

# *I'm Your Woman*: The problem of films not genuinely drawn from life

David Walsh  
20 January 2021

*Directed by Julia Hart; written by Hart and Jordan Horowitz*

In *I'm Your Woman*, set in the Pittsburgh area in the 1970s, a suburban housewife leading a largely conventional life experiences a series of increasingly rude and dangerous shocks. The film is directed by Julia Hart and co-written by Hart and her husband, Jordan Horowitz.

Jean (Rachel Brosnahan) is married to Eddie (Bill Heck), whom she believes to be merely a thief (in fact, he is far more dangerous than that). Eddie shows up one day with a baby, whose teenage mother, the viewer finds out later, had to give him up. Jean, who cannot have children, passively, happily accepts the infant as her own. ("What's his name?" "It's up to you.")

Life moves on. But then, when Eddie is away overnight apparently on a job, one of his pals shows up and informs Jean she must leave immediately. Carrying the baby, Jean gets into a car with a black man, Cal (Arinzé Kene), a stranger, and they take off. No one can explain where Eddie is or what has happened to him. Jean appears to be in danger too. Cal moves her into a new house, instructs her not to make the acquaintance or even talk to anyone and leaves.

Two of Eddie's pursuers finally show up, but so does Cal, who eliminates the threat. He eventually tells Jean that her husband has killed a crime boss and that now "no one knows what's what. It's just ... it's a mess. The city's chaos." Cal brings Jean and her baby to another place, a cabin in the country where he spent time as a child. He departs again. Later, Cal's wife, Teri (Marsha Stephanie Blake), son, Paul (Da'mauri Parks), and father, Art (Frankie Faison), arrive.

When Cal does not turn up, as he promised to do, Teri and Jean head off to the city to find out what's what and make contact with Cal, if they can. The two women go to a nightclub, obviously run by gangsters. While they are there, nosing around, all hell breaks loose. Jean has to act

in a very determined manner if they are all to survive.

Hart and Horowitz explain in various interviews they were enamored of crime dramas of the 1970s and 1980s, such as *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *The Getaway* (Sam Peckinpah, 1972), *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (Peter Yates, 1973), *Straight Time* (Ulu Grosbard, 1978) and *Thief* (Michael Mann, 1981), but wanted to create a work with a female central character.

They have done that, but not all that much of anything else. *I'm Your Woman* (the line comes from Mann's *Thief*) has certain initially appealing elements. It develops carefully and the dialogue and movement are thoughtful enough. However, one's patience begins to wear thin. There is a great deal of waiting here, and not enough insight or revealing drama. Jean learns the need to be more self-reliant and independent, and to separate herself from the reality or the fantasy of life with Eddie.

Hart told Slashfilm that *I'm Your Woman*, in the final analysis, is "a hopeful film and a film about how we need each other. We need to connect. We need to take care of each other. We need to lift each other up in order to survive, and so I hope that's what people feel when they finish watching the movie." This is rather banal, and most viewers will already have known this.

Rachel Brosnahan (*House of Cards*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*) is a very gifted actor, and her intensity, earnestness and convincing emotional changeability provide the film with much of the impact it has. She is almost always worth watching.

The performer, however, cannot single-handedly turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. There is not sufficient substance here. The crime dramas of the 1970s and 1980s were not all of the highest quality, but many endeavored to subject American society or some aspect of it to scrutiny (for example, the fate of small-time or "independent" criminals in a world increasingly dominated by large corporations, the transformation of

organized crime itself into big business, the intensified corruption and cynicism of law enforcement and government agencies in the post-Watergate era, etc.).

Not surprisingly, given the present political climate, what Hart and Horowitz bring to the genre is largely colored by identity politics. Hart told *Entertainment Weekly* that at the film's outset "Jean is in the backseat, and Cal is in the front seat." She continued, "As their relationship develops, they become closer, and they go through some difficult experiences together, so she's in the front seat with him. Then Teri drives the car first, and then Jean is driving all of them while they're in the backseat. That progression was very purposeful in terms of her growing understanding of race and gender and her place in the world."

For the director, the moment when Jean takes the wheel of the car is her "favorite moment" in the film. "That's what we have to do as women," Hart told *Entertainment Weekly*. "We don't have to wait for permission, and we don't have to wait to be taught; she just freaking gets behind the wheel of the car and figures it out. That is the most female thing I can think of."

This is essentially small change and sheds almost no light on the current state of American life and the painful circumstances and challenges facing tens of millions of people. It speaks to the thoughts and feelings of privileged layers caught up in the #MeToo campaign and so on. At a time of unprecedented political crisis, the focus of certain filmmakers has measurably narrowed.

Hand in hand with the concentration on gender, inevitably, goes a fixation with race, which is perhaps even more harmful here. Arinzé Kene is also a fine actor, and the permanent state of anxiety he suggests strikes the proper note. However, the African American characters in *I'm Your Woman* are expected to hold the moral high ground and demonstrate sagacity and coolness throughout in a manner that feels thoroughly false and contrived.

The film tangibly weakens and falters when Teri, Art and Paul arrive in Jean's life. Marsha Stephanie Blake's Teri conveys a smugness and superiority (not necessarily the actor's fault) that simply becomes grating. When Jean, at one moment, has the audacity to suggest that her situation might be "worse" than the other woman's had been at a comparable moment in her life because Jean has a child, Teri replies, "Nothing is worse for you." Jean responds, "You don't know that." Teri looks Jean right in the eyes, "Yeah, I do." In other words, no white woman's situation can ever be less favorable than a black woman's. How is it possible to treat human relations

seriously on this basis, when they are always considered to be decisively influenced by race or ethnicity? Why bother, in any case, since one already knows in advance who the victims and the victimizers are going to be?

At another point, Art describes a time when he, Teri and Paul had to hide out in the city. They stayed at the St. Francis Hotel. He explains, "Black-owned, black-operated. It was a place people could go to get better, to fix their lives. Kind of an in-between place. Not quite there yet, but not where they'd been either." Who speaks like that, apart from motivational speakers and other "uplifting" guests on episodes of Oprah Winfrey's talk show?

In response to an appalling question from a *Hollywood Reporter* interviewer, as to how Hart tried "to authentically portray that Black experience within the world" she created, the director indicated she didn't think that "a white filmmaker ever can" do such a thing. She went on, "Generally speaking, it is important for the person of a certain race to tell the story of their own race. I would never feel comfortable telling a historical story about a culture or a race that wasn't my own." This is truly starting out on one's knees.

An interviewer from Collider.com asked Horowitz whether he had ever considered trying his hand at directing. The co-writer and producer responded, "I don't think we need another 40-year-old white guy directing, to be totally fair." Let that remarkable comment sink in for a moment. To be totally honest, the world probably *doesn't* need another "40-year-old white guy" or anyone else, for that matter, who holds such a semi-masochistic, pitiful viewpoint, directing a film.

The problem does not originate with Hart and Horowitz, who both seem to be intelligent and even artistically sensitive. But an entire social layer has been gripped by an obsession with gender and race largely to the exclusion of everything else, even as the burning problems of social inequality, mass poverty and the danger of dictatorship blow up in their faces. To an unhealthy extent, their films are not drawn from life as it is, but life as it appears in certain petty-bourgeois, identity politics recipe books.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**