

## *How to Have Sex*

[dir. by Molly Manning Walker. Mubi. (UK, 2023)]

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*“Girlhood is a story of desire; innocence; fall from innocence; being desired; being not desired; being desired by the wrong people; by dangerous people; by the right people; by excitingly dangerous people. There's so much storytelling in girlhood. There's so much revision in telling it. So much of my girlhood was fictive. I lived in my mind. I made up the girl I thought I was. Whether that's delusional or not, I really felt the happiest and safest in my fictional girlhood. I think the girls in these stories are the same way. There's the story of their lives, and there's the story that they're telling.”*

- Jenny Zhang (quoted in Siemsen, 2017)

*How to Have Sex* (Walker, 2023), is the debut feature film of British

cinematographer Molly Manning Walker.

It won the Un Certain Regard Award at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for two BAFTA's. Walker cites *Fat Girl* (Breillat) and *American Honey* (Arnold) as thematic and stylistic influences for the film. She has said that the film is about the social pressure teenage girls often feel and are put under to engage in sex and sexual activity before they are emotionally and mentally ready for it and has expressed gratitude that the film has sparked a conversation on this issue, as well as around the topics of consent and sexual assault. For a debut feature film, *How to Have Sex* is assured, accomplished and focused, although there is a problem in how it portrays a young woman's bildungsroman or coming of age

experience as entirely shadowed by the threat of sexual assault, without further subtlety. The film follows a friend group of three teenaged girls on their vacation to Malia, Crete to celebrate the completion of their school exams. The audience experiences this trip through the eyes of one of them, 16-year-old Tara, portrayed with depth and intelligence by Mia McKenna-Bruce.

Her friends are the sexually adventurous Skye and the ambitious, high-attaining student Em. The three connect with another group of teenagers, Badger, Paddy and Paige, who are staying in a nearby hotel room. Together, the six pass the time drinking, dancing, partying, hooking up and throwing up. In the midst of this, Tara, the only virgin in the party, has a questionable first-time sexual experience with Paddy, where her desire and consent to be with him is murky. We see Tara consent to sex with Paddy initially after he sexually teases her in the ocean, but through a focus on her uncomfortable

body language and close ups on her face, we can evidently see she does not enjoy the experience with him. Tara is then explicitly raped by Paddy in a second encounter, when he climbs on top of her whilst she is asleep. Tara hides her assaults up until the end of the film, when she quietly reveals the truth to compassionate Em. She cannot, however, be truthful with Skye, who is jealous and dismissive of Tara's experiences. The film ends as the three girls run for the gate of their return plane home.

On the one hand, *How to Have Sex* addresses a commonplace reality for many young women. However, on the other hand, its portrayal and depiction of this reality results in the central character of Tara, appearing to lack agency and the ability to speak up for herself. Perhaps, like Jenny Zhang says, Tara, like many young women, would rather live in the safety and happiness of a fictional story of her young adulthood, one she has written for herself. Admitting that Paddy has

violated her sovereignty over herself is too unbearable and thus something she struggles to acknowledge to herself, let alone her friends. Such nuance can be read into the film, which has a wide open, opaque quality that leaves it open to many interpretations.

Overall, sexuality in the film is filtered through a lens of negativity, there is sparse positive portrayal of sexual discovery for young women. Badger, who Tara initially has a crush on, seems to be the one source of positive romance for her. However, as the film progresses he is shown to be cowardly, unwilling to reign-in Paddy's abusive behavior with even as much as a serious talk with his friend. He is ultimately not the young man Tara hoped he was. Like the others in Tara's friend group, he stands by and watches her be sexually violated, offering little support. The filmmaker makes some key choices which prevent the film from being more deeply layered. The film is about three young women on holiday, and the

experiences of Tara's friends Em and Skye are largely sidelined. While Em forms an apparently positive same sex relationship with Paige, we see little to none of this subplot in the film, no screen time is devoted to it. Skye is a character who is deeply unsympathetic, and she constantly pushes Tara into situations where she feels unsafe, then antagonizes Tara for her discomfort and pain. Manning Walker could have made a greater effort to more fully show the range of young female experiences with first time sexuality if she spent more time with Tara's friend group in their sub plots. In depicting sexuality as terrifying and largely unwanted, negative and performative for women, the filmmaker is sending a dispiriting message. Her message about the toxicity of sexual peer pressure is well made, but the film's unsubtle delivery of the message takes away from the message itself. Showing young women as incapable of communicating their desires, boundaries or experiences, robs women of agency,

and reinforces the helplessness that Tara experiences in the film. It is disheartening to see young women in the 21st century act so helpless around sex and sexuality, despite how fast they are forced to encounter that sexuality in a hyper sexualized world. This toxic hyper sexuality, in a world addled by easily accessible pornography, is another element of the teenage experience that Manning Walker addresses, and this she does very well.

Manning Walker's influences of *Fat Girl* and *American Honey* can be roughly seen in the film, although *How to Have Sex* is more readily reminiscent of the film *Spring Breakers* (2012) and British TV series like *Skins* and *Misfits*, with the moralist spirit of *Promising Young Woman* (2020). The film's similarity to *Skins* and *Misfits* can be located in its televisual aesthetics, thematics and lack of fully cinematic narrative depth. And much like *Promising Young Woman*, it is a single message movie, delivered rather bluntly.

Manning Walker lacks the experimental artistic audacity and transgressive spirit of both Catherine Breillat and Andrea Arnold, who are willing to challenge the audience with psychosexual murkiness in a way this film does not. Films like *How to Have Sex* face the challenge of depicting their young woman protagonist as more than a victim, as a person defined by more than her sexual trauma. It is difficult to say that this film achieves this.

The director makes up for this lack in her film by hammering home the message that sexual assault is bad and traumatic and challenging the viewer on the topic of consent. Katherine Angel's book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* parallels the central discussion raised by the film. Angel writes, "My question is different: why are women asked to know their own minds, when knowing one's own mind is such an undependable aim? Self-knowledge is not a reliable feature of female sexuality, nor of sexuality in general; in fact, it is not a reliable feature

of being a person... We need to articulate an ethics of sex that does not try frantically to keep desire's uncertainty at bay" (2022, 40). This is the crux of the issue raised about Tara's sexual assault in the film. In her first sexual encounter she does give an uncertain, tentative consent. It is verbalized, but through close ups on her expression and body language the audience is made privy to a suggested reluctance. The second time with Paddy is much more clearly a case of rape, the first time could be interpreted as merely bad sex. The most interesting quality of the film is the way that it shows how often for young women, and for all women, desire is not certain, consent is a negotiation and the emphasis on women knowing themselves enough, especially at a young age, to offer clear consent, is a troubled and problematic insistence.

However, seeing young women suffer silently from sexual assault on film is as old as the medium itself, and much of Manning Walker's film is spent watching

Tara suffer from the trauma of her sexual assaults in silence. In *American Honey*, Sasha Lane's character Star, escapes from a home where she is being molested and runs away to find freedom and herself on the American interstate, finding infatuation, danger, lust and maybe even love with a young man along the way.

There are many different shades and experiences in Star's developing sexuality, her journey is not played for one note. She is a young adult female character of distinct agency, an agency not afforded by Manning Walker to her protagonist Tara in *How to Have Sex*. Star contains dimensions that underwritten Tara does not display.

Tara undergoes some transformation in the film, passing from naïveté and lack of self-knowledge into self-possession, self-knowledge and experiential wisdom. She undergoes a traumatic hero's journey from teenage girl to young woman. Through her difficult experiences on holiday, Tara steps into adulthood and knowing herself. She

allows herself to be vulnerable with her friend Em, communicating clearly with her for the first time, and stops hiding from herself and others.

*How to Have Sex* ultimately is an important film that creates discussion around the issue of sexual peer pressure, as it polarizes the viewer, setting up sexual discovery as a crucible of transformation that young adults must pass through. However, there is a rote single message of pessimism which it does not manage to transcend. Without greater subtlety, more room to breathe and deeper exploration of

its sub plots, it fails to feel like a fully fleshed out film.

### **Works Cited:**

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