

**MEDIA EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION  
STUDY GUIDE**

**War Zone**

A film by Maggie Hadleigh-West

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## NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds.

**Key Points** provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

**Questions for Discussion & Writing** encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and serve to guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

**Assignments** encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

What’s it like for a woman to walk down the street and be heckled and harassed by men? *War Zone* captures this all-too-common experience on film. Arming herself with a video camera and taking to the streets, filmmaker Maggie Hadleigh-West records how men behave toward women when they think nobody’s paying attention, then turns the tables on them by forcing them to explain their behavior on camera. In the process, *War Zone* lays bare the normally unspoken gender rules of the street, where access to women’s bodies is too often regarded as a male right.

## **PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING**

1. How does American culture define “femininity” and “masculinity”? Do you feel that our cultural ideas and ideals about femininity and masculinity – about what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman – can affect how men relate to women, especially women they don’t really know? How so?
2. Do you believe the United States is a sexist society? Why or why not? How would you define sexism, anyway? Do you see it as more of an institutional phenomenon, an individual phenomenon, or a combination of both?
3. How would you define a “cultural environment”? What kinds of things is it made up of? How does a cultural environment differ from the physical environment? In the United States, what sorts of specific ideas about gender – and about gender roles – are communicated and reinforced by our cultural environment?
4. Who do you think is more likely to be heckled, followed, touched or disrespected in public spaces -- a woman or a man? Why do you think this is the case?

## KEY POINTS

- Maggie Hadleigh-West describes how boys and men have harassed her on the streets for years.
- She says that when she was very young, she actually believed what boys yelled at her because it confirmed what the culture was already telling her about herself – that she was too fat, that her hair and skin weren't good enough, that she needed to get rid of her body hair, and that just about everything else about her physical appearance was unattractive and wrong.
- In *War Zone*, she uses a Super-8 camera to conduct guerilla-style interviews with men who belittle and harass her and make unwelcome comments about her looks on the street.
- When Hadleigh-West was 21, a man stopped his car and asked her for directions. He then got out of his car and told her he had a gun in his pocket. For fear of being raped, and even killed, she prepared to run away, but two cars pulled up and scared the man away. After the encounter, a female relative picked her up and said, "This never would have happened if you were wearing a bra."
- Many women do not feel capable of protecting themselves against a man who is physically larger.
- Many men who harass women say they would not like their own daughters or wives harassed on the street.
- While some women like the comments made to them, most women do not.
- Almost all women agree they wouldn't approach a man on the street in the same ways men regularly approach women.
- Hadleigh-West says that when she was a little girl, her mother used to tell her to beware of strangers. At age 10, she realized that her mother actually meant beware of *men*.
- Girls become afraid of being raped at very young ages.
- Women can take their destinies into their own hands by choosing to be in relationships with respectful men.
- Men need to be willing to understand that women aren't always safe in public.

## POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Do you agree with Maggie Hadleigh-West that the streets are a “war zone” for women? What does she mean by this? Explain why you agree or disagree.
2. What are your thoughts on her method of using a video camera as a weapon to turn the tables on men? Is it comparable to how men use their aggression against women? Does it seem like an effective way to make men feel as exposed as she feels when they make unwelcome comments about her appearance? Why or why not?
3. How does she challenge the typical expectations of women in our culture? Where do you think these expectations come from? How fair or accurate do you think they are? How do they compare to our expectations of men?
4. In your view, what does it mean to be a “strong” woman? What terms are often used for women who voice strong opinions? How might these terms serve to keep girls and women from voicing their opinions?
5. According to the men in *War Zone*, what is beauty? How do these standards of beauty get inside our hearts and heads? What’s your own definition of beauty?
6. Do you believe women invite comments and sexual advances from men by wearing certain kinds of clothing? Is it all just “human nature”? Or is that just a convenient excuse for a lack of male discipline and self-control?
7. Why do you think some women appreciate, or can be conflicted about, the comments strange men make about them? What might explain the ambivalence some women experience in these situations? And is this ambivalence an excuse for the kinds of male behavior on display in the film?
8. Why do you think young children are taught to “never talk to strangers” without being taught, specifically, that these dangerous strangers are primarily men? Do you think it’s important to gender these kinds of discussions with kids, for their own safety? Why or why not?
9. Has viewing the film changed your understanding of America’s cultural environment? About men’s behavior? About whether or not it’s cool or funny or attractive or normal or acceptable for men to behave in some of the ways Hadleigh-West captures on film? Why or why not?
10. What can girls and women do to prevent male violence against women? What can boys and men do? Are there things you think that men can do more effectively than women on this front? If so, why do you think so many men seem so reluctant to challenge men about these things? Do you see a contradiction between real courage and men’s tendency to keep quiet about these things in order to seem like one of the guys?

## ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a story inspired by the following question:

What does it feel like to be a woman on the street in a cultural environment that does nothing to discourage men from heckling, following, touching or disparaging women in public spaces?

The story doesn't have to be based on personal experience (although it can be), but it should be realistic.

2. Read Joyce Carol Oates' short story, "Where are you going? Where have you been?"

<http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/WhereAreYouGoingWhereHaveYouBeen.pdf>

Then write a paper exploring any connections you see between the themes of this story and the video *War Zone*.

3. Find a media example – from a movie, television show, magazine, the Internet, etc. – where a woman or girl is sexualized. Then respond to the following questions:

- What message(s) does this media send to women and girls about sex?
- What message(s) does this media send to men and boys about sex?
- How do you think media narratives like these influence the attitudes and beliefs of men similar to those interviewed in *War Zone*?
- How does this media make you feel?

4. Find a media example that depicts beauty. Then respond to the following questions:

- What message(s) does this media send to women and girls about beauty?
- What message(s) does this media send to men and boys about beauty?
- How do you think media narratives like these influence the attitudes and beliefs of men similar to those interviewed in *War Zone*?
- How does this media make you feel?

5. Jay and Silent Bob are fictional characters created by filmmaker Kevin Smith. They spend most of their time dealing drugs and heckling women in public spaces. Watch the following clips:

<http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/JayAndSilentBob.zip> (92 MB)

Take notes about your reactions to these clips. Then write a paper comparing and contrasting the comedic universe in the clips with the real world in *War Zone*.