DISSERTATION

#METOO MEDIA AND HOLLYWOOD: CHALLENGING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN FILM AND TELEVISION AND THE LIMITS OF MEDIA INDUSTRIES

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2025

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ABSTRACT

#METOO MEDIA AND HOLLYWOOD: CHALLENGING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN FILM AND TELEVISION AND THE LIMITS OF MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Ever since bombshell news reports exposed media mogul Harvey Weinstein as a sexual predator in 2017, there has been an influx of narrative film and television texts that address the #MeToo movement—both implicitly and explicitly—in their narratives. Taken together, these texts make up a distinct cycle of film and television I term "#MeToo Media." This dissertation seeks to uncover how Hollywood comes to terms with the #MeToo movement through its relationship with the #MeToo Media Cycle. #MeToo Media both challenge and reinforce power dynamics in Hollywood. On the one hand, these texts can productively engage in #MeToo discourses and challenge sexual violence through narrative storytelling. On the other hand, #MeToo Media can be a mechanism for Hollywood to pay lip service to the #MeToo movement without confronting the larger structural issues that enabled Harvey Weinstein in the first place. I analyze how these tensions play out across industrial contexts, from mainstream Hollywood to independent cinema to streaming television. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the transgressive potential of #MeToo Media is often limited by the regressive practices of the media industry institutions that produce, exhibit, and award them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was made possible by so many people. First, I would like to sincerely thank my committee, Scott Diffrient, Katie Gibson, and Sushmita Chatterjee. I have so appreciated your continued time, effort, and insights guiding this project and beyond. Of course, a very special thank you to my advisor, Nick Marx. Thank you so much for always responding to my emails quickly, being willing to meet as often as needed, and for your insightful feedback. Thank you for encouraging me to think deeper about these questions and pushing me to consider the larger implications. This project and my trajectory as a scholar were shaped by your guidance, and I cannot be more grateful. I also need to especially thank my friend and mentor Julia Khrebtan-Hoerhager. You have gone out of your way to give me so many opportunities, and I cannot thank you enough. You have helped me grow as a scholar and as a person.

I have many family members and friends to thank, namely Zoë, Shawn, Kim, Brian, Mary, Phil, Marissa, Natalie, Shelby, Madison, and Cari. I truly could not have done it without you. I would also like to give a special shout-out to the various coping mechanisms I've adopted during my Ph.D. program, including *Taskmaster*, *Stardew Valley*, *Hollow Knight* streamers, crocheting, Callie and Ben from Peloton, rereading *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, LoFi Girl, puzzles, The Lyric, Cinemark, and Taylor Swift.

Most importantly, I need to thank my partner, Dewey. I truly would not be here without your undying support. Thank you for every dish washed, meal cooked, bed made, room cleaned, errand ran, drive driven, and so much more. Thank you for pushing me and cheering me on. Thank you for being so patient with me during the particularly tough moments. Thank you for always being willing to move out of state so I can chase my dreams. I love you so much.

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2024, the New York Court of Appeals overturned film producer and media mogul Harvey Weinstein's 2020 felony sex charges.[1] Over six years earlier in October 2017, Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor for *The New York Times* and Ronan Farrow for *The New Yorker* exposed Weinstein as a sexual predator.[2] More than one hundred women ranging from assistants to high-profile actresses came forward accusing Weinstein of sexual harassment and assault over the course of decades.[3] These revelations catalyzed what popular media largely refer to as the "#MeToo movement," a global social justice movement aimed at challenging sexual violence.[4]

In the overturn decision, four out of seven judges ruled that several women who accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct should not have been called as witnesses in the trial. "Prior bad acts" witnesses—or "Molineux" witnesses in the state of New York—include testimonies that are not featured in the present criminal charges but are intended to demonstrate a pattern of behavior.[5] In the wake of the #MeToo movement, judges have increasingly allowed prior bad acts witnesses in cases related to sexual harassment and assault.[6] Despite these efforts to center

[1] Maria Cramer, "Harvey Weinstein's New York Conviction is Overturned," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/04/25/nyregion/harvey-weinstein-appeal.
[2] Ronan Farrow, "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories," *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories; Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html.
[3] Nicole Chavez, Eric Levenson, and Lauren del Valle, "Harvey Weinstein Trial: The Women Who Testified against the Former Movie Mogul," *CNN*, February 11, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/23/us/witnesses-harvey-weinstein-trial/index.html.
[4] I use the term "sexual violence" as an umbrella term throughout this dissertation to refer to sexual "abuse, assault, and harassment" (Durham 2021, 14).
[5] Chavez et. al, "Harvey Weinstein Trial."
[6] Eric Levenson, "New York Appeals Court Overturns Harvey Weinstein's Sex Crimes Conviction and Orders a New Trial," *CNN*, April 25, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/25/us/harvey-weinstein-conviction-overturned-appeal/index.html.

survivors' voices, this overturn decision indicates a power shift back to perpetrators.[7] As one of the dissenting judges asserts:

> This conclusion deprives juries of the context necessary to do their work, forecloses the prosecution from using an essential tool to prove intent, ignores the nuances of how sexual violence is perpetrated and perceived, and demonstrates the majority's utter lack of understanding of the dynamics of sexual assault . . . Because New York's women deserve better, I dissent.[8]

The overturn decision will not free Weinstein from prison, as it does not impact a separate California conviction. However, it indicates a harrowing truth about contemporary attitudes towards sexual violence in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

While an illustrative anecdote, this is not a dissertation about legal discourses surrounding #MeToo. It is not even a dissertation about Harvey Weinstein. While Weinstein may have catalyzed the #MeToo hashtag, he is exemplary of a much older systemic problem in Hollywood.[9] Sex-based power dynamics and gender inequalities are baked into the earliest Hollywood industrial practices. This includes the famous "couch culture," where the industry expects actresses to make themselves sexually available to "get ahead," and the industry's sexualization of secretarial work in early Hollywood.[10] Far from existing in a vacuum, these industrial practices impact onscreen representations. As John Thornton Caldwell argues, "the stylistic and on-screen practices in film and television are thoroughly enmeshed by off-screen

[7] Scholars have debated about whether "victim" or "survivor" is more appropriate to describe those who have experienced sexual violence (see Boyle 2019; Freitag 2018; Spry 1995). I will be using "survivor" as a default unless there is a rhetorical reason to use another term.
[8] Levenson, "New York Appeals Court Overturns."
[9] While scholars and industry insiders have deployed the term "Hollywood" to refer to many different people, locations, brands, and contexts (see Behlil 2016), I use the term here to refer to the workers, companies, and institutional practices associated with the film and television industry in the United States.
[10] See Donna Peberdy, "Representing Shitty Media Men and Casting Couch Culture: Film and Television's Fictional Reckoning with #MeToo, Sexual Harassment and Assault," in *Toxic Masculinity: Men, Meaning, and Digital Media*, ed. John Mercer and Mark McGlashan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 149–65; Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

industrial, technical, and economic activities."[11] Thus, it makes sense that representations of sexual violence have permeated the silver screen since the earliest examples of cinema, with examples such as *The Amorous Militiaman* (1905) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).[12] This dissertation articulates how the #MeToo movement is intrinsically connected to media industries, both on and off the screen.

In the wake of the Harvey Weinstein accusations in 2017, there has been an influx of narrative film and television texts that engage in #MeToo discourses—both implicitly and explicitly—in their narratives. By "#MeToo discourses," I mean the ideologies and concerns that the #MeToo movement addresses, ranging from gendered power dynamics in the workplace to rape. I argue that, together, these texts make up a distinct cycle of film and television that I term "#MeToo Media." I define #MeToo Media as texts that (1) engage in #MeToo discourses in the texts themselves, (2) are produced in the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2017, and (3) media industry institutions discursively link to the #MeToo movement. #MeToo Media are importantly defined by their textual features, their historical context, and their relationship to industry. This dissertation seeks to uncover how Hollywood comes to terms with the #MeToo movement through its relationship with the #MeToo Media Cycle.

#MeToo Media both challenge and reinforce power dynamics in Hollywood. On the one hand, these texts can productively engage in #MeToo discourses and challenge sexual violence through narrative storytelling. These texts have the potential to be a powerful tool for survivors of sexual violence to reclaim a platform previously occupied by perpetrators to tell their stories. In a conventionally hostile space for female directors, #MeToo Media represent a unique

[11] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 323.
[12] *The Amorous Militiaman*, directed by Alf Collins (Gaumont Company, 1904); *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (D.W. Griffith Corp., 1915).

exception in Hollywood, as they are largely directed by women. On the other hand, #MeToo Media can be a mechanism for Hollywood to pay lip service to the #MeToo movement without confronting the larger structural issues that enabled Harvey Weinstein in the first place. Additionally, the #MeToo movement itself has its shortcomings that can be reproduced by #MeToo Media, such as its erasure of marginalized voices and its focus on the individual instead of systemic issues. This dissertation ultimately questions why the very institutional body that facilitates sexual abuse is the one charged with its representation.

I ultimately argue that the transgressive potential of #MeToo Media is often limited by media industries. To illustrate this, I analyze eight #MeToo films and television series: *The Assistant* (2019), *Unbelievable* (2019), *Late Night* (2019), *I May Destroy You* (2020), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *She Said* (2022), *Women Talking* (2022), and *Cat Person* (2023).[13] These texts largely effectively engage in #MeToo discourses by representing sexual violence as a systemic issue, problematizing carceral forms of justice, centering survivor voices, focusing on the effects of trauma rather than acts of violence themselves, and articulating how intersectional identities are impacted by sexual violence. However, the productive representations in these texts sit at odds with the media industry institutions that produce, exhibit, and award them. This dissertation articulates how these tensions play out across industrial contexts, from mainstream Hollywood to independent cinema to streaming television. More specifically, I analyze the circulation of #MeToo Media in the Academy Awards, the Sundance Film Festival, and the streaming companies Netflix and HBO. By analyzing the messaging of the texts themselves and

[13] *The Assistant*, directed by Kitty Green (Bleecker Street, 2019); *Unbelievable*, created by Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman, and Michael Chabon (Netflix, 2019); *Late Night*, directed by Nisha Ganatra (Amazon Studios, 2019); *I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel (HBO, 2020); *Promising Young Woman*, directed by Emerald Fennell (Focus Features, 2020); *She Said*, directed by Maria Schrader (Universal Pictures, 2022); *Women Talking*, directed by Sarah Polley (United Artists Releasing, 2022); *Cat Person*, directed by Susanna Fogel (Rialto Pictures, 2023).

how they are situated within larger industrial and historical contexts, I can articulate exactly how media industries (fail to) come to terms with discrimination and abuse in the wake of Weinstein.

This introduction unfolds in several parts. First, I further define the #MeToo Media Cycle and articulate how it is distinct from genre. Thinking of the #MeToo Media Cycle as a *cycle* instead of a genre lends more insight into its generic diversity, its historical specificity, and its economic function. Second, I provide an overview of the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the origins of the #MeToo movement. Here, I discuss more specifically what discourses surrounding gendered power dynamics and sexual violence #MeToo brought to the forefront of the cultural consciousness. Third, I situate the #MeToo movement within larger histories of feminist activism to ground my analysis of #MeToo Media in its historical context. Fourth, I examine the opportunities and challenges female filmmakers in Hollywood face. In this section, I consider how #MeToo Media provide unique affordances for female creatives. Fifth, I assert this dissertation's contribution to other scholarly work on #MeToo Media. While previous scholarship is often limited to textual analysis methods, I bridge textual analysis with industrial analysis. Sixth, I provide the methodological framework for the project. More specifically, this dissertation employs feminist theory, cultural studies, and media industries studies in its analysis. Lastly, I provide the parameters of this study and an overview of the dissertation's chapters.

Defining the #MeToo Media Cycle

I define the #MeToo Media Cycle as a group of film and television texts that share certain narratives and themes regarding gendered power dynamics and sexual violence. These types of texts certainly have historical precedence before #MeToo, such as *9 to 5* (1980), *The Accused* (1988), *Thelma & Louise* (1991), *Speak* (2004), *North Country* (2005), *Veronica Mars*

(2004–2007), *Sweet/Vicious* (2016–2017), and many more.[14] Therefore, texts that challenge sexual violence are not necessarily new but take on new *implications* when put in conversation with its surrounding sociocultural context. Not only are these texts produced with increasing frequency to capitalize on cultural concerns raised by #MeToo, but these texts speak to a very specific historical moment in ways previous texts have not. In these ways, the #MeToo Media Cycle is set apart from prior texts by their historical specificity.

While some scholars have posited #MeToo Media as a distinct *genre*, I argue that these texts are best understood as a *cycle* of media.[15] This is for three key reasons. First, it accounts for how these texts transcend generic and medium-specific classifications. Second, it ties these texts to the very specific cultural moment of October 2017. Finally, it explains how #MeToo can operate as a marketing tool for media industries. Amanda Klein defines a film cycle as "a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes."[16] While this definition also certainly applies to film genres, Klein articulates that what distinguishes film cycles from film genres is their intergeneric potential, their immediacy, and their economic imperatives.

Film cycles are distinct from genres in the sense that they are not contained to any one specific genre. Klein explains that while cycles can exist within a single genre (an intrageneric cycle), they can also exist across genres (an intergeneric cycle). #MeToo Media span across genres and mediums—from horror to comedy to television drama and more—making it difficult

[14] *9 to 5*, directed by Colin Higgins (20th Century Fox, 1980); *The Accused*, directed by Jonathan Kaplan (Paramount Pictures, 1988); *Thelma & Louise*, directed by Ridley Scott (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991); *Speak*, directed by Jessica Sharzer (Showtime Networks Inc., 2004); *North Country*, directed by Niki Caro (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005); *Veronica Mars*, created by Rob Thomas (The CW, 2004–2007); *Sweet/Vicious*, created by Jennifer Katyin Robinson (MTV, 2016–2017).
[15] See Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023).
[16] Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 3–4.

to confine them to a specific generic category. Therefore, #MeToo Media is best characterized as an intergeneric cycle rather than a genre itself.

Cycles are also typically shorter-lived than genres, only lasting five to ten years before they must be updated to maintain their relevance. While film genres certainly evolve depending on the surrounding historical context, film cycles provide more specific, detailed snapshots of specific cultural moments due to their shortened lifespan. While it is impossible to predict when the #MeToo Media Cycle will "end," as the cycle is ongoing at the time of this writing, the fact that it was established by a single historical moment in October 2017 suggests a cycle rather than a genre. As Klein observes, "cycles can serve as a cross-section of one specific moment in time, accurately revealing the state of contemporary politics, prevalent social ideologies, aesthetic trends, and popular desires and anxieties."[17] Because cycles are tied to such specific cultural moments, the #MeToo Media Cycle is a productive site for analyzing #MeToo discourses.

Finally, Klein articulates how cycles serve an economic purpose for its producers, arguing "The film cycle is a commodity to be assembled, packaged, and sold as quickly as possible."[18] In this way, film cycles provide a way for media industries to capitalize on timely cultural events for immediate profit. #MeToo Media serve an economic function for their producers. I will illustrate how media industries can both capitalize off #MeToo Media texts for their timeliness and use these texts to serve a socially engaged brand identity. Ultimately, understanding #MeToo Media as a cycle better informs these texts' relationship to the historical context of #MeToo and their economic function in media industries. Next, I further define the specific historical context from which this cycle emerges.

[17] Klein, 9.
[18] Klein, 8.

The #MeToo Movement

The #MeToo movement was catalyzed by bombshell newspaper reports exposing how media mogul Harvey Weinstein sexually abused women for decades. Industry insiders perhaps know Harvey Weinstein best as the co-founder of Miramax. Harvey Weinstein started the independent film production and distribution company with his brother Bob Weinstein in 1979. Especially after Disney acquired the company in the 1990s, Miramax would become a major Hollywood player, with well-known films such as *The Crying Game* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *The English Patient* (1996), *Life is Beautiful* (1997), and Academy Award Best Picture winning *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).[19] As Alisa Perren notes, "Disney's deep pockets, combined with the Weinsteins' aggressive behavior, enabled Miramax to play a dominant part in shaping the rapidly expanding specialty film business."[20] Weinstein's place as a powerful, central player in Hollywood complicates media industries' relationship with #MeToo. Venues and institutions where Weinstein used to rule are now forced to "grapple with and struggle to make sense of the part they have played in crafting and enabling male abusers."[21] In Chapters One and Two, I consider how the Academy Awards and the Sundance Film Festival confront their historic ties to Weinstein through their exhibition of #MeToo Media.

To better understand the public response it elicited, I now turn to the contents of the reports that exposed Weinstein's behavior. Reporting from Kantor, Twohey, and Farrow reveals that many of the women who were victims of Weinstein's abusive behavior reported similar

[19] *The Crying Game*, directed by Neil Jordan (Miramax Films, 1992); *Pulp Fiction*, directed by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax Films, 1994); *The English Patient*, directed by Anthony Minghella (Miramax Films, 1996); *Life Is Beautiful*, directed by Roberto Benigni (Miramax Films, 1997); *Shakespeare in Love*, directed by John Madden (Miramax Films, 1998).
[20] Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc. Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 4.
[21] Peberdy, "Representing Shitty Media Men and Casting Couch Culture," 151.

stories.[22] They would show up to what they believed to be a business meeting. Sometimes a female employee would initially be present to make them feel safe. Then, the women would find themselves alone with Weinstein and he would assault them. In 1997, Weinstein asked Asia Argento to give him a message in a hotel room where he then forced oral sex on her. Emma de Caunes describes being in a hotel room with Weinstein in 2010 when he emerged from the shower completely naked. Jessica Barth in 2011 and Emily Nestor in 2014 both reported Weinstein demanding they give him a massage once they were alone. In 2015, Weinstein groped Ambra Gutierrez at a reception in New York. Despite Gutierrez reporting this experience to the police, no charges were filed after Gutierrez's character was questioned in the tabloids. Many women reported feeling shame that they did not escape Weinstein's advances or described feeling pressured to participate. When Rosanna Arquette rejected Weinstein's advances in the 1990s, she describes the impact it had on her career, saying, "He made things very difficult for me for years."[23] While there are dozens of more women who have come forward, these examples demonstrate the common patterns as well as the longstanding nature of Weinstein's predatory behavior.

These abuses were not only the result of an individual man's actions but were also facilitated by institutional norms, including the use of NDAs and a company culture of silence. While the 2017 news publications may have been what broke the news to the public, Weinstein's "behavior has been an open secret to many in Hollywood and beyond."[24] Silencing strategies and complicit bystanders largely facilitated Weinstein's behavior over the decades. To keep survivors from speaking up, Weinstein and others at his company utilized nondisclosure agreements

[22] Kantor and Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off"; Farrow, "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault."
[23] Farrow.
[24] Farrow.

(NDAs) and payouts which prevented victims from speaking out about the abuse. As one former employee notes, "It felt like David versus Goliath . . . the guy with all the money and the power flexing his muscle and quashing the allegations and getting rid of them."[25] Past employees describe a "culture of complicity" and "a code of silence" in the workplace.[26] These examples reveal sexual violence within media industries as a systemic rather than an individual issue.

The systemic nature of sexual violence in media industries is further exemplified by the hundreds of other perpetrators beyond Weinstein who were exposed in the wake of the #MeToo movement. After the Weinstein allegations were made public, *The New York Times* reported over two hundred men being fired over sexual harassment claims, including Head of Amazon Studios Roy Price, actor Kevin Spacey, CBS host Charlie Rose, comedian Louis C.K., Pixar Chief Creative Officer John Lasseter, NBC host Matt Lauer, director Bryan Singer, and many more.[27] Popular discourses began using the phrase "The Weinstein Effect" to refer to companies firing high-profile individuals who were publicly accused of sexual harassment and assault.[28] While Harvey Weinstein may have been the catalyst for the #MeToo movement, he is representative of a much larger issue within media industry contexts. #MeToo Media often importantly use individual narratives to gesture towards these larger structures and institutions. However, #MeToo Media are not necessarily valued by media industries for their effective systemic critique. These texts instead offer media industries a surface-level commitment to inclusion and change without examining how their own structures enable abuse and silence survivors.

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[25] Farrow.
[26] Kantor and Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off"; Farrow.
[27] Audrey Carlsen et al., "#MeToo Brought Down 201 Powerful Men. Nearly Half of Their Replacements Are Women," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/23/us/metoo-replacements.html.
[28] See Stephanie R. Larson, *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021).

The reports of Weinstein's behavior quickly translated into the digital realm of social media. In the wake of the Weinstein allegations, actress Alyssa Milano posted on her Twitter account, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet."[29] Social media users began to share their own experiences with sexual assault and harassment, disseminating the #MeToo hashtag across the globe. *The Associated Press* reported twelve million uses of the hashtag within twenty-four hours of Milano's tweet.[30] Despite the hashtag's origins in the United States, global social media users began using national iterations of the hashtag, including #IamNotAfraidtoSpeak in Ukraine, #NiUnaMenos in Latin America, #Aufschrei in Germany, and #LoSHA in India.[31] Stephanie R. Larson posits that the rhetorical power of the #MeToo movement on social media is through the way #MeToo tweets are read in relation to one another.[32] She argues "Taken together, the collection of tweets formed a massive and daunting list that invited audiences to understand rape culture through matters of scale, revealing a new mode of online activism with potential to facilitate powerful feminist protest."[33] #MeToo's roots in networked online platforms importantly point to the large-scale, everyday nature of sexual violence. This dissertation expands on this scholarship to analyze how this activism is translated into fiction film and television. While social media posts speak to the scale of sexual violence, #MeToo Media instead offer insights into how the societal concerns raised by #MeToo are interpreted, represented, translated, and even appropriated by media industries.

[29] Alyssa Milano, "If You've Been Sexually Harassed or Assaulted Write 'Me Too' as a Reply to This Tweet," *Twitter*, October 15, 2017, https://x.com/alyssa_milano/status/919659438700670976?lang=en.
[30] "More than 12M 'Me Too' Facebook Posts, Comments, Reactions in 24 Hours," *CBS News*, October 17, 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-more-than-12-million-facebook-posts-comments-reactions-24-hours/.
[31] M. Cristina Alcalde and Paula-Irene Villa, *#MeToo and Beyond: Perspectives on a Global Movement* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2022), 2.
[32] Larson, *What It Feels Like.*
[33] Larson 137.

While the #MeToo movement made strides in raising awareness about sexual violence, it tends to focus on one very specific image of a sexual violence survivor. Despite the Hollywood-centric nature of the #MeToo movement, the phrase "Me Too" to challenge sexual violence was originally used by a Black woman in Selma, Alabama in 2006. Tarana Burke's non-profit organization Just Be Inc. focuses on survivors of sexual violence, specifically women of color.[34] After the #MeToo hashtag spread across social media following Milano's tweet, Burke describes the anxiety she felt, saying, "I had been trying in vain to amplify it for years, with zero resources and little support, and I was now going to have to fight a viral hashtag that probably wouldn't be connected to the origins of the work at all. I was dejected."[35] After learning about Burke's work, Milano appeared on *Good Morning America* to publicly credit Burke for the phrase "me too."[36] However, the #MeToo movement continues to sideline Burke's important intersectional work in many ways. Because of this, I identify how #MeToo Media texts do (and do not) account for marginalized identities.

Many scholars have pointed to the shortcomings of #MeToo, remarking on how the movement largely centers on white celebrities and erases marginalizing voices.[37] The networked nature of #MeToo partially facilitates this focus on celebrity, as "The #MeToo movement is expressed on those media platforms that easily lend themselves to commodification and

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[34] Sandra E. Garcia, "The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html.
[35] Tarana Burke, *Unbound* (New York, NY: Flatiron Books, 2021), 9.
[36] Garcia, "The Woman Who Created #MeToo."
[37] See Judy E. Battaglia, Paige P. Edley, and Victoria Ann Newsom, "Intersectional Feminisms and Sexual Violence in the Era of Me Too, Trump, and Kavanaugh," *Women and Language* 42, no. 1 (2019): 133–43, https://doi.org/10.34036/WL.2019.014; Ashley Noel Mack and Bryan J. McCann, "Critiquing State and Gendered Violence in the Age of #MeToo," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 3 (2018): 329–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2018.1479144; Alison Phipps, "'Every Woman Knows a Weinstein': Political Whiteness and White Woundedness in #MeToo and Public Feminisms around Sexual Violence," *Feminist Formations* 31, no. 2 (2019): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2019.0014; Ashwini Tambe, "Reckoning with the Silences of #MeToo," *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 197, https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.44.1.0197; Verity Trott, "Networked Feminism: Counterpublics and the Intersectional Issues of #MeToo," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (2021): 1125–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1718176.

simplification."[38] While #MeToo certainly made sexual violence more visible on a global scale, its origin in white celebrity pushes those more at risk for experiencing sexual violence to the margins, including Native American women, transgender people, and incarcerated individuals.[39] As Burke herself makes clear "Sexual violence doesn't discriminate, but the response to it does. In some ways, it is the great equalizer—no demographic or group is exempt—but the reactions to different people telling their stories are far from equal."[40] Survivors of sexual violence tend to garner media attention if they fit into an "ideal victim" image. The most represented survivors of sexual violence in popular media are cisgender, white, heterosexual, middle-class, young, and female, as this demographic is most "deemed appropriate for public sympathy."[41] #MeToo demonstrates this phenomenon in action, with its most visible figures being white, female celebrities. As a result, #MeToo marks itself as another movement challenging sexual violence in "a long list of high-profile movements in which white bourgeois women have co-opted this work."[42] Based on this history, it is worth noting when #MeToo Media texts replicate this shortcoming through their use of white women protagonists.

Considering these shortcomings and its ties to Hollywood, the #MeToo movement is notably removed from Black and Indigenous feminisms. Black feminist scholars contend that African American women have unique constructed knowledge from being doubly marginalized

[38] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 17.
[39] See Allen J. Beck et al., "Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-12-Update," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, December 2014, https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/sexual-victimization-prisons-and-jails-reported-inmates-2011-12-update; David Cantor et al., "Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct," *Westat*, September 21, 2015; Steven W. Perry, "American Indians and Crime: A BJS Statistical Profile, 1992–2002," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, December 2004, https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/american-indians-and-crime-bjs-statistical-profile-1992-2002.
[40] Burke, *Unbound*, 242.
[41] Larson, *What It Feels Like*, 9.
[42] Phipps, "'Every Woman Knows a Weinstein,'" 9.

by both their gender *and* race.[43] Because of this, bell hooks argues that feminism should be aimed at challenging "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.[44] In other words, patriarchy is not just defined by gender but also by race and class. #MeToo complicates this in several ways. First, as noted, the movement largely fails to acknowledge the impact of race in its activism. Second, #MeToo is not necessarily aimed at fighting capitalism, as the movement largely focuses on change *within* Hollywood rather than a *dismantling* of Hollywood as a capitalist system. Therefore, the #MeToo movement and, by extension, #MeToo Media largely fail to engage in Black feminisms.

When it comes to Indigenous feminisms, this line of activism focuses on decolonization as a mode of ending gendered oppression.[45] This is especially critical, as Native American women in particular face disproportionately high rates of sexual violence.[46] #MeToo's ties to Hollywood complicate these decolonization efforts. Hollywood has a long history of mischaracterizing and mistreating Indigenous peoples, as evidenced by the popular Western genre in the 1960s. In Hollywood today, stories about Indigenous women are largely absent or directed by white male directors, with examples such as *Wind River* (2017) and *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023).[47] Therefore, the #MeToo movement additionally fails to include Indigenous feminism in its sexual violence activism.

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[43] See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).
[44] bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 7.
[45] See Joyce Green, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, Second Edition (Nova Scotia, CA: Fernwood Publishing, 2017).
[46] See Valerie N. Wieskamp and Cortney Smith, "'What to Do When You're Raped': Indigenous Women Critiquing and Coping through a Rhetoric of Survivance," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 1 (2020): 72–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1706189.
[47] *Wind River*, directed by Taylor Sheridan (The Weinstein Company, 2017); *Killers of the Flower Moon*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Paramount Pictures, 2023).

Another critical obstacle #MeToo faces is its focus on individual perpetrators rather than the structural issues that facilitate sexual violence. Focusing on Harvey Weinstein and other powerful men as a few "bad apples" in the entertainment industry is problematic as it "suggests that power is individually held by a small number of executive men rather than also considering the broadly gendered social relations that define the cultures in which these industries participate."[48] Therefore, an analysis of #MeToo Media requires balancing the focus on individuals within larger systemic contexts. While the goal of #MeToo should be focused on rescripting the misogynistic hierarchies that enable abuse, individual experiences should not be completely dismissed. Karen Boyle powerfully argues that the phrase "me too" "situates the individual in the conversation whilst also allowing us to see the bigger picture, thus meaning no one woman should carry the weight of that 'Me' alone."[49] With this in mind, sexual violence activism must balance individual critique with systemic critique.

One way to accomplish this is through Emma Bloomfield's conception of constellation rhetorics.[50] Employing a constellation metaphor in the context of #MeToo, Bloomfield argues "we can conceptualize individual instances of sexual harassment as their own stars" connected to one another within broader institutional frames. [51] This type of rhetoric is powerful in the sense that "a collection of individual instances and their representation in discourse manifest as a pattern that carries a stronger 'argumentative force' than any star alone."[52] This dissertation articulates how #MeToo Media engage in constellation rhetorics. #MeToo Media texts face a

[48] Skadi Loist and Deb Verhoeven, "Complex Not Complicated: Gendered Media Industries in the Wake of #MeToo," *Media Industries Journal* 6, no. 1 (2019): 68, https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0006.104.
[49] Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 12.
[50] Emma Frances Bloomfield, "Rhetorical Constellations and the Inventional/Intersectional Possibilities of #MeToo," *The Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43, no. 4 (2019): 394–414, https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859919866444.
[51] Bloomfield, 399.
[52] Bloomfield, 399.

difficult task in the sense that film and television narratives are inherently individualized about specific characters. Despite this, I argue that #MeToo Media texts are largely successful when leveraging individual stories to critique larger systems, including law enforcement, academia, and more.

With this complex history in mind, I distinguish between Tarana Burke's "me too" phrase and the #MeToo movement with the hashtag. "Me Too" without the hashtag better represents Tarana Burke's longstanding, intersectional work about "bringing empathy into the fight against sexual violence."[53] However, Boyle argues that putting the hashtag in "#MeToo" is important in the sense that "#MeToo is indivisible from the media platforms through which it has circulated . . . For better and for worse, #MeToo is *networked* feminism: a feminism made possible by the affordances of the social media platforms on which it circulates."[54] Boyle ultimately defines "#MeToo" as simultaneously that specific moment in October 2017 and the cultural reckoning in the aftermath. As such, #MeToo is best understood as both a moment *and* a discourse. I opt to use the hashtag when describing #MeToo Media to ground these texts within the historical context of the exposure of Harvey Weinstein in October 2017. However, this dissertation continually recenters Burke's original work by considering how marginalized identities are represented in #MeToo Media.

This accounting of the #MeToo movement informs my analysis in several ways. First, it reveals how the #MeToo movement is intrinsically linked to media industries with its relationship to Harvey Weinstein. Second, it provides the exact cultural moment from which these media texts emerge, as the #MeToo Media Cycle reflects the historical context in which it is produced and received. Finally, it examines #MeToo's silences and erasures when it comes to

[53] Burke, *Unbound*, 3.
[54] Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, 3.

marginalized identities and systemic critique, shortcomings that are both replicated and challenged by #MeToo Media. Now that I have outlined the history of the #MeToo movement itself, I turn to how previous feminist activism has historically confronted sexual violence.

A Brief History of Feminist Activism Against Sexual Violence

The #MeToo movement did not emerge in a vacuum in 2017 but stems from a long line of feminist activism. This history is key to understanding the contemporary #MeToo discourses I consider throughout this dissertation. As Boyle argues, "for the contemporary moment to affect radical change it is important to understand its relationship to decades of feminist activism, theory and research."[55] Feminist activism focused on sexual violence is most clearly traced back to second-wave feminism in 1975 with Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*.[56] Since Brownmiller's work, there are several examples of specific feminist activism aimed at fighting sexual violence. For the purpose of this introduction, I select a few key historical moments that inform the #MeToo movement today, including consciousness raising groups during the second wave, the Slutwalk in 2011, and the Women's March in 2016.

The fight to challenge violence is largely grounded in efforts to end rape culture. As hooks simply states, "We live in a culture that condones and celebrates rape."[57] More specifically, rape culture describes "the social and structural norms that excuse perpetrators and demean victims, in effect shoring up and propagating a cultural climate whereby sexual violence can flourish."[58] Rape culture is largely maintained through cultural mechanisms, including media. Despite the ubiquity of sexual violence, it is rendered invisible through "normalized

[55] Boyle, 1.
[56] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1986).
[57] hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 128.
[58] Annie Hill, "SlutWalk as Perifeminist Response to Rape Logic: The Politics of Reclaiming a Name," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016): 26, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1091940.

patterns of behavior that proliferate public life in ways that continue to go unchallenged and even unnoticed."[59] A key task for feminist activism is understanding what systems perpetuate rape culture and how those discourses operate. I consider how #MeToo Media challenge rape culture in their narratives as well as how media industries maintain rape culture through their institutional norms.

Some key factors that sustain rape culture are rape myths. Rape myths refer to widely shared ideas about sexual violence that are not necessarily true and are potentially harmful to survivors of sexual violence and/or marginalized communities. One significant rape myth is the way society blames survivors of sexual violence for their own assaults. Sarah Banet-Weiser explains that these misogynist discourses identify "the sexual agency of women as the primary issue rather than the violence of men" when it comes to sexual violence.[60] However, misogynist discourses are not the only mechanism to maintain this rape myth. Survivors of sexual violence also "internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults."[61] This idea has become popularly understood as "victim blaming." The most common form of victim blaming occurs when women are thought to be "asking for it" based on their appearance and behavior. According to this myth, women are responsible for the actions of men, obscuring larger structural issues and not holding men accountable for their actions. For example, in the series *I May Destroy You*, the protagonist Bella (Michaela Coel) is raped after being drugged at a bar. When Bella tells one of her sexual partners about the rape over the phone, he chastises her, yelling, "If you'd watched your drink, you wouldn't have been raped."[62]

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[59] Larson, *What It Feels Like*, 157.
[60] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 55.
[61] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 10th Anniversary Edition, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 8.
[62] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 5, ". . . It Just Came Up," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, July 6, 2020), 0:28:27.

Bella immediately hangs up the phone and breaks down into tears. Scenes like these in #MeToo Media both raise awareness about victim blaming, and, more importantly, challenge it by representing the damaging effects it has on survivors.

A second rape myth perpetuated in popular discourses is that rape only occurs under specific conditions by certain individuals. This myth posits that "all rapists are monsters—sexual sadists awaiting an opportunity to attack their prey."[63] However, this myth obscures the way sexual violence occurs in everyday situations and how perpetrators can be someone the survivor knows, including acquaintances, co-workers, spouses, and more. It also makes it more difficult to accuse individuals of rape who appear "normal" to outside observers. As Kelly Wilz explains, "We are culturally and societally conditioned to view rape in extremely narrow ways: (stranger rape, with a knife, in an alley, etc.)."[64] Because of this cultural conditioning, rape is rendered unbelievable if it happens outside of these narrowly conceived notions. While some #MeToo Media texts explored here do represent instances of stranger rape, others consider different types of perpetrators, including classmates, co-workers, family members, romantic partners, and more. By representing a range of types of sexual violence, #MeToo Media combat the rape myth that sexual violence can only be perpetrated by a stranger.

A final rape myth I explore here is the idea that those accused of sexual violence are the *real* victims. With #MeToo facilitating more survivors of sexual violence speaking out, the flip side is more perpetrators are now forced to publicly acknowledge such accusations. A common defense strategy these men employ is to invoke victimhood themselves. This phenomenon is what Banet-Weiser refers to as the "funhouse mirror."[65] The funhouse mirror both reflects and

[63] Mack and McCann, "Critiquing State and Gendered Violence in the Age of #MeToo," 105.
[64] Kelly Wilz, *Resisting Rape Culture through Pop Culture: Sex After #MeToo* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 77.
[65] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

distorts, as "politics and bodies are distorted and transfigured so that men—heterosexual, white men—are the ones who appear to be injured by widespread inequities and structural disparities."[66] In these situations, white men claim that rape accusations inflict injury on their lives, their images, and their reputations. For example, the #MeToo series *The Morning Show* (2019–) follows Mitch Kessler (Steve Carrell), a co-host of a morning show who is fired after reports of his sexual misconduct.[67] When Mitch is confronted about the accusations by one of his old executive producers, he retorts, "I am as innocent as any straight middle-aged man there is. The only problem is that seems to be illegal these days."[68] These representations in #MeToo Media reveal how white men take on the mantle of victimhood in the wake of #MeToo.

One high-profile example helps demonstrate this idea. Two years before the #MeToo movement, Brock Turner was a freshman at Stanford when he raped Chanel Miller while she was unconscious outside of a dumpster at a college party in 2015. Despite being eligible for fourteen years in federal prison, the judge sentenced Turner to six months in a county jail, where he ended up only serving three months.[69] As a member of the varsity swim team, Turner's defense hinged on his potential, invoking his status as a young athlete. Turner's father argued in a letter advocating for his son that jail time "is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action."[70] The Turner trial is simply a prerequisite to popular discourse's focus on white male victimhood in the wake of #MeToo. In Chapter One, I illustrate how *Promising Young Woman*, even in its title, critiques the idea that "promising young men" should not be punished for rape.

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[66] Banet-Weiser, 45.
[67] *The Morning Show*, created by Jay Carson (Apple TV+, 2019).
[68] *The Morning Show*, season 1, episode 2, "A Seat at the Table," directed by Mimi Leder (Apple TV+, November 1, 2019), 0:41:00.
[69] Lynn Neary, "Victim of Brock Turner Sexual Assault Reveals Her Identity," *NPR*, September 4, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757626939/victim-of-brock-turner-sexual-assault-reveals-her-identity.
[70] Michael E. Miller, "'A Steep Price to Pay for 20 Minutes of Action': Dad Defends Stanford Sex Offender," *Washington Post*, October 25, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/06/06/a-steep-price-to-pay-for-20-minutes-of-action-dad-defends-stanford-sex-offender/.

To better understand how #MeToo Media challenge rape culture and rape myths today, I point to some specific strategies and protests that pre-date the #MeToo movement, including consciousness raising, the Slutwalk, and the Women's March. One important facet of feminist activism during the second wave is the rhetorical strategy of consciousness raising. In consciousness raising, individual women share their personal experiences in small groups. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains, in consciousness raising, "There is no leader, rhetor, or expert. All participate and lead; all are considered expert."[71] These small, non-hierarchal groups allowed women to raise awareness by sharing their personal experiences with sexual violence. I articulate how #MeToo Media engage in a form of consciousness raising in their narratives further in Chapter One.

Since the second wave, several protests and movements in the twenty-first century demonstrate contemporary efforts to fight sexual violence culturally and politically. One salient example of feminists fighting the victim blaming rape myth is the organization of the "Slutwalk." The protest was spurred by remarks made by a Toronto police constable in 2011: "I've been told I'm not supposed to say this—however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized."[72] The original march in downtown Toronto sparked protests in countries around the world. The Slutwalk stands as a concrete example of a protest countering victim blaming rape myths. Six years after the Slutwalk, more than one million people around the world protested the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017.[73] The self-proclaimed

[71] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59, no. 1 (1973): 79, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637309383155.
[72] "'SlutWalk' Marches Sparked by Toronto Officer's Remarks," *BBC News*, May 8, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-13320785.
[73] Perry Stein, Steve Hendrix, and Abigail Hauslohner, "Women's Marches: More than One Million Protesters Vow to Resist President Trump," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/womens-march-on-washington-a-sea-of-pink-hatted-protesters-vow-to-resist-donald-trump/2017/01/21/ae4def62-dfdf-11e6-acdf-14da832ae861_story.html.

"Women's March" protested the president-elect for his sexist and abusive behavior.[74] The star-studded march in Washington D.C. attracted activists and celebrities, including Janelle Monae, Ashely Judd, Gloria Steinem, America Ferrera, Scarlett Johanson, and more.[75] Notably, the Women's March held in Park City, Utah—home of the Sundance Film Festival—was attended by Harvey Weinstein himself.[76] The Women's March functions as a sort of predecessor to the #MeToo movement, as we begin to see the intersection between feminist activism, celebrity, and Hollywood. While I have just articulated how feminist activism operates on a broader societal level, I now identify how gender inequalities operate within the smaller context of media industries.

Female Filmmakers in Hollywood

A notable form of activism within Hollywood involves pushes for gender parity in media industries, specifically when it comes to female directors. Here, my work is best put in conversation with Courtney Brannon Donoghue's book *The Value Gap: Female-Driven Films from Pitch to Premiere*.[77] She defines a female-driven film as a film that is both narratively centered on women and made by female writers, directors, and/or producers. The #MeToo Media I explore here certainly fit into this definition. Donoghue explains that female-driven films are thought to have no commercial value, according to Hollywood industry logics. Part of this devaluation is the way women are limited to certain genres and types of stories that have been

[74] See David A. Fahrenthold, "Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eeed4_story.html.
[75] Anemona Hartocollis and Yamiche Alcindor, "Women's March Highlights as Huge Crowds Protest Trump: 'We're Not Going Away,'" *The New York Times*, January 21, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/womens-march.html.
[76] Jodi Kantor, "Harvey Weinstein at the January 2017 Women's March in Park City, Utah," *Twitter*, October 6, 2017, https://x.com/jodikantor/status/916103297097961472.
[77] Courtney Brannon Donoghue, *The Value Gap: Female-Driven Films from Pitch to Premiere* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2023).

historically undervalued. Donoghue argues that "popular culture produced for and consumed by women has a history of being culturally discounted, dismissed, and denigrated as superficial or frivolous feminine escapist fantasy."[78] For example, female filmmakers are often limited to culturally feminine-coded genres, such as romantic comedies or "chick flicks." Because #MeToo Media are largely directed by women, they notably expand opportunities for female filmmakers beyond specific genres. However, I articulate throughout this dissertation how these texts' association with #MeToo impacts their commercial value. More specifically, films like *She Said* and *The Assistant* that more literally represent Harvey Weinstein tend to do poorly both at the box office and in awards circuits.

Donoghue argues that female directors specifically face significant institutional barriers in media industries. Issues of funding and opportunity are particularly salient for female directors in Hollywood, largely due to their perceived risk. Donoghue points to two deeply entrenched Hollywood myths that limit opportunities for female filmmakers: "lack of experience and lack of interest."[79] As outlined above, female filmmakers are perceived by media industries as not being interested in masculine-coded genres, leaving them limited opportunities to front big-budget pictures. Most significantly, women "are often caught in a bind where they cannot direct a big blockbuster because they don't have experience and because they cannot get experience, they cannot direct a big blockbuster."[80] This creates a paradoxical loop where women routinely cannot get the necessary experience to helm big-budget films. Despite this myth, female-driven films have proven their economic value in terms of box office returns, as exemplified by *Twilight*

[78] Donoghue, 11.
[79] Courtney Brannon Donoghue, "Gendered Expectations for Female-Driven Films: Risk and Rescue Narratives around Warner Bros.' Wonder Woman," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 3 (2022): 488, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1636111.
[80] Donoghue, 490.

(2008), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Barbie* (2023).[81] Despite the fact that "Women clearly are a viable audience, and female-driven films prove commercially successful again and again," Hollywood chooses to forget these successes and deem female filmmakers as "too risky."[82] Even when films do not prove to be commercial successes, male directors tend to be granted second chances more than women. In Chapter Two, I illustrate how small box office returns end up limiting future opportunities for the directors of #MeToo Media.

These contemporary systemic barriers women face in the film industry stem from historical constructions of women's work in Hollywood. Despite the commonly shared idea that women did not work in early Hollywood, Erin Hill makes clear that "Women were never absent from film history; they often simply weren't documented as part of it because they did 'women's work,' which was—by definition—insignificant, tedious, low status, and noncreative."[83] While many women were able to infiltrate a number of "masculine" departments before Hollywood was fully established as a professional institution in the 1920s, women were soon relegated to more "feminized" roles as "studios worked to project an image of professionalism and control."[84] At this time, the film industry experienced a period of "masculinization" due to the way filmmaking became more connected to technologies.[85] This masculinization of film industries led to certain roles and departments being coded as more masculine or feminine. While women were often relegated to secretarial work or art departments, the role of director was reserved for almost exclusively men. This historical context informs how the director's chair remains elusive

[81] *Twilight*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke (Summit Entertainment, 2008); *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017); *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2023).
[82] Donoghue, *The Value Gap*, 196.
[83] Hill, *Never Done*, 5.
[84] Hill, 43.
[85] See Karen Ward Mahar, "True Womanhood in Hollywood: Gendered Business Strategies and the Rise and Fall of the Woman Filmmaker, 1896–1928," *Enterprise & Society* 2, no. 1 (2001): 72–110, https://doi.org/10.1093/es/2.1.72.

for women today. As I demonstrate in Chapter One, female directors tend to be awarded for more feminized roles like screenwriting rather than their directing accomplishments. Ultimately, I build off Hill and Donoghue's work here to consider #MeToo Media's authorship in the context of larger institutional barriers for female filmmakers.

Representing #MeToo on Screen

Bridging these discussions of feminist activism and female filmmakers, I now turn to how scholars have previously analyzed #MeToo in relation to media. In doing so, I articulate how this dissertation fits into existing scholarship. More specifically, I fill a literature gap by extending beyond textual analysis for my method. Additionally, while much of the scholarship on #MeToo is focused on new media, I account for fiction film and television texts in my analysis.

Feminist activism's relationship with media has a long and complex history. Bonnie Dow asserts that "media have struggled to find ways to embody feminism in particular women and their lifestyles or attitudes."[86] Part of this difficulty is due to the inherent nature of representation and translation. Therefore, there are limitations to media representations of activism. As Sarah Projansky argues, "Media function to identify absorb, transform, and therefore at least partially to disempower movements for social change, even as they give those movements voice within popular culture."[87] In other words, while media representations of social movements can assist in their dissemination, there is power behind social movements that is lost in translation. Therefore, I distinguish between the #MeToo movement itself with *representations* of the #MeToo

[86] Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement since 1970* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 209.
[87] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), 232.

movement. This dissertation is concerned with the representation of #MeToo discourses in fictional film and television rather than the movement itself.

Several recent works have analyzed #MeToo in the context of media. *MeToo: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media* by Meenakshi Gigi Durham is an essential text here.[88] In her book, Durham traces "the specific strategies and structures of rape culture that harbored and hid sexual predation in the media industries, silencing the capacity of survivors to disclose their assaults."[89] Across three chapters, Durham focuses on the specific media industries that facilitate sexual violence, representations of rape culture in media such as pornography and cybercrime, and the backlashes against #MeToo. This book's primary contribution to my work is the way that it examines how media industries function as literal "sites of sexual violence."[90] However, this investigation excludes representations of sexual violence in fiction film and television contexts, a facet of #MeToo that I examine in this dissertation.

Other scholars have considered #MeToo in the context of film and television, such as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Katheryn Claire Higgins in their book *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt*.[91] Hinging on "believability" as its core concept, these authors map out how believability operates within media landscapes. While they analyze a host of media that engage with believability in the wake of #MeToo, including apps, wearable tech, mainstream news, and social media, the book's first chapter focuses specifically on fiction film and television. I employ their analysis in a few key ways. First, they are the first authors to posit "#MeToo Media" as a media category. However, I push against their conception of #MeToo Media as a genre, instead arguing it is a cycle. Second, these authors productively view fictional

[88] Meenakshi Gigi Durham, *MeToo: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021).
[89] Durham, 9.
[90] Durham, 1.
[91] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, *Believability*.

media artifacts as reflexive of real-world ideologies. Banet-Weiser and Higgins explain, "Our approach to media productions is not to view them as discrete media artifacts or texts, but rather as 'moments' within a much broader historical conjuncture, conditioned by the spectacular visibility of networked media and social movements like #MeToo."[92] In a similar vein, I examine how media texts reflect and relate to their surrounding sociocultural context. Finally, Banet-Weiser and Higgins identify a number of #MeToo discourses negotiated in these fictional texts, including redemption narratives for perpetrators, "breaking the silence" narratives for victims, and representation of the "ideal victim" in most cases. I similarly consider how #MeToo discursively plays out in #MeToo Media texts. While *Believability* informs my project in many ways, I uniquely push beyond the texts themselves by putting #MeToo Media in conversation with media industry institutions.

#MeToo Media in the context of television is most clearly explored by Sarah Kornfield and Hannah Jones in their article "#MeToo on TV: Popular Feminism and Episodic Sexual Violence."[93] These authors focus on how established television series incorporate #MeToo into their storylines and "pointedly draw on the frameworks and vocabularies of #MeToo activism."[94] Through an analysis of different television series' portrayals of structures, disclosures, and bystanders, these authors articulate how #MeToo has impacted television narratives. Most productive to my dissertation is the way Kornfield and Jones articulate how these fictional portrayals "join ongoing cultural debates regarding sexual violence and shape cultural norms, assumptions, and expectations concerning sexual violence and feminist activism."[95] In doing so,

[92] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 43.
[93] Sarah Kornfield and Hannah Jones, "MeToo on TV: Popular Feminism and Episodic Sexual Violence," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 7 (2022): 1657–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1900314.
[94] Kornfield and Jones, 1668.
[95] Kornfield and Jones, 1668.

these media texts carry with them real-world implications. I build on Kornfield and Jones' work by considering how #MeToo television texts join in ongoing #MeToo discourses. However, I differ by considering television series that premiered *after* the #MeToo movement.

Margaret Tally's book *The Limits of #MeToo in Hollywood: Gender and Power in the Entertainment Industry* is another critical text in the analysis of #MeToo Media.[96] Tally's self-proclaimed goal is to examine how #MeToo has "been portrayed in popular culture and media as well as how the entertainment industry has responded to the movement itself."[97] While this statement sounds similar to my research questions and goals, this dissertation differs in several ways. First, I limit my case studies to eight rather than the dozens of texts analyzed in Tally's book. Second, Tally's book is largely removed from media and cultural studies. Tally's analysis is focused on some narrative themes in #MeToo Media and how "the entertainment industry itself responded to the demands made about addressing sexual harassment."[98] However, as a professor of public policy, Tally's investigations do not include a grounding in formal film analysis, media industries, and feminist media studies. Therefore, my work extends Tally's book through alternative methodologies.

#MeToo: Resisting Rape Culture through Popular Culture by Kelly Wilz is another text influential to my dissertation.[99] This book focuses on film and television texts in the wake of #MeToo with a specific emphasis on positive representations of sexuality. More specifically, Wilz strives to examine media examples that provide "productive models of affirmative consent, tender masculinity, and women's pleasure in popular culture that work to challenge toxic

[96] Margaret Tally, *The Limits of #MeToo in Hollywood: Gender and Power in the Entertainment Industry* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021).
[97] Tally, 229.
[98] Tally, 275.
[99] Wilz, *Resisting Rape Culture through Pop Culture*.

dominant and hegemonic constructions."[100] Wilz argues that these more productive representations challenge rape culture and provide scripts for healthy sexuality. I expand on this analysis by considering how #MeToo Media challenge rape culture beyond positive representations of sexuality.

My analysis expands and fills gaps in the existing literature in several ways. First, past investigations of #MeToo Media are primarily limited to using textual analysis for its method, tracing common narrative features and themes in #MeToo Media texts. I differ by also examining industrial contexts throughout the dissertation. Second, many investigations of #MeToo in the context of media are limited to new media.[101] I differ through my focus on fictional film and television texts. Lastly, feminist media scholars have historically examined how film and television reflect sociocultural contexts in the 20th century.[102] I build on this literature to account for how media texts engage in feminist discourses since 2017. Through my multimethodological approach, my emphasis on fiction film and television, and my focus on texts made after 2017, I contribute to previous literature on #MeToo and the media.

Methodology

Questions of sexual violence, #MeToo, and Hollywood are often complex, resisting easy answers. As such, this dissertation employs a multipronged, interdisciplinary approach to better analyze #MeToo Media and media industries from a variety of perspectives. Principally, this dissertation draws on feminist theory, cultural studies, and media industries studies for its method.

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[100] Wilz, 5.
[101] See Durham, *MeToo*; Larson, *What It Feels Like*; Trott, "Networked Feminism."
[102] See Lisa M. Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*.

The first discipline I draw on throughout this dissertation is feminist theory. While I employ a variety of feminist scholars in rhetoric, politics, media studies, and critical race theory, I principally center intersectional feminism and popular feminism in my study. As I have discussed, the #MeToo movement has excluded the voices of marginalized populations through its focus on white celebrity. Therefore, feminist activism against sexual violence requires an intersectional approach. Kimberlé Crenshaw uses the concept of intersectionality to explore "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color."[103] In other words, feminist activism must consider that gender is not the singular factor in people's experiences. Race, class, sexuality, religion, age, and more all impact how individuals view and experience the world. These identity categories can "stack up" in different ways, especially if someone has more than one marginalized identity. Intersectional feminism considers how marginalized identities experience discrimination, abuse, and violence differently. Intersectionality prevents a shortsighted approach to feminist activism and allows for the examination of how identities beyond gender are impacted by sexual violence.

This project employs an intersectional lens to its analysis of #MeToo Media to combat the erasure of marginalized perspectives inherent in the #MeToo movement itself. While texts such as *I May Destroy You* offer hopeful points of resistance, it is worth noting many #MeToo Media texts at the Oscars, the Sundance Film Festival, and streaming center whiteness in their narratives. Therefore, I articulate the implications of #MeToo Media centering on white protagonists. Additionally, I articulate how sexual violence impacts identities beyond gender. Texts such as *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* represent how race, sexuality, and class

[103] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

impact individuals' legibility as survivors of sexual violence in culture. In these ways, intersectional feminism is critical both in analyses of #MeToo Media and sexual violence activism at large.

Despite the urgent need for intersectional feminism, #MeToo is most clearly defined by popular feminism as outlined by Banet-Weiser.[104] She argues that feminism has become popular in several ways. First, feminism has moved beyond academic and niche activist circles and is now circulated in popular media channels. Second, feminism is popular in the sense that it "doesn't have to be defended; it is accessible, even admired."[105] Most simply, popular feminism is an accessible form of feminism that circulates in hypervisible ways in the media. The #MeToo movement is a significant example of popular feminism, as it made feminist concerns hypervisible and accessible through its circulation on social media. The issue with popular feminism is that it does not challenge the structures that facilitate gender inequality in the first place. As Banet-Weiser explains, "By commodifying and making feminism 'safe' popular feminism resists structural critique."[106] As illustrated above, the #MeToo movement resists structural critique by blaming individual actors. A critical task for feminist activists fighting sexual violence is to move away from popular feminism towards an intersectional approach.

Popular feminism plays out in the #MeToo Media Cycle in several key ways. Most importantly, media industries tend to replicate many of the shortcomings inherent in popular feminism. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, media industries had to acknowledge sexual violence as a widespread issue. However, they only tend to do so in safe, accessible, and commodifiable ways. I articulate how the Academy Awards, the Sundance Film Festival, and

[104] Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.
[105] Banet-Weiser, 1.
[106] Banet-Weiser, 16.

streaming companies will confront #MeToo on the surface without investigating their deeper industrial roots. I also articulate the many ways #MeToo offers media industry institutions a certain amount of cultural cache. Because popular feminism makes feminism commodifiable, media industries have found a way to profit from sexual violence activism for their own gain. In these ways, both intersectional feminism and popular feminism inform my analysis.

To situate #MeToo Media texts within their historical and industrial contexts, this dissertation also relies on a cultural studies model for its method of analysis. Cultural studies investigates how popular culture forms perpetuate common-sense ideologies. Relatedly, my project examines how fictionalized narratives (re)produce real-world ideologies regarding sexual violence. Originated by Stuart Hall at the Birmingham School in the 1960s, early cultural studies was founded to understand culture beyond elitist, "high" culture. This contrasts previous conceptions of popular culture as the "culture industry" as outlined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, which dismisses mass media as formulaic sameness that controls the working class.[107] By removing culture from the hands of elitist, ivory tower intellectualism, cultural studies facilitates the serious study of popular culture. With its roots in Marxist thinking, cultural studies is principally concerned with issues of power. Because #MeToo Media often circulate in popular culture channels, a cultural studies approach allows me to examine the power dynamics between #MeToo Media and larger media industry institutions.

Cultural studies additionally informs my research as it pushes beyond textual analysis models to consider industry, audience, and historical factors of media texts. Douglas Kellner outlines the "multiperspectival approach" to cultural studies, which consists of examining a

[107] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, NY: Continuum, 1989), 120–67.

media text from three different perspectives: production/industry, text, and audience/reception.[108] This approach places media texts in context, bringing in how industrial and reception factors impact our understanding of media texts. Moving a step further, Julie D'Acci introduces the Circuit of Media Study, which includes a fourth dimension: sociohistorical context.[109] D'Acci conceptualizes "each site as marking out a convergence of discursive practices, which as the phrase indicates are themselves convergences of meaning and matter (including people, environments; and money)."[110] This dissertation employs D'Acci's Circuit of Media Studies model to account for how the sociohistorical context of the #MeToo movement impacts film and television texts at the level of industry, text, and audience.

While I examine #MeToo Media texts from a cultural studies perspective, media industries studies also informs this dissertation in many ways. This complex and multifaceted field broadly examines how producers of cultural forms, both individuals and institutions, are situated in larger systems of power. At its core, media industries research refers to "research that explores the creation and circulation of media across the spectrum of micro to macro perspectives by identifying and examining industrial practices and analyzing their consequences."[111] One apt metaphor for media industries studies as outlined by Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic is the "jet plane" vs. the "helicopter" approach.[112] The jet plane view of media industries involves "a more expansive view, but many details are obscured."[113] On

[108] Douglas Kellner, *Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994).
[109] Julie D'Acci, "Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities," in *Television after TV* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 418–46.
[110] D'Acci, 432.
[111] Daniel Hebert, Amanda D. Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar, *Media Industry Studies: A Short Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020), 7.
[112] Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 234–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x.
[113] Havens et al., 239.

the flip side, the helicopter view of media industries "allows us much finer detail, albeit with narrower scope."[114] These authors argue that the helicopter view is more productive for media industries research, as it involves examining smaller-scale case studies situated within broader power structures. I employ a helicopter view of #MeToo Media to examine how individual case studies are representative of larger-scale industrial phenomena. To best capture the media industries dimension of #MeToo Media, I examine a variety of artifacts, including trade press articles, interviews with producers, reviews from mainstream newspapers and magazines, and what Caldwell calls "industrial reflexivity."[115]

Industrial reflexivity is a way for media industries to make sense of themselves through the production of internal texts. More specifically, industrial reflexivity refers to "forms of local cultural negotiation and expression as well, for the lived production communities that create films, programs, 'making-ofs,' behind-the-scenes docs, DVD bonus tracks, show-biz reports, and cross-media film/TV franchises."[116] This form of reflexivity reveals the ways producers of media make sense of their identities and create their own cultures within larger industrial contexts. I certainly draw on some of these internal artifacts that Caldwell discusses. However, I also extend Caldwell's conception of industrial reflexivity to consider #MeToo Media texts as a form of reflexivity. While Caldwell examines how media industries make sense of themselves *internally*, media industries also make sense of themselves *externally* through fiction film. Donoghue explains that "filmmakers have had a long tradition of turning the camera around to observe insider cultures and behind-the-scenes idiosyncrasies of the movie business," with examples such

[114] Havens et al., 239.
[115] Caldwell, *Production Culture*.
[116] Caldwell, 2.

as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Player* (1992), and *Babylon* (2022).[117] These examples reveal how Hollywood makes sense of itself through (often celebratory) forms of reflexivity. Hollywood's reflexive impulses are complicated when #MeToo forces media industries to reflect on how it has enabled abuse over the years. While there are opportunities for Hollywood to productively consider its complicity in facilitating sexual violence through its cultural products, #MeToo Media texts largely fall back into Hollywood's self-congratulatory reflexive habits. Therefore, #MeToo Media act as a form of reflexivity in which media industries hold up a mirror to themselves and consider their complicity in facilitating sexual violence.

Parameters of Study

Now that I have established my method, I attend to the parameters of my object of study. While there are numerous examples of #MeToo Media, I limit my scope to texts (1) directed by women, (2) made by American studios, (3) produced between 2019 and 2023, and (4) not classified as documentaries. While texts outside of these criteria would certainly provide a rich analysis, I narrow my scope to better employ the "helicopter" approach in media industries studies.[118] By providing detailed accounts of more specific case studies, I can better articulate the nuances of how media industries confront #MeToo discourses.

First, this dissertation is limited to texts with female directors and showrunners. As previously discussed, female filmmakers face systemic institutional barriers in Hollywood. Therefore, I analyze how #MeToo Media texts are devalued in terms of authorship as well as how they provide unique opportunities for female filmmakers in a conventionally hostile industry. With this criterion in mind, I exclude #MeToo Media texts directed and created by

[117] Donoghue, *The Value Gap*, 67; *Singin' in the Rain*, directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1952); *The Player*, directed by Robert Altman (Fine Line Features, 1992); *Babylon*, directed by Damien Chazelle (Paramount Pictures, 2022).
[118] See Havens et al., "Critical Media Industry Studies."

men, such as *The Loudest Voice* (2019), *Bombshell* (2019), *The Perfection* (2019), *Barbarian* (2022), *Tár* (2022), and *May December* (2023).[119]

Second, I limit my study to media produced by American studios.[120] Hollywood—and the #MeToo movement itself—is certainly not limited to the United States in the age of globalization. However, I include this criterion because I primarily analyze media industry institutions based in the United States, like the Academy Awards, the Sundance Film Festival, HBO, and Netflix. With this parameter in mind, I do exclude important international #MeToo Media texts, including *Angels Wear White* (2017) (China), *Revenge* (2018) (France), *Working Woman* (2018) (Israel), *Slalom* (2020) (France and Belgium), *The Worst Person in the World* (2021) (Norway), *Bombay Begums* (2021) (India), *There's Still Tomorrow* (2023) (Italy), and *How to Have Sex* (2024) (England).[121] Despite this limitation, I will explore how international film festivals have shifted in the wake of #MeToo in Chapter Two.

Third, I limit my scope to texts released between 2019 and 2023. Considering that film and television take years to produce, I start in the year 2019 to ensure that most (if not all) of the production of these texts occurred *after* the #MeToo movement. This leaves out texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), *Big Little Lies* (2017–2020), *M.F.A.* (2017), and *The Tale* (2018).[122] I

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[119] *The Loudest Voice*, created by Tom McCarthy and Alex Metcalf (Showtime, 2019); *Bombshell*, directed by Jay Roach (Lionsgate, 2019); *Barbarian*, directed by Zach Cregger (20th Century Studios, 2022); *The Perfection*, directed by Richard Shepard (Netflix, 2018); *Tár*, directed by Todd Field (Focus Features, 2022); *May December*, directed by Todd Haynes (Netflix, 2023).

[120] The only exception is British series *I May Destroy You*, which is a co-production between the BBC and HBO. However, I consider HBO's involvement as grounds for its inclusion in the parameters of my study.

[121] *Angels Wear White*, directed by Vivian Qu (22 Hours Films, 2017); *Revenge*, directed by Coralie Fargeat (Rézo Films, 2018); *Working Woman*, directed by Michal Aviad (Zeitgeist Films, 2018); *Slalom*, directed by Charlène Favier (Jour2Fête, 2020); *The Worst Person in the World*, directed by Joachim Trier (SF Studios, 2021); *Bombay Begums*, created by Alankrita Shrivastava (Netflix, 2021); *There's Still Tomorrow*, directed by Paola Cortellesi (Vision Distribution, 2023); *How to Have Sex*, directed by Molly Manning Walker (Mubi, 2023).

[122] *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller (Hulu, 2017–); *Big Little Lies*, created by David E. Kelley (HBO, 2017–2020); *M.F.A.*, directed by Natalia Leite (Dark Sky Films, 2017); *The Tale*, directed by Jennifer Fox (HBO Films, 2018).

also limit my study to a distinct five-year period to better account for the shortened lifespan of #MeToo Media as a cycle rather than a genre.

Finally, this dissertation is limited to fictional narratives and biopics, excluding documentaries and docuseries such as *Surviving R. Kelly* (2019–2023), *Untouchable* (2019), and *Athlete A* (2020).[123] The distinction between documentary and narrative film is indistinct. However, Bill Nichols articulates that "documentary is not a reproduction of reality," but a "*representation* of the world we already occupy."[124] Therefore, fiction films based on real events differ in the sense that individuals, locations, and events are *reproduced* by actors, production designers, writers, etc. I find Hollywood's reproductive treatment of its past most fruitful to my study because I am more interested in what aspects of #MeToo are transformed in the creative process of translation.

With these criteria in mind, this dissertation focuses on eight #MeToo Media texts: *The Assistant*, *Unbelievable*, *Late Night*, *I May Destroy You*, *Promising Young Woman*, *She Said*, *Women Talking*, and *Cat Person*. While other texts would certainly qualify within my parameters, such as *The Morning Show*, *Black Christmas* (2019), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), and *She Will* (2021), I focus on these specific texts because they are particularly exemplary of the phenomena I explore.[125] More specifically, these eight texts have the most explicit relationships to the media industry institutions explored in this dissertation: the Academy Awards, the Sundance Film Festival, and streaming companies. Additionally, I have purposefully chosen texts that I find most productively engage in #MeToo discourses, including

[123] *Surviving R. Kelly*, created by Nigel Bellis and Astral Finnie (Lifetime, 2019–2023); *Untouchable*, directed by Ursula Macfarlane (Hulu, 2019); *Athlete A*, directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk (Netflix, 2020).
[124] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Second Edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 13.
[125] *Black Christmas*, directed by Sophia Takal (Universal Pictures, 2019); *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, directed by Eliza Hittman (Focus Features, 2020); *She Will*, directed by Charlotte Colbert (Vertigo Releasing, 2021).

confronting sexual violence as a systemic issue, exploring alternative forms of justice and catharsis, and articulating intersectional identities. The exception to this is *Cat Person*, which ultimately fails to fully articulate its feminist politics. I include this film to demonstrate how #MeToo Media are not monolithic and certainly have their shortcomings. In other words, #MeToo Media are not guaranteed to effectively engage in #MeToo discourses simply because they are categorized as #MeToo Media. Ultimately, I find these eight texts to be particularly apt for the present study due to their relationship with industry and their shared commitment to engaging in #MeToo discourses.

Overview of Chapters

I begin in Chapter One by analyzing how #MeToo Media have been awarded at the Academy Awards. The Academy Awards—also known as "The Oscars"—is one of the central reflexive arenas where Hollywood celebrates itself through a series of awards. In this chapter, I analyze the films *Promising Young Woman*, *Women Talking*, and *She Said*. I argue that these films are largely successful in engaging in #MeToo discourses and challenging sexual violence. However, the Academy as an institution largely undercuts this productive messaging through how these films are (and are not) awarded. I begin this chapter by outlining how the Academy Awards have a long history of exclusive practices, especially when it comes to actors of color and female directors. Next, I analyze how these films engage in consciousness raising, address sexual violence as a systemic issue, keep sexual violence entirely off screen, center survivor voices, and explore different concepts of justice. I then articulate that these effective representations are undercut in their reception at the Academy Awards. These films are often limited to winning screenwriting awards or, in the case of *She Said*, not awarded at all. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of the failure of the Time's Up organization as an

alternative venue for challenging sexual violence in Hollywood. This chapter ultimately articulates how #MeToo Media operate in mainstream Hollywood spaces.

Chapter Two turns to the world of independent film by analyzing the exhibition of #MeToo Media at the Sundance Film Festival. This chapter argues that despite independent cinema's reputation for providing alternative venues for filmmakers, independent #MeToo Media are largely reappropriated by mainstream Hollywood. I first outline the history of the Sundance Film Festival to articulate how the festival has been defined by a white male indie auteur canon since the exhibition of *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) by Steven Soderbergh.[126] I then turn to the films *The Assistant*, *Light Night*, and *Cat Person*, all three of which screened at Sundance. While these films do represent important patterns of abuse in the workplace, these films are largely valued by distributors for their timeliness in relation to the #MeToo movement. Additionally, Sundance tends to only exhibit #MeToo Media that center whiteness and focus on the individual rather than the systemic. Finally, I consider how film festivals beyond Sundance have come to terms with #MeToo, specifically the Venice Film Festival in Italy and the Cannes Film Festival in France. This chapter considers how #MeToo Media are produced and received in independent contexts.

Moving away from film, Chapter Three analyzes #MeToo television in the context of streaming. I argue in this chapter that television as a medium offers unique affordance for engaging in #MeToo discourses. However, these productive representations sit at odds with the brand identities of the companies HBO and Netflix. I begin by outlining how the evolution of television has impacted feminist activism on screen. Most importantly, I propose the term "feminist narrative complexity" as a storytelling mode employed by #MeToo television to

[126] *sex, lies, and videotape*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (Miramax Films, 1989).

engage in #MeToo discourses. I then turn my attention to the television series *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You*. Both series leverage feminist narrative complexity to critique law enforcement, represent the effects of trauma, and articulate how intersectional identities are impacted by sexual violence. However, these effective representations are diminished by Netflix and HBO as companies. These streamers will use #MeToo Media to serve a socially engaged brand identity while simultaneously supporting abusers and exploiting women's bodies as a marketing tool. I finally use Apple TV+ as a case study to question if companies free from longer problematic histories can engage in #MeToo discourses differently. This chapter ultimately considers how #MeToo television texts are distinct from their filmic counterparts.

I conclude with an analysis of the potential future of #MeToo Media, as the cycle is ongoing and shifting in relation to industrial and cultural changes. I begin by considering if Hollywood can ever truly be "feminist," using *Barbie* as a case study. Here I argue that questions of Hollywood being "feminist" or "not feminist" are rarely black and white. Then, I analyze the recent film *Sorry, Baby* (2025) to articulate how the #MeToo Media Cycle is evolving.[127] Recent #MeToo texts now internalize the #MeToo discourses and representations from the established "canon" of #MeToo Media. However, I also consider how newer #MeToo Media pave new paths forward with their representation of intimacy after violence, their use of humor, and the unique affordances for first-time filmmakers.

Ultimately, this dissertation posits #MeToo Media as a distinct cycle of media worthy of analysis. An investigation of #MeToo Media reveals how Hollywood confronts sexual violence in the wake of the #MeToo movement. While many of these texts engage in #MeToo discourses and challenge sexual violence in effective ways, media industries largely reassert hegemonic

[127] *Sorry, Baby*, directed by Eva Victor (A24, 2025).

norms baked into the foundations of Hollywood. This dissertation ultimately analyzes how media produce and circulate ideologies surrounding sexual violence in a contemporary moment.

CHAPTER ONE: #METOO MEDIA AND THE ACADEMY AWARDS

In early 2020, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences commissioned actor John Cho and actor, writer, and showrunner Issa Rae to announce the nominations for the 92nd annual Academy Awards—also popularly known as "The Oscars." By choosing an Asian American man and a Black woman as their spokespeople, the Academy crafted a visual example of their commitment to diversity and inclusion (see figure 1). However, this step backfired

Figure 1: Jon Cho and Issa Rae Announcing the 92nd Oscar Nominees

during the announcement of the Best Director category. After reading the list of the all-male nominees, Issa Rae remarked, "Congratulations to those men."[1] Rae's statement speaks to the systemic exclusion of women in Hollywood awards circuits. While industry writers question if

[1] Oscars, "92nd Oscars Nominations," *YouTube*, January 13, 2020, 0:14:54, https://www.youtube.com/live/BEho_CNX43s?si=CZrrcm2h7ZVfgUf4.

the awards show is losing its relevance over the years, the Oscars still play a significant role in determining which types of films are prioritized by media industries.[2] This chapter analyzes how the Academy Awards have continually failed to demonstrate an authentic commitment to diversity and inclusion, especially as it relates to the #MeToo movement.

How the Academy Awards has (and has not) awarded #MeToo films indicates what types of #MeToo stories Hollywood finds worthy of celebration. I examine the Academy Awards as an institution in conversation with three #MeToo films: *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *Women Talking* (2022), and *She Said* (2022).[3] While these films certainly have their shortcomings, they are largely effective in challenging rape culture and sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo. However, I argue that the industry's treatment of these films after their release indicates a lack of meaningful systemic change within both the Academy Awards and Hollywood industries at large. I first outline the history of exclusion at the Academy Awards, specifically as it relates to actors of color and female filmmakers. Second, I examine the three #MeToo films in detail to explore how these texts engage in #MeToo discourses. Third, I analyze how media industries inhibit the messaging of the three #MeToo films in their production, marketing, reception, and awards. I conclude with a discussion of the initiative Time's Up as an example of an institution outside of the Academy that failed to challenge sexual violence in Hollywood. Ultimately, the

[2] See Robyn Bahr, "Why Awards Shows Still Matter for Movies," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 31, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/why-awards-shows-still-matter-movies-1274059/; Ross Douthat, "Opinion | We Aren't Just Watching the Decline of the Oscars. We're Watching the End of the Movies," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/opinion/oscars-movies-end.html; Kristopher Tapley, "The Motion Picture Academy Has Become Desperate," *Variety*, August 8, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/film/news/oscars-popular-film-category-what-it-means-1202899599/.
[3] *Promising Young Woman*, directed by Emerald Fennell (Focus Features, 2020); *Women Talking*, directed by Sarah Polley (United Artists Releasing, 2022); *She Said*, directed by Maria Schrader (Universal Pictures, 2022).

Academy Awards, and Hollywood more broadly, has failed to come to terms with its history of discrimination, exclusion, and even assault.

A History of Exclusion at the Academy Awards

The Academy's contemporary pitfalls when it comes to confronting the #MeToo movement stem from a much longer history of exclusion. Since its inception in the late 1920s, the Academy Awards has served as a central arena where Hollywood executives, producers, directors, actors, writers, and more, negotiate what types of stories and talent are worthy of celebration. During a dinner in Santa Monica in 1927, Louis B. Mayer, Fred Beetson, Fred Niblo, and Conrad Nagel discussed the possibility of forming a central organization in Hollywood. After this initial meeting, these men gathered thirty-six Hollywood insiders to establish the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on January 11, 1927.[4] Of these thirty-six, only three were women.[5] The institution would be an invitational-based organization consisting of five branches: producers, actors, directors, writers, and technicians.[6] Even in its earliest history, the Academy's exclusivity largely centers the voices of elite, white men. Today, the crown jewel of the institution is its annual awards show.

The Academy Awards is an annual awards show founded by the Academy of Motion Arts and Sciences to "encourage the improvement and advancement of the arts and sciences of the profession by the interchange of constructive ideas and by awards of merit for distinctive achievement."[7] The first Academy Awards consisted of twelve categories and took place at the

[4] Robert A. Osborne, *65 Years of the Oscar: The Official History of the Academy Awards* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1994).
[5] Miguel Saraiva, "Oscars Won by the Best Picture of the Year: An Empirical Analysis Across the History of Academy Awards (1929–2023)," *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/02762374231212136.
[6] Osborne, *65 Years of the Oscar*.
[7] Osborne, 9.

Roosevelt Hotel in 1929.[8] Even the Academy Awards' earliest days were littered with controversy. In the first year of the awards, Academy founder Louis B. Mayer protested the board of judges' decision to award *The Crowd* (1928) for the Artistic Quality of Production award over *Sunrise* (1928).[9] Mayer opposed the win because *The Crowd* did not make a lot of money for Mayer's studio MGM.[10] While specific voting procedures and award categories have shifted dramatically over the years, today's awards consist of twenty-four categories voted on by the twenty-seven branches of the Academy.[11] Each branch votes for their own category (directors vote for Best Director, costume designers vote for Best Costume Design, etc.). The exception to this is Best Picture, which is voted on by all members of the Academy.

The entire premise of the Academy Awards is a prime example of reflexivity, as the awards show functions as a way for Hollywood to reflect on itself. Thomas Elsaesser defines the Academy Awards' type of reflexivity as Hollywood's "annual rituals of self-celebration."[12] He argues that the ultimate purpose of the Academy Awards is to "consolidate its own history, to work on the invention of traditions, to recycle and perpetuate its tried and trusted mythologies."[13] In other words, the annual awards function as a ritual for Hollywood to make sense of itself and its past. However, this reflection is not always inclusive and comprehensive. The Academy has a long history of significant shortcomings when it comes to celebrating *all* talent within the industry.

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[8] Anthony Holden, *Behind the Oscar: The Secret History of the Academy Awards* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993).
[9] Holden; *The Crowd*, directed by King Vidor (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1989); *Sunrise*, directed by F.W. Murnau (Fox Film Corporation, 1927).
[10] Holden.
[11] Best Casting was introduced as a new category in 2025.
[12] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Hollywood Turn: Persistence, Reflexivity, Feedback," *Screen* 58, no. 2 (2017): 237–47, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjx018.
[13] Elsaesser, 239.

The Academy's reaction to controversy is best described as *reactive* rather than *proactive*. A prime example of this is the Academy's official apology to Sacheen Littlefeather. In 1973, Marlon Brando famously invited Littlefeather to the podium to speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples when he received the Best Actor award for his performance in *The Godfather* (1972).[14] The audience met Littlefeather's speech with both boos and applause as she declined the award on Brando's behalf. In 2022, the Academy hosted an event with Littlefeather including a land acknowledgment and formal apology to "illuminate the entertainment industry's past while paving the way for meaningful change in the future."[15] However, this apology comes fifty years too late. As Littlefeather herself said about the apology, "As my friends in the Native community said, it's long overdue . . . I could have been dead by now."[16] In fact, the apology almost literally came too late, as Littlefeather passed away less than one month after it was issued.[17] This long overdue gesture exemplifies the way the Academy failed to interrogate the systemic issues that led to the institution's inability to protect Indigenous women in the first place. This historic example reflects the Academy's contemporary relationship with the #MeToo movement. While the Academy gestures towards inclusion through its celebration of #MeToo films, I will articulate how the institution still lacks a deep, meaningful commitment to systemic change.

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[14] Christina Newland, "A Shocking Moment in Oscars History, 50 Years On," *BBC*, March 2, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230302-the-most-shocking-moment-in-oscars-history-50-years-on; *The Godfather*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Paramount Pictures, 1972).

[15] Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, "Sacheen Littlefeather's Oral History: The Oscars, Marlon Brando and a Legacy of Activism (Exclusive)," *A.frame*, https://aframe.oscars.org/news/post/sacheen-littlefeather-oral-history-the-oscars-marlon-brando-legacy-of-activism.

[16] Rebecca Sun, "Academy Apologizes to Sacheen Littlefeather for Her Mistreatment at the 1973 Oscars (Exclusive)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 15, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/sacheen-littlefeather-oscars-apology-1235198863/.

[17] Pat Saperstein, "Sacheen Littlefeather, Activist Who Took the Stage to Decline Marlon Brando's Oscar, Dies at 75," *Variety*, October 3, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/film/news/sacheen-littlefeather-dead-marlon-brando-oscar-1235390968/.

Although the Academy Awards has faced issues related to inclusion since its inception, the institution's lack of diversity was not widely discussed until the 2010s. In 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Academy's membership was 94% white and 77% male.[18] The following year, the Academy appointed the only person of color on the Academy's board of governors—Black woman Cheryl Boone Isaacs—as president.[19] Discussions of racial diversity at the Academy Awards took off even more in the wake of the #OscarsSoWhite controversy. The hashtag originated in 2015 after no people of color were nominated in any of the acting categories.[20] After the nominations were announced, activist April Reign tweeted the following: "#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair. 😒"[21] Reign's hashtag went viral, prompting several civil rights groups to protest the 2015 Oscars over its lack of racial diversity.[22] Despite this activism, the acting categories were once again entirely white the following year in 2016.[23] #OscarsSoWhite demonstrates how the Academy's failure to come to terms with the #MeToo movement is precedented by past exclusionary actions.

One Oscar win stands as a particularly salient turning point in the Academy's history of racial exclusion. In a dramatic mix-up, *Moonlight* (2016) triumphed over *La La Land* (2016) as the Best Picture winner in 2017.[24] After an employee handed presenter Warren Beatty the card

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[18] John Horn, Nicole Sperling, and Dough Smith, "Movie Academy: Oscar Voters Overwhelmingly White, Male," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 2012, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/oscars/la-et-unmasking-oscar-academy-project-html-htmlstory.html.
[19] Horn et al.; Gregg Kilday, "Cheryl Boone Isaacs Elected President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 30, 2013, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/cheryl-boone-isaacs-elected-president-595686/.
[20] Reggie Ugwu, "The Hashtag That Changed the Oscars: An Oral History," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowhite-history.html.
[21] April Reign, "#OscarsSoWhite They Asked to Touch My Hair. 😒," *Twitter*, January 15, 2015, https://x.com/ReignOfApril/status/555725291512168448.
[22] Ted Johnson, "Civil Rights Groups Plan Oscar Protest," *Variety*, February 20, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/film/awards/civil-rights-groups-plan-oscar-protest-1201438033/.
[23] Tim Gray, "Academy Nominates All White Actors for Second Year in Row," *Variety*, January 14, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/biz/awards/oscar-nominations-2016-diversity-white-1201674903/.
[24] Gregg Kilday, "Oscars: Amid Confusion, 'Moonlight' Named Best Picture in a Celebration of Diversity," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 26, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/oscars-

for Best Supporting Actress instead of Best Picture, the musical film *La La Land* was declared the winner, and the film's cast and crew took to the stage to accept the award. After a flurry of activity by Academy employees on stage, *La La Land* producer Jordan Horowitz took to the microphone and declared, "I'm sorry, no. There's a mistake. *Moonlight*, you guys won Best Picture. This is not a joke. Come up here."[25] He then held the card that listed *Moonlight* as the winner up to the camera (see figure 2). The primarily white cast and crew of *La La Land* was

Figure 2: Moonlight *Announced as the Best Picture Winner at the 2017 Oscars*

slowly replaced by the largely Black performers and filmmakers behind *Moonlight* on the Oscars stage. When *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins finally took to the microphone, he exclaimed, "To hell with dreams. I'm done with it, 'cause this is true."[26]

confusion-moonlight-named-best-picture-a-celebration-diversity-980839/; *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins (A24, 2016); *La La Land*, directed by Damien Chazelle (Lionsgate, 2016).
[25] Oscars, "'Moonlight'" Wins Best Picture | 89th Oscars (2017)," *YouTube*, April 3, 2017, 0:04:19, https://youtu.be/GCQn_FkFElI?si=I3NY__U6XYlq4sJK.
[26] Oscars, 0:06:26.

While this dramatic moment certainly secured itself as an iconic moment in Oscar history, it more importantly reflected a shift in what types of films the Academy celebrates. While *La La Land* follows the love story of two white people in Los Angeles chasing their dreams to be an actor and a musician, *Moonlight* tells a poignant coming-of-age story of a gay Black man coming to terms with his sexuality. As discussed in the introduction, Hollywood has a history of making celebratory films about itself. Therefore, *La La Land* was well-positioned to do well at the Oscars. Especially coming only two years after the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, *Moonlight* taking home the top prize at the Oscars indicated a potential turning point in the Academy's exclusive past. Since *Moonlight*, a few other Best Picture winners have featured non-white casts, including South Korean film *Parasite* (2019), the first non-English language film to win Best Picture, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2021), which features a primarily Asian cast.[27] However, the Academy continues to face pitfalls in terms of racial diversity. Two years after *Moonlight*'s win, the film *Green Book* (2018) won Best Picture, despite critics describing the film as a white savior narrative.[28] While the Oscars will at times celebrate racial diversity, it will primarily do so in ways that are safe and self-congratulatory. I later outline how the Oscars will celebrate #MeToo films but only in limited ways that avoid literal representations of the #MeToo movement in Hollywood.

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[27] Brooks Barnes, "'Everything Everywhere All at Once' Is Big Winner at the Oscars," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/13/movies/oscars-everything-everywhere-all-at-once.html; Paul Farhi, "'Parasite' Makes Oscars History as the First Foreign-Language Film to Win Best Picture," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/parasite-makes-oscars-history-as-the-first-foreign-language-film-to-win-best-picture/2020/02/10/93b7e5f8-49fa-11ea-9164-d3154ad8a5cd_story.html; *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho (Neon, 2019); *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (A24, 2021).

[28] A. O. Scott, "'Green Book' Review: A Road Trip Through a Land of Racial Clichés," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/15/movies/green-book-review.html; *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly (Universal Pictures, 2018).

Beyond issues of race, the Academy's inclusion of women, especially when it comes to directing, is shockingly lacking. Kathryn Bigelow was the first woman to take home the Oscar for Best Director in 2010 for her film *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Chloé Zhao for *Nomadland* (2020) and Jane Campion for *The Power of the Dog* (2021) remain the only other women to win the award since.[29] When it comes to #MeToo Media, the only director to secure a Best Director nomination is Emerald Fennell for *Promising Young Woman* in 2021. Even in years like 2019 with critically acclaimed films such as Lorene Scafaria's *Hustlers* (2019) and Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019), the Oscars shut out female directors entirely.[30] More recently, Greta Gerwig's box office phenomenon *Barbie* (2023) was nominated for eight Academy Awards but was famously left out of the Best Director category.[31] When women do take home awards, they tend to be in categories that have historically been feminized in the industry, such as costumes, hair, and makeup.[32]

The Academy's lack of diversity in terms of nominations largely stems from a lack of diversity among those selecting them. If the only perspectives in the Academy itself come from a white male perspective, it makes sense that the Academy's nominations reflect that single point of view. Diversifying the Academy's membership brings in alternative points of view that can help reframe what "the best" in any given category could look like. It is worth noting that the

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[29] Clayton Davis, "#OscarsSoMale: Academy Awards Shut Out Women for Best Director," *Variety*, January 24, 2023, https://variety.com/2023/awards/awards/no-women-directors-nominated-oscars-1235496819/; *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (Summit Entertainment, 2008); *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao (Searchlight Pictures, 2020); *The Power of the Dog*, directed by Jane Campion (Netflix, 2021).

[30] Rebecca Aurthur and Kate Rubin, "Backlash Grows as Oscars Snub Women Directors Yet Again," *Variety*, January 13, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/oscars-female-director-shutout-hollywood-reacts-1203465116/; *The Farewell*, directed by Lulu Wang (A24, 2019); *Hustlers*, directed by Lorene Scafaria (STXfilms, 2019).

[31] Beatrice Verhoeven, "'Barbie's' Greta Gerwig Snubbed for Oscars Best Director Nomination," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 23, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/greta-gerwig-snubbed-oscars-2024-best-director-nominations-1235803664/; *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2023).

[32] See Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

Academy *has* made significant efforts to diversify its membership in recent years. In the wake of the #OscarsSoWhite debacle, the Academy pledged to double the number of people of color and women among its membership by 2020.[33] The Academy did end up reaching this goal by significantly increasing the number of invitations to the Academy's ranks in recent years.[34]

Beyond diversifying its membership, the Academy announced the initiative "Academy Aperture 2025" to increase diversity at the awards.[35] In this initiative, the Academy first expanded the Best Picture category to ten nominees each year to increase the chances for diverse stories to be nominated. Second, the Academy limited the Board of Governors' terms to a lifetime maximum of twelve years. Third, the Academy presented additional inclusion standards for films nominated for Best Picture starting in 2025. For films to be eligible for the award, they must meet two out of four representation and inclusion standards. These standards revolve around (A) onscreen representations, (B) creative leadership, (C) industry access, and (D) audience development.[36] *New York Times* writer Kyle Buchanan argues that the Academy's new Best Picture inclusion standards are relatively easy to meet.[37] He contends, "Since only two of the four standards must be met for a film to qualify for the Oscars top prize, and Standards C and D are so easy for most studios to satisfy, best-picture contenders could remain fairly homogeneous both behind and in front of the camera."[38]

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[33] Gregg Kilday, "Academy Unveils Dramatic Changes to Promote Diversity," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 22, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/academy-unveils-dramatic-changes-promote-858386/.
[34] Scott Feinberg, "Film Academy Invites 487 to Join Including Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, Lily Gladstone, Chris Silbermann and Celine Song," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 25, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/oscars-film-academy-new-members-2024-1235931631/.
[35] Marc Malkin, "Oscars: Film Academy Announces New Plans to Increase Diversity, Expands Best Picture Category," *Variety*, June 12, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/film-academy-announces-new-plans-to-increase-oscar-diversity-1234632801/.
[36] Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, "Representation and Inclusion Standards," *Oscars*, https://www.oscars.org/awards/representation-and-inclusion-standards.
[37] Kyle Buchanan, "The Oscars' New Diversity Rules Are Sweeping but Safe," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/movies/oscars-best-picture-diversity.html.
[38] Buchanan.

These initiatives reveal how the Academy's current approach to racial and gender diversity has become a box-checking exercise. However, *more* representation is not necessarily equivalent to *better*. When discussing racial diversity on screen, Kristen J. Warner articulates that representation for the sake of numbers is inherently artificial.[39] She argues that racial diversity in media has become "synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances."[40] Warner terms this "plastic representation," where diversity is measured in terms of visual identifiers rather than authentic onscreen representation with depth. Diversity initiatives that simply involve the number of underrepresented groups are ultimately plastic. While #MeToo films confront issues related to sexual violence with nuance, they are ultimately unintelligible to the Academy because there is no easy box to check. As Courtney Brannon Donoghue articulates, "The issue is not about lacking quality versus quantity but about who is judging the value and by what measures."[41] Representing diverse stories on screen requires initiatives beyond quantitative measures.

Based on this history, popular discourses surrounding diversity and the Academy have largely been centered around race and gender. However, the institution also has a troubling relationship with perpetrators and representations of sexual violence. The Oscars have a history of nominating and awarding men accused of sexual violence, including Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, Kevin Spacey, and even Harvey Weinstein. Industry insiders have even credited Weinstein with pioneering the contemporary Oscar campaign.[42] Over the years, Weinstein has

[39] Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 32–37, https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2017.71.2.32.
[40] Warner, 33.
[41] Courtney Brannon Donoghue, *The Value Gap: Female-Driven Films from Pitch to Premiere* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2023), 174.
[42] Jesse David Fox, "A Brief History of Harvey Weinstein's Oscar Campaign Tactics," *Vulture*, January 29, 2014, https://www.vulture.com/2014/01/miramax-oscar-campaigns-harvey-weinstein-timeline.html.

been attached to films with over three hundred nominations and eighty-one wins.[43] The Academy's historic celebration of perpetrators of sexual violence calls into question their current commitment to confronting sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo.

The Academy's treatment of films with sexual violence in their narratives remains uneven and complex. Best Picture-winning films have represented sexual violence as early as *Gone with the Wind* (1938).[44] The Academy has continued to award Best Picture wins for films with representations of rape, implied rape, or attempted rape, including *West Side Story* (1961), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Platoon* (1986), *Crash* (2004), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014), and more.[45] For my purposes here, I will examine a few Oscar-winning and nominated films that represent issues related to sexual violence in ways that contrast the #MeToo films explored later in this chapter. More specifically, past Oscar-nominated films often do not treat sexual violence as a systemic issue, have explicit onscreen representations of sexual violence, and do not confront sexual violence in the context of media industries.

A handful of Oscar-nominated films have represented inappropriate relationships between adult men and teenage girls, including *American Beauty* (1999) and *An Education* (2009).[46] *American Beauty* follows middle-aged Lester (Kevin Spacey) who is unhappy in his ordinary suburban life. It is not until he begins to have sexual fantasies about his daughter's

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[43] Madeline Berg, "After Expulsion from The Academy, Here Are All of Harvey Weinstein's 81 Oscar Wins," *Forbes*, October 13, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2017/10/13/here-are-all-of-harvey-weinsteins-oscar-wins/; Fox, "A Brief History of Harvey Weinstein's."
[44] *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming (Loew's Inc., 1939).
[45] *West Side Story*, directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (United Artists, 1961), *Lawrence of Arabia* directed by David Lean (Columbia Pictures, 1962); *Midnight Cowboy* directed by John Schlesinger (United Artists, 1969); *Platoon* directed by Oliver Stone (Orion Pictures, 1986); *Crash* directed by Paul Haggis (Lionsgate, 2004), *Slumdog Millionaire* directed by Danny Boyle (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008); *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).
[46] *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes (Dreamworks Pictures, 1999); *An Education*, directed by Lone Scherfig (Sony Pictures Classics, 2009).

teenage friend Angela (Mena Suvari) that he breaks out of his complacency with his life. Set in 1960s England, *An Education* is a film about 16-year-old Jenny (Carey Mulligan) who drops out of school after beginning a relationship with an adult man, David (Peter Sarsgaard). These films largely treat these relationships as a result of the actions of individual bad actors. In *American Beauty*, Angela simply functions as a narrative device that "wakes up" Lester from the monotony of ordinary life. While *An Education* importantly represents the repercussions of David's actions in Jenny's life, issues of power imbalances beyond David as a character are not explored. While these films do represent issues related to adult/minor relationships, the narratives are ultimately limited to individual characters. The #MeToo films explored here differ by treating sexual violence as a systemic issue. However, the Academy does not recognize these #MeToo films for these productive representations.

Many Oscar films that represent sexual violence on screen do so in particularly violent ways, such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013).[47] The film follows Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a free African-American man in the early 1800s who is captured by white men and sold into slavery in the South. When he works on a plantation owned by Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), Solomon meets a cotton picker named Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o). Epps rapes Patsey on a regular basis and the film represents this in an unflinching long take. When Epps takes Patsey outside and rapes her, the camera stays on their faces for the entire act. When Patsey attempts to look away, Epps grabs her face and forces her to look at him. While this scene captures the brutal realities of American slavery, visceral representations of rape have the potential to retraumatize survivors of sexual violence. In contrast, #MeToo films opt to keep representations of sexual violence entirely off screen.

[47] *12 Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012).

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (2017) is perhaps the most confrontational Oscar-nominated film when it comes to representing issues related to sexual violence prior to the #MeToo Media Cycle.[48] The film begins with Mildred (Francis McDormand) putting up three billboards outside of her small Missouri town that read, "Raped While Dying," "And Still No Arrests?," and "How Come, Chief Willoughby?" Mildred puts up these billboards to prompt the police to further investigate the rape and murder of her daughter seven months prior. Most relevant to my discussion of #MeToo films, Mildred fits into the "female antihero" archetype, as she physically and verbally assaults people in the community and even goes so far as burning down the local police station. While *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* uses the female antihero to challenge sexual violence at times, the film is much more interested in exploring concepts related to grief, revenge, and forgiveness. In contrast, #MeToo film *Promising Young Woman* uses the female antihero archetype to consistently confront rape culture throughout the entire film.

Perhaps the most productive example of an Oscar-winning film that successfully confronts sexual violence prior to the #MeToo movement is *Spotlight* (2015).[49] The film covers the Boston Globe reporters who successfully uncovered systemic sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. The film artfully tackles sexual violence as a systemic issue that is not simply the result of individual bad actors. In one scene, the Boston Globe's editor, Martin Baron (Liev Schreiber), says to the reporters, "We need to focus on the institution, not the individual priests . . . Show me that this was systemic, that it came from the top down."[50] *Spotlight*'s Best Picture win demonstrates how the Academy is willing to celebrate films that productively challenge

[48] *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, directed by Martin McDonagh (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017).
[49] *Spotlight*, directed by Tom McCarthy (Open Road Films, 2015).
[50] *Spotlight*, 1:11:58.

institutions as sites of sexual violence. However, I will illustrate how Hollywood is unwilling to do so when the institution in question is itself. While the Academy Awards does have a history of celebrating films that represent sexual violence, these films are oftentimes directed by men, frequently fail to examine the systemic issues that facilitate sexual violence, include graphic representations of rape on screen, or do not confront Hollywood as an institution directly.

These numerous examples demonstrate how the Academy's outward projections of inclusion do not hold up when looking at the institution's foundation. The institution's reaction to controversy is often surface-level and performative. As one *Hollywood Reporter* writer argues, "the Academy's current course is akin to putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound."[51] Without examining its longer exclusive histories, the Academy will continue to be reactive instead of proactive. The institution's lack of meaningful systemic change is reflected in its treatment of #MeToo films.

#MeToo on the Silver Screen

Despite the Academy's history of exclusive practices, #MeToo films provide some hopeful points of contrast. These films do replicate some shortcomings inherent in the #MeToo movement itself when it comes to relying on carceral forms of justice and not including marginalized identities. However, these films do manage to engage the #MeToo movement in thoughtful, nuanced ways. An analysis of *Promising Young Woman*, *Women Talking*, and *She Said* ultimately reveals how female filmmakers have represented sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo that contrasts their Oscar-winning predecessors. More specifically, I explore how these films engage in #MeToo discourses through consciousness raising, systemic critique, keeping

[51] Scott Feinberg, "Oscars: Academy's Invitation List is Well-Intentioned, But Misguided," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 28, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/oscars-academys-invitation-list-is-well-intentioned-but-misguided-1017509/.

sexual violence off screen, centering survivor voices, and expanding concepts of justice. However, media industries limit the productive representations in these films after their release.

Consciousness Raising: Bystander Complicity and Female Antiheroes

On a narrative level, these films successfully raise awareness about issues related to sexual violence through consciousness raising. As discussed in the introduction, consciousness raising is a form of feminist activism prominent in the 1970s where women would share their personal experiences to raise consciousness about issues that impact them. Although consciousness raising originally focused on small group interactions, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains that consciousness raising is not limited to this particular context.[52] Therefore, it is possible to engage in consciousness raising through the medium of film and television. Instead of participating in small face-to-face groups, these films serve as an avenue for filmmakers to share personal experiences with a large audience. Primarily, these films raise awareness about bystander complicity in the wake of #MeToo. The exposure of Weinstein not only revealed the despicable actions of individual men but also exposed the countless individuals who facilitated his wrongdoing.

The first #MeToo film I explore here that engages in consciousness raising is Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman*. The film follows medical school dropout Cassie (Carrie Mulligan) who feigns drunkenness at bars until she is picked up by lecherous men. After the men take her home, Cassie drops the drunken façade and asks the men their intentions. Cassie's motivations stem from her best friend Nina's rape and subsequent suicide seven years prior. When Cassie reconnects with an old classmate, Ryan (Bo Burnham), she learns of an upcoming bachelor party for Nina's rapist, Al (Christopher Lowell). After acquiring a video of Nina's rape,

[52] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59, no. 1 (1973): 74–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637309383155.

Cassie discovers Ryan's role as a bystander in the incident, pushing her to take her revenge. Posing as a stripper for Al's bachelor party, she confronts Nina's rapist at last. After a physical altercation, Al smothers Cassie to death with a pillow and burns her body. The film ends with Cassie posthumously orchestrating Al's arrest for her murder at his own wedding.

Promising Young Woman in particular targets men who claim to be "nice guys" throughout the film. The film's condemnation of nice guys is most evident through the character of Ryan. Ryan is portrayed as a funny, kind pediatrician who Cassie appears to have strong feelings for. However, after Cassie discovers a video recording of Nina's rape, she learns that Ryan was present at the event and did nothing to stop it. When Cassie confronts Ryan at work with the video, Ryan defends himself, saying he does not remember, he was just a kid, and he did not directly participate in the act. Cassie responds by sarcastically saying, "Poor Ryan, just an innocent bystander."[53] Actor Bo Burnham explains that this film targets the men who claim they are nothing like Harvey Weinstein, stating, "This movie rightfully extends that conversation and says that there are real gradient levels of being complicit and culpable, and it needs to be talked about and examined."[54] *Promising Young Woman* illustrates the way that outwardly presenting "nice guys" can be complicit in rape culture.

The men in the film are not the only ones who are complicit. One example is Nina and Cassie's former classmate, Madison (Alison Brie). Cassie invites Madison to lunch one day to confront her about Nina's rape. Throughout the lunch, Madison gets increasingly drunk. When Cassie brings up Nina, Madison defensively remarks, "Look, when you get that drunk, things

[53] *Promising Young Woman*, 1:22:11.
[54] Bryn Sandberg, "Making of 'Promising Young Woman': How Emerald Fennell Tackled Unbridled Femininity in a Dark Comedy," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 2, 2021, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/making-of-promising-young-woman-how-emerald-fennell-tackled-unbridled-femininity-in-a-dark-comedy-4121763/.

happen. Don't get blackout drunk all the time and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone you don't want to."[55] To expose Madison's hypocrisy, Cassie pays a man to take a drunk Madison to a prepaid hotel room. With no memory of what happened in the hotel, Madison leaves Cassie increasingly frantic voicemails, begging for information about what happened, leaving her questioning if she was drunkenly assaulted. There are several examples of women facilitating Harvey Weinstein's actions. In Farrow's report, he describes female employees at Miramax who "would initially join a meeting along with a woman Weinstein was interested in, but then Weinstein would dismiss them, leaving him alone with the woman."[56] In these ways, women can also be complicit bystanders when it comes to sexual violence.

While the film does engage in consciousness raising when it comes to bystander complicity, its methods in doing so are extreme and controversial. Several critics condemn Cassie's despicable actions throughout the film, calling her an "emotionally wounded sociopath" and a "supervillain."[57] As one reviewer argues about the film's portrayal of Madison, "The notion that the best payback for a person who has minimized someone else's rape in the past is to be terrorized by the false belief they themselves have been raped seems at best troubling and, at worst, sociopathic."[58] While there is certainly merit to these critiques, the film acts as an extreme form of consciousness raising, done so in the mediated, fictional realm of narrative filmmaking. The use of exaggeration to engage in critique in art is hardly anything new, and *Promising Young*

[55] *Promising Young Woman*, 0:39:16.
[56] Ronan Farrow, "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories," *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories.
[57] Peter Bradshaw, "*Promising Young Woman* Review – a Deathly Dark Satire of Gender Politics," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/apr/15/promising-young-woman-review-carey-mulligan; Katie Rife, "Promising Young Woman Is Eye Candy with a Razor Blade Inside," *AV Club*, December 14, 2020, https://www.avclub.com/promising-young-woman-is-eye-candy-with-a-razor-blade-i-1845873285.
[58] Dana Stevens, "*Promising Young Woman*'s Flaws Run Deeper Than its Ending," *Slate*, February 17, 2021, https://slate.com/culture/2021/02/promising-young-woman-movie-review-carey-mulligan-ending.html.

Woman uses its satiric impulses to force the audience to rethink sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo. The film most productively does this through the archetype of the antihero.

The antihero archetype is conventionally a masculine figure positioned against society in some way, with examples such as Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) and Don Draper in *Mad Men* (2007–2015).[59] However, scholars Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman look at the antihero as a *female* figure in contemporary television.[60] They define this figure "as a character who undercuts the common good either through explicitly criminal acts or through pointedly solipsistic behaviors."[61] Like the male antiheroes, female antiheroes are positioned against the social order. However, Hagelin and Silverman articulate that the female antihero's gender "transforms this dynamic" in the way that "women are not expected to rescue society, as men are; they are expected to showcase it, to demonstrate its values and commitments."[62] This tension tends to make audiences uncomfortable with female antiheroes. What makes the female antihero significant is the way she can be an icon of resistance. The Academy has a history of awarding male antiheroes in films such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, *Vice* (2018), *Joker* (2019), and, most recently, *Oppenheimer* (2023).[63] While the institution has increasingly nominated female antiheroes in recent years, with examples such as *Tár* (2022), *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), and *Poor Things* (2023), films with male antiheroes tend to win Best Picture while female antihero films are restricted to just being

[59] *Breaking Bad*, created by Vince Gilligan (AMC, 2008–2013); *Mad Men*, created by Matthew Weiner (AMC, 2007–2015).
[60] Sarah Hagelin and Gillian D. Silverman, *The New Female Antihero: The Disruptive Women of Twenty-First-Century US Television*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).
[61] Hagelin and Silverman, 2.
[62] Hagelin and Silverman, 2.
[63] *The Wolf of Wall Street*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Paramount Pictures, 2013); *Birdman*; *Vice*, directed by Adam McKay (Annapurna Pictures, 2018); *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019); *Oppenheimer*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Universal Pictures, 2023).

nominated.[64] This gap in awards undercuts the female antihero's potential to challenge sexual violence in a rape culture.

Cassie in *Promising Young Woman* fits Hagelin and Silverman's description of the female antihero in many ways. She is positioned against society's conventional model for success. She drops out of medical school, works as a barista, and lives with her parents. She is incapable of fostering friendships and romantic relationships in the wake of Nina's death. She constantly lies about her whereabouts to the other characters. *Promising Young Woman* leverages the female antihero archetype to force audiences to rethink the status quo in a rape culture. Director Fennell explains that Cassie's name comes from Cassandra from Greek mythology whose accurate predictions were never believed.[65] As one reviewer argues of Cassie, "She has the clarity and prophecy of her priestess namesake; it's not her fault that no one is listening."[66] Ultimately, Cassie's extreme antihero tendencies act as a mechanism to force people to listen in a rape culture.

Women Talking also confronts bystander complicity in the wake of #MeToo. Based on the bestselling Miriam Toews novel, *Women Talking* depicts a group of women in a Mennonite community in 2010 who discover that they have been drugged and raped by men in the community continuously for years. While the men are imprisoned in a nearby town, representatives from three families in the community hold a series of meetings to decide if the women in the colony should stay and forgive their attackers, stay and fight their attackers, or

[64] *Tár*, directed by Tod Field (Focus Features, 2022); *Anatomy of a Fall*, directed by Justine Triet (Le Pacte, 2023); *Poor Things*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Searchlight Pictures, 2023).
[65] Kate Aurthur and Matt Donnelly, "'Promising Young Woman': How Carey Mulligan and Emerald Fennell Made the Most Audacious, Feminist Movie of the Year," *Variety*, December 9, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/promising-young-woman-carey-mulligan-emerald-fennell-1234848775/.
[66] Carmen Maria Machado, "How 'Promising Young Woman' Refigures the Rape-Revenge Movie," *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/how-promising-young-woman-refigures-the-rape-revenge-movie.

leave to start over somewhere else. Some of the women include Ona (Rooney Mara), an unmarried woman who has become pregnant from the attacks, her sister Salome (Claire Foy) who represents unbridled rage towards the attackers, and Mariche (Jessie Buckley) who has been continually abused by her husband at home. The older generation is represented by Ona and Salome's mother Agata (Judith Ivory) and Mariche's mother Greta (Sheila McCarthy). Finally, the younger generation consists of Neitje (Liv McNeil) and Autje (Kate Hallett), the latter acting as the narrator of the film speaking to Ona's unborn child. The community's school teacher, August (Ben Wishaw), agrees to take notes during the women's meeting. After deliberating the entire film, most women choose to leave to provide a better life for themselves and their children.

Women Talking importantly takes a different approach to *Promising Young Woman* when it comes to consciousness raising. Instead of a sadistic "gotcha" moment facilitated by Cassie, *Women Talking* instead portrays women being complicit in violence through intergenerational forgiveness. Throughout the film, the other women allude to Mariche being abused by her husband at home. In one pivotal moment, Mariche lashes out, saying, "Who are any of you to pretend I have had a choice?"[67] Here, Mariche's mother Greta approaches her and says, "I am also sorry, Mariche. I didn't try to protect you or your children from Klaas and what you say is true. You had no choice. You forgave him, again and again, as you were told to. As I told you to. I'm sorry."[68] This conversation between mother and daughter not only acknowledges women's role in participating in harmful patriarchal systems but paves a way forward grounded in forgiveness. Both *Promising Young Woman* and *Women Talking* engage in consciousness raising through their representations of bystander complicity.

[67] *Women Talking*, 1:04:18.
[68] *Women Talking*, 1:04:41.

Systemic Critique: Institutions and Cultures as Sites of Violence

These films' critique also extends to the larger institutions that facilitate sexual violence. Films such as *American Beauty* and *An Education* represent issues like grooming and abuse as the acts of individual characters and fail to zoom out to larger questions of power at an institutional and cultural level. When it comes to consciousness raising, Campbell makes clear that "the personal be transcended by moving toward the structural, that the individual be transcended by moving toward the political."[69] Films have the potential to operate in the same way. While individual stories are an inherent part of narrative filmmaking, it is possible for individual characters and storylines to be representative of larger structural issues. #MeToo films accomplish this transcendence through their representation of institutions that facilitate sexual violence.

Promising Young Woman critiques the legal system through Cassie's confrontation with the lawyer who got Nina's case dismissed, Jordan (Alfred Molina). When Cassie knocks on Jordan's door, she explains, "I'm afraid it's your day of reckoning" to which he replies, "I've been waiting."[70] When Cassie asks him about Nina, Jordan responds that he remembers her. He explains that he had an epiphany one day and that he will never forgive himself for all the perpetrators he helped over the years. Jordan stands up suddenly and shouts, "I got a bonus for every settlement out of court. I got another bonus for every charge dropped. We all did."[71] This scene exemplifies the institutional factors that facilitate sexual violence in the legal system, such as financial incentives for lawyers.

[69] Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation," 83.
[70] *Promising Young Woman*, 0:55:46.
[71] *Promising Young Woman*, 0:57:44.

Cassie additionally confronts Elizabeth Walker (Connie Britton), the dean at the medical school who dismissed Nina's rape case. Before she meets with Dean Walker, Cassie lures Dean Walker's teenage daughter to a diner under the pretense she would meet her favorite band. When Cassie confronts Dean Walker about Nina's case, she defends herself for not taking action at the time, saying, "What would you have me do? Ruin a young man's life every time we get an accusation like this?"[72] This parallel to Brock Turner is unmistakable, as his future and potential were continually evoked at his trial.[73] After this defense, Cassie tells the dean that her daughter is alone in a room full of college boys. After Dean Walker becomes increasingly concerned for her daughter's safety, Cassie reveals that the daughter is safe at a diner. When the dean admits that Cassie has made her point, Cassie dryly remarks, "Look how easy it was. I guess you just had to think about it in the right way. I guess it feels different when it's someone you love."[74] This scene ultimately indicts academia as an institution that enables sexual violence. Even though sexual assault has proven to be a prolific problem on university campuses, universities as an institution and Title IX offices often fail to provide adequate justice for survivors.[75]

Women Talking is similarly at its most powerful when it discusses sexual violence as a systemic issue rather than a result of individual action. The film accomplishes this by using a small, isolated religious community as a microcosm for larger patriarchal systems. In one scene when the women discuss whether or not the men are guilty, Ona notes, "We do know that the conditions have been created by men and that these attacks have been made possible because of the circumstances of the colony and those circumstances have been created and ordained by the

[72] *Promising Young Woman*, 0:46:19.
[73] See Amanda N. Brand, "White Masculine Abjection, Victimhood, and Disavowal in Rape Culture: Reconstituting Brock Turner," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 108, no. 2 (2022): 148–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2022.2053566.
[74] *Promising Young Woman*, 0:48:43.
[75] See Nicole Bedera, "I Can Protect His Future, but She Can't Be Helped: Himpathy and Hysteria in Administrator Rationalizations of Institutional Betrayal," *The Journal of Higher Education* 95, no. 1 (2024): 30–53.

men."[76] After this remark, Mariche asks, "But wait, aren't you suggesting that the attackers are as much victims as the victims of the attacks? That all of us, men and women are victims of the circumstances from which the colony has been created?" to which Ona replies, "In a sense, yes."[77] This exchange importantly discusses how the attacks were not necessarily the result of individual actions, but were fostered by an entire community and culture.

She Said also gestures towards broader systems that facilitate sexual violence. The film is a dramatic retelling of the Harvey Weinstein investigation by Jodi Kantor (Zoe Kazan) and Megan Twohey (Carey Mulligan) for *The New York Times*. Together, these journalists speak to a number of Weinstein's victims, including high-profile actresses and former Miramax employees. However, no one initially agrees to go on the record, fearing career repercussions or NDA breaches. At the *Times* office, Weinstein and his lawyers go back and forth with the reporters and their editors about giving a statement as they prepare to publish their article. While Kantor and Twohey struggle with the fact that none of the women have chosen to go on the record, two of Weinstein's victims, Ashley Judd (Ashley Judd) and Laura Madden (Jennifer Ehle), agree to be listed by name at the very last moment. The film ends with the *Times* publishing the story.

She Said engages in systemic critique by acknowledging the institutional barriers that prevent women from speaking out. As one former Weinstein employee, Zelda Perkins (Samantha Morton), explains, "This is bigger than Weinstein. This is about the system protecting abusers."[78] The film acknowledges the legal system as a significant systemic issue for survivors. In a conversation between the reporters and their editors, Kantor and Twohey describe the issues they are running into with the NDAs. When Kantor explains that the attorneys who represent the

[76] *Women Talking*, 0:20:02.
[77] *Women Talking*, 0:20:14.
[78] *She Said*, 1:06:01.

victims can profit nearly 40% from NDA settlements, one of the editors responds, "That's a big incentive to keep that system going."[79] It is scenes like this where *She Said* productively zooms out beyond Weinstein to consider the institutional barriers that contribute to the silencing of survivors of sexual harassment and assault. In these ways, #MeToo films largely use individual stories to engage in structural critique. However, I will articulate how the Academy fails to celebrate these films for these effective representations by shutting *She Said* out of the race.

Offscreen Violence: Representing the Effects of Trauma

These specific #MeToo films importantly do not represent sexual violence on screen. Instead, the films portray the survivors' responses in the aftermath of violence. As discussed, the Oscars have historically celebrated graphic representations of sexual violence with examples like *12 Years a Slave*. Questions of how rape should be represented in film and television have been a central question for media scholars over the years. In exploitation films in the 1970s, Carol Clover argues that representations of rape run the risk of serving "less than savory purposes for the male viewer."[80] In this way, audiences can potentially eroticize representations of rape. Onscreen representations of sexual violence can also potentially retraumatize survivors. While viewing representations of rape is not equivalent to experiencing rape, Sarah Projansky argues "all representations of rape necessarily contribute to the discursive existence of rape and that graphic representations do so in particularly powerful ways."[81] Keeping sexual violence off screen is a useful strategy for refocusing narratives on the impact of sexual violence without the graphic representations themselves.

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[79] *She Said*, 0:42:13.
[80] Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 144.
[81] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), 96.

Women Talking is very purposeful in not representing the acts of sexual violence. Instead, the film refocuses attention to the women and how they confront their trauma. As director Sarah Polley explains, "I have rarely found that sexual assault captured on film has been additive or necessary to a film . . . I think in the case of this film, the important thing was the impact that those assaults had on these women, how they process it, how they move through it, how they move out of harm's way—not the assaults themselves."[82] This focus on the aftermath of violence is immediately apparent in the very first shot of *Women Talking*—a bird's eye shot of Ona lying in bed with bruises on her thighs (see figure 3). Later in the film, this image is used again, this time accompanied by Autje's voiceover, "Many of us saw ourselves from above. I'm not sure

Figure 3: Bird's Eye Shot in Women Talking

if it was God and we were seeing ourselves through his eyes or if we just couldn't be there in our own bodies."[83] This bird's eye shot and accompanying dialogue capture a common response to trauma: dissociation. Individuals who experience trauma may feel a disconnect from their bodies

[82] Sydney Odman, "Why 'Women Talking' Director Sarah Polley Opted Not to Portray Sexual Violence Onscreen," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 18, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/women-talking-director-sarah-polley-safe-environment-on-set-1235265110/.
[83] *Women Talking*, 0:11:51.

during or after traumatic events.[84] By keeping gratuitous violence out of frame, *Women Talking* instead centers survivor experience.

She Said similarly strategically keeps all representations of sexual violence off screen. However, Weinstein's abuses are not completely removed from the film. Instead, the film relies on pairing voiceover descriptions of events over the images of empty hotel rooms and offices where Weinstein conducted his abuses. In one scene, the film uses real audio captured by the NYPD when Ambra Gutierrez wore a wire to confront Weinstein about groping her in 2016. His voice echoes over slow dolly shots of various dimly lit hotel hallways. The patterned carpet and cinematographic framing of one hallway is reminiscent of horror film *The Shining* (1980), further driving home the horrifying nature of Weinstein's crimes (see figure 4).[85] Later, Kantor

Figure 4: An Empty Hotel Hallway in She Said

[84] Charles R. Marmar et al., "Peritraumatic Dissociation and Posttraumatic Stress in Male Vietnam Theater Veterans," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 151, no. 6 (1994): 902–7.
[85] *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (Warner Bros., 1980).

meets Laura Madden at a beach in Cornwall where she tells her story working as a production assistant for Miramax in the 1990s. When Laura begins to describe her assault in detail, the scene cuts from the bright beach scene to a dark, empty hotel room. When Laura explains that Weinstein masturbated on her in the shower, the camera zooms in on water running in an empty shower. By emptying these hotel scenes of people, the film allows the voices that speak to personal experience to become the sole focus. This cinematic choice forces audiences to confront the realities of these acts without the potential of traumatic or eroticizing depictions of sexual violence.

These scenes fit into Stephanie R. Larson's conception of visceral rhetorics.[86] Larson defines visceral rhetorics as a "bone-deep, felt sense of communication that transpires from a position of flesh and wound in addition to the processes that seek to erase the bodies communicating from this very perspective."[87] This type of rhetoric is *felt*, as it demands a sort of bodily response. This form of rhetoric is particularly useful when fighting sexual violence, as "centering the body and embodiment exposes how and in what ways publics fail to take rape seriously, how simply being in public puts some bodies at greater risk, how the violence of rape culture gets disregarded in everyday life."[88] Ultimately, visceral rhetorics confront rape culture and encourage social change through the invocation of visceral bodily responses. The imagery of the hotel rooms and offices paired with the detailed voiceovers participates in visceral rhetorics in the way that "bodies and their residue of feeling—residue layered with historical, material, and cultural notions of violence—can serve to generate a bodily intensity in audiences with

[86] Stephanie R. Larson, *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021).
[87] Larson, 5.
[88] Larson, 5.

powerful potential for feminist protest."[89] This particular film engages in visceral rhetorics through its unconventional representation of sexual violence, that is, by not literally representing the acts at all.

Centering Survivors: Keeping Perpetrators Out of Frame

Beyond keeping sexual violence off screen, these films center the voices of survivors by keeping perpetrators out of frame. Apart from August and the community's children, men are entirely absent in *Women Talking*. In one shot as the men leave the colony, the men's torsos occupy the frame's foreground as the women watch on in the background (see figure 5). This

Figure 5: Men Kept Out of Frame in Women Talking

decision centers the entire film on women and their experiences. This is further driven home by a last-minute editing decision. The original novel is told from the perspective of August and the notes he took from the women's meeting. The film set out to do the same, even recording Ben Wishaw's voiceover as the film's narrator. However, Polley and editor Christopher Donaldson chose to rerecord the voiceover with Autje's voice instead. As Polley explains about this deviation from the novel, "we needed a female voice who had experienced these things telling us

[89] Larson, 5.

the story."[90] *Women Talking* ultimately keeps survivors and their experiences centered by keeping perpetrators largely out of frame.

She Said resembles *Women Talking* in the sense that perpetrators are largely kept off screen. Most importantly, Weinstein is not physically represented until the very end of the film. While we hear his voice in recordings or phone calls, it is not until Weinstein and his team enter the *Times* building that he occupies the frame. Even then, his face is never visible. His back is always turned to the camera, or his face is obscured by another actor. In a scene where Weinstein and his legal team loudly berate Twohey in a meeting about the story, the camera is placed outside of a glass room. We only see the back of Weinstein's head as the camera slowly zooms onto Twohey's stoic face (see figure 6). While the film may be centered around Weinstein

Figure 6: A Faceless Weinstein in She Said

[90] Jenelle Riley, "How Sarah Polley Infused 'Women Talking' with Hope, Humor and Reasonable Working Conditions," *Variety*, December 23, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/awards/awards/sarah-polley-women-talking-humor-hope-1235466694/.

in some ways, *She Said* refuses to give Weinstein a face. While the Academy has a history of giving perpetrators of sexual violence a voice on the awards stage, these films deplatform perpetrators by keeping them out of frame.

Justice for Survivors: Carceral Forms of Justice and Beyond

All three films explore different avenues for providing justice for survivors of sexual violence, both inside and outside of established institutions. *Promising Young Women* is perhaps the most problematic in its enactment of justice for survivors by centering on carceral forms of justice. In doing so, the film assumes sexual violence can be handled by existing law enforcement institutions. While attending Al's wedding, Ryan gets a scheduled text from Cassie, who has already been killed. In a parallel flashback, the lawyer Jordan receives a package in the mail at his home from Cassie with instructions on what to do in the event of her disappearance. Ryan looks at Cassie's text that reads, "You didn't think this was the end, did you?" as a host of police cars pull up to the wedding and arrest Al.[91] This scene obscures the way police have continuously failed to enact justice on behalf of sexual violence survivors by presenting the police as the saviors at the end of the film.

Like *Promising Young Woman*, *She Said* relies on the legal system to enact justice on behalf of survivors. In the film's end title cards, it triumphantly reads, "In February 2020, Harvey Weinstein was convicted of rape and sexual assault in New York. He is serving a 23-year sentence."[92] While the film could have not predicted this, that specific charge was overturned in 2024.[93] Extratextual discourses surrounding the film affirm this attitude. On a red carpet event for the film, actress Patricia Clarkson noted, "Look at us, we're all in power. It's women from

[91] *Promising Young Woman*, 1:46:07.
[92] *She Said*, 2:02:31.
[93] Maria Cramer, "Harvey Weinstein's New York Conviction is Overturned," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/04/25/nyregion/harvey-weinstein-appeal.

beginning to end and we are powerful, we're all beautiful, we're all strong, we're all in a better place. And he's in jail."[94] The sentiment that Weinstein in jail is the end of the road obscures the work there is still left to do when it comes to combatting sexual violence in media industries.

While *Promising Young Woman* and *She Said* rely on carceral forms of justice, *Women Talking* instead centers on moving on from trauma. Some characters who initially want to stay and fight change their minds over the course of the film. In one argument for staying to fight, Greta contends, "We have been preyed upon like animals. Maybe we should respond like animals."[95] Before they are taken to a nearby town, Salome attempts to attack the men with a scythe until she is held down by other members of the community. She is the character that is most vocal about the stay and fight option during the women's discussions. Despite this initial attitude, Salome eventually changes her mind. After reflecting on what would practically happen if she chose to stay with tears in her eyes, Salome says, "I will become a murderer if I stay."[96] Agata replies to her, "Salome, if you will become a murderer by staying here in the colony, side by side with the men who are responsible for the attacks, then you must, to protect your own soul, leave the colony."[97] In these scenes, the film distances itself from violence as a form of catharsis and instead focuses on distance and agency.

The film additionally does not position leaving and forgiveness as incompatible. After Ona suggests that forgiveness is better than revenge, Mariche asks if Ona is suggesting the women stay and forgive the men. Ona responds, "We cannot forgive because we are forced to, but with some distance perhaps I am able to understand how these crimes may have occurred and

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[94] Kirsten Chuba, "Carey Mulligan, 'She Said' Team on Casting Actual Survivors and Releasing Amid Weinstein's L.A. Trial: 'We're All in a Better Place and He's in Jail,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 5, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/carey-mulligan-she-said-survivors-weinstein-trial-1235256257/.
[95] *Women Talking*, 0:09:45.
[96] *Women Talking*, 0:53:40.
[97] *Women Talking*, 0:54:58.

with that distance maybe I am able to pity these men, perhaps forgive them and even love them. Not fighting, but moving."[98] The final frames of the film reinforce this message of healing and moving forward. After the camera pans up from the long line of women leaving the colony, the film cuts from the horizon line to Ona's newborn baby, suggesting the power in new beginnings. The end of *Women Talking* ultimately provides survivors a sense of catharsis and closure outside of established institutions and carceral forms of justice.

#MeToo Films on the Oscars Stage

I have illustrated how these #MeToo films effectively center survivors of sexual violence by representing bystander complicity, the effects of trauma, and alternative forms of justice. However, media industries limit these #MeToo films' messaging through how they are produced, marketed, reviewed, and awarded. For example, both *Women Talking* and *She Said* were produced by Plan B Entertainment where actor Brad Pitt serves as CEO. The company has a consistent history of producing films centering on underrepresented groups, with examples such as *Moonlight*, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (2019), *Minari* (2022), and more.[99] While putting money where your mouth is can certainly be an admirable enterprise for privileged white men in Hollywood, Brad Pitt's involvement in the film is complicated when considering his personal life. In 2022, Angelina Jolie claimed in a lawsuit that ex-husband Pitt assaulted her and their children on a private plane in an altercation.[100] Considering this alleged abuse, Brad Pitt's name attached to #MeToo films sits at odds with the messaging of the films themselves. An example of a film choosing to distance itself from

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[98] *Women Talking*, 0:58:45.
[99] *If Beale Street Could Talk*, directed by Barry Jenkins (Annapurna Pictures, 2018); *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, directed by Joe Talbot (A24, 2019); *Minari*, directed by Lee Isaac Chung (A24, 2020).
[100] Winston Cho, "Angelina Jolie Claims in Lawsuit That Brad Pitt Physically Abused Her and Their Children During 2016 Altercation," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 4, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/angelina-jolie-claims-in-lawsuit-that-brad-pitt-physically-abused-her-and-their-children-during-2016-altercation-1235233551/.

producers accused of abuse is *Wind River* (2017), a film about the rape and murder of Indigenous women.[101] The film was released theatrically by the Weinstein Company in 2017. However, when the Weinstein allegations hit the headlines, director and writer Taylor Sheridan struck a deal with the Weinstein Company to strip the name "Weinstein" from the film, with Lionsgate taking over distribution.[102] The deal additionally ensured that all future profits from the film would be donated to the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center.[103] As Sheridan explains, "I can't have a film about violence against women silenced by the perpetrator of that very act."[104] The names that appear in the credits of these films matter. Ultimately, Brad Pitt's involvement in numerous #MeToo Media texts calls into question where we draw the line when it comes to accepting abuse in Hollywood.

These #MeToo films are additionally devalued in their reception. For example, *Variety* had to issue an apology for a review of *Promising Young Woman* that suggested Carey Mulligan was not "hot" enough to pull off the role in the film.[105] In the review, David Harvey articulates that "Mulligan, a fine actress, seems a bit of an odd choice as this admittedly many-layered apparent femme fatale—Margot Robbie is a producer here, and one can (perhaps too easily) imagine the role might once have been intended for her."[106] Mulligan explains feeling shocked by the review, saying, "I was like, 'Really? For this film, you're going to write something that is

[101] *Wind River*, directed by Taylor Sheridan (The Weinstein Company, 2017).
[102] Mike Fleming Jr., "Weinstein Name Stripped From 'Wind River' Movie Ahead of Oscar Push," *Deadline*, October 25, 2017, https://deadline.com/2017/10/wind-river-strips-weinstein-company-name-oscar-campaign-tunica-biloxi-tribe-financiers-taylor-sheridan-jeremy-renner-elizabeth-olsen-harvey-weinstein-1202194393/.
[103] Rebecca Keegan, "How Taylor Sheridan Wrestled Wind River Back from the Weinstein Company," *Vanity Fair*, December 1, 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/wind-river-oscar-campaign.
[104] Keegan.
[105] Kate Aurthur, "Carey Mulligan Responds to Variety's Apology for 'Promising Young Woman' Review," *Variety*, January 26, 2021, https://variety.com/2021/film/news/carey-mulligan-promising-young-woman-variety-review-1234891885/.
[106] Dennis Harvey, "'Promising Young Woman': Film Review," *Variety*, January 26, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/promising-young-woman-review-1203480660/.

so transparent? Now? In 2020?' I just couldn't believe it."[107] The article now features a disclaimer at the top of the review (see figure 7). Even in films that explicitly challenge sexual violence, women still find themselves held up to antiquated Hollywood beauty standards.

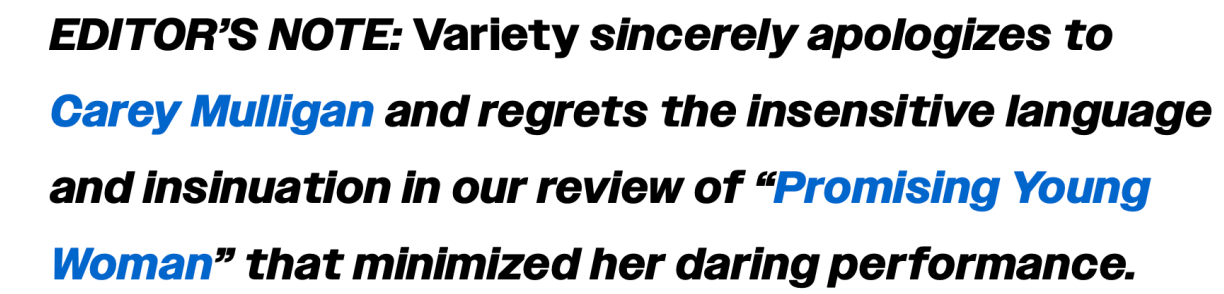

Figure 7: Variety's *Apology to Carey Mulligan*

Most central to this chapter's argument, these films were devalued on the Oscars stage in several ways. First, the #MeToo films nominated at the Oscars are limited to the experiences of white women. Survivors of sexual violence who are men, gender non-conforming, queer, disabled, or not white are not represented. Even these films' titles suggest women are the only demographic impacted by sexual violence: *Promising Young* Woman, Women *Talking*, She *Said*. This shortcoming reflects the lack of intersectionality in the Academy itself. As discussed, the Academy has a long history of maintaining white, male power. Even when the Academy ventures to nominate #MeToo films, it only does so in comfortable ways that reinforce the status quo. As Larson articulates, "the typified victim of rape is always imagined as white and female in public discourse, foreclosing a broader awareness of the range of bodies subject to sexual

[107] Aurthur, "Carey Mulligan Responds."

violence."[108] The Academy ultimately reaffirms the "ideal victim" trope and excludes those more susceptible to sexual violence through its nominations of white-centric #MeToo films.

Additionally, the types of awards these films win ultimately maintain the status quo when it comes to women's work in Hollywood. The only prize #MeToo films have ever taken home is in the screenwriting category—Best Original Screenplay for *Promising Young Woman* and Best Adapted Screenplay for *Women Talking*. While Emerald Fennell secured a directing nomination in her year, Sarah Polley ended up not being nominated for directing at all. Writing appears to be the only arena in which the Academy feels comfortable awarding #MeToo films, even when they are up for Best Picture. This is not a surprise, considering that directing has proven to be inaccessible to women and screenwriting has been a rare arena in the film industry in which women have historically been allowed to participate.[109] *Promising Young Women* and *Women Talking* at the Oscars reveals the ways Hollywood is ready to somewhat acknowledge the #MeToo movement but only in comfortable ways that reinforce existing gendered stereotypes around women's work.

She Said stands apart from *Promising Young Woman* and *Women Talking* in the sense that it was not nominated for a single category at the Oscars, despite being well primed for at least a handful of nominations. Carey Mulligan is no stranger to the Oscar stage as an actress, earning three total nominations throughout her career. The film even strategically split Zoe Kazan and Carey Mulligan's Oscar campaign, putting Kazan up for lead actress and Mulligan in the more open supporting actress category to increase Mulligan's chances at a nomination.[110]

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[108] Larson, *What It Feels Like*, 9–10.
[109] See Hill, *Never Done*.
[110] Clayton Davis, "Zoe Kazan and Carey Mulligan Split Oscar Campaigns for 'She Said,'" *Variety*, October 18, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/awards/awards/she-said-oscars-zoe-kazan-lead-carey-mulligan-supporting-actress-1235407448/.

Films based on real events, and, more specifically, investigative journalism films have a strong history of doing well at the Oscars, as evidenced by Best Picture winner *Spotlight*. The parallels between *Spotlight* and *She Said* are unmistakable. They are both investigative journalism films centered on uncovering systemic sexual abuse. They begin with reporters following a small tip that leads them to a much larger story. They both represent the painstaking process journalists go through to build the story. They both represent doors being slammed in faces, phone calls abruptly ended, and legal roadblocks to securing documents. They both portray journalists struggling to have just enough information to properly publish the story. With so many similarities, how did one film accomplish a Best Picture win while the other did not secure a single nomination?

Spotlight ultimately succeeded at the Oscars because it explored sexual violence in an institution removed from the Academy itself. *She Said*'s focus on Hollywood appears to be the film's primary hurdle. As one *Variety* writer predicted, the film presents "a meta viewing experience that some industry voters may find too real for comfort."[111] Because the Academy Awards act as an arena for self-celebration, there does not appear to be a space for meaningful, difficult self-reflection when it comes to the industry's complicity in enabling abusers such as Weinstein. While the industry is willing to acknowledge a handful of #MeToo films with screenwriting nods, *She Said* reveals that stories about Weinstein himself still hit too close to home for Academy voters.

Conclusion: Time's Up?

In an unprecedented action, the Academy voted to expel Harvey Weinstein in an emergency session less than two weeks after he was exposed as a sexual predator in October

[111] Clayton Davis, "Will 'She Said' Hit Too Close to Home for Oscar Voters?," *Variety*, October 20, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/awards/awards/oscars-she-said-women-talking-weinstein-1235409746/.

2017.[112] However, expelling Weinstein as a member is simply not enough to unearth the deeply rooted inequalities at the heart of the institution. While the Academy feels comfortable enough to acknowledge #MeToo films in limited ways, *She Said* exemplifies how Hollywood is simply not ready to engage in literal reflections on the movement. Despite these films' effective representations of #MeToo discourses, Hollywood continues to limit their messaging at the production and reception level. The Academy Awards' outward projections of inclusion ultimately fail to challenge where the inequalities stem from in the first place—within itself.

With the Academy's continual failures to confront its exclusionary past, Hollywood may need to look elsewhere to enact institutional change. One example of an outside initiative aimed at challenging sexual violence within media industries is the Time's Up organization. One month after the Weinstein allegations, the organization Alianza Nacional de Campesinas composed of over 700,000 farmworkers wrote an open letter in support of women in Hollywood.[113] As a response, hundreds of women in Hollywood, including actresses, comedians, directors, and more, formed a movement they called "Time's Up," writing an open letter in response. [114] By the beginning of 2018, the newly founded Time's Up organization proposed an initiative to fight gender inequality and sexual harassment. This initiative is composed of four central action items: (1) forming of a donation-based legal defense fund to protect less privileged women reporting sexual harassment, (2) legal efforts to stop the use of NDAs to silence victims and penalize companies who tolerate harassment, (3) a drive for talent agencies and studios to achieve gender

[112] Brooks Barnes, "Harvey Weinstein Ousted from Motion Picture Academy," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/business/media/harvey-weinstein-ousted-from-motion-picture-academy.html.
[113] "700,000 Female Farmworkers Say They Stand with Hollywood Actors Against Sexual Assault," *TIME*, November 10, 2017, https://time.com/5018813/farmworkers-solidarity-hollywood-sexual-assault/.
[114] "Open Letter from Time's Up," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/01/arts/02women-letter.html.

parity, and (4) asking celebrities attending the Golden Globes to wear black on the red carpet.[115] Despite these admirable goals, the organization's eventual downfall calls into question the efficacy of Hollywood inclusion initiatives.

While the Time's Up's legal defense fund proved to be the most successful branch, eventually linking 4,000 sexual harassment victims with legal representation, the Time's Up organization ultimately imploded within five years of its inception.[116] The organization went through three CEOs in three years.[117] In early 2019, Lisa Borders resigned after being on the job for less than four months after her son was accused of sexual assault.[118] Another scandal rocked Time's Up in August 2021, when it was revealed that Time's Up board chair Roberta Kaplan advised New York Governor Andrew Cuomo when he was accused of sexual harassment.[119] This final scandal finally led to Tina Tchen resigning as CEO and the majority of the Time's Up staff being laid off.[120] Time's Up officially ceased all operations in January 2023.[121]

Ultimately, this example reveals that initiatives simply are not enough when it comes to confronting exclusion and abuse within media industries. The implosion of Time's Up and the Academy's haphazard efforts towards diversity are examples of Sarah Banet-Weiser's

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[115] Cara Buckley, "Powerful Hollywood Women Unveil Anti-Harassment Action Plan," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/movies/times-up-hollywood-women-sexual-harassment.html.
[116] "Time's Up Legal Defense Fund Has Linked 4,000 Alleged Sexual Harassment Victims with Attorneys," *CBS News*, January 8, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/times-up-legal-defense-fund-has-linked-4000-alleged-sexual-harassment-victims-with-attorneys/.
[117] Rebecca Keegan, "#MeToo, Five Years Later: Why Time's Up Imploded," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 3, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/metoo-five-years-later-times-up-1235228096/.
[118] Cara Buckley, "Lisa Borders, CEO of Time's Up Anti-Harassment Group, Resigns," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/arts/lisa-borders-ceo-of-times-up-anti-harassment-group-resigns.html; Sharon Waxman, "Time's Up CEO Lisa Borders Resigned After Son Accused of Sexual Assault," *TheWrap*, February 22, 2019, https://www.thewrap.com/times-up-ceo-lisa-borders-resigned-after-sons-sexual-misconduct-allegation/.
[119] Jodi Kantor and Michael Gold, "Roberta Kaplan, Who Aided Cuomo, Resigns from Time's Up," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/09/nyregion/roberta-kaplan-times-up-cuomo.html.
[120] Keegan, "#MeToo, Five Years Later."
[121] J. Kim Murphy, "Time's Up to Cease Operations by End of January, Devote Remaining Resources to Legal Fund," *Variety*, January 22, 2023, https://variety.com/2023/biz/news/times-up-cease-operations-me-too-movement-1235498002/.

conception of popular feminism.[122] She argues that "Popular feminism exists along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are more obscured."[123] In popular feminism, feminist activism is performative, surface level, and does not interrogate the roots of systemic issues at the foundation of institutions. Even though Time's Up was founded as a response to working-class women, the movement ultimately failed to be truly intersectional. One example of this is the organization's focus on celebrities and their fashion at the Golden Globes. As Caitlin E. Lawson articulates about Time's Up, "bandwagoning on the latest celebrity feminist trend can be an easy way for some stars to garner nominal solidarity capital with minimal effort, making no attempt to convert their solidarity capital into meaningful change."[124] Despite outward projections of progressive politics, the inclusive efforts of Time's Up and the Academy Awards remain surface-level. Ultimately, the treatment of #MeToo films at the Academy Awards reveals how mainstream Hollywood fails to confront its own past. While the Academy Awards are limited in their treatment of #MeToo films, independent cinema offers an alternative path for the #MeToo Media Cycle.

[122] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
[123] Banet-Weiser, 4.
[124] Caitlin E. Lawson, "Fame, Feminism, and Failure: Lessons from the Rise and Fall of Time's Up," *Women's Studies in Communication* 47, no. 2 (2024): 193, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2331176.

CHAPTER TWO: #METOO MEDIA AND THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

> Sundance as an institution never contributed to [Harvey Weinstein's] behavior. We have long-standing values of respect and tolerance. We support artists. We stand for diversity and creativity—a lot of things that are in direct opposition to that kind of behavior. I do want to be firm about that. Of course, these things sickened us and happened during our festival, but they were nothing we were aware of at the time.
>
> –Sundance Institute executive director Keri Putnam[1]

At the Sundance Film Festival in 1989, Harvey Weinstein himself would change the course of independent cinema forever with Miramax's purchase of the distribution rights to Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989).[2] Many scholars and industry insiders have credited Weinstein as a champion for independent cinema through his work at Miramax.[3] As a tentpole figure in independent cinema, Weinstein leveraged his position of power to abuse women, with actress Rose McGowan and screenwriter and actress Louisette Geiss both accusing Weinstein of sexually assaulting them at the Sundance Film Festival.[4] This abuse sits at odds with Sundance's exhibition of films and documentaries centered on #MeToo discourses and sexual violence, including *The Tale* (2018), *Eighth Grade* (2018), *The Assistant* (2019), *Late Night* (2019), *Leaving Neverland* (2019), *Untouchable* (2020), *On the Record* (2020), and *Cat*

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[1] Gregg Kilday, "Sundance: Robert Redford Calls #MeToo and Time's Up Movements 'A Tipping Point,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 18, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/sundance-robert-redford-calls-metoo-times-up-movements-a-tipping-point-1075798/.

[2] *sex, lies, and videotape*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (Miramax Films, 1989).

[3] See John Berra, *Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2008); Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999); Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011); Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, Second Edition (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

[4] Ashley Cullins, "Harvey Weinstein Accused of Sexual Harassment by Actress at Sundance Film Festival," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 10, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/harvey-weinstein-accused-sexual-harassment-by-actress-at-sundance-film-festival-1047373/; Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html.

Person (2023).[5] In these ways, film festivals are simultaneously sites of sexual violence and exhibition venues for #MeToo Media.

Confronting this contradiction, this chapter analyzes how the Sundance Film Festival comes to terms with the #MeToo movement. On the surface, Sundance seems like the ideal venue for #MeToo Media. Independent films have a reputation for confronting difficult social issues that mainstream Hollywood may be unwilling or unequipped to tackle. Additionally, Sundance has a long history of championing marginalized talent, especially when it comes to female directors. However, I argue that the Sundance Film Festival ultimately (1) disenfranchises female directors through its canonization of white male auteurs, (2) reinforces institutional norms by reducing the #MeToo movement to a marketing tool, and (3) upholds dominant ideologies through individualized, white-centric narratives. Film festivals are ultimately fueled by the same institutional powers that have long ruled Hollywood, despite their reputation for alternative, progressive perspectives.

Film festivals are particularly productive sites for investigating #MeToo Media as they play a key curatorial role in media industries. While the Oscars determine which stories are worth celebrating after they are made, film festivals determine which films even land distribution. The types of films included in Sundance's programming reflect what stories media industries deem worthy of value in independent spaces, as festivals "do the work of determining what kind of cinema will be consecrated and what kind will not."[6] Film festivals also importantly reflect larger industrial trends on a smaller scale. As Courtney Brannon Donoghue argues, film

[5] *The Tale*, directed by Jennifer Fox (HBO Films, 2018); *Eighth Grade*, directed by Bo Burnham (A24, 2018); *The Assistant*, directed by Kitty Green (Bleecker Street, 2019); *Late Night*, directed by Nisha Ganatra (Amazon Studios, 2019); *Leaving Neverland*, directed by Dan Reid (HBO, 2019); *Untouchable*, directed by Ursula Macfarlane (Hulu, 2019); *On the Record*, created by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering (HBO, 2020); *Cat Person*, directed by Susanna Fogel (Rialto Pictures, 2023).
[6] Newman, *Indie*, 54.

festivals operate as "distinct microcosms of business activities across production, distribution, and exhibition."[7] This chapter articulates the ways film festivals determine which stories about gendered power dynamics and sexual violence are worthy of value through Sundance's selection and exhibition of independent #MeToo Media.

Throughout the history of cinema, the term "independent" has undergone different meanings and connotations. While an independent film conventionally refers to a film produced outside of major Hollywood studios by young visionaries working with non-existent budgets, the reality is much more complicated. The label "independent" defies categorization and has taken on various meanings and connotations for institutions and audiences alike since the early 20th century. Despite the lack of a stable definition for independent film, Michael Z. Newman usefully posits that "Cultural categories like indie cinema function through repeated use in multiple discursive sites, and are best understood as they are implemented by communities invested in their meanings."[8] In other words, how audiences and institutions use the label "independent" is the most productive way to understand the category. With this in mind, the criteria for independent films included in this chapter are films that are distributed by a studio that is self-described as "independent" and are exhibited by an "independent" film festival.

Through both an industrial analysis of the Sundance Film Festival and a textual analysis of independent #MeToo films, this chapter examines how the independent film circuit comes to terms with #MeToo. First, I examine Sundance pre-#MeToo to explain how the institution is defined by both progressive politics and dominant ideologies. More specifically, I articulate how Sundance has historically celebrated white male indie auteurs and leveraged sexuality as a

[7] Courtney Brannon Donoghue, *The Value Gap: Female-Driven Films from Pitch to Premiere* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2023), 151.
[8] Newman, *Indie*, 8.

marketing tool. Second, I analyze three female-directed independent #MeToo films that screened at the Sundance Film Festival: *The Assistant*, *Late Night*, and *Cat Person*. I articulate the ways Sundance has marginalized female directors, reduced #MeToo to a marketing tool, and embraced films centered on individualized whiteness. In these ways, Sundance's inclusive promises for female filmmakers and socially engaged films are ultimately unrealized. I conclude with a discussion of how other film festivals beyond Sundance have (and have not) reckoned with the #MeToo movement.

Sundance 1989: Steven Soderbergh, Miramax, and *sex, lies, and videotape*

Nestled in the snowcapped mountains of Park City, Utah, the Sundance Film Festival has become one of the central arenas in the independent film circuit. In 1984, actor Robert Redford took over the struggling US Film Festival, officially renaming it to the Sundance Film Festival in 1991 after his role in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).[9] The festival today is a star-studded affair that draws filmmakers and celebrities from all over the world. While there are several festivals known for exhibiting independent film, including Telluride and Toronto, scholars describe Sundance as a "premier landmark in the annual calendar of American independent cinema" and "a Mecca for aspiring independents."[10] This section articulates how Sundance faces a fundamental contradiction between its public face of progressive politics and the financial structures that undermine its projected inclusivity. While I later articulate how this contradiction impacts the institution's inclusion of #MeToo Media, I first explain how Sundance's conflicting identity has historical precedence. More specifically, I analyze how *sex,*

[9] Berra, *Declarations of Independence*; *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, directed by George Roy Hill (20th Century-Fox, 1969).
[10] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 19; Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 39.

lies, and videotape at the 1989 Sundance Film Festival canonizes a white indie auteur, uses exploitative marketing techniques, and ushers in the commercialization of independent cinema.

Making a Sundance Kid: The Canonization of Steven Soderbergh

At twenty-six, Steven Soderbergh had no money or formal training when he set off to make his directorial debut. He managed to scrape together a $1.2 million budget for a month-long shoot in his hometown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The resulting film he tentatively titled *sex, lies, and videotape* premiered at the 1989 Sundance Film Festival. At the festival, Soderbergh did not hold out much hope for picking up a distribution deal, as the festival was "not yet the make-or-break event for filmmakers that it would soon become."[11] Soderbergh had largely resigned himself to a straight-to-home video release.[12] However, the film quickly found favor with festival audiences. Drawn by its provocative title, its "genuine" independent production, and its autobiographical roots, *sex, lies, and videotape* became one of the most talked about films at the festival.[13]

At the end of the festival, Sundance grants three primary prizes: Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic, Grand Jury Prize: Documentary, and the Audience Award. While *sex, lies, and videotape* lost the Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic Award to Nancy Savoca's *True Love* (1989), the film took home the Audience Prize.[14] In the same watershed year *sex, lies, and videotape* shaped the independent film landscape forever, the Grand Jury Prize was taken home by a female director. The fact that a male-directed film about the sex lives of women is more consecrated in festival history than an award-winning female-directed romantic comedy is telling of Sundance's priorities as an institution.

[11] Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures*, 28–29.
[12] Biskind.
[13] Biskind.
[14] *True Love*, directed by Nancy Savoca (United Artists, 1989).

The reception of *sex, lies, and videotape* at Sundance solidified Soderbergh into a household name in independent film. The lone male maverick auteur has been a staple of independent production since John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959).[15] However, Soderbergh ushered in a new era of celebrity status surrounding the indie auteur. As Emanuel Levy articulates, "With its phenomenal commercial success, *sex, lies, and videotape* ushered in the Age of Sundance, when first-time filmmakers could become overnight celebrities."[16] Since *sex, lies, and videotape*, a host of (mostly male) indie auteurs would be "discovered" at Sundance, including Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino, David O. Russell, Jim Jarmusch, Richard Linklater, Darren Aronofsky, Spike Jonze, Alexander Payne, Todd Haynes, Wes Anderson, and more. While several female directors have also found Sundance success such as Catherine Hardwicke, Karyn Kusama, and Sofia Coppola, the sheer celebrity status of Steven Soderbergh reinforces the institution's tendency to canonize white male directors over marginalized filmmakers.

Entering the Mainstream: Miramax, the Indie Blockbuster, and Selling Sex

Beyond making Soderbergh a poster boy for the independent maverick director, Miramax's purchase of *sex, lies, and videotape* placed Sundance itself squarely in the mainstream. After *sex, lies, and videotape*'s Sundance buzz, calls from potential distributors quickly began rolling in. However, one offer stood out among the rest: Miramax. While the Weinsteins did not attend Sundance that year, they aggressively pursued *sex, lies, and videotape*. Harvey Weinstein promised to outbid any competitor by $100,000 and eventually landed the deal by paying $1 million just for theatrical rights, as the home video rights already belonged to RCA-Columbia.[17] This move baffled competitors but ended up paying off for Miramax

[15] *Shadows*, directed by John Cassavetes (British Lion, 1959).
[16] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 40.
[17] Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures*; Mottram, *The Sundance Kids*.

exponentially. The film ended up making $25 million at the domestic box office and famously won the Palme d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival over Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989).[18] With this single purchase, Miramax and Sundance proved the profitability of independent cinema.

Mainstream Hollywood learned its lesson quickly. The independent cinema landscape in the 1990s was defined by companies attempting to recreate the success of *sex, lies, and videotape*, leading to the emergence of what Alisa Perren describes as the "indie blockbuster."[19] Perren defines the indie blockbuster as "a film that, on a smaller scale, replicates the marketing and box office performance of the major studio event pictures."[20] In the wake of *sex, lies, and videotape,* Sundance became *the* place where independent films could land large distribution deals. However, this marketplace has become increasingly saturated in recent years. As one *Variety* writer observes, "The bidding wars that have become synonymous with Sundance are driving up prices, causing studios to grossly overpay for movies."[21] #MeToo films at Sundance are situated within this bidding war context, with Amazon Studios buying *Late Night* for a record-breaking sum at the festival. Miramax's purchase of *sex, lies, and videotape* exemplifies how independent cinema has become increasingly mainstream, absorbed by major Hollywood studios. In these ways, #MeToo Media at Sundance are a part of the distribution landscape that Harvey Weinstein himself built.

Much of *sex, lies, and videotape*'s commercial success is due to Miramax's marketing strategies. Miramax would heavily lean into the sexual promises within *sex, lies, and videotape*'s

[18] Biskind, 25; *Do the Right Thing*, directed by Spike Lee (Universal Pictures, 1989).
[19] Perren, *Indie Inc*.
[20] Perren, 16.
[21] Rebecca Rubin, "Beware Festival Fever: Sundance Faves Are Bombing at the Box Office," *Variety*, August 26, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/film/news/sundance-box-office-flops-late-night-blinded-by-the-light-1203313651/.

title. It did not matter that the film had very little explicit representations of sex to speak of. Miramax "titillated viewers with the promise of sex" in the film's marketing.[22] Leaning into independent cinema's artsy and alternative elements was a primary marketing strategy for Miramax in the 1990s. For example, Miramax would advertise their films as "borderline X rated" as a marketing strategy in order to highlight the sexually explicit content in films such as *Goodbye Emmanuelle* (1977) and *Eréndira* (1983).[23] Independent cinema's perceived edginess bridges the gap between independent cinema's outsider status and its commercial appeal.

Studios leaning into sexual elements and controversial topics continue to define the marketing of independent film. As Geoff King argues:

> Figures such as pedophiles, and others defined as sexually deviant by mainstream society, turn up disproportionately often in indie films, partly because they raise issues independent cinema is more capable than Hollywood of treating with any complexity but also because they offer the potential for a frisson that can be marketable, as was demonstrated by the landmark box-office success of *sex, lies, and videotape*.[24]

This marketing strategy persists today in the exhibition of #MeToo Media at Sundance. All the films explored in this chapter confront issues related to the #MeToo movement, including patterns of abuse in the workplace and gendered power dynamics. Sundance's projected inclusivity and celebration of marginalized talent appear to make it an ideal arena for exploring these topics. However, it is the fact that these films engage in #MeToo discourses that make them socially relevant and, therefore, marketable at the festival. In these ways, Miramax's exploitative marketing strategies are reappropriated by studios in their marketing of independent #MeToo films.

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[22] Mottram, *The Sundance Kids*, 10.
[23] Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 21–22; *Goodbye Emmanuelle*, directed by François Leterrier (Miramax Films, 1977); *Eréndira*, directed by Ruy Guerra (Miramax Films, 1983).
[24] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 200.

The Sexual Politics of sex, lies, and videotape

While *sex, lies, and videotape* illustrates how mainstream Hollywood has commercialized independent film, it additionally reflects how Sundance has represented issues related to sex and sexuality prior to #MeToo. On the surface, *sex, lies, and videotape* appears to present a very masculinist perspective on female sexuality. However, upon closer inspection, *sex, lies, and videotape* does arm its female characters with agency and explores the harmful effects of voyeurism. As Alice Templeton argues, "Soderbergh managed to create a film that subtly exploits the pleasures of erotic fascination at the same time that it seriously explores the ethics of human relationships."[25] Ultimately, Miramax reduced *sex, lies, and videotape*'s nuanced sexual politics to the word "sex" in its title. This foreshadows the way contemporary distributors value independent #MeToo films for their cultural relevance rather than their productive representations of #MeToo discourses.

Soderbergh's directorial debut follows four central characters with intertwined sex lives. Ann (Andie MacDowell) is a sexually repressed housewife who is married to lawyer, John (Peter Gallagher). John is having an affair with Ann's more sexually adventurous younger sister, Cynthia (Laura San Giacomo). These three characters' lives turn upside down when John's college friend Graham (James Spader) comes to town to visit. Graham spends his free time filming women who consensually share with him their sexual fantasies. After Ann discovers her husband's affair, Graham films one of these sexual confessionals with her. At the end of Ann's tape, it is implied that Ann and Graham have sex. After finding out about Ann's recording session, John locks Graham out of his house and watches the tape. The film ends with Ann and Graham getting together romantically, both having finally overcome their sexual dysfunctions.

[25] Alice Templeton, "The Confessing Animal in *sex, lies, and videotape*," *Journal of Film and Video* 50, no. 2 (1998): 15.

The film does present a masculinist, voyeuristic view of women's sex lives. In fact, the film is even self-described by Soderbergh as inspired by his past manipulation of women:

> I was involved in a relationship with a woman in which I was deceptive and mentally manipulative. I got involved with a number of other women simultaneously—I was just fucking up. Looking back on what happened, I was very intent on getting acceptance and approval from whatever woman I happened to pick out, then as soon as I got it, I wasn't interested anymore . . . I just became somebody that, if I knew them, I would hate.[26]

Graham acts as a stand-in for Soderbergh himself, using the videotapes as some sort of payment for his manipulative past. In this way, *sex, lies, and videotape* almost acts as a therapeutic text for its author to alleviate his guilt. As such, the film is very much grounded in a male-centric perspective.

This perspective extends to the film's use of voyeurism. As Laura Mulvey argues, the cinematic gaze that sexualizes women has ideological implications.[27] Reducing women to sexual objects on screen impacts audience perceptions of women, encouraging the treatment of women as sexual objects in the real world. Graham using women's confessionals for his own sexual satisfaction reduces these women to sexual objects, frozen on tape. While these women do consent to being filmed, they are unable to interact with Graham while he continually interacts with them. As such, Graham mediates his relationships with women through technology.

While the film does offer a voyeuristic view of women's sex lives, the film is simultaneously critical of that voyeurism. This is mostly evident during Ann's confessional taping. At one point during filming, Ann takes the camera and points it back at Graham who cowers under its gaze. Graham says, "I just don't find the turning the tables thing very interesting," to which Ann responds, "Well I do."[28] Ann taking the camera into her own hands

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[26] Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures*, 40.
[27] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833–44.
[28] *sex, lies, and videotape*, 1:26:02.

and reversing its gaze grants her a degree of agency that the women on the tapes do not have. When Graham admits, "I've got a lot of problems and they belong to me," Ann explains to Graham, "You think they're yours but they're not. Everybody that walks in that door becomes part of your problem . . . I didn't want to be part of your problem, but I am . . . You've had an effect on my life."[29] While Graham views his tapes as harmless, the film makes clear that they are not neutral. Ultimately, *sex, lies, and videotape* acknowledges the material impact voyeurism has on these women's lives.

While the film does treat women's sexual experiences and fantasies as something to be looked at (something heavily leaned into in the film's marketing), it simultaneously critiques that voyeurism. As such, *sex, lies, and videotape* offers a masculinist view of women's sex lives while still granting the female characters agency. *sex, lies, and videotape*'s contradictory sexual politics parallels the contradictory nature of #MeToo films exhibited at Sundance. While individual #MeToo films at Sundance productively engage in #MeToo discourses, they simultaneously risk being valued only for their timeliness in relation to the #MeToo movement.

Inclusive Promises, Exclusionary Results: #MeToo Media at Sundance

Sundance's history informs its contemporary relationship with #MeToo. First, Harvey Weinstein himself has historically been central in the institution. Second, Weinstein's work at Miramax facilitated the commercialization of independent film that persists today. Third, the *sex, lies, and videotape* phenomenon reveals how the festival has a history centering on texts about sexuality but told from a male indie auteur perspective. With this history in mind, I turn my attention to the Sundance Film Festival in the wake of the #MeToo movement. I analyze how the institution has made sense of its historic exclusion and complicity in abuse through its exhibition

[29] *sex, lies, and videotape*, 1:27:29.

of #MeToo Media. While Sundance as an institution self-proclaims to provide an alternative venue for films that confront difficult topics like sexual violence, gender inequalities, and workplace abuse, it ultimately fails to follow through on its inclusive promises by reinforcing a male indie auteur canon, turning #MeToo into a marketing tool, and celebrating individualistic, white-centric narratives.

Female Filmmakers Welcome?: Women at Sundance

Independent film potentially offers an alternative, more inclusive space for female filmmakers outside of mainstream Hollywood. As discussed in the introduction, big-budget Hollywood pictures pose significant barriers to entry for female filmmakers. Because of their perceived risk in mainstream Hollywood, "the majority of women directors work primarily in independent productions characterised by lower costs, lower budgets and lower risk."[30] When it comes to #MeToo Media, independent spaces *do* offer female filmmakers opportunities, as all the films discussed here feature female directors. Despite these possibilities, women in independent spaces still face discrimination. For example, female filmmakers operating in independent spaces are rarely "considered auteurs, nor are the same parameters of evaluation applied to them as to their male counterparts."[31] This male-centered auteurism in independent film extends to the Sundance Film Festival.

Sundance's self-proclaimed goal is to be a space for marginalized filmmakers. Levy argues that "Multiculturalism was meant to be Sundance's raison d'être; the festival presented works by women, African Americans, and other ethnic minorities whose voices have been

[30] Susan Liddy, *Women in the International Film Industry: Policy, Practice and Power* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7.
[31] Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 139.

ignored in mainstream cinema."[32] Statistically, Sundance has made waves when it comes to including films directed by marginalized groups. At the 2019 festival, 41% of the films were directed by people of color.[33] In 2022, nearly half of the films at the festival were directed by women.[34] The Sundance Institute additionally provides programs aimed at supporting female filmmakers, including the Women at Sundance Program and the ReFrame coalition.[35] Sundance does offer an inclusive venue for marginalized filmmakers in many ways.

Despite these inclusive promises, independent female filmmakers face uneven treatment at the festival in comparison to their male counterparts. For example, only fifteen women have taken home the Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic in the history of the festival.[36] Sundance additionally has a history of consecrating male directors in the festival's history more than female directors. For its fortieth anniversary in 2024, the Sundance Institute conducted a poll with over five hundred filmmakers to see which films "represent the breadth, diversity, artistic resonance, social, political, or cultural impact of independent storytelling that have screened at the Sundance Film Festival."[37] The resulting list consisted of only one woman, Valerie Faris who co-directed *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) with her husband Jonathan Dayton.[38] With the exception of Alfonso Cuarón and Jordan Peele, the rest of the list reinforced the white, male, indie auteur canon, with directors such as Joel and Ethan Coen, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, Richard Linklater,

[32] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 39–40.
[33] The Sundance Institute, "Festival History," *Sundance.org*, https://www.sundance.org/festival-history/.
[34] Kate Erbland, "Female Filmmakers Dominate Sundance 2022 Beyond Just the Stats, from Big Sales to Buzzy Titles," *IndieWire*, January 26, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/sundance-2022-female-filmmakers-1234693586/.
[35] The Sundance Institute, "Women at Sundance," *Sundance.org*, https://www.sundance.org/initiatives/womenatsundance/.
[36] Robert Lang, "Sundance Film Festival U.S. Dramatic Grand Jury Prize Winners Through the Years," *Deadline*, January 26, 2024, https://deadline.com/gallery/sundance-film-festival-u-s-dramatic-grand-jury-prize-winners-photo-gallery/.
[37] Samantha Bergeson, "'Whiplash' Named Top Sundance Film of All Time in Festival Poll of Over 500 Filmmakers and Critics," *IndieWire*, January 16, 2024, https://www.indiewire.com/news/breaking-news/sundance-top-10-films-all-time-whiplash-1234944417/.
[38] *Little Miss Sunshine*, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006).

and Damien Chazelle. Even though the festival self-proclaims to be an inclusive space, the directors most canonized in the festival's history remain white and male.

Sundance's masculinist biases impact women's participation at the festival. For example, *The Assistant*'s director Kitty Green faced gendered discrimination at Sundance when promoting her documentary *Casting JonBenet* (2017). A festival programmer assumed that the ideas behind the film were from Green's male producers rather than Green herself.[39] In 2019, Green would return to the festival with *The Assistant*, a film inspired by the discrimination she faced at Sundance two years prior.[40] Sundance faces a troubling juxtaposition between celebrating films about gender discrimination while simultaneously enabling that discrimination in the first place.

Female filmmakers also face industrial barriers *after* their participation at Sundance. For example, even when female filmmakers find success at film festivals, "their career progress slows, stalls, or stops on the way to the next film project in ways that their male peers do not experience."[41] These institutional barriers impact the directors of independent #MeToo Media in several ways. While *Late Night*'s Nisha Ganatra experienced post-festival success after being hired to direct the anticipated Disney sequel *Freakier Friday* (2025), other #MeToo directors' careers have stalled.[42] *The Assistant*'s Kitty Green's second fiction feature *The Royal Hotel* (2023) made back only a fraction of its budget and Green currently has no slated projects upcoming.[43] While Sundance does include women in their festival programming, these filmmakers experience inconsistent career success after their festival journeys.

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[39] Steve Chagollan, "Kitty Green Constructs a Woman-Centric Story of Office Harassment in 'The Assistant,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/awards/story/2021-01-13/kitty-green-the-assistant-julia-garner; *Casting JonBenet*, directed by Kitty Green (Netflix, 2017).
[40] Chagollan.
[41] Donoghue, *The Value Gap*, 152.
[42] *Freakier Friday*, directed by Nisha Ganatra (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2025).
[43] *The Royal Hotel*, directed by Kitty Green (Transmission Films, 2023).

Commercializing #MeToo: Reappropriated by the Miramax Machine

Sundance's limiting of #MeToo Media extends to how these texts are purchased, distributed, and marketed. As discussed, independent films have a reputation for being an art form that is better suited to representing controversial topics. This is partially because independent films have more freedom to explore specific types of issues not represented in mainstream Hollywood. As Biskind notes, "If Hollywood avoided controversial subjects, indies embraced them."[44] Because independent films tend to tackle more controversial topics, "viewers are encouraged to see independent films as more socially engaged and formally experimental than Hollywood."[45] Therefore, independent films are potentially more qualified to examine the #MeToo movement than more mainstream films.

Many of the #MeToo films explored here *do* productively engage in #MeToo discourses in their narratives. More specifically, *The Assistant* and *Late Night* represent the patterns and cultures that facilitate discrimination and abuse in the workplace. However, these films' relationship to #MeToo is precisely what makes them marketable at the festival. For distribution companies, association with #MeToo films helps promote a specific brand identity. Purchasing #MeToo Media is less a reckoning with #MeToo and more a business move that aligns these companies with the most recent social issue. In doing so, these companies perpetuate the same industrial machine that Miramax started with *sex, lies, and videotape* in 1989.

In comedy writer and actress Mindy Kaling's screenwriting debut, *Late Night* confronts sexism, racism, ageism, and abuse in late-night television. The film follows late-night talk show host Katherine Newbury's (Emma Thompson) dwindling career. After facing accusations of discriminating against female employees, Katherine hires Molly (Mindy Kaling), an Indian

[44] Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures*, 19.
[45] Newman, *Indie*, 22.

woman with no experience working in television. Molly faces discrimination at work, from Katherine's verbal harassment to microaggressions from the all-male writers' room. Before she's hired, the head writer, Brad (Denis O'Hare), warns Molly, "A TV writers' room is– it's not very PC. It can be a pretty masculine environment."[46] Visually, the all-white, all-male writers' room is a scathing look at the dominance white men hold in late-night television industries (see figure 8).

Figure 8: The All-White, All-Male Writers' Room in Late Night

Molly experiences sexism and racism in the workplace in several ways. When Molly introduces herself to the writers' room, Brad mispronounces her name as "Malee," assuming her name cannot be the conventional Western name "Molly." When the male writers research Molly's background online and realize that she has no experience working in television, one of the writers, Eugene (Paul Walter Hauser), remarks, "I wish I was a woman of color so I could

[46] *Late Night*, 0:08:54.

just get any job I want with zero qualifications."[47] The perception of Molly as a diversity hire or a token permeates the entire film. When Molly performs a stand-up set later in the film, she jokes, "I am a dark-skinned Indian woman. Aren't I un-fireable? I mean, a token for God's sakes."[48] Throughout the film, the discrimination Molly faces in the workplace reveals the racism, sexism, and hegemonic masculinity that permeates late-night television.

Importantly, *Late Night* challenges white women who maintain the status quo. More specifically, the film's representation of Katherine reveals how women in power reinforce the power structures that benefit them. Although Katherine comments on various forms of sexism and speaks out about abortion rights in the film, her position as part of the "old guard" means that she maintains hegemony in the workplace. For example, Katherine is hostile to her female employees. When an employee accuses her of hating women because there are no female writers on her staff, she has the following conversation with head writer, Brad:

> Katherine: "I don't hate women."
> Brad: "I don't think you think you hate women."
> Katherine: "What does that mean?"
> Brad: "I think you might have a problem with women . . . I think you have a problem with living female writers on your staff. You never want to renew their contracts."
> Katherine: "Well find one worth keeping."
> Brad: "Would a gay guy work?"
> Katherine: "No."[49]

After this conversation, Katherine continually calls Brad impatiently, demanding, "Did you hire a woman yet?"[50] Although Katherine herself has experienced the difficulties women face in the entertainment business, she is actively hostile to female employees and deflects criticism by hiring a random face for diversity. Katherine is additionally abusive towards her staff throughout

[47] *Late Night*, 0:21:18.
[48] *Late Night*, 0:52:24.
[49] *Late Night*, 0:05:27.
[50] *Late Night*, 0:08:28.

the film. Because she cannot be bothered to learn people's names, she lists off the writers by number and refers to them only as "One," "Two," and so on. In these ways, *Late Night* critiques the role white women play in maintaining abusive work environments.

Despite Katherine's position of power, she herself experiences sexism and agism throughout the film. When the network threatens to replace Katherine with an up-and-coming white male comedian, Katherine remarks, "if you want to replace me with a meme, a t-shirt of a man who hides his xenophobia and, by the way, his hatred of women behind a congenial, frat-boy persona, just to make yourself seem relevant, then, by all means, you go ahead."[51] In the press, news outlets use sexist, agist remarks to describe Katherine, such as "your worst aunt." The double standards Katherine faces as a woman in her fifties demonstrate how sexism and agism intersect in Hollywood. Despite *Late Night*'s productive representations of abuse in the workplace and sexism and ageism in Hollywood, the film was still appropriated by the Miramax machine, valued only for its social relevance.

Late Night arrived at Sundance less than two years after #MeToo and four years after the #OscarsSoWhite controversy, making the film's subject matter primed for a festival audience. In *The Hollywood Reporter*'s review of the film, they note how the way the film "speaks in a timely way about much-discussed issues of diversity and balance in the workplace, in this instance specifically show business, will attract the spotlight and provoke discussion that will give the film a special profile."[52] Writer and actress Mindy Kaling herself admitted to the timeliness of the film, noting, "I think I was just lucky that the things that I'm really interested in [such as] intersectional feminism [and] equal rights in the workplace . . . just happen to be timely right

[51] *Late Night*, 0:49:38.
[52] Todd McCarthy, "'Late Night': Film Review | Sundance 2019," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 25, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/late-night-review-1179475/.

now."[53] *Late Night*'s "timeliness" turned out to be extremely profitable, as the film entered a hot bidding war between distributors at Sundance. Amazon ended up buying domestic rights to the film for $13 million, a record-breaking sum for U.S. distribution rights at the festival.[54] In a statement, Amazon Studios chief Jennifer Salke noted,

> The moment the lights came up after the premiere, we knew *Late Night* is a film our viewers will love and talk about. It's an incisive workplace comedy that reinvents all the tropes about women. We too rarely get to see female characters like this—complex, flawed, and unapologetically ambitious . . . We can't wait to share this wonderful movie with our customers, first in theaters and then on Amazon Prime Video.[55]

While *Late Night* may importantly tackle issues related to diversity in the workplace, this statement ends centering on the studio's financial imperatives. In this way, #MeToo becomes a marketing gimmick rather than a meaningful reflection on how media industry institutions themselves facilitate discrimination.

Like *Late Night*, *The Assistant* also challenges the patterns of behavior that facilitate abuse in the workplace. The film follows a low-level assistant, Jane (Julia Gardner), at an unnamed film distribution company based in New York City. The film spends a good deal of time depicting Jane doing menial office tasks, including taking out the trash, picking up meals, opening mail, answering phones, and making copies of scripts. The men in the office continually devalue Jane's work through sexist microaggressions. One of her fellow male interns throws a wad of paper at her to get her attention while he's on the phone and asks her, "Can you deal with this?" pointing to the phone.[56] When he explains it is the boss' wife on the phone, Jane asks

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[53] Suzy Evans, "Mindy Kaling on How She Drew on Own Experience, Interests for 'Late Night,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 3, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/mindy-kaling-drawing-own-experience-interests-late-night-1207225/.
[54] Mike Fleming Jr., "Amazon Closing Sundance Record $13M U.S. Rights Deal For 'Late Night,'" *Deadline*, January 26, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/01/late-night-sundance-film-festival-deal-13-million-dollar-united-states-rights-mindy-kaling-amazon-emma-thompson-nisha-gantara-1202542473/.
[55] Fleming Jr.
[56] *The Assistant*, 0:15:40.

"Why me?" to which the male intern simply shrugs.[57] The assumption that Jane is more equipped to deal with the boss' emotional wife as a female employee reinforces sexist stereotypes in the workplace. These assumptions about women in the workplace show up again and again when Jane is charged with temporarily watching the boss' children or is reprimanded after getting an employee's lunch order wrong. Some of Jane's menial tasks were even directly inspired by Weinstein, such as when Jane scrubs a mystery stain from a couch in the boss' office or when she restocks the boss' erectile dysfunction medicine.[58] Ultimately, *The Assistant* captures the devaluation of women in the workplace through Jane's performance of domestic tasks and the male employees' sexist microaggressions.

The Assistant also importantly confronts the company culture that facilitates sexual exploitation. After Jane's boss hires an inexperienced young woman from Idaho as a new assistant, Jane suspects the boss of sexually assaulting her. Jane's suspicions are continually dismissed and diminished by the workplace culture. When a group of men enters the boss' office and one sits on the couch, a male employee remarks, "never sit on the couch," after which the group of men laughs.[59] This scene of reducing the boss' abuses to a workplace joke is reflective of how Harvey Weinstein's abuses were an "open secret" in his workplaces. This idea is reinforced again when Jane phones a male employee to ask about a series of checks. When Jane explains "the last two checks don't have a name or anything. Just the dollar amount," the employee at the other end of the phone tells her to "ignore it."[60] In this scene, concerns about undisclosed payouts are entirely dismissed. Bystanders at the company facilitating abuse are

[57] *The Assistant*, 0:15:44.
[58] Katherine Schaffstall, "Julia Garner Becomes Aware of Abuse in Trailer for Harvey Weinstein-Inspired 'The Assistant,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 5, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/assistant-trailer-julia-garner-works-weinstein-like-boss-1259800/.
[59] *The Assistant*, 0:43:21.
[60] *The Assistant*, 0:29:05.

represented again at the end of the film when Jane rides in an elevator with a female executive after seeing a young actress enter the boss' office. The employee tells Jane, "Don't worry. She'll get more out of it than he will. Trust me."[61] These remarks by other employees illustrate the ways in which sexual exploitation in media industries is facilitated by company cultures.

The Assistant contrasts some of the other #MeToo films explored here in the sense that its marketing was problematized because of its relationship to #MeToo. While *Late Night* uses its timely relevance as a marketing technique, *The Assistant* runs into similar problems as *She Said*. The film is perhaps the most literal representation of the #MeToo movement at Sundance, as the film stems from director Kitty Green's interviews with former Miramax employees and research into hundreds of documents about the company.[62] With these very literal ties to Weinstein, the film hits a bit too close to home for distributors. As one of the film's producers puts it, "It was a very challenging film to present in the marketplace."[63] These challenges are evident in the film's distribution and reception. While other #MeToo films at Sundance were distributed by major streaming companies such as Amazon, Netflix, and HBO, *The Assistant* was distributed by much smaller Bleecker Street. At the box office, the film did not manage to make its budget back. While #MeToo might be a lucrative marketing tactic for some, *The Assistant* shows that media industries largely remain unwilling to confront Weinstein head-on. Ultimately, how #MeToo films land distribution at Sundance limits their productive representations of discrimination in the workplace. While I have illustrated how #MeToo films are treated in their distribution *after*

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[61] *The Assistant*, 1:16:07.
[62] Anthony D'Alessandro, "Harvey Weinstein Assistant Feature in the Works from Kitty Green & James Schamus – Toronto," *Deadline*, September 7, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/09/harvey-weinstein-assistant-feature-in-the-works-from-kitty-green-james-schamus-toronto-1202459356/.
[63] Allison Crist, "'The Assistant' Debuts in New York Amid Harvey Weinstein Trial," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 29, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/assistant-premieres-new-york-harvey-weinstein-trial-1274402/.

the festival, I now turn my attention to how these films are included in Sundance in the first place.

Reinforcing Dominant Ideologies: Individualized Narratives and Centering Whiteness

The types of #MeToo films that Sundance chooses to include in its lineup are indicative of the priorities and ideologies of the institution itself. Therefore, the types of stories that are missing from Sundance's programming indicate some of the institution's blind spots. More specifically, Sundance's inclusion of #MeToo films problematically focuses on individualized narratives and centers whiteness. While some films like *The Assistant* engage in systemic critique by confronting the institutions that facilitate abuse, *Late Night* and *Cat Person* largely focus on the individual. Sundance's inclusion of #MeToo films also largely excludes marginalized perspectives from the demographics most impacted by sexual violence. While *Late Night* does include the perspective of a woman of color, diversity in the workplace is ultimately distilled to a matter of numbers rather than systemic change. Additionally, *The Assistant* and *Cat Person* fail to include discussions of race in their narratives. Independent films are not necessarily an alternative venue for #MeToo discourses, as they still uphold dominant ideologies.

The Assistant is perhaps the most successful in critiquing the institutional structures that facilitate abuse. The film does this through its representation of the human resources department. After Jane suspects her boss of abuse, she walks into the company's HR office to report it. However, she is dissuaded from reporting by the head of HR, Wilcock (Matthew Macfadyen). In a ten-minute-long scene, Jane's interactions with the head of HR reveal systemic silencing strategies within companies, many mirroring Miramax. Initially, Wilcock puts on a sort of false empathetic front to appeal to Jane's struggles as an assistant to dissuade her from reporting her

boss. After this empathetic approach, Wilcock switches to being actively hostile and dismissive to Jane's concerns in a confrontational back and forth:

> Wilcock: "So why are you in here trying to throw it all away over this bullshit? . . . Do you know how many people work at this company? I have to make sure all of them are taken care of. And do you know how many people want to work here? I got four hundred résumés teed up for your position alone. Ivy League grads, 4.0 GPAs. And here you are sitting in my office, stressed out, jealous of some new assistant who's getting more attention than you."
> Jane: "I'm not– I'm not jealous. I was just– I was worried for this girl."
> Wilcock: "She's a woman. She's a grown woman . . . Listen, honestly. What do you want from me? Tell me what you want me to do here. Do you want to keep working here? . . . Look, frankly, it's your call. I could file a complaint for you if that's what you want, but I think you know how it would come off. Should I file this?"
> Jane: "No, don't."[64]

As she leaves his office, Wilcock assures her without looking up from his computer screen, "I don't think you have anything to worry about. You're not his type" (see figure 9).[65]

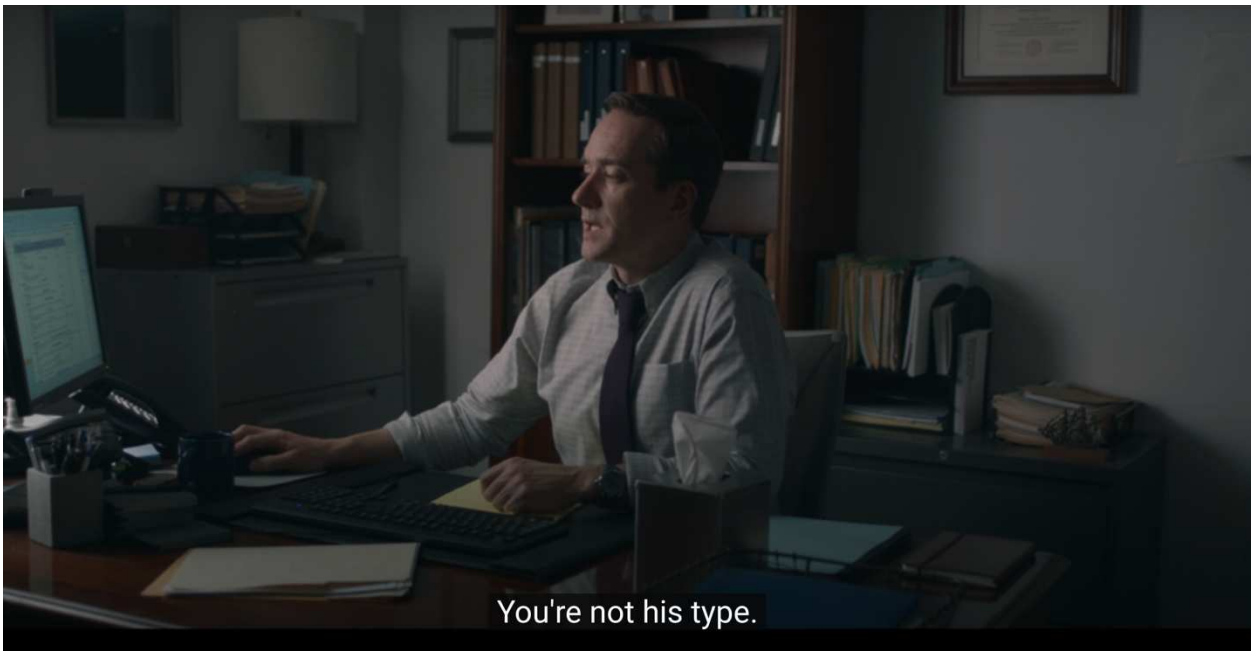

Figure 9: Head of HR Assures Jane She's Not the Boss' Type in The Assistant

[64] *The Assistant*, 0:54:53.
[65] *The Assistant*, 0:57:49.

This scene represents several systemic strategies employed by institutions to silence victims of abuse. First, Wilcock makes Jane's concerns seem trivial and unsubstantiated by being dismissive. Second, he blames Jane's concerns over her own jealousy towards a less experienced new hire. Third, he threatens Jane's employment and reminds her how lucky she is to be working at the company. Finally, Wilcock acts as if he is doing Jane a favor by not filing a report. This exchange is a prime example of how institutional practices dissuade women from speaking out about abuse. As Green articulates about her intentions behind the film, "what I wanted to do was highlight these concrete examples of what that system is—everything from who gets paid what and mysterious checks that get sent through to HR, to different layers of machinery that support specifically white men being in power."[66] She accomplishes this goal by revealing the systemic and cultural issues that facilitate abuse in the workplace on a number of levels.

Despite these important systemic critiques, other #MeToo films at Sundance problematically reinforce dominant ideologies by failing to zoom out to examine the larger systems that enable violence and abuse. This is most evident in Susanna Fogel's *Cat Person*. The film is a feature-length adaptation of Kristen Roupenian's viral short story in *The New Yorker* of the same name.[67] The film tells the story of a college sophomore, Margot (Emilia Jones), who meets a man in his thirties, Robert (Nicholas Braun), at the movie theater where she works. The two begin to date, only for Margot to quickly lose interest after they have uncomfortable, unsatisfying sex. Most problematically, *Cat Person* suffers from a "taking both sides" approach where it ultimately fails to have much to say about either side. Director Fogel's self-proclaimed

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[66] Alissa Wilkinson, "*The Assistant* is a Movie about More than Harvey Weinstein. It's about the System around Him," *Vox*, January 29, 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21112386/the-assistant-interview-weinstein-julia-garner-kitty-green.

[67] Alex Ritman, "Cannes: Nicholas Braun, Emilia Jones to Star in 'Cat Person,' Based on Hit 'New Yorker' Story," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 20, 2021, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/nicholas-braun-emilia-jones-cat-person-new-yorker-short-story-adaptation-1234970961/; Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person.

goal for the film was to "explore the hellscape of modern romance and the idea that we have all been the villain in someone else's story, and the victim in others."[68] This goal unfortunately undercuts any sort of social critique by failing to take any stance at all.

One of the most striking scenes in the short story is a sequence where Robert incessantly texts Margot after she breaks up with him with a series of increasingly unhinged and misogynistic messages ending with calling Margot a whore. While the short story ends with Robert's "whore" text, the film undercuts any potential critique about the abuse and harassment women face when turning down men by continuing the story for a further forty minutes. After the text messages, Margot becomes paranoid for her safety and attempts to put a tracker on Robert's car to trace his whereabouts. Here, Robert becomes the victim when Margot decides to stalk him by breaking into his garage. Then, the film undercuts both of their victimizations by including a fight scene where both parties violently physically assault the other. By deeming both Margot's and Robert's perspectives as valid, the film fails to make any sort of impactful commentary on the power dynamics of relationships or the nature of gendered violence.

Cat Person additionally features a bizarre amalgamation of feminist buzzwords without interrogating violence against women in any sort of comprehensive, systemic way. For example, as Margot walks alone on a dark college campus at night, she tells her roommate, Taylor (Geraldine Viswanathan), on the phone to call campus police if she goes missing, to which Taylor says, "Bleak. Being a girl is so fun!"[69] However, the film stops short of any sort of commentary about *why* women might be afraid of walking alone at night. While the film begins to acknowledge gendered violence, it fails to say much about any of the questions it raises. These representations largely fall into Sarah Banet-Weiser's conception of popular feminism discussed

[68] Ritman.
[69] *Cat Person*, 0:02:25.

previously.[70] In popular feminism, feminist politics become a performative brand that fails to engage in any sort of structural critique. This is most apparent in Taylor's character. Taylor is almost a caricature of a feminist "social justice warrior," as she is the moderator of an online forum about feminism called "The Vagenda." Taylor gestures vaguely towards feminist issues throughout the film by frequently invoking phrases like "internalized misogyny" and "safe space." However, Taylor largely plays the role of comedic relief throughout the film, ultimately distancing the audience from ever taking her feminist politics seriously.

While Sundance is quick to hop onto the next trendy social issue, *Cat Person* reveals how these risks do not always pay off. Director Fogel commented that Sundance is "a young vibrant zeitgeist environment—a perfect launchpad for the film, which I hope will spark a lot of debate."[71] However, Sundance's exhibition of *Cat Person* failed to make much of a social commentary beyond vaguely participating in the most recent hot-button issue. The film was neither well-received nor made any significant money after its release. Critics lauded the film as "2023's most embarrassing cinematic blunder," "a viral short story padded for the big screen," "devoid of nuance," and "a scrambled mess."[72] Most unfortunately, the film only made back a small fraction of its $12 million budget at the box office. Sundance may be keen to include

[70] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
[71] Tara Karajica, "Sundance's 'Cat Person': Director Susanna Fogel Looks at Modern Dating, the Gender Divide in Life and on Screen," *Variety*, January 21, 2023, https://variety.com/2023/film/spotlight/sundance-cat-person-susanna-fogel-1235497714/.
[72] Clarisse Loughrey, "Cat Person Review: The 2017 Viral Story Has Become 2023's Most Embarrassing Cinematic Blunder," *The Independent*, October 28, 2023, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/cat-person-movie-review-b2435718.html; Claire Shaffer, "'Cat Person' Review: A Viral Short Story Padded for the Big Screen," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/05/movies/cat-person-review.html; Rebecca Harrison, "Cat Person Review: A Story Robbed of All Nuance," *BFI*, October 24, 2023, https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/cat-person-this-messy-adaptation-kristen-roupenians-viral-short-story-devoid-nuance; Stephanie Zacharek, "'Cat Person' Turns a Compelling Story About the Perils of Dating Into a Scrambled Mess," *TIME*, January 24, 2023, https://time.com/6249559/cat-person-movie-review/.

trendy social commentary films in its lineup, but the institution does not always consider the consequences of exhibiting films that center on individualized narratives.

Late Night falls into similar ideological pitfalls as *Cat Person*. While the film productively confronts discrimination in the workplace in many ways, it fails to examine the systemic issues that facilitate such discrimination in the first place. While the film vaguely gestures towards larger systems of power in late-night television, it does little to offer any sort of solution beyond hiring more women and people of color. This is primarily evident in the final shots of the film. In a one-year-later flash-forward sequence, a new writing staff consisting of a range of races and genders has taken over the Katherine Newbury writers' room (see figure 10).

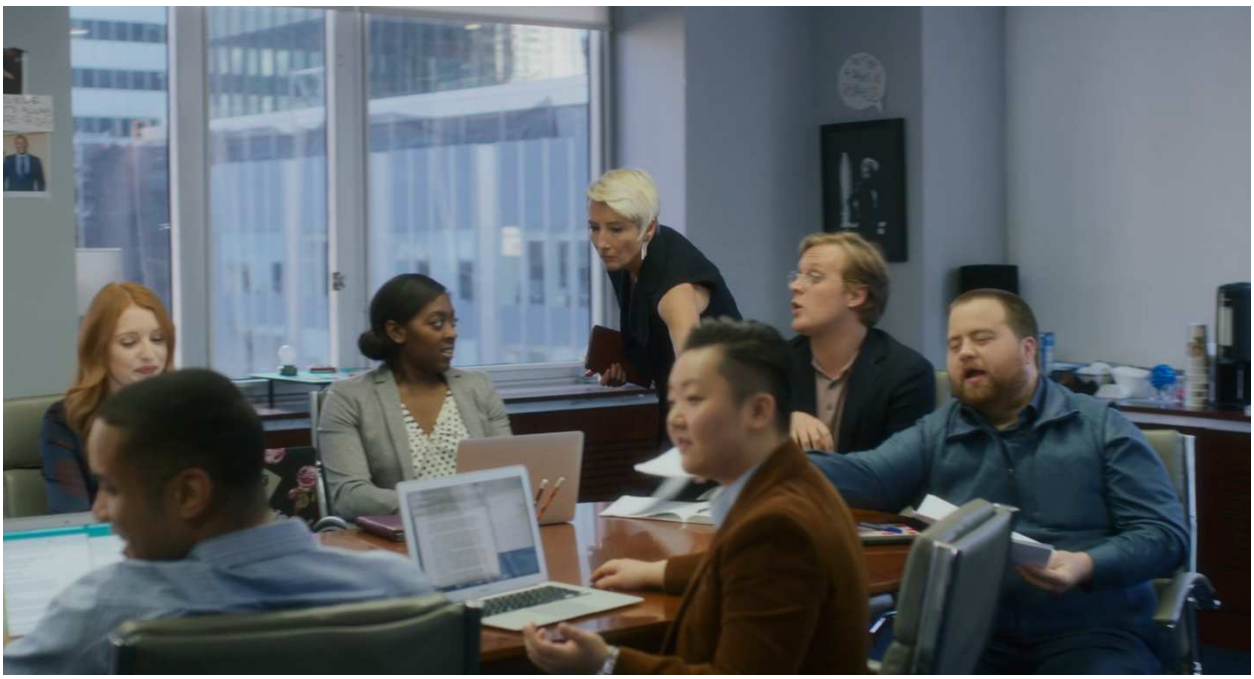

Figure 10: A New Diverse Writers' Room in Late Night

This visual tableau is the film's ideal vision of an inclusive workplace in late-night television. However, the film offers no perspectives on how such a workplace is achieved. As Pauline Ziserman observes, "While the final scenes present *Tonight with Katherine Newbury* with a very

diverse writers' room, the movie does not tackle the issues of structural discrimination that are ingrained in the production system of late-night television."[73] This is especially troubling considering that many of the white men originally in the writers' room who ridiculed Molly when she was first hired are still there. *Late Night* attempts to break the white hegemonic masculinity that permeates the entertainment industry but fails to offer concrete evidence of how true inclusion is achieved or what these diverse perspectives offer. In doing so, the film falls into Kristen J. Warner's conception of plastic representation as discussed in Chapter One.[74] While this final scene offers visual identifiers of diversity, the image remains hollow.

Like *Cat Person*, *Late Night* employs a host of feminist buzzwords without much regard for their meaning or implications. This is partially due to the way the film positions itself as a comedy. When Molly talks to co-worker Burditt (Max Casella) after a difficult day at work, she remarks, "I will not be marginalized by the iron first of white privilege that pervades this work environment," to which he responds, "I am not trying to silence your strong female Indian women of color spirit, #MeToo, trans is beautiful, blah blah blah."[75] This barrage of feminist, progressive buzzwords (including #MeToo) is reduced to the butt of the joke. The film does this a second time when Katherine addresses a sex scandal she's involved in. When a series of emails get leaked that reveal that she cheated on her husband who was recently diagnosed with Parkinson's disease with a young writer on her team, Katherine faces public backlash. With encouragement from Molly, Katherine owns her mistake on her show. She begins, joking, "It's kind of refreshing for a woman to be the perpetrator in a Hollywood sex scandal for once, isn't

[73] Pauline Ziserman, "'You Are a Little Old and a Little White': The Complex Representation of Diversity Issues in Late Night Television in *Late Night* (Ganatra, 2019)," *Film Journal* 9 (2024), https://doi.org/10.4000/11yjm, 10.
[74] Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 32–37, https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2017.71.2.32.
[75] *Late Night*, 0:30:41.

it?"[76] However, this point about the gendered power dynamics in sex scandals is never further addressed. Later in the speech, Katherine explains:

> I've learned an interesting term, "slut shaming." My supporters have said, that if I were a man, I wouldn't be subject to this kind of scrutiny. Well, here's what I think. If it were a man doing this, it would be reprehensible, but guess what, it's a woman doing it and it's still reprehensible.[77]

In this monologue, slut shaming and what Katherine learned about it is not discussed. While she begins to explore the double standard between celebrity men's and women's sex lives, it is immediately undercut when Katherine says her actions are reprehensible regardless of gender. In these ways, *Late Night* ultimately fails to meaningfully engage in feminist discourses by vaguely gesturing to terms that are never interrogated further.

While *Late Night* does include discussions of racism in the workplace, #MeToo films at Sundance are largely told from the perspective of white women. While Taylor in *Cat Person* is played by an Indian actress, her race is never acknowledged or interrogated by the narrative. Margot, a white woman, remains the central face of the story. *The Assistant* fails to feature any people of color at all. While the film confronts HR as an institution that enables abuse, it fails to examine the ways these institutions disproportionately impact marginalized populations. Despite Sundance's reputation for celebrating marginalized talent, the institution's failure to include #MeToo narratives told outside of the perspective of white women ultimately reinforces mainstream Hollywood institutional power.

Independent films are generally considered to have a greater capacity to confront difficult social problems. However, independent films are still embedded in dominant Hollywood systems. As Ziserman argues about *Late Night*, "If Kaling fails to challenge the structural

[76] *Late Night*, 1:27:25.
[77] *Late Night*, 1:28:00.

inequality of the late-night genre in her movie and settles for neoliberal culturalism, it might also be because her movie is part of an ecosystem—Hollywood—that is very much plagued with structural inequalities and discriminatory practices."[78] *Cat Person* and *Late Night* are prime examples of how independent films may engage in hot-button issues in line with the most recent social trends but often fail to fully interrogate the systems that create those social problems in the first place.

Conclusion: Beyond Sundance

Despite Sundance's reputation for being an alternative venue within media industries for marginalized voices, the institution's inclusive promises are never fully realized. *sex, lies, and videotape* demonstrates how independent films are reappropriated by the mainstream Hollywood machine. These institutional roots impact the exhibition of #MeToo films at Sundance. Independent #MeToo Media face several contradictions. While the independent circuit offers opportunities for female filmmakers, Sundance still ultimately celebrates a white, male canon. While these films confront gendered discrimination in the workplace, these nuanced representations get reduced to marketing material. While these films at times critique the systems that facilitate discrimination and abuse, they often reinforce dominant ideologies through white-centric, individualized narratives. In sum, #MeToo Sundance films are not necessarily more progressive or evolved than their Oscar-nominated counterparts.

Sundance is not the only festival unable to fully examine its complicity in abuse and gender discrimination. Weinstein additionally abused women at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival in France.[79] At the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, Weinstein victim Asia Argento told a

[78] Ziserman, "'You Are a Little Old and a Little White," 10.
[79] Scott Roxborough, "#MeToo 5 Years Later: Have Film Fests Cleaned Up Their Act?," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 1, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/metoo-movement-five-years-later-film-fests-1235228657/.

crowd, "I was raped by Harvey Weinstein here at Cannes . . . I was 21 years old. The festival was his hunting ground."[80] Film festivals around the world continue to serve as sites of sexual violence while simultaneously exhibiting films about the #MeToo movement.

The Venice Film Festival has come under fire for continually including directors accused of sexual assault in their lineup, including Kim Ki-duk, Roman Polanski, James Toback, Bruce Weber, and Nate Parker.[81] European film festivals have also been routinely criticized for not including female directors in their festival lineup. Introduced by the Swedish Film Institute at the 2018 Cannes Festival, several international film festivals (including Venice and Cannes) signed the 50/50 pledge, "which seeks equal representation across festival management, including jury selection, and transparency in data about the make-up of programs."[82] However, Venice's participation in the pledge appears just to be lip service. Venice's festival director Alberto Barbera told *The Hollywood Reporter* that "he would 'rather quit' than abide by a gender parity quota," noting that when it comes to the inclusion of female directors, "Venice can't do anything about that. It's not up to us to change the situation."[83]

The fact that many European festivals have yet to embrace #MeToo stems from cultural factors. As the president of the Cannes Film Festival Iris Knobloch observes, "For reasons I can't

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[80] Roxborough.
[81] Ariston Anderson and Scott Roxborough, "How the Venice Film Festival Lineup Reflects Italy's Culture of Toxic Masculinity," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 24, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/venice-film-festival-lineup-reflects-italys-culture-toxic-masculinity-1136331/; Elsa Keslassy, "Cannes Film Festival President Iris Knobloch on France's #MeToo Movement, Women Representation and Political Protests: It's a 'Great Moment of Transformation,'" *Variety*, May 15, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/global/cannes-film-festival-president-iris-knobloch-france-metoo-movement-women-representation-political-protests-1236002646/; Scott Roxborough and Tatiana Siegel, "'Completely Tone Deaf': How Venice Became the F-You Film Festival," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 23, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-venice-film-fest-became-tone-deaf-metoo-times-up-1233163/; Roxborough.
[82] Manori Ravindran, "50/50 Movement Looks to Future with More Inclusive Scope and Targets," *Variety*, February 22, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/50-50-movement-looks-to-future-with-more-inclusive-scope-and-targets-1203508925/.
[83] Anderson and Roxborough, "How the Venice Film Festival Lineup Reflects Italy's Culture of Toxic Masculinity."

explain, it took much longer in France than in the U.S. for women to dare to speak out."[84] Industry insiders have also noted Italy's culture of toxic masculinity explains why "many Italians are skeptical if even a global movement like #MeToo can have an impact."[85] Despite surface-level commitments to inclusion, film festivals internationally continue to platform sexual predators and fail to achieve gender parity. In these ways, #MeToo Media in film festivals do not necessarily fare better than in the awards circuit. Although independent cinema positions itself as an "edgy," alternative cinema that has the intellectual capacity to confront complex social issues, film festivals as media industry institutions limit these progressive capacities. Because awards and festival circuits tend to limit #MeToo Media, I now turn my attention to another exhibition site—the ever-evolving world of streaming.

[84] Keslassy, "Cannes Film Festival President Iris Knobloch on France's #MeToo Movement."
[85] Anderson and Roxborough, "How the Venice Film Festival Lineup Reflects Italy's Culture of Toxic Masculinity."

CHAPTER THREE: #METOO MEDIA AND STREAMING TELEVISION

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, HBO, one of film and television's leading networks, changed the way sex scenes would be shot forever. HBO spearheaded the now-standard industry practice of an intimacy coordinator on set to facilitate any scenes involving nudity and sexuality. In 2018, HBO announced that all its productions moving forward would involve an intimacy coordinator after actress Emily Meade asked to work with one on the production of HBO's *The Deuce* (2017–2019), a series about the pornography industry in the 1970s.[1] While this move is an incredibly important step for maintaining cast and crew safety and comfortability on set, HBO immediately undermined itself by casting actor James Franco in the second season of *The Deuce*. James Franco came under fire in the wake of the #MeToo movement for sending inappropriate messages to a 17-year-old girl and removing protective vaginal guards on female actresses while filming an orgy scene.[2] HBO's pioneering move to hire an intimacy coordinator sits at odds with Franco explicitly violating a protective measure put in place to protect actors filming sexually explicit content. This is indicative of a larger trend in streaming companies, where there is a gulf between projected inclusion and underlying institutional values.

This chapter argues that while #MeToo television texts have unique affordances for engaging in #MeToo discourses that differ from their filmic counterparts, this progressive potential sits at odds with the brand identities and larger histories of their producers. #MeToo

[1] Breena Kerr, "How HBO Is Changing Sex Scenes Forever," *Rolling Stone*, October 24, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/the-deuce-intimacy-coordinator-hbo-sex-scenes-739087/; *The Deuce*, created by George Pelecanos and David Simon (HBO, 2017–2019).
[2] Daniel Miller and Amy Kaufman, "Five Women Accuse Actor James Franco of Inappropriate or Sexually Exploitative Behavior," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-james-franco-allegations-20180111-htmlstory.html.

television texts uniquely confront the #MeToo movement through a narrative mode I term "feminist narrative complexity," an amendment of Jason Mittell's term.[3] I articulate how feminist narrative complexity counters quality television's historic masculinism by leveraging television's seriality to challenge gendered power structures and sexual violence. More specifically, #MeToo television texts use binge-viewing practices, parallel narratives, flashback episodes, and imagined sequences to productively critique the criminal justice system, articulate sexual violence as an intersectional issue, and represent the effects of trauma on the lives of survivors. However, this feminist narrative complexity is compromised by companies like HBO and Netflix. The production and exhibition of #MeToo Media offers streaming companies an opportunity to brand themselves as socially engaged. However, this progressive branding sits at odds with their longer histories of using sexuality as a marketing tool and failing to challenge harmful rhetoric on its platforms. Like the Oscars and the Sundance Film Festival, streaming companies face a rift between the individual successes of the #MeToo texts they celebrate and the underlying values of the industry at large. To explore this further, this chapter analyzes the #MeToo television texts *Unbelievable* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020).[4]

I begin with an overview of the history of feminist politics on TV and the emergence of streaming television to explain the industrial contexts from which these #MeToo television texts emerge. In this section, I also define feminist narrative complexity as a way of analyzing #MeToo television. Second, I consider the limited series *Unbelievable* within the larger context of Netflix's original programming. More specifically, I articulate how *Unbelievable* critiques law enforcement, represents the sustained impact of trauma, and considers trauma across identities.

[3] Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 58 (2006): 29–40.
[4] *Unbelievable*, created by Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman, and Michael Chabon (Netflix, 2019); *I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel (HBO, 2020).

However, the show contradicts Netflix's uneven history of supporting abusers and problematic representations of suicide. Third, I examine *I May Destroy You* and its relationship with HBO as a company. *I May Destroy You* engages meaningfully in intersectionality, represents the fragmented nature of memory, and considers justice and catharsis outside of the legal system. Despite these productive representations, HBO has a long history of masculine-centered texts with troubling, explicit representations of sexuality and rape. I conclude with a discussion of Apple TV+ and its unique affordances as a new streaming service. Ultimately, this chapter articulates how #MeToo television texts successfully challenge sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo, yet are limited by streaming companies' institutional practices and brand identities.

From Soaps to Streaming: Feminism on TV

Before analyzing how #MeToo is leveraged by television in the era of streaming, I look back at how feminism and gender have been negotiated throughout the history of television. Television has always been a critical site where social concerns are circulated and negotiated. Because television texts reflect the priorities and ideologies in culture at large, #MeToo television is a productive site for analyzing larger #MeToo discourses. In this section, I first articulate how feminism on TV has been represented in what Amanda Lotz has characterized as the network era, the multi-channel transition, and the post-network era.[5] Second, I discuss the emergence of "quality television" to explore how television has been legitimized (and masculinized) as an art form. Third, I define "feminist narrative complexity" as a tool for analyzing how #MeToo television confronts sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo.

[5] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Second Edition, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014).

The Network Era, the Multi-Channel Transition, and the Post-Network Era

Television during the network era (1940s to mid-1980s) was primarily characterized by three key networks: NBC, CBS, and ABC. With such few channels, the network era did not revolve around choice. Instead, it relied on broadcasting to appeal to the largest number of people possible. Due to television's place in the domestic spaces, the medium was often associated with women. A popular television genre during the network era was the "soap opera," nicknamed after the soap commercials targeted towards the housewife demographic. Television during the network era was largely delegitimized as an art form, primarily in the ways it was feminized. Representations of sexual violence play out in two central arenas during the network era: the "very special episode" and serial crime dramas. The "very special episode" is a self-contained, single episode of a television program with some sort of didactic moral "message of the week." However, the "very special episode" runs the risk of implying "that such problems can be solved solely through women's action and that they are anomalies in women's otherwise 'normal' lives."[6] A second arena for representations of sexual violence during the network era was the serial crime drama. In earlier iterations of the television crime drama, Lisa M. Cuklanz outlines what she calls the "Basic Plot," where "the victim is attacked by an unseen rapist who clamps a hand over her mouth, grabs her forcefully or throws her to the ground, and speaks lines filled with threats, sexist stereotypes, and outmoded ideas about women and sexuality."[7] These representations of sexual violence are limiting in the sense that it paints women as passive victims and suggests that all sexual violence equates to stranger rape.

[6] Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement since 1970* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 122.
[7] Lisa M. Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 6.

The multi-channel transition (mid-1980s to early 2000s) emerges with the introduction of VCRs, remote controls, and cable. While the network era had a few select channels that had to appeal to a wide audience, the multi-channel transition instead employed narrowcasting, when a multitude of channels caters to niche audiences. One audience that emerged during this period was women, as the "expansion of sex-specific niche-audience targeting from cable to broadcast networks illustrates the importance of female audiences."[8] The multi-channel transition also led to changes in representations of sexual violence on screen. Contrasting the detective dramas of the network era, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–) (also known as *SVU*) stands as an example of an entire series dedicated to issues of sexual violence.[9] The series centers on the New York Police Department's "Special Victims Unit," a unit dedicated to investigating sexually violent crimes. *SVU* importantly makes sexual violence a central theme in a television series, contrasting representations of sexual violence during the network era. However, Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti problematize *SVU*'s politics.[10] They argue, "*SVU*'s misogynist feminism includes false claims of rape; negative portrayals of feminine characteristics such as intuition, emotion, and manipulation; criminal use of interpersonal power by women; and the figure of the monstrous mother."[11] Additionally, while the entire series does consistently confront sexual violence in its narrative, most episodes are self-contained cases, falling into many of the same pitfalls as the "very special episodes" in the network era.

[8] Amanda D. Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 7.
[9] *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, created by Dick Wolf (NBC, 1999–).
[10] Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism: Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 4 (2006): 302–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180600933121.
[11] Cuklanz and Moorti, 318.

The post-network era (early 2000s to present) takes shape with the technological advancements of DVRs and DVDs.[12] Lotz defines this era as "the break from a dominant network-era experience, in which viewers lacked much control over when and where to view and chose among a limited selection of externally determined linear viewing options."[13] The post-network era facilitated shifts in television's audiences and form. One key technological innovation is the introduction of streaming television, which is "the availability of subscription payment for on-demand access to a large media catalog over internet protocols."[14] By licensing a catalogue of on-demand content rather than relying on broadcast television schedules, streaming in the post-network era offers audiences a massive number of choices when it comes to what to watch. This chapter articulates how the post-network era has facilitated alternative ways of representing sexual violence than the network era and the multi-channel transition.

The Legitimization of Television

The post-network era has importantly facilitated the rise in what scholars have termed "quality television."[15] Television has historically been devalued as an art form, especially compared to film.[16] However, there has been a string of more recent television texts that have culturally been associated with artistic importance. Originally coined by Robert Thompson, "quality television" refers to any television that distinguished itself from "normal" TV through

[12] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*.
[13] Lotz, 28.
[14] Daniel Herbert, Amanda D. Lotz, and Lee Marshall, "Approaching Media Industries Comparatively: A Case Study of Streaming," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 352, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877918813245.
[15] See Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
[16] See Robin Nelson, "Quality TV Drama: Estimations and Influences Through Time and Space," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 38–51.

its sophisticated artistry.[17] However, what exactly makes television "quality" continues to be debated by scholars.[18] Sarah Cardwell suggests that American quality television features "high production values, naturalistic performance styles," and "a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing."[19] However, quality TV is not only defined by its textual features but also by how it is sanctioned by producers and audiences. In sum, the "quality" label is unstable and constantly changing depending on historical and industrial contexts.

The concept of "quality" is importantly gendered, with much quality TV in the post-network era being centered around masculinities. While women have historically been a staple audience for television, the post-network era marks an important shift toward male audiences. This audience shift is what Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine call "legitimization."[20] Newman and Levine argue that while television has historically been considered a lower art form, television today takes on newfound cultural importance "by aligning [itself] with that which has already been legitimated and aestheticized."[21] Along with this legitimization, television has increasingly become masculinized. As Newman and Levine make clear, "This new identity, this cultural elevation, is as much a masculinization as it is a refinement of the medium's class status."[22] In sum, as television becomes more "legitimized" as an art form, it simultaneously becomes more geared toward masculine audiences. Several scholars have articulated how quality television texts in the post-network era negotiate ongoing cultural debates

[17] Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*.
[18] See Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*.
[19] Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?: Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 26.
[20] Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).
[21] Newman and Levine, 5.
[22] Newman and Levine, 10.

surrounding masculinity.[23] Some of these pivotal texts include *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Mad Men* (2007–2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), and *True Detective* (2014–2019).[24] #MeToo television provides an interesting point of contrast to this trend, as it recenters feminist issues within a masculine televisual landscape. More specifically, I articulate how quality television engages in #MeToo discourses through the storytelling mode of feminist narrative complexity.

Feminist Narrative Complexity

As television industries increasingly prize masculine narratives and television auteurs, so does television scholarship. In his article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," Jason Mittell proposes the term "narrative complexity" as a televisual storytelling mode alternative to conventional television narratives.[25] Narrative complexity is importantly distinct from film due to its use of episodic and serial narrative forms. Most simply, Mittell defines narrative complexity as "a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" that rejects "the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form" and "foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres."[26] Mittell articulates how narrative complexity disrupts "a chronological viewing experience" and lacks "explicit storytelling cues and signposts."[27] In sum, narrative complexity expands narratives across series rather than self-contained episodes and rejects conventional linear televisual storytelling.

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[23] See Amanda D Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014); Jason Mittell, "Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men: Walter White and the Serial Poetics of Television Anti-Heroes," in *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives*, ed. Roberta Pearson and Anthony Smith (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 74–92.
[24] *The Sopranos*, created by David Chase (HBO, 1999–2007); *Mad Men*, created by Matthew Weiner (AMC, 2007–2015); *Breaking Bad*, created by Vince Gilligan (AMC, 2008–2013); *True Detective*, created by Nic Pizzolatto (HBO, 2014–).
[25] Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television."
[26] Mittell, 32.
[27] Mittell, 36–37.

Some problems with Mittell's original argument are its distancing from feminized art forms and its focus on masculine auteurs. Mittell argues that narrative complexity rejects "the melodramatic style and primary focus on relationships over plots of soap operas, which also distances contemporary programs from the cultural connotations of the denigrated soap genre."[28] This statement certainly confirms Newman and Levine's argument that for television to become legitimized (masculinized), it must distance itself from less prestigious (feminized) televisual forms, like the soap opera. Mittell also primarily focuses on series made by male television auteurs, such as Joss Whedon, J.J. Abrams, Aaron Sorkin, David Lynch, and more. Therefore, how narrative complexity operates within series with female creators and protagonists confronting feminist issues is worth further investigation.

Mittell does somewhat amend his original argument to account for feminist politics in his later monograph *Complex TV*.[29] In his chapter on the serial melodrama, Mittell concedes that complex TV *does* feature elements of melodramatic storytelling that impact these series' gender politics. While Mittell explains that these texts are not necessarily "overtly feminist in questioning patriarchy," he argues that "the narrative act of making male privilege an object of dramatic conflict, as well as encouraging male viewers to experience effeminate melodramatic affect, can be regarded as progressive steps within the traditionally hegemonic realm of dramatic television."[30] In sum, Mittell argues that mixing complex TV with melodramatic conventions has progressive potential when it comes to breaking down gender norms. Despite these amendments, Mittell's argument fails to fully capture how #MeToo Media leverage televisual storytelling to engage in #MeToo discourses and challenge sexual violence.

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[28] Mittell, 32.
[29] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015).
[30] Mittell, 253.

Mittell's argument also fails to account for sociohistorical contexts. Júlia Havas argues that Mittell's formulation of complex TV does not acknowledge "feminism's historic presence in television."[31] I add to this rebuttal to suggest that Mittell's conception of narrative complexity is still too removed from feminist politics. He focuses exclusively on television's textual features rather than the political content of the series themselves or situating these series within their larger historical contexts. In addition, shows with female protagonists and, more importantly, female showrunners, are still largely absent from Mittell's analysis.

With these gendered and contextual shortcomings in mind, I propose a feminist revision to Mittell's concept: feminist narrative complexity. While narrative complexity is still a productive tool for analyzing contemporary television narratives, it does not account for how #MeToo television texts use complex narrative storytelling to articulate feminist politics. I define feminist narrative complexity as a mode of televisual storytelling that leverages television narrative devices to explicitly articulate feminist politics. Feminist narrative complexity operates at three distinct levels: textual, historical, and industrial. On a textual level, feminist narrative complexity uses a multitude of narrative devices, including seriality, non-linear storytelling, and non-diegetic story elements. Feminist narrative complexity importantly expands Mittell's text-specific analysis to consider how television narratives engage in politics within larger historical contexts. Finally, feminist narrative complexity considers how these texts interact with the industrial practices of their producers.

Feminist narrative complexity operates in #MeToo television in several ways. By using seriality, these texts break out of the "very special episodes" characteristic of the network era and multi-channel transition. Series-wide explorations of sexual violence avoid some of these

[31] Júlia Havas, *Woman Up: Invoking Feminism in Quality Television* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2022), 188.

pitfalls, as "serial narratives offer the potential to focus on the ongoing effects of abuse over a number of episodes."[32] By using non-linear and non-diegetic storytelling devices, these texts also manage to articulate the sustained impact of trauma and explore alternative modes of justice and catharsis. However, these important narrative articulations of #MeToo discourses are challenged by the industrial practices of their producers. Next, I analyze how feminist narrative complexity operates in *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You* and how these series are situated within the larger contexts of Netflix and HBO as companies.

Netflix and *Unbelievable*

In 2018, Netflix announced *Unbelievable*, a limited series based on reporting in the article "An Unbelievable Story of Rape" by the Marshall Project and ProPublica and the *This American Life* podcast episode "Anatomy of Doubt." [33] The series follows the true story of detectives investigating a serial rapist in the states of Washington and Colorado between 2008 and 2011. *Unbelievable* provides a productive point of contrast from the serial detective dramas of the network era and multi-channel transition through its use of feminist narrative complexity. *Unbelievable* uses television's form to compare two different forms of detective work, represent the sustained impact of trauma, and explore how sexual violence impacts survivors in different ways. However, Netflix values these productive representations only for their potential to serve the streamer's feminist-oriented brand identity. Netflix's projected progressivism contrasts its troubling history of problematic representations of suicide and its failure to take responsibility

[32] Stuart Joy, "Sexual Violence in Serial Form: Breaking Bad Habits on TV," *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 121, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1396484.
[33] Nellie Andreeva, "Netflix Orders 'Unbelievable' Limited Series From Susannah Grant, Timberman/Beverly, Katie Couric & CBS Studios," *Deadline*, January 22, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/01/netflix-orders-unbelievable-rape-limited-series-susannah-grant-timberman-beverly-katie-couric-cbs-studios-1202266704/; Ken Armstrong and T. Christian Miller, "An Unbelievable Story of Rape," *The Marshall Project*, December 16, 2015, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/12/16/an-unbelievable-story-of-rape; This American Life, "Anatomy of Doubt," February 26, 2016, https://www.thisamericanlife.org/581/anatomy-of-doubt.

for harmful rhetoric on its platform. In this section, I articulate how feminist narrative complexity operates in *Unbelievable* itself, the surrounding historical context of #MeToo, and Netflix as an institution.

Disbelief vs. Empathy: Comparing Two Forms of Detective Work

Unbelievable engages in feminist narrative complexity by using Netflix's bingeable format to compare two very different forms of detective work. This comparison is most evident in the series' first two episodes. The series begins in the state of Washington in 2008 where 19-year-old Marie Adler (Kaitlyn Dever) is raped by a masked assailant in her own home. The following morning, she reports the rape to police. However, she is continually retraumatized through the bureaucracy of law enforcement when she is forced to recount her testimony repeatedly with different detectives, at the hospital, in written reports, and more. Marie is most importantly doubted by the two detectives, Parker (Eric Lange) and Pruitt (Bill Fagerbakke), who are assigned to her case. After the detectives receive Marie's initial statement, Marie's former foster mother meets with Detective Parker to discuss her concerns over Marie's credibility due to her troubled childhood. After this encounter plants doubts in Parker's mind, he calls Marie into another interview at the police station.

In the white sterile room, Marie cries as she slumps across the table from two intimidating adult men (see figures 11 and 12). Detective Parker immediately says, "Okay, I'm going to cut to the chase. I found some inconsistencies in your statements and those of other witnesses."[34] The detectives grill Marie for details about her rape as she cries and taps her foot repeatedly under the table. They talk in increasingly raised voices, continually express disbelief in her account, and suggest that she lied due to her troubled childhood. When they finally ask

[34] *Unbelievable*, season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," directed by Lisa Cholodenko (Netflix, September 13, 2019), 0:37:46.

Figure 11: The Male Detectives Intimidate Marie in Unbelievable

Figure 12: Marie Sits Traumatized and Dejected in Unbelievable

Marie if there is a rapist they need to be pursuing, she lies and says no. When asked to write a written statement that there is no rapist, Marie writes that she dreamed of a rape. This enrages the detectives, as Pruitt yells, “You say one thing, you write another. There is a rapist, there isn’t one. It’s a dream, it’s a blackout. You’ve told us four different versions. At this point, regardless

of what the truth is, the only thing we know for sure is that you have told us at least three lies."[35] After more back and forth with detectives and threats of being charged with false reporting, Marie relents and insists that she was not raped. This encounter reflects how rape survivors can be retraumatized by law enforcement and disbelieved for inconsistent accounts.

Marie's traumatic encounter with law enforcement is directly contrasted by Detective Karen Duvall (Merritt Wever) in the second episode. Three years later in Colorado, a college student named Amber (Danielle Macdonald) reports being raped in her home in a similar manner as Marie. When Detective Duvall arrives on the scene, she notices Amber standing alone away from the crime scene and asks if she would be more comfortable being interviewed in her car, to which Amber says yes. Already, this change in environment marks a stark contrast to Marie's interview. Duvall and Amber are shot with warm lighting from an eye-level angle, suggesting equality and respect from both parties (see figure 13). Duvall continually explains the reasoning

Figure 13: Detective Duvall's Empathetic Approach to Detective Work in Unbelievable

[35] "Episode 1," 0:45:50

behind each step in the reporting process. After asking if she is comfortable, Duvall explains, "Amber, all our research has shown that the sooner a victim of a crime talks about it, the better his or her recall is, so, if it's alright with you, I'd like to dive right in."[36] When Amber defends her decision not to tell her boyfriend about the rape, Duvall says, "Amber, you don't have to explain yourself to me. Who you choose to tell, when you choose to tell them, that is entirely your decision."[37] Duvall's empathetic approach to detective work is a jarring contrast to Detective Parker and Pruitt's callous disbelief in the first episode.

These two representations of different forms of detective work are examples of feminist narrative complexity. Feminist narrative complexity leverages television's form to engage in feminist discourses. In the case of *Unbelievable*, the series uses Netflix's bingeable format to critique how law enforcement handles rape cases. As opposed to a standard television release schedule where episodes are released one week apart, Netflix uniquely drops entire seasons on its platform all at once, allowing users to "binge" entire series in a short period of time. By releasing all *Unbelievable* episodes at once, audiences can more easily watch these two episodes back-to-back. By placing these two episodes immediately after one another sequentially, *Unbelievable* offers a direct comparison of how police work can be traumatic or empathetic. Havas and Tanya Horeck argue that "it is only after experiencing the negative affect of the first episode that viewers can move forward to the next one, and fully appreciate the paradigm shift to a feminist epistemology of rape."[38] In these ways, *Unbelievable* utilizes television's seriality and Netflix's bingeable format to advocate for a more empathetic approach to law enforcement's

[36] *Unbelievable*, season 1, episode 2, "Episode 2," directed by Lisa Cholodenko (Netflix, September 13, 2019), 0:06:32.
[37] "Episode 2," 0:08:24.
[38] Júlia Havas and Tanya Horeck, "Netflix Feminism: Binge-Watching Rape Culture in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Unbelievable*," in *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Research*, ed. Mareike Jenner (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 260, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv27qzrrt.21.

treatment of rape victims. However, feminist narrative complexity is not just limited to television's form, but also how these series engage in the surrounding sociocultural context and ongoing feminist discourses.

Unbelievable's representation of the failures of law enforcement and the disbelief of survivors is importantly tied to the historical context of the #MeToo movement. A common societally held rape myth is the idea that women lie about being raped.[39] Stephanie R. Larson articulates that these rape myths are responsible for marking "women's bodies as inherently untrustworthy."[40] However, the #MeToo movement is aimed at dismantling this myth and believing survivor accounts over perpetrators. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins argue, "the explosive visibility of women who accused men of harassment and assault implied a possible new redistribution of the 'benefit of the doubt' as it relates to sexual violence, away from powerful men and toward those over whom they wield social and economic power."[41] *Unbelievable*'s representation of disbelieving law enforcement exposes the rape myths the #MeToo movement seeks to unravel. In doing so, it leverages feminist narrative complexity to engage in #MeToo discourses.

Feminist narrative complexity also importantly accounts for these texts' relationship with industry. In the case of *Unbelievable*, the series' representation of strong, empathetic female detectives is in line with Netflix's branding as an inclusive company. Netflix importantly has a reputation for providing opportunities for marginalized talent. Statistically, Netflix has outpaced many of its competitors when it comes to including content produced by women and people of

[39] See Kimberly A. Lonsway and Louise F. Fitzgerald, "Rape Myths: In Review," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1994): 133–64, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1994.tb00448.x.
[40] Stephanie R. Larson, *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021), 8.
[41] Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023), 3.

color. In its 2022 inclusion report, Netflix reported its leadership (meaning those who hold the position of director "or above") being 51.4% women.[42] Netflix also has a history of producing content that centers women and confronts issues related to feminist activism and sexual violence, including *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019), *GLOW* (2017–2019), *Jessica Jones* (2015–2019), *Sex Education* (2019–2023), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2020), and more.[43] Ultimately, these are an example of what Havas and Horeck term "Netflix feminism," which refers to programs "that speak to the company's effort to brand itself as concerned with feminist issues via production background and content."[44] More specifically, their conception of Netflix feminism involves the company speaking to some sort of imagined "media-savvy and feminised" audience through its feminist-oriented programming.[45] Given this particular brand identity, it is perhaps not surprising that the platform produced a series like *Unbelievable*.

Despite this projected inclusion, Netflix fails to examine its institutional exclusionary practices. More specifically, Netflix as a company has a troubling history with sexual predators on its platform. Most notably, Kevin Spacey of Netflix's inaugural series *House of Cards* (2013–2018) was accused of sexual misconduct by actor Anthony Rapp, who was fifteen years old at the time.[46] As a result of these allegations, the streamer dropped Spacey from the final season of *House of Cards*, a move that was rumored to have cost the company $39 million.[47] While Netflix

[42] Vernā Myers, "2022 Inclusion Report Update," *About Netflix*, April 28, 2023, https://about.netflix.com/news/2022-inclusion-report-update.
[43] *Orange Is the New Black*, created by Jenji Kohan (Netflix, 2013–2019); *GLOW*, created by Liz Flahive (Netflix, 2017–2019); *Jessica Jones*, created by Melissa Rosenberg (Netflix, 2015–2019); *Sex Education*, created by Laurie Nunn (Netflix, 2019–2023); *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, created by Tina Fey and Robert Carlock (Netflix, 2015–2019).
[44] Havas and Horeck, "Netflix Feminism," 251.
[45] Havas and Horeck, 267.
[46] Kimberly Nordyke, "'Star Trek' Star Claims Kevin Spacey Made a Pass at Him at Age 14; Spacey Apologizes, Comes Out as Gay," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 29, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/star-trek-star-claims-kevin-spacey-made-a-pass-at-him-at-age-14-1052828/; *House of Cards*, created by Beau Willimon (Netflix, 2013–2018).
[47] Stuart Oldham, "Kevin Spacey Suspended From 'House of Cards,'" *Variety*, November 4, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/netflix-fires-kevin-spacey-from-house-of-cards-1202607002/; Todd Spangler,

does at times fire perpetrators, the company does not always take action in issues related to sexual misconduct. A specific example of this is the Netflix-produced Indian thriller *Sacred Games* (2018–2019).[48] The series was co-produced with India-based company Phantom Films. One of Phantom Films' employees accused co-founder Vikas Bahl of sexual misconduct at a wrap party.[49] The other Phantom Films co-founders and the creators of *Sacred Games* were accused of not taking the allegations seriously.[50] Despite this scandal, Netflix decided to continue with the production of season two of the series following an independent investigation.[51] Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos defended this decision, stating, "we are committed to making sure that the workplace is safe and respectful, always. We have instituted harassment training on all our productions in India."[52] These vague statements about committing to a safe working environment are simply not justification for moving forward with projects connected to those accused of sexual misconduct. Netflix's surface-level projections of safe workplace practices do not account for the sheer number of scandals the company finds itself in. Netflix's history of defending perpetrators contrasts how *Unbelievable* productively uses feminist narrative complexity to engage in #MeToo discourses using Netflix's binging format.

"Netflix Took $39 Million Write-Down for 'Unreleased Content'—Was It Related to Kevin Spacey Scandal?," *Variety*, January 22, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/netflix-q4-2017-39-million-write-down-unreleased-content-kevin-spacey-scandal-1202672747/.

[48] *Sacred Games*, created by Vikramaditya Motwane (Netflix, 2018–2019).

[49] Nyay Bhushan, "Bollywood Director Vikas Bahl Accused of Sexual Misconduct, Phantom Films Dissolved," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 8, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/vikas-bahl-accused-sexual-assault-phantom-films-dissolved-1150086/.

[50] Bhushan.

[51] Nyay Bhushan, "#MeToo in Bollywood: Netflix Moves Ahead with 'Sacred Games' Second Season After Investigation," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 24, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-confirms-sacred-games-season-2-investigation-1154623/.

[52] Abid Rahman, "Mumbai: Netflix's Ted Sarandos Talks India Strategy, 'Sacred Games' Controversy," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 28, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/ted-sarandos-netflix-india-plans-1155745/.

Survivor POV: The Sustained Impact of Trauma

Unbelievable also uses feminist narrative complexity to show the impact of Marie's trauma on her life through seriality and non-linear storytelling. This importantly contrasts historic televisual representations of sexual violence by extending narratives beyond the "very special episodes" of the past. These representations also center survivor experiences through their use of non-linear, fragmented point-of-view shots. This use of television's form importantly engages in feminist discourses by contrasting more exploitative, explicit representations of sexual violence. While these progressive representations certainly fit into Netflix's feminist brand identity, they are not consistent across Netflix's platform. Here, I compare *Unbelievable* to the representation of suicide in Netflix's teen drama *13 Reasons Why* (2017–2020).[53]

Feminist narrative complexity importantly involves narrative arcs that occur on the series level rather than the episode level. In contrast to "very special episodes," Marie's story does not end in episode one. As Jackie Hogan importantly notes, *Unbelievable* as a limited series stands "in stark contrast to the self-contained television episodes of police procedural shows . . . in which rape survivors are commonly silenced, while a well-functioning system gets justice for them."[54] Each episode features Marie grappling with the aftermath of both her rape and her police encounter. She experiences continual flashbacks, even several years after the rape. We see her lose work, friends, and housing due to her trauma. The police eventually end up charging Marie with false reporting, and we see her journey in the legal system. We see Marie meet with a therapist who finally helps her come to terms with her trauma. We see Marie find a lawyer willing to help her get a settlement from the city once the perpetrator is caught. And finally, we

[53] *13 Reasons Why*, created by Brian Yorkey (Netflix, 2017–2019).
[54] Jackie Hogan, "Anatomy of a Rape: Sexual Violence and Secondary Victimization Scripts in U.S. Film and Television, 1959–2019," *Crime, Media, Culture* 18, no. 2 (2022): 213–214, https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590211000388.

see Marie's path to healing when she finally gets her driver's license and drives her brand-new Jeep to the beach. By extending Marie's story across eight episodes, *Unbelievable* investigates "the long-term effects of rape, such as victim trauma and recovery" in ways that contrast the serial detective dramas of the network era and multi-channel transition.[55]

Unbelievable also engages feminist narrative complexity through its use of non-linear storytelling. This is primarily evident in the series' use of flashbacks. *Unbelievable* importantly never represents scenes of rape in full. As creator Susannah Grant explains, "I really didn't want to watch a rape. I wanted the viewer to understand the experience of that sort of violation and assault."[56] While there are certainly merits to keeping sexual violence entirely off screen as discussed in Chapter One, *Unbelievable* demonstrates another option for representing sexual violence: POV fragmented flashbacks. The series represents rape cinematographically through point-of-view shots. We almost exclusively witness the events through the eyes of those impacted. In doing so, sexual violence is not shot voyeuristically but in ways that literally adopt the survivor's point of view.

These POV fragmented flashbacks contrast past representations of sexual violence in several important ways. First, the short flashing nature of these images "is an effective way of demonstrating the abrupt and disjointing nature of the experience of sexual violence."[57] Second, these representations also productively keep any literal representations of sexual violence short. In doing so, the series does not linger and eroticize the survivors' pain. Linda Alcoff and Laura

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[55] Katherine Byrne and Julie Anne Taddeo, "Calling #TimesUp on the TV Period Drama Rape Narrative," *Critical Studies in Television* 14, no. 3 (2019): 385, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019856535.
[56] Meredith Blake, "How Netflix's 'Unbelievable' Created Its Revolutionary Portrayal of Rape," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2019-10-03/unbelievable-netflix-rape-representation.
[57] Michaela Keating, "Victims and Survivors in the Rape-Revenge Narrative: A Comparison of *Black Christmas* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020)," *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 10, no. 1 (2022): 74, https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2022.436.

Gray argue that "The media often use the presence of survivors for shock value and to pander to a sadistic voyeurism among viewers, focusing on the details of the violations with close-ups of survivors' anguished expressions."[58] *Unbelievable* importantly contrasts such voyeuristic depictions through these non-linear, fragmented images. In these ways, the series' representations of sexual violence are used to center survivor experience rather than titillate audiences.

Despite the productive ways *Unbelievable* leverages feminist narrative complexity to represent the sustained impact of trauma, Netflix does have a history of troubling representations, specifically as it relates to suicide. This is most evident in Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*. The series follows teenager Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford) who, after committing suicide, leaves a series of thirteen cassette tapes outlining why she made the decision. When it aired in 2017, the series finale featured a three-minute-long explicit depiction of suicide. Audiences, mental health advocates, and parent groups expressed concern over the series potentially leading to increased rates of suicide among teens.[59] Two years after the episode's release, Netflix eventually opted to edit out the scene completely.[60] In a statement, Netflix noted, "As we prepare to launch season three later this summer, we've been mindful about the ongoing debate around the show. So on the advice of medical experts, . . . we've decided . . . to edit the scene in which Hannah takes her own life from season one."[61] While Netflix's choice to edit the series after its release might gesture towards some sort of institutional accountability, the fact

[58] Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (1993): 262, https://doi.org/10.1086/494793.
[59] Brian Porreca, "Netflix Adds Warnings to '13 Reasons Why' Following Criticism," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 1, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-adds-warnings-13-reasons-why-998955/.
[60] Lesley Goldberg, "Netflix Alters Graphic '13 Reasons Why' Suicide Scene After Controversy," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 15, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-alters-graphic-13-reasons-why-suicide-scene-controversy-1224489/.
[61] Goldberg.

that it took two years of intense backlash in order to do so indicates that Netflix is perhaps more concerned with optics rather than the actual impact of its representations. Netflix's history of troubling and explicit representations of suicide contradicts *Unbelievable*'s effective use of non-linear seriality to center survivors' point of view.

Rendered Unbelievable: Sexual Violence Across Identities

Unbelievable's use of feminist narrative complexity also facilitates its ability to examine sexual violence and trauma across identities. The series accomplishes this by using television's extended timetable to follow the stories of multiple characters. These representations importantly account for some of the silences and erasures inherent in the #MeToo movement itself by articulating how identity markers such as class render some survivors more believable than others. However, this intersectionality does not extend to Netflix as a company. This is most evident in the company's support of transphobic rhetoric on its platform.

Because a series is much more extended than a traditional feature film, *Unbelievable* can use feminist narrative complexity to articulate how sexual violence impacts identities in different ways. As discussed in previous chapters, the most visible survivors of sexual violence are typically white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Many of the protagonists discussed throughout this dissertation fit into this model. While Marie in *Unbelievable* is white, she does importantly contrast other texts by accounting for how class impacts survivors of sexual violence. More specifically, Marie as a former foster child in transition housing with a troubled past renders her unbelievable to the people around her. As Detective Parker suggests in one of his interviews with Marie:

> A young woman, been through a ton of bad stuff, on her own for the first time, just broke up with her boyfriend, feeling isolated, lonely, might, on the spur of the moment, come up with something without thinking it through that would get her the attention she needs

> ‘cause you haven’t gotten enough attention in your life. I can see that. You haven’t been cared for or protected, and that’s not your fault.[62]

Banet-Weiser and Higgins argue that believability is a commodity within what they term an “economy of believability.”[63] In this economy, believability is a resource that is unevenly distributed depending on one’s identity. They explain, “the more resources a subject already possesses (including but not limited to various intersecting forms of social, cultural and economic capital, and structural privileges stemming from gender, race, class, etc.), the less labor required to secure access to believability through this economy, and vice versa.”[64] While Marie may be white, her class position ultimately renders her unbelievable. Beyond Marie, the series also features survivors from various races, ages, body types, and class statuses. These representations importantly contrast the #MeToo movement’s tendency to focus exclusively on white celebrities as the most visible survivors of sexual violence.

Unbelievable’s important articulations of intersectionality do not reflect Netflix as a larger company. This is most evident in the company’s response to critiques of one of its stand-up specials. In 2021, hundreds of Netflix employees participated in a walkout to protest transphobic jokes in Dave Chappelle’s Netflix stand-up special *The Closer* (2021).[65] Outrage was exacerbated by an internal leaked email where Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos claimed the special did not “directly translate to real-world harm.”[66] In a statement about the walkouts,

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[62] “Episode 1,” 0:40:50.
[63] Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, “Television and the ‘Honest’ Woman: Mediating the Labor of Believability,” *Television & New Media* 23, no. 2 (2022): 127–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764211045742.
[64] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 130.
[65] Brent Lang, Matt Donnelly, and Angelique Jackson, “Netflix Employee Walkout Grows Tense as Trans Rights Protesters Clash with Dave Chappelle Supporters,” *Variety*, October 20, 2021, https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/netflix-employees-stage-walkout-protest-dave-chapelle-special-the-closer-transphobic-1235093535/; *The Closer*, directed by Stan Lathan (Netflix, 2021).
[66] Nellie Andreeva, “Netflix’s Ted Sarandos Admits ‘I Screwed Up Internal Communication’ Amid Dave Chappelle Controversy, Says ‘Storytelling Has Impact on Real World,’” *Deadline*, October 20, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/10/netflix-ted-sarandos-speaks-up-dave-chapplle-the-closer-controversy-interview-1234858762/.

Netflix said, "We value our trans colleagues and allies, and understand the deep hurt that's been caused. We respect the decision of any employee who chooses to walk out, and recognize we have much more work to do both within Netflix and in our content."[67] Despite this recognition of "much more work to do," Netflix doubled down on its decision to release the special. When asked by *Deadline* if they regretted releasing the special, Sarandos argued, "Stand-up comedy is a pretty singular voice art form. The comedians will road test the material for some times two years before they record their special so we really don't get involved and interfere with the material itself."[68] These types of company statements reveal how Netflix will often wash its hands of responsibility for the content on its platform. However, I would argue that if Netflix cannot take accountability for its wrongs, it cannot take credit for its rights. While Netflix is quick to market itself as a home for feminist programming, it cannot take the credit for its series' productive representations of the #MeToo movement.

Unbelievable ultimately leverages television's form to engage in #MeToo discourses. More specifically, the series uses Netflix's bingeable format, non-linear seriality, and television's longer form to compare detective work, represent trauma, and address intersectionality. However, the series' effective use of feminist narrative complexity sits at odds with Netflix supporting perpetrators of sexual violence, its problematic representations of suicide, and its refusal to accept any responsibility for its programming. Another company that faces similar institutional quandaries is HBO.

[67] Andreeva.
[68] Andreeva.

HBO and *I May Destroy You*

I May Destroy You provides an important point of contrast to Netflix, as writer, director, and star Michaela Coel turned down a $1 million deal at the company.[69] When Netflix would not allow Coel full creative control over the series, she turned to another key player in the contemporary streaming wars: HBO. A co-production between HBO and the BBC, the series is based on Coel's personal experience with rape.[70] The series leverages feminist narrative complexity in several ways. On a textual level, the series uses seriality, flashbacks, and non-diegetic imagined sequences to center intersectionality, depict the wide range of forms sexual violence can take, represent the fragmented nature of memory, and explore different paths to catharsis after trauma. These narrative devices account for some of the shortcomings inherent in the #MeToo movement itself. *I May Destroy You*'s explicit feminist politics conveniently support a socially engaged brand identity for HBO. However, HBO's reputation for controversy and its historic sexualization of women problematizes the series' productive representations.

"That Thing in My Head": Fractured Memory and Fragmented Flashbacks

I May Destroy You's feminist narrative complexity importantly represents the nature of memory in the wake of trauma through its fragmented narrative. The series uses fragmented flashbacks throughout the series, breaking the narrative's linearity. While narrative complexity also employs non-linear narrative devices, feminist narrative complexity importantly uses it for an explicit political purpose. Like *Unbelievable*, *I May Destroy You* accounts for the fact that survivors of sexual violence may not necessarily experience memory in a linear, holistic way.

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[69] Naman Ramachandran, "Michaela Coel on Turning Down Netflix: 'I Was Empowered and Happy to Have Nothing,'" *Variety*, July 28, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/global/michaela-coel-netflix-queer-characters-1234718249/.

[70] Caroline Framke, "How Michaela Coel Processed Trauma and Fought to Own Her Story With 'I May Destroy You,'" *Variety*, August 19, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/features/i-may-destroy-you-michaela-coel-1234739041/.

However, HBO hypocritically uses explicit sexuality and rape in its branding. In these ways, media industry institutions can use different facets of sexuality to serve their image depending on what better suits their economic needs.

I May Destroy You begins with Black Londoner Arabella (referred to as "Bella" by her friends) who is struggling to write a draft of her second book. After self-publishing her first book *Chronicles of a Fed Up Millennial* when her writing gained traction on Twitter, Bella struggles against the deadlines from her new publisher. After deciding to take a break from writing to get a drink with her friends, Bella's drink is drugged, and she is raped in a bar bathroom by a stranger. *I May Destroy You* narratively accounts for Bella's rape through a series of fragmented flashbacks. For example, it takes several episodes for Bella to recognize that she had been raped. Because she was drugged, she struggles to remember what exactly happened during her night out with her friends. It is not until the following day when she returns home that she first sees an image of a man standing over her in a bathroom stall, an image that recurs throughout the series. Like *Unbelievable*, representations of Bella's rape are fragmented, alinear, and always from the perspective of the survivor.

She continues to have flashes of this image throughout the second episode. After having lunch with her friend, Terry (Weruche Opia), Bella realizes she cannot explain why her phone screen is cracked and how she got a cut on her forehead. As Bella starts to question the events of the night before, she calls her friend Simon (Aml Ameen) who was with her that night. However, he does not offer much clarity on the events. Bella tries to explain to Terry the image:

> I got this like thing in my head of, like, this guy, um, he's in a toilet cubicle, and he's like, I don't know, it seems like he did something a bit dodge. He's panting and sweating. He's got really big nostrils and it's like he's blocking the door and the door is like– I

> don't know, there's this like thumping sound. Yeah, it's like he's– I don't know, like, blocking the door.[71]

Bella continually calling her flashback the "thing in my head" shows that coming to terms with a rape is not necessarily straightforward. Especially in a cultural landscape where women are rendered unbelievable, *I May Destroy You* narratively accounts for how coming to terms with one's trauma is gendered.

It is not until Bella goes to the police that she realizes what has happened to her. When detectives call the flashback a "memory" and an "assault," Bella retorts:

> The thing in my head? I wouldn't– Yeah, cause now you're calling it something I never– I never said that . . . You can't call it a memory . . . He may not even be real because I'm the person that can actually see it and I'm not sure, so we should probably pay attention to that. Yeah, 'cause we don't know. That's a very big thing to assume. I'm just saying that we should refrain from talking about things like they're facts and we should probably just be careful.[72]

It is not until a detective asks Bella who the perpetrator is looking at in the image that she breaks down sobbing. By spacing out flashbacks across episodes and extending the timeframe in which Bella comes to terms with her assault, *I May Destroy You* productively represents the fractured nature of memory. However, this feminist narrative complexity extends beyond the series' textual features to account for the historical context of #MeToo.

This fractured, non-linear accounting of Bella's rape centers survivor voices in the wake of #MeToo in several ways. First, survivors of trauma may not experience memory in a coherent way. This is what researchers have called "fragmented and disorganized trauma memories" or "FDTM."[73] By narratively representing Bella's rape in a fragmented way, the series mimics

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[71] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 2, "Someone is Lying," directed by Sam Miller (HBO, June 14, 2020), 0:05:12.
[72] "Someone is Lying," 0:23:15.
[73] Matt J. Gray and Thomas W. Lombardo, "Complexity of Trauma Narratives as an Index of Fragmented Memory in PTSD: A Critical Analysis," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 15, no. 7 (2001): S171–86, https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.840.

survivor experience through the textual facets of feminist narrative complexity. Second, the series keeps explicit representations of rape off screen. Like *Unbelievable*, *I May Destroy You* avoids potentially traumatizing or eroticizing depictions of rape by keeping representations short and through the literal point of view of the survivor.

Avoiding explicit representations of sexual violence notably does not align with HBO's past programming and overall brand identity. HBO (short for "home box office") defined its brand in the early 2000s with popular original programming, including series such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), *The Wire* (2002–2008), and *Deadwood* (2004–2006).[74] Most succinctly, HBO's reputation hinges on being "not television." This is best exemplified by the company's slogan, "It's not TV, it's HBO." As such, HBO has distinguished itself as "better" than other television networks, making it a tailor-made home for quality television. HBO has a reputation for its creator-centered production, high-quality original programming, and adult content.[75] Since its inception, HBO has been free from censorship from advertisers, parental control groups, and the Federal Communications Commission because it is only available to audiences willing to pay a subscription fee.[76] As such, the company is free from many of the restraints of what can and cannot be shown on television. HBO has embraced this, making explicit, edgy content central to its brand identity, not unlike Miramax's niche marketing strategies in the 1990s discussed in Chapter Two. As Havas argues, HBO's "exclusivity, artistry, and explicit content played a crucial role in establishing the association of some television with

[74] *Six Feet Under*, created by Alan Ball (HBO, 2001–2005); *The Wire*, created by David Simon (HBO, 2002–2008); *Deadwood*, created by David Milch (HBO, 2004–2006).
[75] See Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); Gregory Steirer, "HBO Max: Media Conglomerates and the Organizational Logic of Streaming," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson, Second Edition, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 399–408.
[76] Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

high(er) cultural value."[77] In sum, HBO's reputation for showing explicit content goes hand in hand with its reputation for producing quality television.

HBO's explicit content does have problematic repercussions when it comes to representing sexuality and sexual violence. This is most evident in one of HBO's most successful series, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019).[78] The series features troubling representations of sexuality through its use of sexposition. Coined by Myles McNutt in 2011, sexposition refers to the ways *Game of Thrones* often plays out narratively important scenes against the backdrop of sex and nudity.[79] For example, in a scene in the first season of *Game of Thrones*, one of the central characters, Littlefinger (Aidan Gillen), explains his past relationship with Ned Stark (Sean Bean). However, he tells his story while two female sex workers in a brothel simulate loud lesbian sex. While the scene serves an important narrative purpose of building up Littlefinger's character, explaining his motivations, and foreshadowing his future betrayal of Ned Stark, it is completely undercut by the unnecessary sexualization of women in the background. Beyond this sexposition, many of *Game of Thrones*' central female characters, including Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) and Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner), are raped in explicit ways throughout the series. HBO offers productive representations of #MeToo discourses through *I May Destroy You* while simultaneously relying on the objectification and degradation of women in its other programming. As such, HBO's brand identity for controversial content and explicit sex contradicts the streamer's exhibition of #MeToo Media.

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[77] Havas, *Woman Up*, 34.
[78] *Game of Thrones*, created by David Banioff and D.B. Weiss (HBO, 2011–2019).
[79] Michael Hann, "How 'sexposition' Fleshes out the Story," *The Guardian*, March 11, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/mar/11/sexposition-story-tv-drama; Myles McNutt, "Game of Thrones – 'You Win or You Die,'" *Cultural Learnings*, May 30, 2011, https://cultural-learnings.com/2011/05/29/game-of-thrones-you-win-or-you-die/.

"Busy Being Black and Poor": The Intersectional Shades of Sexual Violence

I May Destroy You also uses feminist narrative complexity to center intersectionality in #MeToo discourses. Notably, *I May Destroy You* is the only #MeToo Media text explored throughout this dissertation with a Black protagonist and a largely Black ensemble cast. Through its use of seriality and flashback episodes, the series uniquely accounts for how gender, class, and race intersect when it comes to sexual violence. Additionally, the series uses its ensemble cast to explore how sexual violence takes on many different forms. These representations are important in a #MeToo landscape as they recenter sexual violence discourses onto marginalized people and expand representations of sexual violence beyond stranger rape. On an industrial level, Michaela Coel's status as a Black, female auteur positions HBO as an inclusive brand. However, HBO exploits Coel's marginalized identity for its self-serving interests, especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

Because *I May Destroy You*'s narrative stretches across twelve episodes, the series importantly has time to account for how different identities are impacted by a range of types of sexual violence. As the protagonist, Bella importantly accounts for the sexual exploitation of Black women. Bella's rapist is a white man, gesturing towards the ways whiteness has historically been leveraged against Black women. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins articulates that because Black women's bodies have historically been fetishized and sexualized, "Violence against Black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned while the same acts visited on other groups may remain non-legitimated and non-excusable."[80] In other words, Western culture's historic sexualization of Black women normalizes sexual violence against Black women in ways other demographics do not face. As previously discussed, the #MeToo

[80] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 146.

movement has a history of delegitimizing survivors of sexual violence who are not white celebrities. By placing a Black woman firmly at the center, *I May Destroy You* combats the silences and erasures of the #MeToo movement and accounts for intersectional oppression when it comes to sexual violence.

Bella as a character also accounts for less conventionally legible forms of sexual violence. While Bella's initial rape is facilitated by drugs and perpetrated by a stranger, she also experiences acquaintance rape later in the series. After struggling with her writing, Bella befriends Zain (Karan Gill), a writer at the same publishing house who agrees to help her with her manuscript. When the two eventually have sex, Zain covertly removes his condom during the act. When Bella expresses concern over this, Zain claims that he thought she knew because he assumed she could feel it. While Bella is shocked, she does not realize she had been violated until she learns from a podcast she is listening to that secret condom removal is legally considered rape in the UK. By representing a multitude of types of sexual violence across several episodes, *I May Destroy You* combats the myth that rape can only be perpetrated by a stranger.

The series continues representing the many different forms sexual violence can take through Bella's friend Kwame (Paapa Essiedu). Kwame as a character accounts for sexual violence within the context of queer relationships. Kwame is a Black gay man who is constantly participating in hookups with other men using the app Grindr. When Kwame attempts to leave the apartment of a stranger he met on the app after a consensual sexual encounter, the man pins a fully-clothed Kwame down onto the bed and humps him until he ejaculates, despite Kwame continually telling him to stop. When Kwame joins Bella on one of her trips to the police station, one of the detectives working her case remarks, "The problem is when people don't know what

is a crime and what isn't a crime, they don't report it."[81] As Kwame leaves the police station, he Googles "non-consensual humping" to see if it technically fits the definition of rape. Kwame returns to the police station later to report the crime. However, he has a much more fraught relationship with the police than Bella. The male police officer is perplexed when Kwame tells him he only knows the perpetrator as "hornyman808." The police officer is also unsure if Kwame's experience is considered rape, when he asks, "Just to clarify, did they penetrate you or– Because there's a big difference between sexual assault and rape."[82] Law enforcement's struggle to identify what happened to Kwame indicates how Kwame's gender and sexual orientation impact his legibility as a survivor of sexual violence.

This scene demonstrates the intersectional oppressions Black gay men face as survivors of sexual violence. This is particularly important in the wake of #MeToo, as straight, white women stand as the primary faces of the movement. Black men in particular face additional cultural barriers to being legible as survivors of sexual violence, primarily in the way that they have historically been characterized as rapists. As Tommy J. Curry argues, "Our belief that Black men are dangerous and in need of control and criminal sanction nullifies our ability to perceive them as victims of violence at the hands of other groups of men or even women."[83] Queer people additionally face difficulty when it comes to being culturally legible as survivors of sexual violence. This is further exasperated by the #MeToo movement, which has had a "disregard of sexual violence against LGBTQ people but especially trans women of color."[84]

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[81] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 5, ". . . It Just Came Up," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, July 6, 2020), 0:08:48.
[82] ". . . It Just Came Up," 0:20:29.
[83] Tommy J. Curry, "Expendables for Whom: Terry Crews and the Erasure of Black Male Victims of Sexual Assault and Rape," *Women's Studies in Communication* 42, no. 3 (2019): 288, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1641874.
[84] Lisa M. Corrigan, "The #MeToo Moment: A Rhetorical Zeitgeist," *Women's Studies in Communication* 42, no. 3 (2019): 264, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1652528.

Kwame crucially reveals how race, sexual orientation, and even the type of sexual assault can render certain survivors less believable than others.

I May Destroy You's nuanced depictions of different types of sexual violence are facilitated by the series' use of feminist narrative complexity. As Caetlin Benson-Allott argues about the series, "To witness so many separate incidents of sexual violence in one series is shocking, but their inclusion dramatizes rape culture in a way that no depiction of a single assault, survivor, or perpetrator ever could."[85] Because the series is extended over twelve episodes, the narrative has the time and attention to not only explore different characters but also put them in conversation with one another through juxtaposition. It is not until we see Bella's validating encounter with the police that the utter disregard Kwame encounters at the station is apparent. Bella's slow realization that secret condom removal is rape throughout the episode helps audiences understand that sometimes coming to terms with assault is an ongoing process. Kwame's experience with sexual violence is parallelled by Zain removing the condom in the same episode to compare two different forms of sexual violence. *I May Destroy You* represents the various shades of sexual violence by leveraging television's seriality to include various types of assault across the series' twelve episodes.

I May Destroy You continues to leverage feminist narrative complexity to account for intersectionality in a flashback episode. As an adult, Bella attends a rape survivor support group run by a childhood acquaintance, a white woman named Theo (Harriet Webb). In a flashback episode to their school days, young Theo (Gaby French) has a troubled home life in her lower-class household with her little brother, mom, and stepdad. When she goes to school, a Black student named Ryan (Josiah Mutupa) takes pictures of her with a cell phone while they have sex.

[85] Caetlin Benson-Allott, "How *I May Destroy You* Reinvents Rape Television," *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2020): 102, https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2020.74.2.100.

After Theo tells him to stop and delete the photos, Ryan offers her money. After the encounter, Theo tells a teacher that the boy raped her at knifepoint. However, when another Black student received the photos of Theo and Ryan together, a group of Black students conclude that Theo lied about the rape. Young Bella (Danielle Vitalis) exclaims, "She's white. We could've done the exact same thing, all we'd get is detention," to which young Terry (Lauren-Joy Williams) agrees, saying, "white girl tears have high currency you know."[86] Bella and Terry decide to report Theo to one of their teachers. When Ryan returns to the friend group after being released, Bella exclaims, "We just helped our brother escape from Babylon!"[87] When Theo is being escorted away by school administration as the Black students yell at her across the courtyard, she mutters the racial slur, "Fucking African monkeys."[88]

This flashback episode uses a non-linear narrative to articulate how Bella has historically based solidarity on race instead of gender. It makes sense that the Black students would be concerned over Theo's claims, as there is a long history of white women falsely accusing Black men of rape, as evidenced by Emmett Till. However, Bella's newfound relationship with Theo as an adult indicates how Bella's solidarity exclusively on racial lines has been shortsighted. As Bella states in the following episode, "Prior to being raped, I never took much notice of being a woman. I was busy being Black and poor."[89] In these ways, *I May Destroy You*'s feminist narrative complexity facilitates its political exploration of how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect.

[86] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 6, "The Alliance," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, July 13, 2020), 0:22:12.
[87] "The Alliance," 0:25:40.
[88] "The Alliance," 0:26:26.
[89] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 7, "Happy Animals," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, July 20, 2020), 0:02:53.

Despite the series' nuanced explorations of intersectionality through feminist narrative complexity, these representations are complicated when they interact with industry. More specifically, HBO as a company exploits the series' racial inclusion for its own socially progressive branding. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd that prompted Black Lives Matter protests across the globe in 2020, HBO asked Michaela Coel to release a statement.[90] While Coel did write a moving poem addressed to Floyd and his mother, the fact that she was requested by the producer of her series to speak out warrants closer attention.[91] HBO unfairly offloads its labor of speaking out about police brutality and racism onto one of its only Black showrunners. This places a burden on Black women to speak on behalf of an entire community. While *I May Destroy You* is one of the few #MeToo texts to center race, HBO manages to exploit this strength for its projections of inclusivity.

Ego Death: Alternative Forms of Justice and Catharsis

Through its seriality and imagined non-diegetic sequences, *I May Destroy You* also employs feminist narrative complexity to explore various paths to justice for survivors. The series uses its extended timeline to explore different forms of catharsis for survivors of sexual violence, including carceral justice, self-care, social media, and more. More crucially, the series uses a series of imagined sequences in its final episode to explore three forms of closure. While *I May Destroy You* is certainly not the only quality television series to use non-diegetic scenarios, the series uniquely leverages these imagined sequences to expand what closure means for survivors of sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo. In doing so, *I May Destroy You* crucially points towards justice and catharsis beyond the police station and violent revenge.

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[90] E. Alex Jung, "Michaela the Destroyer," *Vulture*, July 6, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/article/michaela-coel-i-may-destroy-you.html.
[91] Michaela Coel, "A Mother Weeps, A Search for Justice ensues . . .," *Twitter*, June 7, 2020, https://x.com/MichaelaCoel/status/1269662341634969600.

One area where *I May Destroy You* deviates from *Unbelievable* is the way it does not rely on the criminal justice system to offer true catharsis for survivors of sexual violence. While *I May Destroy You* does explore catharsis within the confines of the justice system, it is not the endpoint in Bella's journey. The police are not represented as incompetent like Detectives Parker and Pruitt in *Unbelievable*. The two detectives who assist Bella in her case are a Black woman and a white woman who are both pregnant. They believe Bella's claims and even help her recognize that what happened to her is rape. However, the detectives eventually inform her that they no longer have any leads and need to close her case. In a #MeToo landscape, sexual violence that ends in arrest should not necessarily be considered the end of the road, especially considering how the criminal justice system impacts racialized identities unevenly. As Ashley Noel Mack and Bryan J. McCann argue, the "criminal justice system is, at every level, a tapestry of racialized and gendered violence that we cannot trust to solve our most pressing social problems."[92] It is not a surprise that the only #MeToo Media text explored here with a Black woman at the center operates outside of the confines of carceral forms of justice.

The series also explores how "self-care" does not necessarily offer catharsis. After Bella's rape, her friend Terry sets off on a mission to help Bella with her "care plan." This plan involves doing "enriching" activities, such as painting, yoga, aerobics, and meditation. However, none of these activities necessarily grant Bella true catharsis. When Terry suggests "destination self-care" after being informed by the police that her case is no longer active, Bella admits, "I've maxed out my cards."[93] In this way, the series explores self-care's ties to capitalism. Banet-Weiser and Higgins articulate that there is a marketplace aimed at fighting sexual violence in the

[92] Ashley Noel Mack and Bryan J. McCann, "Critiquing State and Gendered Violence in the Age of #MeToo," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 3 (2018): 331, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2018.1479144.
[93] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 8, "Line Spectrum Border," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, July 27, 2020), 0:08:31.

context of capitalism, ranging from self-defense devices to apps.[94] They argue that products within this marketplace are "examples in an ever-expanding neoliberal capitalist economy, where sexual violence alongside intimate relationships and individual self-care are distilled into products that make a profit in the name of women's empowerment."[95] Self-care activities and sexual violence prevention products are simply a way for companies to profit off of trauma rather than offer true catharsis for survivors.

I May Destroy You is additionally critical of exploiting one's status as a survivor of sexual violence for cultural capital and economic gain. Bella finds that being a sexual violence survivor comes with a certain amount of cultural cache in the wake of #MeToo. This is most evident in Bella's relationship with her editor and social media. When Bella tells her publishing house that she is going to write about her personal experiences, her editor exclaims, "Rape! Fantastic!"[96] This jarring piece of dialogue reveals how companies can exploit sexual violence trauma for profit. This scene takes on particular importance when putting the series in conversation with industry. As I have continually argued, media industries exploit #MeToo stories for branding purposes. By critically reflecting on this phenomenon within her series, Michaela Coel uses the creative freedom granted to her by HBO to critique her own producers.

Bella also discovers that catharsis is not achieved via social media. As an Internet celebrity after the success of her first book, Bella is further revered once she talks about her rape online. When other survivors turn to Bella for comfort and solidarity, Bella takes on the pain of hundreds of strangers. In an episode titled "Social Media is a Great Way to Connect," Bella is constantly online, often at the expense of her friends and even herself. When a stranger stops her

[94] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, *Believability*.
[95] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 112–113
[96] "Happy Animals," 0:05:34.

on the street to tell Bella about his personal experiences with rape, Bella empathetically remarks, "I am never too busy to talk about pain."[97] As Bella confides with this stranger, Kwame stands from a distance and mockingly remarks, "'Make sure you tell your friends to follow me and make me more powerful.'"[98] As Banet-Weiser and Higgins articulate, "within a broader cultural context of #MeToo and a heightened public awareness of the ubiquity of rape culture, [Bella] also finds that her status as a sexual assault survivor is commodified and positioned as marketable."[99] While #MeToo began as an online hashtag, *I May Destroy You* importantly points to how activism and healing must extend to the material world.

Feminist narrative complexity posits that television texts leverage serial narratives to engage in feminist politics. While feature films may be limited by time constraints, *I May Destroy You* can use each of its twelve episodes to explore a different form of catharsis. This approach allows audiences to directly compare how catharsis via social media compares to catharsis via legal means. Mittell articulates that in narrative complexity, "a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time."[100] Feminist narrative complexity uniquely employs this strategy for political purposes. More specifically, *I May Destroy You* uses its serial narrative to examine how survivors of sexual violence find various paths toward healing over time.

Most importantly, *I May Destroy You* leverages feminist narrative complexity to explore various forms of catharsis through a series of imagined sequences in the final episode, "Ego Death." While this is not necessarily unique to feminist narrative complexity, as other quality

[97] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 9, "Social Media is a Great Way to Connect," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, August 3, 2020), 0:07:53.
[98] "Social Media is a Great Way to Connect," 0:08:23.
[99] Banet-Weiser and Higgins, "Television and the 'Honest" Woman,' 140.
[100] Mittell, *Complex TV*, 10.

series like *The Sopranos* and *Lost* (2004–2010) also use imagined sequences, *I May Destroy You* uniquely employs these sequences to explicitly engage in feminist politics.[101] Later in the series, Bella starts to frequent the bar where she was drugged. In the penultimate episode of the series, Bella sees and recognizes her rapist at one of her bar watch events. This event triggers her memory, and she finally remembers what happened that night. In the series finale, Bella imagines three different scenarios where she confronts her rapist. The episode is structured like a time loop, with each sequence starting the night over utilizing a different form of catharsis.

The first sequence explores violent revenge as a means of catharsis. After Bella recognizes her rapist, she brings in friends Terry and Theo to set a revenge plan in motion. Bella approaches her rapist, David (Lewis Reeves), at the bar and starts a conversation. When David drugs her drink, Bella pretends to drink as Theo covertly steals his drugging powder and puts it into a syringe. Bella feigns being affected by the drug and David takes her into the bathroom stall to assault her. After taking off her underwear and unzipping his pants, Bella drops the façade and says in a clear, sober voice, "A criminal always returns to the scene of a crime, but who's the criminal, you or me? Now."[102] Taking the cue, Theo stabs the syringe into David's ankle from the next stall over. David stumbles out of the bathroom while Terry joins Bella and Theo to celebrate their victory. However, Bella quickly realizes that David still has her underwear in his pocket which could potentially be used as evidence. The trio begin to trail David on the streets of London until he passes out from the drug. Bella and Theo approach David where Bella decides that she wants to see his genitals in exchange for him seeing her genitals. When David begins to wake up from the drug, Theo begins to strangle him with Bella's underwear while Bella starts

[101] *Lost*, created by Jeffery Lieber, J.J. Abrams, and Damon Lindelof (ABC, 2004–2010).
[102] *I May Destroy You*, season 1, episode 12, "Ego Death," directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller (HBO, August 24, 2020), 0:07:51.

punching him repeatedly in the face. He goes limp, dying in the street. In a surreal twist, Bella takes David's corpse home on a London bus (see figure 14). Bella then stashes David's dead

Figure 14: Bella Brings Home the Dead Body of Her Rapist in I May Destroy You

body under her bed. This violent revenge akin to the popular rape-revenge genre in the 1970s does not appear to provide Bella the catharsis that she seeks, as the day begins anew.

In the second sequence, the series returns to the possibility of carceral justice as well as explores the psyche of a rapist. This time when David takes Bella to the bathroom stall, he threateningly grabs her face and delivers a lengthy monologue. While it initially appears that he is threatening and insulting Bella, it soon becomes clear that David is berating himself, as he says repeatedly, "You're a dumb little whore. You're just a dumb, stupid, little whore David. That's what you are. Don't you tell anyone, David. This is our secret and if you tell anyone, if you tell anyone David, I will fucking kill you."[103] During this sequence, Bella takes David to her

[103] "Ego Death," 0:22:11.

bedroom where he sits on her bed and expresses his desire to rape. When sirens begin to sound in the distance and the police arrive at Bella's flat, David begs Bella not to leave him. When the police barge into the bedroom, Bella gives David a hug before the police drag him away. However, this carceral form of justice and this exploration of a rapist's motivations does not conclude the episode, and a final imagined sequence begins.

The final sequence suggests that true catharsis comes from personal healing. This iteration of the night is the most surreal, as the bar is almost entirely empty. This time, Bella offers to buy David a drink and leads him to the bathroom stall where they kiss. This sequence again returns to Bella's flat, but this time, David and Bella have a consensual sexual encounter. The next morning, Bella wakes up, and David is asleep in her bed. He tells her, "I'm not going to go unless you tell me to," to which Bella responds, "Go" (see figure 15).[104] David agrees and

Figure 15: Bella Tells Her Rapist to Leave Her Bedroom in I May Destroy You

[104] "Ego Death," 0:31:12.

begins to exit her room. As he leaves, the bloodied, dead David from the first imagined sequence crawls out from under the bed and follows. This sequence of events seems to offer Bella the answers she was looking for, as the series concludes with Bella finally self-publishing her second book.

Feminist narrative complexity in these three imagined sequences importantly suggests that true catharsis is not necessarily achieved through violent revenge or the police arresting the perpetrator. As Benson-Allott argues about this final iteration of events, "no story of rape is complete unless it includes the moment when the survivor no longer allows it to define them."[105] It is not until David is banished from her room that she can start to move on from the event. This parallels *Women Talking*'s conclusion, suggesting that leaving is a productive way to move on from trauma rather than fighting or staying in the community. These imagined sequences also use feminist narrative complexity to suggest that healing is messy and non-linear. As Jess King argues, "By positing multiple alternate endings, Coel is questioning the nature of closure itself."[106] *I May Destroy You* stands as perhaps the pinnacle example of the political potential of #MeToo Media. By questioning the nature of justice, catharsis, and closure itself, the series not only challenges sexual violence but, more importantly, interrogates how we respond.

Conclusion: Apple TV+ and *The Morning Show*

While individual female creators manage to engage in nuanced #MeToo discourses through feminist narrative complexity, these texts often sit at odds with the companies that produce them. *Unbelievable* productively critiques the criminal justice system and offers a look at the sustained impact of trauma. *I May Destroy You* importantly represents sexual violence as

[105] Benson-Allott, "How *I May Destroy You* Reinvents Rape Television," 105.
[106] Jess King, "The Generative Power of Paradigm Destruction in *I May Destroy You*," in *Inclusive Screenwriting for Film and Television* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 111.

an intersectional issue and offers alternative avenues for justice and catharsis. Despite these effective representations, these streaming companies have yet to come to terms with their longer histories of troubling representations of sexual violence and complicity in enabling abusers. While these streaming platforms offer avenues for female creators to exhibit their stories, these companies simultaneously capitalize off #MeToo for profit. But what happens if a new streaming company does not have the same institutional baggage as Netflix and HBO?

In a star-studded event in 2019, Apple unveiled plans for their exclusive streaming service, Apple TV+.[107] Announcing a slate of original programming from stars such as Jason Momoa, Kumail Nanjiani, M. Night Shyamalan, and even Oprah, the tech giant effectively entered the "streaming wars," rivaling competing streaming services such as Netflix and HBO. Most notably, one of Apple's first original series would be centered around the #MeToo movement: *The Morning Show* (2019–).[108] Based loosely on the book *Top of the Morning*, the series centers around a television morning news program grappling with the departure of lead anchor Mitch Kessler (Steve Carrell) after coworkers accused him of sexual misconduct.[109] Featuring stars such as Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon, the series would feature a hefty price tag of $15 million per episode.[110] The fact that one of the largest companies in the world would explicitly discuss the #MeToo movement with some of the biggest stars in the business with such a large budget in its inaugural scripted series demonstrates the relevance of #MeToo in contemporary streaming. As Donna Peberdy argues, "Launching with a #MeToo story brands

[107] Daniel Holloway, "Apple Reveals New TV Streaming Service," *Variety*, March 25, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/apple-tv-streaming-service-1203171335/.
[108] *The Morning Show*, created by Jay Carson (Apple TV+, 2019).
[109] Joy Press, "How *The Morning Show* Wrote Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon into the #MeToo Moment," *Vanity Fair*, October 29, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/the-morning-show-kerry-ehrin-interview.
[110] Todd Spangler, "Apple TV Plus Will Cost $9.99 per Month, to Launch in November (Report)," *Variety*, August 20, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/apple-tv-plus-9-99-per-month-november-launch-1203307316/.

Apple+ in a particular way: we are invested in these issues."[111] Apple TV+'s immediate foray into #MeToo Media makes clear that these streaming companies have realized that in the age of media convergence and fractured audiences, #MeToo Media sells.

Apple TV+ serves as an interesting example, as it lacks the longer institutional histories of HBO and Netflix. While Apple certainly has a long history as a tech company, its streaming service is less than six years old at the time of this writing. As such, its brand identity and the types of programming it is "known" for is still murky. Perhaps this "fresh slate" allows Apple TV+ certain affordances to address the #MeToo movement. *The Morning Show* is certainly the most literal televisual representation of the #MeToo movement. Not only does it account for sexual violence within the context of media industries and continually reference Weinstein in its narrative, but it is also inspired by true events. While originally intended as a program about the ins and outs of broadcast news, the series was rewritten to account for the #MeToo movement when NBC news anchor Matt Lauer was accused of sexual misconduct during the series' pre-production.[112] The series also replaced *The Morning Show*'s original creator Jay Carson with female creator and writer Kerry Ehrin who could better "pen a woman's experience."[113] Apple TV+ rewriting a series and hiring a female showrunner to more explicitly address the #MeToo movement is an affordance perhaps only granted by a newer company. As discussed in previous chapters, literal representations of the #MeToo movement tend to be less viable in awards and

[111] Donna Peberdy, "Representing Shitty Media Men and Casting Couch Culture: Film and Television's Fictional Reckoning with #MeToo, Sexual Harassment and Assault," in *Toxic Masculinity: Men, Meaning, and Digital Media*, ed. John Mercer and Mark McGlashan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 161.
[112] Ramin Setoodeh, "Jennifer Aniston on How Me Too (and Matt Lauer) Influenced 'The Morning Show,'" *Variety*, October 8, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/film/news/jennifer-aniston-friends-reunion-morning-show-metoo-1203362119/.
[113] Lesley Goldberg and Natalie Jarvey, "Inside Apple's Long, Bumpy Road to Hollywood," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 15, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/apples-bumpy-tv-launch-inside-tech-giants-impending-arrival-hollywood-1247577/.

festival circuits. Perhaps the emergence of new media industry institutions can facilitate alternative ways of representing #MeToo.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF #METOO MEDIA

This dissertation has traced a very recent film and television cycle in Hollywood in the wake of the #MeToo movement. However, #MeToo Media texts do not exist in a vacuum, as they are informed by historic feminist activism and past film and television texts that challenge sexual violence. With this trajectory in mind, the #MeToo Media Cycle is not frozen in time and is continually evolving in line with contemporary activism. Looking forward, #MeToo Media texts continue to be produced every year, evolving with industrial changes and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, the year 2025 and beyond offer numerous opportunities for future #MeToo Media scholarship. Like 2017, the year 2025 begins with the start of a Trump presidency. However, there was no resurgence of the Women's March during the inauguration. Instead, Trump's attacks on Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives have major implications for how Hollywood might navigate inclusive measures moving forward.[1] The Oscars continue to face controversy regarding representation and inclusion at the 2025 Academy Awards.[2] The Sundance Film Festival faces an uncertain future, possibly changing locations in a couple of years.[3] As more companies enter the "streaming wars," streaming's place within Hollywood continues to be negotiated.[4] With this evolving landscape in mind, this conclusion posits the possibilities for the future of #MeToo Media. First, I review what I have argued about the #MeToo Media Cycle thus

[1] See Andrew Ross Sorkin et al., "The War on D.E.I. Heats Up," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/23/business/dealbook/trump-diversity-equity-inclusion.html.
[2] See Scott Feinberg, "Feinberg on Karla Sofía Gascón, 'Emilia Pérez' and a Very Modern Oscars Scandal," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 2, 2025, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/karla-sofia-gascon-emilia-perez-oscars-scandal-1236122527/.
[3] See Chris Gardner, "Sundance Sets Three Cities as Finalists for Future Home of Film Festival," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 12, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/sundance-film-festival-future-location-finalist-cities-boulder-salt-lake-cincinatti-1235999742/.
[4] See Hernan Lopez, "TV's New Big Four: Netflix, YouTube, Disney and Amazon Dominate as Streaming Wars Enter New Phase," *Variety*, September 26, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/netflix-youtube-amazon-disney-big-4-streaming-wars-hernan-lopez-1236156334/.

far. Second, I consider the possibilities for feminist politics within the context of Hollywood, using *Barbie* (2023) as a case study.[5] Finally, I analyze the recent film *Sorry, Baby* (2025) to consider where #MeToo Media may be going next.[6] While some of these questions and concerns remain speculative, I hope they will open potential future lines of scholarly inquiry.

The Cycle So Far

Before gesturing toward the future of #MeToo Media, I review what I have argued about the cycle thus far. Throughout this dissertation, I have articulated a distinct cycle of film and television that has emerged in the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2017. The #MeToo Media Cycle engages in #MeToo discourses and challenges sexual violence through fictional narratives. While individual texts confront sexual violence as a systemic issue, problematize carceral forms of justice, center survivor voices, and articulate how intersectional identities are impacted by sexual violence, these productive representations are curtailed by awards show traditions, independent film discourse, and company branding. After Harvey Weinstein, Hollywood was forced to confront its own malpractice. As demonstrated here, many female filmmakers and creators took on this challenge, explicitly addressing #MeToo in Harvey Weinstein's home turf of Hollywood. However, media industries tend to only acknowledge #MeToo Media in ways that reinforce the status quo. I have explored how these tensions play out in different industry contexts, from mainstream Hollywood to independent cinema to streaming television.

The Academy Awards' outward projections of inclusivity in recent years fail to examine its long history of exclusive practices. Films like *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *Women Talking* (2022), and *She Said* (2022) effectively engage in consciousness raising, confront sexual

[5] *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2023).
[6] *Sorry, Baby*, directed by Eva Victor (A24, 2025).

violence as a systemic issue, and center survivor voices by keeping sexual violence off screen.[7] However, how these films are awarded—and not awarded—at the Oscars reveals shortcomings within media industries. Oscar-nominated #MeToo films often center on the experiences of white women, excluding more inclusive #MeToo films from the Oscars stage. While some #MeToo films were awarded in screenwriting categories, the Best Director award remains elusive for women. Most importantly, literal representations of Weinstein are shut out of the Oscars entirely, revealing how media industry institutions are still unable to fully confront the #MeToo movement head-on. The Academy Awards undercuts the efficacy of #MeToo Media in the awards circuit.

The Sundance Film Festival is another institution with a problematized relationship with #MeToo Media. Independent film has a reputation for providing an alternative venue for more "authentic" voices within media industries. However, Miramax's purchase of *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) placed independent film firmly within mainstream Hollywood.[8] As such, independent #MeToo Media are often reappropriated by the very industrial machine that Harvey Weinstein built. Films such as *The Assistant* (2019), *Late Night* (2019), and *Cat Person* (2023) engage in #MeToo discourses by representing patterns of abuse in the workplace.[9] However, these very topics are precisely what make these films so marketable at the festival. Additionally, Sundance remains marked by a white male indie auteur canon, despite its projections of being a welcoming space for female filmmakers. Finally, independent #MeToo Media tend to reinforce

[7] *Promising Young Woman*, directed by Emerald Fennell (Focus Features, 2020); *Women Talking*, directed by Sarah Polley (United Artists Releasing, 2022); *She Said*, directed by Maria Schrader (Universal Pictures, 2022).
[8] *sex, lies, and videotape*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (Miramax Films, 1989).
[9] *The Assistant*, directed by Kitty Green (Bleecker Street, 2019); *Late Night*, directed by Nisha Ganatra (Amazon Studios, 2019); *Cat Person*, directed by Susanna Fogel (Rialto Pictures, 2023).

dominant ideologies by centering whiteness and focusing on the individual rather than the systemic. Even media industry institutions that position themselves as inclusive often fall short.

Finally, streaming television offers an alternative exhibition site for #MeToo Media. #MeToo television texts such as *Unbelievable* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020) differ from their filmic counterparts through what I term "feminist narrative complexity."[10] More specifically, these series leverage narrative devices such as seriality, non-linear storytelling, and imagined sequences to engage in #MeToo discourses. Through feminist narrative complexity, these series effectively critique law enforcement, represent the effects of trauma, include intersectional identities, and explore alternative forms of catharsis and justice. However, these productive representations sit at odds with the longer histories and brand identities of their producers, HBO and Netflix. These companies exploit women's bodies for marketing purposes while simultaneously using the #MeToo movement to serve a socially engaged brand identity. While television offers unique storytelling devices, streaming companies ultimately complicate these productive articulations of the #MeToo movement.

In sum, this dissertation has analyzed the tensions between the feminist sensibilities of #MeToo Media texts and the regressive practices of media industry institutions. However, these chapters still leave a couple of lingering questions. Can Hollywood ever truly be feminist? And what is next for the future of #MeToo Media? With these questions in mind, the films *Barbie* and *Sorry, Baby* offer possible future scholarly directions for the #MeToo Media Cycle.

Feminism in Hollywood: *Barbie*

I have described the tensions between the feminist potential of media texts and how they circulate within media industries. While not explicitly a #MeToo text, perhaps no film better

[10] *Unbelievable*, created by Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman, and Michael Chabon (Netflix, 2019); *I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel (HBO, 2020).

exemplifies this tension than Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*. Here, I examine how the feminist politics of *Barbie* contrast with the commodification of the film. Then, I argue that analyzing feminism in Hollywood calls for a more ambivalent, nuanced approach than calling texts "feminist" or "not feminist." Ultimately, *Barbie* offers future possibilities for analyzing feminist politics within Hollywood contexts.

Backed by Warner Brothers and toy company Mattel, Gerwig's *Barbie* brings the famous doll to life. The film is set in motion when Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) begins to see cracks in her "perfect" life in Barbieland. When she falls down, develops flat feet, and begins thinking about death, she visits Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) who sends her off to the Real World to find the cause of her ailment. Accompanied by Beach Ken (Ryan Gosling), Stereotypical Barbie faces a rude awakening when the Real World does not function as the matriarchy of Barbieland. Beach Ken, newly learning what "patriarchy" is, returns to Barbieland and leads the other Kens to take over while Stereotypical Barbie is away. After meeting her owners, Gloria (America Ferrera) and her daughter Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), in the Real World, Stereotypical Barbie returns to reclaim Barbieland for the Barbies once again.

Given that the film is simultaneously centered on women's issues and based on a product from a giant corporation, it makes sense that popular discourses surrounding *Barbie* have been centered on whether or not the film is "feminist." The film contrasts the original Barbie doll produced by Mattel in important ways. Since its inception in the 1950s, the doll "has become synonymous with sexist, infantilised and unattainable womanhood in the cultural imagination."[11] In contrast, the film engages directly in women's issues, feminism, and even patriarchy. The film breaks down Stereotypical Barbie's desire to be perfect, encouraging her self-actualization. It

[11] Alicia Byrnes, Janice Loreck, and Nonie May, "'She's Everything': Feminism and the *Barbie* Movie," *Feminist Media Studies*, 2024, 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2381254.

posits the dangers of patriarchal ideology with Ken's radicalization. And, most discussed, it breaks down the double standards women face in society through a lengthy monologue by Gloria. *Barbie* critiques and contrasts what the Barbie doll has historically represented in the cultural imagination through its articulation of feminist politics.

Despite these representations, critics note how *Barbie*'s feminism remains surface-level, often falling into popular feminist discourses.[12] The film's accessible approach to feminism ultimately facilitated enormous financial success. *Barbie* is the first film by a single female director to achieve a staggering $1 billion at the box office.[13] As Sarah Banet-Weiser makes clear about popular feminism, "specific feminist expressions and politics are brandable, commensurate with market logics."[14] *Barbie*'s representation of feminism is safe enough to not damage its commercial appeal. As Alicia Byrnes argues, "Artistry gives way to financial imperative, and Gerwig translates her politics into the lexicon of blockbuster cinema. Ideas like women's rights and the upending of patriarchy are here part of the narrative, so clear as to be accessible—and enjoyable—to the everyman at the multiplex."[15] Additionally, the film's feminism fails to be intersectional. While actors of color, disabled actors, and transgender actors are included in Barbieland, the impact of the characters' identities goes entirely unaddressed, ultimately falling into Kristen J. Warner's conception of plastic representation.[16] Barbieland may be visually

[12] See Alicia Byrnes, "Surface and Depth: Ambivalence as Postfeminist Ideal in *Barbie*," *Feminist Media Studies*, 2024, 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2372010; Byrnes et al., "'She's Everything'"; Ruth Houghton, C. R. G. Murray, and Aoife O'Donoghue, "Kenstituent Power: An Exploration of Feminist Constitutional Change in *Barbie*," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 608–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291463; Stacy Gillis and Chiara Pellegrini, "'In Pink, Goes with Everything': The Cultural Politics of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 4 (2024): 495–501, https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291402.
[13] Rebecca Rubin, "'Barbie' Surpasses $1 Billion Globally After 17 Days of Release," *Variety*, August 6, 2023, https://variety.com/2023/film/news/barbie-billion-dollar-box-office-1235683570/.
[14] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 13.
[15] Byrnes, "Surface and Depth," 5.
[16] Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 32–37, https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2017.71.2.32.

diverse, but the film fails to account for the implications of that diversity. Ultimately, *Barbie* articulates feminist politics in a way that is most safe for its corporate stakeholders, Warner Brothers and Mattel.

Despite this safe presentation of feminism, the film still faced misogynistic backlash after its release. Sarah Banet-Weiser explains that "the rise of popular feminism has encouraged both a response and an intensification of popular misogyny."[17] In other words, as feminism becomes more visible, it becomes more vulnerable to backlash. *Barbie* is a textbook example of this, with right-wing critics calling the film "man-hating."[18] The film was also unequally represented at the Academy Awards. While the film was nominated for eight awards, including Best Picture, audiences were outraged by some notable "snubs," including Greta Gerwig for directing and Margot Robbie for acting.[19] While *Barbie*'s feminism might be safe and accessible, it is not quite accessible enough to overcome misogynistic backlashes and gendered inequalities in the awards circuit.

Barbie ultimately represents a (limited) feminist politic that is simultaneously financially successful. Byrnes articulates this tension best, noting, "The feminist critic thus likely finds herself in an ambivalent relation to her object, happy for *Barbie*'s success but deflated by its articulation of women's issues."[20] This ambivalence poses several questions about the state of feminism in Hollywood today. Can Hollywood ever truly be "feminist" if its goal is centered around financial imperatives? Must feminism always be "watered down" to turn a profit? Should

[17] Banet-Weiser, 4.
[18] See Zack Sharf, "Bill Maher Claims 'Barbie' is 'Man-Hating,' Criticizes Satirical Scene with All-Male Mattel Execs for Not Being Accurate," *Variety*, August 8, 2023, https://variety.com/2023/film/news/bill-maher-slams-barbie-man-hating-preachy-1235690908/.
[19] Armando Tinoco, "'Barbie' Oscars Snubs for Greta Gerwig & Margot Robbie Generate Hollywood Reactions," *Deadline*, January 24, 2024, https://deadline.com/2024/01/barbie-oscars-snubs-greta-gerwig-margot-robbie-hollywood-reactions-1235803695/.
[20] Byrnes, "Surface and Depth," 6.

making a profit even be the goal for feminist texts? Should feminism in Hollywood simply always be discounted for never being "enough"?

I argue that the most productive way to analyze feminism in Hollywood is by accounting for the gray areas, ambivalences, and nuances. While *Barbie* is certainly centered on commodification and has limited articulations of feminist politics, we cannot discount the fact that a huge number of people went to the movies to see a female-directed film centered on women's issues. While I have articulated the many problems in which #MeToo Media are awarded, we cannot dismiss the importance of these films being celebrated on one of the biggest awards stages. Although possibilities for female-directors remain limited, we can celebrate the fact that female-directed stories centered on sexual violence are regularly being produced. Even as I have critiqued distributors for purchasing #MeToo films for their own sense of social engagement, these films are finding wider audiences because of these distribution deals. Ultimately, feminist-oriented Hollywood texts are neither a perfect articulation of feminist politics nor something to be entirely dismissed because they are created within the context of capitalism. We must acknowledge both the possibilities and limitations of these texts. Future scholarship on feminism in Hollywood must make space for all the contradictions, tensions, and nuances that come with it.

The Future of #MeToo Media: *Sorry, Baby*

The discourse surrounding *Barbie* indicates that feminist politics remain at the center of the cultural consciousness. As such, it makes sense that #MeToo Media continue to be released each year. The recent film *Sorry, Baby* indicates potential future directions for the #MeToo Media Cycle. Written, directed, and starring first-time filmmaker Eva Victor, *Sorry, Baby* made its debut at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival. The film follows English graduate student Agnes

(Eva Victor) at a New England university who is sexually assaulted by her academic advisor. I analyze how *Sorry, Baby* draws on past iterations of the #MeToo Media Cycle while simultaneously charting new paths forward.

Internalizing the Cycle: Representing Justice, Trauma, and Identity

As discussed throughout this dissertation, #MeToo Media are a part of a distinct cycle of texts that share specific strategies for challenging sexual violence in the wake of #MeToo. While these texts share certain characteristics, they work semi-independently from one another, as they are produced around the same time. Now that we are over six years removed from the #MeToo movement, the #MeToo Media Cycle has effectively established a "canon" of texts that share certain characteristics, like engaging in systemic critique, keeping sexual violence off screen, using non-linear storytelling, etc. Now that this canon has been established, newer #MeToo Media can internalize and build from previous iterations of the cycle. *Sorry, Baby* draws on many of the questions, patterns, and concerns raised throughout this dissertation, including how these texts are awarded and distributed and how they represent justice, trauma, and identity.

Sorry, Baby importantly reflects several of the industrial aspects of #MeToo Media discussed throughout this dissertation. First, the film is another example of how directors tend to be awarded. Sundance gives out several awards at the end of the festival, some voted by audiences and others by the festival's jury. While the coveted Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic eluded *Sorry, Baby*, the film took home the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award at the end of the festival.[21] Like *Promising Young Woman* and *Women Talking* at the Academy Awards, *Sorry, Baby* is an example of how non-male directors tend to be awarded for writing rather than directing accomplishments. Second, the film reflects the ways #MeToo Media are sucked into the

[21] Matt Donnelly, "'Atropia,' 'Twinless' Win Top Sundance 2025 Awards (Full Winners List)," *Variety*, January 31, 2025, https://variety.com/2025/film/news/sundance-2025-winners-list-1236292692/.

Sundance-Miramax distribution machine established in 1989. The film was one of the few to land a distribution deal during the 2025 festival, selling to A24 for $8 million after a reported bidding war.[22] This sale demonstrates how media industries continue to value #MeToo Media for profit. Even within the first week of its premiere, *Sorry, Baby* indicates how many of the industrial concerns raised throughout this dissertation maintain their relevance in 2025.

Like many #MeToo Media texts explored here, *Sorry, Baby* zooms out beyond the individual to engage in systemic critique. While the story remains very much centered on Agnes' personal journey, the film also critiques academia and medical fields in how they treat cases related to sexual violence. The morning after the assault, Agnes reports it to the university. When she enters a university building for a meeting, two administrator women suddenly appear, eager to talk to Agnes. Troubled by their sudden enthusiasm, Agnes follows them into a meeting room. The two women explain that they are taking the accusations "very seriously." However, this seriousness is ultimately unrealized, as the women explain the university cannot take any action, as the advisor resigned from his position the night before. The two administrators offer sympathy to Agnes by explaining that they "are also women." These vague attempts at establishing solidarity with Agnes along gender lines further emphasize the university's empty promises. This scene reflects *Promising Young Woman*'s critique of how academia fails to enact justice on behalf of survivors.

The film further critiques institutions through its portrayal of doctors. While Agnes is at the hospital after her assault to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases, the doctor is very casual and callous throughout the interaction. He tells Agnes she shouldn't have bathed after the

[22] Rebecca Rubin, "'Sorry, Baby' Sells to A24 Following Sundance Film Festival Premiere," *Variety*, February 2, 2025, https://variety.com/2025/film/news/sorry-baby-sells-sundance-film-festival-premiere-eva-victor-lucas-hedges-1236288784/.

incident and instead should have gone straight to the emergency room. Whenever he uses the word "rape," Agnes visibly flinches. Agnes' friend and roommate Lydie (Naomi Ackie) who attends the appointment chastises the doctor for his aggressive tone. Like *Unbelievable*, the film critiques institutions' treatment of sexual assault survivors by representing approaches that lack empathy. *Sorry, Baby* reveals how #MeToo Media continue to use individualized narratives to engage in systemic critique.

An institutional body that is noticeably absent from *Sorry, Baby* is the police. Both the university and the doctor bring up reporting the assault to police, but Agnes refuses. She explains that she does not want to see the perpetrator in jail, and she does not want to ruin his life. The absence of police functions in a few different ways. First, it represents how Agnes has internalized the white male victimhood, "funhouse mirror" rhetoric in the wake of the #MeToo movement.[23] This reveals how survivors of sexual violence themselves can buy into rape myths. Second, the absence of police removes the possibility of achieving catharsis and justice through carceral means. Instead, Agnes finds solace and healing in her relationships with herself and her friends. Texts like *I May Destroy You* and now *Sorry, Baby* indicate a shift in #MeToo Media that removes true catharsis from the police station. In doing so, these texts break away from the #MeToo movement's reliance on carceral forms of justice and expose law enforcement's uneven treatment of sexual violence survivors.

Like the films explored in Chapter One, *Sorry, Baby* chooses to keep representations of sexual violence entirely off screen. The film represents Agnes' assault through a series of jump cuts outside of the building where the assault takes place. Agnes arrives at her academic advisor Decker's (Louis Cancelmi) house to meet about her thesis. He answers the door and invites her

[23] See Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*.

in, explaining that his kids are not home and are with his ex-partner. The camera does not enter the house, instead opting to stay stationary outside. While Agnes entered the house during the day, a jarring jump cut cuts to sunset, with the camera continuing to remain stationary outside of the house. A second jump cut then cuts to nighttime. This time, Agnes leaves the house holding her boots in her hand. Decker stands in the doorway as Agnes runs back to her car. In an excruciating long shot, Agnes drives home, her face stoic and unmoving as she grapples with what happened to her. The audience learns about the assault after Agnes returns home and confides in Lydie what happened. Lydie listens intently as Agnes sits in the bathtub and describes the assault in long close up shots. The film is much more interested in the *impact* of the assault rather than the assault itself. In keeping sexual violence entirely off screen, texts like *Women Talking* and *Sorry, Baby* center survivor experience and avoid potential triggering or exploitative representations of sexual violence.

Although *Sorry, Baby* is not a television series, it does engage with aspects of feminist narrative complexity to engage in #MeToo discourses. More specifically, the film uses non-linearity and time jumps to represent the ongoing effects of trauma after an assault. The film is organized into four chapters, each accounting for a year in Agnes' life. The film starts with the most recent chronological year, "The Year of the Baby," where Agnes is living alone and working full time at the university. Lydie, who now lives in New York City, visits Agnes and reveals that she is pregnant. When Lydie leaves after the visit, she expresses concern over Agnes' wellbeing. Agnes jokes that she won't kill herself and that if she was going to, she would have done so three years ago. The film then cuts back in time three years to "The Year of the Bad Thing," which represents Agnes' assault. The following year in "The Year with the Questions," the assault continues to haunt Agnes as she is called for jury duty. Another year

passes in “The Year with the Good Sandwich.” Even years after the incident, Agnes has a panic attack in her car. When she pulls over into a parking lot, a sandwich shop owner, Pete (John Carroll Lynch), comes outside and helps her breathe through her panic attack and gives her a free sandwich. The film ends by returning to “The Year of the Baby.” Lydie is back visiting, this time with her partner and new baby. When Lydie and her partner leave for a day trip, Agnes confides with the baby that bad things will inevitably happen to them in life. However, Agnes will be there to talk with them if they ever need it.

Sorry, Baby leverages non-linear storytelling in ways similar to *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You*. By bookending the film with “The Year of the Baby,” the film represents how Agnes’ healing journey is not necessarily linear. In jumping across years, the film articulates how trauma manifests in different ways at different stages of Agnes’ life. Objects Agnes discarded in “The Year of the Bad Thing” come back in subsequent chapters like skeletons in the closet. The boots Agnes wore during her assault are shoved into a bag in her closet and are unearthed years later. The thesis that Agnes has refused to read after her assault comes back when she is asked to teach a university course on her thesis topic. By accounting for four years in Agnes’ life, the film represents the ongoing effects of trauma and Agnes’ long path toward healing. Although not a television series, *Sorry, Baby*’s non-linear narrative reveals feminist narrative complexity’s continued efficacy in #MeToo storytelling.

Like many of the #MeToo texts explored here, *Sorry, Baby* features a white protagonist. However, the film’s inclusion of a gender non-conforming survivor manages to explore how intersectional identities are impacted by sexual violence. Director, writer, and star Eva Victor uses they/she pronouns, and this gender non-confirming is reflected in Agnes’ character in some ways. When Agnes reports for jury duty and fills out paperwork, she struggles to decide which

"gender" bubble to fill out on her form. She fills in the "female" bubble but then draws a complex, in-between arrow towards the "male" bubble. This paired with Agnes' androgynous wardrobe centers how sexual violence impacts individuals with fluid gender identities. The film also accounts for intersectionality through Agnes' friend Lydie, a Black lesbian who comes to terms with her sexuality throughout the film. Like *I May Destroy You*, *Sorry, Baby* represents intersectional identities through its gender non-conforming, non-white, and queer characters.

Beyond the Cycle: Intimacy After Violence, Humor, and First-Time Filmmakers

While *Sorry, Baby* has certainly internalized many of the representations and strategies from previous iterations of the #MeToo Media Cycle, it also importantly departs from these texts in several ways. The film stands apart by representing intimacy after violence and engaging humor as a coping mechanism. Additionally, the film is the only text explored here made by a first-time filmmaker. *Sorry, Baby* gestures toward potential future directions and possibilities for the #MeToo Media Cycle.

As a #MeToo Media text, *Sorry, Baby* uniquely explores how survivors engage in sexual intimacy after violence. Throughout the film, Agnes keeps running into her polite, eager neighbor Gavin (Lucas Hedges). After her assault, she has mediocre, unfulfilling sex with Gavin. Agnes looks amused but a bit uncomfortable as Gavin thrusts on top of her. Gavin asks if she enjoyed the sex, to which Agnes politely says yes. However, things look different when she has sex with Gavin again later in the film. This time, Agnes appears to be enjoying it much more and manages to achieve climax. These representations of Agnes' sex life after her assault make *Sorry, Baby* an incredibly unique #MeToo narrative. Most #MeToo texts explored here do not represent survivors of sexual violence experiencing sexual intimacy after their assault. The exception to this is Bella in *I May Destroy You*, who is assaulted again after her partner removes

his condom without her consent. *Sorry, Baby* instead articulates that consensual sexual intimacy is possible after sexual assault. Future scholarship should consider the implications of representing healing and pleasure in the face of trauma and violation.

Sorry, Baby also uniquely leverages comedy to engage in #MeToo discourses. Notably, Victor's professional background is in writing stories for the satirical website *Reductress* and creating viral comedy videos on social media.[24] Victor's comedy background informs *Sorry, Baby*'s approach to representing sexual violence. While *Sorry, Baby* is certainly not the only comedic #MeToo Media text (Mindy Kaling and *Late Night* are a prime example of this), the film manages to balance its representations of trauma with moments of levity. The film's humor functions in several different ways. First, the film uses satire to engage in its critique of institutions. When the doctor at the hospital tells Agnes she needs to go to the emergency room immediately after being assaulted, Agnes dryly responds, "I'll remember that for next time." Second, the film explores how humor can be used as a coping mechanism, as Agnes regularly jokes about committing suicide. As one reviewer of the film notes, "Victor shows us a woman who uses humor to dodge and deflect—to avoid tangling with life's trickier moments and tougher realities."[25] Similar to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's series *Fleabag* (2016–2019), *Sorry, Baby* explores how humor can be used to cope with trauma.[26] Finally, the series engages humor in a way that centers survivor humanity. Victor's portrayal of Agnes makes clear that Agnes is simply a very funny person. By showing her humor throughout the film, *Sorry, Baby* centers Agnes' personality while simultaneously confronting her trauma. Using humor to engage in

[24] Mia Galuppo, "How Social Media Maven Eva Victor Became a Bona Fide Sundance Auteur," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 24, 2025, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/eva-victor-interview-sundance-2025-sorry-baby-1236110771/.
[25] Jon Frosch, "'Sorry, Baby' Review: Eva Victor's Feature Debut Is a Frank, Funny and Tender Spin on the Female 'Traumedy,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 28, 2025, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/sorry-baby-review-eva-victor-naomi-ackie-lucas-hedges-1236118828/.
[26] *Fleabag*, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Amazon Studios, 2016–2019).

sexual violence discourses is not necessarily new, as "feminist and other political movements have long used humor, laughter, and parody as forms of resistance, and even as ones of subversion, in coping with, or providing relief from oppression and violence."[27] However, future scholarship should consider how comedy can be used as a vehicle for engaging in #MeToo discourses in the #MeToo Media Cycle.

Eva Victor differs from the directors and showrunners of the other #MeToo Media texts explored throughout this dissertation by being a first-time filmmaker. When Victor wrote their first feature-length screenplay during the COVID-19 pandemic, they reached out to one of their social media followers: Oscar-winning director Barry Jenkins.[28] Victor asked Jenkins if he would consider directing, as they never had any formal training in filmmaking. Jenkins expressed that Victor was already exhibiting the necessary skills in their social media content. Jenkins came onto the project as a producer and Victor ended up directing the film. As a first-time filmmaker, Victor does not carry the same institutional baggage that comes from a more conventional background in filmmaking. Amateurs without formal training "have the ability to see through the dominant paradigms, are freer to recombine elements of paradigms thought long dead, and can apply everyday life experiences to their deliberations."[29] Perhaps this facilitates a certain degree of freedom from institutional norms and industrial practices for first-time filmmakers. Future scholarship should consider the affordances first-time filmmakers have when it comes to crafting #MeToo narratives.

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[27] Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen, "Inappropriate Laughter: Affective Homophily and the Unlikely Comedy of #MeToo," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883425.
[28] Galuppo, "How Social Media Maven Eva Victor."
[29] Critical Art Ensemble, *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media* (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2001), 8.

Now that the #MeToo Media canon has been established, new #MeToo Media producers like Eva Victor draw on and expand previous iterations of the cycle. *Sorry, Baby* indicates how the #MeToo Media Cycle has potentially entered a new phase that draws on previous canons paired with innovative paths forward. By gesturing towards *Sorry, Baby*'s representations of intimacy after violence, its use of humor, and Victor as a first-time filmmaker, I hope to open potential future scholarly directions for the #MeToo Media Cycle.

Conclusion: Now What?

In this conclusion, I have articulated some potential paths forward for #MeToo Media that future scholarship should consider. First, I have considered questions about the efficacy of engaging in feminist politics in the context of Hollywood. While I have largely argued that media industries undercut the successes of #MeToo Media texts, we must also make space for the more gray areas in which feminist politics are articulated in Hollywood contexts. Second, I have explored how *Sorry, Baby* stands as an example of the past, present, and potential future of #MeToo Media. While the film engages in many of the industrial and political discourses characteristic of past iterations of the #MeToo Media Cycle, its exploration of intimacy after violence, its use of humor, and its status as a text made by a first-time filmmaker indicate some potential shifts and opportunities for future #MeToo Media texts.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues for systemic industrial change in Hollywood in the wake of the #MeToo movement. While changes like diversifying the Academy, including a record number of female-directed films at the Sundance Film Festival, and offering creators like Michaela Coel full creative control of their work are certainly important markers of progress, media industries have yet to fully confront how their institutions have enabled sexual violence and abuse over the years. As institutions face cultural reckonings in the face of social movements

and activism, inclusive practices and systemic change must move beyond the cosmetic and the surface level. To engage in meaningful institutional change in the wake of #MeToo, these media industry institutions must more closely examine their roots and how they have enabled exclusive practices and even violence. In doing so, Hollywood might better support female-directed #MeToo Media at all stages, including hiring, funding, production, distribution, and exhibition.

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