

# Introduction

## The Promise of #MeToo as a Theoretical Lens

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Social justice initiatives require the development and adoption of new critical lenses through which pervasive and pernicious systems of oppression (such as sexism, racism, heterosexism, and the like) can be recognized, interrogated, and subsequently dismantled. Media literacy—the ability to read, think about, and respond critically to texts—plays a key role in this transformative process. Mainstream culture in general and Hollywood film specifically are designed to maintain the status quo; producers don't necessarily want you to think about how/why media is made, and the responses they seek, particularly in the digital era, are essentially extensions of marketing done with free labor. In terms of context, the most influential filmmaking personnel—from director and producer to screenwriter and cinematographer—are largely white, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual, able-bodied cis-men, so it is not surprising that they relay narratives from a perspective of privilege. Despite efforts to diversify in terms of gender and race, the unseen unconscious advantages that make up privilege are disconnected from the narratives.

In terms of content, sexual violence—be it real, threatened, or suggested—and particularly against marginal/minority groups, has become so pervasive in Hollywood film that it is often goes unnoticed. This is deeply troubling given the way that mainstream culture binds individuals and institutions together, shapes public consciousness, and sends powerful messages about what is to be considered appropriate conduct. Over the

last 100 years, Hollywood has played a key role in shaping social ideas associated with gender, sex, and power via effects that happen both in front of and behind the camera.

### #MeToo Movement

The rise of the #MeToo movement has drawn attention to the sexual assault, coercion, and harassment experienced by many individuals, and especially cis-women. While there are a number of precursors and starting points for the movement, it's important to recognize the role Tarana Burke has played in its creation through her activism. Her experience with discussing sexual abuse with a thirteen-year-old girl not only resulted in a profound desire to help survivors but also alerted her to the power of shared voices (i.e., there is strength in numbers for survivors as well as in collectively challenging deniers/victim-blamers) (Garcia 2017). The movement went viral in October 2017 when actor Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." The #MeToo hashtag exploded across Twitter as well as Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms around the world. The magnitude of sexual violence was finally rendered visible through the courageous posts of survivors sharing their experiences with sexual violence in professional, public, and private spaces.

The rapid expansion that followed Milano's tweet was a confluence of Burke's understanding of survivor solidarity, the power of social media to give voice to a mass movement, and the significance of celebrity attention. Many women working in Hollywood began speaking up about their experiences of sexual violence, condemning the industry for silencing survivors while safeguarding predators. Hollywood has arguably served as a microcosm for concentrated discussions of sexual assault, coercion, and harassment in the workplace. Fortunately, this conversation about sexual conduct and safe working spaces extended into other fields/industries via the #TimesUp movement as greater awareness was raised about abuse of power and the victimization of employees. At the time of this writing, we have seen several high-profile cases that have resulted in the public shaming, "cancelation," removal, and occasionally prosecution of powerful and predatory men working in film (e.g., Harvey Weinstein), news media (e.g., Bill O'Reilly), finance (e.g., Jeffrey Epstein), sports (e.g., Larry Nassar), and the law (e.g., Brett Kavanaugh). While these high-profile

cases offer some justice, many other abusers have not been outed and continue to be safeguarded by power, money, and social privilege.

Efforts to reduce systematic sexual violence will require the sustenance of this crucial conversation as well as the extension of social, media, and scholarly attention and empathy to survivors in less privileged positions, who may not be celebrities, or be recognized for the injuries of class, economics, and marginalization. Part of sustaining the conversation, we argue, includes a consideration of *our* experience with all media, and especially film, utilizing the perspectives and issues raised by the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.

### Screening #Me Too

This anthology constitutes a step, albeit one of many, toward dismantling the deeply entrenched heteropatriarchy through the interrogation of Hollywood film. Chapters examine films released from the 1960s onward, a broad period defined by the end of the Production Code in Hollywood that resulted in more frequent and increasingly graphic images of sex and violence being included in mainstream films. Additionally, chapters in this collection cover a variety of film genres—spy films, teen comedies, kitchen sink dramas, coming-of-age stories, rape/revenge thrillers, horror flicks—in which surveillance and sexual violence figure prominently in the narratives. Our authors are not concerned only with the content of the films under scrutiny but also with the clear relationship between the stories, how they are being told, and the culture that produces them. The goal of *Screening #MeToo* is to challenge our readers to look at mainstream Hollywood film differently, in light of attitudes about art and power, sexuality and consent, and the pleasures and frustrations of criticizing “entertainment” film from this perspective.

We also hope that *Screening #MeToo* offers a variety of starting points that readers can use to reexamine their own histories of viewing. The varying perspectives brought forward in this collection are applicable to many other films. In truth, we consider this book to be a series of invitations to reexamine storytelling, and the power and privileges associated with it, in alternative lights. Readers are encouraged to consider how our understanding of consent has changed, how the roles of people and their gendered interactions can be understood differently, and how power manifests in film storytelling. Moreover, while films

reflect contemporaneous attitudes, events, and agendas, our remembrance of them is often influenced by feelings of nostalgia and fandom. This anthology offers an opportunity to (re)think the meanings of these films utilizing different lenses and new critical approaches, thereby challenging our memory of them. We believe that this process of reexamination will result in deeper, more nuanced understandings of film while destabilizing the institutional privilege and power undergirding their creation.

Chapters in part I, “Sexual Politics and Violence in Established Genres,” offer new and expansive ways to think about the bodily autonomy and sexual agency in well-known films and genres. Lisa Funnell explores the spectrum of violence featured in the James Bond films of the Sean Connery era (1962–1971) as well as their source novels and considers the influence of these foundational sexual politics on subsequent Bond films as well as other derivative spy narratives. Sabrina Moro examines the significance of the nonconsensual rape scene featured in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), presenting the argument that the recent shift in media coverage of the accusation made by Maria Schneider is reflective of a broader change in social perception regarding the disclosure of sexual assault in the #MeToo era. Katherine Karlin challenges the nostalgia associated with *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), arguing that the film is a kitchen-sink drama centering on violence, racism, and rape. She discusses the depiction of two sexual assaults in relation to the changing social definition of rape at the time of the film’s release. In his analysis of *The Howling* (1981), Brian Brems considers how the portrayal of Karen White as a victim of trauma parallels the experiences of sexual assault survivors. He contends that while the film predates the #MeToo era, it anticipates the trajectory of many women’s stories that gained traction in the media beginning in the fall of 2017. Emily Naser-Hall discusses the historical connections between the figure of the witch and the laws governing sexual violence, especially the marital rape exception. She explores how American witchcraft films of the 1980s and 1990s—such as *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) and *The Witches* (1990)—reflect both the rise of female sexual agency in the criminal justice system and the cultural backlash against it from deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes of male sexual license.

Part II, “Consequences and the Fixing Gaze: Surveillance and Rape/Revenge,” draws attention to the range of sexual violence inflicted on women’s bodies on and through film—from surveillance to assault—and the (ongoing) problem of presenting sexual violation/victimization as a

narrative strategy that justifies women (temporarily) enacting violence on men (via revenge). Julia Chan explores the depiction of image-based sexual abuse and especially nonconsensual sexualized imaging and surveillance (or “revenge porn”) featured in the classic frat body comedy *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984). Brittany Caroline Speller examines how maverick horror director Wes Craven addresses rape in his franchise work. Focusing on the *Scream* trilogy, Speller identifies a shift toward confronting the consequences of rape culture rather than simply the act of assault. Amanda Spallacci examines mimetic representations of trauma in *Monster* (2003), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003). She argues that by focusing on the effects of trauma rather than the acts of sexual violence, each individual rape is presented as being part of a much larger chain of violence against women. Finally, Nicole Burkholder-Mosco discusses how the story of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*—from the original novel to the Swedish and American films—depicts the classic disparity between violent men and the women they violate. Written or directed by men, these texts present the impression that women have no hope for official retribution or even the prevention of abuse, with vigilante justice being their only recourse.

Chapters in part III, “Teen Comedies and Women’s Horror Stories in the #MeToo Era,” explore the rising emphasis on affirmative consent and bodily autonomy in relatively recent Hollywood narratives. Michelle Meek traces the history of sexual consent in American teen films and discusses how such #MeToo-era releases as *Blockers* (2018), *The Kissing Booth* (2018), *Good Boys* (2019), and *Booksmart* (2019) highlight the importance and complexity of consensuality. Shana MacDonald explores the feminist counter-narratives featured in recent teenage romantic comedies written and directed by women. She argues that *To All The Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2018) and *Booksmart* (2019) reconfigure the sexual politics associated with the traditional rom-com by depicting both straight and queer women protagonists in formative and consensual sexual/romantic relationships. Michelle Kay Hansen discusses how Leigh Whannell’s 2020 iteration of *The Invisible Man* updates the 1933 monster movie with a #MeToo horror spin and offers commentary on the ways in which the concerns of women (especially with respect to sexual violence) are often rendered invisible by systems of oppression designed to safeguard privilege.

Finally, we include a chapter that suggests two potentially transformative moves: first, the expansion of the Hollywood storytelling ethos moving to serial on-demand drama—what some might consider the end

of television or maybe even a middle ground between television and film narratives—and, second, what it means when women storytellers occupy writing and directing chairs. Tracy Everbach discusses how the Netflix miniseries *Unbelievable* (2019) offers a feminist deconstruction of traditional rape and sexual assault portrayals featured in male-centered dramas that feature women as victims and men as cops and criminals. By focusing on the work of two women detectives, *Unbelievable* presents survivors being believed and treated with empathy and respect, and decreases the usually indulgent and underserved attention to the perpetrator, thereby making a powerful statement about conditions within rape culture.

### To Be Continued . . .

As suggested earlier, we hope the critical directions explored here are an impetus and invitation to extend these critiques to other genres, other kinds of storytelling, and other possible uses of a transforming media sphere. We hope this collection offers moments of self-reflection, and also a recognition that these issues have been around for as long as the production of images has used sexual assault victims as aesthetic objects. In her 2019 book *Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s*, Nancy Princenthal writes:

What does rape look like? How can it be differentiated visually from an act of consensual sex? These questions pertain with special force to graphic imagery. As feminist scholar Sharon Marcus observes, the ambiguity of rape imagery can be seen to parallel the difficulties of adjudicating rape charges, so many of which require us to determine intentions—states of mind—that are invisible. The question is whether rape can be pictured—in paintings, say, or photographs—without being a form of involuntary and unwanted exposure, hence of harm. (para. 2)

As Princenthal points out, these discussions have been around for a long time, since rape was used as “allegorical” subject matter by male artists painting for male audiences. Many contemporary women artists, from the Guerilla Girls to Nancy Spero to Marina Abramović, have problematized the use and violation of women’s bodies in visual culture. We acknowledge the efforts of artists and critics to contend with this

issue in its complexity. We hope to add to the interrogation of these issues by focusing on similar questions in the context of film.

There is certainly something to celebrate in the high(er) profile that the #MeToo movement has offered to some media spheres. But much more work remains to be done. Sexual violence in relation to issues of race, class, and LGBTQIA+ inequality require further exploration on the screens, behind the productions, and in the world that films come from and are speaking to.

Included in this work is the need for a broader examination of the conditions experienced by victims of sexual assault outside of the usual scope of attention reproduced in legacy and digital culture. This is a continuing challenge because it requires attention at the intersection between focused, critical attention to the day-to-day practices that perpetuate much of this behavior away from the spotlight, and the questions of pleasure and desire produced in popular media. The participation of Milano and other high-profile individuals brought welcome attention to the issues in the #MeToo movement, but at the same time they revealed what conditions would need to be in place to garner such attention. It is possible to be grateful for the social justice that comes from high-profile and celebrity attention to such important issues, while at the same time critiquing how those conditions draw attention to disempowerment in an unbalanced way.

In the material world, victims of sexual harassment and assault span widely across intersections of class, race, and gender identity. Many people are still being victimized in unacknowledged locations. We need to extend to these individuals the attention that encourages them to speak out from all those places beyond the spotlight. The sincerity of our concern for these issues is measured not by the widely known and obvious cases but from how the most disempowered are cared for as a result. This means shedding additional light on indigenous people, Black and Brown people, people in the Trans community, and people who do hard work at low wages to play their part in our culture. They deserve our attention, and they deserve justice too.

But that lack of attention is partially a product of our media imaginaries as well. The treatment of a character in traditional Hollywood film elevates attention to stories that might appear to attend to other kinds of social marginalization, but this accomplishes what these chapters are trying to achieve only if such treatment inspires new ways of thinking about the real lives of the people represented through the hegemony of Hollywood storytelling. And the revision to our ways of consuming

the present and the past of film (or television, or fiction, etc.) must be informed by the ability to acknowledge how these issues were marginalized in the past, how the conditions of harassment and assault have been used in media. Through the careful development and deployment of media literacy skills, it is possible in the future for young people to grow up acknowledging that media systems in the past can be understood in their own context but can also be reexamined for new and different ways of attending to the way ideologies of identity are manifested in popular media. We can use new critical lenses to bring attention where it has not previously been in focus, and to use our voices and our dollars to insist that media industries change the assumptions built into their traditional storytelling. One clear route to accomplishing this is expanding the range of creative talent to include previously marginalized people, to focus on previously underexamined areas of life, and to seek to end the reproduction of attitudes that give a pass to such behavior and its role in media storytelling. This has implications for how we understand and critique the history of these media forms, and how in the future we can insist that the issues that impact disempowered and exploited people receive the attention they deserve.

While some of these issues are more thoroughly depicted in non-fiction media like documentaries, news programs, reality television, and online storytelling of a wide variety of types, as well as independent film, the mainstream industry all too frequently sidesteps these projects or greenlights them to be created and/or performed by people who are not part of the communities being represented (e.g., trans\* actors should play trans\* characters). It not only matters what stories are being told but also who gets to tell and embody them. We hope that the reflection and reevaluation that occurs in this book inspires others to (re)consider the issues at stake as well as the importance of addressing these issues in relation to other identity categories, in other media spheres, and in other storytelling industries around the world as we continue to question power and how it is used.

### Works Cited

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