

What the Sony emails tell us about the American film industry

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22 December 2014

The leaked emails that have emerged from the hacking operation directed against Sony Pictures Entertainment, thanks to its involvement in the production of *The Interview*, add useful detail to what we already know about the inner workings of the American movie industry and the character of its personnel. No one familiar with Hollywood will be astonished by the picture of back-biting, pettiness and shortsightedness that emerges, but the information is salutary nonetheless.

One can safely assume that *The Interview*, directed by Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen, co-written by and featuring Rogen, along with James Franco, is a fairly witless and vulgar affair, like nearly everything that comes from this particular “school” of movie-making.

Initially, Sony announced that it was shelving the film, but on NBC’s “Meet the Press” Sunday morning, David Boies, an attorney for the studio, indicated that it “is going to be distributed.”

We have no idea who performed the hacking at Sony—and the claim that this was done by Kim Jong-un’s Stalinist-nationalist regime in Pyongyang seems less and less credible. In any event, to present the fate of *The Interview* as having something to do with “free speech”—as George Clooney and others are doing—is ludicrous. A film that culminates with the assassination of a foreign head of state is a reckless and unprecedented provocation.

The argument of the Canadian-born Rogen and his collaborators, seconded by the American government and media, that by making the film they were delivering a blow against a tyrant is also absurd. As the recent US Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on the CIA torture program makes evident, the chief source of violence and aggression in the world today is the American military-intelligence apparatus. The “human rights” politics of Rogen and his ilk (Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, etc.) is merely the aims of the State Department and the CIA translated into the language of pseudo-comic, philistine ignoramuses.

As far as “freedom of expression” goes, Hollywood film studios ruthlessly fight to dominate global movie screens and would establish an absolute monopoly if they could only attain it.

Sony is one of the handful of media conglomerates that controls what a considerable portion of the world’s population sees and hears daily. In 2012, Sony Pictures Entertainment led all other film companies in worldwide market share, taking in \$4.4 billion in ticket sales on such eminently forgettable works as *Skyfall*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Men in Black 3*, *Hotel Transylvania* and *21 Jump Street*.

The leaked emails shed light on the sort of debased environment out of which such expensive and empty movies emerge. Nonetheless, it would be useful to bear in mind that the individuals writing and receiving the various messages, including Amy Pascal, chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment’s Motion Pictures Group, prominent

producer Scott Rudin, actress Angelina Jolie and others, have not created the present conditions in the film world. Rather, the personalities, relationships and artistic opinions revealed in the Sony communications are the product of the serious, protracted decline of American movie-making and culture generally.

That decline finds debilitating expression in the perpetual pursuit of “blockbusters,” on which vast amounts are spent, by studios that are merely divisions of giant corporate entities; the “sequel” phenomenon, in which commercial successes are endlessly recycled and drained of life; the metastatic “celebrity” culture; and, centrally, the turn away from any interest or engagement with great social problems and the conditions of wide layers of the population, among other features.

Whatever the good, bad or indifferent motives and aims of the various executives, publicists, film stars, writers and others, the latter find themselves trapped in a field where very little counts except immediate box office success and corporate profitability. The shortsightedness inevitably bound up with the financially parasitic, stock market-driven character of the American economy is especially destructive to art. Reading the correspondence of the film executives and their associates, it is difficult to see how anything thoughtful, penetrating or enduring could emerge from such a milieu. One would imagine that for human beings with any degree of sensitivity or possessing the semblance of a social conscience such an existence must be demoralizing.

The leaked Sony emails, for example, capture Pascal, Rudin and Jolie engaged in a sordid and bitter squabble over competing film projects. Rudin wanted director David Fincher (*The Social Network*, *Gone Girl*) for his proposed movie about the late Steve Jobs, while the actress was determined to land Fincher for her film about Cleopatra.

In one exchange, in February 2014, Pascal emailed Rudin: “Do not f----- threaten me. I have been asking you to engage with me on this for weeks.” Rudin replied, “What the hell are you talking about? Who’s threatening you? Let me remind you I brought this material to you and I can off her [Jolie] from it in a phone call. Don’t for one second even think about trying this s--- with me. There is no movie of Cleopatra to be made (and how that is a bad thing given the insanity and rampaging ego of this woman and the cost of the movie is beyond me).”

In a subsequent email, Rudin noted: “I’m not destroying my career over a minimally talented spoiled brat [again, Jolie] who thought nothing of shoving this off her plate for eighteen months so she could go direct a movie [*Unbroken*]. ... She’s a camp event and a celebrity and that’s all and the last thing anybody needs is to make a giant bomb with her that any fool could see coming.”

At one point in the email exchange, Pascal and Rudin were considering who should contact Swedish filmmaker Tomas Alfredson (*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*) to see if he might be persuaded to direct Jolie's Cleopatra. Rudin asked, "Who wants to make the call?" Pascal (who earns \$3,000,000 a year) responded, "Your [sic] more impressive. I have more money." Rudin rejoined, "I bet you don't."

Claims that Pascal and Rudin exhibited "racism" in their references to Barack Obama—whom the Sony chief was scheduled to meet—are off the mark. The comments were sophomoric more than anything else, with Pascal (a major Democratic Party donor) joking, "Should I ask him [Obama] if he liked *Django [Unchained]*?" Rudin answered, "*12 Years [a Slave]*," etc.

These banalities, however, provided Al Sharpton, political charlatan, former FBI informer and millionaire, sufficient grounds for inviting himself to Hollywood last week in order "to increase and improve racial diversity in the entertainment industry" (ABC News). Sharpton met with Pascal, who had already indicated the messages were "not an accurate reflection of who I am." Sharpton, America's self-appointed arbiter and no doubt with his eye on Hollywood's riches, was not so sure, pontificating: "The jury is still out with where we go with Amy."

The hacked emails laid bare the cozy relationship between Sony officials and the *New York Times*. Pascal's husband is former *Times* film business reporter Bernard Weinraub. The leaked emails reveal that *Times* columnist Maureen Dowd promised to show Weinraub a proposed piece about Pascal before publication. According to BuzzFeed, "The end result was a column that painted Pascal in such a good light that she engaged in a round of mutual adulation with Dowd over email after its publication. It also scored Pascal points back at the studio, with Sony's then-communications-chief calling the column 'impressive.'"

Other emails indicate that Sony officials altered or suppressed *Times* articles entirely. In one instance, a *Times* reporter, Rachel Abrams, checked with Sony officials about a story she was writing that reported relations between Pascal and Sony Entertainment CEO Michael Lynton (who also takes in \$3,000,000 annually) were strained. Pascal emailed Sony communications chief Charles Sipkins, "PLEASE FIX THIS." Sipkins did precisely that, by talking to *Times* Hollywood reporter Brooks Barnes. "I talked to brooks and to NY, it is out of the story," Sipkins could later write to Pascal. Sipkins was able to kill one *Times* story entirely, a minor item about the fact that the infamous film failure, *Ishtar* (1987, Elaine May), had finally broken even financially.

Egotism and careerism were involved in a further attempt (which ultimately failed) to change another *Times* piece. Barnes sent Sipkins a version of an article that referred to Sony's TriStar chairman Tom Rothman, who had previously worked at 20th Century Fox, as being responsible for "some" of Fox's current undertakings. Rothman took this as a slight against his career and insisted that "some" be changed to "many"! He was outraged when "some" showed up in the final version of the story.

Various Sony emails about the proposed new James Bond film, *Spectre*, to be directed by Sam Mendes, underscore the terribly circumscribed state of artistic life in Hollywood. The movie, projected to cost around \$350,000,000, was seriously mired in rewrites during the summer of 2014. Executives exchanged numerous comments centering on the trite and anti-climactic character of the existing script. One email suggested "There needs to be some kind of a *twist* rather than a series of watery chases with guns," while another referred to Bond "simply fighting henchmen in many overblown and

familiar sequences—helicopter, elevator shaft, netting." *Spectre* is set to be released in November 2015.

Studio officials also criticized Sony's overall film output. One email commented: "There is a general 'blah-ness' to the films we produce. Although we manage to produce an innovative film once in a while, *Social Network*, *Moneyball*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, we continue to be saddled with the mundane, formulaic [comic] Adam Sandler films." The message continued, "[T]here's a strange dichotomy of encouraging us to be fiscally responsible, but then upper management allows certain talent and filmmakers to bleed us dry with their outlandish requests for private jets, wardrobe and grooming stylists—and are surprised when they are asked to work more than 5 hours to promote their film."

Celebrity and wealth and self-centered antics in Hollywood are not new. However, all this has taken on a grotesque character in the past several decades.

The enormous sums showered on studio executives, producers, performers and certain writers (screenwriter Aaron Sorkin was paid \$2 million for his draft of the never-to-be-made Steve Jobs film, as well as \$3 million in deferred money) help generate a type of social disorientation. These are individuals far removed from the mass of the population, its concerns, problems and needs. Their films reflect this unreality and lack of knowledge about the dynamics of contemporary life.

The climate in the American film industry is an unhealthy one. There are outstanding exceptions, but they are genuinely rare. This makes even modest acts of courage seem remarkable. Most often, when an actor or writer makes a critical comment about American government policy or social life, he or she quickly retracts it, or simply withdraws apologetically, either because of the pressure of official opinion or the requirements of career.

The Sony scandal reveals once again how culture is strangled by the financial-corporate domination of every significant aspect of American life. The film industry is a heavily polluted environment. Everything, including the rejuvenation of artistic life, depends on the emergence of a socialist working class movement directed against the economic foundations of capitalism.



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