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A Short Film with Long-Lasting Implications

There are times when videos seem to innocuously pop up on ones' YouTube video feed. *Mishka (short film about teen pregnancy)* was one of these videos. However, the viewer is soon greeted by far more than they ever expected to see. The viewer is introduced to the titular character of Mishka, a young girl just reaching her teenage years. In the beginning of the film Mishka is seen hanging out with friends on her bed before she has to quickly run to the bathroom and promptly gets sick. Soon thereafter, the film moves to Mishka purchasing a pregnancy test at a store after sneaking out of the house with some money taken from her dad. The film moves to the following morning as her dad drives her, in silence, to school. Mishka takes the test at school, but hides it in her pencil case as another girl enters the bathroom. The audience sees Mishka walking down the hallway, seemingly in her own world. When she returns home, she looks at the test in her room, then quickly hides it once again as her dad comes in. The film then cuts to a scene of Mishka in the shower followed by her evaluating herself (with an emphasis on her stomach) in the mirror. We then see Mishka attending a friend's birthday party. She is gathered alongside other friends around her own age as the birthday friend discusses that her parents are letting her get a puppy in honor of her birthday. Mishka looks across the room at a boy playing a game involving solo cups (who Mishka's friends earlier teased her as having a crush on) before isolating herself outside. This boy comes and joins her on a bench outside and talks with her briefly before offering to walk her home. As they reach Mishka's house they share a quick kiss.

Mishka is then shown awake in bed looking at the glow in the dark stars and plantets on the ceiling of her bedroom. She quickly pretends to be asleep as her dad enters the room. The next morning Mishka and her dad have breakfast as he asks her questions about the birthday party the previous night. She also notices him taking pills and asks him what they are for to which he responds that they are for his arthritis. There is then a sequence of Mishka taking a walk through a park. It is revealed that she took the arthritis pills and pours a large number of them into her hand and proceeds to consume them.. It then cuts to Mishka in the bathroom in visible pain and crying. The toilet is filled with an alarming amount of blood. She cleans herself up mildly and then goes to her dad's bedroom and gets into bed with him. The final frame before the credits roll contains the phrase, "I killed our baby," finally declaring to the audience who the father of the baby is.

With such an intense plot twist, it is important to look into the context of the short film. The short film was published on YouTube on April 22, 2019. As of December 11, 2019 the video has forty-five million+ views. The short film is seventeen minutes and forty seconds long, however the majority of the content takes place in the first fourteen minutes of the film with the remaining three to four minutes consisting of credits. The film was directed by Cleo Tellier. Tellier hails from Canada and is also an actress and appeared on shows such as *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. She also directed an additional short film/documentary entitled *The Silence (short film about child abuse)* which went on to win forty five awards and was nominated for an additional thirty-four nominations, even qualifying her for the Academy Awards. However, despite this early success, a CBC Arts interview with Tellier in 2018 notes how *Mishka* was rejected by sixty film festivals which ultimately led to the decision to post the short film on YouTube. However, the number of views on YouTube speaks to its success and its ability to

connect with an audience. Some background research might help reveal why this video had such an effect.

The first source discusses the trends of child sexual abuse in Canada. “Evidence of a decline in CSA in Canada since the early 1990s is encouraging, given the long-term debilitating effects with which it is associated. Continued monitoring is critical. The long-term negative effects associated with CSA underscore the importance of continuing to move from lower risk to zero risk” (Shields & Hovdestad, 2016). This source is important in noting that, although trends of childhood sexual abuse are going down, videos such as this short film are still vital as the issue still persists for many children. It is through education about such topics that perhaps, one day, the long-term debilitating effects will move to the aforementioned zero risk zone. The second source talks about family history and teen pregnancy in Canada and the United States. “The risk of teen pregnancy was higher among both U.S. and Canadian adolescents from more unstable and economically insecure families and that link between cumulative experiences of childhood disadvantage and adolescent pregnancy was stronger in Canada. [...] Policies and interventions to reduce teen pregnancy must address childhood socioeconomic disadvantage” (Smith, Strohschein, & Crosnoe, 2018). This source is especially interesting as Mishka does not seem to fall under this vulnerable population of unstable and economically insecure families as she is shown to live in a relatively nice house and her dad has a nice car and works at a place which requires suits. However, it is never voiced what happened to her mother. Additionally this reinforces the importance of this particular story as victims of abuse can sometimes come from unexpected places. It also further reiterates the need for and importance of education on such topics. The third source looks at a specific case involving incest. “The event was suffered in a town called Alpu in the province Eskisehir in western Turkey. In the event, it was claimed the

biological father had experienced sexual abuse during 3-4 years with his daughters whose ages were 15 and 16. When DNA investigation comparative with the oldest daughter's baby was performed, it was determined that the father had a baby from his daughter. The court sentenced the father to imprisonment for 27 years and it sent the baby to social services and child protection agency" (Gunduz & Ayranci, 2009). This particular source, though taking place in a different country, adds further emphasis to the severity of Mishka's father's actions and gives insight into what may be awaiting him if his abuse is discovered. It also makes the audience wonder what would've occurred if Mishka had not terminated her pregnancy when she did. The fourth source evaluates self-induced abortion in the United States (Hayden, 2011). "Although not common, self-induced abortion continues to exist in the contemporary United States, where women are being criminalized for the practice" (Hayden, 2011). While this short film takes place in Canada where abortions are legal, Mishka does not attempt to seek professional care for terminating her pregnancy thus calling into question her ability to access such institutions given her specific situation. Furthermore, the short film is targeted towards a larger audience as the description box beneath the video starts with the statistic, "11% of the births worldwide come from a teen mother. 31,000 children have a baby every year in Canada. Nearly 820,000 teens are pregnant each year in the USA. More than 16 million teen girls become pregnant each year in the world." The final source looks at the long-term impact of sexual abuse on a woman's sexuality. "There is overwhelming documentation of the profound impact that GSA has on its victims. This article gives mental health counselors information on GSA prevalence and the numerous negative consequences it may cause, with special attention to the sexual problems and disorders women experience. It also offers practice suggestions for working with them, featuring treatment approaches that may help women with histories of GSA to overcome sexual dysfunctions

resulting from their abuse” (Colangelo & Keefe-Cooperman, 2012). This article provides some hope for children like Mishka as it demonstrates what resources are available to assist in moving forward in life despite undergoing childhood sexual abuse.

With this context and background in mind, it is time to turn more to the elements within the video itself to which help explain why the video itself has become so successful. The short film *Mishka (short film about teen pregnancy)* employs perspective, focus, and realism in order to convey Mishka’s complex narrative. It is through the synthesis of these components that the short film ultimately is effective in supporting its ultimate goal towards awareness and advocacy.

The first stylistic element of analysis is perspective. Perspective involves incorporating what the audience does and does not get to see. The short film is shot from a single-camera perspective that employs a single camera to get shots from a sequence of events then edits them together into a cohesive storyline. For this particular short film, the audience alternates between a third person limited perspective and an omniscient perspective. The audience travels alongside Mishka over the course of the few days the story takes place. However, there are instances where the video cuts abruptly and the audience is left contemplating what happened in the expanse of time they were not able to be with Mishka. A notable example of this is when the audience sees Mishka’s dad enter her room and they are both silent and the subsequent scene involves Mishka in the shower. While this may seem insignificant to some viewers others who have knowledge about sexual assault may recognize that victims of sexual assault often feel unclean after an encounter and may shower frequently in an attempt to relieve this feeling. The omniscient perspective also comes into play at a few separate occasions when the desire is to have the audience linger on a certain moment a little bit longer. This can be seen when Mishka’s dad drops her off at school and the time is taken to see him watch her walk in and him eventually

pulling away from the school. Perspective is also employed to show the contrast between how Mishka interacts with her friends and her crush versus how Mishka interacts with her dad. Between her friends there is always some space separating her from them such as when she lays on her bed a distance away from them. Similarly, in the first sequence with her crush Mishka stands watching him from across a room and sits on the opposite side of a bench from him during their subsequent conversation. However, she appears to open up to him more than her friends as she holds hands with him on the walk home and shares a quick peck on the lips before entering her house. Initially, Mishka and her dad seem to entertain the same amount of space between them that would be considered normal for a daughter and her father. However, the final scene, with Mishka hugging her shirtless dad in bed makes the viewer second guess their previous ideas about their relationship. This perspective emphasis allows the audience to see the space (or lack thereof) between characters and make nuanced conjectures about the relationships between the characters.

Working in tandem with perspective is the stylistic tool of focus. The film makes pointed choices about what to focus in frame and what not to focus on. The film continually re-centers itself around Mishka as there are scenes in which the background is blurred out while Mishka remains in focus such as when she is walking down a hallway at her school after taking the pregnancy test. Another instance is that (purposefully or unintentionally) the audience only gets to focus partially on the pregnancy test and gets to see the test as a whole, but cannot quite see whether the test is marked positively or negatively leaving the audience to utilize other information to establish that Mishka is indeed pregnant (such as squeezing her belly as she examines herself in the mirror or the very title of the film itself). A key example of focus is when the camera looks at Mishka's dad's arthritis pills. It focuses specifically on the label and the

viewer is just able to glimpse the warning of not taking the pills if pregnant. Once again this brief glimpse leaves the viewer questioning and, in some ways, may increase their anxiety as they hypothesize what may be occurring next given the information they already have. This anxiety is confirmed when the audience next sees the bottle and sees the number of pills Mishka has poured into her hand followed by her consuming all of the pills. Focus is also vital in the process of analyzing initial versus subsequent viewings. When re-watching the film, after knowing who the baby's father is, it is easy to see moments in which this is subtly implied throughout the film by how the camera focuses on elements of the father-daughter dynamic (e.g. a photograph in Mishka's bedroom in the first thirty seconds of the film, Mishka's dad's hand on her thigh before dropping her off at school, her dad coming to her room silently followed by the scene of Mishka showering, and Mishka pretending to be asleep when her dad enters her room again).

Furthermore, focus is employed verbally as well as visually. There is a focus on the contrast between what Mishka's friends are talking about and what Mishka's life contains. Her friends talk about topics that are commonly accepted as typical for girls of that age such as crushes and being old enough to get a new pet. Meanwhile, Mishka is dealing with topics far beyond what is expected of her age such as sexual abuse by her father, an unintended pregnancy, and subsequent attempt at aborting the fetus at personal risk to her own well-being. This speaks to the audience in noting that one may never fully realize what is happening in someone else's seemingly typical life. Furthermore, this visual focus also reveals that the only people Mishka talks with are her crush and her dad. She communicates nonverbally with the female clerk as she buys the pregnancy test and is entirely silent around her friends. However, she engages in some conversation with her crush and even more with her dad. Based on the title of the film the audience is likely aware that Mishka is pregnant but unsure of who the father is. These

conversational interactions help reinforce who the possible fathers are, but it ultimately through the final words displayed on the screen that the truth is revealed.

Realism is another stylistic element that is especially crucial to the effectiveness of the short film at conveying its message. Mishka goes to school and hangs out with people her own age which are normal practices for her age group. However, lingering scenes featuring silence and brief conversations between Mishka and her dad add the element that maybe something not quite right is occurring while maintaining the belief that all these events are happening in the real world. Additionally the viewer is constantly reminded of how young Mishka is. One instance of this is the glow in the dark stars and planets above her bed. Mishka also has a stuffed animal that appears with her throughout the short film. It is seen at the beginning of the short film when she is lying on her bed then subsequently gets sick. It is seen when she is lying in bed pretending to be asleep when her dad walks in. Finally, it is with her in the bathroom as she cries and she brings it with her as she gets into her dad's bed. This forces the audience to consider the harsh reality that sexual abuse subjects children to and yet they still want to just be children. This may also explain some of Mishka's motivation for aborting the baby as she does not want to face the responsibilities of pregnancy and motherhood. The director also speaks about trying to make the elements realistic, as though this fictionalized story could be real (and it does indeed illustrate a circumstance that some girls find themselves in). One example of this is the miscarriage scene, where the director wanted to be clear that the amount of blood was meant to illustrate that Mishka had suffered a miscarriage and not just had her period. She also wanted the kiss with the crush to be seen as sweet and innocent like many first kisses are often intended to be, thus showing that the crush was not the father of Mishka's baby. Through its ability to depict seemingly real events such as these the audience is compelled to watch the film and feel an

emotional response from this connection. This is a large reason why the film was created in the first place.

Together these elements help illuminate Mishka's story. There is so much to analyze it is in some ways difficult to believe that it all takes place in roughly fourteen minutes. However, the pacing of the video kept the reader engaged without feeling overwhelmed by the difficult content. This was accomplished through moments specifically dedicated to allowing the audience to process the information they were receiving. This comes into play when Mishka and her dad are driving to school as well as when Mishka is taking a scenic walk prior to taking the pills to induce a miscarriage. This is also crucial as the final words linger on the screen even as the image behind them fades so that the audience has a chance to read them several times to make sure they have read the short phrase correctly. Additionally, an important, though easily overlooked, element of the film and its storytelling is its use of music. The video is underscored in given places (largely in those moments when the emphasis is solely on Mishka) by instrumental music that could possibly evoke feelings of anxiety through its eerie obscureness. The bell like tones at the beginning of the video almost have a haunting quality to them as well. There is a brief moment when the music can be described as happy and this is when Mishka is staring up at the stars on her bedroom ceiling after kissing her crush. The haunting bell tones punctuate the piano notes at the end of the film as Mishka gets into bed with her dad seemingly coming full circle. These narrative elements along with the greatly fleshed out components of perspective, focus, and realism all contribute to the narrative in that they dictate who and what is important in addition to allowing the audience to connect with Mishka. Thus storytelling is what makes the short film truly moving as is what keeps audiences thinking about the film even after they've clicked away.

Ultimately, *Mishka* (*short film about teen pregnancy*) stimulates conversation about teen pregnancy, incest, and abortion through its reliance on perspective, focus, and realism. The sum of these elements dictates what is most provocative in the narrative and why these topics need to be brought to the forefront for recognition and action. In short, this film makes the audience connect on an emotionally raw and open level which in turn sparks the motivation to promote positive change in the world. It points out that perhaps one of the most essential components in tackling sexual abuse is educating the public about it. With the number of views this video has accrued, this video alone has informed so many people. The Instagram page ([mishka.theseries](https://www.instagram.com/mishka.theseries)) has sixty-seven thousand+ followers. Merchandise is also available for purchase with the contributions going to support a youth center in Canada. However the merchandise largely consists of somewhat grotesque images of Mishka and it is open for debate as to whether this is the best route to go to fundraise money given the content of the video itself and the employment of Mishka as a brand for marketing. Cleo Tellier has also voiced her goal to continue Mishka's story as a series with the next installment following Mishka and the boy she has a crush on after Mishka is placed into foster care. It will be interesting to see how this additional element influences the overall takeaways from Mishka's story. It will also be interesting to see how this video is received compared to the original short film. In the meantime, what started as a simple click, revealed robust stylistic elements which in turn illustrated the power of narrative and importance of telling all kinds of stories.

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