
**THE ABUSIVE COUPLE:
LIVING IN LOVE'S SHADOW**

Documentary Treatment

by
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INTRODUCTION

A recent report from Statistics Canada reveals that 51% of women have suffered physical or sexual abuse by men. Given a social problem of such alarming proportions, closer attention must be paid to how and why relationships between men and women evolve into abuse.

Perhaps domestic violence is an extreme case of problems whose seed can be found in so called 'normal' relationships. The film attempts to dig beneath the surface, beneath sensational portraits of 'battered' women and 'psychopathic' men, and uncover this seed which forms a common thread with non-abusive relationships. Although the men and women who end up in abusive relationships tend to have certain characteristics (abusive childhoods, low self-esteem, few limits as to what they will tolerate, deep attachment to the loved one), they also have certain expectations of each other and of love. It is these that are shared by us all. Long standing cultural myths animate our expectations of men and women, and of love itself. Maybe we need to question these myths if we really expect to have an egalitarian basis for male and female relationships.

This film will explore these issues by letting men and women speak for themselves and comment on what others are saying. The structure is that of a group therapy session but where the participants are separated by time and space. The goal is to collectively define who these mythical 'ideal' players in the drama of love are, and what is the plot which animates the action. Perhaps by seeing the shape of this clearly, the shadow will become understandable as well.

This treatment is based on a review of current research about domestic violence, and on a series of preliminary interviews. The insights and perspectives of men and women who have been in abusive relationships, of therapists and social workers, of representatives of the Montreal police department, and of representatives of organizations providing services to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence are included.¹

¹A list of people and organizations contacted is provided at the end.

The passages of dialogue presented are based on notes taken during interviews and are included to give the flavor of what was said. The wording during filmed interviews will differ. Due to the personal nature of the interviews with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, not all of the individuals interviewed wish to appear on screen or be identified. In such a case, we will either use voice-overs, or film the speaker in a way as not to reveal their identity. In some cases further research will be undertaken to find other individuals with similar insights and experiences who would be willing to appear on screen.

Further research will also be undertaken to find a focal couple who have been through the cycle of violence but who have survived it, and are still together to share the story. Both their points of view will be integrated, providing support to the statements of the other men and women appearing in the film. However, in order not to invent material at this stage, the proposed presence of such a couple has only been suggested in one or two sections of the treatment. Their full integration into the story would be achieved during the next phase of development. By showing that it is possible to break the cycle of violence, we aim to provide hope to those caught in it's grip, and to inspire an attempt at change. For those viewers not touched by violence, we still invite them to question their expectations of the other sex, and of love, and to question if these expectations are fundamentally beneficial or detrimental to the relationship.²

²This documentary may be partially bilingual - English and French. Where appropriate, voice-over translation will be provided.

SUBURBIA - THE CHRISTMAS SEASON - NIGHT

The film opens on an idealic suburban street, lined with single-family homes decorated for Christmas. As we cruise down the street (POV from inside a car) we catch glimpses of life inside the homes - Hallmark-Card-style family scenes.

The pulsating lights of an ambulance parked in front of one of the homes are hardly noticed at first - blending in with the pretty lights. As the ambulance veers away - siren wailing in odd counter-point to the 'jingle-bells' of festive carols - reveal the POV as one from inside a police car.

A MAJOR HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ENTRANCE

Typical emergency ward commotion. Notice a petite woman, 'Marie'³, move out of the way as a bleeding patient is rushed past her. She looks around, remembering ...

"When they brought me in ..." she details the injuries she had when she was admitted following a 'fight' with her boyfriend. She talks about the strange mix of safety and danger she felt. On the one hand she was away from him. But on the other, it was only a matter of time before she would face him again. From his POV, having protected herself by calling 911 would be construed as betrayal.

POLICE STATION - DETENTION CELLS

A tall imposing man, 'Bob', looks around the cells and those detained within. His hands grip the bars as he reminisces ...

Bob

It's true what she said. Although she is not my wife - she could be - it's the same story.

He is silent for a moment.

Bob

I didn't expect my marriage to end up like this.

³The names of the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence whose experiences are presented in this treatment have been changed to protect their anonymity.

TITLE SEQUENCE

Montage of black and white wedding pictures. End on a still of a wedding picture in a frame on a shelf - pull back to reveal a living room, the man portrayed in the picture in handcuffs, police, a woman crying and children.⁴

Narrator

This is a love story - one being lived by thousands of women and men right now. It's about hopes and dreams and disappointment. It's about trying again. But most of all, it's about pain and the need for change. We're all a part of this story - it's only a question of degree ...

Opening Title:

The Abusive Couple: Living in Love's Shadow

Narrator

If you are currently in an abusive relationship, the content of this film is not to be used to excuse your situation. If you are abusive, you are responsible for your behavior. If you are abused, you are responsible for your safety. For additional support, call the following organizations ...

SUBURBIA - THE CHRISTMAS SEASON - NIGHT

Two Police Officers talk about the problem of domestic violence as they slowly cruise down a street. From their experience, domestic violence calls are very hard to deal with. The situations are emotionally charged and highly unpredictable. With other calls coming in, there is a lot of guilt about not having enough time to spend with the victim. And then there is the reality of knowing that probably they will be back in the same home, dealing with the same problem again, and again, and again. As they talk, we scan the houses passed - so innocent from the outside, yet who knows what lurks within.

OFFICE - POLICE DIRECTOR IN CHARGE OF CONJUGAL CRIMES

The police director in charge of a unit that monitors the evolution of conjugal crime, outlines the current policy on domestic violence:

⁴Photographer Donna Ferrato, who specializes in documenting domestic violence, may be called upon to provide such stills.

Police Director

Since 1986 ...[we've] had a policy on conjugal violence that requires officers, when there is sufficient evidence and regardless of whether the victim wants to or not, to lay criminal charges.⁵

However, he points out that police officers 'on the front line' can only stop violence on a temporary basis. Long-term change will occur only if both perpetrator and victim agree to some sort of therapy. Even ending the current abusive relationship may not be the end of the problem - serial victims and serial abusers are not uncommon.

POLICE STATION - CONTINUING TRAINING DEPARTMENT

Narrator

Abusive relationships trace a predictable path. From case to case, the drama remains the same, only the actors change.

A criminologist outlines what constitutes the cycle of violence to a room full of police officers. There is a tension building phase, an explosion of violence, and then the honeymoon period. Usually, with each pass through the cycle, the violence escalates. On average the cycle has to repeat itself 35 times before the police are called, before someone leaves, or before someone gets treatment.

PERSONAL INSIGHTS

Intercut several locations as men, women and police officers present personal insights. For instance ...

AUSTERE OFFICE

'Charles', with an ambiguous face expression, recounts how after seventeen years of marriage, fifteen of which were colored by his violence, there was a mutual decision between himself and his wife that he leave. They both had come to realize that without some sort of break, or intervention, nothing would change.

⁵John Kousik, as quoted by James Mennie in the Montreal Gazette story, How Can We Stop Conjugal Killings?, Monday November 29, 1993.

Charles

I think the biggest shock came when I started therapy and realized that this thing we had been suffering through was a pattern. Each violent episode, which at the time seemed justified and important, was predictable. The shock of that realization stays with you a long time.

AN APARTMENT

A woman walks through an apartment, showing us around. She talks about her experience - different from that of Charles except for the same disturbing realization that her life was a perfect example of the cycle of violence.

Woman

It's hard to believe that what happens in your life is not unique. Now I can see what we must have looked like to the officers that came to arrest my boyfriend ...

She recreates the night of the arrest. She blocks out the scene as a theater director might do - where everyone was, what they were doing, what was being said.

POLICE STATION - OUTSIDE THE TRAINING ROOM

Against a sea of uniforms, individual police officers recount various calls during which they exercised the standard protocol in dealing with victims of violence.

Police Officer

We have to gain the confidence of the victim, but in order to do that, we must try to get her away from the perpetrator, take her to another room, take him in the hall, something like that ...

APARTMENT

The woman recounts how confused and afraid she was. Pointing in the direction of where her boyfriend was being retained, she describes how although she was alone with a police officer, she still felt like her boyfriend was right there listening and watching.

Woman

My loyalty was to him - not to my own safety.

POLICE STATION - OUTSIDE THE TRAINING ROOM

An officer talks about how the men are usually very angry - it takes them quite a while to cool off.

Police Officer

They don't necessarily accept that they've done something wrong. They feel like they're the victim.

OUTSIDE A SUBURBAN HOUSE

'Bob' stands outside a suburban house, shifting from foot to foot in the cold. He talks about his own arrest - about how strange it was to be taken out of his own home. He talks about how nearly a dozen cops came to pick him up.

He says he was angry at first, but eventually just felt humiliated and confused. He realizes that beneath much of the anger was this terrible fear.

STILL PICTURE

A black and white still picture from the domestic 'battlefield' - she, crying in the kitchen ... he, downcast, sitting in the other room ... police officers trying to maintain a neutral gap in between.

Bob

I look at these pictures and know exactly what the guy's feeling. I guess the biggest fear is of ending up alone.

Woman - 'Wendy'

I was afraid too. If I thought about leaving, it was like I was paralyzed - glued to the floor. But I knew it was the only way ...

THE ESCAPE

The same female narrator, 'Wendy', continues to recount her escape from home. Without visually revealing her identity, we retrace the logistics of her plan ... how she slowly packed over a series of weeks, hiding things in the car. How she couldn't tell anyone, especially the kids. How until the last day she pretended nothing was wrong, and how she finally escaped to a shelter.

FAMILY PHOTO ALBUMS

Narrator

The physical separation is only the tip of the iceberg. It's the psychological separation which many can't survive.

Details of everyday life - moments from the lives of several family are revealed: the Sunday picnic, the first birthday, the Christmas party, the 'happy' ornament-laden tree, full of promise for the new year.

VIGNETTES - THE FACE OF ATTACHMENT

Vocals

My love, my darling, I hunger for your touch. A long, lonely time. Time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much. Are you still mine? I need your love. I need your love. God speed your love to me.

With the romantic yearning of *Unchained Melody*⁶ as background, trace the intense attachment of abusive couples in a series of scenes ...

A plastic Christmas tree in the reception area of a woman's shelter - around it, an assortment of children, while above it, an elaborate security system set-up.

A man crying in a jail cell.

A woman in a hospital bed.

A women with children at a shelter, talking on the phone. She is clearly upset, and whispering, almost as if she is not sure who the enemy is, the battering husband on the phone, or the women in the shelter helping her leave him.

A man trying to gain admittance to a well guarded shelter - he stares at the bars on the windows, he pounds on the mirrored glass in the front door, but he is not allowed in.

Children looking out the window - through the iron bars.

A man walking alone in the distance.

WOMAN'S SHELTER

A therapist who works at a woman's shelter talks about the profound attachment between the women and men. The hardest thing is to get the women to start talking about something other than 'him'. The men are lost without their mate too. Some try suicide, stop eating, stop going to work.

Therapist

It's almost as if they share one self between the two of them.

⁶ By the Righteous Brothers.

POLICE STATION

A police officer in charge of admitting arrested individuals describes how the accused in conjugal crime cases are treated. Since the rate of suicide is so high, a special code has been established - 'VC' (Violence Conjugal) - in order that officers can take special preventative measures.

Police Officer

It's amazing the lengths these guys will go to trying to kill themselves. We've seen guys strangle themselves with their own shirts.

ACKERMAN INSTITUTE FOR FAMILY THERAPY - NEW YORK

A family therapist who specializes in co-joint therapy for abusive couples points out that although most people focus on the violence in abusive relationships, there is another dimension - that of redemption, of intense love

...

Therapist

The life stories of these men and women, [both] his and hers, are narratives filled with pain and disappointment. Yet, when the couple tells the story of their relationship, especially how it began, the cloud lifts. It is as though an electrical connection had been made between them, a bond that keeps them attached despite the crazy violence.⁷

VIGNETTES - TRUE LOVE

The stories of how the relationship started for a few men and women will be told in a series of vignettes. Each story will flow into the next, almost as if it were the same relationship. However, we also aim to present the story of an actual couple who have survived the cycle of violence. This way both points of view in one relationship will be revealed.

The stories will be told on location - at some sentimental spot which will be chosen by the storyteller.

Momentos, photos, favorite songs ... all those little 'special' reminders of lover's bliss will be revealed.

Woven into the narrative, will be clips from films and television shows which were the model of love for these individuals - their inspiration so to speak.

⁷Quote from Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg & Walker (1990). *Love and Violence: Gender Paradoxes in Volatile Attachments*, Family Process, 29 (4).

For instance ... clips from The Waltons, or the orchard scene from The Sound of Music, or the beach encounter in From Here to Eternity.

The women will talk about feeling safe, taken care of, protected. "It was like I was saved somehow, and things would never be the same again." They will recount how "he did all those romantic things that girls dream about", of how they felt swept off their feet. Even his jealousy when revealed was an aspect of the fantasy - "I thought it meant he really cared". But again and again, they will talk about feeling needed.

The men will also talk about feeling safe initially, and of not being judged. "She accepted my weaknesses and vulnerability." They will talk about being respected. "I thought I'd finally found the 'home' I never had. You know, somewhere where I could be myself, and didn't have to keep measuring up."

In many respects, for both the men and the women, this love was a 'dream come true'.

Narrator

Perhaps it's a simple equation - the higher you place your romantic expectations, the harder you fall. There isn't much romance in changing diapers.

ACKERMAN INSTITUTE FOR FAMILY THERAPY - NEW YORK

The family therapist continues, pointing out that the love in abusive relationships can be like an addiction - the highs and lows are a part of it - a contrast effect.

Therapist

The belief is: if you want the rainbow, you have to put up with the rain. The question is: how much rain?

Often, the abuse can be there right from the start - but it is not defined as such.

DANCE CLUB - NIGHT

'Bob' is seated at a table in a dance club. He recounts his first date, in a club a bit like this, with the woman who later became his common law wife, and who later had him arrested.

Bob

We were clearly attracted to each other. So I said to her "let's get out of here". She says "I haven't finished my drink". So I take the drink and I throw it down on the floor, glass and all and say "there, now you're finished". She just got up and left with me! PAUSE. Now I look at that and realize I was being abusive right from the start!

FILM CLIP

A clip of Humphrey Bogart in one of his macho roles, with 'the girl', very interested in him, hanging about.

TOY DEPARTMENT - LARGE DEPARTMENT STORE

'Jane', a bubbly smiling woman, walks down the aisles of the boy's toy section, past the GI Joes, the guns, the trucks, the tanks pointing in all directions. She talks about how she might have fallen for that behavior too.

Jane

I thought that's the way men were supposed to be - in control. It was their job to take care of me. It's only when he wouldn't 'allow' me to pursue my own interests that this became a problem.

She reaches the girl's section. Here, an assault of Barbies, mommies, babies, housewives, kitchens and dollhouses.

Jane

See? Another prince. Hey, if a knight in shining armor came by and swept me up today, we'd call that abuse, right? I guess some of us are still hooked. What do they call it? Cinderella complex?

FILM CLIP

A clip from Emile Skola's film Le Bal. A man makes his way across a long empty dance floor in order to ask a woman to dance.

TOY DEPARTMENT - LARGE DEPARTMENT STORE

'Jane' studies the inside of a dollhouse. She tells us about how she got offers from several 'nice guys' but she chose the 'prince'.

Jane

It was a fairytale - the yacht, the cars, the big house.

And then came the abuse, and the endless trying to please him. She ended up a nervous wreck in no time, never being able to quite meet his standards. After 20 years, she left.

Jane

Hey - if you meet a guy and you think he's too good to be true, he is!

She walks away, past the Kermit the frogs lined up on a shelf.

Jane

I've learnt to run away from the seductive charmer - regardless of if I want to or not!

LUXURY HOUSE

'Bob' is pensive. He sits looking around his stately home. He comments on the irony of 'Jane's comment. He says that's exactly what he had - the Porsche, the big dream house on a hill. But then he expected things to fall apart, so he made sure to have a back-up plan in the shape of another woman, and another plan behind the plan and so on and so forth. "That way if it all fell apart, I was still in control, right?" He talks about his father, who died when he was five, and how his mother worshipped his memory.

Bob

Maybe I've been trying to live up to an impossible standard of a man. I had to be the best in everything. It continued at home - I had to control everything there too. She wanted to work. But to me, if she worked, it would mean I was a failure. I took everything personally.

ANOTHER HOME - LIVING ROOM - NEAR WINDOW - NIGHT

A woman looks out the window, at the empty street. A car passes by. She follows it with her eyes.

She reminisces about how many times she stood in the window waiting for her husband to come home. She never knew what to expect, what his mood would be. Looking back, she finds it hard to believe how much she let him define her world.

We scan the empty living room - waiting to be filled with life. Hers alone did not fill it.

COUNSELOR COUPLE'S HOME

Surrounded by the bouncy energy of their children, a couple who both work as counselors for several self-help groups talk about their work.

She talks about how women are caught up in the 'mother as eternal nurturer archetype' - the selfless martyr. As a matter of fact, not far from what constitutes Christian expectations of women.

The type of therapy abused women need is one where their sense of self will emerge. However, if you consider that in some cases one has to reconstruct an entire personality, one can't expect instant results. Basically, some abused women have no idea who they are - their personality has been built in response to the specifications of others.

DOWNTOWN STREET - NIGHT

We take the POV of a social worker who works on the streets with teenagers as she walks down her 'beat'. She says that the feminist movement may have reached the higher levels of society, but down here on the street - not much has changed. Girls have a hard time saying 'no' - even realizing they have a right to. Date violence is not uncommon. She describes how the girls she works with are yet another generation that has been indoctrinated into the same passive mold. The messages are in their homes, in the behavior of their parents, in the media, in popular culture. It isn't easy to move counter stream when you're a teenager.

POLICE STATION

The criminologist, surrounded by police on a coffee break from the training session, reminds us that there is much more in operation here than cultural patterns and socialization. In fact, this notion of male control of women extended into the law until only recently.

She outlines how until the late 60s, women were considered 'minors' in the face of the law. And, there were various sayings which described the acceptable limits to the physical beatings which a man could resort to in order to 'keep the wife under control'. Things like 'the rule of thumb' for the size of stick, and other such helpful hints.

COUNSELOR COUPLE'S HOME

The husband of the female counselor talks about how men are also caught in the web of archetypal societal expectations. In their case, it is the 'powerful father archetype'. Men have very high expectations of each other, and any sort of weakness or vulnerability is not part of those expectations. Abusive

men tend to be real believers in these stereotypical standards for maleness. He continues to talk as we switch location ...

VIDEO ARCADE

He is surrounded by boys and men playing video games. Only a few women are present, watching their men at the helm of their game of choice. The guys are busy shooting, killing, saving scantily clad women, and occasionally victimizing them.

Therapist

I'd say the expectations of men are pretty clear.

He talks about how men are denied their full range of emotions.

Therapist

We're expected to be in control. What about when we're feeling vulnerable or insecure ... it's like those emotions are supposed to not exist.

FILM CLIP

A clip from Emile Skola's film Le Bal. The man who asked the woman to dance has been turned down. He has to walk all the way back across the floor - with everyone watching.

Therapist

And getting therapy for vulnerability and anything to do with admitting to feelings of failure is certainly not 'in'. It's okay for women - most people in therapy are women - but maybe that's because it's socially acceptable for them to admit their weaknesses, while for men it's still taboo.

OFFICE

'Charles' sits against a window in his office - snow blows outside. He talks about learning that he is responsible for his violence - it was not his wife's fault. He confides his inexperience with emotions beyond violence and rage.

Charles

I have problems identifying emotions. I'm learning to be aware of a feeling when it happens, to identify what that feeling is, and to know what to do about it. Without making any grand generalizations, it seems rather obvious that if you were to bottle up all your emotions and not express them, they might sort of build up and explode at some point.

He talks about violence in general. About how we don't know very much about it and are only beginning to study it - we're in the pioneering days.

BOOKSTORE

As 'Charles' peruses the aisles in a large bookstore, he continues to talk about how he wanted to understand his violence and went to look for books on the issue, particularly on the effects it had on the victim. To his shock he didn't find any that tried to understand the problem. There were many that glorified it however - quite evident as we scan an entire section of 'true crime' chronicles.

OFFICE

'Charles' concludes by confiding that perhaps central to his process of self-discovery is the acknowledgment of fear - fear of loss of control.

GROUP THERAPY CENTER FOR ABUSIVE MEN

A therapist talks about his experience with abusive men from the perspective of one who was abusive in the past as well.

Therapist

There is a need to control distressing situations.

He talks about how anger is a defensive mechanism, and essentially covers feelings of powerlessness. Usually, it is hardly in proportion to the situation, and actually has very little to do with it. The battle is with a self-image which may be in danger of crumbling. The psyche can't face that, so it shifts the focus onto something else, or better yet, someone else.

FILM CLIP

A scene from the movie Falling Down where the character played by Michael Douglas vandalizes a store because he didn't like the price he was given for a coke.

GROUP THERAPY CENTER FOR ABUSIVE MEN

The therapist continues, pointing out that the anger played out with the storekeeper as victim had nothing to do with him and price setting. It was the sense of failure felt by Douglas's character which was the intended victim - he was out of work, out of a marriage, and generally in a crisis. The anger was a skewed way of trying to recapture a 'powerful' self-image. This is clearly not a long term solution.

The therapist points out that often anger can lash out when there is an element of truth to what is being said about the perpetrator. They can't face that truth. It's the old 'she pushed my buttons' excuse.

ANOTHER GROUP THERAPY CENTER FOR MEN

Two men, who have been through group therapy, and a therapist talk about abuse in general. 'Jacques', still married, talks about how it is important to realize that it is not always physical abuse that we are talking about.

Jacques

If you include psychological abuse, you will have a lot more men admitting they have a problem.

He was psychologically and verbally abusive, and in a way, he says it is worse. He describes how with psychological abuse you can destroy a person from the inside out. He is lucky to have broken the cycle and still have his marriage.

FILM CLIP

A scene from Silence of the Lambs, when the police chief warns the young female detective not to let the psychopathic Dr. Lector into her head. "Don't tell him anything about yourself!"

AN APARTMENT - BEDROOM CLOSET

Without revealing the identity of the woman, she points to a closet and describes how she would go in there and shut the door when her husband started on one of his abusive episodes.

Woman

But even when I couldn't hear him clearly anymore, his words still echoed in my head, digging in.

GROUP THERAPY CENTER FOR MEN

'Jacques' listens as 'Alain' talks about his experiences, and the therapist comments saying that most of the men that come for therapy at her group are not physically abusive, but the same patterns exist in terms of the cycle of violence, and the same blaming the victim behavior is evident.

THERAPIST'S OFFICE

A dialogue between two therapists - the woman who works at a shelter, and a man in charge of a marital violence clinic.

He begins by talking about the fact that male stereotypes are only one part of the scenario. Patriarchy and the expectations that go along with it is another. But there is the aspect of childhood experience which plays a big part too - abuse and violence are learned behaviors.

She elaborates ... But what is interesting is that it does not have to be violence per se, there can be a sense of abandonment during childhood, where the child has to keep winning love and is insecure about being loved, or some sort of power dynamic between a parent and child which is later sought in future relationships.

CHILDHOOD VIGNETTES

The men and women whose stories are told will take us into their childhood - some telling aspect which they feel is important to their situation. They will illustrate their story with pictures, or where possible they will take us on a 'field-trip' to their home town, or first house, whatever is appropriate.

If possible, the children of these individuals will speak as well - about this generation of violence and its effect on them. We begin with a ...

FILM CLIP

A scene from the movie The Radio Flyer - as a little boy tries to escape the beatings of an alcoholic step father.

VIGNETTES - FOR INSTANCE ...

'Marie', pensive, watching a TV with the movie continuing on screen. "I can understand the little boy's fear. For me it was worse than beatings". The daughter of aristocrats from France, who lived in a castle as a child, was sexually abused by her father. Her relationships have always been full of drama - high drama. It is all she has ever known.

'Bob' talks about how his father - what he remembers from the age of five - and how he used to keep a ruler at the table during dinner time, in case the kids were not as neat as they should have been. And he would use it! Now he finds himself going nuts if his kids make a mess. His mother was a martyr - she sacrificed her life for the kids when this 'ideal' father died.

'Wendy' talks about how overprotective her mother was, and psychologically abusive. 'Jane' agrees. Her mother too was overprotective and controlling. For both women, there was little room to form an identity or personality of their own. The husbands just fit the controlling mold like a hand in glove. Initially, the marriage seemed like the perfect way out of their home situation.

'Charles' talks about how when his father would go away on trips, which was often, he would leave him in charge. "You're the man now!" he would say. He confesses that at the age of six, he really didn't know much about what a man was supposed to act like! So, he played out some cartoon idea of a man.

MEDICAL CENTER - LAB

A doctor who does research on brain chemistry sheds light on new developments in the study of aggression, and its link with stress experienced during childhood.⁸ In particular, the effect on behavior of an imbalance in the levels of the 'brain chemicals' serotonin and noradrenaline is explained.

The latest research indicates that a stressful environment during childhood may permanently affect the brain chemistry, and predispose individuals to either aggression or to depression (which can be likened to anger turned in against the self).

Thus, in the case of individuals whose childhoods were affected by violence, there may be more involved than simply social learning of violent behavior patterns; the brain's entire response mechanism to a perceived threat in the environment may have been altered (the fight or flight instinct is somewhat skewed, either too impulsive, or too passive). Medication which adjusts the levels of certain brain chemicals may hold the key to changing behavior patterns.

THERAPIST'S OFFICE

The dialogue between the two therapists continues ...

They discuss their use of medication in cases involving domestic violence. But is the solution as simple as that? Or must one work on the problem at many levels.

They talk about limits - those involved in abusive relationships have few. They tolerate a lot in each other's behavior. Each time the limits are pushed, they are willing to accept a little more, and on it goes potentially getting worse and worse.

They talk about seeking out that which is familiar - no matter how dysfunctional. When these individuals begin therapy, they have to move out of their comfort zone, and redefine it.

⁸Further research will be undertaken with regards to this issue. The information in this section is based on a series of articles entitled The Biology of Violence, which appeared in the Montreal Gazette between December 24 and 28, 1993.

The women, who have grown comfortable in giving themselves away, must learn the discomfort of thinking about their own needs.

The men, who have learned to blame everyone and shift focus from their own failings, must face the discomfort of looking at themselves honestly.

Change is discomforting - and that is good. They have to redefine the notion of 'home' to fit a new mold - one not based on passed experience, but truly the 'safe haven' they never had.

ACKERMAN INSTITUTE - NEW YORK

The therapist specializing in co-joint therapy comments about how the relationship starts as a unique haven against the world, but specifically against the family of origin. Ironically, slowly the patterns from the family of origin creep in and the whole thing is destroyed.

VIGNETTES

Couples who have undergone this type of therapy may share bits of their story at this stage. However, further research is needed. These could be set in the therapist's office, with her present.

The therapist concludes by presenting her view that indeed, stereotypical expectations of gender play a big part in the type of dynamic that plays itself out in abusive relationships. As do idealized expectations of romance.

THERAPIST'S OFFICE

The two therapists (the women who works at a shelter, and the man in charge of a marital violence clinic) conclude.

They talk about relationships and what would be considered healthy, versus not. They both talk, confirming each other's statements, sometimes elaborating, sometimes disagreeing. But the gist of what they are saying is along the following lines:

Therapists

The healthy relationship is inter-dependent, not co-dependent. Both partners have a strong sense of their own identity. One will not die without the other. Their feeling of self-worth is not defined by how the world responds to them, and therefore dependent on the world playing along with this self image they are trying to foster. They can tolerate difference of opinion - it's not like they have to agree on everything. It may be a whole new definition of love for some.

FILM CLIP

Katherine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart argue in The African Queen. But beneath the surface, beneath the independence, one can clearly see they are devoted to one another. They are together and apart, at the same time.

LIVING ROOM - CHRISTMAS EVE

The couple who have survived the abusive period in their relationship decorate their Christmas tree. They disagree about the placement of the decorations, they argue, but they continue. They also laugh.

Man

We've come a long way. One thing's for sure - I don't regret this process. I'm a much stronger person now.

Woman

Maybe once you've seen the worst of your fears lived out, you can stop being afraid. Only then are you free to shape the future.

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

The men and women who shared their experiences in the film conclude. Shot against a plain white background, they share their vision of the future. One statement dissolves into the next. For instance:

Marie

When I look ahead of me I see a big, big void. I don't think there is any hope for me. I was abused as a child, in all my relationships I was abused. How do I build a new future for myself - based on what? If we cannot rely on the past, what can we rely on?

Charles

I think about the effect my violence has had on my wife and kids. No matter how good the self-discovery feels, it doesn't take away the guilt. But still, I don't think it's hopeless. It's just that we're afraid of change, all of us. But change is our only hope. But I don't think the problem will go away without some sort of intervention. That goes for individuals, but perhaps it goes for society as well. Who knows. I can only speak for my situation.

Bob

Maybe we all have the potential to be abusive. Perhaps if we accept that, we can start to control the behavior? I'd like to have the security in myself to not sabotage what I have because I fear losing it. I know I am 'stronger' now - if I can use that word! I'm not as afraid of being alone. But I guess the only way to really see how far I've come is to get into another relationship - one not based on need.

Jane

I'm in another relationship. He's wonderful. Truly nice. Yet I'm afraid to commit 100% like before. I've got some people on hold. I guess I'm a little like Bob used to be now! Nice can seem a bit boring somehow. Without the ups and downs I feel lost sometimes ... like something's wrong. That's funny - what's right and good for me can seem wrong!

Alain

That's why I'm alone right now. I realize I always picked the same type of girls - the ones with no limits, who would tolerate my abuse. I have to learn to be attracted to a different type of person. Otherwise it's just too easy to slip into familiar patterns.

Wendy

For me, it's hard realizing how much work I have to do to build my self-esteem - my sense of self. I thought leaving would be the end of it. But it's just the beginning.

Jacques

My wife says some people will not like me now after therapy. She says I'm too honest. She says to me ... "you disturb things". Well, I'm glad! Some things must be disturbed otherwise they will never change.

CROWDED DOWNTOWN STREET

The police director in charge of conjugal crimes walks down a crowded city street. He looks around, taking in the sights, pointing out certain things as he walks by. He summarizes his position ...

Police Director

We have to look at three things. First, we have to look at human frustration and anger. It exists. There must be an outlet. It won't go away just like that. Next, we have to ask ourselves what do we expect from relationships nowadays. How far can we go in enforcing our own rights? And finally, we have to question what is expected of men these days. Many are confused. Women changed their roles substantially - men have to catch up.

FILM CLIP

Le Bal continues. Men and women dancing, spinning in endless circles across the floor.

Narrator

It is estimated that half of Canadian women have experienced abuse at the hands of men. This is clearly not a marginal social problem. But maybe bringing the monster out of the shadows is half the battle.

SUBWAY DOOR - RUSHHOUR

A crowd squeezes past a door. Everyone fends for themselves. Then a man and woman both arrive at the door at the same time. He tries to open it for her, she for him. They're stuck ... another pedestrian ends up walking through the open door, hardly concerned with who opened it. The man and woman laugh and continue on their journey side by side.

And yet, as we narrow in on various ads on the subway walls, it is clear that the stereotypes are alive and well.

CREDITS

Dissolve to black and white and continue to watch as people pour down the tunnel - a rich mosaic of individual men, women, and children. Alternate an elevated view taking in the whole human procession, with intimate details ... here hands holding, a smile, over there a secret glance, somewhere else a hostile glare ... a heated discussion, faces contorted with conviction, there a helpful hand down the stairs for a woman with a child in a stroller, and nearby a shove with no apology to follow. Study the many different faces of behavior, side by side - all part of the infinite wealth of human nature.

© Ida Eva Zielinska, December 22, 1993

PARTIAL LIST OF PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT GROUPS FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Henry Kuperberg, Psychotherapist

Centre for Violence Intervention and Research, Montreal
Group and individual therapy for men, women, or children

Jacqui Voyer, Psychotherapist

CHOC Centre pour hommes opprimants et colériques, Laval
Group therapy for men

Kevin O'Connell, Psychotherapist

PRO-GAM, Montreal
Group therapy for abusive men

Harle Thomas, Counselor

Adult Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse, Montreal
Support Group

Minda Bernstein, Counselor

Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families, Montreal
Support Group

Tom Caplan, Psychotherapist

McGill Marital Violence Clinic and **Private Practice**
Group psychotherapy for abusive men, and individual therapy for men and women.

Gillian Walker, Social Worker

Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy, New York
Gender and Violence Project
Co-joint therapy for abusive couples, individual and group therapy for men and women.

Dr. Maria Subak, Psychiatrist

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Child Psychiatry
Individual psychotherapy for women, men and children

Vivian Konigsberg, Director

Auberge Shalom ... pour femmes, Montreal
Emergency housing and therapy for women and children, victims of domestic violence

Ellie Friedmann, Psychotherapist

Auberge Shalom ... pour femmes and **Private Practice**
Group and Individual therapy for women

Marlène Poirier, Director

Carrefour Pour Elle

Emergency housing, therapy, support and resources for women and children, victims of domestic violence

Louise Fleischmann, Businesswoman

Founder, financial support group for **Carrefour Pour Elle**

Kathleen, Social Worker

Head and Hands Social Services

Social services to teenagers

Marielle Héту, Criminologist

L'Association Québécoise Paidoyer-Victimes

POLICE DEPARTMENT

John Kousik, Director of Operations, Region West

Director, **Conjugal Crime Unit**

Nadine Girault, Director

Continuous Training Department

PERSONAL INSIGHTS

- A.D. male, married, completed group therapy.
- F.B. male, single, undergoing group therapy.
- H.B. male, undergoing group therapy.
- R.L. male, undergoing group therapy.
- T.R. male, not undergoing therapy.
- W., female, separated, completed group therapy while at a shelter, currently in individual therapy.
- F., female, divorced, criminal court proceedings in process, undergoing individual therapy.
- I.H. female, separated, undergoing individual therapy.
- L.C. female, separated, not undergoing therapy.
- D.S. female, common-law, not undergoing therapy.
- D.M. female, divorced, not undergoing therapy.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Ferrato, D. (1991). Living With the Enemy. New York: Aperture Foundation.

Keen, S. (1993). Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man. New York: Bantam.

Zielinska, I.E. (1992). The Abusive Couple: A Symbiotic Bond Enabling the Expression of Formative Behavioral Scripts. Unpublished manuscript, Concordia University, Montreal.

Films seen:

When Women Kill, Life With Billy
One Hit Leads to Another, Love, Honored and Bruised
Fires of Transformation, Bridging the River of Silence
A Room Full of Men, The Crown Prince