How Fiction Impacts Our World

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The Weinstein Company and Miramax are responsible for some of the largest films of the past four decades. These films have shaped where the film industry moves (like *Pulp Fiction*), were widely praised (like *The King's Speech*), and have made hundreds of millions of dollars (like *Chicago*). Harvey Weinstein is one of the most important financiers in Hollywood. And after decades of sexual harassment and assault against women, he was finally fired. One of the men most responsible for the shape of film today has been mistreating women for decades. Now think about film: what we learn from it and what it teaches us. Horror films have us on the edge of our seats in anticipation; comedies have us wiping tears of laughter from our eyes. So, what effect does a sexist film have? Harvey Weinstein is not only part of the problem—he is a symptom of it as well. He produces films that promote these ideas, but why? Is it possible that it is because of the films he grew up with, the films he loved? Film is one of the biggest industries in the world. If it is propagating sexism, what is this doing to the viewers of these films, as well as future film makers, the people who will lead this industry going forward? The sexism prevalent in not only the film industry, but also its films, helps ensure that the status quo of inequality remains for years to come.

One can argue about the effects of gender-biased film all day, but if the person they are talking to does not believe film as a whole is biased, the argument is pointless. So, is film gender-biased? Whether it is bias within the films, or bias related to who can work on them, the answer is yes. A 2016 study by USC Professor Stacy L. Smith evaluated the 100-top grossing films of every year from 2007-2015. It found that "Out of 4,370 speaking or named characters evaluated, 68.6% were male and 31.4% were female…[and] there has been no meaningful change in the percentage of girls and women on screen between 2007 and 2015." But underrepresentation extends to more than just female characters—it also extends to LGBT characters, minority race groups, and characters with disabilities. And the issue is not simply a general lack of representation, but the type of representation these groups get. Women are routinely shown as more sexual than men, with nudity or revealing clothing being par for course for women—even those aged 13-20. In fact, in 2012, 13-20 year olds were almost 20% more likely than 21-39 year olds to be shown either partially naked or in sexually-

revealing clothing, 56.6% and 39.9% respectively for sexually-revealing clothing, and 55.8% to 39.6% for partial nudity (Smith, et al.). The same is true for other groups as well, as they're often represented stereotypically. Think of the gay best friend with extremely effeminate characteristics and a deep knowledge of fashion in *Legally Blonde*, or the gong and poor English of "Long Duk Dong" in *Sixteen Candles.*

The numbers are even worse behind the camera. Smith's study also found that "across 800 films and 886 directors, only 4.1% were women" and that only 1.4% of the composers working on film from 2007-2015 were female. If so few women are working on film, how can we expect them to be portrayed equally and fairly? The issue certainly isn't a shortage of women interested in film, as almost 50% of all film school enrollees are female (Murphy). So the issue lies in Hollywood's hiring practices. If the men at the top of the film industry refuse to finance female-led films as readily, then how will we reach equilibrium? It is a fixable issue, but it is not easy—bias in the film industry goes all the way to the top people like Harvey Weinstein who abuse their positions to take advantage of not only women who are powerless, but also women as high up in Hollywood as Kate Beckinsale and Gwyneth Paltrow.

Problematic media is any media with themes that promote or display, whether intentionally or unintentionally, prejudiced or supremacist themes and ideas. But what exactly does that mean in the real world? *Star Wars* is one of the biggest film series of all time, but that does not mean it is without fault, especially with how it treats the women of the original trilogy. There are four speaking females among the trilogy's entire cast, one of which has only one line, and the total runtime dedicated to female characters speaking outside of Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia is one minute and three seconds. But this is perhaps not the worst way these three films treat their female characters. To see that we have to look at *The Empire Strikes Back*. The scene in question takes place between Han Solo, played by Harrison Ford, and Princess Leia. Solo starts to make romantic advances towards her, and she responds by saying no "eight different times with both verbal and nonverbal communication" (Mcintosh). However, instead of accepting this, he continues to the point of kissing her without consent. This is played as romantic. Not as creepy, or inappropriate, but romantic. How does she respond? She proves him right, she teaches men that women are simply playing hard to get and that secretly, they want it. That is the problem, the writing is such that a female is being presented in an unrealistic, and dangerous, way. The script is teaching harmful lessons. If the argument is that Solo was right in pressuring her, because she did want it, the point still stands that if she was not consenting, it does not matter. He is not justified in pressuring her. The script sends a different message however, and that is why this is a textbook example of media with problematic themes.

Another example from a Harrison Ford movie is that of *Blade Runner*, where Deckard (Ford) tells Rachael (Sean Young) she is an android, which upsets her immensely, at which point he tries to kiss her. After she rejects his advances, even

trying to leave the room, he blocks her in, pushes her against a window and demands a kiss. "When she tries to protest, he doesn't listen. And commands her to 'ask for it.'… [so] Deckard… is shifting the blame, and the culpability, for this assault away from himself and onto Rachel. He is forcing her to make the assault her fault" (Mcintosh).

Upon originally watching *Blade Runner,* this scene horrified me. I saw it for what it was: sexual assault. But after becoming aware of the romantic music that swells after their kiss, it's hard to argue that the scene was not intended to frame this interaction as romantic instead of horrifying. This brings up an interesting point. I really love *Blade Runner* and think it is a brilliant, beautiful movie—but I still believe it is okay to criticize it. One can argue that the intention was not to frame this romantically, but the direction and editing make it such that this reading of the scene seems incongruous with the filmmaker's intent. That is okay. One can still like a piece of media that has problematic scenes or themes. But one should always look at fiction critically, at what it is attempting to say, and make sure that one can accept it, flaws and all.

Of course not all media has to be so extreme in order to be considered problematic. I already mentioned *Star Wars'* lack of female representation, *Sixteen Candles'* racist stereotypes, and *Legally Blonde's* gay caricature. Films are constantly doing these sorts of things. *Transformers* has a penchant for photographing its female characters in an objectifying way and the James Bond series likes to treat women as pretty things to be looked at, used, and then replaced in the next film. The point is that problematic media is an everyday issue, and is not always as obvious as *Star Wars* or *Blade Runner*. But the better we get at spotting and critiquing this sort of thing, the better creators will get about not having it in their media.

The study of the effects media can have on our beliefs, behaviors, and worldviews is cultivation theory. Basically, this means humans can have what they think and do shaped by the media they consume. Researchers have been looking at this for years, and most of the studies published support cultivation theory even if the specific effects they are testing for do not prove true. When sexism has been studied through this lens, it is often found that since we live in an already deeply sexist world, problematic media tends to strengthen these beliefs. A study from 2010 attempted to look into the connection between playing games of a sexually explicit, objectifying nature and the likelihood to objectify. It found that men who played these games were likely to respond more quickly to sexually-objectifying portrayals of women than men who had played a control game (Yao, et al). They also found the players of the sexually-objectifying game "reported a significantly greater tendency to sexually harass… than did players of…" either the control or second experimental game (Yao, et al.). Basically, when asked how likely they would be to take advantage of a series of situations involving sexual harassment, on a scale of one to seven, the men who had played the sexually-objectifying games tended to be more likely. Men who had seen other— fictional men acting inappropriately towards women—tended to also act

inappropriately. This is an example of sexist media not only affecting our beliefs, but our behaviors as well.

Other studies back these findings, like a 1981 study conducted by Neil M. Malamuth and James V.P Check. They looked at whether or not film of a sexually-violent nature increases acceptance of rape myths and of interpersonal violence against women. They concluded that men who watched the experimental film were more likely to accept rape myths by about 3% than the control group, while the women were about 2% less accepting of these myths. The figures for acceptance of interpersonal violence had about the same difference. It is startling just how effective having seen one film can be on people's beliefs. This was not a study that took place over the course of many years, studying the long term effects of interacting with this kind of media—this was *one* film. One film can increase acceptance of interpersonal violence by a significant amount. If we are being exposed to this type of media every day, the impact over the course of years would be astronomical.

When you have discussions with people about cultivation theory, often times they quote a single study by scholar Johannes Breuer to disprove it. This study found that video game usage could not be correlated to three specific sexist beliefs. The beliefs were as follows. First, "The man should be responsible for all major decisions made in a family." Second, "In a group of male and female members, a man should take on the leadership." and, "Even if both partners work the woman should be responsible for taking care of the household." These beliefs are extremely simplistic and antiquated, which could certainly have an effect on the number of people who will say they agree with them. These notions of gender have been outdated for decades in the mainstream. Also, not many games promote these ideas. Most sexist games involve female objectification and violence against women—nothing that would promote those specific gendered beliefs. They concluded that the only factor that could be linked to a stronger belief in these statements was religiosity, not video game usage. They state:

> Although the findings from the present study are certainly not conclusive, the absence of longitudinal links between video game use and sexist attitudes at least suggests two things. First… it is likely that there are factors… that affect the development, proliferation, prevention, or reduction of sexist attitudes more strongly than (fictional) media content. Second, general and broad cultivation effects of video games are somewhat unlikely, as they differ in the games they play, and the interactivity of the medium also causes the experience of the same game to differ between players. (Johannes Breuer et al.)

This study is simply too broad and nonspecific in its methodology to be a really effective tool for gauging whether sexist games can really produce sexist attitudes. It is not testing specific games, or even asking what type of games the participants played, but simply asking them to indicate how much time they spent playing them. Herein lies the issue: while this study is often quoted to disprove cultivation theory, that was not

the main subject of the study. They were looking at multiple factors that could be correlated to these beliefs. They were not testing control games versus experimental games, but instead opting to just consider any game usage. The study refuses to focus in, and so the factor their testing isn't the specific effects of consuming sexist media, but instead of consuming any media, along with the handful of other factors tested. Because of this, the study cannot really be used to prove or disprove cultivation theory.

But these impacts are not always so nebulous. We have historical examples of fiction impacting our world. In 1915, when *The Birth of a Nation* was first released, Ku Klux Klan membership skyrocketed. The organization went from nearly dead to exceeding "4 million people nationwide" (History.com Staff). The film helped spread the organization, presenting klansmen as heroes and freed slaves as savages whose only purpose is to steal your belongings and rape and kill white women. It's a horrible narrative and one that the film's opening title ("This is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today") would present as historical fact. While watching this film, it was hard for me to not be uncomfortable with what the film was trying to present. In fact, the KKK continued to "…Use the film as a recruiting tool for decades after that" (NPR Staff). This is just one example of an impact that manipulative fiction has had on our world. It shapes beliefs and behaviors in a way that was not only damaging to communities and race relations but led to actual deaths and assaults at the hands of members who were recruited using the film. It is truly terrifying. We can not allow this sort of thing to embolden yet another dangerous group living on the fringe of our political discourse that could quickly grow out of hand and harm humanity once more.

Now is the perfect time to start fixing this issue. With men in the film industry like Harvey Weinstein and James Toback finally being ousted after years of women speaking up about their actions, now is a better time than ever to start pushing for a complete change of how the film industry treats its female members. It can be fixed, and when it is, female representation will improve, decreasing the amount of damage done to women by film little by little until it is no longer an issue. Sexual assault will not continue to be normalized, nor female characters being objectified and stereotyped. Though we may not reach this hypothetical utopia, any move in the right direction is hopeful. We do not have to read into what appears to be sexist ideas in a specific film. A trope does not have to be a problem, but right now, we can not be sure. So until we get there, we have to continue to critique media and the people and industry that creates it.

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