

Amanda Hess and Manohla Dargis on the Weinstein-Spacey-Louis C.K. affairs

Viciousness and ignorance: New York Times columnists on the rampage

David Walsh

18 November 2017

The *New York Times* has been at the forefront of the campaign over sexual misconduct in the entertainment industry in particular, which has now been extended to the political arena (preposterously in the case of Sen. Al Franken). The newspaper has devoted considerable resources and published dozens of articles and “exposés” on the subject since early October, when it ran a story recounting allegations of sexual harassment against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

The campaign has a deeply reactionary and anti-democratic character. The *Times* and other media outlets, on the basis of allegations alone, have already ruined the lives and careers of a number of individuals and there is no reason to believe they will stop there. In its treatment of the issue, the *Times* entirely disregards elementary constitutional rights, including the presumption of innocence, due process, the ability of the accused to confront and respond to witnesses and more. The individuals in question are pronounced, either by the *Times* or by those it cites, to be monsters, worthy of destruction.

The methods of the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s have been taken out, dusted off and brought to bear without any serious opposition within the artistic world. Once again, individuals are named and denounced, found guilty and excluded with hardly a voice being raised against the process. All of this has taken place without a single charge being laid, much less a guilty verdict having been reached by a jury.

This may outrage the *Times*’ editors and surprise a large portion of the newspaper’s readership but Weinstein, Brett Ratner and James Toback—not to mention Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K., Franken and countless others being drawn into the dragnet of yellow journalism—are owed the legal protections due every citizen.

The attack on democratic rights often begins with relatively easy, even “guilty” targets and proceeds from there. The elimination of constitutional protections, under conditions of a ruling elite moving at the speed of light toward authoritarianism and war, has extremely dangerous implications for the entire population. Today’s moral guardians may well find themselves bearing a share of the responsibility for openly dictatorial and fascist measures in the not so distant future.

Two recent articles in the *Times* exemplify the ignorant and pernicious character of the current offensive on sexual matters, “How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women,” by Amanda Hess, and “Louis C.K. and Hollywood’s Canon of Creeps,” by Manohla Dargis.

Neither author shows any evidence of having thought through the issues involved. Hess makes a number of wide-ranging comments about art and the history of art on the basis of superficial observations about recent developments in the American entertainment world. She writes like a glorified lifestyle columnist, which is what she is. On her own website,

she cites the comment of fellow columnist Benjamin Freed in regard to her work, “I can’t think of anyone who writes about personal identity or relationships in a more intelligent or engaging fashion.”

Dargis, a film critic at the *Times*, has apparently composed her piece on sexual misconduct primarily out of personal spite and bitterness. Her article is hardly more than a series of unenlightening complaints and grumbles about Louis C.K. and Woody Allen and their purported relations with or fantasies about young women. If anything, her comment is pitched at an even lower and more vindictive level than Hess’s. She begins her article: “Soon after Harvey Weinstein was first outed as a sexual predator, I created a document titled ‘Creeps’ in which I tried to list every man who had sexually harassed or assaulted me.” Frankly, why should anyone be the slightest bit interested? Let us hope that Dargis finds the will-power to control the urge to share her story with the rest of the world.

These are two highly paid, privileged members of the American *affluencia*, writing for a “prestige” publication, who would have one believe they are horribly oppressed. It’s all self-pitying nonsense for starters, and that needs to be said.

It is also useful to bear in mind, to put matters in proper perspective, that Hess and Dargis write for a newspaper that published barefaced lies about “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq (notably by the infamous Judith Miller), which helped justify the criminal US intervention responsible for more than one million deaths. Dead Iraqis, Afghans, Syrians, Libyans, Somalis, Yemenis and Pakistanis do not perturb our authors, both of them undoubtedly supporters of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, one of the two war parties.

Ultimately, such individuals—like their counterparts in academia engaged in what might be termed “gender cleansing”—are most interested in clearing a career and income path for themselves. A vicious settling of scores is at work here. There is almost nothing as ruthless as the petty bourgeoisie when it smells blood. The watchword in these circles today is clear enough: certain tides taken at the flood “lead on to fortune.”

A very large portion of the top posts in the entertainment and media world are held by men. Hess and Dargis would like to see them pushed out the door. That would open things up and make life generally more pleasant—and lucrative—for people like themselves.

Would the female sector of the corporate species be any less swinish in their own fashion (or more talented) than Weinstein and the others if that sought for eventuality were to come to pass? One doubts it. Their lack of compassion and empathy, the absence of any democratic sensibility in what they write, provide a sense of what Hollywood et al would look like under their domination, and it is not a pretty prospect.

For her part, Hess would like to rewrite artistic and cultural history. She

wants to do away “with the idea of ‘separating the art from the artist’ ... Whenever a creative type (usually a man) is accused of mistreating people (usually women), a call arises to prevent those pesky biographical details from sneaking into our assessments of the artist’s work.”

Referring to “the Hollywood players accused of sexual harassment or worse—Harvey Weinstein, James Toback, Kevin Spacey and Louis C.K.,” Hess goes on, “We’re learning more every day about how the entertainment industry has been shaped by their abuses of power. It’s time to consider how their art has been, too.”

It may be time for such a consideration, but Hess doesn’t indulge her readers by actually offering one. She carelessly throws a number of things into the pot, including Bernardo Bertolucci’s alleged mistreatment of Maria Schneider in the making of *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier’s disoriented cinematic rubbish, within which “riling actresses” is hardly the greatest of his crimes, but comes up with very little of substance. She cannot stop herself from smearing Roman Polanski in passing, but, again, since she makes no concrete analysis of any of Polanski’s film work, her pledge to examine the “art” in light of sexual misconduct remains a dead letter.

Hess, like Dargis, concentrates much of her time and energy on the case of Louis C.K. Her description of his work, however, suggests that the comic, for all his peculiarities and excesses, has been capable of providing more insight into sexual and social relations than Hess herself. Disapprovingly, in the light of the recent accusations, she writes, “What once looked like creative provocations now read like justifications of a moral universe where women are as complicit in sexual violation as men are, and where sex that begins with force easily gives way to mutual desire.”

The subjectivism in Hess’s approach should be noted. “We once admired Louis C.K. for his comic efforts,” she argues, in effect, “but now we’ve discovered they mean something quite different.”

Hess claims that a “proclivity for reprehensible acts is built right into the mythos of the artistic genius—a designation rarely extended to women. ... The art excuses the crime.” While she refers sweepingly to 19th century culture, Hess again excuses herself from providing one example of the trend she identifies.

The relationship between the life and personal behavior of the artist and his or her body of work is a complex one. No one ought to suggest that talent or even genius excuses everything. As we noted years ago at the time of the “rehabilitation” of Hollywood director-informer Elia Kazan, an accurate assessment of artistic achievement inevitably requires “making a certain distinction between the artist and his or her art. We do not go searching through garbage cans for all the ways in which the writer, painter or composer falls short. But the distinction is a relative, not an absolute one.” Mozart is remembered fondly as a human being, while Wagner, the composer of much beautiful music but a horrible anti-Semite, is not.

At that time, the opposite argument to Hess’s was often being made: artists like Kazan were boasting in their memoirs of their rotten behavior and implying that rottenness was a necessary ingredient of artistic genius. We noted that imperfect human beings produced art, along with everything else. “They inevitably sin against others and against themselves,” we wrote. “But why make a virtue out of those inevitable errors and misdeeds, much less a program? History teaches us that class society occasionally mutilates very gifted people beyond recognition, so that artistic genius and personal vileness coexist within a single human being. Why not simply recognize this as an unfortunate fact of that society, another sign of its incompatibility with the demands of human happiness, and not as a proof that genius feeds on vileness?”

However, criticism of the existing social order and what it does to people is beyond Hess and Dargis, a pair of extraordinarily self-satisfied petty bourgeois.

On the basis of her arguments, Hess would presumably urge reconsidering or even proscribing the work of every male artist who mistreated women (or who were merely alleged to have done so). She and Dargis essentially rejoice in the destruction of Louis C.K. and Kevin Spacey. Dargis writes of the former: “I don’t feel bad for him or mourn a career that may be over. He’s rich and can crawl into a cushy hole.” An individual capable of writing such a foul sentence, shamelessly expressing delight in another person’s humiliation, is worthy only of contempt.

In fact, the purging of Spacey and Louis C.K. and the series with which they are connected will have an immediate impact on television in particular, not to mention a chilling effect on possible future ventures, helping to render the medium less critical and more conventional. If Hess and Dargis were allowed to carry out their purges, the results would be disastrous for cultural life.

Already we have the appalling example of Spacey being excised from a finished film, Ridley Scott’s *All the Money in the World*, and his scenes re-shot with Christopher Plummer in his stead. Stalin comes to Hollywood! Scott and Plummer ought to be ashamed of themselves, but there is no indication they are.

Louis C.K. is not a fiend deserving to be liquidated. He appears to suffer from emotional disorders that find expression in his compulsive exhibitionism. There must certainly have been a way to deal with his form of behavioral disorder without ending his career as an actor and comic. Perhaps one of his producers, directors or agents might have done more, or anything, to help Louis C.K. if he or she had not been so fixated on making as much money off the comic’s work as possible.

What if the moral criteria advocated by Hess and Dargis were to be applied retroactively?

Perhaps the writings of Ernest Hemingway, August Strindberg and Lord Byron (notorious for their stormy or difficult relationships with the opposite sex), the films of Charlie Chaplin (who married 18-year-old Oona O’Neill when he was 54) and the paintings of Egon Schiele (arrested for having sex with a teenage girl) and Fra Filippo Lippi (the Renaissance artist who scandalously seduced a young nun) should be removed from libraries, cinemas and galleries, respectively. Charles Dickens abandoned his wife for a younger woman, Leo Tolstoy broke from his on the eve of his death.

Oscar Wilde could easily be viewed as a sexual “predator” for his relationships with working class adolescents. And let us not forget that Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, was not quite 21 when he first had sex with Wilde. Of course, there is evidence that Bosie may have been the aggressor, but let’s not quibble over facts and miss the bigger moral picture. Perhaps the Marquess of Queensberry, Lord Alfred’s father, deserves belated thanks for having served as the agent of Wilde’s destruction.

Should we continue down the list of artistic miscreants whose works might, in light of their notorious exploits, merit destruction? The painter Caravaggio and the poet François Villon may well have been murderers. Balzac, a little less recklessly and bloodily, had a child with one married woman and a decade-long intimate correspondence with another. Conservative contemporaries generally regarded him and his work as immoral and dangerous. What about Frida Kahlo, the icon of present-day feminists, who was relentless in her pursuit of sexual conquests, choosing targets of both genders?

Hess, Dargis and the rest of the middle class moralizers never stop to consider whether there is an element in art that transcends the individual life and personal conduct.

In fact, the more insightful writers on aesthetics over the past two centuries have understood that the great artist immerses him or herself as thoroughly as possible in the material at hand, largely setting aside his or her own personality and its individual characteristics. The artist becomes the particular means through which the theme that has seized him or her is

formed.

But Hess and Dargis construct art according to their own petty intellectual and moral dimensions, as something narrow and thoroughly subjective. Of course the artist deals in sensations and perceptions, but as Marxists insist, the question of questions is: “Do our subjective sensations have objective significance?”

Our authors never concern themselves with whether or not the work of a given artist, even with his or her socially produced deformities, contributes to our understanding of the world and of ourselves. One of the difficulties is that both operate in the shallow and stagnant waters of contemporary American popular culture, where nothing especially illuminating does occur at present.

Dargis writes: “One fallacy about criticism is that it can be practiced objectively, as if we could see and write about movies from some sort of out-of-body experience. As if it were possible for me to watch a movie in which women are abused for no apparent reason—without even a pretense of narrative rationale—and view this exploitation as simply another formal attribute, like the cinematography, soundtrack or superb camerawork.”

As is the habit with philistines, Dargis identifies “objectivity” with passive impartiality. The aim is not to write about or regard films from “some sort of out-of-body experience,” but to treat them with regard for their truthfulness, their correspondence to the way the world is. Films that present women or any other portion of humanity in a dishonest or exploitative manner need to be rejected, although again Dargis’s selective perception is worth noting. She is evidently not upset by films that defend US imperialism’s crimes and paint Iraqis as a form of alien life, having placed Clint Eastwood’s foul, pro-military *American Sniper* at the top of her list of 2014 films “that meant the most to me.”

Art arrives at objective truths about reality, as science does, although obviously by other means. The recent series *Genius* played upon Albert Einstein’s supposed misdeeds as a husband. It chose to suggest, as the WSWS review observed, that his first wife, Mileva Maric, “came up with the ideas and mathematics for special relativity and that Einstein essentially stole her ideas.” This was wrongheaded enough, but suppose another film or series were to take a different tack: that the theory of relativity itself is tainted and needs to be reexamined in the light of Einstein’s unhappy relations with certain women in his life.

There is a lengthy intellectual and social history behind the retrograde positions advanced by Hess and Dargis, as they have emerged and flourished within the well-heeled professional middle class.

On the one hand, we have suffered through decades of postmodernism and identity politics with their extreme subjectivism and relativism, which write off the possibility of establishing the objective truth about society or history. On the other, whatever meager democratic residue that remained within official American life has been worn away through the endless “war on terror,” with its “human rights” justifications of military interventions, detention without trial, torture and other atrocities, along with a series of manipulated sex scandals.

The entire identity politics crowd in the US, like the establishment as a whole, is moving sharply to the right, toward support for censorship, political or moral witch-hunting and outright repression. The Weinstein-Spacey-Louis C.K. affairs (with more to come!), combined with the “fake news” and anti-Russia campaigns, have simply provided these people the occasion for more brazenly embracing a right-wing, anti-democratic program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact