Submission: A college professor undone by sexual harassment allegations

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Written and directed by Richard Levine, based on a novel by Francine Prose

Submission, directed by Richard Levine, was released in March 2018. Given the film's subject matter, the involvement of a male college professor with a manipulative female student, the generally hostile or condescending treatment it received at the hands of the most prominent film critics should not have come as a surprise. *Submission* rapidly disappeared.

Levine (responsible for television series *Nip/Tuck* and *Masters of Sex*) based his film on a 2000 novel, *Blue Angel*, by American author Francine Prose. Prose, in turn, had been inspired by Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930), starring Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich. Von Sternberg's film was adapted from a 1905 novel by Heinrich Mann (*Professor Unrat*) and transferred in time to Weimar Germany. Jannings plays a respectable teacher at a college preparatory school whose infatuation with and eventual marriage to a cabaret singer (Dietrich) leads to his ruination and insanity.

In *Submission*, Ted Swenson (Stanley Tucci) is a novelist, with one successful work to his credit, who teaches at a fictional liberal arts college in Vermont. As he observes in a voiceover, "I arrived at this well-paying but lower-tier institution with wife and child in tow, the promise of health insurance beckoning. A short-term gig, I thought, fully expecting my second novel to offer me a reprieve and save me from obscurity. That was a decade ago." Swenson has been unable to produce or even seriously make headway on a second book, much to the displeasure of his New York City editor.

The atmosphere at Euston College is not good. Ted doesn't appear to be the only faculty member going through the motions. Indifference or apathy largely rules the day. At a staff meeting, the school's dean makes mention of the college's policy on sexual harassment: "Every September one receives this in one's mailbox. … And every September one immediately tosses it all into the trash."

Swenson's creative writing students are not promising for the most part. They write mostly to shock or impress, and derive significant pleasure from tearing into one another's work. One student, however, stands out. Angela Argo (Addison Timlin) requests a meeting with Swenson and gives him a chapter from a novel she is writing, about a girl having an affair with an older man, her science teacher. Swenson is impressed with her efforts. Angela also flatters Ted, letting him know his novel is "my favorite book in the universe. … It saved my life, actually. … And also, it's just a really great book. It's up there with Brontë and Stendhal."

As a matter of fact, Ted explains to Angela, he is currently "working on a postmodern retelling" of Stendhal's epochal *The Red and the Black* (1830). Swenson becomes increasingly interested in Angela. The persistently erotic element in her writings does not lessen that interest.

In a pivotal scene, at a dinner party, various faculty members air their grievances. One notes, "Well, I don't suppose it'll come as a shock to say that each year's entering class seem to have read less than last year's worst students."

Another mentions an incident during an American literature class where Edgar Allan Poe's work was under study. He explains that when he referred to Poe's marriage to his 13-year-old cousin, "the entire class gets quiet. And when I asked them what the matter was, none of them would answer. Until one young woman says, 'We've been studying the work of a child molester?' "

One of the guests then asks, "Have the rest of you found this, um, heightened consciousness about those issues?" Someone replies, "I never talk to a female student alone in my office without the door wide open." And a third puts in, "And I keep a tape recorder in my desk in case things get dicey."

Ted, fortified with vodka, finally bursts out, "I think that we have been giving in without a fight, that we have been knuckling under to the most neurotic forces of repression and censorship. I think we need to help these people get over their problems. We should desensitize them the way the Scientologists do. Lock them in a room and shout dirty words at them until they grow up."

Needless to say, the others are shocked by his (half-) joke of a proposal. Afterward, Swenson tells his wife, Sherrie (Kyra Sedgwick), "God, what a bunch of spineless idiots. … Imagine my father seeing me wind up here. He would've staged a hunger strike to shut this place down." (Ted's father set himself on fire and died protesting the Vietnam War.)

The almost inevitable occurs, and Swenson and Angela have a fumbling, semi-comic sexual moment, which she essentially initiates or encourages. She also presses him to have his editor read the first few chapters of her novel.

Without revealing too much, Swenson eventually finds himself in front of a college committee answering charges of sexual harassment. After apologizing for a number of things, including his inability "to write a novel that's nearly as good as my first" and the fact that "my daughter won't speak to me," Swenson tells the committee members, "What happened between Angela and me…was personal, and it was complicated."

This notion, that such situations are "complicated," is one that gets shouted down amid the self-serving bombardment of #MeToo propaganda. One feminist reviewer immediately suggested that *Submission* "asks the wrong questions about sexual harassment" and

"unintentionally perpetuates the idea that many sexual misconduct allegations are false."

In other words, such impertinent "questions" shouldn't even be asked.

As noted above, a good number of the leading critics also adopted a generally antagonistic attitude toward the film. Ann Hornaday in the *Washington Post*, for example, argued that "Levine seems content to stay on the surface of #MeToo-era button-pushing for its own sake, rather than risk more complex layers or a ruthlessly biting tone. (This isn't the first time viewers will be treated to hackneyed arguments about college students being 'babied' by anti-harassment codes of conduct. It's probably too much to ask that it be the last.)"

Undemocratic, heavy-handed "anti-harassment codes of conduct" on college campuses are among the phenomena Levine's *Submission* is taking aim at. Hornaday obviously supports those measures. But this *a priori* disagreement doesn't prevent the *Post* critic from commenting on this or that dramatic element that is supposedly lacking or pretending to be offering an "objective" appraisal of a work she was clearly predisposed to dislike.

At any rate, arguments against the codes of conduct have hardly had the opportunity to become "hackneyed" since they *virtually never appear* in publications like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. A number of the reviewers claimed they only wished Levine had gone "deeper" into the subject. One can only laugh. That, in fact, is the last thing any one of them wants, as it would cut far too close to the bone.

This is the level of journalism and film criticism at present. A relatively honest film on a question that obsesses these upper middle-class layers is dispatched as quickly and quietly as possible. Critics like Hornaday and A.O. Scott of the *Times* did their best in this regard. Scott commented, "The more you think about *Submission*, the less relevant it looks. Which may represent a pyrrhic kind of vindication. There's nothing here that's really worth arguing about."

The opposite is the case, although while *Submission* is intelligently done, it isn't as savagely satirical as it might be. The actors do well—Tucci is one of the finest actors in the American film industry. But the film as a whole is somewhat flat and muted.

One of the problems may be the lack of artistic separation from the subject matter. *Submission's* tone tends to take on the slightly discouraged mood of the Euston College campus. Without meaning to, Levine's work ends up a little blasé and cynical itself. In regard to the sexual harassment drive, the film and the book on which it is based remain largely at the level of personal neurosis and ambition. In an interview, Levine commented that he thought of Angela's character as "this cross between Eve Harrington [in *All About Eve*] and Iago [in *Othello*]."

Swenson makes reference to his father's political opposition and, by implication, the radicalism of another era. In a telling exchange, his estranged daughter Ruby (Colby Minifie) suggests that her grandfather must have suffered from a mood disorder. Ted rejoins, "My father wasn't bipolar. He was angry about the state of our country." But why has such a shift to the right taken place among these layers? It's a question worth investigating in drama.

In her novel, Prose does make her hostility, or at least Swenson's, toward the identity politics industry more explicit, for example, in this passage, where the book's central protagonist amusingly recognizes "the inverted bowl of gray hair and the tense, aggrieved shoulders" of "Lauren Healy, the English Department's expert in the feminist misreading of literature and acting head of the Faculty-Student Women's Alliance. Swenson and Lauren always fake a chilly collegiality, but for reasons he can't fathom—a testosterone allergy, he guesses—Lauren wants him dead."

Much later, during the kangaroo court of a hearing that will determine his fate, Swenson thinks to himself in the novel that the entire operation has been arranged so that Healy's "gang of thugs…must be appeased."

Healy, in fact, opens the fatal hearing, " 'Well, I guess everyone knows the drill. The committee will call the slate of agreed-upon witnesses.' Who agreed? Swenson would like to know. Who is lining up to take turns slandering him? 'Cross-examination is not allowed. This is not, after all, a trial.' So they don't have to worry about bothersome sticking points like due process.' "

Prose was one of 145 or more authors in April-May 2015 who opposed the decision by PEN America to bestow its Freedom of Expression Courage Award on the French satirical and anti-Muslim magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, whose offices in Paris were attacked by terrorists in January of that year. While denouncing the deadly assault on the magazine, Prose and the others, including Russell Banks, Peter Carey and Michael Ondaatje, rejected what amounted to PEN America's effort to legitimize anti-Muslim bigotry and build public support for the "war on terror."

In regard to *Blue Angel* and its film adaptation, in a comment published in the *Paris Review* in February 2018 ("When Women Aren't Angels"), Prose explained that what still engaged her about the story in her novel, "and what makes it now seem riskier than ever, is that the female character—younger, more vulnerable—is the one who has the agency. She is the one who turns out to be in control, and who determines the way things proceed. This version of the familiar professor-student narrative is so rarely mentioned that it is likely to provoke a hostile reaction. But are we saying that these situations *never* exist? That woman are *always* the hapless innocents?"

She concluded her piece on this note, "I hope that the film's appearance will add some small degree of nuance and complexity to the cultural conversation. But I fear that nuance and complexity are no longer operative concepts. In today's ferocious climate, where the rush to judgment is hastened by the dizzying speed of the news cycle, Ted Swenson would not only lose his job, he would have his book removed and his name erased from the college library catalogue."

Prose's worst "fear" was indisputably realized. Neither the media establishment nor feminist circles responded at all positively to the "nuance and complexity" in a film that Prose described as "an unusually faithful translation of my novel." In her *Paris Review* piece, the novelist already took note of the reaction of "some audience members" at a question-and-answer session following a film festival showing of *Submission*, "who seemed to believe that I'd helped create a reactionary, anti-feminist, even misogynist work."

For its intelligence and clear-eyed approach to things, *Submission* is worth viewing.