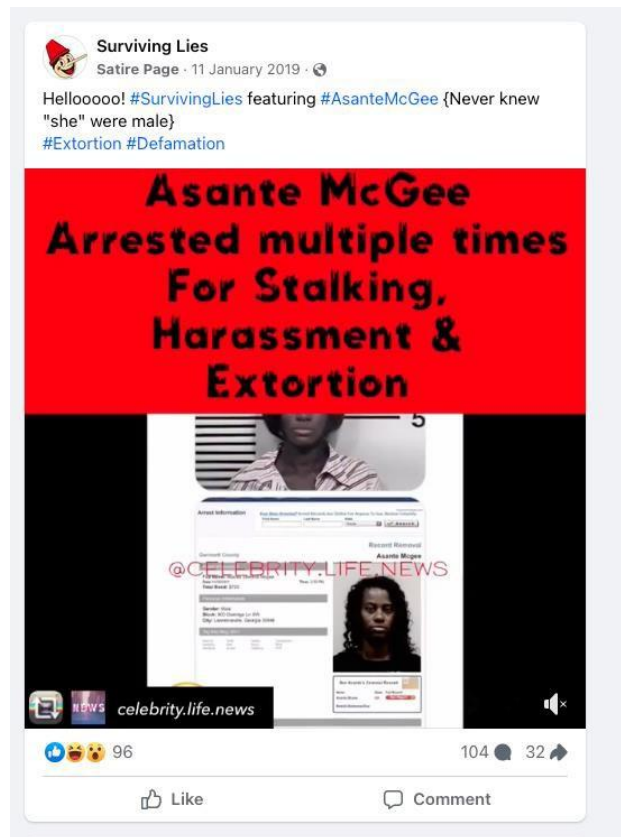


Figure 3. Screenshot of Surviving Lies Facebook page.

As a result of some of these posts, women who had been exposed had to move house as they experienced security threats. The Facebook page also sells merchandise and launched a Twitter account in February 2021. Following the first instalment of the documentary, one survivor, Faith Rogers, was threatened with the release of nude images and videos. She attended a meeting with someone from R. Kelly’s team at an Applebee’s restaurant, accompanied by her mother. There, Faith, and her mother were shown nude photos and sexual videos of Faith on a device. Kelly’s associate instructed Faith not to assist the police and to rescind her statements, or else the material would be exposed. Faith refused. Later, those same photographs and videos were released on social media.



Figure 4. Screenshot of *Surviving Lies* Facebook page

R. Kelly had a vast fan base, power, influence, and money. Despite the challenges, the women spoke up against him and faced the consequences of taking on an abuser who had the means to punish them for speaking out. The final instalment of the documentary, *Surviving R. Kelly Part III: The Final Chapter*, was released in 2023. It revealed the ongoing traumatic fallout that survivors were experiencing due to the increased harassment over the years. Azriel Clary's family became victims of arson when one of Kelly's associates, Michael Williams, set their car on fire (Morrow, 2021). The BBC reported that when police attended the scene, an accelerant was also found around the perimeter of their house. Williams was convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison (BBC, 2021).

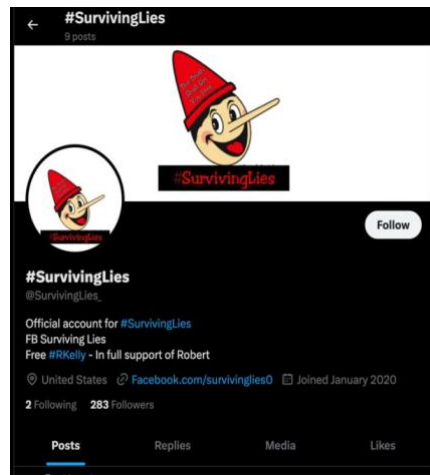


Figure 5. Screenshot of Surviving Lies Twitter account.

Faith Rodgers revealed she has continued to struggle with fear and depression: “[some] days I really don’t think I’m going to make it to 30. I’m 24 years old, and I hate life ... It has taken everything in me to not just blow my head off some days because I feel like I can’t press forward.” Another woman, Jrhonda Pace, disclosed she could not send her children to school throughout the trials due to safety concerns (Morrow, 2021).

These events indicate that speaking in the documentary had a severe impact on the participants. The aftermath of the documentary was traumatic, and, in many cases, the survivors experienced exponential backlash following each instalment. This case highlights the real-life dangers subjects in documentaries face when they speak out. It also identifies the fine line filmmakers must walk when the documentary contributes to bringing someone to justice yet comes at such a high cost to the individuals involved. It is worth considering the role of broadcasters, particularly the Lifetime Network, regarding the financial benefits they derive from depicting the trauma and suffering of individuals. As these entities profit, it becomes essential for them to offer protection, support, and financial compensation to those affected. *Surviving R. Kelly* serves as a reminder that filmmakers should thoroughly assess risks during production, continuously evaluate these risks, and strive to mitigate them effectively. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of broadcasters and those who benefit

financially, such as the Lifetime Network, to address these challenges and provide necessary support to the individuals depicted in their programming. The *Surviving R. Kelly* saga raises important and difficult questions for filmmakers working with victims. Some risks might not be able to be mitigated, and if so, should the filmmakers continue to make the film?

Balancing truth and protection: ethical considerations in Audrie and Daisy

The premise of the documentary *Audrie & Daisy* (Cohen & Jenke, 2016) is grim. Two girls experience a similar devastating event, only one dies and the other lives. This documentary brings attention to the shattering impact cyberbullying has on teen mental health and its tragic link to suicide. It is “the new public square of shame, the convergence of high school sexual assault and social media bullying. It’s kind of this new horror for teenagers,” explained director Bonni Coen in an interview with *Newsweek* (Westcott, 2016). The film focuses on the events in the girl’s lives, the devastating impact social media played in their trauma, and proposes the question: how can victims be supported? It promotes the idea that speaking out and advocating can have a positive impact on the healing process. The suggested through line is that *if only Audrie had found support, she may still be alive like Daisy*.

Content warning: the following paragraph includes descriptions of sexual assault.

Audrie Pott was 15 when she passed out from alcohol poisoning at a high school party in September 2012. Male classmates stripped her naked, penetrated her, before writing obscene words and drawing cartoons all over her body. They then took photos and videos, which they posted online and shared with classmates. Eight days later Audrie posted “My life is over,” and hanged herself in her family home. She died in hospital two days later.

Daisy Coleman was 14 when she claimed 17-year-old Matthew Barnett raped her at a party in a basement in January 2012. As explored in the documentary, Barnett was a popular

high school footballer and the son of a Republican senator. Barnett's friend filmed the assault on his mobile device, and the video was shared with others. The boys then dumped Daisy's unconscious body in her front yard, where she was found the next morning by her mother, her hair frozen to the ice and suffering from frostbite. In the documentary, Daisy's mother tells the audience that a rape examination at the hospital showed evidence of a horrific assault, and they pressed charges. We see the Sheriff at a press conference declare to the public, "Girls are just as culpable as boys," and said there was not enough evidence to prove it was not consensual. The sexual assault charge against the perpetrators was dropped, however a charge of child endangerment remained. At trial, Barnett confessed to intercourse with Daisy Coleman, saying it was consensual, and he was convicted only with child endangerment for dumping her body out in the cold.

The documentary shows how the community then turned on Daisy for accusing the popular student Matthew Barnett of rape. Barnett publicly claimed she had ruined his life and prospects of becoming a professional footballer. The documentary follows the court case and Daisy as she tries to cope with the aftermath of the assault. The main theme for Daisy is that she is trying to find support and heal herself through advocacy. She and her family were harassed in person and online. Throughout the trial for child endangerment, hashtags #matt1daisy0, #daisyisawhore, #daisyisaliar, #ihatedaisy, and #freematt dominated the high school's social media circles. A girl turned up to the local school dance wearing a t-shirt that read "Matt 1 Daisy 0." Local and state news coverage brought further criticism to Daisy. Daisy did not withdraw her accusation, and her family continued to support her. In his article "Nightmare in Maryville: Teens' Sexual Encounter Ignites a Firestorm against the Family," Dugen Arnett outlines the extent of the torment the family suffered. Daisy's mother lost her job, and her three older brothers were threatened. After years of abuse, the Colemans were

ostracised and pushed out of their town, with their house burned down in a suspicious fire (Arnett, 2018).

Filmmaker responsibilities: protecting vulnerable voices

After the release of the documentary in 2016, which was four years after the initial assault took place, the harassment and abuse increased. In an interview for *Crime Watch with Chris Hansen* (Truesdell, 2017), Daisy explained, “The bullying was really intense because it didn’t just end at school ... When I would go home, it would be all over the internet. These people can say a lot crueller of things because it’s such a dehumanized way of speaking ... a lot of things affected how I looked at me and my idea of self-worth.” There were online campaigns against her for speaking out in the documentary. Supporters of Matthew Barnett ramped up their threats and online presence with hashtags and websites. Students at Daisy’s school and their parents posted abuse online and made physical threats on her life (Arnett, 2018). There were countless public posts on Facebook that Daisy should kill herself, and she deserved to be raped again. Notable members of the community made statements about false accusations and lamented how the boy’s potential had been compromised. The abuse followed Daisy everywhere she went.

Daisy took her own life in August 2020 when she was 23 years old. *People* magazine reported that Daisy had dealt with stalkers and one man who threatened her life, and “in a Facebook post before she died, Coleman alleged the man had shown up at her house repeatedly and pounded on her door. She also wrote she believed he had managed to steal keys to her apartment and had tried to directly access her apartment” (Barcella, 2020). At the time of her death, she was still enduring bullying and harassment online and in person. At the time she was also the subject of another documentary, *Saving Daisy*, that was in production, telling the story of how she was dealing with her trauma. Her mother, Melinda, another key

subject in the documentary *Audrie & Daisy*, killed herself in her home in what was described as a copycat suicide in December 2020 (Mandini, 2020).

Interpretations of informed consent

Although Daisy gave consent to be in the documentary, it raises the question of how informed that consent was, and whether a 16-year-old girl, who has already gone through severe trauma, can make decisions of this magnitude. It is worth restating the victim's reaction of fawning (Walker, 2013), whereby someone aims to please others as a defence mechanism after undergoing sexual assault. Can someone who has experienced trauma at a young age have informed consent to appear in a documentary about an assault when the event was so recent and the person is so young and vulnerable? Interestingly, Daisy initially did not want to be in the documentary. According to director Bonni Cohen, interviewed by Lucy Westcott for *Newsweek* in 2016 when the film was released, Cohen commented that Daisy "felt like she had to participate because she needed to speak about Audrie," "I think actually, forgetting the film, that the process really helped her healing," she says, adding that they consulted with experts who advised on how to ensure Coleman would not be re-traumatised from speaking about her rape (Westcott, 2016).

While it is important that the filmmakers consulted experts on how to ensure Daisy Coleman would not be re-traumatised from *speaking* about the rape, the bigger issue this case study raises is the *impact* the release of the film had on the rest of Daisy's life. Instead of the town of Maryville turning against her, she also had people from all around the world turn against her. The anger and vitriol increased after the release of the documentary in 2016 and continued to haunt her until she ended her life in 2020. Following Daisy's death, Netflix said in a statement: "We're deeply saddened" and that her "courage in sharing her story in *Audrie and Daisy* was an inspiration to viewers around the world" (Adejobi, 2020). The filmmakers

Cohen and Jenke released a statement and started a GoFundMe to cover funeral expenses. They ended the statement, “Now, more than ever, we find it important to recognise and draw attention to survivors” (Adejobi, 2020).

Much has been published about Daisy’s positive impact on conversations about sexual assault. She started the not-for-profit organisation SafeBAE (Safe Before Anyone Else), a foundation that focused on helping teens, which aimed to end sexual assault in high schools. It is the only student-led not-for-profit that helps teens with the aftermath of a sexual assault. Daisy spoke publicly and online about the need for support for victims. She struggled with her mental health. The tone of much of the writing about her story is that Daisy spoke out to save other people. Daisy was not participating in the documentary with a scar; she was still deep in the wound of her assault, and the aftermath and backlash she was enduring. When Daisy agreed to be in the documentary, she was a teenager and in the middle of a life-changing event. Participating in the documentary, as healing as the director Bonni Cohen claims, left her open to more criticism and negative attention on a global scale and allowed this moment of trauma to define the rest of her life in a very public way. Instead of healing privately, Daisy’s pain and process was given an audience. For almost a decade, Daisy endured the abuse and criticism whilst recovering from a harrowing assault, one in which the courts did not serve her justice. Perhaps teenage Daisy, with her initial reluctance to participate, knew what was best for her journey to recovery.

Navigating the aftermath of speaking out

These films highlight the significant risks that victims encounter when they participate in true crime documentaries as survivors of sexual assault. *Surviving R. Kelly* demonstrates the impact of victim testimony and the change that can occur when survivors are empowered to speak up. The *Surviving R. Kelly* trilogy shows the risks that can befall participants when they

take on an abuser who has power and dominance in society. It raises the question of who bears that responsibility and whose job it is to protect the participants. Daisy's experience in *Audrie and Daisy* sparks a discussion on how informed consent can be when the subject is still in the process of recovering from trauma and has not yet reached adulthood. The filmmaker plays a crucial role in handling participant backlash, but they should not be expected to do this without support. The broadcaster, streamer, and production house that is profiting from the exposure should have a financial stake in protecting and supporting victims when they face backlash as a result of having shared their stories. Possible ways they could do this include allocating a percentage of the projected profits to victim support or setting up a fund for victim support in the context of their profiting from the audience's interest in these true crime documentaries. Anna Kendrick donated her fee from *Woman of the Hour* to two victim charities (Youngs, 2024). The true crime film is about the women targeted by a serial killer in the 1970s. The film, which she directed and in which she played Cheryl Bradshaw, was acquired by Netflix. I am not suggesting that filmmakers should not profit from their work, nor that all directors should donate their fees. Kendrick's actions highlight the necessity of directing a portion of profits to aid victims. The organisation set to gain the most from the project should be responsible for redistributing those profits to assist those already affected by the crime.

Best Practice: In His Shoes

In the list of 34 documentaries, there was an overwhelming imbalance between male and female victims. Only six of the 34 films featured male victims, and three of those films were about Michael Jackson. *Leaving Neverland* (Reed, 2020) features two victims and has been selected for analysis. *Michael Jackson: Chase the Truth* (Hill, 2019) was made in reaction to

Leaving Neverland to dispel the claims of the victims. *Square One: Michael Jackson* (Wu, 2019) is also an argument in defence of Jackson, dealing with the 1993 allegations. *Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV* (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024) explores the culture of abuse in children's television and features one male victim of sexual abuse, Drake Bell. The final two, *Revelation* (Ferguson, 2020) and *Procession* (Greene, 2021), were both televised broadcasts about sexual abuse of male children by Catholic Priests. *Procession* has been selected for analysis.

The two films chosen from my list for greater analysis, *Leaving Neverland* and *Procession*, showcase best practices. They depict adult men who, as children, endured sexual abuse by other males, created by male filmmakers. This presents a compelling comparison and serves as an example of effective participant experience and creative practices in portraying victim narratives, particularly concerning representation, informed consent, and participant autonomy. I have highlighted the difficulties women and children encounter in the judicial system regarding being believed by law enforcement. There exists substantial historical and contemporary research demonstrating that society does not readily believe women who report assault or abuse. Women also suffer from rape myths and blame. In contrast, male victims do not face the same degree of blame (Hine et al., 2021). Some studies indicate that male victims of assault and abuse are perceived as more trustworthy and are more easily believed (Rozmann Nir & Walsh, 2018; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Ward, 1988). This raises questions about how this societal viewpoint influences the filmmakers' approach. As men telling stories about other men, do they inherently grant a respect that female victims often do not receive?

No tropes in sight

Leaving Neverland and *Procession* are examples of best practice for filmmakers working in this genre. The participants reported mainly positive outcomes after the release of the films. They are allowed ample screen duration to communicate their feelings and experiences. The filmmakers do not use other male voices to validate the testimony. We see the participants in both the interview format (with extended screen duration) and in embodied representation, moving about on screen. We see the whole of their characters, learn who they were before the assault, and their steps to recovery from the abuse; their identities are three-dimensional. There is no sign of the rescue narrative trope in either film, nor do they employ other male voices to act as a protector or speak for the men about their experiences.

The power of participant autonomy in Procession

Robert Greene's *Procession* (2021) is a compelling exploration of trauma and healing. It follows six men, who had all previously been sexually abused by Catholic priests, as they engaged in a therapeutic process, creating short films to confront their past. The documentary is notable for its collaborative structure, emphasising collective healing, done so within the individual narratives. *Procession* centres the group dynamic as a key aspect of the storytelling. The men are in this together; they support one another and 'act' in each other's scenes, depicting turning points in their abuse suffered as children. Greene encouraged the men to write and direct short scenes based on their experiences, granting them creative control over how their trauma was portrayed. This approach merges documentary filmmaking with drama therapy.

The re-enactments, filmed by a professional crew but directed by the men themselves, bring a creative and poetic treatment to the traumatic event. Greene also used intimate vérité-style camerawork, capturing their raw emotions during the making of the re-enactments and

at more reflective moments of their lives. Through this technique, Greene highlights the humanity of the subjects, bringing the audience close to their vulnerability and emotional processes. Cinematography plays a crucial role in differentiating between the re-enactments and interviews, allowing the audience to understand the development and processes. The lighting shifts from warm, diffused tones during therapy sessions to stark, dramatic lighting during the re-enactments, mirroring the emotional intensity of the memories being portrayed. This shift not only distinguishes the re-enactments but also deepens their emotional impact. The non-linear editing weaves together the men's personal narratives, behind-the-scenes footage, and re-enactments, reflecting the often fragmented nature of healing from trauma. We viscerally feel how the men are building pieces of themselves back together.

Greene's decision to involve the survivors as active participants in the creative process is central to the documentary's ethical approach. By giving them the tools to direct their own stories, *Procession* becomes a project of self-expression rather than a mere documentation of trauma. Greene emphasised the importance of collaboration, explaining, "The idea was never to simply document their stories; it was to let them tell their stories in their own way" (Greene, as cited in Lodge, 2022). This approach warrants that the men are not passive subjects but active agents in shaping how their stories are portrayed. Critically, Greene's handling of such sensitive material has been widely praised. He was careful not to sensationalise the survivors' experiences, avoiding the pitfalls common in abuse documentaries where subjects are often objectified or exploited. Instead, *Procession* raises important standards on how filmmakers can responsibly engage with vulnerable subjects and the ethical considerations involved in documenting trauma, making it an example of best

practice. By giving the men control over their narratives, the film empowers them while challenging traditional power dynamics in documentary filmmaking.

Working through trauma from a place of healing

The men featured in *Procession* generally reported positive experiences, finding the process both empowering and therapeutic despite its emotional challenges. The men were all children when they suffered abuse; however, they were all adults at the time of filming. Robert Greene did not ask the men to participate; rather, they were ‘cast’ for the film by their lawyer, Rebecca Randles, who had known the men for years and had overseen their cases against the Catholic Church. This process is advantageous for the participants, as they were selected based on their perceived ability to cope with the exercise and were not pressured by Greene to appear in the film, thereby lowering the risk of agreeing just to please him. Randles knew the men very well by this stage and was also aware of who could speak in terms of the status of their case (Kuehner, 2021).

The film focuses more on the men’s personal healing than on criticising the Catholic Church, which has remained largely silent about the documentary. Greene was careful to ensure that the survivors felt like they were in control throughout the process, emphasising the importance of ethical filmmaking: “The goal was to make sure that they felt empowered, not retraumatised” (Greene, as cited in Ehrlich, 2021). Additionally, the presence of an on-set therapist underscored Greene’s commitment to the participants’ mental health, meaning they had professional support during the re-enactments. Critics have noted the emotional depth of *Procession*, particularly its focus on collective healing (Kuehner, 2021). The re-enactments serve as cathartic experiences for both the participants and the audience, offering a space for the men to confront their past in a controlled and creative environment. However, the film also sparked debate within the film community regarding the ethics of trauma representation.

Some critics questioned whether it is appropriate to ask survivors to re-enact their trauma, even in a therapeutic setting, raising concerns about the potential for re-traumatisation and the filmmaker's role in guiding the process (Hans, 2021). Greene did not take on this project without intense critical self-reflection and consultation. In terms of the ethical considerations regarding the therapeutic theatre, he said the initial ethical question was whether to do it or not. Also, it was important for the men to be able to elect to leave the space if they needed to:

There was always an exit door. For every real and metaphorical room, we stepped into, there was a door out. Do we want to leave? We can leave at any time. None of this *has to* happen. We're not obliged to do any of this. If you want to stop, there's no imperative to continue unless you, and we collectively, want to. (Kuehner, 2021)

The other side to the ethical consideration was the fidelity to the truth, to portray the experience and process of what the men went through to the audience. This was what Greene wrestled most with in the editing process, and it impacted his choices around representation.

The safest edits did not honor the risks these men were taking. If we were too worried about the viewer thinking this was good or not, it did not honor how scary it felt at times. While the more frightening cuts failed to honor how cathartic and safe everyone felt. I spent a year editing the film to find a way to exhibit the truth of both the risk involved and the safety that we worked hard to maintain. How much information makes it either too safe or too dangerous. (Kuehner, 2021)

Greene wanted to probe deeply into the victim's experience and challenge the audience on their own perceptions, such as how they viewed a victim of abuse. The men featured in the film have spoken about their experiences, with most reflecting positively on the therapeutic

aspects of the documentary. Michael Sandridge, one of the participants, described the process as emotionally intense but ultimately healing: “It was hard at first, opening up those old wounds. But doing it with these men made it feel different—it made it feel like we were helping each other heal” (as cited in Seitz, 2021).

Greene’s innovative, hybrid approach ensures that the survivors are not passive subjects but empowered co-creators of their own narratives. By giving the survivors control over their narratives, Greene creates a powerful and confronting documentary that is both emotionally impactful and artistically significant. *Procession* offers a way for survivors to process their abuse through creative re-enactment and does not treat them as passive objects to be pitied but empowers them through art (Seitz, 2021). It is a powerful and emotionally impactful example of best practice, demonstrating an informed, educated, and empathetic approach to trauma.

Leaving Neverland

When *Leaving Neverland* was released, it ignited a great deal of controversy. Michael Jackson’s estate sued HBO for \$100 million, claiming the documentary violated a non-disparagement clause from a 1992 contract. HBO argued that the clause was irrelevant due to the documentary’s public interest nature (Lee, 2019). The subjects, Wade Robson and James Safechuck, were not unfamiliar with backlash and criticism, having already endured public outcry at their accusations against Michael Jackson, who they claimed sexually abused them for years when they were children. The claims were met with intense scrutiny, as both men had supported Jackson at his earlier trial, saying he did not abuse them (Morris, 2019).

Dan Reed’s documentary focused all four hours exclusively on their experiences, even though there were other victims in the public eye. This allowed the story to concentrate solely on them and provided a detailed and sensitive portrayal. The series has emotional depth,

allowing the accusers to share their stories in a raw and unfiltered way. The men are the main characters, and whilst other family members—wives, brothers, and mothers—are also involved, they do not act as validators, protectors, or attempt to rescue them. The men are treated as voices of authority in their own narratives. Archival footage played a significant role in the film, but rather than being used as straightforward evidence, it often appeared alongside the testimony to serve as a backdrop. Reed incorporated clips of Michael Jackson’s public appearances, performances, and interviews, juxtaposing them against the alleged private life that Robson and Safechuck described. The contrast between Jackson’s public image and the personal testimonies added a layer of complexity to the narrative, emphasising the dichotomy between his celebrity persona and the accusations against him.

Connection and screen duration

Leaving Neverland employed intimate, static interview shots. Reed focused on long, unbroken interviews with Wade Robson and James Safechuck, allowing the camera to linger on their faces as they recounted their experiences. This technique added emotional weight and gave the subjects space to tell their stories without distractions. The close-up shots emphasised the personal nature of the testimony and they had extended screen duration. Reed also included footage of the men dancing, interacting with family members, and they were not restricted to just the interview frame. The interview itself was directed by Reed, and did not supply them with the questions ahead of time. Of this process, Wade explained it helped his healing process, as it allowed for more freedom of expression:

Doing that enabled me to re-experience it all as I told it to him, which ended up being just a whole new level of release for me. I had never quite experienced that. I’d been in a lot of therapy, and I’d talked about all those things before, but not in order. (Vary, 2019)

The film portrayed Wade and James as three-dimensional characters, providing ample backstory to their unique personalities and life before the abuse started. It allowed for a clear explanation of how the grooming that led to the abuse took place and did so with a slow, methodical pace. The two stories had similarities, yet they were not mixed together or intercut in a way that blurred their testimonies; they were awarded long screen duration and embodied screen representation. We saw them dance, laugh, cry, and emote in many contexts. We learnt that they had families of their own, the complexities that brought up, and how they were dealing with the aftermath of the abuse. Their experiences were treated with nuance, delving into the broader themes of celebrity culture, power dynamics, fame, and domination through influence. We understood the way their parents were manipulated, sidelined, and betrayed. Reed achieved this through his interview style, which was respectful, allowing the subjects to tell their stories without sensationalism.

When asked about agreeing to be in the film, James explained, “Dan has a nice way of making you feel comfortable ... He’s been doing this for a long time, so I’m sure he has his ways. But it’s a leap of faith. He made it very clear, ‘You will have no control over anything.’ I just have to sort of spill my guts and trust that he’ll treat it with respect. That was a big decision” (Vary, 2019). His approach is unequivocal in that the filmmaker and subject roles are clearly stated, and the subject is not expected to direct the interview or do more than tell their truth. The approach from Reed demonstrates the filming process can be therapeutic for participants when the interview is treated with mutual respect, and a space with clearly defined roles.

Representation through embodiment in editing

Leaving Neverland employs a chronological narrative structure that begins by establishing the childhood of Wade and James and then slowly builds to the more traumatic aspects of

their alleged abuse. This linear storytelling gave viewers a sense of the gradual grooming process that both men described. By focusing on their personal experiences and following a traditional arc from childhood innocence to trauma, Reed structured the documentary to make the story relatable and understandable without relying on sensationalism. The editing of *Leaving Neverland* was deliberate, drawing parallels between the testimonies of Wade and James. The cross-cutting between their stories was designed to show the similarities in their experiences, reinforcing the credibility of their claims. The documentary maintained a sombre, serious tone, avoiding flashy transitions or overly complex cutting patterns. This restrained style allowed the harrowing stories to stand independently.

Instead of using Michael Jackson's own music, the score featured minimalist, ambient sounds that subtly reinforced the emotional tone of the documentary; the weight of the silence of the scenes was hugely impactful. This restrained use of music underlined the gravity of the situation without exploiting the emotional content. The absence of Jackson's music, given his cultural significance, could have been an intentional choice to keep the focus on the accusations rather than his fame. Reed employed editing techniques to create pace and tension and drive the narrative. However, he did not minimise Wade and James in his choices. The series had a significant duration, four hours, and did not follow a serialised true crime episodic structure. Instead, the episodes were dedicated to slowly revealing the victim's experiences, identities and challenges through speaking out.

Both *Procession* and *Leaving Neverland* offer distinct yet exemplary approaches to representing trauma in documentary filmmaking, prioritising the autonomy and well-being of their subjects. In *Procession*, Robert Greene uses therapeutic hybrid and reflexive re-enactments and verité camerawork, empowering survivors as co-creators of their own narratives while ensuring their emotional safety through careful participant selection. This collaborative process creates an emotionally impactful and artistically significant film,

highlighting the survivors' agency. In contrast, *Leaving Neverland* employs a more restrained, expositional narrative style, allowing the subjects' testimonies to take centre stage without sensationalism. Both documentaries serve as examples of best practice, offering thoughtful and empathetic approaches to trauma representation while providing survivors with the space to reclaim their narratives.

Conclusion

Critical analysis plays a vital role in my research, allowing me to identify key issues within the true crime sexual assault documentary subgenre. This approach has shaped my understanding of the pitfalls and ethical challenges faced by victims depicted in this genre. The themes of power and agency are essential to my evaluation of victim representation in the media. I have outlined the ethical risks and challenges that victims encounter in true crime documentaries. I conducted an in-depth analysis of on-screen representation, the backlash faced by participants, and issues surrounding informed consent, while also highlighting examples of best practice. This critical analysis has been instrumental in informing my creative practice and has illuminated the theoretical frameworks and discursive debates underlying contemporary documentary practice in the true crime subgenre where my work is situated, particularly regarding visual grammar, modes of address, and the politics of representation. This foundation not only contextualises the field in which my work operates but also guides the methodological choices embedded in my creative practice. The following chapter shifts from analysis to praxis, presenting the findings that have emerged from the process of creation. It explores how cinematography, editing, and storytelling served as both tools and methods of inquiry, and how the act of production itself generated new insights into the aesthetic, ethical, and ideological dimensions of documentary filmmaking.

Chapter 5. The Making Made the Knowing: Creative Practice Findings & Discussion

Information About the Creative Practice Film

At this point in the dissertation, I recommend that you watch the documentary, *Niki! Shot by Blue*. It is 71-minutes long and in the rough-cut stage. It is not currently fit for release, it requires music, graphics, and a fine cut. There is also one final scene to film, of Niki working in her new profession as a Pilot Driver, working with mining trucks in Western Australia, which will be filmed in September 2025. There are also links throughout the text to additional material not included in the film that demonstrates the evolution and exploration of my practice.

[Link to rough cut](#)

Introduction

This chapter explores the insights gained from my creative practice research film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*. Since 2014, I attempted to make five films with Niki Wilkie as the participant. These were *Skimpy* (Thomas, 2014), *Judged* (Lucine, 2018), *Asking For It* (Unreleased), *Asking For*

It (Lucine, 2020) and *States of Consent* (Unreleased). Due to legal complications only two of the films; *Skimpy* (Thomas, 2014), *Judged* (2018), were ever released as intended. *Asking For It* was first filmed as an observational documentary, then re-imagined, re filmed and then released as a hybrid documentary. The films are identified with title cards and are numbered to identify their progression. I have taken the rushes from all the different shoots over the 10-year period and re-edited the footage to tell the bigger story, which is the sixth film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*. They are not the original films as they were released; they are recut to explore themes in my practice.

The film reveals the development of my documentary filmmaking approach dedicated to documenting a victim's story in a true crime setting. The findings are grounded in the practical challenges and ethical questions that emerged during this project. They reflect my technical and artistic growth and my critical engagement with feminist film theory and documentary ethics.

These themes are explored through three key areas: I interrogate my **cinematography** by tracing how my visual style evolved over the decade, identifying the shift in my gaze, and how it corresponds with the growth in my relationship with Niki. This includes reflecting on my position as a filmmaker and the shift toward a more feminist and empathetic way of looking in response to critiques of power and representation in true crime media.

I analyse my **editing strategies**, on-screen representation, and modes of address to explore how various documentary styles, such as verité, hybrid, expository, and reflexive modes, engage audiences while being mindful of the subjects' experiences. Inspired by the themes in my critical analysis, I pinpoint essential tropes and representation patterns to avoid in my editing. In particular, I avoid the rescue narrative trope and became acutely aware of not reinforcing the great white male protector and validator tropes.

I examine how I negotiated **informed consent** through the processes of consultation, collaboration, and ongoing communication with my subject, Niki, and how I facilitated the telling of her story and the documentary process. Throughout the chapter, I reflect on the ethical considerations that informed these decisions, highlighting the dynamic interplay between artistic expression and responsibility toward Niki. The negotiation of informed consent became a cornerstone of the filmmaking process. This negotiation involved securing agreement at the outset and maintaining a dialogue throughout the project to address changes in the legal status of her case and her mental health.

My practice demonstrates how a holistic ethical framework established in collaboration with a participant can guide filmmakers in navigating the complex terrain of representing victims and trauma, offering a more respectful and empowering way of storytelling that is also compelling to an audience. By synthesising and discussing these findings, I aim to provide insights into the possibilities for ethical practice in true crime filmmaking, contributing to the broader discourse on creative research methodologies and documentary ethics.

Practical Aspects of Production

To construct the narrative film, my first task was to log the footage from the five projects I had made with Niki. There were 34 individual shoot days conducted over 10 years. The footage totaled three terabytes and about 270 hours or 16,200 minutes. The final film was to run for 90 minutes, so I had a shooting ratio of 180:1. By logging, I could review the footage and take notes on my cinematography and Niki's interactions with the camera. I approached the logging with my conceptual framework in mind. Instead of simply looking for usable footage, I was trying to unearth the narrative unfolding alongside the footage that told the

story of Niki and my relationship. It was an opportunity to explore the shift in my own practice over the years and to identify aspects I wanted to improve from previous practice.

It was my goal to privilege Niki's telling, and so it was crucial that *Niki! Shot by Blue* was engaging and told a compelling story. To help me make a compelling film, I needed a structure to guide and shape the narrative. Frank Daniel's Eight-Sequence Structure, developed during his tenure as the head of the screenwriting program at the University of Southern California, systematically deconstructs film narratives into eight distinct sequences, each functioning as an independent "mini-movie" (Gulino, 2024). This methodological approach emerged partly because of early cinematic limitations when films were stored on separate reels. This naturally led to dividing stories into segments of approximately 10 to 15 minutes each. The eight sequences correlate with a conventional three-act structure, typically divided into two sequences for the first act, four for the second act, and two for the third act, thereby establishing a rhythm that effectively guides viewers through plot development, conflict escalation, and resolution. The eight-sequence structure remains a key component in screenwriting education as it establishes clear narrative checkpoints that help manage pacing and focus within longer narratives (Gulino, 2024). Each sequence serves a distinct purpose—introducing themes, escalating conflicts, or providing crucial turning points—thereby boosting the story's overall cohesiveness and audience engagement.

My stance is that documentary seeks to balance factual, legal, and emotional truths while ethically portraying sensitive issues. The structure is crucial in mapping events and shaping the audience's emotional journey and I wanted Niki's story to have an impact on the audience; I wanted them to be invested and to follow the journey emotionally. Using this structure could help me achieve that. These sequences fall under the following headings:

Act 1

Sequence One: Status Quo and Inciting Incident

Sequence Two: Predicament and Lock-In

Act 2

Sequence Three: First Obstacle and Raising the Stakes

Sequence Four: First Culmination/Midpoint

Sequence Five: Subplot and Rising Action

Sequence Six: Main Culmination/End of Act Two

Act 3

Sequence Seven: New Tension and Twist

Sequence Eight: Resolution

The desired duration was 90–96 minutes, so I worked with a guide of 11–12 minutes per sequence. To illustrate the audience’s overall experience, I concentrated on the main actions and pinpointed significant turning points across my three acts. I aimed to highlight Niki’s choices as the plot’s turning points, so she propelled the narrative.

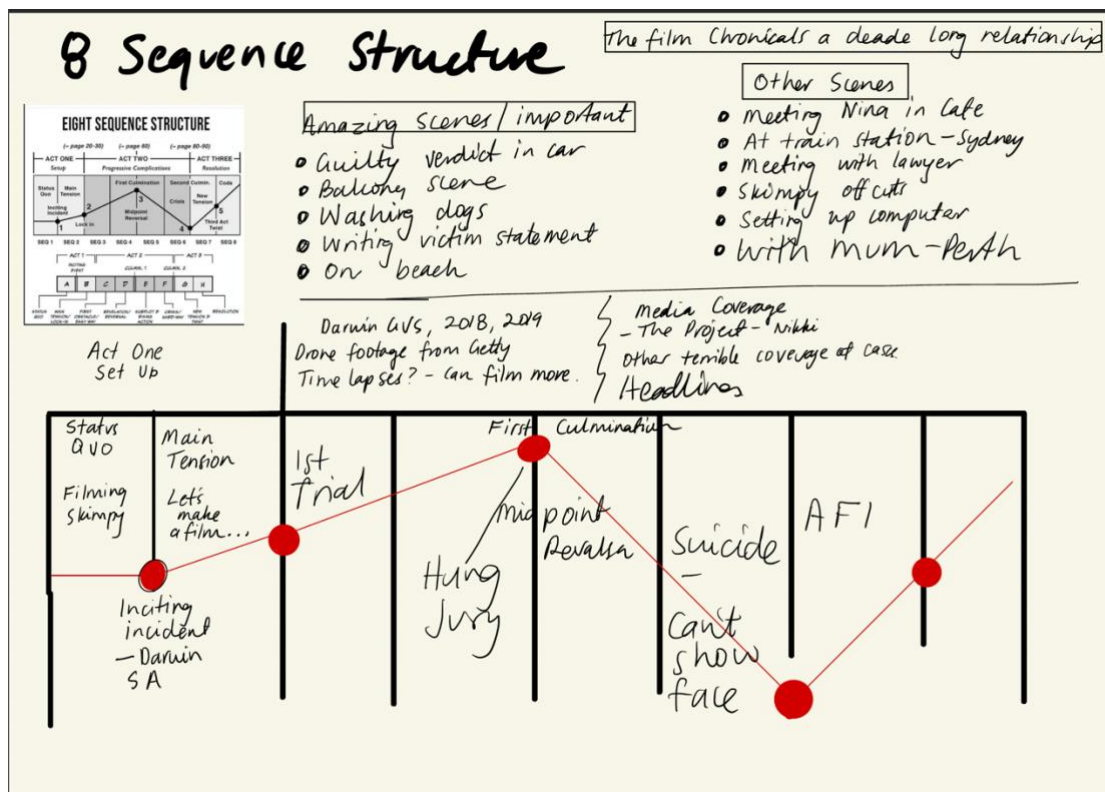


Figure 6. The film's main action plotted as an eight-sequence structure

After outlining the main events, I wrote a treatment of the film, which can be found in the Appendix. I then added more detail and wrote a description for each sequence, highlighting five essential scenes within the sequences. I was working with existing footage, which allowed me to concentrate on what to include. Throughout the process, I considered the audience's emotional reactions and aimed for them to develop empathy for Niki and invest in her journey. I focused on the audience's relationship with Niki, asking myself questions

What does the audience know about Niki?

Do they care about her?

Can they see this from her point of view?

Do they believe her?

What do they think about her?

The non-linear video editing began with one scene at a time. Each scene started as an assembly and went through a series of drafts. This was a very slow process, as I was still rediscovering different parts of the material, and I would get distracted listening to conversations between scenes. These interstitial conversations informed my thinking about consent negotiation, and enriched my perspective on the filmmaking process, which I will expand upon in **Consent Practices**, later in this chapter.

Once each scene had reached a fine cut, I combined the five scenes into the sequence and began the process of assembly, rough cut, and fine cut once again. When I had the first two sequences, they became Act One, and so I continued in this same method of my editing process until I had the whole film assembled. I reviewed the major edits at each stage with my supervisors. With every major edit, I engaged in thorough written reflections regarding my motivations and intentions. This reflection was vital for reassessing my creative choices, challenging the function of each scene, its benefit, and my rationale for its inclusion. This reflective process was an essential part of my creative practice. I also identified the need for additional interviews, which I conducted with Niki in July 2022 and May 2023, where we discussed the filmmaking process itself.

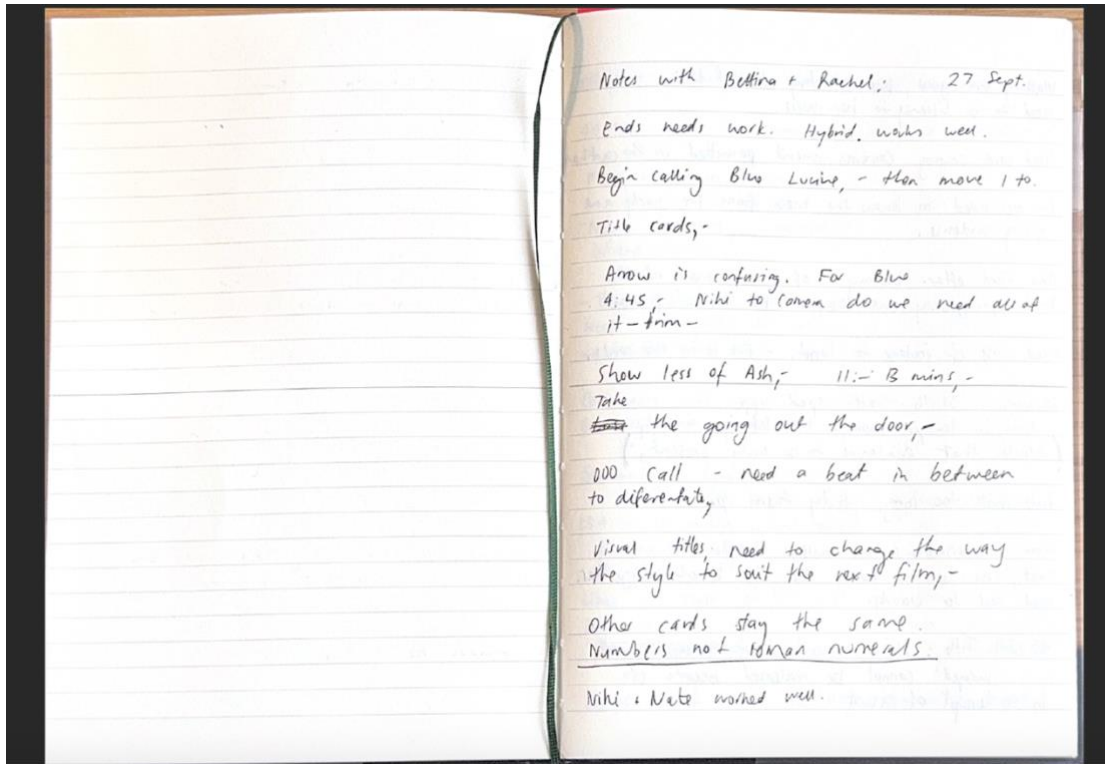


Figure 7. Scan from my notebooks

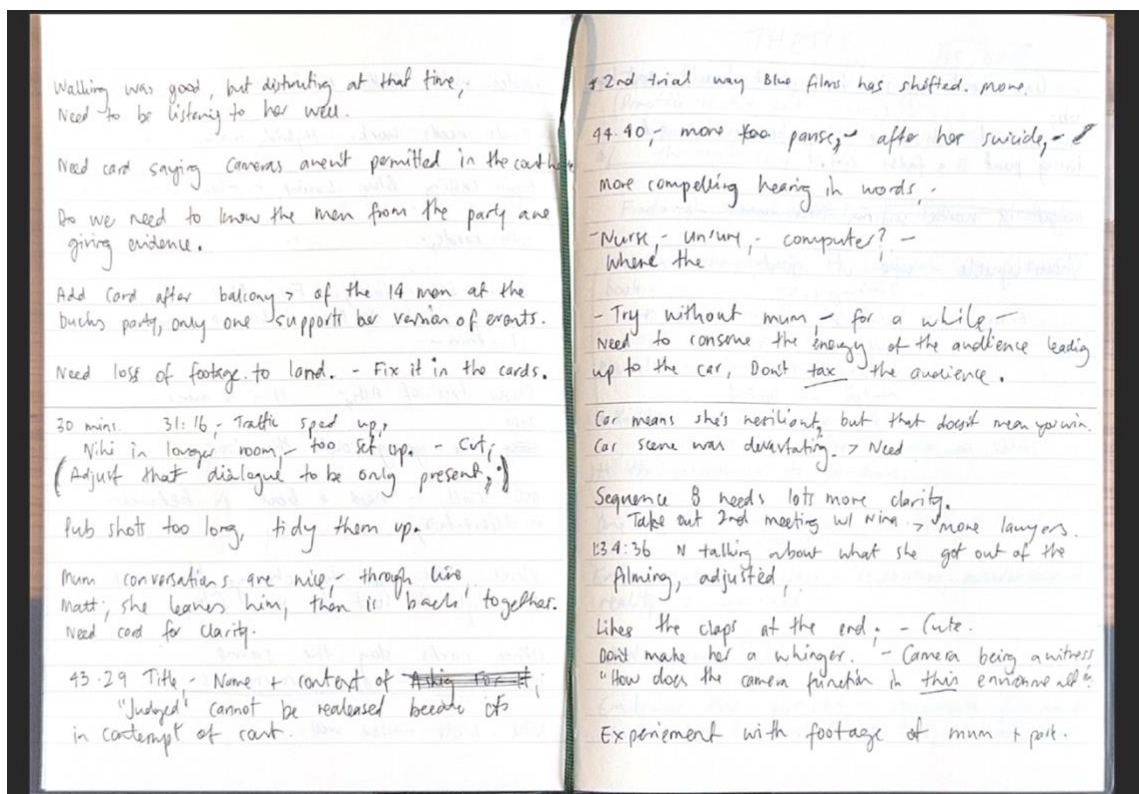


Figure 8. Notes highlighting reflexive practice.

As the edit came together, this, in turn, informed the writing of my thesis. I found myself in a place of praxis; the physical making of the film was influencing and informing my theoretical study, and this study was also informing my editing choices.

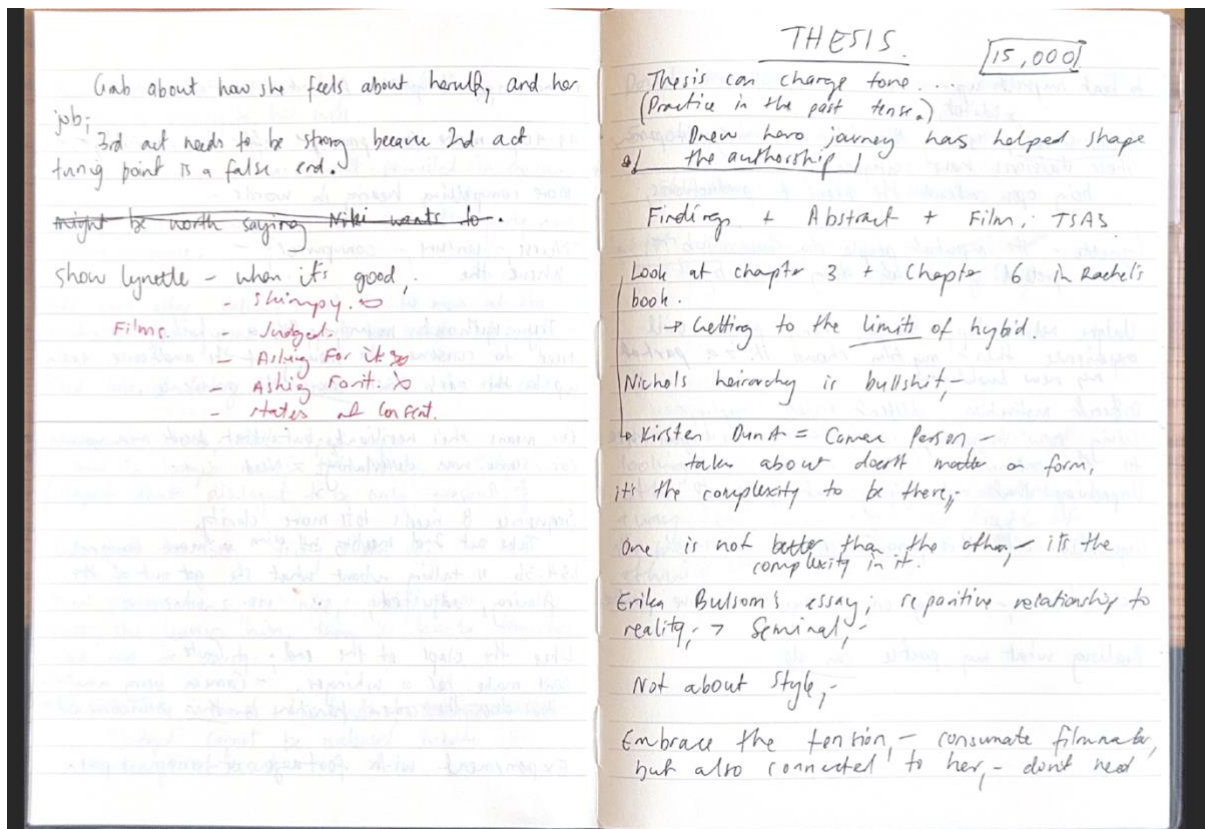


Figure 9. Example of practice feeding into theory.

This approach of logging the rushes and methodically reviewing each shot allowed for a detailed and focused editing process, enabling me to analyse the footage closely. With over a decade's worth of rushes, I had access to a broad resource for my research. It helped me recognise patterns in my on-screen depiction of Niki and track the development of my cinematic perspective and relationship with her. Considering the sensitive and complex experiences of sexual assault victims, I see these truths as layered and intricate, which heavily influences my filmmaking approach. Such insights are likely only obtainable through this practice, and I was able to experience what Ross Gibson described as “being fully attentive inside and outside the unfolding phenomena”(Gibson, 2017, p. xiii) and I was able to explore

both the theory behind my ideas, enact the theories I wanted to test, take that information back to my theory work and explore it critically, and continue going back and forth between my craft and my theory, each iteration of the project informing the next.

The Camera and Me

One of the things that initially drew me to filmmaking was the opportunity to show other people what I could see, or more accurately, *how* I was seeing it. The camera allowed me to capture and reveal my point of view and explain what I found to be beautiful, intriguing, or important. Zoe Dirse (2013), an academic and cinematographer, describes documentary cinematography as responsive and requiring the cinematographer to react spontaneously to the action around them. The relationship between a cinematographer and director in the documentary context is unique:

In a documentary, there is a symbiotic relationship between the director and the cinematographer. They discuss the style, the philosophy, the ideas, the desired focus, the visual approach, and the overall look of the piece, and then it is up to the cinematographer to capture the images on film or tape that best conform to the director's wishes. (Dirse, 2013, p. 16)

Documentaries differ from fiction films in that the director is sometimes the camera operator, too. This was the case for the majority of the footage in *Niki! Shot by Blue*. I worked alone and was responsible for operating the camera, recording sound, and conducting interviews with Niki. This differs from a conventional documentary crew, where separate individuals perform specific roles such as cinematographer, director, sound operator, and producer.

I find solo filmmaking rewarding because it lets me direct my focus and energy solely on the subject. The camera becomes an extension of my thoughts, providing the freedom to position it exactly how I envision it. I skip the need for consultation with others about what to film,

and this enables the camera to respond to my emotions and capture the subject's expressions more authentically. Changes in angles, shot sizes, and overall image composition significantly shape the audience's perception of the subject. Reacting to my surroundings while filming has always been crucial in my projects. Moreover, I prefer to shoot the footage myself because, for me, documentary storytelling is personal. After spending months fostering a relationship and building trust with my subject, they tend to open up to me in significant and unique ways. This emotional labour is an essential part of the filmmaking process. My personal feelings about the subject are reflected in the ways I film them and how my cinematic eye captures their filmic self.

Evolving cinematography: shifting the gaze

The first rushes I watched were from 2014, a decade ago, a time capsule to my previous ways of looking. I watched each shot from start to finish, logged it, and organised it into sequences. This method allowed me to engage with my practice in an in-depth self-examination. I then observed and reflected on my practice and identified emerging patterns in my on-screen representation of Niki. *Skimpy* (M. Thomas, 2014) was a half-hour television program for ABC2, to be broadcast in a 9:30 pm timeslot. It was produced as part of Opening Shot, a joint funding scheme between Screen NSW and the ABC that supported first-time directors to tell bold, compelling, and provocative stories. “*Skimpy* peeks into the life of three so-called ‘Skimpies’ as they serve beer in their lingerie to quench more than the thirsts of farmers and miners across outback WA” was the tagline on ABC iView (2023).

I was hired as a second camera operator, and it was my first major gig since graduating from film school. First-time director Mariel Thomas came from reality television, where she worked as a shooter producer, and this was her first venture into the documentary format. The producer, who was also a woman, and Mariel, the

director, wanted to contrast the sexuality of the girls with the isolated, harsh Australian outback, and I was told to film as much skin as possible. We visited six remote pubs in Western Australia, following the ‘Skimpies’ as they served isolated and often inebriated fly-in fly-out miners.

Optional viewing material: [Skimpy \(2014\) duration: 30 minutes](#)

I examined the male and female gaze as a part of my literature review for this research project. While reviewing the rushes of my camera work on *Skimpy*, I was surprised by how often my cinematographic eye employed the male gaze. A. E. Kaplan argues that the male gaze defines and dominates women as an erotic object (Kaplan, 1983). As documentary cinematographer Kirsten Johnston suggests, “With this world saturated in male-imagined imagery, it takes some of us years to understand that it is possible to see differently” (Telfer, 2018, p. 3). The male gaze is so dominant in television and film that it is fair to assume these conventions have influenced my way of looking. I was also working to fulfil the brief as directed by the production company, to capture the characters’ sexuality and contrast it with the landscape. I would trace her body up and down, often never getting to her face for the reveal. This added to the creeping feeling of objectification, as her identity and face were omitted. At the time, I remember thinking I was filming her from the point of view of the male customers, trying to convey the sexual tone and desperation of their attention. However, analysing the rushes in 2023, I felt ashamed and confronted. My intention to convey the customer’s desperation did not matter because I was still diminishing Niki on screen by imitating a male gaze.

[Link to Male Gaze Sequence](#)

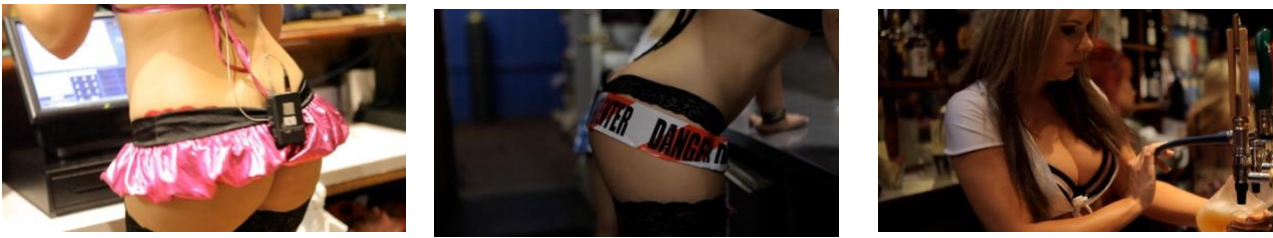


Figure 10. Stills from my Skimpy rushes that exemplify the male gaze.

In 2014, when trailers for *Skimpy* aired on the ABC and their social media sites, there was strong criticism regarding the depiction of women in the film. People were upset and offended by the exploitative images of women displayed on the national broadcaster's screens. The new commissioning editor of ABC Factual, Andrea Ulbrick, released a statement coinciding with the broadcast to address the public's concerns: "The majority of the creative team involved in the making of *Skimpy* was female, women who would never want to associate themselves with anything sleazy or exploitative" (Ulbrick, 2014). This statement appears to be based on a kind of gender essentialism that assumes that because the director, producer, and I were all female, the film would not and could not be exploitative. It is naive to think that the film exemplifies a female gaze just because the looker and the subject are female.

Scopophilia, the pleasure derived from looking, is a central concept in film theory, particularly in discussions about how visual pleasure is structured in cinema. Mulvey (1975) identifies scopophilia as a key component of the male gaze, where the act of looking becomes a form of power, often objectifying women for male pleasure. This aligns with broader discussions of how film creates a dynamic where the spectator is positioned as a voyeur, finding pleasure in viewing others without being seen. The ethical implications of such dynamics, particularly in traditional narrative cinema, have been a frequent subject of critique for perpetuating gendered power imbalances (Hollinger, 2012; Kaplan, 1997; Murray, 2019). Jessica Bennett writes about human nature and the love of looking at a spectacle and how that

is doubled when “the spectacle involves women and sex” (Bennett, 2022, p. 2). She questions whether the reframing of the male gaze in films that are purportedly trying to comment on it and demonstrate it has negative impacts: “When does the depiction of the spectacle become just as bad as watching it in the first place?” (Bennett, 2022, p. 2).

The sexual spectacle of the women in *Skimpy* was reframed as an attempt to unveil the hidden aspects of their lives. Their objectification, alongside the exploitation of their sexuality and nudity, was treated as an inevitable consequence of their professions. Nonetheless, the narrative also embodied the male gaze, as the plot focuses on the financial gains of the Skimpies, depicting them as opportunists who manipulate men for their own benefit. This creates an underlying disdain for the women as they present themselves on screen.

An example of this is when the youngest and most inexperienced character, Ash, is depicted flaunting her body and gyrating to appeal to male customers. Ash is framed in a close-up, and fast cuts juxtapose her movements with applause and adoration from the men watching. A non-diegetic music track accompanies the sequence, and the lyrics “Money has no shame” are heard. When I revisited that moment in the rushes to compare it with the edited scene, I saw that Ash was only doing the dance moves and gyration for the camera. No large crowd is watching her, and she is playing up for the camera in a jokey manner rather than performing the seduction the edit sequence portrays her to be doing. The edited sequence exaggerates Ash’s confidence and penchant for male approval, bolstered by the association of the lyrics “Money has no shame” on repeat. In trying to immerse the audience in the hidden world of Skimpies, a world that exploits and objectifies women’s bodies, how can the film depict the women without succumbing to the embodiment of the male gaze?

Scopophilia and female stories of exploitation are an interesting crossover area. There has been a surge of docuseries and dramas published in recent years that revisit scandals with

a purported new feminist framing. Karen Vanarendonk says we are “living in the golden age of humiliated women,” with stories about women who have been wronged in the past and are now having their stories re-examined. Examples include Britney Spears, Janet Jackson, Pamela Anderson, Monica Lewinsky, and Tonya Harding (Vanarendonk, 2022). The use of this so-called ‘Feminist redemption plot’ takes viewers on a journey into a space they can remember well enough to feel a sense of nostalgia but now see the mistreatment in a new light. She calls this experience “empathy tourism,” which, like all tourism, “has a perpetual double vision: It’s the culture of one place seen through the eyes of a foreign traveller” (Vanarendonk, 2022, p. 2). There are limits to this kind of plot, in that it relies on pointing the finger at the recent past to highlight mistreatment. Under fire is the social framework that made the mistreatment possible and somewhat acceptable at the time. When watching a humiliation-driven plot, the audience is encouraged to experience the smugness and self-righteous arrogance of knowing better. Still, one needs to think about the telling or reliving of the humiliation. These programs often make use of re-enactment or dramatic reimagining. We see the mistreatment played out again, this time with female actors in place of the women who were originally sinned against. This content is titillating, exploitative, and driven by the male gaze, yet it is accepted as it speaks to a past crime. Nonetheless, where is the line of reliving that exploitation through a new woman, albeit an actor? The only difference is that it is presented in a time (now) when the audience should know better.

There are similarities here in how *Skimpy* promised to take audiences into the previously unseen world the women inhabit to examine their mistreatment by men. The Commissioning Editor of ABC TV Factual at the time, Andrea Ulbrick, said:

I am satisfied that the filmmakers have achieved what they set out to do: honestly explore the lives of three women working in a little-known nor understood career. Importantly, the documentary provides something we know that our ABC2 audience loves—exclusive access to a rarely seen and often confronting world. (Ulbrick, 2014)

In attempting to pull back the curtain, however, the film participates in the exploitation of women, capitalising on their objectification, yet asks to be excluded from judgement as exploitative since the filmmaker and crew are all women. There is also a prevailing assumption, due to their belief that it is acceptable to depict women on screen in an objectified manner, that the end justifies the means, allowing them to expose their unfair treatment by men. This perspective fundamentally oversimplifies the issue at hand. Viewing *Skimpy* through specific conceptual frameworks and my evolving relationship with Niki has highlighted that having a female filmmaker does not inherently equate to feminist filmmaking or imply one is employing a female gaze. *Skimpy* is a faux-feminist film that fails to represent women's complexity, lacks an effort to convey their perspective, and does not thoroughly explore their identity. Despite its appearance as a female-centred film, I contend that *Skimpy* aligns more with the sexploitation genre, exploiting women's sexuality without any benefits to them, often at their expense. This serves as a caution in my research; while aiming to depict the objectification and suffering of true crime victims of sexual assault, I wanted to avoid recreating that visual narrative on screen, which could further traumatise or exploit the victims involved.

The impact of Skimpy

Content warning: the following paragraph includes a description of sexual assault

When *Skimpy* premiered on the ABC, Niki was fired from the company that managed her representation, as she had appeared topless in the program, and nudity in the bars was illegal. This meant she was barred from working in many of the pubs and clubs managed by her previous employer. After a few years of struggling to make enough money, Niki moved to Darwin in 2017. One of her first jobs in the new city was as a topless waitress for a buck's

party pub crawl. She was also booked to perform a strip show at the last pub on the crawl. On arrival, that pub withdrew the space for her to perform, and Niki was told to perform the show at the best man's house. When they arrived, Niki saw it was a mechanic's shed, a long distance from the main house in isolated, rural Darwin, with no streetlights. The bus left. She performed her show, and a few minutes in, one patron approached her while she was lying on her back, held her down and pushed his beer bottle inside her. She tried to kick him with her stripper boot, but she missed, and his friends pulled him away. She felt the beer run out of her, then burst into tears and tried to gather her things to leave. The men assembled in a circle around her, some laughing, some trying to calm her down, some saying "nothing happened." Niki had organised for a friend to collect her from the location, but they were ahead of the planned schedule, so it would be a while before he arrived, and now she could not reach him. She was looking for her phone and could not find it anywhere. "Smack My Bitch Up" by The Prodigy, the third song in her routine, just before the finale, was still blaring on the speaker connected to her iPod. As she looked through the legs of the men standing in a circle around her, she saw her friend Nathaniel walking towards her. He took in the situation and asked Niki to get in the car, now. Scrambling around on her knees, completely naked and terrified, Niki knew she only had one way of getting out of there, and that was to be friendly. She saw her bright pink iPhone sticking out the top of one man's back pocket and gave him a hug to secretly retrieve it. In the car, heading back to the city, Niki could not stop crying; Nathaniel, who had known her since they were teenagers, had never seen her like this before. She told him what happened. He gave her an ultimatum: call the police, or he would head back there later with a group of men to serve vigilante justice.

The police interviewed all 15 men who attended the buck's party, and one man, Kevin Wilcocks, admitted to the assault and acknowledged he did it against Niki's will; he was aware she did not want him to do it, and he did not ask permission, and he was sorry. This

confession was recorded. Despite this, he entered a plea of not guilty, and Niki was named the star witness in the Crown's prosecution case and was subpoenaed to appear at Darwin Supreme Court. Niki posted on Facebook a month before the trial, briefly saying she had to go to court and that she was feeling nervous about it, then deleted the post. The director of *Skimpy* saw the post and asked Niki if she wanted to make a film; Niki agreed. When the time came, Mariel could not attend the trial, so I went alone as director and camera operator. This was my second time meeting Niki; it had been three years since we worked on *Skimpy*.

Our relationship in a new context

During the first few days of the shoot in Darwin, Niki and I were getting to know each other again. Mariel requested specific sequences she wanted me to film with Niki, which required her to do multiple takes to get the appropriate coverage options for the story. I directed Niki's actions and controlled what she did on camera for those sequences, such as walking up the court steps, getting her make-up done for the first day of court, and a timelapse of her waiting for a (pretend) verdict. I was filming on a Canon EOS 5D Mark II, with no rig, and struggled to do much handheld footage. This meant Niki was limited to a static interview frame and did not have much bodily autonomy.

I approached the first interview, in which she recounted the assault for the first time, very cautiously. I let Niki tell me what she remembered, and her explanation was given in short images, feelings and moments that stuck in her mind. Her telling was not cohesive or ordered; she went from one thought to the next and did not clearly explain things. It was my first day filming with Niki, and I did not want to push her to describe the details, especially the mechanics of the assault itself. I felt her pain; it was close to the surface. I was also wary that she would start the trial the next day, and I did not want to put her in a more vulnerable state. I was trying to keep her emotionally buoyant. The interview frame for Niki in that first

telling is very restrictive. I did not allow her bodily autonomy on screen; her movements were not expressive, nor did they allow her to exist as more than the image in the static frame.

The difference between the male and female gaze, as viewed by cinematographer Ashley Connor, is that the male gaze seeks to devour and control, and the female gaze is more a frame of mind, where the approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful (Telfer, 2018). Watching these rushes and reflecting on the gaze, I find my cinematic eye stilted, male, and heavily constructed. The overlay sequences we did were all planned ahead of time, and they had no spontaneity. Niki was never freely moving about on screen; she was restricted and restrained, and her image was controlled. Niki also had an on-screen and off-screen persona; she was self-conscious of how she was portrayed. Her body shape had changed since *Skimpy* due to her assault and years of anxiety and depression. The tone of the male gaze had shifted from consumption to pity. I still fixated on Niki's body, filmed it in sections, and was concerned with how she viewed and judged her own body. Instead of exploiting her exposed body and sexuality, I was focusing on her insecurity and self-criticism.

As the trial continued, the visual setups I was instructed to do with Niki became less important. Our personal relationship quickly got back to where we had left off in *Skimpy*: long conversations, jokes, comparing battle scars and philosophy. Together, we spent four days in court, first for Niki's testimony and then for her cross-examination. These were the hardest days. The defence barrister, Mark Thomas, said she was "not a normal woman," that she had welcomed the attack, and that the context of the situation overrode any notions of "so-called consent" (Defence Barrister Mark Thomas, personal field notes from Trial 1, 2018). These were also the days that drew us closer. After Niki finished her cross-examination, I attended the remainder of the trial, taking notes and reporting back to her. By the end of the 15-day trial, our relationship had reached a new intimacy. My understanding of

Niki had grown more layered and complex. In the end, the jury could not reach a verdict, and the re-trial was scheduled for the next year.

The plot thickens

I used footage from the first trial to show a proof of concept and was awarded funding for a 30-minute observational documentary that promised to follow Niki through both trials and the final verdict. The rushes for Film 3, *Asking for It* (2019), in *Niki! Shot by Blue* was a co-production supported by Screen Australia and the *Guardian Australia*⁵. The unique selling point of the pitch was an inside look at what it takes to go through a sexual assault trial and that the audience would feel like they were privy to Niki's daily experiences.

There is a huge shift in my cinematic eye between the two Supreme Court trials. I upgraded my camera equipment, so I was filming with a shoulder rig Sony PXW-FS5 and could now follow unfolding action unimpeded. I employed the verité shooting style to film Niki. However, crucially, in between securing funding and the second trial, Niki's mental health suffered greatly, and she attempted to end her own life. I will unpack the intricacies of these events, Niki's perspective, and how I managed the relationship with Screen Australia in the **Consent Practices** section of this chapter.

When I travelled to Darwin for the second trial, I was unsure of whether the film would continue. The Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) were made aware of Niki's suicide attempt when she was brought to the hospital six months after the hung jury. The DPP decided to apply to exempt her from appearing in the second trial, as they felt it would be too damaging to her mental health. The Supreme Court approved, and this meant Niki would no longer need to attend court to give evidence; the recordings from the first trial would be

⁵ Funded initially with Mariel Thomas as producer who stepped away from the project before completion in 2020.

played to the jury instead. I still attended the court sessions to stay abreast of the proceedings, chat with the police and prosecutors, and observe how the accused and other party attendees gave their evidence this time around. I took extensive notes in case the quotes from court would be useful for our documentary. It meant I was also able to tell Niki how the trial was going, and it gave her a sense of representation and control despite not being physically present. However, Niki did not visit the court, so our filming sessions were no longer reacting to an external event. This meant the filming became more internal, and I focused instead on how Niki was evolving in isolation from the court case, not as a direct reaction to the day-to-day unfolding events. I did not want to put pressure on Niki to be on camera, and instead of instigating the filming, I asked her what activities she wanted me to cover. Niki would produce ideas for different sequences we could do, and I saw a positive impact on her mental state when she could direct our scenes.

Verité, but verified: authenticity without exploitation

When logging these rushes, I saw I had a completely different gaze than in the first trial. My gaze in 2019 was more empathetic, responsive, and feminine. It allowed Niki to unfold on screen, for her personality to grow. It was clear my perspective of Niki had shifted. I was responding to her agency and movement rather than directing her action, which can be seen in Film 2, *Judged* (2018). During the second trial, we never shot multiple takes of any of the action; there were no setups, and I never directed Niki, only to let her know I was ready. I chose to record all the conversations we had while filming to keep a record of all our consent conversations, as I did not think a simple release form would suffice for this project. I was aware of Niki's fragile mental health and wanted to make sure she was agreeing to the filming because it was something she wanted to do and not something she felt pressured into.

I had not learned about the ‘fawn response’ yet, as it was before my research for the thesis had begin.

During the footage review, as part of the 2023 logging process, I listened to the conversations that occurred between the filmed scenes, including discussions about consent and negotiations regarding what to film and how to execute it. I noticed Niki’s growth in her grasp of the technical aspects of filming and her increasing comprehension of how we were weaving the narrative together. For example, Niki turned off the air conditioning to avoid it interfering with our microphones, even though it made the environment quite hot and uncomfortable for us. She frequently prioritised this over her discomfort, understanding that it would enhance the quality of our work. Niki also provided input on camera angles, one instance being when she directed me to shoot from a higher angle so that she and her friend Steph could exit the frame, effectively linking the tick scene to the washing scene and ensuring I started filming before they began washing the dogs. It seemed like Niki was enjoying the process and was becoming more self-aware of what it meant to be a character on screen.

In my exploration of true crime films on sexual assault, I found few examples of a verité or observational filming style. This approach is rarely used for victim narratives. Among the six films I examined in the critical analysis section of Chapter 4, only one—*Procession* (Greene, 2021)—employed verité filming, and that occurred alongside the creation of hybrid therapy films. The verité footage in *Procession* captured the men as they staged their scenes, reconstructing instances of abuse they experienced at the hands of Catholic priests. Many victim narratives are told in retrospect, often due to the prolonged nature of legal proceedings and filming restrictions. As a result, victims tend to be limited to the interview context, which, as I explored, lacks a sense of bodily autonomy when limited to

a single frame, and the subject is not filmed interacting with other people, denying them depth and presence in the larger world.

In Film 3, *Asking for It* (2019), we gain a glimpse into Niki's life outside the courtroom. The audience witnesses the various facets of her character as she gradually embraces her strength. The verité approach allows Niki to exist in a world where she tends to tick-bitten dogs, talks about studying and the future, spends time with a best friend, cuts her hair, and folds washing. She is performing actions that are not connected to the court case and are not about her assault. She is not in a constant state of crisis; she is able to grow before our eyes. In my literature review, I identified traits and characteristics often associated with the female gaze and female filmmaking, and the characteristic of patience is often associated with the female gaze. Filmmaker Hedy Honigmann says, "Space is something where you can feel there is a woman, length of shot you can feel there is a woman, [she] has more tendency to be more patient in looking, time passing. We [women] are used to waiting ... This waiting is in our blood and has great potential for making film. (Honigmann, 2014, quoted in French, 2018, p. 58).

During the second trial, my understanding of who Niki is, her complexities and how I see her has evolved to a point where I am now concerned with depicting her in a complex light. My gaze is female, and this, in turn, impacts how she is represented on screen visually. This is completely different from how I filmed Niki in Film 1, *Skimpy* (2014). In *Asking for It* (2019), the composition principles I employed centralise her as the main character. Instead of cutting off body parts, Niki is seen as a whole on screen. She inhabits what Giessner et al. (2011) nominates as the powerful high-status parts of the frame. I shoot her at a low angle, making her bigger in the frame, and keep her above or at my eye level. She is never filmed from a high angle, which is typically used to make a character or object seem small in the

frame and connote a lower status. When Niki is facing the high point of her crisis, when we wait for the verdict in the car, she occupies the dominant central screen area.



Figure 11. Niki occupying the centre of the screen.



Figure 12. Niki filmed from a low angle.

This was not the result of planning. I did not write a shot list or plan to film Niki in this way. It came, instead, from my instinctive reaction to her. It was the development of my personal relationship with Niki that impacted the way I filmed her.

My observations of my evolving gaze and cinematic eye show that my personal involvement and emotional response to Niki affect how I filmed her. My first approach to Niki replicated the male gaze; I was imitating an exploitative style in an attempt to reframe her in a different context. This resulted in the same effect as the original exploitation that the male gaze connotes. The next time I filmed Niki during the first trial, my gaze evolved in that I was no longer objectifying and exploiting her body, yet my approach was still controlling, and I filmed her in sections and focused on her self-criticism. It was only once my relationship with Niki had evolved into something more genuine, and I had spent time getting to know her as more than a stripper, more than a victim, that I could capture her with dignity, respect, authenticity, and empathy with my camera. I see the evolution and shift in my gaze as something that moved from an indoctrinated and learned male gaze to a female approach in that it was empathetic and responded to her growth and identity.

Edit Room Ethics

Crafting stories that balance truth and care

Editing played a crucial role in enhancing my understanding and learning from my practice. While physically cutting the film, I recognised that my editing choices greatly influenced Niki's on-screen portrayal. I utilised the editing process to examine her representation through various modes of address, such as *verité*, hybrid, expository, and reflexive. By drawing on the themes from my critical analysis, I pinpointed important tropes and patterns of representation to avoid in my edits. In particular, I consciously avoided the rescue narrative trope and was careful not to endorse the great white male protector and validator tropes.

Avoiding harmful tropes in true crime

In Chapter 4, my critical analysis, I examined the rescue narrative (Baker, 2014), the great white male protector (Dyer, 1997, 2017; Kelly, 2014; Szörényi & Eate, 2014; Watts, 2005), and validator tropes, and explored how these tropes were evident in many of the documentaries on my viewing list. The rescue narrative tended to blame the victim for behaving in a naive way and putting herself in danger, and it also placed a high value on her virginity. The great white male protector, an 'honourable man' like Randall Margraves from *At the Heart of Gold*, who tried to attack Nassar in the courtroom, is a popular trope audiences know from fiction films. Validators—typically lawyers, police officers, and journalists—received most of the screen time and were tasked with explaining the victim's circumstances instead of her doing it herself. This blend of roles resulted in female victims being sidelined, minimised, silenced, and infantilised. They were given little screen time and did not experience on-screen bodily autonomy. My observations exposed that in films about

women and girls, the use of these tropes contributed to the shifting focus from the victim to a man.

I was cautious about avoiding these tropes, as they represented the antithesis of what I wanted to achieve with my work. I chose not to interview Niki's stepfather or her boyfriend. I did not interview the prosecutor or the sex crimes detective, who were both male. I did, however, interview Nathaniel Vivian, the man who collected Niki from the remote property where she was assaulted and drove her to safety. Niki had initially organised for him to pick her up at the pub, and when the last-minute change of location happened, she hurriedly texted him the new address and did not have confirmation that he had received it. Nathaniel was one of the Crown's witnesses and was called to appear in court. The Crown utilised him to place Niki independently at the crime scene and identify the men surrounding her. Nathaniel accurately described the location and the other witnesses, detailing the men encircling Niki.

In my edit, I use his perspective to reinforce Niki's account of the events. I deliberately avoided focusing on Nathaniel's anger and did not attempt to enhance the drama of his heroism. He illustrates that Niki had proactively established a safety network, ensuring she could return home securely. I did not film Niki and Nathaniel interacting in other situations; there is no deeper investigation into how they relate. He serves a purpose in her story, not taking it over. Niki and Nathaniel both agree that he gave her the ultimatum of either calling the police or he would return with a group of men to serve vigilante justice. However, I decided not to focus on this aspect of the story, as it replicated the rescue narrative and shifted the focus to Nathaniel's hypothetical heroism.

Pacing and perspective: balancing agency and audience needs

My initial approach to Scene 8, where Niki recounts the day's events and the assault for the first time, was to present her testimony exactly as she shared it, without any additional

commentary. I aimed to illustrate how a victim recalls such events—fragmented and driven by emotions. At the time of our interview Niki was on the brink of her court case. She shared fleeting images from the night of the event, mentioning the flashes that came to her mind. A trauma retelling is rarely straightforward; it often emerges in chaotic ways triggered by specific words. I also wanted to avoid mixing Niki’s testimony with Nathaniel’s to avoid the validator trope. Consequently, Niki shared her version of events first, followed later by Nathaniel’s account in Scene 11 (as outlined in the Treatment in the Appendix). I thought this separation was important to ensure that Niki’s story stood on its own, as I was reluctant to introduce a male authoritative voice that might reinforce the problematic tropes I critiqued in Chapter 4.

[Draft Scene 8-Trauma Perspective](#), duration 5:08.

Unfortunately, this structure created significant confusion. During audience screenings, feedback indicated there were too many gaps in Niki’s story. Viewers were eager to understand her location, how she arrived there, and how she escaped, with the missing details proving too distracting. They were left with unanswered questions, which undermined Niki’s reliability. As an editor, my role is to clarify these issues, so it was disappointing to learn that my structure had led to audience confusion. In my effort to avoid clichéd and troublesome tropes, I inadvertently clouded Niki’s representation. Reflecting on the purpose of that sequence, I realised my primary aim was to ensure the audience believed Niki’s narrative of events. It is crucial that they accept the reality of the crime committed and recognise the wrongness of what she endured. The next draft involved editing Nathaniel’s testimony alongside Niki’s. I decided to focus solely on Niki’s experience rather than his feelings on the assault or his threats toward the perpetrators.

Scene 8 – Integrated Perspectives Duration 3:21

Earlier, I discussed my trauma-informed approach and what that meant for my practice. Trauma-informed interviewing allows the victim to disclose information at their own pace, and the role of the interviewer is to help bear witness in order to help them feel supported (Felman & Laub, 1992; Huang, 2019). Yet in 2018, seeing Niki for the first time in a few years, I was so cautious about not overwhelming Niki that I failed to guide her in fully answering the questions. This reflects my inexperience at that time in conducting interviews with individuals who have experienced severe trauma. If I were to interview her now, in 2024 instead of 2018, I would approach it quite differently. My research indicates that while the interview process must be sensitive to the victim, it should also fulfil its purpose to avoid needing to repeat it later to cover omitted details. During that initial interview I did not fulfil my role as an interviewer effectively; I was reluctant to ask Niki for more detailed information. I was focused on rebuilding our rapport and did not want to destabilise Niki ahead of her court case. Over the subsequent interviews and years, my approach improved significantly as I gained confidence in both my abilities and our relationship, along with a better understanding of the process.

From victim to subject: reframing narratives with agency

In my critical analysis in Chapter 4, I critiqued the films that included the voices of multiple victims and edited them so they overlapped one another, suggesting that in their oversupply of evidence, they denied the individual the opportunity to properly express their story and, in turn, also denied the audience an emotional connection. This analysis informed my editing decisions for the verité segments in Film 3. I explored the impact of uninterrupted screen duration and how it enhances audience engagement when they can closely observe the

subject. My editing approach aimed to avoid both of these pitfalls and instead dedicate time to Niki so the audience could build empathy and understanding for her story through extended screen duration. In the editing process, I prioritised longer takes, allowing more room for Niki's silences, expressions, and those moments when she visibly flourishes and gains strength. For instance, we notice a significant shift in her mood and body language after her haircut. The scene emphasises her non-verbal cues over dialogue; she smiles, exudes more confidence, and speaks positively about her future. In that scene, I aim to achieve an authentic and intimate portrayal of her character, ensuring she appears whole and multidimensional on screen.

Throughout Film 3 *Asking for It*, I permit Niki to exist on screen and for the audience to enjoy moments with her. It is important to have the audience spend time with Niki. The quality of time spent becomes the organisational logic for the edit and the motivation. The verité style and female gaze approach to filming, my *listening* with the camera, is what permits longer shots in the editing sequence. I do this by letting shots play out longer on screen, and I have minimal editing interventions; I do not re-order or cut up her statements to make them artificially faster. Niki looks into the camera, and the audience can look back. David MacDougall writes about the importance and significance of what a look returned by the audience can achieve: "It is the look of exchange that says, 'At this moment we see ourselves through one another.' The encounter produces a phatic reversal of roles in which the viewer seems to be regarding himself or herself with the eyes of the other" (MacDougall, 1995, p. 225). Niki looks directly into the lens and holds the connection. I wanted her to look to connect with the audience and for them to feel as if they could look back on her and see her as more than a victim.

Niki has a much more physical and emotional presence on-screen. She is flourishing, and the role of the edit is to give space for her growth. In films with overlapping victims' voices, the excessive presentation of evidence inhibits individuals from adequately conveying their stories, thereby also preventing the audience from forming an emotional connection. My editing strategy sought to circumvent these shortcomings by dedicating sufficient time to Niki, allowing the audience to cultivate empathy and understanding of her story through an extended duration on screen.

Turning roadblocks into opportunities with hybrid filmmaking

After completing filming the second trial, I returned to Sydney, where I began logging and editing the footage. However, I soon learned about a law exclusive to the Northern Territory and Tasmania that forbade the publication of any material regarding a sexual assault or abuse victim, even if the victim consented. This posed a significant obstacle, as it meant I could not release a film about Niki without risking prosecution, fines, and imprisonment. It also threw me into financial jeopardy, as I would be required to return the funding I had received from Screen Australia, much of which I had already spent on flights and accommodation while filming the trial in 2019. I also used it to pay back Mariel, the producer who fronted the costs for me to film the first trial in 2018, who had since stepped away from the project. I had signed delivery contracts with Screen Australia, guaranteeing them a film. The funding body had postponed delivery due to Niki's mental health struggles and suicide attempt in between the two trials, which I will discuss in the Consent Practices section of this chapter. Niki was incredibly disheartened that the film could not be released. It felt as if I had failed everyone by not researching the Northern Territory's laws beforehand, and I was deeply ashamed to realise that after two years of filming, the footage might never reach an audience. I became increasingly anxious and depressed, unsure of how to proceed. I had hit a dead end,

exhausted the funding, disappointed Niki, and could not deliver what I planned, leaving me feeling foolish.

When I hit creative problems in my practice, I often re-read old notebooks to remind me of ideas or strategies to help with inspiration. I turned to my film school notebooks that I wrote throughout 2013 at the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS), including ideas, guest lectures, and workshops. In our second semester, we did a workshop on hybrid documentaries run by our convenor, Professor Rachel Landers who was the Head of Documentary at AFTRS. AFTRS sent out a casting call to the public, and people came in to tell a true story about their lives. We spent the day interviewing people, and afterwards, each of us selected someone to collaborate with. Our project was to bring their story to life. Creatively, this was a new approach to making a documentary for me, as it required scripting a drama scene to reenact moments from their real-life story. We also studied hybrid documentaries such as *The Abor* (Barnard, 2010), which uses Dunbar's plays and documentary to tell the story of a playwright, Andrea Dunbar, and her hometown. The film used the verbatim or lip-synching technique, where actors mimed the words to the original audio.

The law in the Northern Territory stated that the identities of sexual assault victims could not be published, so I could not show Niki's face or say her name; however, I could use her voice. I did not want to blur Niki's face as that has negative connotations. I always felt that the most impactful part of Niki's testimony was her voice, so I decided to use that and hire an actor to lip-sync her words. The verbatim technique has been used to bring testimony to life in true crime documentaries. The documentary *Married to a Paedophile* (Camden, 2018) incorporated audio recordings of women who learned their husbands were paedophiles and wished to stay

anonymous. These recordings were then paired with actors to protect their identities. Initially, my idea was to cast several different women to ‘play’ Niki in the hybrid film, as I felt it would thematically communicate the point that a sexual assault victim could be anyone. The restraints from the budget, however, meant I could only cast a single actor. To cast the role, I selected a particularly emotive section of Niki’s testimony and exported just the audio. I asked the actors to lip-sync to the section and record themselves delivering it straight to the camera. The brief was that *this unnamed woman had been silenced by the law. She wants to tell her story. Will you help?*

Without spectacle: visualising trauma respectfully

Seeing another face mime Niki’s words was eerie, and the slight mismatch created a sense of foreboding and unease, which I thought would work well for the true crime genre. I selected Contessa Treffone for the role and sent her casting clip to Niki for final approval. Niki said it was bizarre to see someone else miming her words. Her feedback was that it was “Super weird and a bit fucked up, like, I feel sorry for her having to say all that stuff!” (N. Wilkie, personal correspondence, July 15, 2019).

Film 4, *Asking for It* (2020), was edited very differently from any of the previous films I had made with Niki. The distribution of the film was for an online audience, which meant it had to get straight to the point and hook the audience in the first five seconds. Niki’s story was reduced to the major events, and it was more about the fact that she was gagged by the law. I was only using the audio recordings, which meant Niki’s interviews could be recut significantly as the audience would not be able to see the jump cuts. Visually, it was a creative reimagining of what I had filmed with her in Darwin. I staged the scenes in different rooms around our hired location house. We played the audio of Niki aloud on set, as one would for musicians to lip-sync along to when making a music video. The actor, Contessa,

studied Niki's breathing and delivery with precision. I chose to exclude parts of the story from the lip sync. These sections of the film portray extremely high emotion and intensity. I felt protective of Niki's trauma and did not want someone else to act it out and risk a disrespectful portrayal of her pain. I had a strong instinct to reserve these moments for Niki alone and did not want the actor to mimic her. This included the description of her suicide attempt, which I chose to overlay with a supercut of the actor in different locations around the house and a single shot of her hand in the shower. For the final scene, when Niki hears the verdict and breaks down with heavy sobs, I had the actor, Contessa, stay silent. I played the phone call Niki had with the sex crimes officer, Toby, on loudspeaker and filmed the actor's emotions. I did a single, smooth pull-away shot with the camera on a dolly, trying to convey a sense of space opening and finality.

This film was released as scheduled on the *Guardian's* website and Niki was initially happy with it. We watched it together for the first time over Zoom, as I was unable to travel to see her in person due to Western Australia's strict border control in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. She said she was "proud and excited for that to be put out into the world" (N. Wilkie, personal correspondence, January 17, 2020). Niki also had positive reactions from family and friends and was able to see the impact her story had on the world and how it was received whilst remaining protected by anonymity. Two years later, however, Niki expressed dissatisfaction with the hybrid film form. She felt like she still had not told her story. Whilst it had been her voice, it was another woman's face. In our 2023 interview, she said it was "frustrating," and that a lot of people were confused by the technique and "didn't get it" (N. Wilkie, personal correspondence, May 12, 2023). Ultimately, for Niki, the

hybrid experience of storytelling allowed her a temporary solution to the gag laws. However, it did not give her permanent satisfaction.

Role of reflexivity in editing: bringing transparency to the process

While editing my film, *Niki! Shot by Blue*, I intentionally used the reflexive mode of address to highlight the subject's voice as an authoritative and introspective presence. This decision was deeply rooted in my stance, prioritising the co-construction of knowledge and meaning in documentary filmmaking. Through the reflexive mode, I sought to shift the narrative focus towards Niki's own reflections on her experiences and the evolving nature of our relationship. I conducted two reflexive interviews with Niki to help shape the overall narrative arc of the film. By creating space for her to articulate her thoughts and feelings, the film became a platform for self-representation rather than an externally imposed narrative. This method aligns with feminist documentary practices that challenge conventional power structures where subjects are often portrayed as passive or silent objects of the filmmaker's gaze (Kaplan, 1997; Kelly, 2014; Murray, 2019; Nichols, 2017; Thornham, 1999).

In privileging Niki's telling of events, the reflexive approach ensured that her voice was not merely present but central to the film's structure. This was achieved through sequences where Niki's commentary on her lived experiences and the filmmaking process are foregrounded; for example, it is the first and last voice we hear in the film. By doing this, the film acknowledges the interplay between her agency and my role as a filmmaker, making the power dynamics visible rather than concealed. This transparency is especially vital in documentaries about people who have experienced trauma, where ethical considerations demand a heightened sensitivity to the subject's vulnerabilities and boundaries. As Renov (2004) observes, reflexivity in documentary disrupts conventional storytelling modes,

encouraging the audience to critically examine how narratives are mediated and whose voices are privileged.

Moreover, Niki's reflective role allowed her to act as an engaged contributor to the filmmaking process. Her insights revealed how she navigated her own agency within the context of our collaboration, offering the audience a nuanced understanding of her perspective. The inclusion of her reflections also mapped the progression of our relationship over time, highlighting the gradual establishment of trust and mutual understanding. Such an approach challenges the "neutral" gaze, which frequently obscures filmmaking's constructed and relational dimensions, perpetuating the illusion of objectivity (Trinh, 1991).

Ultimately, the reflexive mode positions Niki as a co-creator of meaning, allowing her to actively shape how her story is told and perceived. This strategy resonates with trauma-informed filmmaking practices, prioritising participant agency and respectful storytelling (Re-Present Media, 2024). By privileging her voice and granting her narrative authority, the film amplifies her perspective while inviting the audience to critically engage with the layers of power, representation, and ethical responsibility embedded in the documentary process. This commitment to centring Niki's voice not only aligns with my stance but also demonstrates how collaborative storytelling can serve as a form of empowerment and ethical resistance to dominant media tropes.

Consent Practices

The negotiation of informed consent became a core aspect of the filmmaking process. This involved gaining initial agreement and then maintaining an ongoing dialogue throughout the

project to manage any changes in Niki's case's legal status and changes in her mental health. I never regarded consent as simply 'obtained'; it was a continual negotiation and evolving conversation. I will discuss how I navigated consent with Niki throughout the project, what insights I have gained from my practice, and the lessons this garners for other filmmakers and funding organisations.

The ethics of vulnerability: protecting subjects while sharing their truths

I have established that sexual assault can have a severe impact on the victim's mental health (Campbell et al., 2009; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Niki experienced depression and wrestled with suicidal thoughts between the first and second trials. When she made an attempt on her life and ended up in hospital, I did not see how the film would continue. The challenge I faced stemmed from having already secured funding for a longer film and having signed contracts with Screen Australia and *The Guardian*. However, since I was working independently and lacked a broadcaster connection, I could act as producer and be a champion for my subject. I am uncertain how this negotiation would have differed if I had been under a binding contract with a broadcaster or production company that had already utilised a sizeable portion of the budget, as I had done. I met with Alyssa Ovis from Screen Australia's Documentary Fund and told her about the situation. I explained the fragility of Niki's mental health and that, as far as the project was concerned, it might all be over. Alyssa was incredibly supportive. She told me that Niki's health was the priority and that she would be there whenever I needed to discuss the situation. She told me not to worry about the funding; we could work all that out together after some time had passed.

A few months later, Niki asked me to join her for the second trial in Darwin. I had a follow-up meeting with Alyssa at Screen Australia. I informed her that I would attend the trial upon Niki's request since her boyfriend would be absent, and that I would bring the camera

equipment without any assurance that filming would actually occur. Alyssa wished me well, reiterating her support and encouraging me to do what was best for Niki. Upon my arrival in Darwin, Niki expressed her desire to film. In our reflection interview in 2023, she shared that she asked me to keep filming because it gave her hope that something positive could emerge from the experience.

Niki's suicide attempt changed our roles significantly. As I mentioned in the earlier section on my shifting gaze, I hesitated to suggest filming, contrasting sharply with our earlier trial dynamic where I proactively set things up for Niki to film as much as possible. This change stemmed purely from instinct as I balanced my responsibilities as both a filmmaker and a friend. Previously, in my section on *Innovative examples of best practice* I identified Lynette Wallworth's approach to subject maker relationships and the importance of not blurring these boundaries, and technically, I would agree. In this unique case due to Niki's vulnerability, I did not feel like I could be there in solely a professional capacity. For me, the two roles fit seamlessly together, and Niki and I could transition from filming to 'hanging out' and back again easily. As we spent more time together, it became apparent that Niki was enjoying the filming sessions. Rather than retreading any old ground, I focused more on who she was as a person and the changes she was undergoing. We did not discuss the rape, the events surrounding it, or the court case except for when she was discussing the verdict with her friend Steph, which she would have done regardless of the camera's presence. Niki's mood would improve while we were filming together. It seemed that the activities gave her purpose, and it appeared to me that she was enjoying her more dominant role in the process. She would make suggestions about what we could do and what might be useful for the film. The rushes from the second trial showed that the camera 'bearing witness' was a powerful mechanism for healing

and growth. This is supported by Niki's comments in the 2023 reflection interview. She said the camera made things better and that someone was paying attention. It gave her something to do with her time, rather than just locking herself inside and hiding for the duration of the trial.

During my visit to Darwin in March 2019, we engaged in various activities that brought meaning to our days beyond just filming and moments when we were simply friends. We went crocodile spotting, played with meerkats, clothes shopping and other activities, none of which I did for the purpose of filming. The camera did not accompany us. This allowed us to transition between two types of relationships: the filming relationship and friendship. By taking regular breaks from filming, Niki could genuinely enjoy the process. The on-camera time became increasingly comfortable for her, enabling me to communicate with her from behind the camera in a relaxed and informal way. I could make spontaneous decisions and respond confidently to her remarks. This demonstrates to me the importance of flexibility when working with people undergoing a traumatic event. In her role as the representative of Screen Australia, Alyssa Orvis played a significant role in supporting me. I did not feel under pressure to deliver the film, and this enabled me to have patience and empathy for Niki. I was not inclined to push Niki towards consenting to the filming in our conversations leading up to my trip to Darwin.

Practical approaches to consent

Although Niki had agreed to my filming during the second trial, I did not assume this applied to every day and every scene. I remained aware of obtaining consent each time we filmed, allowing Niki to withdraw her agreement at any time. This ongoing dialogue was open even after the camera was rolling. The scene in the car while waiting for the verdict is a good example of my consent practice in action. I had spent a lot of time contemplating and

planning for how I could capture Niki's reaction to the verdict. As we could not film inside the courtroom, I knew that my best chance of on-screen reaction would be away from the court. I also worried about Niki's mental health if the verdict was not guilty, and she had to see her perpetrator celebrating in front of her in that setting. We elected to be away from the courtroom for the verdict for these two reasons.

My biggest concerns around consent were related to Niki's current mental state and her ability to make decisions. When we received the phone call that a verdict was in, we were driving back from visiting her friend Steph and were unprepared. We pulled over and decided not to drive anywhere until the prosecutor called us again. This meant I had a protected environment in which to film (the car) and a lead-up to establish consent in the moment. I chose to include these moments in the film as it felt like the simplest way to communicate the unique nature of our relationship to the audience. I start by openly asking her if she wants me to film, and she replies, "Yep, just get my natural reaction, I guess." "So, I have your consent no matter your mental state?" "Yep" (Wilkie, in *Asking for It*, 2019). The car scene captures Niki at a significant point of crisis, at a crossroads in her life. Not guilty would mean (to her) that it had all been a waste of time, and she was not believed. A guilty verdict, however, would mean her fight for justice had all been worth it. She wrestled with self-doubt and fear and tried to put herself back together after almost three years of damage. This was all unfolding right before my eyes (and my camera). The filmmaker in me knew the value of capturing these extraordinary moments. The human in me wondered if this was the best thing for Niki to be on camera during a moment of crisis. As the tension rises and I start running through the possible ramifications of a not guilty verdict in my mind, I try to understand her current vulnerabilities. I was

considering if she was suicidal, and if so, what that meant for consent, duty of care, and my responsibility in the situation.

[Link to Car Scene](#)

I decided to raise the notion light-heartedly to break the tension, and her reaction would help me ascertain if she was a danger to herself. Her response was unequivocal: “Fuck no, that would be a cunt way to die! I am one hundred per cent not suicidal in this moment” (*Asking for It*, 2019). Her response is darkly humorous and provides a moment of relief for both us and the audience. My experience in the field and the research I undertook at film school into ethical considerations regarding informed consent told me it was necessary to regularly ‘check in’ with Niki for the duration of the waiting time, which in real time was close to an hour. I wanted to give her many opportunities to withdraw consent. As we were in a controlled environment, when we did finally receive the phone call and heard the verdict of guilty, I was able to continue filming and focus on the moment, rather than panic about Niki’s reaction. This meant my filming was calm, centred and participant focused, and relayed the emotions of the scene.

Maintaining an open dialogue with subjects

Upon reflection, the camera was a good thing to have present, as it allowed Niki and I to focus on something tactile and made the situation matter more; it was being recorded. This huge moment would be witnessed. The knowledge that someone else could one day share this moment with her made the moment more bearable. It gave us purpose and focus. This theory was reinforced by Niki’s comments four years later when we conducted our reflection interview: “The camera’s the best thing. The camera’s the best thing that happened” (N.

Wilkie, personal correspondence, May 12, 2023). She also revealed that the film production helped her survive from one trial to the next. She stated, “I don’t think I would have even made it to the next trial,” and reflected that had I not been there filming, she “would have gone through two Supreme Court trials by myself. Can you even imagine?”

I am not stating that all subjects will benefit from having a film made about them. On the contrary, my research has shown that in many cases, being the subject of a documentary can cause significant harm to a person, their family, and livelihood, such as the subjects who appeared in *Surviving R. Kelly* and Daisy from *Audrie and Daisy*. For Niki, however, the camera represented to her that her story mattered; someone “cared enough to pick up a camera” (N. Wilkie, personal correspondence, May 12, 2023), and it helped her in her journey toward healing. Niki also felt that the documentary played a significant role in helping her justify some of her behaviour to those around her and that it would “explain a hell of a lot.” When asked if the documentary explained her experience, she said, “Yes, it explains it all way better than I ever could” (N. Wilkie, personal correspondence, May 12, 2023). Niki had experienced severe isolation after her sexual assault. She withdrew from her friendship groups and felt like she pushed away those close to her. This is common for people who experience sexual assault (Deck et al., 2022), and they experience a substantial impact on their personal and professional relationships. Sexual assault is a trauma that takes; it takes agency, power, and control. A filming experience that mimics those qualities can potentially have a doubly negative effect. For Niki, however, the film as a document supports and validates her unique experience.

My research indicates that during periods of intense emotion, significant discomfort, or when individuals feel a lack of control, the right to withdraw from participation is not just ethical—it is essential for honouring their autonomy and

emotional well-being. These situations often reveal vulnerabilities where individuals may find it difficult to express their boundaries. Providing a clear and easily understood right to withdraw acknowledges the participants' agency and prevents potential re-traumatisation, coercion, or a fawning reaction (Walker, 2013). This approach is particularly vital in settings involving trauma, power disparities, or sensitive content, strengthening trust and ethical obligations in the process. Since we began filming for the first trial in 2018, Niki has maintained control over her story, and the overall influence of the camera in her life has been one of positivity and empowerment. This demonstrates a fruitful relationship between subject and creator, emphasising the need for continuous communication to establish consent, especially as new risks arise that require ongoing discussions about consent.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Reflecting on the Research

My research aimed to answer the question, **Can you make a true crime documentary without causing harm to the victim?** The objective was to foster a more empathetic and nuanced representation of victims that avoided ‘rescue narrative’ tropes and other patterns of representation that minimise the victim. Additional goals included exploring ethical portrayals of trauma in creative practice and incorporating reflexivity and feminist approaches into the subgenre of crime, films about sexual crimes. I explored innovative techniques for documentary filmmaking in the realm of true crime. This research offers guidance for filmmakers and media professionals, encouraging them to reconsider their creative methods in order to emphasise collaboration and respect while embracing feminist values, trauma-informed approaches, and reflexive practices.

This research fulfilled its aim of developing a trauma-informed, ethically reflexive creative practice output by creating my documentary, *Niki! Shot by Blue*. By employing co-constructive approaches with Niki, the process challenged traditional power dynamics. Theoretical exploration further deepened this understanding by situating the work within the frameworks of documentary ethics (Alamouti, 2020; Barry, 2021; Nash, 2012; Nichols & Baron, 2024; Winston, 2000), feminist film theory (Kaplan, 1997; Kelly, 2014; Mulvey, 1974; Trinh, 1989), and trauma studies

(Atkinson, 2023; Bowie, 2013; Bullock Brown, 2021; Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012; Melzer, 2019; Nicholson, 2021; Sunderland et al., 2023) which I established in my literature review. These insights were realised practically in creative decisions, such as prioritising informed consent and collaborative editing. The film, however, has yet to be released, so the test of publication for Niki has not been conducted in this particular instance. I have released the earlier films, which obscured Niki's face, and used her original voice, so have seen her react positively to having her story distributed. When the film is released or published, I will write a follow-up exploring the results. For now, Niki and her family have a document of her experiences.

Key Findings and Contributions

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by proposing a model for ethical true crime filmmaking. It integrates feminist ethics and trauma-informed principles into creative practice. My investigation employed the two key methods of creative practice, and critical analysis.

Warnings gathered from critical analysis

Critical analysis was central to my research, allowing me to examine the ethical dilemmas and representational challenges inherent in the true crime sexual assault documentary subgenre. I watched 34 films, identified key areas for analysis, and selected six films that exemplified these themes. This process uncovered how power and agency are often skewed in these films, with victims' voices marginalised or overshadowed by other contributors. Through my critical analysis, I delved into key issues like informed consent, participant backlash, and the ethical considerations of victim representation, identifying instances of harmful practices and best-case examples that offer a framework for ethical storytelling.

Films such as *At the Heart of Gold* and *Athlete A* highlight a pervasive reliance on external male perspectives to legitimise women's experiences, reinforcing the rescue narrative. These narratives often position men as protectors or validators, reducing women's roles in their own stories. This framing diminishes the agency of female victims, portraying them as secondary characters even when the crimes and trauma primarily concern their lives.

On the other hand, documentaries like *Surviving R. Kelly* underscore both the empowering potential and the risks faced by survivors when speaking out. The series exposes the systemic power imbalances that protect abusers and examines the backlash victims often endure, highlighting the necessity of broader industry accountability. Films like *Audrie and Daisy* further explore the complexity of informed consent, particularly when participants are young, still healing from trauma, or unable to fully comprehend the long-term implications of their participation. Both of these examples emphasise that while filmmakers play a crucial role in managing participant welfare, the responsibility to safeguard victims should also extend to broadcasters and production companies that profit from their stories.

In contrast, *Leaving Neverland* and *Procession* provide exemplary approaches by prioritising the voices of victims, and presenting them as multidimensional individuals. These films avoid using other male voices to validate victim experiences, instead allowing survivors to share their stories directly. The use of embodied, on-screen representation gives participants agency and portrays them as complete individuals, illustrating their lives before, during, and after the assault. It is significant that these films, which feature male victims and are directed by male filmmakers, are the only examples of best practice in the list of 34 films. Survivors involved in these

projects reported largely positive experiences, finding the process both therapeutic and validating, even amidst its emotional demands.

My critical analysis highlights the importance of rejecting harmful tropes like the rescue narrative, which incorporates the great white male protector and validator tropes. Instead, I compel filmmakers to embrace ethical, trauma-informed approaches that centre victims' agency and voices. This framework not only ensures a more respectful representation of survivors but also addresses systemic challenges within the genre.

Insights from *Niki! Shot by Blue*

Filming practice

My approach to filming Niki developed considerably over the life of the project. In the initial rushes, I imitated a predictable male gaze, offering Niki as an object within the frame, a perspective heavily influenced by traditional norms. After the assault on Niki, this gaze shifted, reducing her to a victim. Unintentionally, I was adopting a viewpoint that sensationalised her trauma, treating it as a spectacle. However, as my rapport with Niki developed, my gaze became a *verité* visual style. This shift reflects a broader transformation in my filmmaker's gaze, from a male gaze-saturated approach to one deeply informed by empathy, and that reflected my way of looking. These findings suggest it is not the filming style that can either exploit, harm, support, or champion a subject; it is the emotional reaction from the filmmakers and how they perceive the subject that will have the greatest impact.

What implications does this have for new knowledge if I have only pinpointed an obvious component of documentary craft? I conclude one's gaze must be explored, confronted, questioned, and challenged throughout the duration of the project, particularly when engaging with subjects who are victims of trauma. Using reflection is essential, as it highlights aspects of our craft that we may be accustomed to and may not see. The

Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG) agrees that a filmmaker must reflect on their point of view. In their guidelines published in 2022, the first step in a project is Reflection. The first three actions of reflection are (1) acknowledge intentions, values, biases, and power; (2) consider relationships and proximity to community or issues and how that might influence their understanding; and (3) consider biases and preconceptions based on education, social status, lived experience, and proximity (DAWG et al., 2022). Frameworks such as this encourage filmmakers to be introspective about their craft before the project begins, which can prevent some issues from occurring later. For my camerawork, reflexivity proved an essential method, as it allowed me to understand my intentions and attitudes in a way that I otherwise may have overlooked.

I have developed a deeper understanding of the intricacies of interviewing people who are undergoing or have experienced a traumatic event. I now understand that the role of interviewer and interviewee should not have blurred or unclear boundaries. It is better for the subject to be able to trust that the interviewer is guiding the interview. Due to the risk of fawning (Walker, 2013) I do not suggest letting an interviewee control the interview, as they might offer up information in a manner aimed at pleasing the interviewer. Rather, it is essential that the interviewer has empathy for the subject and discusses parameters ahead of time so the interviewee can be prepared for the topics and agree on a hand sign to move on if they do not want to answer. I recommend that the subject be able to have a support person in the room, and be free to take water and tissue breaks, which should also be actively encouraged by the interviewer, in case the subject is afraid to ask permission. It is also important to allow the person to stop the interview when they need a break, as it helps their emotional composure.

Editing practice

Editing proved to be an essential approach for ethical decision-making. I tried various modes of address to examine Niki's on-screen portrayal. The expository mode offered clarity and context for complex legal issues and explained the crime, events, and other essential plot advancements. My critical analysis of other true crime films highlighted narrative tropes such as using male characters as validators and the rescue narrative. Forewarned of this representation trope, I avoided it by including only one other voice in Niki's story, Nathaniel Vivian. I relied on him to fill the gaps in Niki's account of events and treated him as a witness to the crime, not the hero of the story. I did not focus on his 'rescue,' nor did I spend time on his emotional experience, anger, or guilt. These choices meant that Niki's story was conveyed with nuance, avoiding the pitfalls of sensationalism or reductionism often associated with true crime media.

The verité mode provided raw, unfiltered moments that captured the authenticity of Niki's lived experience. These scenes have fewer edit points, longer shots are held, and Niki has extended screen duration, which allows her to exhibit bodily autonomy and agency on screen. A hybrid approach allowed me to tell Niki's story when the law restricted the release of her identity. It also offered Niki anonymity and protection and the opportunity to experience the film being released into the public sphere without the direct consequences that come with exposure. The reflexive mode highlighted the filmmaking process itself, allowing the audience to critically engage with the narrative's construction and offering them the chance to observe how our relationship had changed. As a practitioner, it gave me the reflexive tools to critically examine my craft and stance. Ethical editorial decisions, such as including very personal moments like revealing a suicide attempt or self-harm, were guided by Niki's input.

I have highlighted how each mode of address enabled me to tell Niki's story in diverse ways, each with a unique style and approach. Yet my film demonstrates that in terms of representing a victim, one mode of address is not better or worse than another. It is not simply the mode of address that is responsible for the on-screen representation, but how that mode is used and how the filmmaker portrays the subject. The relationship between them has a greater impact on the on-screen representation.

Consent practice

Underlying all these creative decisions was a commitment to informed consent, achieved through ongoing collaboration with Niki. The negotiation of informed consent emerged as a cornerstone of the filmmaking process, ensuring that the subject retained authority over her story. This was not a static agreement but an ongoing dialogue that evolved as the project unfolded. Key moments of negotiation included reviewing sensitive footage, consulting on how certain events were framed, and revisiting decisions during the editing process to align with the legal status of Niki's case. This process demonstrated that ethical filmmaking is about avoiding harm and actively involving the subject in storytelling. It reflects a broader feminist commitment to collaboration and accountability. This approach emphasised Niki's agency in shaping the narrative, balancing storytelling demands with a respect for her experiences. These findings illustrate how a reflexive and subject-centred methodology can help address the ethical challenges inherent in true crime filmmaking, offering a potential framework for others working in this genre.

The synthesis of these findings illustrates how cinematography, gaze, editing, and consent negotiations work together to create a documentary that respects the subject while engaging the audience. This integrated approach provides a framework for ethical true crime

storytelling, challenging existing norms in the genre and contributing to scholarly debates on creative practice research and feminist filmmaking.

Bridging Gaps in the Literature

This inquiry was prompted by notable gaps in both creative practices and academic research that needed addressing. In the domain of true crime media, the study sought to fill the void of comprehensive frameworks for ethically portraying trauma, particularly those rooted in feminist and reflexive methodologies. My research found many current approaches frequently overlook survivors' voices, inadequately accounting for the enduring impact media representations have on individuals and communities. The need for this research was underscored by the pervasive cultural impact of true crime narratives, which heavily influence public perceptions of victims, perpetrators, and the justice system.

On an academic level, the research addressed the limited scholarship that integrates creative practice, ethics, and feminist theory in the context of true crime documentaries. The study filled this gap by developing a methodology that not only critiqued prevailing practices but also offered an alternative model centred on lived experiences and relational ethics. My research also advanced the field of creative practice by illustrating how practice-led methods yield fresh insights. Engaging in a reflexive process of co-creating meaning with participants highlighted the ability of creative research to enhance ethical practices and theoretical knowledge.

Ultimately, the research tried to make contributions to documentary ethics, creative practice research, and the true crime documentary genre, while engaging with the ethical responsibilities of media creators. My research connects with wider societal discussions about media accountability. This research questions prevailing paradigms and supports a broader cultural movement toward ethical media practices by highlighting agency, consent, and

representation issues. The work adds to new ways of working from Peace is Loud, DAWG, Re-Present Media, and Documentality, which are all gathering momentum, and this researcher hopes for significant shifts in practitioner approaches. However, change will not occur on a larger scale unless streamers and broadcasters develop and adopt guidelines that protect crime victims. Funding bodies could integrate victim protection plans into the distribution models for projects involving crime, and this could have a lasting and significant impact.

Implications of the Research

This research offers contributions across several dimensions, extending beyond the immediate context of my analysis to influence broader fields such as creative practice research, ethical media representation, and research on feminist and trauma-informed approaches.

Creative practice as research

My research demonstrates the potential for creative practice to function as a method of academic inquiry, emphasising its capacity to produce new insights through the process of making. By employing practice-led methodologies this research demonstrates how practice can serve not only as a tool for storytelling but also as a medium for developing theoretical contributions, particularly in the ethics of representing trauma and the power dynamics in documentary filmmaking, adding to the growing field of creative practice research emerging in the Europe, North America and Australia.

Ethical media representation and true crime filmmaking

This research critiques problematic norms in the true crime genre, focussing on the subgenre of sexual assault and abuse films, such as victim marginalisation, reliance on rescue narratives, and the perpetuation of harmful tropes. It advocates for trauma-informed, survivor-centred approaches that prioritise ongoing informed consent and collaboration. The findings offer a pathway for filmmakers to create documentaries that empower participants addressing the responsibilities of filmmakers, broadcasters, and production companies in safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable participants. This work calls for industry-wide reflection on how media creators approach stories of trauma, challenging filmmakers to adopt ethical practices that respect survivors' agency.

Feminist and trauma-informed approaches

This research integrates feminist theory with trauma-informed approaches, bridging gaps within the current framework of documentary ethics. It highlights the necessity of relational ethics in creative practice, emphasising the importance of collaboration, reflexivity, and the co-creation of meaning with participants. By challenging patriarchal and hierarchical norms within filmmaking, the research aligns with feminist scholarship advocating for inclusive and equitable practices. It also contributes to trauma studies by demonstrating how storytelling can be both therapeutic and empowering for survivors, offering strategies that can be adapted across various media and academic contexts.

In summary, this research provides some actionable frameworks and theoretical insights. It invites creative practitioners, media professionals, and scholars to rethink how trauma, agency, and ethical responsibility are navigated within both practice and discourse.

Future Directions

This research opens several pathways for future exploration, providing a foundation for expanding trauma-informed, feminist, and co-creative methodologies within documentary filmmaking and beyond.

Trauma-informed approaches in other creative formats

Further research could investigate how trauma-informed practices might be applied and adapted to other documentary genres, such as environmental or political documentaries. These areas often engage with vulnerable communities or sensitive topics, where ethical considerations are equally critical. Future studies could examine how these approaches might evolve to address the unique challenges of representing collective trauma, such as that experienced in displaced or marginalised communities. These techniques for interacting with victims transcend filmmaking, and a trauma-informed approach for research could be adapted to work across podcasting and screenwriting.

Influence of feminist media ethics on mainstream filmmaking

Another potential area of inquiry is how feminist media ethics can inform broader filmmaking practices, particularly in mainstream media. Research could explore how principles like relational ethics, prioritisation of underrepresented voices, and survivor-centred storytelling could shift industry standards, potentially reducing the prevalence of exploitative tropes in blockbuster films and episodic television. This work could also assess the barriers to integrating feminist frameworks in commercial settings and propose strategies for overcoming them.

Long-term impacts of co-creative storytelling on documentary subjects

Future studies could delve deeper into the long-term effects of co-creative storytelling on documentary participants. While this research highlights such methods' therapeutic and empowering potential, a longitudinal approach could explore how these experiences shape subjects' personal and professional lives over time. This could also include evaluating whether ongoing collaborations or changes in media exposure have sustained positive or negative impacts on participants' well-being, identity, and agency.

By pursuing these directions, future research can extend the insights and methodologies developed in this study, contributing to a broader, interdisciplinary understanding of ethics, representation, and creative practice in media production.

Limitations

As a filmmaker utilising a reflexive method, my perspective inevitably shaped the narrative structure and interpretation of events. While this can foster a more empathetic and feminist viewpoint, it also presents challenges in balancing artistic expression with academic rigour. Although the research offers insights into trauma-informed documentary techniques, particularly with the victim in a true crime documentary, its findings pertain specifically to the narrative and experiences of a single subject. Consequently, one should approach its applicability to wider contexts in true crime filmmaking by placing one's own unique set of circumstances at the forefront of one's research.

There was a significant lack of industry pressure in the creation of this project, there was no budget or funding schedule or deliverables I had to adhere to. This meant I was able to create the work outside of those pressures that normally dictate how long one can spend in the edit, exploring different ways of telling the story. This is a limitation in that the circumstances do not replicate an industry environment.

The thesis is published at a time when the film *Niki! Shot by Blue* is yet to be distributed and thus reactions to the screening have not been researched and tested.

A Way Forward

This research demonstrates that it is very difficult to create a true crime documentary that respects the dignity and agency of the subject without perpetuating harm or exploiting their trauma. The findings could offer ideas to other practitioners seeking to adopt a more ethical storytelling approach. The research identifies three main areas practitioners need to pay attention to when working with participants who are victims of sexual crimes and are, therefore, potentially exposed or vulnerable to additional complications. These areas are informed consent, the subject's experience, and patterns of representation.

Informed consent should be an ongoing negotiation, encompassing preparation for the project, throughout filming and post-production, and the filmmaker should continue to manage the participant's consent through the release or screening. Many facets of documentary production can put participants at risk both physically and psychologically, and this is heightened when working with people who have experienced trauma from sexual crimes. It is the filmmaker's responsibility to do everything in their power to minimise and eliminate these risks and guide the participant through the release process. This includes protection from the demands of the broadcaster or streamer, who may try to expedite early consent conversations or rush distribution before a participant is ready. Upon release, participants should be provided with social media protection education, to equip them with the tools to protect the privacy of their (and their families) social media accounts. This was something I did with Niki and her family prior the release of the 2021 Guardian film,

Asking For It, which was released online. When *Niki!Shot by Blue* is due to be released, I will do this with Niki and her family in preparation. Broadcasters and streamers also need to take proactive steps to manage potential risks and offer support to subjects and their families. They should recognise the emotional labour required for filmmakers in this emotionally charged period, and provide fair compensation to filmmakers, as this assistance is crucial. Considering the monetary gain they stand to obtain, broadcasters and streamers should provide financial support for participants to access psychological services in the years following the release of the documentary. In cases when participants experience extreme threats of physical and psychological violence, they should also consider financial support or funds for protection and private security for participants following the release and due to the documentary. To achieve real, actionable change, these types of requirements need to be included in contracts with funding bodies, which make compliance contingent on receiving finance enforced by an external body. There are many contemporary groups who are working on evidence-based ethical frameworks. Organisations like Re-Present Media, the Documentary Accountability Working Group, DocuMentality, and Peace Is Loud are trying to confront inequalities in documentary filmmaking, challenge traditional power hierarchies and encourage filmmakers to evaluate their own biases and responsibilities from the start of production.

Victims of sexual crimes are often subjected to tropes and patterns of representation that minimise their onscreen presence and do not privilege their telling in the documentary. Documentaries in this subgenre of true crime often follow the rescue narrative and rely on additional male voices to add validation to a female victim's claims. When working in this subgenre, my research recommends practitioners interrogate their instincts about whose voice to centre and challenge, confront and question any additional voices they feel are required. Having a collaborative approach to the filmmaking process can help practitioners make a

more equitable and nuanced film that represents the participant as more than the crime that was perpetrated against them.

The resulting research leads this researcher to conclude that the intricate dynamic between documentary filmmakers and their subjects demands a thoughtful and ethically informed practice, especially when the subject is a victim of sexual assault or abuse. As the discipline of documentary studies and creative practice continues to progress, there is an urgent need to embrace greater accountability, establish comprehensive ethical frameworks, and cultivate an enhanced understanding of the inherent complexities within such narratives that represent victims of crime. Nurturing a culture of collaboration and respect for participants has the potential to help equip practitioners with the necessary tools to produce works of profound significance that impact audiences while amplifying the voices of those whose stories are represented. The ongoing debate surrounding documentary ethics remains crucial to safeguarding the role of this medium as an influential catalyst for social change.

Appendix

Timeline

March 2014: Niki and Blue meet during the filming of *Skimpy*, a documentary directed by Mariel Thomas.

November 2014: *Skimpy* airs. Niki is fired from her promotional job, effectively barring her from working in most pubs and clubs across Western Australia.

February 2017: Niki relocates to Darwin.

June 2017: Niki is assaulted by Kevin Wilcocks while working at a buck's party.

May 8, 2018: The case, *The Crown vs Kevin Glenn Wilcocks*, goes to trial in the Darwin Supreme Court. Blue films with Niki during the proceedings.

Outcome: Hung jury; retrial scheduled.

August 2018: Blue and Mariel secure funding for a 30 minute film, *Asking For It*, co-produced by The Guardian and Screen Australia destined for online release on the Guardian Website.

March 2019: Second trial takes place. Blue returns to Darwin to continue filming.

Outcome: Kevin Wilcocks is found guilty.

June 2019: Film release delayed due to laws prohibiting the identification of sexual assault victims.

Niki joins the *Let Her Speak* campaign, represented by Marque Lawyers.

Mariel steps away from the project.

June 2020: Blue films an actor to narrate Niki's story using her voice, without showing her face.

January 2021: *Asking For It* is released as a short film on the Guardian Website.

October 2022: Northern Territory law changes—victims can apply to reveal their identity once appeals conclude.

Niki applies and is now legally allowed to share her story

Treatment

Niki! Shot by Blue ***The Crisis of Filmmaking*** **TREATMENT**

ACT ONE

Super tease. Setting the scene and tone of the film. 10 years in the making. Story of friendship, perseverance. Getting things wrong. Getting things right.

Sequence One *Undisturbed status quo of main*

Five key scenes

Scene 1 Blue meets Niki in WA on Skimpy film shoot. The filming and friendship begins. They are going on a road trip across lonely mining towns with the goal of making as much cash as possible. And these girls will do almost anything to get it. Blue is in tow, filming all the way.

Establish Niki with Courtney identity. Set the characters up – Niki is loud and boisterous, skinny and suntanned. Full of life and ready to tackle anything. She has a tenacity and cheekiness that are infectious. Traits that can get you into trouble, if you're not careful. We don't know what is her skimpy persona and what is the real Niki. Ash and Shae are minor characters. They have different attitudes to how to cope with Skimpy work. Niki is the loudest of them all, the one who throws caution to the wind and says, "fuck it, I'll deal with him." She's the toughest with the patrons, but also gives them the most attention. She pushes the line sometimes. She's bossy with the new girl, tries to guide her and thinks her naive.

Scene 2 Meet Western Australia... the mining towns, the fly in fly out culture... Themes of women placating men. Performing versions of themselves to get better tips. Parading themselves, preening, posing for the cash. But is it feminism? Sex positive? It's their choice after all. Who are we to judge? But it is fun to judge them...

We visit the first pub on the road trip, Boddington. Alcohol, overindulgence, and misogyny are the backdrop to this first sequence. All the interactions happen with this in the background.

This world poses a risk to Niki and all the women in it. Foreshadowing danger to come; Blue is given personal alarm by production company. Publican at bar tells her not to use it, as other men might come along and join in. He's joking, but is he really? He's not laughing.

Scene 3 Back on the road. Blue's Instagram posts provide road trip type punctuations to the sequence. The girls talk about why they Skimpy, and what they'd do instead. They share battle stories of bad customers. Next pub is Cataby, a one-horse town. Racist bumper stickers and not a woman in sight. The men are hungry for female 'companionship.' Moments of

patrons flirting and talking to Blue off camera, how she tries to deal with it. The local bar girls hate the skimpies, the men are polite to them when the skimpies aren't around. When the Skimpies arrive, they're animals. The men in the bar take it too far. Two won't leave and try pull their dicks out. Shae has a breakdown in the backroom. Niki is the only one that can deal with "Bert and Ernie," and after a lot of shouting sends them on their way.

Scene 4 The shine of the trip has somewhat dimmed. Last night was a downer. Niki is keen to lift people's spirits. They suspect Ash is drinking to cope. They drive through salt lakes and arrive in Westonia, which suits its name as it feels like the wild west. Blue gets picked up and swung around by a patron while holding the camera. Niki sets a man on fire with shaving cream on the bar. The publication loses his temper and threatens to shut down filming. The night is a hot mess. Everyone wants to quit. Culmination of Sequence One is Courtney/Niki's interview where she talks about losing a relationship with her boyfriend because she's a skimpie, she's in the middle of making a decision about whether to leave this work or not. He boyfriend will break up with her if she doesn't quit. She talks about what this work has cost her. We see chinks in her armour.

Scene 5 At the last pub of the tour, Corrington. Ash breaks down. A man propositions Blue whilst filming and she has to run away and beg Ash to let her in to escape... Blue's drink gets spiked. A note is slipped under her door at the hotel, from a man who says he watched her last night as she went to bed, would she come and meet him? He leaves his phone number. A twinge of danger lingers in the air.

Scene 6 The last day of the tour. The girls wake up bleary eyed, hungover and swear they're never doing another job. Then instantly Niki says she will. It's a jovial mood. Ash has disappeared. Skimpie shoot ends. Courtney/Niki says she will still do this kind of work. She's not quitting.

(this is one too many scenes....)

"It would be three years until I saw Courtney again. And that's when the real story began."
HOOK

Sequence Two *Building the dilemma, the collision*

Use title cards to show chapters.

Five key scenes

"A Terrible Idea"

Niki posted an update about the assault on Facebook. The director of Skimpie, Mariel, sees it and says we should make it into a film. Blue thinks it's a terrible idea. Mariel has to work, so Blue goes to Darwin to film the court case.

Scene 7 GVs of Darwin. Timelapse of stormy clouds. Mood shifts.

We see Niki, older, in interview frame.

"I'm Courtney"— Blue cuts her off "You don't have to be Courtney anymore..."

"Well okay, I'm Niki"

Building the dilemma, my ability to film Niki. Remember the process of representation.

INCITING INCIDENT

Niki tells us how she fell in love and moved to Darwin. Something she promised she'd never do (follow a man to a new city). She tells us life was going well, and she was about to quit being a skimpy/stripper, but she had one more job to do so she could buy a car to gain some independence.

Scene 8 At that job, a man assaulted her. It was on a rural property far out of the city of Darwin. Nothing but a great expanse around the tin metalworks shed they had her preform in. Her best friend turned up in the nick of time and put her, half naked and sobbing, into his car. On the drive back to the city he eventually got the story out of her. He gave her an ultimatum: call the cops, or he would return with his friends and teach the men a lesson. Niki calls the cops, not expecting to be believed. She apologizes the whole phone call. To her surprise, officers are waiting when she gets back to her apartment. The next day, they press charges. She's going to court; the Supreme Court. Shit's getting real.

Scene 9 Preparing for trial. The audience meets Darwin. Understand a little about the history of the place, this is the backdrop of the trial, the charge hinges on consent. Is it possible for her to get justice here? Will everyone think she deserved it? She was asking for it? Niki and Blue talk about what they are trying to film. Overlay of crocodiles.

Scene 10 Niki talks about how the wait has affected her. How she wants to shrink away, hide from the men in town. She's put on weight. She's on antidepressants. Can she cope with what's to come? She's optimistic, but is it realistic?

ACT TWO

Sequence Three *Elaborating on future obstacles. Introduce new characters.*

Scene 11 A hurricane has hit Darwin. The aftermath shows uprooted trees and fallen branches. It's a mess. Niki and Blue try to do some filming at the courthouse before the trial – multiple takes – include off takes... "Try that again." She's locked in now. There's no backing out. This is actually happening. They get scared someone will see them and think Niki is just doing it for the fame. This is supposed to be direct cinema, why are you talking to the subject? Be pure!

Scene 12 The morning of the trial. Niki agonises over her make up, her outfit. "Do I look like a respectable member of society?" She heads to court. Media treatment of her case is less than desirable. It's all about a beer bottle, she's nothing more than a stripper. Darwin life chugs along outside. The NT News have some shocker headlines.

Scene 13 We meet Nathaniel, the friend who rescued her from the buck's party – arrived for the trial as a witness. We hear the night from his perspective. We hear chilling new details and see the story from someone else's perspective. We'd forgotten the violence she was faced with, the danger that the site had to her- stranded, in the middle of nowhere. He describes the men in a circle around her, how she was crouched naked on her knees on the floor. His friend since teenagers, and this was the first time he'd seen her cry. He ends his interview saying he reserves the right to see the film before he consents to his interview being included, because he doesn't know the filmmaker and doesn't trust how she will represent Niki. Don't want them to make it seem like she deserved it to happen.

Scene 14. Niki undergoes cross examination. Emotional highpoint of her on balcony after cross examination, how this was like being assaulted again. Left her broken and regretting she ever

reported. She warns other girls that if they come forward they might not make it. This is too hard. The only thing keeping her going is the idea that she might help someone else one day. For the first time she leaves an interview. Niki shares that leading up to the trial she got drunk on her balcony and contemplated jumping off.

Scene 15 Phone calls with mum on beach. Closing arguments were today. Niki gushes to her mum about how clever her female prosecutor was, how amazing she did. Because it's almost over, they discuss her plans to come home. She might leave her boyfriend. They discuss her dad and his abuse. Niki talks about needing confidence. Her mum says she shouldn't put up with it. Niki's spirits are lifted. "Whatever the outcome, I'll be home soon."

CARD: Blue has to leave Darwin. Trial ends with hung Jury.

MIDPOINT – First culmination: main character almost gets what they want. Niki ALMOST gets justice. Blue almost finishes a film. This is good but not enough of the latter in this sequence.. How is the representation of Niki changing say from Skimpy till now?

Sequence Four

First serious obstacle overcome... for now

Scene 16 Blue cuts Judged, a three-minute film for WHIMN and News.com that ends on the hung Jury.

Scene 17 Blue gets funding for another, longer film. It will be called "Asking for It." It's a lot more money. Blue is excited to make an observational film about Niki's trial.

Scene 18 The night before release of Judged, Blue discovers a gag law that means Niki can't be shown. It's only in the NT. She faces jail if the film is published. Blue tries to get the film pulled from the internet before anyone in the courts sees it. Niki and Blue are devastated.

Scene 19 Either give back the money or find a solution – Blue recuts the film and published with a hidden face and no name. It sucks to have to hide Niki and make her invisible. Blue and Niki vow to change the law in the NT

Scene 20 Play out judged with blurred face version.

Sequence Five

Main subplot kicks in. A break from or contrast to the main PLOT
Subplot is Niki trying to kill herself.

Scene 21 Blue is still deep in the shit. She got lots of \$\$ from Screen Australia to make an observational documentary that will never see the light of day. How else can she tell this story?

Scene 22 Blue is busy worrying about the promises she's broken, Niki is getting more and more depressed.

Scene 23 Midpoint Reversal - Niki Attempts suicide. Filming stops. The project is on hold.

Scene 24 Blue meets with Screen Australia and has to convince them not only to let her make the film in a new way,

Scene 25 The case has to continue. Blue is going to Darwin and probably won't film. Blue goes because Niki's boyfriend is away and won't be there for the trial and she's worried Niki will attempt suicide again.

Sequence Six

Main plot kicks in.

Blue goes to film just to be there and make sure Niki doesn't try to kill herself again. Blue feels responsible. Would Niki be suffering this much if Blue wasn't making a film? Filming style shifts to verité. Blue is speaking with Niki, we hear more of Blue's voice behind the camera, asking questions.

Scene 26 Back to Darwin. Here we go again. Second Supreme Court Trial. Because of her suicide attempt Niki is exempt from testifying in person. She goes to get her hair cut to celebrate. She discusses how different it is not needing to be in court, yet there is the threat that if they have more questions she may be summoned. Niki gets a new computer to prepare for her nursing degree. She spends time around the house folding her boyfriend's underwear. Things are slow and strange. Locked off static shots of empty house. Everything is waiting. Niki wants blue to film.

Scene 27 Niki goes to her best friend's house to discuss the trial. They discover huge ticks all over her three tiny Chihuahuas and spring into action, bathing them with lotion. Niki is the hero, pulling out the ticks with tweezers like a professional. She cares not her the hair and water covering her clothes and face. We see a caring, no-nonsense Niki.

Scene 28 Niki and Blue are driving doing overlay shots, killing time. The prosecutor rings to say there will be a verdict soon. They park and wait. And wait. It gets more and more tense. The phone rings- it's just a message that the Jury have a question. Tension rises still. Niki says "There's only 11 minutes left. That's my luck number – I'm the eleventh of the eleventh. Maybe my angel number will give us good news." The NEXT second the phone rings. It's the lead detective. It's a guilty verdict. Niki cries. Screams. 3 years fall over her all at once in a wave. at car side of the road calls mum. CRISIS/CLIMAX ?

Scene 29 Niki quickly tries to call her family but in a farcical way no one will answer. She finally gets hold of her mum and tells her the news. There's lots of tears under the hot humid Darwin sun.

Scene 30 Niki sits down to write her victim impact statement on her new computer. The statement will be read out in court the next day. She reflects on all that has happened, including her suicide attempt, not wanting to go outside, the friends she lost, the isolation, the self worth depletion. She says she will not make a suggestion about sentencing. She'll leave that to the judge. She's proud of what she's written. We see a serious, calm Niki who is in control. A giant weight has been lifted. She's already acting differently. Lighter, more herself.

TWIST The convicted man Wilcocks appeals. Blue and Niki still can't make the 'real' film. Niki is still gagged.

ACT THREE

Sequence Seven *What the main character has learnt*

Scene 31 Screen Australia say yes to new film. Blue has had this problem before, not being able to show the real person's face. Thinking about hybrids, what do hybrid films do? They can liberate from a tragedy giving authorship to the participant. How do you tell the story of a silenced person, and invisible person?

Scene 32 Blue and her team make Asking for It in the middle of Covid 19. Behind the scenes footage and stills of it coming together. Process of Hybridity. How that helps shift the power. What have I learnt? To shift the power.

Scene 32 Some of Asking for It inserted

Scene 33 Niki reacts to her story being told with an actor. She and her mum love it. Blue thinks about the power of a story that protects the participant in a way that they get a 'dress rehearsal' for the later film coming out.

Scene 34 There's a flurry of media – a podcast, Nina Funnell articles, Grace Tame gets Australian of the Year for fighting the same gag law. Grace is Australian of the Year, Niki is just a retired stripper. Grace is on the cover of woman's day. Niki is still invisible.

Sequence Eight *what actually happens*

Scene 35 BUT Niki still wants 'real' film made. Blue and Niki have achieved one goal – to tell Niki's story, but in the process, they have sacrificed Niki's identity. They have successfully avoided jail time-but at what cost? Niki is still nameless and silent.

Scene 36 Blue experiments with the different ways of telling Niki's Story. Niki as an AI generated face. Niki as a cartoon. Niki speaking fast with lots of overlay. Niki speaking slowly with lots of pauses and screentime allocated to looking at her while she speaks. What's the best way to make her believed? What do they do if the law never changes?

Scene 37 Convicted rapist Kevin Glenn Wilcocks has lost his last appeal lost. The gag law silencing Niki is lifted and she is finally free to tell her story with her own face and name. TWIST.

Scene 38 Blue tells her about the idea to make a film about them filming and their friendship over the years. Niki thinks it's loopy and asks "who'd wanna watch that!"

Scene 39 Blue goes to WA to film with Niki for one last hoorah- Interview, scenes at dog park. Scenes with mom knitting. Plating dinner in the kitchen. She has gone full circle-back to her hometown. We hear about her new job at the homeless shelter, how she looks after her niece and cares for her mother. We see a new side of Niki – the aunty, the daughter, the carer. Blue+ Niki's film has ended where it began. WA.

Scene 40 Summing up the film, the coda. Montage of Niki shots from 2014 to 2024.

***Have a filming opportunity of Niki and her niece in June 2023 when they attend a Black Pink concert in Sydney. Niki will be in a hotel room in the city. Could be a last chat option?

Video Essay Stuff.

- Cut up Niki’s interview so she’s faster, vs how she’s believed when slow.
- Explore the length of the shot..
- Explore the angle and shot treatment.
- Try her with different music-how does it charge the mood.

Cut main structure and work with video essay- reflexive moments in between.

Acts and Sequences and Scenes oh My.

Act 1

Seq 1 | 1 2 3 4 5

Seq 2 | 6 7 8 9 10

Act 2

Seq 3 | 11 12 13 14 15

Seq 4 | 16 17 18 19 20

Seq 5 | 21 22 23 24 25

Seq 6 | 26 27 28 29 30

Act 3

Seq 7 | 31 32 33 34 35

Seq 8 | 36 37 38 39 40

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