

She Said: The origin story of the #MeToo campaign, or a version of it

David Walsh

20 November 2022

Directed by Maria Schrader, written by Rebecca Lenkiewicz

She Said, directed by Maria Schrader, is a fictional account of the researching and writing of a *New York Times* article about the alleged abuses of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The October 5, 2017 piece, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,” helped launch the #MeToo sexual misconduct campaign.

Carey Mulligan and Zoe Kazan play *Times* reporters Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor, the co-authors of the article.

She Said is a bland, stilted work largely without genuine dramatic life or energy. No element of ambiguity or complexity is allowed to intrude. Whatever conceptions and prejudices the viewer enters with, he or she leaves with.

To understand why that is so, why it is *almost inevitably* so, involves considering issues that the filmmakers themselves studiously avoid.

The #MeToo campaign has taken up a great deal of the media’s time and attention since October 2017. As Schrader’s film reveals, *The New York Times* – along with publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times* and others – has devoted considerable resources to the #MeToo initiative. *She Said* shows *Times* executive editor Dean Baquet (Andre Braugher), investigations editor Rebecca Corbett (Patricia Clarkson) and numerous other leading lights at the newspaper involving themselves directly and systematically in the Weinstein case.

Numerous claims have been made for the earth-shaking character of the #MeToo campaign. *Time* named sexual abuse “Silence Breakers” its “Person of the Year” for 2017. Voices in the media have argued that #MeToo “could well be the most important movement of a generation” or “the single most important movement of our era.”

If that were so, a film focused on the origins of this “movement” and on the investigation of one of its central targets, Harvey Weinstein, now on trial again in Los Angeles, ought to reflect something of its pressing character.

After all, with whatever limitations, films such as *All the President’s Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976), concerning the investigation of Watergate by *Washington Post* reporters, which led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon; *Spotlight* (Tom McCarthy, 2015), which follows the *Boston Globe*’s inquiry into child sex abuse by Catholic priests; and *The Post* (Steven Spielberg, 2017), about the publication of the Pentagon Papers, are animated by real urgency and thus emotionally compelling.

She Said has none of that character. It is composed of a series of mostly uninspiring, tepid encounters, as Twohey and Kantor travel around, attempting to pick up whatever dirt they can on Weinstein. Tellingly, in the film’s (anti-)climactic moment, a collection of *Times* writers and editors hovers around a computer, fussing about whether to click “Publish.” Not a bang, but a keystroke.

The film opens, after a brief prologue in 1992, in 2016 as Twohey reports on allegations of Donald Trump’s sexual misconduct, which

results in an angry phone call from Trump himself. After the downfall of Bill O’Reilly of Fox News in 2017 on similar charges, the question is raised at a *Times* staff meeting: “Why is sexual harassment so pervasive?,” and a leading figure suggests, “Let’s interrogate the entire system.”

Kantor receives a tip about actress Rose McGowan and her sexual assault claims against Weinstein. (*She Said* never refers to the July 2017 email from McGowan’s former manager Jill Messick in which the latter asserted that the actress told her at the time, in January 1997, that the episode was consensual. Messick committed suicide in February 2018.)

Actress Ashley Judd, a strident Democratic Party supporter and would-be candidate for the US Senate, appears as herself and recounts a sordid little scene with the producer. (Years later, Judd appeared in two Weinstein films without incident.)

The journalists’ breakthrough comes when they are put in contact with several former Weinstein assistants, Rowena Chiu (Angela Yeoh), Zelda Perkins (Samantha Morton) and Laura Madden (Jennifer Ehle), whose younger self we see in the prologue.

The most emotional scene involves London-based Morton as Perkins, who describes standing up for Chiu, an alleged victim of an encounter with the producer. Perkins speaks out strongly against Weinstein’s bullying and “emotional abuse.”

In numerous cases, women had reached cash settlements with Weinstein’s lawyers and signed non-disclosure agreement (NDA). His legal team insists these were not admissions of guilt, but clearly his behavior was aggressive and problematic.

In any event, *She Said* meanders on, as Twohey and Kantor get hold of an internal memo from Weinstein’s company, Miramax, detailing claims of employee abuse. The reporters attempt to convince the alleged victims to go on the record.

Weinstein himself intervenes, demanding to know from Baquet and the *Times* whether this is “a hit job.” Once the *Times* editors satisfy themselves that they have a sufficient number of individuals prepared to give their names, and anxious about the rival piece from *The New Yorker* (which would appear 18 days later), the fateful moment arrives, and the article is sent out into the world.

In *All the President’s Men*, *Spotlight* and *The Post*, reporters and publications faced powerful, entrenched enemies, with vast means and the potential at least to exact serious vengeance. Each of these dramas had a meaningful, democratic content and to one extent or another helped undermine belief in the status quo.

In its lack of democratic and anti-establishment substance, *She Said* is an accurate enough reflection of the original piece Twohey and Kantor produced in October 2017 (as well as Ronan Farrow’s contemporaneous article in the *New Yorker*.) The *Times* put its considerable assets behind tracking down complaints of abuse against a single individual. The resulting article was a mishmash of gossip, innuendo, unsubstantiated claims and indications of boorish, objectionable behavior. It was not clear

after reading it that any of the individuals were charging Weinstein with a crime.

Nor is it evident precisely what Weinstein did of a criminal nature to any of the women portrayed in *She Said*. That he made persistent advances they found objectionable is clear enough, if they are to be credited, but what actually went on, since none of the incidents are dramatized, remains unclear. None of the women reported the incidents to the authorities, none of them ever testified under oath. We are simply meant to take everyone at his or her word, which seems a reckless course, as though no personal or social interests were at stake.

One does not expect the slightest depth or complexity in Weinstein's treatment, and one is not disappointed. In fact, he was not an insubstantial figure in the film world. As we remarked in our initial comment on the controversy five years ago, "It does not excuse anything, but to the extent that there has been any life in the mainstream American film industry in recent decades, Weinstein has had some hand in it."

The list of 330 films he produced includes *Ready to Wear*, *The Crossing Guard*, *Flirting with Disaster*, *The English Patient*, *Cop Land*, *Jackie Brown*, *Velvet Goldmine*, *B. Monkey*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Holy Smoke*, *Love's Labour Lost*, *The Yards*, *Chocolat*, *Iris*, *Full Frontal*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, *The Human Stain*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko*, *The Reader*, *Capitalism: A Love Story*, *The King's Speech*, *The Fighter*, *My Week with Marilyn*, *Carol*, *Macbeth*, *War & Peace* (the mini-series) and many others.

Why did Weinstein produce such films? Was he simply a "beast"? He clearly had some artistic inclinations or intuition, along with his other qualities. *She Said* takes an entirely uncritical attitude toward the various claims against Weinstein. Why was that necessary? In general, unhappily, absent here is nearly everything that would have made this an intriguing, enlightening film, everything that would have shed light on the crisis-ridden state of American filmmaking and culture, including its moral condition.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has insisted from the outset that the #MeToo campaign had "no progressive content," that its base was "the more affluent sections of the middle class." The use of the sex scandal did nothing to enlighten popular consciousness, but rather served to debase it. The affair was bound up with the political needs of the Democratic Party in the wake of the 2016 Clinton campaign fiasco and the economic dissatisfaction of the upper middle class "with the distribution of wealth at the top. They want access to privileges and wealth, and are prepared to use any means to obtain it."

It is not possible to turn such narrow, selfish concerns into great, compelling drama. To borrow a thought from Plekhanov and John Ruskin, if the self-involved petty bourgeois in Hollywood did "sing" of their plight, the song "would not move anybody, that is, could not serve as a means of communication" between themselves and other people.

She Said is insufferably priggish, prim and dull. The filmmakers are determined to make their central characters respectable and upstanding throughout. Nothing "radical" here, not even "radical feminism" for the most part (Mulligan is allowed one outburst at an obnoxious man in a bar, which provides a small glimpse of just how horrible "they" [the male gender] can be).

Twohey and Kantor are provided with thoroughly enlightened, supportive partners. They have young children. One of the more ridiculous moments in the film is their considerable surprise and amusement when they discover they are setting off to an interview both wearing white dresses.

The pair of journalists spend their time pulling sad, grave faces at the stories they hear. If one were to take the film seriously, the discovery that bosses can be explosive and abusive, verbally or otherwise, came as a complete surprise to these veteran "investigative reporters" and the entire *Times* leadership. Have any of them worked in a factory,

warehouse, office or hospital where employers "bestride the narrow world like a Colossus"?

As for the specific role of *The New York Times*, much could be said. In 2017, as we argued in our very first response to the Weinstein controversy, as "the world teeters on the brink of nuclear war, and a madman shoots and kills or wounds hundreds of people in Las Vegas, this is what the 'newspaper of record' zeroes in on." The media obsessed about Weinstein both because of its own prurience and the need to divert attention from the social crisis and the deeply reactionary character of the Trump administration, which threatened to provoke a mass, *left-wing* opposition.

The sanctimonious comments of "Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, the *Times* editorialists et al," we wrote, "expressing their outrage and amazement over Weinstein's activities reek of hypocrisy. These are people responsible for, or who lost no sleep over, drone strikes, illegal bombings and assassinations and the murderous activities of the American military and CIA in every corner of the globe."

Weinstein was a major fundraiser for the Democratic Party and a personal acquaintance of the Clintons. By 2017, however, the influence of the race and gender-obsessed forces had become so pervasive among the Democrats that they were prepared or obliged to throw Weinstein to the wolves.

Needless to say, the creators of *She Said* are allergic to looking into any of these broader social and historical issues. This is the smug, affluent petty bourgeoisie on display.

The #MeToo uproar and demonization of Weinstein led to the latter's conviction in a travesty of a trial in New York, in which a "mountain of doubt," in the words of one journalist, was introduced by his defense team. His 23-year sentence, as we noted at the time, was longer "than that given to numerous former Nazi officials convicted of horrifying war crimes at the Nuremberg trials. US government leaders, responsible for illegal, aggressive wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, resulting in more than one million deaths and tens of millions of refugees, have never been charged with any crime."

Neither Schrader, screenwriter Rebecca Lenkiewicz nor anyone else involved in the production appears to have the slightest concern for the democratic and legal issues involved in the #MeToo scandalmongering. By implication, they concur with the insistence that the abuses were so serious that it was necessary to set aside concerns about due process and the presumption of innocence and to rely, for example, on anonymous and unsubstantiated denunciations. The title of the film, in fact, refers to the claim that to right long-lasting wrongs and systemic injustices, women accusers should simply be given the benefit of the doubt and quasi-automatically "believed."

In this regard, it would not occur to anyone in the media to point out the irony that a principal performer in this whitewash of the new, sexual McCarthyism, Zoe Kazan, is the granddaughter of the informer-in-chief during the original purges of the film industry in the 1940s and 1950s, Elia Kazan.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact