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The Visual Language of Oppression: Harvey Wasn't Working in a Vacuum



by [Nina Menkes](https://filmmakermagazine.com/author/nina-menkes/) in [Filmmaking](https://filmmakermagazine.com/category/filmmaking/) on Oct 30, 2017

Like many others who work in the film business, I find none (zero) of the revelations about Harvey Weinstein's behavior even remotely surprising.

His abusive work style was widely known, and, until two weeks ago, even admired by many of his male colleagues and/or competitors. And as is becoming increasingly clear, he was most definitely not alone.

Pretty much everyone within a 1,000-mile radius of the biz is well aware that Sex-for-Work is Standard Operating Procedure in Hollywood. As Quentin Tarantino recently explained, in its treatment of women, Hollywood has been “operating under an almost Jim Crow-like system.” Precisely. Within this system, men are subjects and young women are objects for gratification/consumption.

Glamorous Sexual Objects cannot be imagined as film directors or DPs by those holding power. It just doesn't click with the Hollywood system. Looks wrong. Feels wrong. Just no. And less than glamorous and/or over-40-year old women are more or less invisible. Not even in the running for Object-dom. Therefore the beyond-dire statistics we have lived and suffered for decades.



An entire culture of visual language supports and encourages this system, justifying both the perpetrators' actions and the victims' humiliated silence. It is essential that this visual code of oppression be exposed and understood.

We've all heard the phrase "the objectification of women," but most don't know how precisely and insidiously this objectification manifests itself cinematically inside the very details of shot design. Laura Mulvey, in her seminal expose, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," was the first to explain that women in traditional cinema primarily signify "to-be-looked-at-ness."

Demoting half the world's population to use-object happens not only at the level of script and narrative but within actual framing choices and lighting strategies. (https://accoun

Almost without exception, every “important” and “great” white male director, those who win Cannes or the Academy Awards, those who are considered must-see viewing for any aspiring student of cinema — e.g. Hitchcock, Welles, Scorsese, Godard, Tarantino, Aronofsky (to name only a few) — utilize cinematic techniques that belittle women while appearing to glamorize them.

And although these directors are considered auteurs with their own distinct styles, and their films represent very different stories and genres, there is a stunning consistency, and frankly, a total lack of originality around the way these men use lighting, angles, POV and framing to formally disempower women on screen.

While we are watching an exciting spy story, an emotional drama, or an allegory set in the Garden of Eden, the powerful message we are actually absorbing is consistent information about who gets to be a subject and who doesn't. It's hard to over emphasize how widespread and destructive these techniques are...leading women to understand that their best — and maybe only — chance for advancement is through sexual attractiveness.

It's therefore no surprise that many women try very, very hard to turn themselves into beautiful objects in order to succeed in relationships, or on the job (two categories that can often overlap). It doesn't work that well for most, but for those women who do advance, via this route, the price is steep.

Over my many years teaching film, both at USC's School of Cinematic Arts and currently at California Institute of the Arts, I have watched many female film students — and of course, the male students — reproduce the same kind of images they have been seeing (why wouldn't they?) without even being aware that they are doing so. As a result, I developed a visual talk that exposes these systematic cinematic techniques: “Sex and Power: the Hidden Language of Cinema,” which I will be presenting at Sundance 2018. This visual language lays the most basic groundwork for a system in which the most promising male students will go on to get directing jobs, while women, no matter how deeply talented, barely stand a chance.

Hollywood and its “almost Jim Crow” system of discrimination against women is one of the major players in a massively destructive ideology which idealizes ego, male power and financial profit over anything else. This has been called, appropriately, “Rape Culture,” and it is destroying our planet.

One can hope that Harvey Weinstein's fall signals the beginning of a new consciousness.

Nina Menkes is a prominent independent filmmaker and a member of the film faculty at California Institute of the Arts. She will be giving her visual presentation: "Sex and Power: the Hidden Language of Cinema" at Sundance 2018. For more information, please see: [ninamenkes.com](https://account.ninamenkes.com) (<https://account.ninamenkes.com>); follow her on twitter [@menkesfilm](https://twitter.com/menkesfilm) ([http://www.twitter.com/menkesfilm](https://twitter.com/menkesfilm)); follow her on twitter [@menkesfilm](https://twitter.com/menkesfilm) ([http://www.twitter.com/menkesfilm](https://twitter.com/menkesfilm))



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WordyDoodles · 2 years ago

"a stunning consistency, and frankly, a total lack of originality around the way these men use lighting, angles, POV and framing to formally disempower women on screen." Yes. Thank you for saying it out loud. Thank you for teaching this and hopefully increasing the number of filmmakers and storytellers who think twice about the cliches, the formalisms, the tropes that surround us-- and that need to evolve, improve, sharpen.

55 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

Nina Menkes → WordyDoodles · 2 years ago

Thank you so much!!!!!! :-)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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Nic M · 2 years ago

Will the talk be recorded? It would be so great if it were!

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Adrienne · 2 years ago

Great article!

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Nina Menkes → **Adrienne** · 2 years ago

Thank you very much!!!!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ronald Eubanks · 2 years ago

Almost always, in every film blockbuster, women's bodies (not women themselves) are used as reward for some magnificent feat of accomplishment by men or they are brutalized and portrayed as something to be dispensed with or disposed of. Undoubtedly, this is an intentional path to film riches; one that is not just encouraged by producers and directors, but demanded of them.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Nina Menkes · 2 years ago · edited

Im aware of gay sex demands in hwd, you are of course totally right- i think the diff is that men are still men and still glean the privileges that come with that. for example-there are many high profile and well paid gay male directors, but women-very, very few. So as a class, women are far more.....screwed, overall.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Simon_Q → **Nina Menkes** · 2 years ago

If someone can face sexual harassment and sexual demands and still have access to the privileges of Hollywood, the two things might not be connected. You're proposing that Hollywood presents an "almost Jim Crow" of oppressive anti-female behaviors that reinforce each other. The gay male (or all-gender underage) experience disrupts your theory. If you're wrong there, maybe Godard's framing or Tarantino's lighting don't affect working Hollywood women either.

(Incidentally, it's in poor taste for white Americans to call themselves "the new blacks" under any circumstances. Hollywood's treatment of women is poor but it is not the new Jim Crow any more than it is the new Holocaust.)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Nina Menkes → **Simon_Q** · 2 years ago · edited

I appreciate your perspective, Actually it was Quentin Tarantino who called Hwd an "ALMOST Jim Crow-like system" of discrimination (quoted in the NY Times), but

yes, I was quoting him because I agree. No question that Jim Crow was worse, its polemical. (https://accoun

13 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Si Llage → Simon_Q · 2 years ago · edited

"Your're proposing that Hollywood presents an "almost Jim Crow" of oppressive anti-female behaviors that reinforce each other. The gay male (or all-gender underage) experience disrupts your theory."

Because gay men are women? Huh?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Lucky Mochiano → Si Llage · 2 years ago

No. Because gay men aren't going to sexually oppress women. How could you think he's saying gay men are women??

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Nina Menkes → Simon_Q · 2 years ago · edited

I appreciate your perspective. Actually it was QUENTIN TARANTINO who used the phrase "almost Jim crow ilke" to describe discrimination in hwd., and I was quoting him-- since I found it precise. see New York Times article

<https://www.nytimes.com/201...>

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Cliff Tarpey · 2 years ago · edited

"Almost without exception, every "important" and "great" white male director, those who win Cannes or the Academy Awards, those who are considered must-see viewing for any aspiring student of cinema — e.g. Hitchcock, Welles, Scorsese, Godard, Tarantino, Aronofsky (to name only a few) — utilize cinematic techniques that belittle women while appearing to glamorize them."

"And although these directors are considered auteurs with their own distinct styles, and their films represent very different stories and genres, there is a stunning consistency, and frankly, a total lack of originality around the way these men use lighting, angles, POV and framing to formally disempower women on screen"

i'm gonna have to call bullshit on this one. i mean one could easily make this claim about any of your films with female subjects. except you'd be accused of simply belittling women without the glamorization aspect

2 ^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›

pwwparsons → Cliff Tarpey · 2 years ago · edited

I think continually of Jon-Benet Ramsey, and the "socialization", in, and by, our culture, of "girls", and their process/"progress" to "womanhood". Was she not martyred/murdered because she was manipulated into being the kind of "object" that "succeeded" after a "fashion"? Think of Shirley Temple, etc. etc. in Hollywood terms, too. Who could have imagined the price that "God" and/or his various, vicious Patriarchal delegates, would exact from Eve/women for his "gift" of Adam's Rib?! And/or the consequences of our ignorance

of, and from, its fatal effects?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

(https://accoun

ron.roguearts@gmail.com · 2 years ago

Regarding your statement. The sex issue has always been an issue in show biz. As a male actor many gay agents and producers and directors suggested having a sexual relationship with me and it would have boosted my career. I did not agree with that suggestion and do not regret it. So just not men approaching women but men approaching men

2 ^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›

Si Llage → ron.roguearts@gmail.com · 2 years ago

Why do men always, always do this in these conversations?

The author's finger is pointed squarely at power-backed men's collective behaviors against women and the entire rest of the world, "...ego, male power and financial profit over anything else...is destroying our planet."

Your painfully predictable "men get sexual harassed by men too" does not in any way contradict or add to the article, which acknowledges that the problem is men's historically systematized predations against the whole world, a world that includes you.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Lucky Mochiano → Si Llage · 2 years ago

I've replied to you above. but just in case:

Si Llage, he wasn't contradicting the article, so well observed. Ron merely seeks to point out that men should be inclusive of the article... which is what you also say... so you agree with him and yet you seem to be trying to denigrate his comment and suggest his experiences are invalid because he has Y chromosomes.

2 ^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›



Dewey → Si Llage · 2 years ago

Way to shut him down. He deserves to be silenced, don't you think?

^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›

Ruby Dynamite → Dewey · 2 years ago · edited

When the article and the issue at hand are about primarily women being victims of Weinstein and his ilk in Hollywood and basically the world at large? 'It happens to men, too' is nothing but derailing and not the least bit productive.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Winky Granfoers → Ruby Dynamite · 23 days ago

Hos mad

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Lucky Moochiano → Ruby Dynamite • 2 years ago

How so? OHHHHH cos you're a sexist cunt. No worries :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Lucky Moochiano → Dewey • 2 years ago

No Dewey he does not. Why would a victim of sexual harassment deserve to be silenced?

1 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share ›

Maria Giese → ron.roguearts@gmail.com • 2 years ago

The next barrier that needs to be crushed is the sexual abuse of gay men and of male and female children in Hollywood.

3 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share ›

Alanna Bulletproof-Tiger Blair → Maria Giese • 2 years ago

And as Weinstein upped the ante for turning the tables on Rape Culture towards women, Kevin Spacey is showing us how badly that reform is needed for male victims of Rape Culture as well.

I'm glad you didn't agree, Ron.

^ | v 1 • Reply • Share ›

Lucky Moochiano → ron.roguearts@gmail.com • 2 years ago

hahaha, apparently judging by the comments below, only women can be victims. It's ok I get your point, which is that Hollywood is a predatory mechanism regardless of your gender. You're seeking a point of gender equality, and in response are the comments replying to you, saying "Noooo, it's women's chance to be the victims (as always) :(Stop ruining it! Stop mansplaining that men can be victims too! We know! obviously we just don't want to recognize it" ... in response to Si Llage, he wasn't contradicting the article, so well observed. Ron merely seeks to point out that men should be inclusive of the article... which is what you also say... so you agree with him and yet you seem to be trying to denigrate his comment and suggest his experiences are invalid because he has Y chromosomes.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

anton cattunar → Lucky Moochiano • 2 years ago

gay means soft and political correct bullshit

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Florica1 • 2 years ago

Thank you so much for showing all this in the light. It's been hidden for so long. And I can say I feel more than happy that you relate all of what's going on in the film industry with everything else on the planet. That * Rape Culture* is literally destroying everything on Earth. And it was going on since ages. The rape of our beloved Earth goes hand in hand with the disempowering of women. And it will not stop until we, all of us, humans, we understand and accept this reality.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Marie Christine • 2 years ago

right on

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

samazon13 • 2 years ago

This would be reason enough for me to try to get to Sundance for the 1st time. Thank you so much for this article. You are saying what I have been thinking for years. Why I don't want to go to film school. We need a new language of film: the one that has been enshrined into reverence doesn't serve women. Why the hell would we want to perpetuate it?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

timhulsey • 2 years ago • edited

What would be an example of filmmaking that _doesn't_ "disempower women" through montage and/or composition? I can think of one or two -- Barbara Loden's "Wanda" immediately comes to mind -- but almost without exception the films I'm thinking of are gritty, documentary-like affairs in which the images have been deliberately purged of aesthetic appeal. Is there a widely released, commercial American film that avoids these strategies?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Nina Menkes → timhulsey • 2 years ago

A few personal favorites would include- VAGABOND by Agnes Varda// jeanne dielmann, by Akerman// amazingly, the new blockbuster BLACK PANTHER does a great job of NOT objectifying (female DP surely helped)//all films by Julie Dash// Selma, by Ava DuVernay, while not female centered still does not objectify, "Wendy and Lucy," directed by Kelly Reichardt (and, ummm all my movies, naturally, :-) :-) ;)

19 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

timhulsey → Nina Menkes • 2 years ago

I'll grant most of those _except_ BLACK PANTHER.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Nina Menkes → timhulsey • 4 months ago

BLACK PANTHER still male centric but at least on a photographic level the women were not diminished!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

timhulsey → Nina Menkes • 4 months ago

Except for their outfits.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Aric Gardner → timhulsey • 2 years ago

Harold and Maude comes to mind.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

timhulsey → Aric Gardner · 2 years ago

I think maybe that one might work.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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Cathy Akers → timhulsey · 2 years ago

Professor Marston and the Wonder Women did a good job of representing women in non-objectifying ways.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

timhulsey → Cathy Akers · 2 years ago

... except, of course, in the title ...

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Cathy Akers → Cathy Akers · 2 years ago

Also Lynne Ramsey's Morvern Callar.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Laura Geralyn Kline-Etheridge · 2 years ago



1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Winky Granfoers · 23 days ago

Fat hag mad.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Susanne G. Seiler · 2 years ago

Let's not forget about all the abused young men for whom exactly the same holds!

^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›

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