



## THE LINE

Sex. Consent. Power. Pleasure.

a documentary film by Nancy Schwartzman

[www.thelinemovie.org](http://www.thelinemovie.org)

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### The Line: Sex, Consent, Power and Pleasure

Text by Marni Grossman

Filmmaker Nancy Schwartzman, the original creative director of *Heeb Magazine*, storms through life defying challenges to find success. She's independent, liberated and unabashedly sexual. She's the type of woman who knows how to flirt, drink and fuck. Yet, in our society all of the characteristics that have made Nancy a strong, fun and sensual woman have also made her something less than the "perfect victim". Schwartzman discovered this when she was raped at 24 years old while living in Israel. She had gone out one night in Jerusalem and met a seemingly nice Jewish guy. Sure, she went home with him, but she didn't asked to be raped.

Eight years later, Nancy Schwartzman uses her story of assault as a jumping-off point for *The Line*, a powerful documentary that explores sexual politics, violence and where to draw the line with regard to consent. In addition to her own narrative—a confrontation with her attacker captured on a hidden camera—*The Line* includes interviews with sex workers, victims of sexual assault and everyone else in between. The documentary poses some tough questions. What is consent? What is rape? What do we mean when we talk about sex? And, most importantly, where do we draw the line? Heeb sat down to talk with Schwartzman about her groundbreaking piece.

#### What made you decide to weave your own story of sexual assault into this film?

After dragging my feet, it became clear that if I were going to address the issue of sexuality and assault, I would have to put my story and perspective in the film. What I decided to do with *The Line* is present the point of view of someone who is unapologetically sexual both before and after the assault, and present a story that's complicated—that has nuance. The reason I used my story is because I knew it best and felt the most confident telling it.

#### How do you define 'rape culture'?

A rape culture is one that assumes violence will happen during sex. It says: 'Watch your drink' or 'men are pigs' or 'what did she expect?' It asks women to live in the narrow roles of either virgin or whore, and tells us to be fearful. Jewish girls get somewhat of a break here, thanks to Dr. Ruth and our sex-positive roots in the Judaic marriage contract, but for men, rape culture expects them to be dogs and tells them they have to trick or coerce girls into bed. If given the choice, most people want to have good sex, where both parties initiate, are into it and are begging for more. A rape culture tells us that sex is bad, so you either have to steal it, rush through it, or get punished for doing it, or—God forbid—liking it.

#### Do you think there's a difference in the way sexual assault is perceived in Israel there as opposed to the way it's perceived in the U.S.?

I don't think I can speak to how rape is perceived in either country, but in Israel they don't have the rampant sexual assault on college campuses like we do. But they have a big sexual harassment issue, especially for young



women in the army. Israel has a very sophisticated rape crisis network and the activists are nuanced and savvy. What is most interesting is that Israelis have no mythology about the behavior of "the Jewish people" or Jewish men – they know Jewish men can rape, something America was less likely to accept or want to hear.

#### Do you think the pervasiveness of the military has an effect on sex in Israel?

I think the military has a pervasive effect on the entire country, but I didn't notice anything particularly militaristic about my sex life in Israel. I do know from a few sex workers that there are men high up in the army who request BDSM scenes that mimic their experiences working with Palestinian prisoners, but that has not been my direct experience.

#### In your statement about the movie, you note that you're not 'the perfect victim.' Which I take to mean that you're not virginal and unassuming.

#### Why do you think it is that women have to be chaste to have their stories of rape and assault taken seriously?

I think we as a society are unable to deal with women who are sexual, who want to experiment, have sex, enjoy it, and not feel guilty. In the Puritan model, we associate sex with sin, so those who want sex are sinful, and they deserve what comes to them. There is an implied acceptance that sexuality and violence go hand in hand, so that if you are sexual, eventually violence will happen to you. 'Good girls' don't get raped, because good girls shouldn't be having sex.

If you're not a 'perfect victim,' (white, Christian, virgin) and something bad happens, we like to say you brought it upon yourself. We hold onto this idea, because we don't want to believe that it can happen to us. We need to acknowledge that engaging in risky behavior, such as having multiple partners, casual encounters, drinking, etc. is indeed risky, but does not excuse the individual decision of your partner to cross the line. The two have nothing to do with each other.

How—if at all—does Judaism and Jewish culture view rape? I'm not sure what Jewish culture we're talking about and what kind of Judaism... I think most sane people will say that rape is a crime, but I think the issue is how are we defining rape? Is it a stranger on a dark street? Can it be your nice Jewish boyfriend? Another question to ask is: 'Do Jewish high schools want to educate young boys about making sure they engage in consensual behavior? Does Birthright want to show my film to the girls on their way to Israel with stars in their eyes? Does our American Jewish community want to prioritize discussing violence against women in their safe little enclaves?' Not so sure about that.

#### You've screened the film in Israel before. How was the reaction there? Did it differ from other places?

I just screened it in Israel this month. *The Line* screened at the International



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Women's Film Festival alongside the work of Chantal Ackerman, Deborah Kampmeier and Jane Campion. It was amazing! A really supportive, positive response. The audience was a mix of locals, film lovers, feminists and men, and they were moved, and asked some great questions.

### What are the most surprising reactions you've gotten to the film?

I've heard a fascinating array of sexually inappropriate comments when discussing the film in both a social and fundraising contexts:

Executive director of a New York arts organization (male):

*'Well, Nancy, I pull out... and it made me think of an experience I once had...'*

New York arts program officer (male):

*'You clearly don't like anal sex.'*

European broadcaster (male):

*'That's quite a dress you're wearing to be making a film on this topic...'*

During a panel at Barnard College (female):

*'How dare you show Israel and Jewish men in this light. Don't piss on the Jews and complain that it's raining.'*

### Has it been hard to have to relive your experience over and over again through the film? Or has it been therapeutic?

I don't feel any trauma when watching the film related to my own personal story. I mostly worry that the sound won't work, that there will be some technical problem, or that the audience will hate me.

However, when I was raising money for this film, a film about rape, and even worse, my own rape, I was told repeatedly that this wasn't important or worthy. So the process of convincing people that the topic was important and that my story was important was re-traumatizing, but it strengthened my determination to finish the film.

What is empowering is that I get to control how I frame this issue. My goal is to include as much nuance and complication as possible and to leave space to include consent in the conversation when we talk about sex education, and to create a sex-positive language to talk about boundaries.

### What's next for you?

*The Line* is making its way to festivals around the globe and I've kicked off a national college tour this fall that started at American University in D.C. last week. We just launched a group blog dedicated to consent and sexual boundaries where the visitor is the participant called: *Whereisyourline.org*

**Nancy Schwartzman** is a filmmaker, a freelance writer, and an activist. She helped found **Heeb Magazine** and served as its creative director. She started the organization **nyc-safestreeets.org**, which helps pedestrians—particularly women—plot safe travel routes. She also recently made **Time Out New York's** round up of **Bumpers & Grinders** – a list of nine New Yorkers who've made the city—and all its naughty bits—their bitch.

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