

Cultural Daily

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Sex, Lies, and the Issue that's Larger than Harvey Weinstein

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, October 18th, 2017

Every time a character is killed in *The Hateful Eight*, Quentin Tarantino's revisionist Western distributed by The Weinstein Company in 2015, blood and butchery splatter across Jennifer Jason Leigh's expectant face. Tarantino stages these violent outbursts, and the degradation of the female lead, for gleeful male laughter. The residue on Leigh's face is a porn trope: blood substitutes for semen. To promote the film when it opened, distributor Harvey Weinstein cajoled *People Magazine* into heavy coverage.

In microcosm, that's the larger context for the past weeks in Hollywood — because Hollywood is just part of a pervasive cultural fabric that interweaves the complex relationship between business and art, studios and talent, power and media, men and women, entertainment product and sexual assault. *The Hateful Eight* is just one among thousands of movies and TV shows that are violent and degrading to women. Harvey Weinstein is just one among thousands of producers and executives who have made such films and TV shows, and, one among many men who sexually harass and assault those over whom they have power.

Harvey Weinstein made his mark on American independent cinema in 1989 by picking up Steven Soderbergh's film *sex, lies, and videotape*. It revolutionized American indies, and Miramax, Weinstein's company, created the market for them. Miramax, and subsequently The Weinstein Company, released hundreds of movies, movies no studio would pay attention to, and launched the careers of dozens of important directors, Soderbergh and Tarantino among them. Those of us in the movie business also know that Weinstein bought the rights to hundreds of films he did *not* release (massively frustrating their filmmakers), and we knew his bullying tactics, brutal language, and piggish dealmaking. Some, but not all, clearly knew about his sexual predation.

For the first few days after the [New York Times](#) and [New Yorker](#) stories broke, the entertainment industry's reaction was swift and unanimous. Weinstein's name was stripped from projects; he was fired by his board; he was ousted from the Academy. The whole thing felt like the kind of over-the-top showmanship Weinstein himself had used to promote his films, loud and with bare knuckles.

Swift and definitive reaction against Weinstein is justified. No question about that. But it feels like sound and fury directed at a single perpetrator, not actual change for an awful truth about our society at large.

Hollywood is an easy target. Many Americans loathe Hollywood; politicians use "Hollywood" as a pejorative. The problem with easy targets is that you can shoot them easily, and not focus on the

more difficult targets that should be taken down.

The more difficult target is systemic social norm.

Only 6.4% of Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs, which, sadly, is an all-time high. Of the top-grossing 100 films in 2016, only 4% had female directors. According to a study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, men have twice as much screen time as women and speak twice as often (male characters have double the lines of dialogue compared to female characters).

This is not new news. In 1985 cartoonist Alison Bechdel formulated the “Bechdel Test” for films, asking if they meet these standards:

1. Does the film have at least two female characters in it?
2. Who talk to each other?
3. About something besides a man?

With the Weinstein scandal, there has been a groundswell. I hope it’s a move for real change, but we’ve seen the cycle before. Less than one week before the Weinstein story broke, 58 people were killed and 527 injured in Las Vegas by a gunman on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Hotel. It was the largest mass shooting in modern U.S. history and, despite ceremonial condemnations, America’s lawmakers still won’t pass meaningful gun control legislation.

The issue of male sexual harassment and assault is now center-stage, in a way, oddly, that it was not when Donald Trump’s “grab ’em by the pussy” video surfaced. In the Industry, a GoogleDoc of sexual harassers and abusers called “Shitty Media-Men” has been circulating (it was made into a private document after its existence was reported on October 11).

The #MeToo hashtag has been posted more than a million times on Facebook and Twitter since it was suggested in a Twitter post by Alyssa Milano on October 15. Bringing more global attention to the issue, on October 17 an [ABC News/Washington Post poll](#) showed that:

More than half of U.S. women have experienced unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances from men, three in 10 have put up with unwanted advances from male co-workers and a quarter have endured them from men who had influence over their work situation.... Indeed, among women who’ve been subjected to unwanted work-related sexual advances, eight in 10 say it rose to the level of sexual harassment, and one-third say it went a step further, to sexual abuse. This translates to about 33 million U.S. women being sexually harassed, and 14 million sexually abused, in work-related incidents. Yet among women who’ve personally experienced unwanted sexual advances in the workplace, nearly all, 95 percent, say male harassers usually go unpunished.

I hope we can have meaningful change from the Weinstein scandal, but let’s not forget that women, and allies, have been working for meaningful change for decades and centuries.

Media frequently objectifies women for the pleasures of sex or pain. But it is more than the media. All major religions in their fundamentalist (or to use the politically correct term, “observant”)

versions, practice segregation and oppression of women. The onscreen subjugation of women emanates from a social construct that the world is made by and for men. The “male gaze” of the camera reinforces this social construct, and simultaneously profits from it. But the social dynamic is more difficult and more pervasive than any movie or TV show.

Real change, if it is to come, will be a shift in consciousness and power. It still awaits.

Image: Jennifer Jason Leigh in The Hateful Eight. Courtesy The Weinstein Company.

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