

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2022/23 SEASON**



**HAPPENING**  
(Language: French)

Director: Audrey Diwan, 2022. Running time: 100 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 21 November, 2022.

“Can you help me?”

It's the first sentence you hear in *Happening*, filmmaker Audrey Diwan's loose adaptation of Annie Ernaux's semi-memoir-ish novel, and given that the opening credits are still rolling over a black background, it's hard to say who's asking whom for what. But it's definitely a female voice, and belongs to one of the three young woman getting ready for a night out. Two of them are ribbing each other about their outfits, their looks, their chances of getting lucky; the other, Anne (Anamaria Vartolomei), mostly keeps quiet as she raises her friend's hem above her knees. All three of them are university students in a modest French town, eager to indulge in the follies of youth while anxious to experience what's looming on the other side of adulthood. Meanwhile, there's rock & roll to dance to, Coca-Colas to sip, boys (and/or hunky local firemen) to flirt with. The year is 1963, which technically makes this a period piece. The idea of it being just a reminder of things long past, however, is nothing but a cruel joke.

Anne, we soon find out, met a gent from out of town a little while back, one thing lead [sic.] to another, and she's now pregnant. She asks her family physician to “do something” to help her rectify this situation. He replies that she must not ask him that, “not me...not anyone.” Abortion is illegal in France (it would remain so until 1975), and Anne has already seen classmates become pariahs and leave school under duress because of unwanted pregnancies. She wants to continue her studies, possibly to become a teacher one day. and to make her working-class mother (the great Sandrine Bonnaire) proud. More than anything, Anne needs to have a say as to which way her life will go. The ability to have a choice in this matter is “essential” to her — not a privilege but a basic human right. The more she talks to disapproving doctors, disappointed professors and other male authority figures, the more desperate she becomes. And desperate times lead to measures that aren't just desperate but dangerous. A former journalist and longtime screenwriter, Diwan has said she was interested in doing something in regards to her own abortion experience as a

follow up to her directorial debut *Losing It* (2019). When she came across Ernaux's book, the French filmmaker found that the author's story of trying to procure a termination procedure nearly 60 years ago touched on the same intersection between the sociopolitical and the extremely personal that she'd been curious to explore. And despite the difference in eras, it's easy — too easy — to imagine the common ground. The male allies who morph into opportunists (and straight-up creeps), the medical practitioners who foist their own prejudices and agendas upon patients, the sense of secretiveness and shame that's de facto associated with even inquiring about an abortion: those factors are not the exclusive property of the 1960s or the 21st century. The one big change is that a young woman risked prison time for herself and others, not to mention putting their own health at serious risk, in 1963.

It's these life-or-death stakes that *Happening* puts front and center, as it forces viewers to not just confront the stigma associated with abortion — a word, by the way, that's never uttered in the film — but to immerse themselves in the same dread and paranoia that Anne feels. At one point, our hero is forced to take matters into her own hands; Diwan films the entire sequence with the camera on Vartolomei's face, letting her expressions and reactions guide us through every fraught moment. (The young Romanian actor has proven herself to be an extraordinary listener and observer onscreen up until this point, yet this key scene demonstrates her chops for simultaneously channeling emotional vulnerability and strength. It's one of several devastating virtuoso moments in a genuinely stand-out performance.) Once Anne is forced to enter an underground network in order to obtain the procedure, Diwan and her cowriter Marcia Romano ratchet up the suspense, complete with ticking-clock intertitles charting how far along her pregnancy has progressed. There are times when you'd swear you were watching a WWII French Resistance thriller.

When *Happening* won the Golden Lion after its premiere at the Venice Film Festival this past August [2021], you got the sense that the jury was rewarding the movie less for making a statement and more for the sheer amount of cinematic talent apparent in every close-up, every terse and/or coded exchange, every narrative left-turn. If you were lucky to catch it when it began [sic.] screening on the domestic fest circuit this year, playing everywhere from Sundance to San Francisco, it was still possible to appreciate not just Diwan's use of silence and space, for letting scenes unfold at a deceptively leisurely pace before turning the screws, and for her seemingly telepathic rapport with her lead actor. It's the type of movie that deserves praise and your undivided attention.

Yet it's tempting to think some sort of cosmic joke is being played regarding the fact that Diwan's cri de coeur is being released in America this week, only a

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few days after a leak of papers confirmed that Roe vs. Wade is a mere whisper away from being overturned.\*...

*Happening* is no longer just a look at what happened then. It's a preview of what happens next if we don't stop this reversal of rights right away."

Reviewed by David Fear, *Rolling Stone*, May 5, 2022.

From: *Wikipedia*.

\*"Roe vs Wade was a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States conferred the right to have an abortion. And on June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court overruled Roe in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* on the grounds that the substantive right to abortion was not "deeply rooted in this Nation's history or tradition", nor considered a right when the Due Process Clause was ratified in 1868, and was unknown in U.S. law until Roe."

No longer a federal right, each State now has the ability to legalise abortion.  
Or not. **(DFS)**