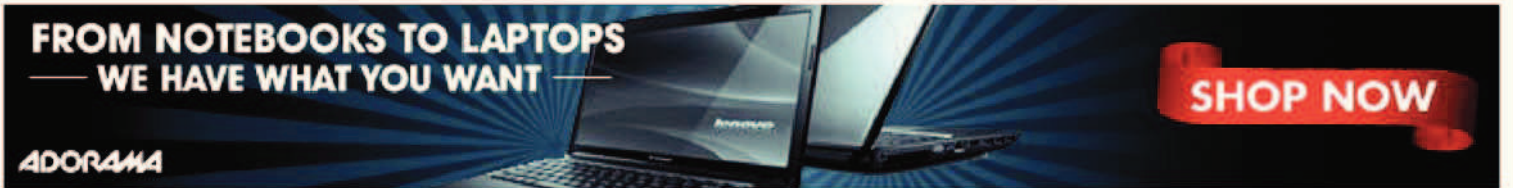


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My trigger-warning disaster: “9 1/2 Weeks,” “The Wire” and how coddled young radicals got discomfort all wrong

I believed in trigger warnings when I taught a course on sex and film. Then they drove me out of the academy

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(http://media.salon.com/2015/10/pillow_talk_wire.jpg)

Doris Day in "Pillow Talk," Michael Kenneth Williams and Michael Kevin Darnall in "The Wire" (Credit: Universal Pictures/HBO)

About a year ago I was asked to teach a class about the evolution of the representation of sex throughout American Cinema. I started with the silent film (*The Cheat*) and ended with Spike Jonze's disembodied sex in *Her*. Along the way, I showed a number of sexually graphic films that caused a great deal of controversy.

At the time I was teaching the course, I was also figuring out a life outside of academia. I had been a wandering postdoc for a long time and was tired. A friend of mine had recently been violently sexually assaulted. I was a witness. The trauma she suffered, from the assault and the long, drawn-out trial of her assailants, led me to volunteer at my local rape crisis center. Working directly with folks who have experienced trauma, I entered the course believing in trigger warnings and gave them throughout the class, even though it seemed as though the title of the course was a trigger warning in and of itself. Regardless, I gave them for almost every film I showed. I even gave them for films that really shouldn't have needed them (i.e., *Psycho*).

Midway through the semester, because of my work in sexual assault prevention, I was asked to fill in for the Director of the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention Services at the university. The Director had to take a short leave so I was there to fill in temporarily. In accepting the position, I took on a dual role. First, I was an activist against sexual violence, supporting survivors on campus, but I was also an educator who believed that learning is about shaking up one's world and worldview. I didn't realize that occupying both roles at once would be impossible; failure was inevitable.

The first "uh-oh" moment came when was when I taught *Pillow Talk*

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillow_talk) with Rock Hudson and Doris Day. Rock Hudson plays

...with new guy, Rock Hudson and Donny Osmond. Rock Hudson plays the role of a womanizer (the irony of all this, of course, is that he was closeted). When he gets women into his home there are a series of "booby traps" meant for getting it on (who says that anymore? me). One seemed like a literal trap—the door locks itself shut. I suggested that this might be a predatory act. The class was suddenly divided—there were the ones who vehemently believed that Hudson's character was a rapist, and those who vehemently argued that he was not. This divide would get deeper and uglier throughout the semester, with me caught irrevocably in the middle.

Next, I assigned a reading by Linda Williams, a chapter from her book, *Screening Sex*. It looked in intimate detail at the first blaxploitation film ever made—Melvin Van Peebles', *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (SSBAS). The chapter outlined (with pictures), the plot of the movie and all the sexual acts that were in the film. Williams' argument is that Blaxploitation and SSBAS arose from a reclamation of masculinity by black men who were historically emasculated and castrated (think of the killing of Emmett Till).

I assumed everyone had done the reading. I showed one of the scenes that Williams' writes about in detail. Before I screened it, I gave a warning, indicating that it was one of the disturbing scenes to which Williams refers. The scene shows a young Sweetback (played by the director's son Melvin Van Peebles) having sex with a 30-year old woman. She finds him irresistible and thus starts the hyper-sexual evolution of Sweetback—every woman on earth wants to fuck him, including a whole bunch of white women. This, of course, is statutory rape. When the lights went on and the scene was over, two students left the room in tears. I was perplexed. I started to ask questions about Williams' reading, how it felt to read about and then watch the scene, what questions of race and masculinity it provoked. Crickets man, crickets. Clearly no one had done the reading.

Later that day, I had a white female student come to my office hours crying. Between picking up tissues and blowing her nose she said, "I'm doing a minor in African American Studies. How could your first images of black people be that horrible?" I told her that I understood her concerns. I went on to explain how the class was a historical look at sex on screen and as the reading for the class articulated, it was one of the first film's to show black people having sex and was important to film history. She still didn't get it. She said I had to show some positive images, otherwise it was unfair, that the other students weren't African American Studies minors so they didn't understand race politics as she did. I told her that I would bring a positive image to the next class to address her concerns. Finally, she smiled.

That night I went home and thought about it, hard. Isn't confronting difficult issues what learning is about? My classes were about race, gender, and sexuality. These are inherently uncomfortable topics that force students to think critically about their privilege and their place in the hierarchy of this world.

It's not fun to talk about inequality. It's not fun to talk about slavery. It's not fun to talk about the complexity of sexual desire. It's terribly, terribly, uncomfortable. But it was my job as their teacher to navigate through this discomfort. I felt like I handled the class poorly. I had

teacher to navigate through this discomfort. I felt like I handled the class poorly. I had kowtowed too much, so I went to class the next day prepared to break this shit down.

I also thought about a positive image of black sexuality and sex. I decided to show a clip from *The Wire* that shows Omar in bed with his boyfriend just after having sex, a tender moment where they kiss. Omar's character, a black, gay dude who steals from drug dealers, is a revolutionary representation of black masculinity that stands in stark contrast to SSBAS. I was excited to show it. I mean, it's *The Wire*: who doesn't want to talk about *The Wire*?

I began class by talking briefly about learning through discomfort. The students were silent. I turned to them for questions about moments of feeling uncomfortable and how we could read these as productive. The student who came to my office raised her hand and asked, "Are we gonna talk about SSBAS."

"Yes," I said, "but I want us to talk about any of the films that made people uncomfortable. Let's discuss the discomfort." Her face fell. She started crying and ran out of the room. Her friend followed her. Right after she left I showed the scene with Omar. Later that day, she came to my office again, sobbing.

For the rest of the semester, I gave trigger warnings before every scene I screened. Every. Single. One. This wasn't enough. A student came to me and asked that I start sending emails before class outlining exactly which disturbing scenes I would be showing so that I wouldn't "out" survivors if they had to walk out of class when hearing what I was about to show. This took all the free form and off the cuff ability to teach. It stifled the teaching process. There would never be a moment for me to educate them by confronting them with the unknown, by helping them become aware of their own biases by making them feel uncomfortable.