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Film Discussion Group  
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## *Disobedience* (dir. Sebastián Lelio, 2017)

### Cast

Ronit (photographer): Rachel Weisz: One year ago, we watched her in *My Cousin Rachel* (17)  
Esti (her former lover): Rachel McAdams: nominated for *Spotlight* (15); fun in *Game Night* (18)  
Dovid (Esti's husband): Alessandro Nivola: a star of one of my all-time favorites, *Junebug* (05)  
Rav Krushka (the rabbi): Anton Lesser: Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in *The Crown* (16–)  
Moshe Hartog (uncle): Allan Corduner: Sullivan to Broadbent's Gilbert in *Topsy-Turvy* (99)

### Off Camera

Director/Cowriter: Sebastián Lelio: Oscar-winning Chilean director in his English-language debut  
Co-Screenwriter: Rebecca Lenkiewicz: English playwright who co-wrote Oscar winner *Ida* (13)  
Author of Source: Naomi Alderman: English novelist adapting her own debut novel into a script  
Cinematography: Danny Cohen: *The King's Speech* (10); *Room* (15); *Victoria & Abdul* (17)  
Original Score: Matthew Herbert: English electronic musician, with occasional forays into film  
Film Editing: Nathan Nugent: Another veteran of *Room* (15); also *Glassland* (14), some TV  
Prod. Design: Sarah Finlay: the excellent *Weekend* (11) and *45 Years* (15), by Andrew Haigh  
Costume Design: Odile Dicks-Mireaux: close with Weisz; also *Brooklyn* (15), *An Education* (09)

### Also directed by Sebastián Lelio...

*The Sacred Family* (2005) – Debut feature about a Chilean man and his parents vacationing at their beach house, thrown into chaos by the son's rebellious girlfriend; now free on Amazon Prime

*Christmas* (2009) – Another intense love-triangle, as a teenage boy and girl in a rocky relationship discover a 16-year-old stranger inside one of their houses, and both become attracted to her

*The Year of the Tiger* (2011) – Filmed and set in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake that devastated Chile; follows a convict who escapes during the quake and seeks his way home

*Gloria* (2013) – An incredible movie about a divorcee in her 50s who is determined not to live her single life in sorrow or in service to her adult children's needs; she meets a man at a dance club and has an exciting but frustrating fling with him. Lelio's global breakout. I love this movie!

*A Fantastic Woman* (2017) – Lelio won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar this year for this story of a transgender woman (Daniela Vega) left alone when her older, male lover dies and his family, including his ex-wife, refuses to involve her in his burial or include her in his legacy

*Gloria* (2018) – Lelio has remade his five-year-old Chilean hit for English-speaking audiences with Julianne Moore in the lead role. Look for it this fall; she'll likely be in the mix for Oscar.

If you enjoyed *Disobedience*...

*Fire* (1996) – This story of a sexual affair between two women in an Indian household sparked so much controversy for its sexual and religious themes that some cinemas were bombed!

*High Art* (1998) – Ally Sheedy, star of several 80s teen films, had a major artistic breakthrough in this story of a troubled NYC photographer who gets involved with a female magazine editor

*Trembling Before G-d* (2001) – Award-winning U.S. documentary that surveyed the experiences of gay men and lesbians trying to reconcile their Orthodox Jewish faith with their sexuality

*Fill the Void* (2012) – One of my favorite recent Israeli dramas, about an 18-year-old woman pressured by her Haredi community to marry the husband of her sister, who dies in childbirth

*Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem* (2014) – The third of three films by the same actress-director playing the same character, who in this movie is trying to seek a divorce via a religious court

*Lovesong* (2016) – Less heralded than some gay-male U.S. dramas of the last two years but very moving, as two young rural women fall tentatively in love—before one elects to marry a man

*Menashe* (2017) – A Yiddish-language, U.S.-produced feature about a recently widowed Hasidic single father in New York City, resisting his rabbi's commands to marry to hold onto his son

Facts about *Disobedience* you may appreciate...

Weisz initiated the project while seeking material that contained multiple, meaty roles for women in her age-range and would thus allow her the rare opportunity to work in depth with another actress. She purposefully read a number of lesbian-themed novels, expecting they might fit this bill, and was thrilled to find that *Disobedience* also contained a great, fleshed-out role for a man. Moreover, she grew up only four Tube stops away from where the storyline is set. She optioned the novel from Naomi Alderman, signed on as a producer, and commissioned a script.

Weisz proposed the project to Lelio, having been so impressed with the complexity of the female lead in *Gloria* and that film's refusal to settle into simply hero/villain dynamics. She also felt the film would benefit from a perspective totally unfamiliar with the world of the movie—just as Taiwanese Ang Lee had turned out to be perfect for *Sense and Sensibility* (95). She admits she had never met a straight male director so invested in telling women's stories. Lelio worked on the script for two years before submitting to a co-writer. Alderman declined to be involved.

Weisz and McAdams had worked together for one day on Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder* (12), from which Weisz's role was totally eliminated in post-production. The two actresses were mutual fans and expressed a desire to re-connect later. Weisz and Lelio together thought of McAdams and were thrilled that she accepted the part so quickly. Lelio later described how their personalities and working methods mirrored the contrast between their characters, with Weisz more impetuous and large in personality, and McAdams more quiet and methodical.

Alessandro Nivola prepared for his part by hanging out in an Orthodox Jewish hat shop in Crown Heights, New York. When the male regulars learned why he was there, they began teaching him Hebrew prayer and pronunciation and inviting him to Shabbat dinners in their homes, which surprised Nivola by being such raucous affairs, with a great deal of wine and talk.

## Broad conversation topics...

**Judaism:** Naomi Alderman wrote the novel as a British Jew living as an expat in New York City. She has described how in the process of writing the book she abandoned what was left of her Jewish faith, while also finding herself increasingly respectful of those who believe, and not wanting to denigrate or demonize the Orthodox community in her story. Lelio is not Jewish, and neither are McAdams, Nivola, or even Weisz, who was raised in a very secular style by her Jewish parents (including her mother, a late convert from Catholicism) and has never maintained any religious faith of her own. Whether or not you are Jewish, how did you react to the film's portrayal of religious observation in general, and Judaism specifically? How familiar were you with the beliefs and practices of Orthodox Jews in particular? Did the film affirm any ideas or stereotypes you had about this community, or challenge others?

**Free Will:** The film begins with the Rav speaking on free will and the difficult relations between obedience and disobedience. The whole movie unfolds during the seven days that span from his final sermon through his funeral and the presumed appointing of Dovid as the new rabbi, on which occasion he revisits these ideas before the same community. Rachel McAdams has described how, in her own research into Judaism, she was struck by how intensely *collective* the faith, its observances, and its social worlds are, but also how much value is placed on *individual* contemplation, interpretation, and self-study. In that way, she came to believe that the story's thematic conflict between independence and group membership is completely inextricable from it being a Jewish story—and also that Judaism, in recognizing free will as a gift from God, ironically gave her character the “out” she needed to abandon Orthodox practice as an *embrace* rather than abandonment of her faith. What do you think about these ideas, or the ways the film treats independence, loyalty, and disobedience as themes?

**Sexuality:** Esti, who agreed to marry a man, is also the character who describes herself as desiring women and having “always been this way.” Ronit, whose role is that of the rebellious outsider, and who felt more actively banished by her community, is more ambiguous in describing her sexuality. Weisz has admitted that she is not sure if Ronit is only or even primarily attracted to women, or if Esti emerging as the love of her life is unique to *their* history and feelings. Both of the sex scenes—Esti's with Dovid, and the much longer encounter between the two women, which heavily stresses Esti's orgasm—were the subject of much discussion on the set and in interviews. What was your “read” on the women's desires? What questions did you have about their attraction to each other, and why the community seemed to treat them differently?

**Intimacy and Three-Dimensionality:** You may not have noticed this (I didn't), but Lelio admits that one of his tactics for making the audience feel unusually close to all three main characters in *Disobedience* is making sure that every single shot features at least one of them. Even when we cut to another character in the synagogue or at dinner, he insists that there is always at least a part of Ronit, Esti, or Dovid visible in every frame. He has also said that he hates when films treat “Society” as an abstract villain, and he tries hard to make every conflict in his movies feel like they originate in specific people's personalities and circumstances. Did you feel that way?

**Staying or Going:** One critic suggests that the kernel of the film arrives late, as Esti says, “It's always easier just to leave, isn't it?” and Ronit replies, “No.” Whose plight seemed tougher?

### Some specific touches worth contemplating...

**Sound:** The movie starts with the clarion call of a horn, almost certainly a *shofar*, over a black screen. That instrument traditionally blows on Rosh Hashanah, heralding a new year, and at the end of Yom Kippur, a holiday emphasizing atonement or repentance. Though the movie is not set on either of those occasions, the welcoming of the new or the seeking of forgiveness still feel like pertinent themes—and the whole film might be viewed as an ambivalent sermon.

**Mise-en-Scène:** We meet Ronit as she photographs an older man who is covered in tattoos. In the background of the shot, we see other folks his age who also have tattoos. We could consider this motif in her shoot in relation to her interest in older people (as someone disavowed by her own father) and/or as a tribute to proud rebellion (if that's what you associate with tattoos).

**Sound, Image, Environment:** The film leaves New York City fairly quickly but doesn't seize any occasions to idealize the city or Ronit's life there. After getting her bad news, she has sex in a bathroom stall and ice skates by herself, and the music in both places is loud and grating. For someone who says she has "wonderful friends," we never see any—and as grim as her return to London is, the movie stresses a beam of sunlight that falls on Ronit's face mid-flight. Why?

**Dialogue:** We learn early that in this film, where characters sometimes go for long periods without speaking, almost every line merits some close interpretive pressure. As Dovid receives Ronit outside his home, she asks how exactly her father died. Why did nobody tell her earlier, and/or why did she not ask before now? In Dovid's kitchen, he offers her coffee and asks, "You still take it black?" Remembering that detail after so many years speaks to deep familiarity!

**Music:** You wouldn't guess from the score that its composer is famous for electronic pop (just as you wouldn't imagine that the man who wrote *Phantom Thread*'s richly symphonic score is a member of the alt-rock group Radiohead). Once in London, the score becomes a conversation among three instrument groups: low, collective strings; low, occasional, and isolated brass or woodwinds; and quick runs of high, fluttery, birdlike flutes or piccolos. The latter often signify excitement or erotic desire, surfacing most often around Esti, especially when she's with Ronit. We first hear them when Ronit arrives to Dovid and Esti's house, even though we haven't met Esti yet. If you track these flutes through the film, you'll hear the arc in Ronit and Esti's relationship, though the score has other complexities—and there are curious sounds from a glassophone or other "celestial" instrument that often underline moments of religious feeling.

**Depth of Field:** As Dovid and Esti wake, we see her very clearly in the background of the shot while he is very blurry in the foreground, reciting his morning prayer. I suspect this visual choice helped to "cover" for Nivola in case he had trouble with the Hebrew, which he might have recited better in the recording booth than he did on set when they filmed; it's not the only time in the film that a non-Jewish actor speaking Hebrew is shot so we can't see their mouths. But we also see from the contrast in focus that Esti and Dovid don't really *share* this moment.

**Costumes:** It would be easy to contrast the modest Orthodox characters, with their wigs and dark, heavy fabrics, against Ronit's clothes, which might be more colorful or form-fitting. At times that happens, but more often Ronit, too, is covered in layers of scarves, sweaters, and coats.

**Mise-en-Scène and Music:** As Esti arrives to teach her pupils, we hear the return of those light, excited flutes—cementing their association with her character but broadening their resonance from a specifically sexual connection to a larger association with her happiness. We know Esti loves mentoring these girls and will later describe her identity as a teacher as core to her self-conception. The image, however, works somewhat against this association. She lingers outside the classroom listening to her unseen girls before entering, and the opaque, thick-paned window between her and them suggests a heavy barrier, no matter how close she feels to them.

**Costumes:** As Dovid reviews scripture with some boys in the synagogue, the costumer again resists the obvious by putting him in a button-down blue shirt with sleeves rolled-up. Given the film's heavy adherence to a dull, narrow palette of black, white, ochre, and gray, David's shirt is actually a pop of color, and we see how he allows himself some physical relaxation. Many other films would stress his dullness or rigidity, including in his formal, rabbinical attire.

**Editing:** At the Shabbat dinner, Ronit and Esti pointedly agree that artists and women are often pressured to take names other than their own. They exchange meaningful glances after backing each other up on this point, but because the editor refuses to cut directly between them—the kind of immediate “eyeline match” that would stress how the women are holding each other's gaze—you might not notice this right away. Instead, we keep cutting to multiple people around the table, singly, in pairs, or in large groups. Esti and Ronit are never framed as a set-off pair, so you have to be watching every shot *and* paying attention to where the women are looking to see how clearly they are re-establishing an affinity, after their somewhat frosty re-introduction.

**Money:** When Esti takes Ronit to her father's house, expressing her condolences that Ronit has been written out of the Rav's will, Ronit replies sarcastically that “financial freedom” would surely have been too easy. If we *only* think of Ronit as a lapsed Jew, a prodigal daughter, or a woman in pursuit of a former lover, we might be missing the part of her return that revolves around being a struggling artist, and how vulnerable her canceled inheritance leaves her.

**Music:** The Cure's “Lovesong,” the tune that erupts from the radio on the Rav's mantel when Esti and Ronit turn it on, is surely meant as a surprise. Who would guess their fondness for post-punk English alternative synth-pop, or how different their childhood felt and sounded from Esti's current life? Lyrically, though, this seemingly incongruous song—which repeats over the end credits—is almost *too* on the nose for the film's themes. It starts, *Whenever I'm alone with you / You make me feel like I am home again // Whenever I'm alone with you / You make me feel like I am whole again*, and the chorus insists *However far away / I will always love you // However long I stay / I will always love you // Whatever words I say / I will always love you*.

**Production Design:** The above scene unfolds in the Rav's study, which the women remember as a book-filled garret he rarely left, freeing them up for all kinds of unmonitored play and experimentation elsewhere in the house. The room is cramped by its slanted roof, just like the guest room Ronit occupies in Esti and Dovid's house. The women steal moments of affection in dark, heavy-bricked alleys and at a chain-linked tennis court. When the women get away for a moment of ecstatic release, they are in a notably sterile hotel room. Some tender ideas at the end of the film are expressed and received inside a synagogue and, in particular, a women's balcony where nobody looks too comfortable. The film's spaces rarely suggest any ease.

**Dialogue and Action:** Ronit feels like a disruptive agent, returning to shake Esti out of her unfair compromises and oppressive routine, but that doesn't reflect what often happens. Ronit, for one, keeps passively foisting decisions *onto* Esti, asking whether she thinks Ronit should sleep somewhere else than Dovid and Esti's home, and whether she thinks Ronit should fly back to the U.S. immediately, lest their attraction be reignited. When they do share their first kiss in Ronit's father's house, it is Esti who initiates the kiss and Ronit who ultimately pulls away.

**Visual Motifs:** When Esti returns from her day out with Ronit, we linger on her blurry silhouette through her translucent shower curtain, as she surely mulls all that transpired between them and the implications of those events. This is a close visual match with climactic shots of Dovid through the ribbed, translucent glass pane of a particular door inside the synagogue, as he seems to struggle with whether to accept his appointment as the new rabbi. These are not the only shots that adhere to this pattern, underscoring how the characters may be opposed in their particular goals or struggles but are all experiencing comparable forms of doubt and unrest. This motif also stresses how none of the protagonists or their thoughts are *fully* knowable to us.

**Dialogue and Plot Construction:** "What's happened?" Dovid asks twice, with increasing panic, as he comes home to find Esti showering late at night, following a day with Ronit. This is not the behavior of a totally oblivious man or one untroubled by Ronit's return, even as he goes out of his way to be nice to her, and seems glad to see her. Indeed, *Disobedience* avoids drawing out its conflicts or building much suspense from them. Dovid quickly guesses what's up. The women act fast in rekindling their passion, and it takes almost no time for them to be found out, with immediate repercussions. (Though Esti pointedly teaches *Othello* in her class, this script doesn't need an Iago to plant any seeds of doubt, and paranoid suspicions are quickly confirmed.) What does it mean to you that the movie avoids protracting its drama any further?

**Framing and Color:** As Ronit and Esti leave the Tube station, having purposefully traveled to a distant area of London to consummate their relationship, the camera shoots them through the heavy, iron bars of the railing leading up from the subway: they are heading off to a "freeing" moment, but these women are not free. Note, too, that the colors of the hotel suite and of the women's undergarments throughout their sex scene—Ronit in black, Esti in very pale peach—preserve the overall palette of the film. A different movie might have injected a lot of bright color here, to insist on this scene's total contrast from the women's lives elsewhere. Another movie might also have gotten Ronit and Esti out of their clothes! So as much as this scene clearly *does* evoke a major break in the women's emotions and routines—even more for Esti than for Ronit, who isn't even in the final shots—the imagery does not suggest a *total* break.

**Cinematography:** As the men of the temple hold a ceremony that I believe (pardon my inexact understanding!) affirms Dovid as their choice for the next rabbi, the camerawork is unusually fluid and smooth, by this movie's standards. As aware as we are of how disturbed the main characters are at this moment, the *film* is expressing some elegant tranquility...until, in the very next scene, Dovid descends to a kind of carrel or office in the basement (another cramped space!) and the suddenly-handheld camera is very shaky and unsteady as it follows him. The movie thereby uses the image to evoke how Dovid feels torn between certainty and dismay.

**Dialogue:** "Are you free?" Ronit asks a cab driver, on her way to the airport. Well: is anybody??