POPULAR VICTIMIZATION:

CONSTRUCTING WIFE ABUSE IN THE MEDIA FOR FUN AND PROFIT

by

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Popular Victimization: Constructing Wife Abuse in the Media for Fun and Profit

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the social construction of wife abuse as a public problem and the media's role as key claims-makers in defining the issue. Claims-makers are those with the authority to define a social problem as unacceptable and make demands on existing institutions to alleviate the problem. It will be argued that the media have figured significantly in affecting the public discourse about wife abuse: what it is, how it happens, and what should be done about it.

The first half of this thesis examines the emergence of wife abuse and the battered woman as a public problem and the role the media has played in the social construction of the issue historically. The latter half of this thesis examines three made-for-television movies containing representations of wife abuse and the battered woman. The patterns of meaning that emerge from these texts and their affect on the public discourse surrounding the issue will be discussed.

It will be argued that the media produce meaning that is asymmetrical and serves, at least in some circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of patriarchal domination. The *popular reality* the media construct about wife abuse may influence public support for policies, programs, and resources allocated to deal with the problem. As well, media constructions of wife abuse help to contain wife abuse within the social construction of social problems, obscuring the conditions that perpetuate violence against women in the private sphere, and

thus deflecting the need for an inquiry into these conditions.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Still Going On Out There: Wife Abuse in the 1990s

The infamous 911 call Nicole Brown Simpson made on October 25, 1993 recording her desperate plea for help, while the former all-American football legend was heard furiously screaming obscenities at her in the background, forced the North American public to again confront the issue of wife abuse publicly in 1994. The call Brown Simpson made is particularly disturbing when one realizes that the police took no action against O.J. that night. When the police arrived at the house, Nicole, who had obviously been beaten, was found huddling outside in only a bra and muddied sweat pants, with a black eye and a split lip. Terrified, she told the police "he's going to kill me." However, police did not arrest O.J. because she refused to press charges against her husband. However, it is more likely they never made the arrest because of who O.J. Simpson is. It was later discovered that Brown Simpson had called the police eight times during her marriage to O.J. Simpson.[1]

O.J. Simpson is certainly not the first celebrity accused of beating his wife. The list includes famous men such as Mike Tyson, Steve McQueen, Ike Turner, James Caan, Sean Penn, and Jackson Browne, to name just a few. And while these high-profile cases make titillating copy for the tabloids, they serve to underscore the fact that wife abuse reaches women in every social class and race.

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[1] Reported in the Vancouver Sun, June 24, 1994, p. A11.

More disturbing however, is the fact that wife abuse is still not taken seriously in our society, even in the 1990s. In the words of O.J. Simpson when asked about his conviction for spousal battery, he replied "it was no big deal." The "no big deal" attitude prevails in society and is most evident when one looks at the legal consequences batterers face for their actions. In hindsight, it is clear that Nicole Simpson Brown was up against a very "big deal." Although Simpson pleaded no contest and was convicted of spousal battery, he received a seven-hundred dollar fine and was placed on two years probation. He was required to seek six months of counselling, but the judge allowed him to choose his own therapist and to receive his sessions via the telephone. It seems O.J. was too busy to show up for therapy in person. Eighteen months after this incident, O.J. Simpson was charged with the murder of his ex-wife and her friend, Ronald Goldman.

Nicole Brown Simpson's experience is not unique. Millions of women in Canada and the U.S. have met the same reaction when they reached out for help, which may explain why less than half the victims of wife abuse ever make a report to the police. Studies show that women are often reluctant to report violent acts perpetrated against them due to fear of retaliation, lack of confidence in the police and the legal system, as well as guilt and embarrassment.[2]

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[2] Government of Canada, The War Against Women, Report of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women, Barbara Greene, Chair. June 1991, p. 5.

In a nationwide survey of 12,300 Canadian women undertaken by Statistics Canada in 1993, (the most comprehensive study of violence against women ever undertaken), it was revealed that more than half (51 percent) of Canadian women had been physically or sexually assaulted at least once in their adult lives. More than half of those women stated that they had been attacked by dates, boyfriends, husbands, family members, or other men familiar to them. Equally disturbing is the fact that one in ten women (one million) claim they had been assaulted in the past year.[3] Battering is the leading cause of injury to women in both Canada and the U.S. For instance, a woman is more likely to killed by her partner than by anyone else. A woman has a greater chance of being injured by her partner than of being injured in a car accident.

Some critics charge that wife abuse has not increased but the reporting of it has; however the fact is that violence against women in their homes is not declining. Some claim domestic violence has now reached "epidemic" proportions. Although wife abuse has resurfaced as an issue for public concern in the last twenty-five years, with millions of dollars spent studying the problem, it appears that we are no closer today than we were in 1970 toward finding solutions that would reduce, let alone eliminate, the prevalence of wife abuse in our society. While resources continue to be spent on researching the

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[3] Karen Gram, "Half of Canadian Women Suffer Violence, Study Shows," Vancouver Sun, November 19, 1993, p. A1 (front page).

problem, millions of women and their children continue to live in terror. The statistics raise important questions, not the least of which is why, after twenty-five years of studying the problem, is wife abuse still permitted in our society?

This thesis examines the issue of wife abuse as a public problem and the mass media's role in creating public sympathy for abused women. Although there has been much research dedicated to the issue of wife abuse, there appears to be a lack of study with respect to the media's role in shaping the public discourse about the issue. While many theorists have cited the important role the media have played historically in helping to gain the public's sympathy for battered women, there has been a gap with respect to the relationship between the media and its impact on the social construction of the issue, and more important, the effect the media has had on the public discourse surrounding the issue of wife abuse and the battered woman. This is the lacuna addressed by this work.

The first half of this thesis examines how wife abuse and the battered woman have been socially constructed historically and the role the media has played with respect to the public discourse surrounding the issue. The media have played a significant role as claims makers and are responsible for bringing the issue to the attention of the public initially. As Ericson et al. argue, the media should be taken seriously as they are "central agents in the social construction of reality ....[T]hey [the media] shape the moral boundaries and contours

of the social order...providing an ongoing articulation of our senses of propriety and impropriety, stability and change, order and crises."[4]

The latter half of this thesis examines three made-for-television movies that have encoded representations of wife abuse and the battered woman as part of their discourses. I have chosen to examine television movies because they are pervasive and important sites of discourse. Television movies play a role in how society constructs and conceptualizes vital issues, such as wife abuse, and the discourses encoded in them affect society collectively. Elayne Rapping, author of *The Movie of the Week: Private Lives, Public Events* (1992), states: "I consider them [television movies] an important element in the broad public discourse about issues of public values and policies."[5] Douglas Gomery shares a similar view: "television programs...deserve to be studied as indicators of significant shifts in dominant attitudes, beliefs, and values."[6] John Fiske elaborates the argument that television is "a cultural agent...a provoker and circulator of meanings," but also believes that "television makes, or attempts to make, meanings that serve the dominant

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[4] Richard Ericson et al., Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization, University of Toronto Press, 1987, p. 356.

[5] Elayne Rapping, The Movie Of The Week: Private Stories, Public Events, American Culture, Volume 5, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London 1992, p. x.

[6] Douglas Gomery, "*Brian's Song:* Television, Hollywood, and the Evolution of the Movie Made For Television," in Television: The Critical View, Oxford University Press, Fourth Edition, Horace Newcomb ed., 1987, p. 199.

interests in society...and circulates these meanings amongst the wide variety of social groups that constitute its audiences."[7] Made-for-television texts, along with other media products, provide representations through which we construct the world. However, the world which television constructs often has little to do with reality. The question is not, as Robert Allen points out, "does television give us the truth?" but rather, "how does television represent the world?"[8] Keeping this question in mind of how television represents the world, I wish to examine how a particular genre, the made-for-television movie, constructs an important social issue, wife abuse, as a way of understanding how the public discourse about the issue has evolved and perhaps to shed some light on why, after twenty-five years, society is still struggling with the issue.

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[7] John Fiske, Television Culture, Routledge Press, London and New York, 1987, p. 1.

[8] Robert C. Allen, "Talking About Television," in Channels of Discourse, The University of North Carolina Press, 1987, p. 5.

CHAPTER 2

The Literature Review

This thesis is comprised of three analytical components: (1) an examination of how the issue of wife abuse has evolved as a public problem, with particular attention paid to the social construction of wife abuse and the media's role in this construction; (2) a textual analysis of several made-for-television movies about wife abuse; (3) an interpretation of the meaning and/or impact these messages might have on the public discourse about the issue. Each of these components will be examined within the social-historical context of the issue of wife abuse as it has evolved in the last twenty-five years, although some attention will also be paid to another historical epoch, the Victorian era, when wife abuse also emerged as a problem for public concern.

This thesis is situated in the academic tradition of Communication, which incorporates a multi-disciplinary approach. From within this rubric the categories of discourse and textuality will serve as a theoretical framework, specifically within the contexts of genre and narrative theory. In addition, cultural studies will be employed as the basis for this analysis. This thesis also draws on the methods and theories from other disciplines such as Sociology, Film Theory, Women's Studies, and Philosophy for the basis of analysis.

As this thesis examines the popular media's role in contributing to the public discourse of wife abuse, some

discussion about the theoretical nature of discourse is relevant. Drawing from the French Structuralist tradition, Michel Foucault's theory about discourse will be applied as a means for understanding how discourse operates in society. Foucault attempts to map out how the forms of power are exercised via discursive and other practices.

Nancy Fraser's (1989) concepts about discourse and the depoliticization of need will be employed as a way of utilizing some of Foucault's ideas about the operation of discourse. In *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (1989), Fraser attempts to bridge theory with practice. Her analysis of wife abuse as a site of struggle and conflict illustrates how discourses operate in the "real world." Fraser discusses the way in which wife abuse has been framed as a social problem and how wife abuse has been contained as a result within the social problems rubric, diverting attention away from key political questions. Her work is based on Foucault's thematic focus on power and knowledge.

From the field of sociology, the work of Donileen Loseke (1992) and Joseph Gusfield (1981, 1987) provide the basis for the discussion about the social construction of wife abuse. Loseke is interested in studying the phenomenon of wife abuse and battered women as "*objects* that are socially constructed."[9] Loseke, like Joseph Gusfield, explores how the "real world" is

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[9] Donileen Loseke, The Battered Woman and Shelters: The Social Construction of Wife Abuse, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 1.

socially constructed. As well, she seeks to understand the social processes we use to "define and then create particular "types of creatures"."[10]

The work of Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek and Janet Chan (1987) provides the basis for the discussion about how the news media participate in defining and shaping social problems. Ericson et al. examine the role that journalists play in determining social values. They suggest that in western countries, journalists have the power to determine what constitutes deviance, from serious forms such as criminal acts to violations of common sense knowledge. Furthermore, Ericson et al. argue that journalists and news organizations exert tremendous influence as agents of social control. The visions of social order and stability put forth by the news media are absorbed by enormous audiences on a daily basis.[11] What follows is a more detailed description of the theorists outlined above as well as a discussion of the other key theorists whose work informs this thesis.

Organizational Framework

Thompson's *Ideology and Modern Culture*, (1990) is an analysis of the nature of the mass media and the historical development of media institutions. Briefly, Thompson is inter-

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[10] Joseph Gusfield, The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 2.

[11] Ericson et al., p. 3.

ested in how symbolic forms are used socially; that is, how symbolic forms circulate in the social world. In addition, Thompson is interested in the concept and role of ideology, the concept of culture and the characteristics of cultural transmission, how the mass media have developed as a part of western culture, and the implications for social (and political) life as a result.

Thompson develops a theory of ideology and relates it to the analysis of culture and the mass media in modern societies. The key component to Thompson's analysis is what he terms the *"mediazation"* of culture or the process by which the transmission of symbolic forms have become increasingly dependent on media institutions for circulation. Thompson argues that symbolic forms are embedded in the social contexts of power relations, forms of conflict, and inequalities in the distribution of resources and that the analysis of mass communication must incorporate a political as well as an epistemological standpoint.

Thompson refers to his methodology of interpretation as a *"tripartite"* or *"depth hermeneutics"* approach for studying cultural phenomenon. Specifically, Thompson attempts to articulate his theory of ideology in light of its relationship to mass communications using his *"depth hermeneutics"* approach. In developing this theory, Thompson draws from the work of Paul Ricoeur, among others. Broadly defined, it is the study of the interpretation of texts, initially employed by Christian

theologians as a means of interpreting and understanding the spiritual truth in the bible. More generally, hermeneutics can be described as "a theory of interpretation, of understanding the significance of human actions, utterances, products, and institutions."[12]

Thompson believes that hermeneutics is the appropriate means for studying the ideological character of symbolic forms on two levels. Theoretically Thompson believes that hermeneutics invites study of "the hermeneutical conditions of social-historical inquiry."[13] He believes that these conditions arise from the "constitution of the object domain of social-historical inquiry...[which] is also a subject domain...made up, in part, of subjects who...are constantly involved in understanding themselves and others...."[14] The pursuit of social-historical inquiry is a means of understanding and explaining "a range of phenomena which are...already understood by the individuals who are part of the social-historical world.... " thus allowing us to "re-interpret a pre-interpreted domain."[15]

On a practical level, Thompson believes that the tradition of hermeneutics can provide a methodological framework for the

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[12] *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1988 (revised ed.), Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, eds., p. 380.

[13] John Thompson, Ideology and Modern Culture, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1990, p. 21.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*

analysis of cultural phenomena. As a methodological framework it is particularly useful as a means in which "particular methods can be situated and related to one another, and within which their value (as well as their limits) can be appraised."[16] Further, he believes this methodology is "oriented towards the interpretation (or re-interpretation) of meaningful phenomena, but in which different types of analysis can play legitimate and mutually supportive roles." [17]

Like Thompson's work, this thesis concerns itself with an inquiry into the transmission of symbolic forms and their effect on the public discourse. This inquiry will take the form of an analysis of the ideological character of symbolic forms, namely popular media constructions of wife abuse. Constructions of wife abuse and the battered woman by the entertainment media are significant for two reasons. First, the public perception of the issue of wife abuse and the battered woman (which is based in large part on the media's discourse about the issue) affects public support of programs and resources that are mandated to deal with the issue. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the discourse about the issue, vis a vis the media, may affect the way some women perceive themselves in relationship to the characters constructed by the media. For instance, some women who are in abusive relationships may not identify themselves as battered if the abuse they suffer is perceived as less serious

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16 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

than what happens to the characters on the screen. Or, some women may minimize their situations, denying they are in abusive relationships if their situations are not quite as serious as those constructed on television. In some cases, the actions taken by the characters in the television movie may inspire some women to do the same, as was the case after *The Burning Bed* first aired. The day after it was shown at least four women murdered their husbands and one man killed his wife by setting her bed on fire in the U.S.[18]

This thesis argues that the media have played a critical role in the articulation of the public discourse about wife abuse in both the Victorian era and when the issue resurfaced in the 1970s. The media continue to influence the public's attitudes and beliefs about the issue. The media represent and construct stories and images about the battered woman and wife abuse to millions of people, and many people rely solely on the media for their understanding about the issue. But these messages and images are not created in a vacuum. Taken out of their social-historical context, these symbols can become disconnected and abstract. Therefore, these representations will be analyzed within the social-historical context of the issue and (re)interpreted in this context.

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[18] Elayne Rapping discusses this phenomenon, see p. xxviii.

The Social-Historical Aspects of Wife Abuse: The Birth of a Social Problem

i) The Social Construction of Wife Abuse

The social-historical context of wife abuse is examined in order to establish how and why abuse became a social problem for public concern and how the issue has been articulated in the public discourse. Included is a brief discussion of the way in which wife abuse evolved historically when it emerged as a problem for public concern during the Victorian era, with an emphasis on the relationship between the media and the feminist movement of the time. However, this thesis is mainly concerned with the social construction of the issue as it (re)emerged publicly approximately twenty-five years ago. Special attention will be paid to the role the media has played in defining what wife abuse is, as well as articulating what should be done about it.

I begin with a brief description of how the battered women's movement (re)emerged in the early 1970s. The work of two theorists are key here, Susan Schechter and Gillian Walker. Schechter's *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (1982) provides an in-depth history of wife abuse and the social movement against it from an American perspective. Walker's analysis of wife abuse is rooted in a Canadian context. In *Family Violence and the Women's Movement: The Conceptual Politics of Struggle* (1990) she examines the way in which the issue was transformed from a

political to a social problem and how the experience of wife abuse has come to be defined as part of the broader issue of family violence. Both Schechter and Walker have spent years working as activists in the shelter movement and combine their own experiences of activism with a systematic and empirical analysis of wife abuse as a public problem.

In order to understand how wife abuse has been articulated in the public sphere, a discussion of how social problems are socially constructed is helpful. In *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order* (1981), Gusfield explores the way in which situations become public problems using drinking and driving as his case study. Gusfield argues that the collective content of drinking and driving as a social problem included the claims-making activities of journalists, scientists, the state, social services and social movements (for instance, MADD).

In addition, Gusfield attempts to reveal the ways in which the phenomenon of drinking and driving is not just a matter for science and technology to solve but also involves the moral attitudes of the public about alcohol. These attitudes infuse the public discourse surrounding the issue, which Gusfield argues "are essential to understanding the bases of the cognitive reality and the legal position of drinking-driving."[19] In addition, Gusfield strives to show the way in which the language of science obscures the fact that the choices

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[19] Gusfield 1981, p. 10.

made about drinking and driving have political undertones.[20]

While Gusfield's model may be applied to the evolution of wife abuse as a public problem and its articulation in the public sphere, Donileen Loseke specifically examines the social construction and the content of the collective representations of wife abuse and the battered woman. In *The Battered Woman and Shelters: The Social Construction of Wife Abuse*, Loseke illustrates how particular representations created the problem of wife abuse as well as the type of person called a "battered woman" beginning in the early 1970s. Loseke argues that the explanation of how and why women experience violence in their homes has had major implications for what the collective representation of a battered woman is, the role of the transition shelter, and the role of the state.

The women's movement, transition shelters, and the state each have a vested interest in having their particular definition of wife abuse sanctioned as legitimate. Besides these claims-makers, others, including academics, professionals from legal and medical institutions, social service workers, and, significantly, the news media converged on this newly identified area of concern. Each of these claims-makers purport to know what the root causes of wife abuse are and, by extension, how to deal with the problem. However, these and the other claims-makers who have contributed to our understanding of the problem are not united with respect to their definitions of wife abuse.

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20 *Ibid.*, p. 194.

There has been an on-going struggle between the various claims-makers over the definition of the problem. Who has the power to define the issue as well as the power to determine what needs to be done about it has had a major impact on our collective understanding of the issue of wife abuse. The competing definitions between the various claims-makers also help explain the many tensions and contradictions surrounding the issue that remain today.

Like Gusfield, Loseke's analysis focuses on the social construction tradition of the study of public problems. Specifically, she is interested in how wife abuse emerged as a public problem. She says, "[A]s socially constructed, the collective representation of wife abuse is a system for categorizing violence and for morally evaluating it; as constructed, the battered woman is a collective representation for a woman with a particular type of experience, biography, motivation, and subjectivity."[21]

As Loseke (among others) points out, wife abuse existed before the 1970s; historical records have clearly documented cases of men physically assaulting their wives throughout history, with references dating back to biblical times. However, there have only been certain periods when this behavior has been deemed *morally unacceptable*. When wife abuse (re)emerged in the 1970s as a public problem, it was not because it was a new phenomenon. Rather, it was the result of claims-

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[21] Loseke, p. 3.

makers and their activities to define the issue of wife abuse as a public problem that was intolerable and to assert that battered women needed and deserved the public's sympathy and resources.

ii) The Operation of Discourse: Theoretical Implications

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.
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> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1979. (p.100-101).

In the broadest terms, this thesis is about the emergence and articulation of the public discourse about wife abuse. Michel Foucault argues that discursive practices are "characterized by a "delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories"."[22] The effect of these practices is that it makes it "virtually impossible to think outside them....It is in this way that we can see how discursive rules are linked to the exercise of power; how the forms of discourse are both

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[22] Michel Foucault, "The Order Of Discourse," in Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader, Robert Young ed., 1981, Routledge, London and New York, p. 48.

constituted by and ensure the reproduction of the social system through forms of selection, exclusion and domination."[23]

Firstly, Foucault defines discourse as the "multiplicity of views and voices and the inherently "unruly" nature of these articulations."[24] Secondly, in principle at least, Foucault argues that discourse is boundless. However, societies do not permit just anything to be said within a particular discourse. Foucault refers to this as "the illusion of discourse." Foucault states:

> [In] every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. [25]

Foucault believes that societies have devised methods to contain discourse through certain practices, such as prohibition. Placing a taboo on certain subjects is one method of prohibiting the discourse on a subject. For instance, the formal proceedings that must be adhered to in Parliamentary debates or restricting discourse to only those "qualified" to speak about an issue are ways the domain of discourse is defined. Foucault discusses the impact that language has on institutions and practices (and vice versa), arguing that language also plays a vital role in defining the discourse. This has certainly been

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[23] *Ibid.*

[24] As quoted by John Tomlinson in Cultural Imperialism, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1991, p. 9.

[25] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," p. 52.

the case with the issue of wife abuse. For instance, feminists have been critical of the state's use of language, which, they charge, is euphemistic. Terms such as spousal assault, domestic disputes, etc. tend to obscure the true nature of the problem.

Another method for regulating discourse is the practice which Foucault has termed "rarefaction." Simply defined, rarefaction is a scientific term which describes the process of refining matter, in order to make it less dense. Foucault uses the term to describe the ways in which ideas are refined and/or made subtle, and to illustrate the various ways in which the unruly nature of discourse is managed via the formal practices of society. According to Foucault, through this process of rarefaction, a subject becomes less dense and therefore a thinning out and/or purification of what is said about a subject or issue takes place. For example, Foucault argues that academic disciplines enforce control of discourse by establishing their own rules of what counts as legitimate knowledge within their boundaries. Foucault claims that each discipline, in staking out the limits of its own legitimate knowledge domain, "pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins."[26]

The principle of the author is another example of how the process of rarefaction tends to limit or control the boundaries of discourses in society. Here Foucault is not simply referring to the individual who writes a text, rather he is referring to "a principle of groupings of discourse, conceived as a unit and

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

origin of the meanings, as the focus of their coherence."[27] Foucault draws our attention to the fact that the author principle serves as a limiting function of discourse in an effort to prove that discourse exists "in a much more problematic relationship to authorial intentions."[28]

Foucault's understanding of the way discourses operate in society is useful in helping to understand how the issue of wife abuse has been contextualized in contemporary society. Foucault argues that in society the dominant voices shape social issues. Clearly, the discourse about wife abuse in modern society has developed with the dominant views and voices being heard, often at the expense of other voices. For example, although feminists were originally instrumental in bringing the issue to the public's attention as a political issue, academics, social service workers, and other professionals generally working on behalf of the state have come to be viewed as the experts on the issue. The women who were identified as victims of abuse, rarely, if ever, were asked their opinion of how to help them best. More important perhaps, is what began as a political problem has been transformed into a social problem. As such, in Western countries at least, the state has been given legitimacy to define the issue of wife abuse; society has come to rely on the state for solutions to the problem. The state has the authority to interpret the needs of battered women and what

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27 *Ibid.*, p.58.

28 Tomlinson, p.10.

should be done to satisfy them. Nancy Fraser's ideas about the interpretation of need discourses helps to illustrate how the depoliticization of need has occurred within the context of wife abuse.

The Politics of Interpreting Need Discourses

Nancy Fraser argues that in the late capitalist welfare-state societies, "talk about people's needs is an important species of political discourse."[29] Within the battered women's movement the discussion of needs talk has been prominent, and the interpretation of needs by the state has structured the strategies that have been carried out to address those needs. Fraser believes that when social movements seek to politicize needs that were previously depoliticized, there are two types of struggles that must be waged. First they must challenge the more powerfully organized interests that are intent on "shaping hegemonic need interpretations for their own ends."[30] Second, they must challenge the "expert" discourses in and around the social state."[31]

Fraser focuses on discourses and interpretation of needs rather than satisfaction of needs. She has chosen this emphasis because she believes that theories of need tend to divert

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[29] Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 161.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

[31] *Ibid.*

attention away from key political questions and instead focus only on whether the various pre-defined needs will be provided for. They obscure the fact that need interpretations are politically contested. Further, this approach neglects the fact that the power to define peoples' needs "is in itself a political stake."[32] It disregards questions about whether these forms of public discourse "are skewed in favour of the self-interpretations and interests of dominant social groups,"[33] and ignores the fact that "the means of the public discourse themselves may be at issue in needs politics."[34] Fraser argues that such theories fail to address important political questions such as *which institutions are given the legitimacy and the authority to determine the interpretation of the need? and what kind of social relations are at work between the agents and actors involved?*

While Fraser uses her framework of analysis for looking at the social welfare system in the US, the battered women's movement can also be seen as a site of struggle as identified by Fraser. Once the problem of wife abuse was identified, feminist activists claimed it was a public not a private matter. Wife abuse thus was re-interpreted as a social problem by positing its connection with a set of related needs. Once these needs

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32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

"were sufficiently [de]politicized, they were to become candidates for publicly organized satisfaction."[35]

What has been the outcome of interpretation of needs within the context of wife abuse? Fraser argues that the costs of depoliticizing the issue of wife abuse have been significant, affecting the administrative constraints surrounding the issue, such as accounting procedures, accreditation, professionalization requirements, and regulation of those employed as professionals.

This shift has also transformed the way women who are abused are viewed by society and the state. Today women are seen as victims, sometimes with psychiatric or other problems such as drug and/or alcohol abuse, but not as potential activists, as was the case when the battered women's movement first emerged. Instead, many women are encouraged to seek alcohol counselling while they are getting family and/or psychological help. And with this transformation, the language used to address the problem has also been transformed, replacing the earlier feminist discourse that linked wife abuse to the systemic oppression of women with the neutral language of science; spousal abuse has replaced the more political talk of male violence against women.

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35 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

The Media As Agents of Discourse: News and Entertainment

The news media, and more recently the entertainment media, have been key agents for the articulation of the public discourse about wife abuse and battered women since the (re)emergence of the battered women's movement in the early 1970s. Although this thesis is mostly concerned with the constructions of wife abuse in the popular or entertainment media, the role of the news media as shapers of the discourse on wife abuse requires some discussion as well. The news media initially brought the plight of battered women to the attention of the public and continue to influence our attitudes and beliefs about the issue today.

Joseph Gusfield examines the links between the emergence of social problems and the place of the mass media and educational institutions, the role and use of language, and the struggle over the definitions of problem conditions. He argues that the study of social problems should be tied more closely with the study of "how social movements and institutions affect and are affected by the interpretations, the language, and the symbols that constitute seeing a situation as a social problem in historical and institutional context."[36] His theory about the link between social order, institutions of power, and the media inform the analytical basis for this portion of my thesis.

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[36] Joseph Gusfield, "Constructing the Ownership of Social Problems: Fun and Profit in the Welfare State," Social Problems, Vol. 36 No. 5, December, 1989, p. 431.

Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek and Janet Chan discuss how the news media participate in defining and shaping social problems. In *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization* (1987), the authors argue that, while the emphasis on research has been on the more conspicuous agents of social control (such as the legal system), little if any research has examined the news media's role in contributing to social control. Ericson et al. argue that "most people derive their understanding of deviance and control primarily from the news and other mass media."[37] In concert with the other agents of control, the media act as a "deviance-defining elite."[38] Further, they believe that journalists do not merely reflect what other agents define as deviance and effect control but are themselves actively involved as agents of social control.[39]

Ericson et al. suggest that journalists present accounts of reality as they themselves envision it. The object of these accounts are rarely, if ever, presented to the viewing audience to contemplate themselves.[40] Most problematic is the daily "common-sense" articulation of the problems of deviance provided by journalists. The news represents particular perspectives at the expense of others. Journalists define what is deviance and what should be done about it, drawing on "key spokespersons in

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37 Ericson et al., p. 3.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, p.4.

the hierarchy of credibility" for their sources, which has a narrowing effect on the news. According to Ericson et al. the result is that the news "gives preferred readings to the ideological messages of particular source organizations" [41] through the outright omission of the accounts of other sources or by relegating these others to a subordinate status. News journalists "purvey a common sense wisdom that incorporates the knowledge of a wide range of experts, bureaucrats, and specialists of all types....in the process of providing knowledge...."[42] In addition, they believe that "[J]ournalists exist to offer the notions and visions of well-placed persons who are in a position to give official imprint to versions of reality...."[43]

In sum, Ericson et al believe the media are important agents of social control and as such should be taken seriously for their capacity to choose what messages to convey and for the massive audiences to whom they convey them. Second, the media do not report a self-evident reality; rather, the media are involved in a process of structuring reality rather than recording it. Third, media representations, whether fact or fiction, seem unobtrusive but carry the power to inscribe particular versions of reality that seem natural and inevitable. The authors believe that it is through the discourse of the news

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41 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

43 *Ibid.*

media that a society comes to understand itself and that through the study of the news media one can gain an understanding of society. [44]

Movies of the Week: Discursive Sites for Social Problems

This thesis attempts to make some sense of our relationship with television by examining a particular social issue, wife abuse, and the entertainment media's treatment of it. In *The Movie of the Week: Private Stories, Public Events* (1992), Elayne Rapping demonstrates the importance of television movies, their strengths and weaknesses, and their potential for creating change as well as their limitations for facilitating change in society. Her work is key to my discussion about television.

Two key questions that arise from this analysis are: a) how does television represent a social problem called wife abuse? and b) what does this representation mean to us; for instance, do these representations give us the "truth" about the problem? A third question that arises from the first two is, what effect (if any) have these representations of wife abuse had on the public discourse about the issue?

In the last decade the emphasis in media and cultural studies has been on reader-oriented criticism. This work has been invaluable in unmasking old assumptions; for instance, as a result, it is no longer possible to discuss audiences or texts "in the naive, totalizing, naturalized ways in which we once

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[44] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

did."[45] However, as the emphasis of study has shifted almost exclusively to the decoding process in the last few years, some theorists have begun to question the lopsided tendencies in much of this current media theory. As Rapping points out, these tendencies may be seen "as similarly "conservatizing," in the sense that they no longer ask or answer questions about how actual oppositional forces and practices may develop in ways that are collective and therefore capable of challenging existing power differentials and relationships."[46] Therefore, this thesis is "text centred" in its approach and focuses on the encoding process.

There are two key assumptions underpinning this analysis. First is the belief that television movies (as popular texts) are a part of a public sphere that allows readers (as part of the public) to participate in such spheres in a myriad of ways. The construct of television as a public sphere is important, for "it allows us to posit a set of representations and textual practices existing in a common site within which a complex, shifting set of dominant and subaltern meanings are struggled over by an entire community with a broadly shared set of social terms and values understood to be at stake in the process of these negotiations."[47] In this context, the term "public" is

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45 Rapping 1992, p. xx.

46 *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

47 *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

more useful than "audience" as a means of identifying those engaged in decoding the text.

Second, it is assumed television texts are contested sites of political struggle. While there is no doubt that the producers of these texts "encode dominant, hegemonic meanings into texts in order to gain consent," at the same time, audiences are able to contest these meanings, "since they are always encoded in contradictory ways to ensure that consent may be achieved by a broad collective audience,"[48] with divergent perspectives, experiences, and other kinds of differences. This assumption is rooted in the tradition of British cultural studies, which "conceives of culture as an arena of struggle between those with and those without power."[49] However, care must be taken not to push the idea of audience heterogeneity too far, (as some critics believe the case to be presently), for it "strips away potential for conditions under which oppositional movements may form and at what particular historical sites of economic, cultural, and political intersections collective transformation may actually happen."[50] In other words, a certain amount of objectivity for the textual features that guide the reader's response must be maintained, for, as Robert Allen maintains, "without this...if we can't agree there's something "there" in the text that at least stimulates and guides meaning produc-

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48 *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

49 Allen 1987, p. 15.

50 Rapping 1992, p. xxiv.

tion," [then] scholars might as well pack up shop and find another line of work."[51]

Rapping makes a similar point when discussing the politics of difference. For despite the acknowledged differences in the way individuals interpret and receive texts, she argues that "there is something commonsensical about acknowledging that there is still a dominant text we can recognize as the thing we have experienced."[52] Whether the program is viewed alone or in groups or at another time on videotape, makes no difference. The fact remains that "there is an idea of an entity called *The Burning Bed* that we can talk about in common because we have in our minds a sense of how it is in fact a recognizable, discursively describable entity."[53]

As well, the politics of "difference," although central to any discussion of the relationship between the media and social change, may not be enough to "describe how popular texts may become sites of ideological struggle over meaning."[54] For as Rapping rightly points out, the production of texts is in itself a "slippery site fraught with contradiction and ideological

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[51] Robert C. Allen, "Reader-Oriented Criticism and Television," in Channels of Discourse:Television and Contemporary Criticism, Robert C. Allen ed., The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1987, p. 99.

[52] Rapping, p. xxvii.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

struggle."[55] This idea becomes clearer when one considers the number of people involved in the production process. Included are the writers, producers, director, crew, actors, etc. in addition to the sponsors and the networks themselves, all who operate with their own agendas and with various levels of power within which to enforce them. Rapping argues that it is **because** of these competing agendas that television movies provide opportunities "for a kind of work not easily done elsewhere in television or film and therefore tend to attract from the start producers, actors, and writers with more politicized agendas."[56] In addition, while a dominant text is produced by the networks, which acts "as a unifying construct", one must remember the commercial tendencies of the industry require networks to produce shows that will attract the largest audience possible. This unifying construct also acts as "a heterogeneous, internally contradictory and polysemous one as well."[57]

In conclusion, the power of the media raises questions about how the millions of people who regularly watch television for news and entertainment are affected by what they see. Many people rely on television for their understanding of social problems such as wife abuse. In part, this thesis seeks to answer questions about the kinds of images and information the news and entertainment media present about wife abuse and the

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55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

57 *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

news and entertainment media present about wife abuse and the battered woman. For instance, is it a fair and accurate representation of the issue and the women who are victimized? In whose interest are these representations being constructed? And, what effect (if any) do these representations have on our understanding about the issue?

CHAPTER THREE

The Birth Of A Social Problem: Wife Abuse As A Public Problem

This chapter looks at how wife abuse was transformed from a private matter between a wife and her husband to a social problem, beginning in the 1970s. The social-historical context of wife abuse will be examined in order to establish how and why wife abuse became a social problem for public concern and how the issue has been articulated in the public discourse. Included is a brief discussion of how wife abuse has evolved historically since it (re)-emerged as a public problem approximately twenty-five years ago.[58] As well, the social construction of wife abuse will be surveyed.

"She Must Have Done Something to Deserve It"

From the turn of the century until the 1970s public discussion about the issue of wife battering was virtually non-existent. Before this time wife beating was labelled a "domestic disturbance" by police and as a "family maladjustment" by therapists and social workers.[59] Elizabeth Pleck notes that in the Journal of Marriage and the Family (the major scholarly journal in family sociology), "no article on family violence

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[58] In *Domestic Tyranny* (1987), Elizabeth Pleck argues that reform against family violence surfaced in two earlier historical periods: between 1640 to 1680; and a second reform period took place between 1874 to 1890.

[59] Susan Schechter, Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement, South End Press, Boston, 1982, p. 20-21.

appeared in the Journal of from its founding in 1939 until 1969."[60] When the problem was acknowledged, psychiatrists routinely declared both the battered woman and her abuser deviant, often labelling the "case" as psychiatric.[61]

Psychiatrists often blamed the woman who was being beaten, not her husband, for the "problem." If the woman was not accused of causing the husband to beat her, no attempts were made to help her leave the relationship or to change her circumstances. Instead, the woman was defined as abnormal, not her abusive husband; it was left to the woman to find a way to "live with" the problem.

For instance, a paper by Snell el al. entitled "The Wifebeater's Wife: A Study of Family Interaction" was published in the Archives of General Psychiatry in 1964. The study involved thirty-seven men who had been charged with assault and battery of their wives. The women, who were seen in a psychiatric clinic annexed to the court, had only reported the abuse to the police after twelve to twenty years of marriage; the apparent lag in reporting puzzled the psychiatrists. In some circumstances, it was discovered the reason the women had sought help was concern for their children. Snell et al. state: "[T]his "discovery"...is interpreted as a disturbance

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[60] Elizabeth Pleck, Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy Against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 182. Also see Schechter, 1982 pp. 20-27.

[61] Schechter 1982, p. 20.

of... a marital equilibrium which had been working more or less satisfactorily."[62] Snell et al. conclude the women were masochists and that their self-abusive needs were being met by the violent husbands.[63]

In a paper entitled *"You Can't Commit Violence Against An Object: Women, Psychiatry and Psychosurgery,"* Diane Hudson describes several cases where psychiatrists prescribed leucotomies[64] for women who were diagnosed with depression. Two of the cases she describes are of particular interest. In the first instance, the woman had been severely emotionally abused for years by her husband; in the other, the woman had been physically abused by her husband and had withstood many broken bones over the years. In both cases the women received leucotomies on the premise this course of treatment *would enable them to remain in their respective marriages!* Sargant and Slate, (as quoted by Hudson), argue that leucotomies are advocated as an appropriate course of action for women living with violent and/or crazy men:

> A depressed woman, for instance, may owe her illness to a psychopathic husband who cannot change and who will not accept treatment...[women] patients of this type are often helped by anti-depressant drugs. But

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62 as quoted by Schechter, 1982, p. 21.

63 *Ibid.*

64 A leucotomy is similar to a lobotomy. Hudson describes it "as an operation on the healthy brain tissue of someone suspected of suffering from a mental disorder in order to change or influence their behaviour." The instrument, which resembles an apple-corer is used to bore holes in the brain by pushing in the leucotome and twisting it.

> in the occasional case where they do not work, we have seen patients enabled by a leucotomy to return to the difficult environment and cope with it.[65]

The act of destroying a woman's healthy brain tissue to enable her to remain in an abusive relationship is an extreme example of the manifestation of the misogyny evident within psychiatric profession. Shockingly, Hudson's research took place over a ten year period beginning in 1977.

Most of the papers and articles published about men beating their wives between the 1950 and 1970 did not condemn the violence perpetrated against the women they studied. Much of what was written about men beating their wives ascribed *weakness* as the husband's problem but not his *aggression*. A frequent conclusion was that the woman deserved the violence because of her own hostility and lack of emotion; some went further claiming the woman required physical violence to maintain her psychic well-being.[66]

Although less openly contentious, even by the mid-1970s sexism still permeated much of what was written in psychiatry and psychoanalysis about the issue of wife abuse. The theory of *"victim precipitation,"* that the woman was somehow responsible for her victimization, was gaining acceptance in many academic circles, including the fields of criminology, sociology and

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[65] Quoted by Diane Hudson in, "You Can't Commit Violence Against an Object," in Women, Violence and Social Control, Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard eds., Humanities Press International, Inc. Atlantic Hylands, NJ. Reprinted 1991, p. 118.

[66] Schechter, p. 23.

psychology. This theory was not, however, confined to the academic world. Victim provocation theories were embraced by the legal and medical institutions, as well as by the social services. As Schechter states, "[B]attered women consistently found that institutions were unwilling to help them and to deal with the real problem....In case after case...the police did nothing to help and often made the situation worse by encouraging the man's violence or by minimizing and trivializing her injuries and fears."[67]

Consciousness Raising and the Battered Women's Movement

However, with the rebirth of the women's movement, the public's awareness of violence against women was also awakened. In the early 1970s women across Canada, the U.S. and the UK began organizing around many issues of concern, in what would become known as consciousness raising sessions. Women gathered in groups, supporting one another, sharing the experiences of their lives as wives and mothers, and exploring many issues such as sexuality, housework, and the right to control their bodies and lives. Other important issues were identified and women began to organize in protest around them. Issues such as equal pay and access to safe and legal abortions were raised; as well, the anti-rape movement was formed.[68] The anti-rape movement

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[67] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

[68] The feminism which engendered the anti-rape and the battered women's movement were influenced by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. Susan Schechter discusses the

led feminists to begin to address the broader issue of violence against women and was the impetus for the battered woman's movement.

One issue that came up repeatedly during consciousness raising sessions was the problem that many women faced within their daily lives; they were being routinely and at times savagely beaten by their intimate partners. As women shared their experiences of abuse, it became clear this problem was much more serious and widespread than anything previously imagined. In some cases women's lives were seriously in danger. As shock turned to anger and then outrage, feminists turned their attention toward raising awareness of the problem in the public's consciousness and they then demanded something be done about it. As Schechter notes, from the mid-1970s "...the ongoing struggle of the women's movement was to name the hidden and private violence in women's lives, declare it public, and provide safe havens and support."[69]

Gaining the public's sympathy was crucial because as discussed above, before the mid-1970s, wife abuse was considered a private matter between a man and his wife. Previously, wife abuse was not considered a serious or widespread problem; when it occurred, it was widely believed to have been precipitated by the woman. As well, wife abuse was linked to socio-economic

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roots of the battered women's movement in more depth than covered here.

[69] Schechter, p. 11.

status. It was believed to be a problem only for poor and/or minority women. Yet it was obvious from the consciousness raising sessions that wife abuse crossed all socio-economic and ethnic boundaries. Feminists and activists within the battered women's movement set out to dispel the myths and stereotypes surrounding wife abuse and to transform a private matter into a public issue.

Activists were able to achieve public recognition of wife abuse as a serious problem worthy of the public's sympathy and resources largely through the mass media. For decades legal, medical, and religious institutions and agencies had ignored or rationalized the circumstances that might justify women leaving their homes.[70] But as Gillian Walker points out, "[T]he mainstream media, both locally and nationally, found the subject newsworthy and published articles and reports on the subject. Our "issue" was identified as one of women being beaten, abused, battered, and killed."[71] As the horrifying stories of beatings, torture, and in some cases even murder began to filter through the press to the public, interest in the issue increased significantly. Seemingly overnight, the issue became a very hot topic for public concern; workshops, conferences, and policy hearings were organized with wife battering as the thematic focus.

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[70] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[71] Gillian Walker, Family Violence and the Women's Movement: The Conceptual Politics of Struggle, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990, p. 23.

Material written by feminists and other activists working in the shelter movement was eagerly sought out. For example, Erin Pizzey's *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear* was published in 1974. Pizzey was a founding member of the first transition shelter in Britain and wrote of her experiences using the words of the women and children who sought refuge in the shelter from the violence in their lives. Throughout her book, Pizzey painted a graphic picture of the fear, hopelessness, and despair that many battered women experienced. Probably more than any account at the time, Pizzey's book had a profound impact on the public's awareness about the reality for women and their children who were the victims of wife abuse.

Staggering statistics on the numbers of women who were being beaten by their intimate partners began to emerge in the mid-1970s. Prior to this time, documentation had been scarce, as reliable data and statistics were unavailable, even from the police.[72] However, by the end of the 1970s a landslide of documentation substantiating the severity of the problem emerged due to public interest (via the news media) in the issue because of the efforts of the women's movement. Some of the findings were startling to say the least. For example, a study done in Kentucky estimated that 80,000 women from the state had been the victims of abuse at the hands of their menfolk in just one year; 33,000 of the women studied were seriously injured.[73]

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[72] Schechter, p. 53.

[73] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Feminist activists, community activists, and women who had survived abusive relationships felt what abused women needed most was a safe place to go to escape from a violent and potentially lethal partner. More important though, was the belief that battered women needed the support of other women rather than the institutions and so-called "helping" professions, which determined what the needs of battered women were and what types of resources and services should be provided. The long history of re-victimization that many battered women experienced seeking assistance from the legal and medical institutions was more than enough to convince those in the battered women's movement that help for abused women should come from their peers.

Shelter Philosophy and Structure

In the US, the *Women's Advocates* was the first feminist transition shelter to open its doors to women on the East Coast. The *Women's Advocates* developed from a consciousness raising group and was oriented toward direct action; the mandate of this group was to *"do something."*[74] The philosophy behind the shelter was based on a woman's right to self-determination, including the right for the woman to decide whether or not to stay separated from her partner. The shelter was run on a collective rather than a hierarchical model, and initially would

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[74] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

only accept limited state funding. Instead, the shelter depended heavily on volunteers, with a small hired staff.[75]

The shelter movement emerged in Canada about the same time as it did in the U.S. In the early 1970s the federal government had completed a Royal Commission on the Status of Women. What became apparent through the Commission's study was that many women who were living with abusive partners needed somewhere to go. The main recommendation by the Commission was that funding be allocated for transition shelters in Canada as a solution to the problem. In Canada, the first transition shelter opened its doors in Vancouver in 1973.[76]

Shortly after the first transition shelters opened, and with the support of government at all levels, hundreds of transition shelters opened their doors to women in Canada and the U.S. in rural and urban areas. As each new house opened it was filled to capacity with women fleeing from their abusive menfolk. Yet, as the issue gained the public's attention, ideological conflicts emerged, and there were many struggles for control over how wife battering was going to be understood within the feminist movement as well as from outside it. The public discourse about wife abuse was beginning.

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[75] The sad truth is that all transition shelters in Canada and the US have always depended heavily on volunteers to keep them open and running, as shelters have been chronically underfunded by the state since the first shelters opened. For instance, in Canada transition shelters do not receive stable core funding for operating costs from the government.

[76] Walker, p. 22.

Feminism and Ideological Diversity

The battered women's movement has been involved in many ideological conflicts and struggles since it emerged. As Emerson and Russell Dobash point out, the struggles have been "over the recognition of the problem, as well as the recognition and legitimation of the grass-roots activists, definitions of causes and solutions and construction of pragmatic and direct ways of working within these movements, as well as with outside agencies."[77]

The aim of this discussion is to acknowledge the key positions upon which the philosophical underpinnings of the battered women's movement were based. However, before going on a caveat is necessary. It is important to recognize that any attempt to unravel ideological strands is controversial, as feminism itself has been the site of conflict and struggle, resulting in tensions and competing definitions in the public discourse surrounding the issue of wife abuse, many of which remain today. I merely wish to draw attention to the fact that the women's movement has itself been a site for conflict, particularly during the period of the 1970s and early 1980s, and that the struggle within the women's movement has greatly affected the public discourse about wife abuse and the battered woman during the last two decades.

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[77] R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, "The Response of the British and American Women's Movements to Violence Against Women," in Women, Violence and Social Control, Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard eds., Humanities Press International Inc., 1987 (reprinted 1989, 1991), p. 169.

Some discussion of the perspectives within feminism is necessary, as the identification of the causes of and the solutions to wife abuse depend on the perspective chosen. There are key questions to pose: Why do men beat women? What political role (if any) should the battered women's movement play? What is the appropriate relationship between the battered women's movement and the state? What types of services do battered women need; is it strictly a question of safety? Who should own this movement, the battered women, feminist activists, members of the social services? How can the battered women's movement best help the women who are in need?[78]

The women who participated in the battered women's movement came from varied backgrounds, bringing many different experiences, as well as ideological and political perspectives with them. This included women who were radical feminists as well as those who identified themselves as non-feminist; it included women, who had survived abusive relationships and professional women who also called themselves feminists. Schechter contends that most of the women who were involved in the battered women's movement during this period would loosely fit into one of three categories: feminist, professional, and grassroots women.[79] But even the women who identified themselves as feminist did not agree on what feminism meant or its implications, except in the broadest sense.

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78 Schechter, p. 44.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

By the early 1970s, feminism could be roughly divided into two main camps: radical and liberal feminism, although many of the women who were involved with the battered women's movement and/or the women's movement did not label themselves as one or the other.[80]

Radical and Liberal Feminism

Radical feminists believed that feminism was "both an analysis of how women are oppressed as a gender category and a commitment to organizing to end that oppression, gaining power and autonomy on many levels."[81] In addition, radical feminism embraced the philosophical principles of non-hierarchical organizational structures and interpersonal relationships. Activists who identified themselves as radical feminists linked the issue of wife abuse to the larger issue of the patriarchal system of oppression of women on a much wider scale. According to Walker, radical feminist believed that "the work must progress from consciousness-raising about the existence and nature of the experience to political action aimed at changing the structure of society that perpetuated it."[82]

Women who called themselves "liberal feminists" made up the other main branch of feminism. Liberal feminists were part of the women's rights branch of the feminist movement and believed

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80 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

81 *Ibid.*

82 Walker 1992, p. 24.

that feminism "primarily implies making the society better through winning concrete changes in the law and within institutions."[83] Liberal feminists often were from the legal and social work professions, and while some defined their goals more broadly, these feminists believed that with fair laws and equal opportunities, women would gain equality and be free of oppression. Others with professional backgrounds based their analyses of wife abuse on a medical treatment model. Some women who identified with this perspective believed the reasons for violence could be found in family pathology. Other professional women were inclined to place more emphasis on providing traditional quality services to women based on a separate and hierarchical relationship between them and the "client" (the battered woman).[84]

Many women who identified themselves as radical feminists had the same goals as liberal feminists but went much further in their analysis, "exploring the unequal gender division of labor and women's lack of control over their bodies, sexuality, and lives. Because of its analysis, women's liberation demanded a total, egalitarian restructuring of male/female relationships and society."[85]

A large number of women working in the battered women's movement did not neatly fit into either "group," and I do not

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[83] Schechter, p. 44.

[84] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[85] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

wish to imply otherwise. And some who identified themselves as liberal feminists held many of the same views as the radical feminists, and vice versa. Of course, as has been mentioned already, there were many women working in and for the battered women's movement who did not embrace feminist views, period. For instance, some of the early shelters were run by church groups and other religious organizations, such as the Salvation Army. However, these women found common ground with feminist principles of organizational autonomy, equalitarian treatment, and self-help.

Common Goals, Competing Definitions

The goals of the battered women's movement could broadly be defined as feminist goals, regardless of the ideology one embraced. All women working in and for the battered women's movement believed that "battered women faced a brutality from their husbands and an indifference from social institutions that compelled redress."[86] The one thing these women had in common was their commitment to doing something concrete to improve, and perhaps save, the lives of women who, at times, were in desperate situations. However, given the fundamentally different perspectives, with different visions about the causes and solutions to wife abuse, it is not surprising that there would be tensions between the different groups. The struggle to have each perspective legitimized as the correct one caused conflicts

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[86] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

within the feminist movement as well as outside it. These conflicts have intensified over time and have influenced the way in which the issue of wife abuse has become known in the public discourse. The explanation of why women were experiencing violence in their homes have had major implications with respect to the collective representation of wife abuse and the battered woman, transition shelters, and the role of the state.

The process through which the issue of wife abuse emerged as a social problem can be traced to the activity of various claims-makers, including the feminist activists, the media, social scientists, social services, academics, bureaucrats and policy makers, and those attending policy hearings, among others. By the early 1970s the collective representation of the issue as a social problem for public concern was entering into the realm of the public sphere. But what is the collective representation of the battered woman and wife abuse? Given the various claims and ideological positions within feminism as well as outside it, it can be assumed that the collective representation of wife abuse and the battered woman were not unified. It also explains why many contradictions in the construction of the battered woman and wife abuse remain and why we are still struggling to find solutions to the problem today. Competing representations have been conflated within the social construction of the issue, which is reflected in the public discourse surrounding the issue of wife abuse and the battered woman.

> Human problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced into the consciousness of bystanders. Even to recognize a situation as painful requires a system for categorizing and defining events.[87]
>
> Joseph Gusfield

In order to understand how the public has come to understand wife abuse and the battered woman, it is useful to examine the way in which the issue became one of social concern. I draw from the study of social problems, employing the social construction tradition of the study of public problems. Underlying this tradition is the belief that social problems are not " assumed to be mirrors or reflections of objective conditions ...rather [they] are understood to be the result of human activity."[88] As Gusfield points out, many human experiences and problems have long histories, although they have not always been understood as they are now or might be in the future. For instance, throughout history the concept of "mental illness" has been awarded different values and status, from merit to condemnation. Similarly, the concept of poverty has been imbued with different and contradictory values throughout history. Gusfield points out that in Western history there have been periods when the poor were revered, while at other times, they were denounced.[89] The question is, how and why do some of the

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87 Gusfield 1981, p. 3.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

situations and problems experienced by humans become *public problems;* how does this occur? Gusfield argues that there is a structural component to public problems, which may help to explain how and why they emerge as concerns for the public. Further, Gusfield believes that the structure of public problems contain cognitive and moral judgements. Cognitive judgements contain beliefs about the facts of the circumstances and events which constitute the problem, including the beliefs and hypotheses about the causes and solutions to the problem, whether it be alcoholism, poverty, crime or whatever. Moral judgements facilitate an understanding of the situation as painful, disgraceful, and/or immoral. Moral judgements evoke public sympathy, which in turn prompt public action on behalf of those victimized in an attempt to eradicate or to alter the situation which has been deemed to be the cause of the problem.[90]

Like Gusfield, Candace Clark has also written on the subject of public sympathy. In an article entitled "Sympathy, Biography and Sympathy Margin", she argues that sympathy can be understood as a type of "feeling currency" and as a social commodity. As such, Clark argues that "cultural conventions" encompass sympathy.[91] She also claims that in our culture, the grounds for warranting sympathy are specific, although they can and do change over time.

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[90] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[91] Candace Clark, "Sympathy, Biography and Sympathy Margin," American Journal of Sociology Vol. 93 No. 2, September, 1987, p. 291.

To successfully construct wife abuse as a public problem, claims-makers needed to convince the public of the reprehensibility of a specific type of violence, wife abuse, and to morally condemn this type of violence. Furthermore, claims-makers asked the public to provide public sympathy and support for battered women. Therefore, the battered woman had to be constructed as someone who deserves sympathy, determined by cultural evaluations of sympathy worthiness; or, the rules of sympathy would have to be changed to accommodate her.[92]

According to Clark, part of the criteria used to judge whether a person is worthy of sympathy includes: 1) the situation must be considered "dire;" 2) the individual must appear in no way complicit in creating the problem; and 3) she must be deemed as morally worthy.[93] With respect to battered women, claims-makers needed to circumvent the long-standing beliefs held by the public "that violence toward women was not severe nor consequential, and that women somehow "deserved" to be hit."[94] As a result, changing public beliefs and assumptions required extreme images of wife abuse and the battered woman.[95]

Both Gusfield and Clark's arguments are particularly relevant for the issue of wife abuse. Women have been beaten by

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92 *Ibid.*, p. 290-321.

93 *Ibid.*

94 Loseke 1992, p. 54.

95 *Ibid.*

their menfolk for thousands of years,[96] yet only periodically has this behavior warranted the public's attention and/or sympathy.[97] Furthermore, in an attempt to understand how the battered woman was deemed "morally worthy" of the public's sympathy, Loseke has examined how the collective representations of wife abuse entered the realm of the public sphere.

Loseke contends that wife abuse was defined as a public problem only after the activities of claims-makers could convince the public that the behaviours now called wife abuse were in fact "morally intolerable" and that battered women needed and deserved the public's sympathy and support.[98] Secondly, she hypothesizes that as the collective representations of wife abuse and the battered woman entered into the realm of the public sphere, they have provided the mandate for a specific type of social service: transition houses.[99]

It is useful to understand what the terms wife abuse and battered woman actually mean. Therefore, an examination of how we as a society came to understand what a battered woman is and why society has decided to give her our sympathy is crucial to

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[96] The first recorded incidence of wife battery appears in the bible, where numerous references are made sanctioning a man's right to chastise his wife using force. For a discussion of the historical precedents for wife beating see Kathleen Hofeller's Battered Women, Shattered Lives, published by R&E Publishers, P.O. Box 2008, Saratoga, California 95070, 1983, pp. 49-66.

[97] See Pleck, Domestic Tyranny, 1987.

[98] Loseke, p. 2.

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

any discussion about the public discourse of the issue. In addition, the social construction of wife abuse and the battered woman has had far reaching implications for women who are labelled as victims of wife abuse, as well as for women unable to legitimately lay claim to the label, which is the argument at the heart of this thesis.

Who Are the Claims-Makers?

I use the term claims-makers collectively to describe those who formulated and advanced "claims" which were responsible for how society perceives wife abuse as a social problem. Marlena Studer (quoting Spector et al, 1973), describes the activity of claims-making as "the process through which certain groups define a social problem as undesirable and make demands on existing institutions to ameliorate the problem."[100] The success of claims-makers is dependent on several factors: 1) the authority of the group(s) making claims; 2) the nature and variety of the claims; and 3) the resources and mechanisms the group(s) have for pressing claims.[101]

Although the impetus for the battered women's movement came from grass-roots feminists, other claims-makers quickly became involved. In fact, the power of the battered women's movement was greatly legitimized when professional groups including the

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[100] Marlena Studer, "Wife Beating as a Social Problem: The Process of Definition," in International Journal of Women's Studies, Vol. 7 No. 5, November/December 1984, p. 412.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 413.

legal, medical and helping professions took up the issue.[102]

However, claims-makers were not unified in their definitions of the battered woman and wife abuse, particularly the causes of the problem. Although professional groups lent legitimacy to the battered women's movement, competing claims hindered the movement's ability to make proposals for change and diminished the possibility of expressing a unique ideology.[103]

An added problem in describing the collective content of the issue is the fact that only a few of the claims put forth contain explicit definitions.[104] In addition, the form the discourse has taken depends on who is speaking (or writing) about the issue and the intended audience. Furthermore, the claims made about wife abuse have been advanced by various persons and groups, who do not necessarily share a common discourse; no single person or group has been vested with the legitimacy to explain the issue. In fact, recurring debates and disagreements about what constitutes wife abuse, as well as what should be done about it make the task of deconstructing the content of these claims difficult.

Despite the fact that claims makers with competing interests were successful in gaining official recognition for the wife beating problem, it was not without a price. Johnson (1981), Studer (1984), Walker (1992) and others believe that the

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102 *Ibid.*

103 *Ibid.*

104 Loseke, p. 13.

support of professional groups meant that some groups and/or goals, particularly the groups which embraced a radical feminist ideology in the movement were "officially" coopted. Groups that were not prepared to accept a depoliticized definition of wife abuse found themselves struggling for funding.[105]

What is Wife Abuse?

> As socially constructed, the collective representation of wife abuse is a system for categorizing violence and for morally evaluating it; as constructed, the battered woman is a collective representation for a woman with a particular type of experience, biography, motivation, and subjectivity.[106]
>
> Donileen Loseke

Claims makers generally agree that wife abuse primarily encompasses physical violence and frequently involves extreme physical violence. The stories circulating during the 1970s and 1980s illustrate this point. Books such as Del Martin's *Battered Wives* and Lenore Walker's *The Battered Woman* include long descriptive stories from women who suffered abuse and illustrates the magnitude of depravity embodied by the label "wife abuse."[107]

The collective content of wife abuse distinguishes it from other forms of abuse; for example, an occasional slap or mutual combat between a husband and wife would not constitute wife

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105 Studer, p. 419.

106 Loseke, p. 2.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

abuse.[108] Rather, wife abuse is described as having certain specific characteristics. Loseke believes that the label "wife abuse" is used to define a pattern of events, that involves continued (mostly) physical abuse and/or degrading acts against the woman by her partner. Loseke begins with three constructions which most claims-makers agree upon. The first construction is that wife abuse is a condition that includes all groups of women regardless of socio-economic status in any cross-sex relationship, not just women who are legally married. Second, wife abuse involves men as offenders who intend to do harm and women as victims who do not create their victimization.[109] Significant is the fact that "wife abuse" is a label for acts where women are *pure victims*.[110] The key here is the belief that the woman has not in any way precipitated the violence committed against her by her husband. The notion of the battered woman as "pure victim" is probably the most important aspect of what has been communicated to the public about the battered woman's plight, and I would argue, has given the most legitimacy to the issue for the public. However, the battered woman as "pure victim" has serious implications for women, both those who are able to claim legitimacy as victims of wife abuse, as well (and most likely even more so) for women who are unable to lay claim

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108 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

110 *Ibid.*

to the label of battered woman. The third construction is that, almost universally, claims-makers recognize men as offenders.

What *specifically* constitutes "abuse?" According to Loseke, while most claims-makers would agree that wife abuse should be broadly defined to include any and all forms of abuse, "most claims-makers construct wife abuse to be primarily about *physical violence*. It is explicitly defined in terms such as the "use of physical force," a "physical assault," or a "physical attack"."[111] The definition of wife abuse as extreme physical violence is evident in the many policy hearings by governments at all levels in both Canada and the US, as well as in the many hundreds of articles, policy papers, and books written about the subject in the last two decades, which all depict wife abuse in a similar manner.

An illustration of the definition of wife abuse as extreme brutality can be seen in Linda MacLeod's *Battered But Not Beaten*, published in 1987 as part of the mandate of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Throughout the book there are accounts from women who have experienced wife abuse firsthand. For example, chapter one begins with a testimonial from a woman who endured not only years of physical abuse but emotional abuse as well:

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[111] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

> I was hit plenty by my husband over the years. I had a couple of concussions, broken ribs, and I'm still deaf in one ear from him always hitting on that side of my head....[112]

As well, *The Report of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women* entitled *The War Against Women*, submitted to the House of Commons in Canada in 1991 contains testimonials from women working in transition shelters (among others) who describe their experiences working with and for battered women. To quote one worker:

> I know a woman whose ex-partner was convicted of aggravated assault against her. She was hung by ropes, naked, from the beam of a barn and whipped to a state of unconsciousness. The assault took place in front of the male's three children.[113]

The recently published report of the British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence entitled *Is Anyone Listening* (1992) contains quotes from battered women such as these:

> My husband shot at me twice but he was so drunk he missed me. I locked myself in the bathroom and crawled out the window. I ran through a field in knee-deep snow with no shoes on. . . .[114]

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[112] Linda MacLeod, Battered But Not Beaten: Preventing Wife Battering in Canada, Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, June 1987, p. 11.

[113] The War Against Women, p. 25.

[114] British Columbia. Ministry of Women's Equality, Is Anyone Listening?: Report of the British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence, Minister, Penny Priddy, February 1992, p. 78.

These types of collective representations are not reserved solely for academics and bureaucrats. The news media has often relied on testimonials from battered women as well to support their reports on the issue. For example, recently *Time Magazine* ran a cover story on wife abuse entitled " When Violence Hits Home." The article contains the quotes from several battered women.

One woman called "Diana" was rushed to the hospital after arguing with her boyfriend in his truck. She states:

> He wanted me to get out, but I kept holding on to the door handle. Then I let go. He ran over my chest with the back wheels.[115]

Included in the *Time* report was the account of Diane Hawkins and her daughter Katrina Harris, who were found stabbed and mutilated in their home in May 1993. Hawkins, the mother of six, had been disemboweled and her heart cut out. Harris was partly decapitated. Hawkin's ex-boyfriend was arrested and charged with the murders.

Ms. magazine recanted the story of a man "who poured a kettle of boiling water over his pregnant wife's vagina just before she went into labor."[116]

The books, policy briefs, magazines, and reports mentioned above are filled with similar testimonials from the many women

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[115] Jill Smolowe, Time Magazine "When Violence Hits Home: The O.J. Simpson Case Sheds New Light On The Epidemic Of Domestic Abuse," July 4, 1994, Vol. 144 No. 1, p. 21.

[116] Gena Corea, "Northern Ireland: The Violence Isn't All In Streets," Ms. Magazine, July 1979, pp. 98-99.

who were courageous enough to share their experiences with the authors, as well as the public. The point here is that although most claims-makers will recognize that all forms of violence should be condemned:

> ...their claims construct the core of wife abuse to contain *extreme physical violence*. As explicitly defined and implicitly illustrated, "wife abuse" is not "just slapping or shoving," it is not the same as a "marital quarrel," a "domestic spat," or a "domestic disturbance." According to claims, wife abuse is a label for events seeable as those of "conjugal terrorism."[117]

In addition to the characteristics described so far, the definition of wife abuse may also extend to include emotional abuse if it is considered severe enough. Although most of the reports by the press are about women who have experienced *both* physical and emotional abuse, at times the media have also printed accounts of cases of emotional abuse which are framed within the rubric of wife abuse. For instance, one magazine reports the story of a pregnant woman who was locked in her bedroom with her young daughter by her husband each morning before he left for work. To ensure they did not try to escape, he took away their clothes and wired the door handle with electricity.[118] In another instance, the press published the account of a woman whose husband threatened to lock her into a coffin-like box he had built specifically for that purpose.[119]

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[117] Loseke, p. 18.

[118] Gay Search, "London, Battered Wives," Ms. Magazine June 1974, p. 24.

[119] *Ibid.*

Another published account describes how a man poured gasoline "over his wife's naked body then flicked matches around her."[120]

In addition, "experts" such as Lenore Walker, a psychologist who testifies as an "expert witness" at the trials of battered women who kill their partners and the author of several books on the subject of the *Battered Women's Syndrome*, have often been quoted in the press. For instance, Walker describes the emotional abuse that battered women face as "life-threatening."[121] "Expert opinions" have been cited often by the press as to what causes this behavior as well as why women who are victimized so brutally might not leave such a relationship.

To sum up, wife abuse is characterized as a label for a pattern or series of mostly physical violence against the woman. According to claims, it is "continuing, escalating, and unstoppable victimization"[122] that results in physical injury and/or death in some cases. It is also characterized as "terrifying." In combination, the various claims represent the collective content of the social problem now known as 'wife abuse', which is "a label for severe, frequent, and continuing violence that escalates over time and is unstoppable."[123] Secondly, these acts of violence are perpetrated by men who intentionally wish

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120 Corea, Ms. Magazine, July 1979, pp. 98-99.

121 Loseke, p. 18.

122 *Ibid.*

123 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

to cause harm to the women they are married to or live with and where "the women are not the authors of their own experiences which they find terrifying."[124]

The collective representation of wife abuse as described above helped to dispel some of the myths and stereotypes surrounding the public's perception that wife abuse was limited to women who were poor and/or from minorities and/or that it was precipitated by the victim. Moreover, the collective content of wife abuse has constructed the battered woman as someone who needs help. As a result, wife abuse, which had been viewed as a personal problem was transformed into a problem for the public's concern.[125]

Who is the "Battered Woman"?

The collective representation of the battered woman is constructed as a woman experiencing violence within the rubric of wife abuse as described above. This collective representation of the content of wife abuse immediately raises questions about why the battered woman would remain in such a relationship. Most would assume that anyone subjected to the kind of treatment that battered women have reported would immediately leave the situation on their own accord, never to return. Such is not the case, however, with many women who are in abusive relationships. This irrational behaviour seems to defy logic. As wife abuse has

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124 *Ibid.*

125 *Ibid.*

been transformed from a private to a public problem, the question that has been given much attention by claims-makers is: Why does she stay? Given the fact that the collective representation of wife abuse is a situation that is intolerable, it would seem a reasonable question, although a more appropriate question might ask why the men continue to engage in this abhorrent behavior.[126]

Loseke argues that because wife abuse has become a public problem "the behavior of staying in a relationship containing wife abuse must be constructed in a way not challenging claims about the content of this social problem."[127] In effect, challenges to the content of claims would emerge if, for example, the woman professes not to mind the abuse or (for any reason of her choosing), remains in the relationship.[128] Rather, the reasons the battered woman remains in the relationship must support the claims about what constitutes wife abuse as a public problem. As a result, claims-makers define the battered woman as deviant and her behaviour as 'unreasonable' and unexpected.[129] However, the behaviour the battered woman exhibits *is not her fault*, according to claims.

The content of claims construct the battered woman stereo-

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126 Although she does not speculate why, Loseke points out "that claims-makers alike have transformed this question about repeated behaviours into one about women victims. See p. 20.

127 Loseke, p. 21.

128 *Ibid.*

129 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

typically as wife, mother, woman, and victim.[130] Often the battered woman is characterized as a woman with traditional values, who believes that marriage is for life regardless of how she is treated, who has young children to care for, who is economically and/or emotionally dependent on her husband, and who has no where else to go. According to claims, these characteristics justify her deviant behaviour, as the battered woman is constructed as one who indeed wishes to leave the relationship but is unable to due to circumstances beyond her control. However, this construction of the battered woman presents some contradictions already.

As mentioned above, wife abuse has been constructed as crossing all socio-economic boundaries. As such, according to claims women from wealthy backgrounds may be victimized and are as likely to be victims of abuse as are women who are poor. However, according to claims, women who are affluent may be in an even worse position than poor women due to the fact that their position of privilege is dependent on their affiliation with rich men. Claims-makers argue that these women would bear even greater economic hardship, as they have farther to fall if they leave the relationship.[131]

Claims construct the battered woman as a person trapped within her brutal victimization and as alone in her plight. Again, this notion may be challenged: what about family and/or

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130 *Ibid.*

131 *Ibid.*

friends of the victim or social services? It is a reasonable question to ask why the battered woman does not seek help from these sources. Claims-makers argue that the battered woman is constructed as a one who is humiliated by her situation, who might therefore isolate herself from family and friends. Her isolation could be imposed by her partner as a way of controlling her. Whether or not the battered woman is isolated, claims argue she would not necessarily seek help from her friends or family as they might not believe her, for according to claims, the abusive man often seems normal to outsiders. In some cases, family and friends may have been threatened by the man, or simply fear retribution from him if they interfere.[132] The battered woman may also not seek help from social services, at least according to claims. Claims-makers argue that the social services system does not understand the battered woman's plight, and often ends up re-victimizing the woman seeking assistance. For instance, the woman may need to leave the situation on the weekend when social services are closed, or she may not be eligible for welfare if her partner is legally responsible. Further, her needs may be difficult to meet within the mandates of the various social service agencies. As well, claims-makers argue that the battered woman "may not be helped by

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132 *Ibid.*

"professionals"....[who may] treat this type of woman as the problem and...deny, discount, or ignore women's stories of brutality."[133]

To sum up, claims-makers are (generally) united in their construction of the battered woman as one who will not receive help from the social services. Taken together, Loseke contends that the battered woman is a **social problem** because it is her **social life** that has her trapped in a cycle of continued victimization: "...the problem is a woman's economic entrapment, unresponsive friends, social service providers, and the traditional organization of social services."[134]

Claims-makers have cast the battered woman as someone who has no one to help her and no where to turn -- literally as an outcast from society. Within this construction, the battered woman is represented as someone who would like to leave her situation, but is unable to because of the social factors against her. In addition, the battered woman is constructed as one who is unable to gather the resources she needs to leave. As Loseke concludes, the collective representation of the battered woman effectively diverts challenges that emerge due to the woman's seemingly irrational behavior to remain in the relationship. At the same time, the collective content authorizes public intervention because the battered woman is constructed as one who requires assistance as she is unable to act

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133 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

134 *Ibid.*

on her own behalf. The social construction of the battered woman "supports the claim that this type of person is "society's problem"."[135]

The next question, though, is what kind of help does she require? Although feminists and activists, among others, have argued that attention should be focused on preventing wife abuse before it happens, the image that has captured the public's attention is that of the battered woman requiring immediate assistance. At all stages of social problem construction, claims-makers have been united in their assessment that battered women need a safe place to go, first and foremost.[136] As a result, claims-makers at all levels have petitioned the government for transition shelters for the battered woman.

Through the process of collective representation, claims-makers successfully created a category. The shape of this category was based on the struggle to gain recognition for wife abuse as a social problem that deserved the public's sympathy. But this collective representation does not represent the heterogeneity among battered women or the different experiences of women who have been subjected to wife abuse. Not all women have experienced extreme violence, not all women willingly seek independence from their intimate partners, and not all women attribute the violence in their relationships to inequality between the sexes. Nevertheless, the problem was presented in a

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135 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

136 *Ibid.*

particular way in order to evoke public sympathy. This is the logic, according to Loseke, underlying the collective representations of the battered woman and wife abuse. As society tends to "withhold sympathy from all but pure victims and to label as social problems only extremely troublesome conditions, it remains...that the collective representations of wife abuse and the battered woman commonsensically fit only a small proportion of real life experience and only a small proportion of victimized women."[137] Constructing wife abuse as extreme (mostly) physical brutality and the battered woman as "pure victim" has had significant consequences for women attempting to lay claim to battered woman status. For example, the woman needs to convince us that she is a battered woman before she may gain access to a transition shelter or receive financial and emotional support.

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[137] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

CHAPTER FOUR

Historical Links: The Battered Women's Movement and the Media

This chapter examines the relationship between the media and wife abuse as a social issue and how the media has influenced the public discourse surrounding the issue. I will argue that historically the media figured prominently as claims-makers in the construction of wife abuse and have had a profound effect on the articulation of the public discourse about wife abuse, initially as "news" and more recently as "entertainment." A discussion of the relationship between activists and the media will begin the chapter, including an examination of the relationship between the media and activists in an earlier period of reform against family violence during the Victorian era. As well, this chapter looks at how activists were able to manipulate the news media in order to gain public sympathy for victims of wife abuse and to put pressure on the government To take action on behalf of battered women when the issue re-emerged in the 1970s. Included are examples of how the media have constructed wife abuse in order to gain an impression of how the media (primarily the print media) has constructed battered women and wife abuse historically in the last two decades.

Wife Beating as Public Issue: In the Victorian Era?

A wife isn't a jug...she won't crack if you hit her ten times.

Russian Proverb

A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree, the more they're beaten, the better they be.

English Proverb

The link between the media and the issue of family violence is generally thought to have emerged in the early 1970s. However, historically there has been a connection between the media and public sympathy for women and children who have been victims of violence at the hands of their menfolk. Although this thesis focuses on the relationship between the entertainment media and the discourse about wife abuse in the last twenty-five years, it is important to recognize the historical links between activists working on behalf of women and children and the media.

In fact, the media played a consequential role as claims-makers about wife abuse in an historical epoch other than the 1970s. The period between 1874 and 1890 was one of two historical periods, prior to the 1960s, when reform against family violence occurred.[138] During this period the news media were largely responsible for garnering public sympathy for women and children who were victims of violence.

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[138] According to Pleck, the other historical period of reform lasted from 1640 to 1680, when the Puritans of Massachusetts enacted laws that protected women from wife beating.

It has often been reported that the "discovery" of wife abuse as an issue for public concern began in the early 1970s. Prior to this time, it is commonly believed that although wife abuse existed, it was a private matter between a husband and wife and not a matter for public concern. As well, it is often claimed that wife beating was legal in most of the world prior to the 1970s. While it is true that wife beating was sanctioned by church and state throughout much of history, including during the Victorian period, in fact, wife beating was illegal in England and most states in America by 1870 "and considered illegitimate by many American men as well as women."[139] Despite the fact that wife beating was illegal, often the penalties for men who were convicted of wife abuse were mild. And more often than not punishment was meted out by the church, family members, and neighbours, not the state. While some women who were victims of violence were able to seek legal redress, battered women could expect to be protected by the church, state and the community from violent husbands only as long as they conformed to the Victorian definition "of woman as weak and defenceless....those who stepped out of the traditional female role were largely unprotected and excoriated."[140]

However, the period between 1860 and 1890 is remarkable in that feminists in both England and America (who at the time did

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[139] Elizabeth Pleck, "Wife Beating in Nineteenth-Century America," Victimology: An International Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1979, p. 60.

[140] *Ibid.*

not even have the right to vote), were able to raise public awareness and sympathy for battered wives, and had some success in getting laws passed that offered some measure of protection for (married) battered women. Feminists such as Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony in America and Frances Power Cobbe in England used the media to bring public attention to the plight of battered women. The media played a key role in gaining public support for passing the legislation that provided some measure of protection for wives from their violent husbands during this period in history.

The Legacy of Frances Power Cobbe

A husband's wrath spoils the best broth.

Victorian Proverb

What is there that beats a good wife? A bad husband.

Victorian Proverb

In England the rights of battered women were championed by a remarkable woman by the name of Frances Power Cobbe. A successful journalist, essayist, critic, philanthropist, theologian, and moralist, Cobbe was extraordinary for her time; she wrote extensively on many theoretical and philosophical questions concerning women. Among her most widely read articles were "What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?"; "Celibacy Vs. Marriage"; "Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors"; "The Little

Health of Ladies" and her most famous work *Duties of Women*, which went to eight editions.[141]

Cobbe, an effective propagandist and a passionate advocate for the rights of women in England, laboured incessantly to that end in the literary and intellectual circles within which she moved. Cobbe was deeply concerned about the rights of working-class women in particular, which led her to address the problem of wife abuse. And while the abuses described by Cobbe occurred within the working classes, she believed that wife abuse also existed among the so-called "better classes" of Englishmen, "many individuals of this class practice[s] wife abuse....but [they did it] discreetly, usually in the form of an occasional blow or two of a not dangerous kind."[142]

Cobbe's views on wife abuse were sophisticated for her time. For instance, most Victorian reformers believed that wife abuse was a symptom of the condition of inequality between men and women, which could be remedied by giving women access to education, employment, property rights and the vote.[143] However, Cobbe believed that wife beating would not cease while men enjoyed the right to beat their wives "into a state of

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[141] Carol Bauer and Lawrence Ritt, "'A Husband is a Beating Animal': Frances Power Cobbe Confronts The Wife-Abuse Problem in Victorian England," The International Journal of Women'Studies, Vol. 6 No. 2, Mar/April 1983, p. 99.

[142] Quoted by Bauer and Ritt in "A Husband Is A Beating Animal," p. 106.

[143] It is astonishing that the same debates surrounding the causes and the solutions to the problem of wife abuse that remain today were evident during this period in history.

cringing submissiveness," treating their wives as mere property.[144] Until women were liberated from "domestic tyranny," Cobbe believed that there would be no meaningful improvement in the status of women.

Cobbe was particularly intent on rousing public opinion to the problem of wife beating in Victorian England and hoped to bring about a change in attitude by documenting the horrors that mainly working class women were subjected to by their violent husbands.

In 1878, the *Contemporary Review* published her article entitled "Wife Torture in England." In the article Cobbe asks,

> How does it happen that the same generous-hearted gentlemen, who would themselves fly to render succour to a lady in distress, yet read of the beatings, burnings, kickings, and"cloggings" of *poor* women well-nigh every morning in their newspapers without once setting their teeth, and saying, "This must be stopped! We can stand it no longer!"[145]

Cobbe deliberately used the term "wife torture" because she wanted to rouse public passions and felt that the more conventional term "wife-beating" "understated the savagery and cruelty of the treatment to which women were subjected."[146] In "Wife Torture" Cobbe provided evidence that 19th-century wife-beaters used clogs, hobnailed shoes,[147] hammers, and hatchets, and

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144 Bauer and Ritt 1983, p. 99.

145 Frances Power Cobbe, "Wife Torture in England," The Contemporary Review, April 1878, p. 32.

146 Bauer and Ritt, p. 104.

147 In fact, some parts of Liverpool and London were called "kicking districts."

threw corrosive chemicals such as vitriol into their wive's faces. In addition, Cobbe documented how women were attacked by dogs, thrown into burning fireplaces, thrown out of buildings and down flights of stairs by their husbands. The evidence Cobbe provides is particularly chilling given that it was drawn from police reports over a period of only three or four months.[148]

"Wife Torture" apparently "shocked the English public with tales of wives who were "trampled on" by their husbands."[149] As a result, legislation was passed by Parliament in 1878 under the *Matrimonial Causes Act*.[150] Under Cobbe's bill, battered women were granted custody of children under ten years of age and a judge could order the husband to pay support for his wife and children. However, many husbands refused to pay maintenance, either leaving town or terrifying their wives by threatening them with (and carrying out) violent acts. A woman who forgave her abusive husband was assumed to have condoned the abuse and no longer had any legal redress. But the legislation made it easier for a woman to separate from her husband; between 1897 and 1906 the English courts granted over 87,000 legal separ-

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148 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

149 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

150 Cobbe's bill was passed but not before it was amended, as opponents viewed it as an attack on the institution of marriage. The amendment was attached by Lord Penzance, who was a former head of Parliament's divorce court and highly esteemed. His amendment contained a clause which would deny a woman access to custody and financial support from her husband if it was proven she had been adulterous. Pleck speculates that the bill passed in Parliament because of Penzance's sponsorship.

ations and maintenance orders.[151] Cobbe looked upon the passage of this legislation as one of her greatest accomplishments; her efforts in gaining public support against wife abuse were also recognized by the Victorian public and the press at the time as significant achievements.[152]

While the *Matrimonial Causes Act* of 1878 provided some measure of protection for some battered women, Cobbe herself realized that it did not "become a Magna Carta for women victimized by tyrannical husbands."[153] Even with the *Matrimonial Causes Act* in place in England, feminists denounced the "monstrously lenient" sentences which were apparently meted out to convicted wife beaters.[154] As well, women were rarely able to obtain separation orders. For instance, a man who had been repeatedly convicted of assaulting his disabled wife received a sentence of only twenty-one days in jail. The wife's request for a separation order was ignored by the courts.[155] In the rare cases where the wife was granted a separation order, often custody of the children remained with the man, thus (re)victimizing the victim.

For the few women that were courageous enough to pursue divorce proceedings the victory was bittersweet. "Victorian

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151 *Ibid.*

152 Bauer and Ritt, p. 114.

153 Pleck 1979, p. 196.

154 *Ibid.*

155 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

society was unalterably hostile to the woman who dared to flout the marital conventions, no matter what justification she appeared to have."[156] Many women were racked with guilty feelings for leaving their marriages; mirroring the attitude of society, "many women gave up the struggle and besought their husbands to take them back."[157]

Wife Abuse is "Discovered" in America

At about the same time (1878-79), newspapers in America began reprinting lurid details of sex crimes against women from the English papers. For instance, a "sensational expose on child prostitution rings touched off a torrent of public demands to end "the white slave traffic"."[158] Quite a remarkable achievement when one realizes that these stories were published despite the fact Victorians were generally unwilling to discuss sexual matters publicly. The published news accounts are accredited with aiding women's reform groups, which had some measure of success in orchestrating legislative campaigns to raise the legal age of consent, as well as gaining other measures of reform in America.

In Chicago, *The Protective Agency for Women and Children* was founded in 1885. The club was organized by women and included the wives of some of Chicago's wealthiest men. The

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156 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

157 *Ibid.*

158 Pleck 1979 pp. 94-95.

society hired its own agents, and membership was restricted to women only. Some of the members had read the accounts of sex crimes against women and children that had appeared in a Chicago newspaper over the course of several months. The newspaper claimed judges either overlooked rape as criminal behavior or punished rapists leniently.[159] As well, other articles condemned the sexual harassment of women clerical workers by their male employers and denounced the extraordinarily low age of consent (ten years at the time).

Largely as a result of these published accounts, the club established a separate department devoted to the protection of women and children. Pleck claims the *Protective Agency* "was the most significant organizational effort to aid female victims of violence in nineteenth-century America."[160] The *Protective Agency* provided legal and personal aid for women and children who had been victims of assault by their husbands. Members accompanied victims to court to ensure they were treated fairly. If the woman had the resources to pay for her own council, the

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[159] Although there were no provisions protecting wives from being raped by their husbands in Anglo-American common law, Pleck argues that Victorian judges regarded marital rape as legitimate grounds for divorce. However, most nineteenth-century rape laws were not specific as to whether a husband could be prosecuted for raping his wife, and no husband was ever brought to trial on these grounds. Also see Elaine Tyler May, Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.35; and Robert L. Griswold, Family and Divorce in California, 1850-1890: Victorian Illusion and Everyday Realities, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982, p. 116.

[160] Pleck, p. 94-95.

agency would advise her to get a lawyer and proceed to court. However, the agency provided legal council for poor women free of charge and retained lawyers on staff who represented the victims in court. As well, the agency sent abused women to a shelter run by another organization called the *Women's Club of Chicago*, where the victims of wife abuse and homeless women could stay for up to a month. Through the efforts of the *Protective Agency*, it was possible for a battered woman to acquire property held in her husband's name.[161] These reforms are truly remarkable, given the fact that women had not yet received the right to vote in America, let alone own property in their own names.

Lucy Stone: An American Advocate For Battered Women

A key figure in the American suffragist movement was Lucy Stone. Stone was a conservative figure in the women's movement of the time, considered more respectable than some of the more radical feminists such as Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But because Stone was considered more proper and willing to work with male reformers, she was a respected advocate for battered women, whose voice was heard through the news media.

Stone and her husband purchased the Boston women's rights newspaper called the *Women's Journal*. In 1879, Stone published an article in it protesting that abused animals received more

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[161] *Ibid.*, pp. 94-96.

protection than battered wives. She called for a society that would protect women from cruelty.[162] Shortly after, and under Stone's editorship, a weekly series called "crimes against women" was published, which was reprinted from the New England newspapers.[163] The stories featured under the headline "crimes against women" included accounts of wife beating, rape, torture and murder. Most if not all of the accounts that were printed contained graphic and shocking depictions of wife abuse. According to Pleck, the examples Stone provided "were extreme because Stone wanted to shock her middle-class readership and awaken them to action."[164] In addition, Stone was attempting to refute the myths and stereotypes of the time that *women provoked their husbands into violence*. The similarities between the rhetoric of this period in history and the battered women's movement of the 1970s is striking.

Drawing on Cobbe's success, Stone introduced a similar bill in the Massachusetts legislature that would give a battered woman the right to legally separate from her husband, order the husband to pay the woman and her children support, and allow the woman sole custody of her children under the age of ten years. However, although Stone tried to get the bill passed three times

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[162] Lucy Stone is generally regarded as a relatively conservative suffragist of the period. Although she spoke out often against violence against women and children and called for a society tht would protect women and children from violent men, she was not personally involved at the grassroots level.

[163] Pleck, p. 102.

[164] *Ibid.*

in 1879, 1883, and 1891, she was unsuccessful each time.[165] Opponents labelled the antebellum feminist crusade against wife-beaters as an attack on marriage, thereby killing any chance for legislative success.

Although legislation which would have offered battered women some protection from their abusive husbands failed in America during the Victorian period, legislation which made wife beating illegal remained on the books. Even so, "wife-beating continued practically unchecked in the late Victorian period."[166]

Wife Abuse Disappears Behind Closed Doors

Despite the efforts of Lucy Stone and the other reformers of the time, the issue of wife abuse disappeared as a problem for public concern by the end of the 1890s, not reappearing until the second wave of feminism in the 1970s.[167] The reasons for this may be due in part to the fact that feminists such as Stone believed that once women received the vote, wife abuse like the other injustices that women faced would cease. Stone and others believed that once women had the right to vote, their voices would be more powerful, and women would be more willing

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165 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

166 Carol Bauer and Lawrence Ritt, "Wife-Abuse, Late-Victorian English Feminists, And The Legacy of Frances Power Cobbe, International Journal of Women's Studies, Vol. 6 No. 3, May/June 1983, p. 195.

167 Pleck, p. 106.

to complain to the police and the courts. Judges and politicians that refused to offer redress for battered wives would be subject to the wrath of the female electorate. Therefore, the suffragist feminists concentrated their efforts on helping women gain the right to vote.[168]

Another factor which may help explain why wife abuse disappeared in the late 1890s was the backlash against feminism which occurred as a response to the feminist movement of the period. In particular, feminists who advocated divorce for abused married women were accused of trying to break up the family, and any legislation that would allow a woman to obtain a divorce was easily defeated.[169] However, indirect efforts that were perceived as helping to strengthen the family were accommodated: "As long as male dominance was confronted indirectly, women temperance reformers could succeed." [170]

In addition to the factors mentioned so far, another possible explanation as to why the issue of wife abuse disappeared behind closed doors by the end of the nineteenth century

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[168] Pleck points out that the existence of a powerful women's movement does not guarantee redress for battered women. Although women were given the right to vote in 1920 (in America), from the late 1890s through to the end of World War I, there was no public interest in the issue of crimes against women.

[169] This is hauntingly similar to the conservative backlash against feminism that occurred in the 1980s, when feminist espousal of divorce for battered women led to the initial Congressional defeats of domestic violence legislation in the U.S. For an in-depth discussion of the 1980s backlash against feminism see Susan Faludi's Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991.

[170] Pleck 1987, p. 106.

may lie in the strategies employed by feminists to gain public sympathy for battered women. Between the 1860s and the 1890s many accounts of the horrors and brutality that battered women faced graced the pages of Victorian newspapers, for a time on a regular basis. It is not unreasonable to believe the public may have simply lost interest in the subject after a while. Whatever the reasons, the issue of wife abuse literally disappeared from the public discourse, not reappearing until the early 1970s.

Echoes of the Past

Just as in the Victorian era, the media played a significant role in the construction of wife abuse when it re-emerged as a public problem over two decades ago. Feminist activists working on behalf of battered women initially went to the media, just as earlier feminists did during the Victorian era. However, feminists in the 1970s did not have to fight for a woman's right to divorce her abusive husband. Rather, the goals of the battered women's movement were twofold: to seek financial aid from the state for transition shelters and to use the issue of wife abuse to unmask the structures of patriarchy which served to keep women oppressed. Like the Victorian feminists, modern activists also used the media to "get their message out" to the public.

For instance, in *"Wife Beating As A Social Problem: The Process of Definition"* (1984), Marlena Studer claims that an

important strategy employed by feminists in the early battered women's movement was to "use the media to increase pubic awareness of battered wives."[171] According to Studer, the strategy of exploiting the media to achieve visibility was largely successful in making wife abuse an issue for public concern. This strategy was first employed by Erin Pizzey, who founded the first transition shelter in England in 1971.

Chiswick Women's Aid: A Refuge For Battered Women

Erin Pizzey, who has been described as a modern-day Frances Power Cobbe, came up with the idea of temporary shelters for battered women in England in the early 1970s. Pizzey and a group of other women activists established Chiswick in 1971, the first transition house to open in England. Chiswick admitted any woman who needed shelter, however, many of the women that came to the shelter were fleeing abusive men. Pizzey soon realized that these women were not getting the assistance they required from social services or any help from the police or the courts. Pizzey became a powerful advocate for battered women, publicizing the plight of battered women and demanding something be done about it.

Pizzey unabashedly used the media as a vehicle for making the issue public. She provided a steady stream of personal accounts to the English newspapers and television stations about

171 Studer 1984, p. 416.

the horror and brutality that some women faced at the hands of their husbands and she demonstrated the need for more shelters by showing the large number of women who had stayed at Chiswick. Pizzey was able to get media attention for the issue, in part because of her personal connections as her husband was a journalist for the BBC. Her success in using the media to bring attention to the issue inspired the opening of many more shelters not only in England and Scotland but also in France, Holland, Germany, Canada, New Zealand and the U.S.

Pizzey was a self-professed feminist, however she eschewed radical feminist ideology. Rather, she associated with mainstream psychiatrists and other "experts" in the helping professions, who defined wife abuse as part of a "cycle of violence." Adding to the controversy, Pizzey attributed the violent man's behavior to a troubled childhood. Her views were often quoted in the media: "[A]s far as I can see, the men who are violent are that way because society stood back and allowed them to be beaten or mistreated as children. So you can't blame the men who are involved....Sometimes I cry more for the man than for the woman."[172]

Her views about the causes of wife abuse spilled over into the debate between feminism and the battered women's movement, and an ugly public battle between Pizzey and many of the more

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[172] Sarah Haffner, "Victimology Interview: A Refuge For Battered Women," a conversation with Erin Pizzey conducted by Sarah Haffner, Victimology, An International Journal, Vol 4. No. 1, 1979, p. 106.

radical women's groups was played out, again, largely through the media. The battle came to a head in 1975 when Pizzey fought to thwart the formation of a national feminist organization in England. Although unsuccessful, Pizzey sent a letter to every Social Service and Housing Department in the country, asking each department to carefully scrutinize requests for funding from groups that were apparently using Women's Aid as a platform for the Women's Liberation and Gay Women's Liberation groups. Both groups were radical feminist organizations which espoused a lesbian ideology and blamed the plight of women's oppression on all men, not just men who were violent. As a solution these groups called for the exclusion of men from having *any* part in women's lives, period. Pizzey's letter forced some groups to face questions about their politics, while others were refused funding for shelters.[173]

Pizzey was also criticized for exploiting the plight of battered women in the media. As one anonymous activist complained:

> We have very limited coverage in the press as a direct result of our not being prepared to produce bloodcurdling stories to keep the papers happy. Neither are we prepared to produce individual women as "stars" for them; they therefore continue to refer to the "star" they already have created in Ms. Pizzey who is prepared to give the blood and guts stories they want.[174]

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[173] See Schechter, p. 154.

[174] Quoted by Schechter in Women and Male Violence, p. 154.

For a brief period in the 1970s, Erin Pizzey was *the* international figure-head of the battered women's movement. Her path-breaking work with battered women was documented in her book *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear* (1974), which had a profound impact on the goals of the early battered women's movement, the issue of wife abuse and the public discourse surrounding the issue of wife abuse and the battered woman. However, although Pizzey is credited with bringing the plight of battered women to the public's attention, many of her ideas and beliefs about the causes of wife abuse were contested and remain controversial today.

The Uneasy Alliance: The Media (Re)Discovers Wife Abuse

American activists visited Chiswick and other English shelters in the early 1970s, while the rest of the North American public learned about Chiswick and wife abuse from the media. For example, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times* ran stories about Chiswick, helping to bring attention to the issue in the U.S. and Canada.[175]

Following Erin Pizzey's lead, feminists working on behalf of battered women in North America went to the media in order to "get their message out." For its part, the media "sensing a good story," quickly took up the issue. Wife abuse had all the

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[175] "Battered Wives: Chiswick Women's Aid," Newsweek, July 9, 1973, p. 39; Judith Weinraub, "The Battered Wives of England: A Place to Heal Their Wounds," New York Times, November 29, 1975, p. 17.

important elements the media (and the public) relish: sex, violence, love, hate, drama, murder, and mayhem. Battered women made "great copy." Horrifying stories of brutal beatings, torture and murder began to appear in news reports in print and on television; "true stories" appeared in popular magazines with all the gory details. For instance, in 1976, *Ms. Magazine* shocked the American public by publishing a close up of a woman's face that was bruised and swollen, her eyes black and blue on its cover. The cover title read: *"Battered Wives: Help For The Secret Victim Next Door."* Other newspapers and popular magazines quickly followed suit. Headlines such as *"Husband Found Guilty of Setting Wife on Fire After She Refused Sex,"* or *"Blind Justice: Women, Beaten, Maimed, and Tortured in the Bedrooms of the Nation"* soon became common fare in the daily news and popular press.

In addition to the personal accounts of individual women, stories surfaced in the press about the lack of an appropriate response (or sometimes any response) by the police when women called to report their abuse. There were accounts about the unwillingness of the church or the medical profession to even acknowledge that this was a part of many women's daily experience. In 1974 Marjorie Fields, a New York attorney and feminist activist who handled divorce cases, attempted to meet with the police chief of New York to complain that police did not respond when her clients called to report abuse at the hands of their husbands. Fields was unable to get an interview with the police

chief so she went to the *New York Times* instead. The story received national attention when it appeared in syndicated newspapers across the country and served as an indictment of the systemic patriarchy embedded in the legal institutions designed to protect women in society.[176]

In the next few years, literally hundreds of articles appeared in various print media, from women's magazines such as *Vogue* and *Redbook* to *Time* and *Esquire* magazine.[177] For instance, in 1977, the *New York Times* printed forty-four articles on wife beating alone.[178] Wife abuse contained the elements that were necessary for making an issue and/or story newsworthy, including simplification (for instance, abusers are evil, battered women are pure victims) drama, and personalization.[179] But as Schechter points out, the media proved to be a double-edged sword:

> [T]he media...was both a help and a hindrance. At first, the plight of battered women...made "good news stories"...sometimes however.... reporters produced sensationalized accounts which made battered women look foolish; worse, they sometime revealed the addresses of shelters, thereby endangering staff and residents and

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[176] The journalist who reported the story was J.C. Barden. The story was entitled "Wife Beaters: Few of Them Even Appear Before a Court of Law," New York Times, October 21, 1974.

[177] J.B. Victor, "He Beats Me, "Vogue Magazine, January 1978, p. 177; S. Edimiston, "If You Loved Me, You Wouldn't Hurt Me," Redbook, May, 1979, p. 99-100.

[178] Pleck, p. 182.

[179] See Erickson et. al *Visualizing Deviance*, chapter 5 for an in-depth discussion as to what elements are needed to make a story newsworthy.

forcing groups to move after they had spent years finding housing.[180]

Overall, the issue of wife abuse received much attention from the media, including the popular press (women's magazines), and the news between 1971 and 1977, despite the fact that newspapers did not even begin to report on the issue until 1974.[181] As was the case during the Victorian era, the construction of wife abuse and the battered woman by the news and popular press in the 1970s was extreme. As Loseke argues: "Only at the extreme can enough worry be generated to support the social problem designation; only at the extreme do stories sell newspapers and magazines; only at the extreme do stories make good topics for talk shows and television movies."[182] Similarly, Pleck argues that from the media's point of view, "wife beating was new, controversial, and somewhat titillating in that it involved the staple of modern American culture -- sex and violence. The issue...provided a vehicle for a popular discussion of family life and feminism and supplied the human element and dramatic urgency the media require."[183]

Nevertheless the media, for all its faults, was largely responsible for creating public sympathy for the plight of

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180 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

181 However, according to Pleck, by 1975 the flurry of media had already peaked in terms of the numbers of stories being published in the news media and the popular press. See p.182.

182 Loseke, p. 149.

183 Pleck 1987, p. 188.

battered women. The accounts of horrific beatings, maimings, torture and death reported by the media contributed to an increasing climate of awareness by the public, which in turn reinforced the claims made by activists that the legal, medical and religious institutions either ignored or denied these women's plight. As a result, the state began to provide funding for research and programs (transition shelters). Secondly, structural changes were made with respect to the manner in which "domestic violence" was treated by the police and the legal system. The sexist treatment battered women were subjected to by the police and the courts were subject to public scrutiny, and changes were made, at least at the policy level.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Nightly News Becomes Our Evening Entertainment

Within a relatively short period of time, wife abuse went from an issue that was considered "hot" by the media, with reports appearing regularly in the news and popular press, to an issue that received dwindling media attention. The apparent decline in interest of the news and popular media for the topic was most likely the result of several factors. Feminists who had initially found the media sympathetic were becoming increasingly critical of the exploitation of the plight of battered women in order to sell newspapers.

Secondly, the adage, "familiarity breeds contempt" may be appropriate here and help to explain the increasing lack of interest in reporting stories about wife abuse. The saturated coverage of the issue probably contributed to a decline in reporting about wife abuse.

In addition, as the state at various levels began to take action on behalf of battered women, there was the appearance at least, that "something was being done" to help the plight of battered women and that the "problem was being resolved," which may also have led the media to drop the issue. In reality, while there was limited funding made available for shelters and other programs for battered women, the need far outstripped the resources. While some women were helped, many others were turned away due to lack of space in the shelters. It is estimated that for every woman admitted into a shelter, two were turned away

(this statistic remains constant in the 1990s). In hindsight, it is obvious the problem was far from solved; the (re)discovery of wife abuse in the early 1970s was only the "tip of the iceberg" with respect to the magnitude of the problem.

Troubling questions about the issue remain today, for it is still not clear, in some cases at least, how best to help battered women, and more importantly how to stop the violence. Statistics clearly indicate that the number of women who claim they have been abused by an intimate partner has steadily increased in the last two decades. As well, the number of women being murdered by their intimate partners has increased annually since the issue re-emerged in the 1970s. The bottom line is that despite the fact that the issue has entered the public discourse, it would appear that we are no closer today to finding a solution that would eliminate wife abuse from our society than we were in the 1970s or during the Victorian era.

Whatever the reasons for the decline in reporting about the issue by the news and popular media, wife abuse did not completely disappear from the media. While the number of accounts dwindled in the news and the popular media about the issue, reports about wife abuse did not disappear completely. Sensational accounts were still eagerly sought out and reported by the news media in grizzly detail. But by the late 1970s a shift occurred in the type of media interest about the issue that had not been present before. Battered women and the issue of wife abuse entered the public sphere as a form of entertainment

through the *movie-of-the-week (MOW)* genre. The first telefeature that dealt with wife abuse was entitled *Battered Women*, which aired in 1978. It is described by Leonard Maltin as an "[A]bsorbing and disturbing drama [that] interweaves three stories of wife-beating victims."[184] The movie, although only rated as average by Maltin, apparently did fairly well with respect to ratings when it first aired. It's success may be based on a strong cast, which included Joan Blondell, Howard Duff, Mike Farrall, and Levar Burton. It was directed by Peter Werner, who would go on to direct *The Burning Bed* several years later. Between 1978 and 1984, no other television movies contained storylines about battered women. However, on October 8 1984, *The Burning Bed*, which was based on the case of Francine Hughes, a battered woman, who after years of abuse murdered her abusive husband by setting him on fire while he slept in a drunken stupor, aired on national television, drawing an estimated seventy-five million viewers and making it the fourth highest rated television movie ever shown.[185]

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[184] Leonard Maltin, ed., TV Movies 1983-1984 Edition, New American Library, 1982, p. 47.

[185] Rapping 1992, p. 69

The Ancestry of the Docudrama

Since the mid-1960s, when the *MOW* first emerged, social issues as entertainment have been a staple on network television.[186] Many *MOW*, particularly the successful ones, are docudramas, and although based on events within the lives of actual persons, are actually a hybrid of fact and fiction, constructed in a dramatic setting. By the 1960s the networks had discovered docudramas were popular with the public. However, the origins of the docudrama date much earlier than the made-for-television movie and can be traced to the theatre, literature, radio, as well as film and early television. Robert Musburger, who has studied the ancestry of the docudrama, believes that the notion of "re-creating historical events for an audience is as old as theatre itself."[187] For instance, he argues that "all of the extant Greek tragedies of the influential golden age of Greek theatre are based on history or myth."[188] Musburger describes how the tradition of re-enactment was used effectively in radio, feature films, and television, among other media. He argues that these techniques filled the audience's need for

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[186] According to Gitlin in Inside Prime Time, by the early 1980s, made for television movies represented twelve and a half hours a week, equal to 20 per cent of the prime time. In 1982-83, ABC, CBS, and NBC produced and scheduled over ninety movies of the week. This figure was down from an earlier peak in the 1970s.

[187] Robert B. Musburger, "Setting the Stage for the Television Docudrama," in Journal of Popular Film and Television, Vol. 13 No. 2, Summer 1985, p. 93.

[188] *Ibid.*

information and met their expectations for fact-based drama. The tradition has continued with the emergence of the made-for-television movie.

The Telefeature is Born

Beginning in the 1960s, the networks began producing their own low-budget movies to be released on television as a means of coping with the ever increasing costs of purchasing theatrical releases.[189] By the early 1970s production of *MOW* had rapidly increased to the point where television movies outnumbered available theatrical releases new to television.[190] This transformation in programming took place because of the unexpected profits *MOW* reaped for the networks. And when ratings like those for *The Burning Bed* are considered, one can see that *MOW* were fast becoming one of the most widely shared phenomenon of mass culture. Douglas Gomery, who has studied the *MOW* genre, claims television movies were so popular "that they rivalled the ratings power of even the most expensive theatrical products."[191] Further, he argues that since 1966 *MOW* movies have formed their own genre, fulfilling a cultural need that combines Hollywood's idea of social realism, with topical entertainment which is an affirmation of basic values and beliefs.[192]

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189 *Ibid.*

190 *Ibid.*

191 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

192 *Ibid.*

However, some have argued that the genre might more accurately be labelled social-"commercial" realism.[193]

MOW often explicitly dealt with aspects of social and political life. The topics television movies tackled were subjects that Hollywood would not touch. As a result, "[T]hese remain, without exception, fascinating documents, demonstrating both a gritty feel for social realism, and a total inability to give any coherent reasons for social difficulties."[194] The topics were (and still are) often controversial, and open to pressures from advertisers and special interest groups, such as the Moral Majority, limiting what networks were (and are) able to present. However, network executives recognized that films that dealt with controversial topics were often the ones that attracted the biggest audiences. The solution, according to Gomery, was to find a way to make controversial films "noncontroversial," to create television movies that would titillate viewers without scandalizing them. The trick was to create some public wrangling without offending (at least the majority of) viewers, for if a film was deemed too controversial it could be disastrous for the networks.[195] In the last two decades the networks have been very successful in making controversial topics "non-controversial" particularly in their

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193 see Rapping, p. 67.

194 Andrew Bergman (quoted by Gomery) in "Brian's Song", p. 207.

195 *Ibid.*

treatment of social issues. But the success is due in part to how television movies are themselves constructed.

Made-For-Television Movies

> Many serious people pride themselves on a contemptuous ignorance of television entertainment, accompanied by a sneaking fascination with its raw cultural power and a horror of its effects on public sensibility.
> Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*[196]

This analysis focuses on the made-for-television, or the movie-of-the-week *(MOW)* genre . Although generally dismissed by critics as "trashy, sentimental, sensationalized tearjerkers plagued with everything from wooden acting to poor production values,"[197] television movies are an important public sphere "within which social meanings and myths are constructed and circulated..." that are important to "our common political life."[198] *MOW* are significant because of their uniqueness as discursive sites, where representations and ideologies of "the family" are struggled over within the text itself. As well though, this struggle occurs in the larger public sphere of social and political relations, which is the result of the form's unique position "among other discursive structures -- news broadcasts, media critique and debate, formal and informal

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196 Gitlin 1983, p. 15.

197 Rapping 1992, p. ix.

198 *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

gatherings" where the movies and their topics are debated and discussed.[199]

MOW are worthy of study for several other reasons. For instance, movies of the week have been a staple of the major networks' programming schedule for almost twenty years. The fact that television movies are ubiquitous in our culture makes them worthy of academic study. However, until recently, the genre has not been taken seriously, which is peculiar, when genres such as soap operas, sitcoms, and talk shows have received sympathetic and sophisticated treatment from theoreticians, despite the fact that the top-rated television movies have consistently been able to attract much larger audiences. In some cases, the astonishing numbers of viewers that have tuned-in to watch the top-rated *MOW* made them cultural events.

Secondly, *MOW* are unique, relatively speaking, compared with the other series fare produced for network television, in that since they first began airing in 1966, *MOW* have often attempted to tackle very serious social issues, such as wife abuse, AIDS, race relations, sexual abuse, and rape among others. In fact, the most successful *MOW* were the ones that addressed serious issues, and as a result their importance to the networks increased (due to their ability to draw large audiences -- and advertisers).[200] This increased legitimacy has prompted the networks to promote (rather heavily at times)

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199 *Ibid.*

200 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

certain *MOW* as major public events. The solemn tone and pseudo-documentary style taken in their construction and in some cases the discussions among experts about the issue and/or interviews with the actual victims that sometimes follow the airing of the movie have also legitimized the *MOW* as more than mere entertainment.[201]

As such, it seems a worthy endeavour to examine how *MOW* construct the stories about the issues undertaken, which obviously includes an examination of how the text is constructed, but also includes some concern for aspects of the production itself, including the actors chosen for the roles, the set design, mise en scene, etc. Fiske believes that as part of the sense-making process, viewers "bring extra-textual experience and attitudes to bear upon the reading of the text,"[202] which plays an important role in reader response. Fiske's concept of intertextuality consists of three levels. The primary text produced by the industry, Fiske argues "needs to be seen in its context as part of that industry's total production."[203] The second level of texts include studio publicity, television criticism and comment, feature articles about shows and their stars, gossip and fan magazines (in print and on television), etc. Fiske claims these provide evidence of the

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201 *Ibid.*, p. xii.

202 Fiske, Television Culture, 1987, p. 39.

203 John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies", in Channels of Discourse, Robert Allen, ed., The University of North Carolina Press, 1987, p. 285.

ways that "the various meanings of the primary text are activated and inserted into the culture for various audiences or subcultures."[204] The third level of textuality contains the texts that the viewers produce themselves: "their talk about television; their letters to the papers or magazines; their adoption of styles of dress, speech, or even of thought in their lives."[205] I would add another level of intertextuality that is peculiar to television movies that deal with serious social issues, which are the other discourses about these topics, such as wife abuse, which are present in other media as well as the public sphere, in policy hearings, government reports etc. Fiske's argument is particularly relevant as two of the *MOW* discussed in this thesis are based on "true" stories and are good examples of how these films are only a part of the discourse surrounding the particular cases of wife abuse on which the films are basedd. For instance, *The Burning Bed* was based on the best-selling book by the same name. In addition, the story received international coverage by the news media and the popular press. Francine Hughes became a celebrity, and Farrah Fawcett, who portrayed Francine in the film, describes it as "the role of a lifetime."[206] She received critical acclaim for her portrayal. Combined, these intertextual elements of the

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204 *Ibid.*

205 *Ibid.*, p. 286.

206 Taken from an interview with Farrah Fawcett in People Weekly Magazine, "Interview with the Star of *The Burning Bed*," Vol. 22, p. 109 (2), October 8, 1984.

case of Francine Hughes have entered the public sphere and most certainly have affected the public discourse surrounding both her case, and more generally the issue of wife abuse. For while the film had a radical effect on only a few people, Rapping argues that "it is impossible to deny that this drama worked its way into a public consciousness in ways that -- combined with any number of other textual and social interventions in the public sphere -- have led to actual structural changes in the way domestic violence is handled."[207]

The Television Movie As A Genre

While most *MOW* could be categorized simply as "the disease of the week," "the social issue of the week," "the disaster of the week," the television movie is a genre that centres its narrative on the family. Everything else is subsumed "into that never-questioned ideal institution."[208]

Virtually all television movies begin with a problem or a crisis "that threatens, or at least has an impact on, the functioning of a nuclear family or the values that generally accrue to that idealized structure."[209] Halfway through, the crisis or pro-blem escalates, but by the movie's end, one way or another, it is resolved "and family values are reinstated as

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207 Rapping 1992, p. xxix.

208 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

209 *Ibid.*

inalienable and transcendent."[210] This structure is apparent even in movies that have tragic endings, as do most of the movies about wife abuse that will be analyzed further on. Even in cases where the woman murders her abusive husband, as was the case in *The Burning Bed*, at the end of the film when Francine is acquitted for the murder, we are led to believe that "she will move on to a better life and a better man."[211]

The term family is continuously being redefined as a way of perpetuating the myth that all personal problems within a capitalist society can be resolved by individuals who see themselves essentially as family members.[212] Thus the dominant ideology of the family is preserved and reinforced, "which falsely assumes a perfect harmony between conflicting values revolving around the conflicts and contradictions in families and between family values and those of capitalism."[213]

The genre of *MOW* also works to preserve the dominant ideology in other ways. For instance, according to Rapping, it works to "neutralize all contradictory elements that cannot be reconciled to the dominant family ideology by excluding them from the constructed world in which the ideal families live or by naturalizing the causes of these problems so they seem

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210 *Ibid.*

211 *Ibid.*

212 *Ibid.*

213 *Ibid.*

fatally "tragic" rather than historical and political."[214] Therefore, the genre is effective in negotiating contradiction and difference while maintaining dominance.

However, while television movies are limited as sites of opposition, in some instances *MOV* can work as a critique against the family by providing "oppositional polarities between matters of privacy and political interventions, marital harmony and gender conflict, sexuality and maternity, economic values and those of love and nurturance...."[215] These and similar issues are resolved "within the context of a narrative pattern that is stable but maintains its stability by maintaining flexibility, by incorporating oppositional voices and concerns into an always shifting overview of what a "real" family is."[216]

MOW gain legitimacy and authority in the first place because they tend to treat the most serious social ills in much more complex and elaborated ways than other television genres. They are often successful because they tend to focus on controversial issues of a political and socially charged nature, which makes them a powerful and significant form. Paradoxically, even though they tend to domesticate social issues, at the same time, they allow alternative voices and experiences to be heard,

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214 *Ibid.*, p. xli.

215 *Ibid.*, p. xl.

216 *Ibid.*

legitimating voices that in some cases might not be heard at all.[217]

Television movies reduce social problems, such as wife abuse to family problems. But this does not mean that social problems are not important subjects. John Ellis points out that we are hailed as members of family groupings and constituted as "normal citizens"[218] by network television. As such, viewers can scan the world outside but are "powerless to do anything about the events portrayed other than sympathise or become angry."[219] However, even if only by implication, *MOW* make it clear that society does indeed exist. For example, a commonly used device the use of statistics about the problem within the text, which tend to create a link between the stories reported on network television and the "real world" outside. In other cases, the viewers are invited to stay tuned for a discussion about the issue after the airing of the movie. These discussions may include panels of experts (and sometimes the victim of which the *MOV* was the subject), or discussions about the topic may be included in the newscast which follows the movie.

As the goal of the television movie is to "tell the story," another characteristic of this genre is the subordination of visual style to the telling of the story. The result is an

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217 *Ibid.*

218 John Ellis, Visible Fictions, Routledge, London and New York, 1982, p. 169.

219 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

emphasis on telling the "important events," at the expense of all the other aspects. The use of flashbacks, dialogue, and action explain to the audience a character's behavior, particularly if it appears strange.[220] And certainly, in the films that are examined here, these and other plot devices, codes and conventions are present.

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220 *Ibid.*

Constructing Wife Abuse on Television

> TV movies, even at their least interesting and most hokey...are at worst, social fairy tales; at best, they are shattering moments of radical insight shared by a national community.[221]
>
> Elayne Rapping

The focus of this chapter is an examination of the way in which network television constructs wife abuse and the battered woman within the movie-of-the-week genre. One of the key theoretical assumptions is the idea that the images in any society are meaningful and not arbitrary, including those of the mass media. Network television can be viewed as an (inter)national billboard; the space it occupies is scarce and its messages important.[222] In addition, as Sarah Kozloff points out, in modern society television has become the primary storyteller, a task which she claims was carried on the shoulders of wise (mostly) men in earlier times. Two questions which arise from Kozloff's views are: 1) what kind of stories are told? and 2) what kind of storyteller is television? These questions will be explored within the context of the media analysis.

The movies that are discussed here have appeared on network television in the last decade and include one fictional account and two which are "based on fact." While there have been many *MOW* about wife abuse produced in the last decade, such as

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221 Rapping, p. 32.

222 *Ibid.*, p.12.

Shattered Dreams (1990), *Lies of the Heart: The Laurie Kellogg Story* (1994), *Shameful Secrets* (1993), *House Of Secrets* (1992), and *Beyond Betrayal* (1994), to name but a few, this discussion will focus on three films: *The Burning Bed* (1984), *Cries Unheard: The Donna Yacklich Story* (1993), and *When No One Would Listen* (1992). The narratives in these films contain representations of wife abuse and/or the battered woman. The films that were chosen contain specific representations of the category wife abuse; their narratives specifically deal with the issue of wife abuse as a main part of their storylines.

The objective of this analysis is not to recant every scene and shot of the particular movie in detail -- that would be an immense undertaking and far beyond the scope of this project. Rather, this examination is broad in its scope and will view the chosen films collectively, aiming to make sense of the stories these films tell by examining key elements and patterns of meaning. After a brief synopsis, some of the key elements in each film will be scrutinized with respect to their discourses about wife abuse and the battered woman. As well, some of the contradictions contained within each film will be discussed.

The Burning Bed

The Burning Bed first aired on October 8, 1984 and is probably the most widely known example of the three, in part because of the phenomenal audience it drew when it first aired but also because it was the first television movie that dealt

with wife abuse in such graphic terms. The fact that a major star, Farrah Fawcett played the role of Francine also created an intense interest about it. As mentioned, it deals with the sensational case of Francine Hughes, who was acquitted on the grounds of temporary insanity for the murder of her abusive ex-husband.

The Burning Bed stands out among most other television movies for many reasons, including the quality of the production, the talent involved, and the the use of flashbacks intertwined with Francine's present situation in jail to tell the story, a device unusual for the genre at the time. The past and the present eventually converge towards the end of the movie when the trial is shown, and Francine is eventually acquitted for the murder of her husband. While this technique was first used in the *Burning Bed*, it has been copied over and over again, and has been used almost to the point of cliche in the movies about wife abuse that have appeared since on television.

The film begins with a flashback of the night that Francine murdered Mickey, then cuts to Francine in jail with her lawyer. From here the scene shifts to Francine's first encounter with Mickey and chronicles their relationship with key scenes which depict the on-going and escalating violence against Francine, the poverty and desperation in which she and her family lived, and the unresponsiveness and insensitivity to her plight by the major institutions. Throughout, the film subtly and at times not so subtly suggests complicity by those involved with Francine,

including social services, the judicial system, and especially the family, both her own and Mickey's.

The film then switches to the present and to the trial. We see key witnesses including the police who attended one of her calls, her mother-in-law, Francine's daughter Nicole, and finally Francine herself. Once Francine has testified, the defence rests its case. The jury deliberates, comes to a decision, and in a highly emotional scene, Francine is acquitted on the grounds of temporary insanity. The last shot focuses on Francine joyfully hugging her children as the verdict is read out loud. The camera freeze frames on this shot. It is a happy ending as Francine is reunited with her children, and the audience is left with the impression that Francine will move on to a better life.

Cries Unheard: The Donna Yacklich Story

This *MOW* first aired in January 1994, and it is based on the true story of Donna Yacklich, who hired someone to murder her abusive husband in Pueblo Colorado in 1987. Although acquitted of murder, she was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder and was sentenced to forty years in prison (her case is currently under review). Her husband Dennis, was a narcotics detective as well as a state champion body builder. *Cries Unheard*, although technically and artistically inferior, is structurally similar to *The Burning Bed*, using flashbacks intertwined with the voice-over narration of Donna (Jacyln

Smith, another ex-*Charlie's Angel*) to tell the story. It begins much the same way as *The Burning Bed* does, with a recreation of the night when Dennis was murdered.

The scene then shifts to Donna's narrative in prison. However, rather than conferring with her lawyer (like Francine), Donna tells her story to her eighteen year old son, who has come to visit her before he goes off to college. Her son Denny, who has some knowledge of the life his mother led and what pushed her into conspiring to murder his father, admits he does not know why she did it. The story, then begins as Donna starts to explain why. The story chronicles how Dennis and Donna met, their marriage, his obsession with weight training and use of drugs (steroids), his rages and violence against Donna, which escalates over time. Donna gets pregnant, has his child; Dennis becomes increasingly violent and unpredictable in his behavior. The story builds, showing how trapped Donna is and that from her point of view at least, there is no other way out. It is kill or be killed, as she tells her son at one point. Donna hires someone to kill Dennis.

The film ends with Donna in jail, her son leaving to go off to college, and some end notes, which reveal that the real Donna was convicted of conspiracy to murder and received a forty-year prison sentence. As well, we learn that her case is currently under review as she is appealing her sentence.

When No One Would Listen

When No One Would Listen is a fictitious film that first aired in November 1992. Michelle Lee (most well known for her role in the long running prime time soap, *Knots Landing*) stars as Jessica Cochrane, the abused wife, while her ex-husband in real life, James Farantino, portrays the abusive husband, Gary. This film is unique for several reasons. First, there is a subtext to the main story. The characters, Jessica and Gary address the audience directly, explaining their motivations and behavior to us with the use of camera close-ups at strategic moments in the film. And although it is structured similarly to the other two films using flashbacks, this technique of addressing the audience directly is not only unique but also a powerful device, which lends a credibility and reality to this film, which ironically is lacking in the two docudramas. Jessica's narrative is politically charged with a running commentary on the politics of wife abuse. Gary, on the other hand, is constructed as someone who is one step away from completely losing control (which he eventually does).

Another unique aspect of this film is that it does not have a "happy ending." Jessica is stalked and murdered by Gary at the end of the film. However, despite the strong feminist discourse and political undertones throughout the film, *When No One Would Listen* is the most problematic of the three.

The film begins dramatically, in total darkness, which changes abruptly with Jessica lighting a match for her ciga-

rette. It is an extreme close-up of Jessica's face. She lights her cigarette, takes a long drag on it and begins: "...the first time I was eighteen. We'd been married three years. I remember feeling scared, but not really surprised. It wasn't as if I'd never been hit before...anyways...afterwards, I cried, he cried. I told him if he ever hit me again I'd leave him and he told me if I ever left him he'd kill me... and you know what I thought-- (long pause)-- wow, Gary really loves me."

The camera cuts to Gary, using the same extreme close-up. "I always took real good care of what was mine -- tools, houses, cars, just ask anybody. Jessica most of all....When we first met, we just fit (pause, then sigh)-- I never had that before....I know it was precious-- and when you've got something that's precious, you do everything (emphasizing the everything) to keep it safe (heavy sigh and a long pause now)...EVERYTHING!! This narrative, although weighted toward's Jessica's point-of-view, continues periodically throughout the movie and is one of the most provocative aspects of this film.

The opening credits roll after this dramatic beginning, then the story charting Jessica's life with Gary, beginning with them moving into a new neighbourhood, the socio-economic problems this family faces (Gary is unemployed and Jessica is a waitress), Gary's legal problems as a result of shooting his next door neighbours, the escalation of violence between Gary and Jessica, and the sensational ending of the film. After Gary has murdered Jessica and her boyfriend (in slow motion), the

camera cuts to a shot of Jessica, in extreme close-up as we have become accustomed to throughout the movie. Jessica finishes her cigarette, and as she finishes her monologue she literally disappears from the screen -- for Jessica is dead -- and has been speaking to us as a corpse sitting on an autopsy table. This macabre and bizarre scene is how this movie ends.

Discourses About Wife Abuse

When these films about wife abuse are examined as a group, certain patterns of meaning emerge. As Rapping contends, the discourses in these texts are heterogeneous, contradictory and polysemous. Oppositional voices are encoded within these texts, providing at least the potential for a multiplicity of meanings. Rapping and Fiske among others argue that producers encode oppositional discourses intentionally, partly because the texts themselves are produced collectively (the producers, writers, directors, performers etc.) However, the driving force behind these "oppositional discourses" is an economic imperative: after all, the point of producing television programs in the first place is to attract audiences for sponsors. Therefore, "for commercial reasons, the network and sponsors will be more concerned about including, as part of the ideologically contradictory and tension-filled narrative text, elements taken from feminist discourse."[223]

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[223] Rapping, p. 12.

These films echo feminist discourses about wife abuse and battered women and attempt to explain the dynamics of wife abuse as well as the politics of the issue. For example, in *The Burning Bed* there are numerous scenes which depict the misogynistic attitudes of the legal and social service agencies that Francine goes to for help, with little or no response. When the police come to the house, instead of charging Mickey, they merely talk to him to "cool him down." Francine is outraged that the police are not going to charge Mickey and take him away; the police officer tells her that unless he witnessed Francine being beaten, he could do nothing to help her (although he does offer to take her to the hospital as her head is bleeding and her face is bruised and cut). When Francine goes to social services after Mickey has taken the children from her, she is told that if she pursues her complaint, she will lose her welfare because she does not have her children with her anymore. The message here is that the "system" encourages wife abuse and makes it difficult if not impossible for women to escape.

In addition, there are scenes of Francine in conversation with Mickey's family as well as with her own mother that illustrate how traditional family values serve to keep Francine trapped. For instance, when Francine leaves Mickey the first time, she goes to her mother, who refuses to acknowledge Francine's not wanting to return to Mickey. When Francine tells her mother she wants to stay with her, her mother tells Francine that she has sold her bed. Then her mother tells her "women have

to put up with their men, especially if there's children" (Francine is pregnant). She adds, "Mostly, the men don't mean it." She continues, "...if you make a hard bed you have to lay in it."

When Francine is in the hospital with her third child and has actually obtained a legal divorce from Mickey, her mother-in-law visits her to see the baby. She tells Francine that "Mickey has cleaned up his act" and even has a job now. Francine reminds her that she and Mickey are now divorced, to which her mother-in-law replies, "there ain't no divorce, you've just had his child" and adds that she must "take the bitter with the sweet" in her marriage, especially for the children's sake.

In *Cries Unheard* Donna, after having been brutally beaten by Dennis, approaches his best friend to ask him to help her, he tells her he tells her he and Dennis do not get involved in each other's private business. When Donna begs him to speak to Dennis about his use of steroids, he tells her, "Hell, Dennis just gets a little carried away, that's all."

When Donna finally flees with her son to a transition house, Dennis, because he is a police officer, knows the location of the shelter, finds her and, forces her to return home with him telling her that if she ever tries to leave him again, he will cut her sister's throat and make Donna watch him while he is doing it.

In *When No One Would Listen*, as the title suggests, when Jessica turns to the justice system for help, she gets none.

When the police come, they do nothing except talk to Gary and cool him down and then leave. When Gary breaks into Jessica's house (he has been obliged to leave by a restraining order), and forces Jessica to have sex with him at gunpoint, he is only charged with burglary, rather than hostage taking and/or attempted murder. And when Gary purchases the gun which he uses to murder Jessica and her lover, the owner of the gun shop accepts Jessica's credit card from Gary without hesitation, suggesting complicity in his crime.

In addition, we witness scenes which depict Jessica and Gary in rigid stereotypical roles, which is corroborated with Jessica's on-going voice-over narrative. We learn that she has no where else to go and cannot depend on her family. At one point, she asks herself "why did I stay?" Jessica answers by saying that, yes, she knew he was dangerous, but that, in light of the fact that he'd already killed three people, she felt it was safer to stay than to leave. Eventually however, Jessica has enough and leaves Gary, fleeing with her children to a transition shelter. She is provided with a police escort to follow her from the transition shelter to work and back each day. However, Gary follows her home from work (he rents a vehicle so Jessica and the police do not recognize the licence number or the make) and finds out the address of the transition shelter. Gary stalks Jessica one night when she and her children have been out at a restaurant for dinner (with her new boyfriend, who, happens to also be the manager in the restaurant where Jessica works).

Jessica and her friend are outside the restaurant, locked in a passionate embrace. Gary pulls out a gun and shoots them both in front of the children.

Throughout, Jessica's narrative explains her situation and why she did not leave. There are many references within her on-going narrative to the broader issue of wife abuse and much of her narrative is political. For instance, Jessica talks about feeling trapped and compares her situation to that of a hostage. "Here's the guy with all the power and you're stuck whether it's because you're chained to a radiator or because you're chained to him in your head...with kids, money, and history...people look at the hostages and say, hey we got to get those guys outta there -- sending in special forces and all. But people look at women like me and think crazy bitch -- she must like getting beat up -- otherwise she'd just walk out, right? -- Right?"

In another segment Jessica tells us that she "can't leave with two kids and no place to go.... Anyways, you made your bed -- like Mom used to say...you gotta sleep in it, which isn't all that bad, if you know what I mean." Later on Jessica tells us she stayed because she thought it was safer than leaving.

Political Motifs

Part of the feminist discourse encoded in these films includes certain political motifs. In all three films there is at least some reference to wife abuse as a larger social issue. For example, in *The Burning Bed*, Francine receives letters of support from other battered women who, upon hearing her story, were inspired to leave their abusive husbands.

In *Cries Unheard*, at one point Donna flees to a transition house. The scene depicts Donna at the transition house in a meeting with the other women who are staying there. They are having a "group session" discussing the dynamics of wife abuse. In one of the framing scenes which show Donna talking to her son she tells him that "for the next five years I lived with Dennis in constant fear -- like a prisoner of war in a torture chamber -- it got crazier...I lived in constant fear of my life." Further on, there is a sequence in flashback of Donna's trial, which includes the testimony of Lenore Walker, who in real life is the psychologist who developed the concept of the battered women's syndrome and has published several books on the subjects. As well, she has testified on behalf of many battered women who have killed their mates including Donna Yacklich in May 1988.

When No One Would Listen is the most overtly political of the three films. Jessica's narrative continuously makes references to the issue of wife abuse and the image of the battered woman as it has been socially constructed. In addition to the

direct references made by Jessica in her narrative; for instance, several times she refers to Sarah, and Sarah's explanations of why Gary beats Jessica. Sarah works at the transition shelter that Jessica eventually goes to. But as well, the on-going narrative of the film depicts the dynamics of wife abuse and how it is played out in Jessica's relationship. For instance, Jessica does not want to accept a cigarette from her friend, even though Gary is not around, saying "my husband would hit the roof...he'd never allow a smoker in the house." One of the most powerful scenes in the film takes place when Jessica is being beaten. We do not see Gary hitting her, instead the camera focuses on the children, who are watching cartoons. We hear Jessica's screams and the sound of her being punched and slapped. The camera focuses on the television. The cartoon, is a spoof on the fairly tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. Prince Charming, who wakes Sleeping Beauty from her sleep, does so by screaming at her "wake up" while he shakes her violently, slapping her across the face screaming "you lazy good-for-nothing." The camera moves to Jessica's children, who huddle together frightened by the sounds coming from the other room. Her son, Matt, turns the television up to block out the anguished cries of his mother. The implications here are unmistakable; the seed of male violence against women is planted at an early age and the media is responsible.

Pure Victims: Battered Women as Virgins and Mothers

The women in these films are constructed in what could be called the "pure victim" motif, providing representations of the social construction of the battered woman.

In all three films the women are constructed stereotypically in traditional roles as wives and mothers, who, through no fault of their own, are trapped in horrible relationships with vicious and psychotic men. In addition, they are constructed as women who are highly motivated to leave but have no where else to go, or are ignored by society's institutions. In each film, Donna, Francine, and Jessica must remain in the abusive relationship until the point is reached where the relationship become unbearable with murder as the outcome.

As well, the women are traditional in their beliefs about the family and the institution of marriage. Jessica tells us that she "never believed in divorce." And after being slapped across the face in front of a group of friends, Francine tells her shocked girlfriend that "it was just as much my fault as it was his...we're a family now and I have to figure out what he wants and what he's thinking...it's not easy for him too, you know...he's doing the best he can."

Donna, Francine and Jessica embody the social construction of the battered woman. They are presented as having done absolutely nothing to precipitate the violence perpetrated against them; they are pure victims in this respect.

A case in point: at the beginning of each film, when we are first introduced to the characters before they have met their partners, the women are presented as carefree, happy, innocent beings. The women are also constructed as having low self-esteem. They are flattered by the attentions of their future mates, who, from the beginning are overly possessive and jealous, which is misread by the women as true love.

Francine is constructed as innocent and childlike when she meets Mickey. The "good girl" image continues, as Francine refuses to have sex with Mickey until she's married, but when she finally gives in and has sex with him, she asks her friend if "she looks different." When her friend has no idea what she's talking about, Francine walks up and down, asking her friend "do I walk different?" thinking that somehow she looks different because she's had sex. Her fate is then sealed once she's had sex with Mickey; marriage is now the only option for Francine.

Donna is older than Francine when she meets her abusive partner. Donna is introduced to Dennis during a visit with her sister, who sets her up on a blind date with Dennis. Initially, Donna does not want to go out with him, suggesting to her sister that they "blow this guy off and go to a movie instead." Her sister insists that she go out with Dennis and suggests Donna wear a sexy red dress for the date. Donna refuses, saying "too sexy" instead opting for a more reserved peasant blouse and long denim skirt. The message here is that Donna is modest and does not go out on blind dates. She would rather spend time with her

sister. In addition, it is not Donna's fault that she ended up with Dennis; she did not want to go out with him; it was her sister who insisted she date him. In another scene, when Dennis asks Donna to come to see his house, she declines, telling him it "wouldn't be proper" for her to go to his house on a first date. However, he eventually convinces her into going by telling her he built the house himself.

Although we are not privy to how Jessica and Gary met, through their personal narratives, we are told about their first meeting. Jessica tells us that she was fifteen years old (obviously young and inexperienced), and that she comes from a troubled family. Her mother had died already, and she had problems with her father. She tells us that Gary flattered her, told her she was smart and sexy, and that for the first time she felt really loved.

In addition to constructing the women characters in these films as "good girls" another strong motif that is contained in all three of these films (and in almost every other telefeature that has been made about battered women) is that of the victim as "good mother." The women in these films all have young children who are totally dependent on their parents. The women are constructed as selfless beings whose motivation for staying with their partners is depicted as "for the good of the children." Curiously, when the women leave the situation and/or kill their partners, they also claim that they did it for their children. For instance, when Francine is on the stand giving

testimony at her trial, when asked why she murdered Mickey, she replies that it was for her children. Similarly, when Donna begins to tell her son why she killed Dennis, she says that she "I thought about you upstairs sleeping."

Another aspect which contributes to the construction of the female characters are constructed within the "pure victim" motif is the choice of actors to portray the battered women in these films. Farrah Fawcett and Jacyln Smith are both veterans of Aaron Spelling's 70s series *Charlies Angels* (commonly referred to as *giggle tv*). Fawcett and Smith both epitomize the ideal in femininity and beauty, and I believe that both women were cast in roles that required a very sympathetic audience. Donna Yacklich and Francine Hughes murdered or had their husbands murdered, and not while they were being beaten. Francine incinerated her husband while he lay sleeping; Donna hired someone to kill her husband as he was coming home from work.[224] Obviously the producers were well aware that in order for the audience to feel sympathy for these women, actors that could embody the "pure victim" motif were needed.

The construct of the battered woman as "pure victim" is particularly interesting when one compares Donna and Francine's characters with that of Jessica's. Michelle Lee, although very beautiful, has often played stronger feminist roles than either Fawcett or Smith. In the long-running soap *Knott's Landing* for

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[224] Even though Dennis is portrayed as a monster throughout most of the film, he is gunned down while holding a toy for his child while he attempts to leave his vehicle.

instance, she had to deal with many serious problems inside her family as well as outside and was portrayed as a confident, capable woman who could handle herself, with or without a man. Interestingly, of the three, Jessica is the battered woman who gets murdered. And although the film does attempt to show wife abuse in a larger political context, there is a subtle but unmistakable subtext that blames the victim (Jessica) throughout.

For instance, Jessica is the only woman of the three that has a boyfriend, which tends to lessen audience sympathy for her predicament. Jessica is seen as flirtatious as well as a cheat as the audience witnesses the relationship blossom before Jessica leaves Gary. Jessica is changing into her uniform and Walter (the boyfriend) unintentionally walks in while Jessica is undressed. They laugh about it; this leads Walter and Jessica towards the beginning of a romantic relationship. In another scene, when Jessica is late coming home from work, Gary explodes, violently beating her. However, the reason Jessica is late (she lies to Gary) is that she has been at work flirting with Walter. It is unclear whether Gary has lost his temper because he is aware of Jessica's relationship with Walter, or he is angry simply because she was late coming home from work.

Gary goes berserk and murders Jessica when he sees Jessica and the boyfriend locked in a passionate embrace, which takes place in front of the children, as does the murder of Jessica and Walter.

Evil Demons: Constructing Batterers on Television

The male characters in all three films are stereotypical constructs of men who hold extremely rigid patriarchal values about the family and sex roles, which is consistent with the social construction of wife abuse. However, there is an added element to the male characters in television movies about wife abuse, which Tanya Modleski, among others, refers to as "the mystery of masculine motives."[225] Modleski compares such narratives to Gothic romances, which are tales written for women "who are afraid of their husbands."[226] If the women have been constructed as pure victims, the men in all three of these films are the diametric opposite; they are constructed as pure evil. These representations, in my mind at least, pose some of the biggest problems with these films. In all three films there are extenuating circumstances revealed as to why the men behave the way they do toward their wives. And in two of the films, the men are constructed as psychopathic killers, which has serious implications for the public discourse of wife abuse. The underlying message seems to be that men who beat their wives are psychopathic killers. As well, there are external forces, such as drug and alcohol abuse and or unemployment that cause these men to beat their wives.

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[225] Tanya Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women, New York and London, 1982, p. 37.

[226] Quoted by Rapping, p. 111.

For instance, Gary is constructed as a man with an uncontrollable temper, which appears in the second scene of the film, when the family is moving into their new house. Gary is an unemployed blue collar worker; unemployment is certainly represented as a problem in this film. Gary believes his neighbours are too noisy and often calls the police to complain. The conflict soon escalates. Later on, Gary, shoots and kills three of his neighbours, including a woman.

As the film progresses, we see Gary become increasingly psychotic in his behavior and in his appearance, as do all three of the male characters. For example, all three men grow mustaches and then full beards. The men are depicted as completely out of control towards the end of the film, often shown as sweating profusely, unkempt and demonic in their appearance.

In *Cries Unheard*, Dennis appears to be pretty normal in the beginning. He has a good job and is a respected member of the community, is well educated, and does not drink or smoke. However, Dennis quickly changes once he and Donna are married. Dennis becomes obsessed with lifting weights and is apparently addicted to steroids. The implication is that it is the drugs that cause his psychotic behavior. Donna tells us as much when she pines for "that dear, sweet, loving man that I married."

Dennis is also constructed as a "Rambo" type of character with respect to his work. One dramatic scene contains a hostage taking. Dennis shoots his way into the mobile home and puts a gun to the head of a nine-year-old boy as a means of forcing the

hostage takers to surrender. And a little later on, we find out that Donna suspects that Dennis may have murdered his first wife.

As the film progresses his appearance degenerates; Dennis becomes wilder looking. For instance, in the scene leading up to his murder, we see Dennis in his truck driving home, listening to dramatic organ music. I was reminded of the scenes of the man who was possessed by evil spirits (apparently) in the *Ammetyville Horror*. In fact, Dennis looks very similar to the male character in that film towards the end of the film.

While Mickey's character is somewhat more realistic when compared to the other two male abusers, there are still problems with the construction of his character. Poverty and alcohol play a large role in explaining the tensions felt within that family; as well, twisted family dynamics play a role. Although only hinted at, we sense there is something frightening about Mickey's relationship with his mother, which is implied from the beginning of the film. Because Mickey is unemployed, Francine and Mickey have to live with his parents; the mise en scene, the use of close interior shots convey the sense of claustrophobia as well as dysfunction and the poverty in which the family lives.

Each time Francine leaves Mickey, his mother comes and attempts to convince her to return. Even when Mickey's mother recognizes that Mickey "ain't right" and finally agrees with Francine that Mickey needs psychiatric help, this revelation

comes to her, not from acknowledging the brutality that Francine has suffered but because, when he was recuperating in the hospital after the accident, he would not take his mother's hand. As well, his mother blames the accident on Mickey's violence toward Francine, apparently not noticing that Mickey was just as violent towards her prior to his accident.

Blame It On the Steroids... or the Booze or....

In all three of these films, external forces and/or extraordinary circumstances are constructed which serve to lessen the blame on the men for their violence towards their wives. Blame it on the steroids, unemployment, and/or alcohol abuse, blame it on a car accident. Of more concern though, is the fact that the male characters in these films are extreme examples of pathological men with extreme psychological problems. Gary murdered three people and Dennis, although it is never substantiated, is suspected of murdering his first wife. And while Mickey was never accused of murdering another person, he is constructed as embodying evil in another way. During the scenes when Francine is on the witness stand, she is asked to recount a particular incident that took place while she was married to Mickey. The story is about how Mickey killed the family pet by leaving it outside to freeze to death while giving birth. The puppies died as well. This information is rather curious, for there are no scenes in the film that include a family pet. Francine obtained a pet for her children; her lawyer

connects this act with her being a good mother. In my mind, the act of killing an innocent animal symbolizes Mickey as evil. More important, this information provided by Francine is the pivotal point in the film; if you were not sympathetic towards Francine and her situation, there could be no room for doubt now. Not only was Mickey a wife beater, he was also cruel to animals.

Distortions, Deletions, and Lies: Artistic Licence

The Yacklich and the Hughes trials were highly publicized media events. Women's groups rallied around both these women, supporting their legal defence funds and strategies, as well as using the media spotlight as a platform for drawing public attention to the issue of wife abuse. However, the women's movement is scarcely alluded to in both films. Instead, the narrative of *The Burning Bed* concentrates on Francine's family and personal life. In reality, Francine's case was taken up by a variety of feminist organizations, who were responsible for developing Francine's legal strategy as well as helping to bring her case to the attention of the public (via the media, of course). However, in the film Francine is represented by a court appointed (male) lawyer. As Rapping among others points out, this construction of the Hughes case tends to depoliticize wife abuse by refusing to situate Francine's story in a social-historical context and instead "insists... that problems -- even widespread social problems like domestic violence -- be viewed,

understood, and tackled only in terms of isolated cases and within the limits of existing social agencies."[227] Rapping believes the message of the film would have been different if feminism had been depicted as the agent of Francine's acquittal instead of a "good lawyer in a well-cut suit" who, as part of the mainstream establishment, was all that Francine needed in order to win her case.[228] The film, for all it's contradictions, is in fact a kind of Cinderella story, with Francine living "happily ever after" simply by trusting her lawyer. "He gets her off; she returns to business school to join his world, moving on up, presumably, to the kind of setting we see in every commercial during the broadcast."[229]

However, happy endings are rare in the real world. In the decade after Francine's acquittal her struggles continued and private demons emerged. For instance, she developed substance and alcohol problems. While in jail she was separated from her children for nine months and the relationship with her children disintegrated as a result. Once out of jail, Francine received death threats from Mickey's family and lived in fear of retaliation. She took the threats seriously and at one point was afraid to leave the house alone. Two years after Francine was acquitted, she met and married Robert Wilson, an ex-convict recently paroled after serving ten years for armed robbery.

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227 Rapping, p. 75.

228 *Ibid.*

229 *Ibid.*

Wilson was later accused of sexually abusing one of Francine's children; after the accusations, Francine left him, however she left two of her children in his care. Francine herself was accused of physically abusing her children. For instance, Wilson alleges that Francine "had to beat the tar out of Nicole" (her daughter) on one occasion, and another time struck her daughter Christie, "blackening both of her eyes."[230]

In *Cries Unheard*, Donna is also represented by a male lawyer, who, while not getting her off, is still constructed as "her knight in shining armour," who has come to her rescue. In the actual case, Donna was first represented by a body-building friend of her husband's, who offered to protect Donna after she was charged. But, according to Lenore Walker, her lawyer became "abusive and controlling towards her too."[231] When it became clear that there was a conflict of interest he was fired.

One other aspect of the case which was overlooked in the film was the fact that one of the "men" Donna hired to kill her husband was only sixteen years old. It seems that Donna had asked several friends of Dennis to kill him; however, no one would take her up on her offer of fifty-thousand dollars worth of insurance money (once Dennis was dead). In desperation, she

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[230] Gioia Diliberto, "A Violent Death, A Haunted Life", People Weekly Magazine. Oct. 8, 1994, v.22, y p. 106.

[231] Lenore Walker, Terrifying Love: When Battered Women Kill And How Society Responds, Harper and Row Publishers, 1989, p. 285.

convinced the sixteen year old, who was assisted by a twenty-year old male as well.

Analysis

The dominant text contained within these films provides a very narrow definition of what wife abuse is, how it happens, and what happens when it occurs. Not surprisingly, the narratives in these movies reproduce representations of wife abuse and the battered woman as they have been socially constructed and reproduced by the media for over one hundred years. In addition, these films work to "neutralize all contradictory elements that cannot be reconciled to the dominant family ideology by excluding them from the constructed work in which the ideal family live, or by naturalizing the causes of these problems so they seem fatally "tragic" rather than historical and political."[232]

There is a pattern of discourse that is consistent in all three films. Each film is encoded with similar messages and each film contains a moral to the story. For instance, the narratives that are woven throughout overtly and covertly tell us that this is wife abuse; this is how and why it happens. The problem, of course, is that in all three films the narratives are apolitically and ahistorically contextualized. Thus the issue of wife abuse is reduced to a family problem, and in the somewhat mythical terms of a conflict of good versus evil. Thecharacters-

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[232] Rapping, p. xli.

are portrayed as heroin and villain. The stories are formulaic, sentimental, and pander to raw emotion and audience identification through the use of personal narratives. In all three films the mise-en-scene is obvious and emblematic. As Rapping points out, the use of "[C]lose-ups and tight interiors make the reading of the text unambiguous and transparent."[233] And except for the ending in *When No One Would Listen*, these films leave us with a "happy ending." As well, they are sensationalized stories told in over-simplified terms. In the case of the stories "based on fact," representations involve distortions, deletions and in some cases, pure fabrication, often in the name of artistic licence.

Moreover, the woman characters are constructed as "pure victims," who hold traditional beliefs and values about marriage. Duty-bound to their husbands, they place the highest value on their roles as wives and mothers and are constructed as women who have no self-esteem. Their abusers are constructed as over-possessive and controlling men who have strong patriarchal views on the family and the woman's role. Socio-economic pressures also play a part in representations of wife abuse in television movies. However, in all three films the representation of abuser is much more problematic than the victims; they are constructed as psychopathic killers who degenerate before our very eyes as each film progresses. The overwhelming messages these films impart, subtly blaming the victim and/or

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[233] Rapping, p. 38.

external forces, steroids, unemployment, etc. as the cause of the abuse leads to some troubling conclusions about what wife abuse is and how it happens. The conclusions one might draw from looking at these films about wife abuse is that the perpetrators are extremely dangerous, psychopathic in nature, and that wife abuse typically ends in murder. These films ignore or trivialize issues of power, both within the family as well as institutionally; they tend to mystify and/or obliterate "social, economic, and political institutions, making it seem as though individuals, acting as "family members" and according to the dictates of personal family values, actually are the agents of social and political phenomena."[234] They suggest that by "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" one can overcome almost anything; a dangerous discourse, as it releases the responsibility from those in power to take action on behalf of the victims. By the end of each film, no matter how complex, the issues are resolved, "tied up in a neat oversimplified bow. They exaggerate the amount of change that is actually possible through sheer effort."[235]

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234 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

235 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The first portion of this thesis mapped out the relationship between the media and the social construction of wife abuse in a social-historical context. In addition, the relationship between the media and the issue of wife abuse as a social problem for public concern was examined in an earlier historical epoch, the Victorian era. I then discussed how wife abuse re-emerged in the public sphere in the early 1970s, the result of the women's movement during this period. I argued that historically the media has had a profound effect on the public discourse surrounding the issue and continues to do so. I illustrated this point by examining some of the texts about wife abuse and the battered woman that were produced by the news and popular media during the 1970s and early 1980s.

The latter half of this thesis examined three made-for-television films, in an attempt to find collective patterns of meaning as well as the contradictions and tensions evident within each film. I argued that made-for-television movies are an important public sphere and should be taken seriously due to the nature of these films, which deal with important social issues and make political statements in the process. As such, television movies should be viewed as important mechanisms of social control, which have the ability to affect the public discourse about the issue of wife abuse (as well as other social issues). The vast number of viewers that these films attract,

combined with the fact that they tackle important social issues should convince us that they do matter; these films affect our collective consciousness and foster personal and public debate. The most graphic evidence of the effect of these films can have was illustrated in the case in *The Burning Bed,* where the aftermath was measurable, if alarming, with some women murdering their husbands (and in one case where a husband murdered his wife), the day after the film first aired on network television.[236]

Made-for-television movies are in a special category of media. I have argued that they are important sites of discourse because of the millions of people who view these movies. The representations of wife abuse and the battered woman encoded into television movies have significant impact on the public discourse about the issue, as no other form of media has the ability to garner such audiences. The Hughes and Yacklich cases are good examples of the power of television films. Even though both cases were highly publicized media events, the vast majority of the public had no idea who Francine Hughes or Donna Yacklich were until the docudramas were shown on television.

I have argued in this thesis that in all its forms, the media have constructed representations of battered women and wife abuse in rigid, stereotypical terms. However, the representations contained in the television movies examined here are particularly problematic. These films contain claims about the

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[236] Rapping, p. 42.

battered woman and wife abuse which have contributed to the social construction of wife abuse and the battered woman as a social problem, (which by itself may be problematic for some women who are unable to legitimately lay claim to the label of battered woman). On the one hand, the women in all three films are constructed as trapped within their own victimization, as having no self-esteem, and as caught in horribly desperate situations. These stories are grim and depressing and are unusual for television productions in that, for the most part, the actors lack glamour. All three films contain graphic scenes of violence, which is at times, difficult to watch. By and large the violence contained in these three films is not sensationalized. Rather, the violence is constructed as painful and unheroic as it is in reality. On the other hand, however, these representations may pose another problem. These grim tales do little to foster character identification with the audience. For even if one were in a situation similar to these battered women, it is not a position, at least in my mind, that anyone would readily admit to being in. Adding to this problem is the way in which the men who are the abusers are constructed as dangerous men with psychopathic tendencies who are capable of murder. The message seems to be that wife abuse is an extreme form of violence that leads to murder. In some cases at least, these films may prevent some women from seeing or themselves as battered, or from seeking help early on.

Further, and I believe that this is the most distressing message these films bring home, if the women who were in these extremely dangerous situations could not get help, then what hope is there for women in situations that are less extreme?

In addition, one glaring contradiction becomes apparent when these films are studied collectively which I feel needs to be addressed. The "wife beater as psychopath" motif would appear to contradict the statistics. As mentioned at the outset, it is estimated that one woman in ten will be physically and/or emotionally assaulted by her intimate partner in Canada (the statistics for the U.S. are the same). Obviously, one in ten men in North America are not psychopathic killers. For the most part, they are (otherwise) normal men, doctors and lawyers, athletes, musicians, actors, skilled and unskilled workers from all socio-economic groups and races. However, the message these films give is that wife abuse is an abberation that occurs only in extraordinary circumstances and that it is perpetrated by men who are deranged. This discourse about wife abuse may shed some light on why society has yet to deal with the magnitude of the problem. For as Gitlin points out, "[T]elevision adds up to American cultures' impoverished version of itself. Some of our collective fears it ratifies, others it suppresses, but in either case, and at virtually every choice-point in the production process...the gatekeepers work up smoothed-out versions of public desire and feed them back to us."[237] Similarly, Thomas

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[237] Gitlin 1983, p. 332.

Schatz believes that movies are the manifestation of the myths of our culture, which reflect our "desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in culture while at the same time participating in the projection of an idealized collective self-image."[238] The discourses contained in these films seem to reflect the wholesale denial of the pervasiveness of the problem that pervades contemporary society. And yet, the statistics continue to show us that wife abuse, which includes slapping, pushing, shoving, as well as brutally beating, maiming and killing women continues mostly unchecked.

More broadly though, the question that remains is what effect do these films have on the discourse about wife abuse? It is not an easy question to answer, as these texts do not stand alone; rather as I have argued, they intermingle with other texts, including other media and published accounts of the stories they tell. But that is exactly the point. For to gain an understanding of the discourse about wife abuse requires an examination of how the media, in all its manifestations, deals with the issue of wife abuse.

As I have demonstrated, the relationship between the media and the discourse about wife abuse began over one hundred years ago. It is clear that the media have been a significant agent in defining the discourse about the issue historically in the two periods when wife abuse emerged as a public problem. However,

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[238] Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1981, p. 261.

the concern is that the representations of the collective content the media have almost singularly focused on have consisted of a very narrow definition of the problem. The representations of the collective content may be a contributing factor with why society has yet to find the answers that would begin to stop wife abuse, if not eliminate it.

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