

Disney stands by firing of James Gunn, director of *Guardians of the Galaxy*

Tim Avery
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For more than a month now, the Walt Disney Company has stood by its decision to fire James Gunn, director of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* blockbuster film series, despite widespread opposition from fans of the films, mainstream critics and Hollywood professionals.

Disney took the action because of a series of crude, sophomoric jokes Gunn tweeted between 2009 and 2012. Nearly 400,000 people have signed an online petition headlined “RE-HIRE JAMES GUNN.” The cast of *Guardians*, including Chris Pratt, Vin Diesel and Dave Bautista, have also signed an open letter in defense of Gunn’s character. Bautista, to his credit, has threatened to negotiate the release of his contract if Gunn’s script for *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* is not used.

Gunn (born 1966 in St. Louis) began his career at B-movie production company Troma Entertainment in 1995, before developing a reputation as a writer-director of black-comedy genre pastiches such as *Slither* (2006), *Super* (2010) and the zombie video game *Lollipop Chainsaw* (2012).

His first two *Guardians of the Galaxy* films (2014, 2017), which follow a colorful group of mercenaries stumbling across alien worlds, are some of the more creative offerings of Marvel Studios’ comic-adaptation franchise, although this may not be saying all that much. *Vol. 2* strains somewhat against the Marvel formula insofar as it explores interpersonal fallout resulting from parental abuse, while Kurt Russell’s performance as the chief antagonist—a godlike being called Ego driven to narcissism by the mortality of others—might have been drawn from the pages of classic science fiction were the drama not damaged by its breezy, indifferent dialogue.

The offending jokes from 2009-2012 were exhumed

and screen-captured by supporters of extreme-right sensationalist and Alex Jones associate Mike Cernovich, who presented them on his website as “evidence” that Gunn “advocated for and seemingly admitted to being a pedophile.” The first image shows Gunn falsely attributing to a friend the quote, “I like it when little boys touch me in my silly place. Shhh!” The rest are about as stupid and obviously not expressions of Gunn’s sentiments.

The extreme right instantly labeled Gunn not only an apologist for pedophilia but “a rabid Hollywood leftist and Trump hater” (Breitbart) and made a stink, demanding his removal by Disney.

Less than twenty-four hours after Cernovich posted his exposé, on July 20, Disney complied, announcing, “The offensive attitudes and statements discovered on James’ Twitter feed are indefensible and inconsistent with our studio’s values, and we have severed our business relationship with him.” Gunn was no longer to direct *Vol. 3*, which had been scheduled to start filming in early 2019.

The petition, written by Change.org user chandler edwards from the UK, points to the arbitrariness of this decision. He notes that “if you do this to Gunn you have to do it for all the other directors who have said some crappy joke sometime in their life, which is all of them.” Comments by signatories include those of Jacqui Connell, who wrote, “I don’t want to see anything remotely like McCarthyism back in Hollywood,” and Christopher Neve, who wrote, “The Constitutional right to free speech should not be circumvented by the perpetuation of witch-hunts.”

These comments and more like them draw attention not only to McCarthyism, but to the ongoing #MeToo campaign, which has substituted accusations of sexual misconduct for the democratic right to due process.

Entertainers are terrified—and rightly so—that they will be the next to lose their careers in an increasingly repressive climate.

It is notable that Cernovich, in an interview published the day Gunn was fired, makes no distinction between his supporters and #MeToo. “The Harvey Weinstein case showed us that Hollywood is rotten to the core,” he said. “We are continuing our investigation into the conduct and behavior of members of the Hollywood elite.”

According to *Variety*, Walt Disney Studios chairman Alan Horn and Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige stand by their decision not to reinstate Gunn. In late May, Disney’s ABC Entertainment Group cancelled its popular sitcom *Roseanne* when its eponymous star Roseanne Barr tweeted a racist comment. To allow any room for “error” in Gunn’s case would be to call into question the company’s decisions and the anti-democratic power #MeToo—and the far right—have helped it to assert.



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