

# **Feminist Philosophy and Film: The Conditions of Sexual Violence in Marilyn Frye's *Politics of Reality* and Joyce Chopra's *Smooth Talk***

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**Abstract.** Eliminating sexual violence requires understanding its origins and addressing the conditions that enable it. Marilyn Frye's foundational work, *The Politics of Reality*, identifies the systemic norms and practices that constrain women and render them vulnerable to oppression and violence. Joyce Chopra's 1985 film *Smooth Talk* exemplifies these insights, presenting the story of Connie, a teenager navigating the conflicting expectations of suburban 1980s California. Connie is caught in what Frye calls a "double bind": expected to conform to sexual norms while also fulfilling gendered domestic roles, she is alienated from potential allies, such as her mother and friends. This isolation leaves her vulnerable to the predatory Arnold Friend. By juxtaposing Frye's philosophical framework with Chopra's cinematic narrative, this paper demonstrates how film can illuminate the interconnected mechanisms of oppression, enhancing our perception of the social conditions that sustain sexual violence and fostering critical reflection on these pervasive structures.

## **1. Introduction**

Eliminating sexual violence requires understanding where it comes from and why it happens. We must learn to detect when the grounds for violence are being built up so that we can promptly take them down. In her foundational work on oppression and sexism, featured in the collection *The Politics of Reality*, Marilyn Frye illustrates the complex conditions that give rise to violence against women and their subjugation more generally. Far from being a matter of isolated actions by individual "bad apples", seemingly innocuous norms and practices in which ordinary well-meaning members of society participate are the very conditions that reduce and constrain women, making them vulnerable to sexual violence, among other serious harms.

Frye teaches us that understanding oppression is not merely a matter of adopting certain beliefs, but requires changing the manner of our perception. We must begin to *see* subtle features of everyday social life and how they give rise to oppressive structures. This is no easy task, especially since many of these practices are so normalized that they appear inevitable and thus non-negotiable. Indeed, in the opening of her paper on sexism, Frye describes the difficulties she

faced in attempting to make sexism perceptible to others. She reports bleakly that teaching philosophy had taught her that “people cannot be persuaded of things they are not ready to be persuaded of; there are certain complexes of will and prior experience which will inevitably block persuasion, no matter the merits of the case presented” (Frye 1983, 17).

How can we improve our ability to notice the subtle practices of sexist oppression and make them a matter of critical reflection? The aim of this chapter is to show how film can enhance critical perception of the social conditions that give rise to sexual violence in particular.<sup>1</sup> We will do this by way of a specific example, showing how Joyce Chopra’s 1985 film *Smooth Talk* serves to display the complex circumstances that make sexual violence possible, thereby illustrating (and allowing us to *see*) Frye’s philosophical insight about the interconnected mechanisms of oppression.

*Smooth Talk* presents the story of Connie, a young girl dealing with the typical growing pains of teenage life. As she strives to embody the beauty norms for women in her cultural milieu (1980’s suburbs of northern California), she simultaneously stokes the ridicule of her mother who urges her to play a different but equally oppressive gender role: that of the dutiful homemaker. Connie is thereby forced into what Frye calls a ‘double bind’: she can either become the object of male attraction and thereby lose the respect of her family, or she can become the dutiful maid and lose the attention of her friends and male peers. Most crucially, the conflicting expectations of society and familial life sever Connie from potential allies (e.g., her mother, sister, and close friends) that might support and empower her as she navigates a difficult time in her life. This leaves Connie in a place of isolation that makes her the sexual victim of Arnold Friend, a man presented in the stereotypical image of a charming “James Dean” type, but who proves to be a persistent sexual predator. The film thus serves not only as a perfect illustration of Frye’s insights about sexism and oppression, but allows us to enhance our perception of the conditions of violence and to make them a matter of focused conversation and critical scrutiny. Our hope is that this case study will illustrate the more general point that film can be a powerful tool for insight in feminist philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Frye 1983, xii: “Depending on what one has already figured out, a single detail of an anecdote from one woman’s experience may be exactly as fertile a clue as a carefully gotten and fully documented statistical result of a study of a thousand women, and literature or a television sit-com may reflect the shape and velocity of the “prevailing winds” as intelligibly as real life.” Clearly Frye would also recognize the power of film to reveal important facts about sexism and oppression more generally.

In section 2, we explain Marilyn Frye's conception of gender-based oppression, focusing on features of the account that are most relevant to Connie's circumstances in *Smooth Talk*.<sup>2</sup> In section 3, we illustrate how these conditions play out in Connie's life, ultimately leading her to a harrowing encounter with the sexual predator Arnold Friend. Finally, we conclude with a brief note on the role that film can play in feminist pedagogy, especially by enhancing our capacity to perceive the social conditions that make oppression possible.

## 2. Marilyn Frye on Sexist Oppression

How should we understand patriarchal oppression and how do its circumstances give rise to sexual violence (and harms to women more generally)? Marilyn Frye addresses these questions in two now classic essays, "Oppression" and "Sexism". The aim of this section is to outline the details of Frye's framework that are most relevant to Connie's experiences in *Smooth Talk*, which we turn to in section 3.<sup>3</sup>

Frye defines patriarchal oppression as "a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the immobilization, reduction and molding of women and the lives [they] live" (Frye 1983, 7). Oppression is a property of social environments in which the dominant norms jointly mold and constrain people, thereby forcing them to live subordinate lives. These norms are varied and wide ranging, and they affect people in numerous domains of life (personal, social, economic, political). They manifest in stereotypes, media representations, dominant cultural narratives and social scripts, familial roles, laws, educational practices, labor distributions, among other norms and practices.<sup>4</sup> More concrete examples include

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<sup>2</sup> We also sidestep aspects of Frye's account that we find (on separate grounds) to be either questionable or unhelpful for our purposes. For instance, Frye aims to undermine the very notion that "men (as men) can be oppressed" (Frye 1983, 1-2). This point is neither helpful for understanding Connie's experiences nor one the authors are particularly sympathetic with – but discussion of this goes beyond our scope. To be clear: this is not to say we think it was an unreasonable argument for Frye to make in her social-political milieu, since a common objection at that time was that feminist discourse is illegitimate because "*men are oppressed too*". For discussion of how patriarchy can be oppressive to men, we recommend Robin Dembroff's forthcoming book *Real Men on Top*. We also sidestep common worries about Frye's lack of attention to issues of intersectionality – largely speaking from the standpoint of white, educated women. We merely note that Frye is well aware of such a limitation on her philosophy (Frye 1983, ix), and that it is not a reason to reject genuinely insightful aspects of her framework, which we highlight below.

<sup>3</sup> See fn. 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990) for an influential discussion of these features of oppression that builds on Frye's account.

the quality and extent of support women and girls may receive from friends and family; the narratives that are imposed on them by others, and how they use those narratives to direct their lives and make sense of their experiences; the kind of attention they are taught to seek and what they learn to find attractive in a friend or partner; how their testimony is regarded, and whether they are perceived as morally or intellectually credible; how (and whether) they are represented in film and popular media; the roles they are expected to play in their family and wider community; how they are required to dress, speak, and comport themselves; whether they have access to healthcare and legal protection from assault; and so on. Under sexist oppression, aspects of public and private life such as these (and more) work together to mold and constrain women in such a way that they are forced to live lives that are lacking and inferior. Patriarchal oppression, in short, is a system of institutional and interpersonal norms and conditions affecting women in numerous domains of life, and which jointly serve to denigrate them and restrict their autonomy.

All humans suffer and encounter barriers, but not all suffering or restraint is a feature of oppression. Frye emphasizes that oppression is the product of a system of harms rather than individual instances of harm (i.e., oppression is systemic and structural). To determine whether someone is being oppressed or not, it is not enough to know that they experience some harm or limitation. We need to know whether the harm they experience plays a role in a network of forces and barriers that collectively lead to the denigration of their social group. Someone who is oppressed is “caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility” (Frye 1983, 2).

Frye illustrates the systemic nature of oppression with her famous “bird cage” analogy. Consider the configuration of a cage. It is composed of many wires which jointly confine the bird. The bird’s confinement is not due to any single wire in the cage but is the result of all the wires working together to enclose it within its barriers. One wire does not constitute a cage. Similarly, one harmful encounter or limitation does not constitute oppression. Oppressed people experience a pattern of interconnected harms and restrictions which diminish them in many areas of life. They are caught between forces that “restrict or penalize motion in any direction” culminating in “the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped” (Frye 1983, 3). Thus, oppression does not refer to any single instance of harm or

frustration, but rather, to a system of harms which encircles a person, pressing and squeezing them into a life of subordination.

“One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people” is what Frye calls the “double bind” (Frye 1983, 2). Oppressive double binds are situations where a person’s choices are limited due to their group-identity, and all options available expose them to some form of punishment or censure (be it physical, social, or psychological) (Frye 1983, 2). However, double binds are not simply situations where one is forced to choose between two bad outcomes.<sup>5</sup> The harms that a woman in a double bind is exposed to are “not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable” (Frye 1983, 4). Rather, these harms are the product of and serve to enforce gender oppression.<sup>6</sup> They impose patriarchal values, punish deviations from sexist norms, and have the overall effect of deterring resistance. Among other things, a woman in a double bind may face, for instance, ridicule for her appearance (because it falls short of patriarchal beauty standards), sexual objectification, infantilization, harassment, neglect, alienation, violence, or exploitation (the list goes on). Thus, double binds are cases where the agent is forced to choose between limited options, each of which exposes them to harms that result from or serve to further their oppression.

Frye provides several examples of oppressive double binds. Especially relevant for our discussion of *Smooth Talk* are those surrounding women’s sexuality. It is common in American society for young women to face competing expectations surrounding sexual activity. On the one hand, she must be chaste and demure, on the other hand, she must be an object of male sexual attraction. She is forced to choose between competing social roles and expectations, but “neither sexual activity nor sexual inactivity is all right” (Frye 1983, 3). If she is heterosexually active,

a woman is open to censure and punishment for being loose, unprincipled or a whore [...] criticism, snide and embarrassing remarks, being treated as an easy lay by men, scorn from her more restrained friends. She may have to lie and hide her behavior from her parents. She must juggle the risks of unwanted pregnancy and dangerous contraceptives. On the other hand, if she refrains from heterosexual activity, she is fairly constantly

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<sup>5</sup> See Sukaina Hirji, “Oppressive Double-Binds,” *Ethics* 131, 4 (2021): 643-669 for a helpful explanation of this point.

<sup>6</sup> See Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford University Press, 2017) for an in-depth discussion of misogyny as the “law-enforcement” branch of the patriarchy.

harassed by men who try to persuade her into it and pressure her to “relax” and “let her hair down”; she is threatened with labels like “frigid,” “uptight,” “man-hater,” “bitch” and “cocktease.” The same parents who would be disapproving of her sexual activity may be worried by her inactivity because it suggests she is not or will not be popular, or is not sexually normal. She may be charged with lesbianism [...] You can’t win. You are caught in a bind, caught between systemically related pressures. (Frye 1983, 3)

Relatedly, women face double binds with respect to the way they dress. She must dress in a manner that is sexually appealing to men, but she must also dress modestly and not appear to be too interested in male attention. No matter what she chooses to wear, she falls short of a patriarchal expectation and will face repercussions.

If one dresses one way, one is subject to the assumption that one is advertising one’s sexual availability; if one dresses another way, one appears to “not care about oneself” or to be “unfeminine.” (Frye 1983, 4)

Where the foregoing examples involve choosing between competing patriarchal expectations, other double binds involve choosing between complying with a sexist norm and refusing to comply with it. For instance, there is often an expectation that women be agreeable, docile, and always smiling. Whether she does this or not, she is on the receiving end of oppressive harm.

If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found “difficult” or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one’s livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. (Frye 1983, 2-3)

Thus, a characteristic feature of oppression is that it repeatedly places people in double binds, situations in which their options are constrained, with each option resulting in harm that is a product of or serves to reinforce their oppression.

Much of the time, sexist oppression is maintained “from the inside” by women themselves, without need for overt violence from men (although men do use violence against women, and the threat of such violence is always present). The mechanisms of oppression are “more or less internalized and self-monitored” (Frye 1983, 14).<sup>7</sup> Women with the best intentions live by patriarchal values, teach them to young girls, and hold each other to sexist roles and expectations. They reward each other's obedience, malign inadequacies, and punish violations. This is not meant to absolve men of their responsibility for oppression or deny their participation. Sometimes, however, men are oblivious to the oppressive forces that diminish and constrain women; even while these forces occur under their own roofs and to their immediate benefit. And it is not only men who may be oblivious. Oppression, given that it manifests in an often subtle collection of interconnected practices, can be difficult for anyone to *see* as such.

Frye notes the difficulties she faced when trying to get people to recognize instances of oppression.

I was seeing sexism everywhere and trying to make it perceptible to others. I would point out, complain and criticize, but most frequently my friends and colleagues would not see that what I declared to be sexist was sexist or at all objectionable (Frye 1983, 17).

Why is oppression so hard to grasp? – The bird-cage analogy allows Frye to provide a reason for the difficulty. Imagine that you are looking at a bird cage and you zoom in on a single wire. From this microscopic point of view, “you cannot see the other wires” (Frye 1983, 4). Suppose your entire understanding of the cage was based on this zoomed-in picture. You would not be able to see how a bird could be harmed or inhibited, or why it “would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere” (Frye 1983, 4). To see the cage, it is not enough to see one of the wires, you need to see the bigger picture. “It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can

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<sup>7</sup> See Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 1990) for an influential account of psychological oppression.

see why the bird does not go anywhere” (Frye 1983, 5). One must see how the wire is connected to the other wires in the cage, how the wires collectively serve to create a structure, and how the whole structure serves to enclose the bird and prevent its movement.

Analogously, oppression cannot be seen by focusing on a single situation or encounter in an oppressed persons’ life. “One has to look at it *in context*”, seeing how the event is connected to others which collectively serve to mold and constrain them (Frye 1983, 10). Recognizing oppression requires exercising attention at micro and macro levels. We must learn to see both the details and the broader pattern, shifting our attention between them to get the full picture.<sup>8</sup>

The following section is an exercise in the perception that Frye thinks is essential to understanding sexist oppression. We look carefully at Connie’s encounter with Arnold Friend, and show how it is made possible by a pattern of harms and limitations that mold and restrict Connie, alienating her from sources of support and making her vulnerable to sexual violence. The film allows us both to see the big picture of Connie’s life, as well as the intricate factors that contribute to her oppression.

### **3. The Conditions of Sexual Violence in Joyce Chopra’s *Smooth Talk***

Joyce Chopra’s film *Smooth Talk* is an adaptation of a short story by Joyce Carol Oates titled, “Where are you going, where have you been?”. In addition to being a mostly faithful presentation of the events described in the story, it addresses the latter question (“where have you been?”) about Connie with rich and significant detail, spelling out a crucial backdrop against which the major events of the short story take place, but are not mentioned there.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of Oates’s story (roughly 11 of 14 pages) describes Connie’s disturbing encounter with a sexual predator named Arnold Friend, an event which only occupies the last third of Joyce Chopra’s film. Chopra’s cinematic additions to the background story of Connie are artful and profound. To highlight their importance, especially as they so beautifully illustrate many of Frye’s lessons about sexism and oppression, we will discuss the film in a nonlinear fashion, and

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<sup>8</sup> This is akin to Wittgenstein’s notion of a ‘surveyable representation’ of human (linguistic) practices: “A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have *an overview* ... A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’” (Wittgenstein 2009, 122).

<sup>9</sup> To be clear, in spelling out Connie’s background, Chopra took some liberties in changing details of the original story. These differences are mostly insignificant (and typical for any film adaptation of a literary work), but when interesting they will be mentioned by us in footnotes below.



for reasons that will become clear in due course. That is, we will begin in section 3.1 with the penultimate events of the film (i.e., Connie's encounter with Arnold friend), then in section 3.2 explore their backdrop at the beginning of the film (i.e., the events leading up to Connie's encounter with Arnold Friend), and finally in 3.3 discuss the end of the film (i.e., Connie's immediate, though fraught, attempts to process her own trauma with her sister) – which hauntingly leave us as viewers with the question (for Connie) “where are you going?”.

### ***3.1 Connie's Encounter with Arnold Friend***

Connie Wyatt (Laura Dern) is a 15-year-old girl living with her family in what appears to be early 1980's rural northern California. She is spending her summer on outings with friends at the beach and the local mall, which serve as an escape from her stressful adolescent homelife. After a family squabble, and particular hostility from her mother (“leave her here to stew in her juices”, her mother says), Connie decides not to join her family to a barbeque with her cousins, aunts, and uncles. Instead, she stays home by herself, and once alone turns hard rock music up to full volume on every radio, screaming into the house to vent rage against her family. She soon after experiences tense, uneasy boredom, trying to pass the time alone stringing beaded jewelry and suntanning in the yard, where she is noticeably restless, itching, and agitated by buzzing flies.

But then a golden convertible pulls into the driveway. Connie is intrigued. Perhaps it's here to transport her from alienation and despair? She's especially curious about the man driving the car (Treat Williams), who has the looks and likeness of James Dean. (The iconic actor is shown on two separate posters in Connie's bedroom). A shy friend (rather, accomplice) named Elliot sits in the passenger seat hiding his face behind a radio. Connie is initially charmed. The driver shares his name written on the side of the car in black letters “Arnold Friend”, saying “and that's what I want to be to you: A. Friend”. Connie chuckles as he then points out an inexplicable “secret code” also written on the car “33, 19, 17” (presumably the ages of his previous victims,<sup>10</sup> though how could Connie suspect this?) and a tag next to his smashed rear fender that says “DONE BY CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER!” – An explicitly misogynistic message, which women and

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<sup>10</sup> The character Arnold Friend in Oates's short story was inspired by Charles Smid, who committed three murders in Tucson, Arizona.

girls are nonetheless expected to find funny.<sup>11</sup> – Connie is, for a short while, receptive to Friend’s jokes and flirtations.<sup>12</sup> After all, he’s a handsome guy with a car, living up to all the masculine stereotypes that Connie has learned are marks of an ideal boyfriend (note again: James-Dean-look-alike). Whether there is anything truly desirable about this man is thus far beside the point. Connie and Friend are simply acting out the sexist and gendered performances of their time and place. But in a sudden moment when Friend silently creeps up behind Connie, she realizes that something isn’t right.

“Don’t you wanna go for a ride?”, Friend asks. “Kinda doubt it”, Connie responds, beginning to show reluctance and reservation. (Friend later says, “You’re a hard girl to handle! How come?”). Throughout the rest of the scene Friend persistently forces a narrative on Connie, according to which she was planning to go on a ride with him all along, that this day was set aside for their date together, even though Connie has never spoken to this man before. “Connie... you’re not telling the truth. Today’s your day set aside to go for a ride with me and you know it.” Connie playfully asks, “How do you know my name’s Connie?”, since this is her first time meeting him. “I know my Connie. I’ve been watching you.” Connie is alarmed. Friend reveals that he has been stalking Connie and interviewing (or interrogating) her close friends and acquaintances to learn about her. “I found out all about you. Like I know your parents and sister are gone somewhere. I know how long they’re gonna be gone.” He begins to reveal his knowledge about Connie’s best friends and other details about her personal life. Connie is understandably disturbed by this and soon retreats to her house for safety, or at least the illusion of it.

The next round of dialogue takes place with Connie in her house behind a screen door and Friend outside on the porch. “How old are you anyway?”, Connie asks. Friend claims that he’s 18, but Connie can tell he’s much older. (According to Oates’s short story, he is at least 30 years old.) Friend’s accomplice Elliot in the passenger seat is a similar age, and so Connie is obviously intimidated by the fact that she is up against two older men. “Look, maybe you two

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<sup>11</sup> As Oates puts it: “Connie *had to* laugh at that. Arnold Friend was pleased at her laughter” (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> This is a significant modification of Oates’s short story, in which Connie is immediately impatient and agitated by Friend’s advances. By contrast, Connie’s immediate receptiveness to Friend in *Smooth Talk* indicates that Connie has been primed to find Arnold Friend attractive on the surface. The background story that Chopra adds to Connie’s encounter with Friend helps to make sense of this. And not only, we might add, in this particular case, but also to illustrate more generally how predatorial men can get away with appearing “charming” and “attractive” to the general public while nonetheless being perpetrators of blatant violence and misogyny. An appearance that often and tragically interferes with their being brought to justice.

better go away.” But Friend persists, again forcing the narrative that they had planned to go on a ride together and even that they are “lovers”. It is clear throughout that Friend wants Connie to either willingly join him “for a ride” or, at the very least, to join him and believe that she is doing so willingly. It is equally clear that, despite Connie’s joining him without any use of physical force, this is in no relevant sense an act of free will: since Friend insinuates that if she doesn’t join him he could burn her fragile house to the ground, and that if Connie attempts to call the police, his friend Elliot will pull out the telephone line. If one reads between the lines, as Connie presumably does, there is a strong indication that Friend will use force if Connie resists his advances, but that he prefers that she “stick to their plan of going for a ride”.

In our interpretation, the house’s fragility is symbolic of Connie’s more general vulnerability as a young girl in a sexist world. To the extent that a house is a symbol of a home and of family, the fragility of her house (or the thin screen door that is the only barrier between her and Friend<sup>13</sup>, or the (phone) line of communication that could easily be pulled out) marks the fragility of support from friends and especially her family.<sup>14</sup> (Who, recall, left her alone that day “to stew in her own juices”.) We’ll return to this in section 3.2.

Connie eventually caves and joins Friend for “a ride”. Again, due to obvious even if only insinuated threats. Though with an important moment of resistance from Connie. “My sweet little blue-eyed girl”, Friend says as Connie walks out to his car, to which Connie responds, “What if my eyes were brown?”<sup>15</sup> Friend may have “won” in the sense of getting Connie to join (without use of physical force), but this does not mean that Friend really knows who Connie is or that she is participating in any of this willingly, as he apparently desires.<sup>16</sup> The film does not

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<sup>13</sup> Compare Oates’s short story: “[Connie] rushed forward and tried to lock the door. Her fingers were shaking. ‘But why lock it,’ Arnold Friend said gently, talking right into her face. ‘It’s just a screen door. It’s just nothing. . . . This place you are now – inside your daddy’s house – is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it.’”

<sup>14</sup> To the extent that there is a parallel between the symbolism of Connie’s fragile house and Frye’s “bird cage”, it is that the house confines Connie, much as the bird cage, but does not protect her. Indeed it only makes her more vulnerable to harm.

<sup>15</sup> An adaptation of the short story’s conclusion: “‘My sweet little blue-eyed girl,’ he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him – so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.”

<sup>16</sup> This reminds the authors of a powerful moment in David Lynch’s 1997 film *Lost Highway* in which Alice/Renee says to the desperately clinging Fred/Pete, “You will never have me.” This presents the similar theme (by our lights)

itself present any act of sexual assault, but certainly leaves one to imagine the worst. It is our own view that this is the most natural way, however unsettling, to interpret the events of the film.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not this was the intention of Chopra, it strikes us that leaving out the actual scene of sexual violence puts the viewer in the position of Connie's own felt uncertainty about what really happened (to be blunt: that she was manipulated and coerced by Arnold Friend and the victim of sexual assault). Indeed, when Friend drops Connie back at her house, he reinforces the false narrative: "Hey. I asked you to go for a ride today and you came and that's what happened. Am I right?". A clear attempt to gaslight Connie, again, into thinking she did everything willingly. Connie walks away silently at first but then turns back to say, "I don't wanna see you here again. Ever. Understand?" One hopes she never does. Whatever certainty or self-assurance she expresses here, however, soon crumbles in a later scene with her sister, which we will discuss in section 3.3.

Friend is an unequivocal stalker and sexual predator. He is a "bad apple" if there ever was one. This might tempt the viewer into thinking about the events reductively: Friend is evil and what we have witnessed are the isolated acts of a depraved individual. But does this give us the full story? Do we really understand what has happened to Connie merely through the reductive account of a mere isolated act of evil? If this were so, then the first hour of Chopra's film would largely be superfluous, and clearly it is not. Indeed, Chopra's depiction of Connie's backstory effectively illustrates the systemic factors that helped make this traumatic encounter possible. To use Frye's "bird cage" analogy, Chopra helps us to see the various interconnected wires that account for Connie's engagement, oppression, and vulnerability to sexism and sexual violence.<sup>18</sup>

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that, in a world where women are simply forced to conform to standards of patriarchal domination, they do not act willingly or with desire – and in that sense can never really be possessed (as much as patriarchy might demand it).

<sup>17</sup> In conversation we have heard friends entertain the possibility that "maybe 'nothing happened' – maybe they just went on a ride." Although logically compatible with what is shown on the screen, we do not see what artistic or philosophical worth is gained by this reading. We also resist it perhaps out of a reluctance to accept Friend's forced narrative. And, as mentioned above, we read the absence of an actual "scene" of (physical, sexual) violence as allowing us as viewers to experience Connie's own felt uncertainty about the situation (see section 3.3) – itself a product of manipulation and gaslighting. But even assuming the worst does not take place, there is no denying that these events are traumatic for Connie and that she is at a minimum the victim of misogyny, coercion, manipulation, among other serious harms.

<sup>18</sup> And one should note the merely logical point that one can grant all this and still think that Friend is a terrible person, and (at the very least, legally) the one who should be held ultimately blameworthy for this incident. But questions of (ultimate) responsibility and blame aside, a richer account of these events is desirable if only to reveal a richer array of possibilities for how we might protect folks like Connie from such despicable acts of violence. Though perhaps also the more challenging point: that many of us can be indirectly complicit in violence against women, despite our loving intentions and best efforts to protect them from it.

### ***3.2 Where Connie's been: The Conditions of Sexual Violence***

So, let's go back to the beginning. The film opens with Connie and her friends Laura (Margaret Welsh) and Jill (Sarah Inglis) waking up on the beach, surprised by how much time has passed. They need to rush back to the mall where they told their parents they would be spending the day. To make it back before Laura's mother arrives to pick them up, they hitch-hike and are offered a ride by an unknown, older man. Despite their initial hesitation, they hop into his truck and everything thankfully works out. They chuckle about it all as Laura's mother drives them home. "What are you laughing about?", Laura's mother asks, to which they say, holding their chuckles, "Oh, nothing!" However trivial these opening scenes might initially appear, they reveal a major theme of the film: that girls seeking innocent fun are forced to lie to their families and thus placed in vulnerable, even if not inevitably dangerous, situations. The stranger who gave them a ride was in this case harmless. But he might not have been. A world that validated girls' desires for enjoyment and allowed for honest and open communication could have avoided these risks entirely. But that is not the world of sexist oppression.

Connie returns home from her day out with friends. She immediately walks past her mother, Katherine Wyatt (Mary Kay Place), without acknowledging her. Presumably because her mother is a constant source of stress who she would rather avoid. Irritated by this, her mother finds Connie in her bedroom and begins to scold her. "You didn't even say hello. ... The mysterious case of the invisible mother." Soon after Connie asks if her mother would be willing to drive her to the beach the next day, to which she sarcastically replies that *of course* she'll wait around all day until Connie is "tan all over". The implicature, a message sent to Connie many times throughout the film, is that she is selfish, never helps around the house, and that her desires for fun are irrational and frivolous. "Do you ever think about anybody except yourself? ... I look at you, I look right in your eyes, and all I see are a bunch of trashy daydreams." No wonder Connie did not acknowledge her mother when she entered the house earlier.

Later on at the dinner table, Connie's father (Levon Helm) complains that her mother has served them tuna fish for dinner. He's disappointed by this since she had "all day" to prepare something better. This clearly illustrates the patriarchal expectation that the women and girls of the home are to be domestic servants or homemakers. It also helps to explain the mother's (earlier and continuing) hostility to Connie. That is, Connie's mother is not an inexplicably mean

person, but merely transmitting the oppressive sexist expectations onto Connie, perhaps out of protection for both of them. (Indeed, in a later scene when Connie and her mother attempt to bond, her mother complains that she is never able to speak her mind. “Who made up these damn rules and who says I have to follow ‘em!? I mean, why can’t I ever say what I feel?” Sadly, the attempt to bond is not a success and merely exacerbates their inability to honestly communicate with one another.) The father’s general obliviousness is hilariously expressed when he asks his daughter June (Elizabeth Berridge) for a beer, to which her mother responds, “It’s there already”, pointing at the large glass of beer underneath his nose. “Knew it all the time!”, he exclaims. Despite the father’s often warm intentions and sincere concern for his daughters, his obliviousness throughout the film demonstrates that he cannot be a genuine source of support for them when it comes to navigating the challenges of adolescent girlhood.

After dinner, Connie finds her father happily smoking outside and gazing at the stars. “Who’d have thought I’d be out here, smoking a cigarette, summer’s night. Don’t owe nobody nothing. Know what I mean?” Connie responds, “I guess”, but obviously she doesn’t: he is celebrating the comforts of male privilege which Connie will never experience. “My own house. Jesus. Just come out for a smoke whenever I want. My own lawn chair. Leave it out all night if I want.” Connie’s response is important and revealing: “You know. I can’t wait until I’m old enough to drive.” Connie desires freedom: freedom of movement, freedom to pursue what she wants, freedom of expression, and so on. The sorts of things her father revels in without recognizing they are by and large the exclusive privileges of men. (In a later scene on her date with a boy named Jeff she likewise says, just before Jeff moves in to silence her with a kiss, “I wish I could just travel somewhere”.)

The next scene reveals the other side of Connie’s double-bind. (In the short story, Oates writes, “Everything about [Connie] had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home.”) As we have already seen, Connie is subject to the sexist expectation that she be a humble domestic servant. She fails to live up to this standard and is thereby continually punished. But this is not her only “option”. Perhaps she can live up to the alternative expectation that she be a beautiful object of sexual attraction for men, rather than a demure servant (perhaps just another form of servitude). This is the option Connie pursues for the most part, though it merely subjects her to other harms or punishments. We see Connie painting her toenails red. She showers listening to dreamy, romantic 80’s pop music. Afterwards, she looks into the bathroom

mirror and rehearses charming lines for boys. “Hi. How are you feeling tonight? Good?” She licks her lips. “Hi. Looking for fun? ... Ugh. [She embarrasses herself.] ... Hi. How are you? How are *you*? How *are* you?” She is trying out scripts for seduction. Denying one set of expectations (private, domestic) in hopes that she can live up to another (public, sexual).

To be very clear: Connie is attempting to live up to these expectations by actively conforming to gendered stereotypes of appearance and behavior. But by our lights, Connie does not herself want either sex, or to be sexually objectified, or to be viewed as merely sexually attractive, but rather wants a kind of “innocent” romance (however cliché) and basic validation from men.<sup>19</sup> The problem, however, is that Connie cannot pursue these seemingly harmless aims without performing the scripts of sexual objectification.<sup>20</sup> Making herself an object of romantic attraction (according to the stereotypes of this time and place) means presenting herself as an object of sexual attraction and opening herself up to sexual objectification. Since we already know where the film is heading, we can note that Arnold Friend is at this time “watching her” and determining, based on her cultivated looks and behavior, that she is a mere sexual object (who has already “agreed” to their “plan to go for a ride”). But as we also noted in 3.1, Friend has not even the slightest idea who Connie is or what she really wants. It is itself a false logic of patriarchal culture to read a girl’s or woman’s “desires” off her “appearance” (how she dresses and so forth).

Connie’s double-bind is thus a forced choice between demure domestic servitude and sexual objectification. Whichever way she goes, she is subject to sexist oppression and hostility. Her sister June (often praised by their mother as “the good” daughter, an “angel”<sup>21</sup>) represents the

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<sup>19</sup> The same could be said for her mother and sister pursuing the other end of the double-bind: they don’t want to be mere domestic servants, per se, but this is the only means available to be respected as functional members of the home and society at large.

<sup>20</sup> Even if she did want sex (which would be perfectly fine, it just doesn’t seem to be Connie’s desire), by pursuing this, she would (much as Connie already does) render herself vulnerable to objectification and harm. Two scenes illustrate to us that Connie desires cliché romance rather than sex. First, on Connie’s date with Eddie, she darts off as soon as Eddie begins advancing beyond “making out”. Second, Connie tells her sister how nice it is to be held by a boy who sings to her – rather than expressing a desire for anything particularly erotic. Again: there would be nothing wrong with Connie wanting sex, but this desire does not seem present at this point in her life.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Oates’s short story: “Her sister June was twenty-four and still lived at home. She was a secretary in the high school Connie attended, and if that wasn’t bad enough—with her in the same building—she was so plain and chunky and steady that Connie had to hear her praised all the time by her mother and her mother’s sisters. June did this, June did that, she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked and Connie couldn’t do a thing, her mind was all filled with trashy daydreams”; “If June’s name was mentioned her mother’s tone was approving, and if Connie’s name was mentioned it was disapproving.”

life of domestic servitude; Connie represents the life of sexual objectification. Neither can avoid the harms of oppression; they merely experience different harms.

What makes Connie's double-bind even more tragic and severe is that she is not protected by her sister or mother against sexual violence. Since they pursue the ideals of domestic servitude, they accordingly view Connie as selfish in her pursuit of other aims and punish her accordingly (partly out of envy it seems<sup>22</sup>). For instance, Connie's mother expresses disgust at Connie's carefully groomed hair, complaining about the "stench" of her hairspray, and then immediately scolds Connie for "never picking up a dish that is not hers", expressing the expectation, once again, that Connie really ought to do more domestic labor. In a later scene, her mother scolds her for not being careful and getting herself "into trouble" (i.e., risking pregnancy and/or rape), "If I ever catch you fooling around young lady I will personally...", Connie cuts her off, "Well you weren't too careful yourself were you!" (referring to her mother's young pregnancy). Her mother responds by slapping Connie hard across the face. "You make me wanna laugh", Connie says to her mother before rushing off to her bedroom to sob.

June joins Connie in hopes of comforting her. "God, why does she think I'm so bad?" Connie asks. "Just be careful. That's what we're both trying to say to you. That's all", June responds. Connie reveals her harmless romantic desires to June, perhaps to give June a window into her life. "I mean it's not what you think. ... It's just... the boys are so nice to you. When we're together. I never knew it was gonna be so nice. Did you ever have a boy hold you close and sing to you?"<sup>23</sup> June coldly responds, "I wonder if you know what a little bitch you are. ... You're gonna have it all aren't you? And you think you deserve it." June wells up with tears after saying this. Why the hostility from June? Our interpretation is that June, like her mother, feels that it is unfair for Connie to exempt herself from the sexist standards of modest servitude that June herself painfully conforms to. This leads June and their mother to, as it were, preemptively blame Connie for getting herself pregnant or raped, insisting on the ever-impractical advice of strict abstinence. In other words, if Connie is the victim of unwanted sexual advances, then it's

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<sup>22</sup> This is made clearer in the short story: "Her mother had been pretty once too, if you could believe those old snapshots in the album, but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Connie."

<sup>23</sup> Compare Oates's short story: "[Connie's] mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the night before and how nice he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs".



her own fault and she is in some sense getting what she deserves. As Connie goes through the already difficult growth-pains of girl's adolescence and her first experiences dating boys, she faces a deeply untrusting sister and mother, on the one hand, and a completely oblivious father, on the other.

It is no wonder then that in their later encounter Arnold Friend remarks so frequently on the fragility of Connie's house. That he could burn it down. That the telephone line (her only means of communication with the outside world) could be pulled out with ease. That the only thing dividing them is a delicate screen door.<sup>24</sup> These are symbolic of her family life. Due to sexist oppression, Connie is alienated from her family and they are unable to support her as she navigates a world riddled with gendered risks and harms. And the "lines of communication" are severed by the lack of trust from her mother and sister<sup>25</sup> (punishment for Connie's failure to comply with domestic norms), and the general obliviousness of their father (due to the inherent blindness of male privilege). These are the conditions that make a young girl like Connie vulnerable to sexual assault.

What about Connie's friends Laura and Jill? Does she at least have their support? This is indeed demonstrated in earlier parts of the film, but does not last. At one point, they go "scopin'" at the mall, i.e., scoping out "cute boys", no doubt with the hope of being admired by them as well. (The mall itself stands as a vivid illustration of the influence of a broader culture on Connie's adherence to sexist expectations.) By all accounts they have a harmless day of fun. Eventually, however, the three girls are approached by two large, threatening boys who insist that the girls hangout with them. But the scene immediately yields a laugh when Laura saves the day, saying, "Oh my god Connie! The roller and the pan, your mother's gonna kill you!", and playing along Connie says, "Oh my god Um, and she's down here. Um, she's in the store down here!" as they run off together, commiserating and laughing about the creepy boys they just encountered. "Did you ever see such perverts!?". One should contrast this powerful moment of girls' solidarity with Connie's lonesome encounter with Arnold Friend later on. But by that point in the

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<sup>24</sup> See fn. 13.

<sup>25</sup> After June expresses rage at Connie's talk of boys, Connie tries to rebuild a connection by recalling old times when June used to rub Connie's feet. "Don't you remember? You were the nicest sister." June initially shows warmth on her face, but then coldly responds, "I don't remember." Our interpretation is that June does not fail to remember the (literal) events that Connie is referring to, but rather she cannot recall the feeling of closeness or intimacy with Connie. Their connection has been too thoroughly severed to remember what that feels like. One of many heartbreaking moments in the film, to be sure.

film, Connie has become (emotionally, and physically) separated from her friends too, yet again due to sexist oppressive norms.

Connie's alienation from each of Laura and Jill happens in separate though interrelated ways. Laura and Connie are similar in that they desire romance and male validation. Jill is less sure. She is pressured by Laura and Connie into flirting with boys, despite her shyness and possibly also her lack of interest. At one point, three older boys invite the trio into a movie theater with them, to which Jill expresses extreme reluctance and discomfort. Laura and Connie are annoyed with Jill (for being a prude, for failing to play along with the sexist narrative) and soon decide to leave her out of their adventures. This leads Jill to develop a lack of trust for Connie, but also leads Connie not to take Jill as seriously as she should. For instance, later in the film Jill tries to warn Connie that a boy has been "asking about her". But Connie is simply flattered by the thought that she is the object of a boy's curiosity, trying to get Jill to calm down rather than to understand why she is distressed. As Jill's interrogator was Arnold Friend, she has good reason to be concerned. Once again, sexist norms and expectations sever a line of communication and support among the previously tight-knit girlfriends.

Laura, by contrast, shares Connie's desire for male attention. They lie to their parents regarding their whereabouts so that they can venture to a popular local hangout called, rather phallically, "Frank's". Their aim is to get picked up by boys. As they sit inside Frank's waiting for someone to approach them, Laura asks, "Well what do we do now? ... Is there, like, a system?" (Indeed, a system of oppression, we can't help but answer!) Eventually a boy named Jeff comes by to flirt with Connie and they go away together, leaving Laura behind, alone. This night goes off without a hitch, and Connie herself says she had a great time. But their next outing to Frank's is less fortunate. This time Connie goes off with a boy named Eddie who is more aggressive than Jeff. As Eddie makes sexual advances, Connie becomes extremely uncomfortable and darts off. "I'm sorry, I'm not used to getting this excited!" She's then on her own well after dark, without a ride, and Laura is not at their usual meeting place. She calls Laura on a payphone to find out that Laura has been caught and, one assumes, grounded for the summer, but that at least she hasn't ratted out Connie. This leaves Connie alone and stranded, refusing to call home for help out of fear of getting in trouble with her parents. So she walks home by herself through the dark night. As she does, a pack of boys in a car harass her on the side of the road, tossing beer cans at her as they speed off. "You cockroaches!" Connie screams.

Another vivid portrayal of Connie's isolation and lack of support. She has been cut off from her two best friends. Left to "stew" in a fragile house and home.

This is the backdrop to Connie's encounter with Arnold Friend. Due to various norms of sexist oppression, Connie is regularly forced into vulnerable situations, made to feel shame for her harmless dreams, made to doubt herself and the validity of her desires, alienated from the most basic sources of (emotional) support, i.e., her family and friends, and quite literally confined due to her lack of mobility. To view her encounter with Friend as an isolated incident is a failure to see the bigger picture. Arnold Friend could not have gained power over Connie if she had not already been rendered powerless by sexist oppression.

### ***3.3 Where are you going, Connie?***

After being dropped back home by Arnold Friend, Connie sees that her family has returned from their outing. "We missed you. Wish you had come to the picnic", her father says. "Me too", says Connie. "You mean that?" "Yeah... no... I mean, ah... I don't know anymore." Connie's sense of self and her perception of reality have been shattered by the incident. Connie's mother rushes out to greet her, "Honey, I'm so sorry I hit you this morning. ... Honey, I thought about you all day." "It's OK," Connie says. An unusually warm moment between the mother and daughter as they embrace. One wishes it had happened sooner. Though perhaps it gives hope that someday Connie and her mother will form an authentic connection of mutual understanding. Maybe they will eventually be free to say "what they really feel".

In the final scene of the film, Connie sits in her bedroom to process the events of the day. June enters, once again with the intention to console. Though one should recall June's previous attempt at consolation.

JUNE: What happened today?

CONNIE: I don't know.

JUNE: Well where'd you go?

CONNIE: This man... he... asked me for a ride. And I went, ya know, uh...

JUNE: Connie?

CONNIE: Maybe I didn't go. Maybe I'm going out of my mind. Listen: I didn't go. Don't worry. It didn't even happen.

It is disturbing to see that Connie initially reports the account of events foisted on her by Arnold Friend. As disturbing as it is to see that she then deems herself crazy, expressing skepticism about her own thoughts and memories, eventually caving and saying that none of it really happened. But Connie's words are not surprising given all that we have seen. June had scolded Connie earlier for merely daydreaming about romance. Further, June and Connie's mother had also blamed Connie preemptively for any "trouble" she might get herself into. Why subject herself to further abuse, after the day she has already had, by telling June what really happened? And why should she trust her sense of things to begin with, given that she's been taught to doubt herself, and so thoroughly gaslit by Arnold Friend?

This final scene is a reminder to the viewer that the harms of sexual trauma can and often do persist long after a sexual assault. Connie's immediate attempts to understand the events and embark on a process of recovery are fraught, but this is not the end of her story, even if it is the last we see of it.

Where are you going, Connie? Well, we've seen where she's been. Caught in a web of forces that has led her to sexual humiliation and violence. She does not, at this very moment it seems, have the resources to process all that has happened and it is too much for anyone to process all on their own. But maybe she will someday. Maybe she will find, or reconnect with, a special friend who will understand where she has been and will help her figure out where she's going next. Maybe she will get a car and finally be free to travel where she likes, living a life of self-love and self-affirmation. One can hope.

The film ends with Connie inviting her sister to slow-dance to a song by James Taylor.<sup>26</sup> “I mean you wouldn’t feel, like, defiled by touching me?” “Connie!?!”, June says, startled by her remark. They timidly hold each other and dance. The lines of communication between sisters have been severed by sexist oppression, but a wordless embrace is enough comfort for now. Again: perhaps a day will come when they can process their collective trauma together.

Where are we going, and where have we been? The film demonstrates the rich, often subtle, and deeply interconnected factors that lead to sexual violence. It is on us as viewers to ask how we might have saved Connie, and other women and girls, from such unfortunate events. And the film does not merely ask, but provides many insightful resources for response.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Frye suggests that understanding oppression requires more than simply changing our (general) beliefs. We must hone our perception and learn to see the world differently. Like the muscles in our bodies, strengthening our perception requires regular exercise. It cannot be achieved by mere acceptance of abstract definitions and principles. We must practice seeing it in our everyday experience. We hope to have shown how the 1985 film *Smooth Talk* can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing feminist perception, allowing us to see the workings of oppression in the subtle details of a person’s life.

Through careful analysis of the film, we illustrated how Connie’s encounter with Arnold Friend was the tragic result of a pattern of harms and limitations that jointly served to mold and restrict Connie, penalizing her movement in every direction. First, due to male privilege, Connie’s father is blind to sexism and thus unable to provide adequate protection or support. Second, expected to devote herself to domestic tasks, Connie is exposed to scorn and ridicule from her mother and sister. Mutual distrust renders them unable to communicate openly and

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<sup>26</sup> “Do you still like this song?”, Connie asks June. It is very doubtful that this was the intention of Chopra, but we can’t help but mention that the song played (its lyrics at least) is (however catchy) somewhat unlikeable after what we’ve seen in the film – that we shouldn’t “still like it” after previous events. The major lyrics are: “If your broken heart, she needs repair, Then I’m *the man* to see ... I fix broken hearts, I know that I truly can”. A ‘*man*’ who ‘*sees*’ (understands) and will come to repair Connie’s broken heart? And who might that be: Connie’s oblivious father or the horrible Arnold Friend? – The dance between Connie and June powerfully indicates that Connie is in serious need of girl’s/women’s solidarity rather than a male savior.

<sup>27</sup> Left as an exercise for the reader and viewer of the film. Our experience teaching the film alongside Frye’s essays has shown that class discussion around this question is very fruitful.

honestly. Third, expected to devote herself to male desire, she is objectified, alienated from her friends Jill and Laura, and eventually assaulted, without either protection or support in recovery. These are the conditions that make a young girl like Connie vulnerable to sexual assault and its lasting trauma. Conditions that are rendered perspicuous by the vivid cinematic presentation of Chopra's film.

One of the most valuable things that feminist philosophy can offer our students is helping them connect with their own experiences of injustice and oppressive systems. We not only want our students to understand the general principles of feminist philosophy, but also to be able to connect those general principles with their day-to-day lives. Pairing philosophical essays such as Frye's with films such as *Smooth Talk* allows us to draw attention to the workings of oppression in one's lived experience, to see it and feel it through the richness of personal narrative. A philosophical understanding that connects directly with one's perception is highly practical,<sup>28</sup> preparing our students to detect oppressive practices and resist the injustices in which their lives are enmeshed. The more they can detect, the more ways they can imagine transforming our lives to overcome oppressive systems.

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<sup>28</sup> Essential to what Aristotle (2014, 1142a25) calls "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*).

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