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Re-creational Eyewitnessing and the Representation of the Me Too Movement in Contemporary American Films

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Declaration

I, the undersigned Berraf Hana Lina Dalel, hereby declare that the present dissertation is the result of my research carried out under the supervision of Dr. habil. Réka M. Cristian. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where appropriately cited, and the papers previously published by myself are clearly indicated. This thesis contains no material accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program in English or any other language.

Berraf Hana Lina Dalel,
Szeged, on the 31st of March 2025.

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Abstract

The Me Too movement is a contemporary, feminist movement led by African-American activist Tarana Burke. While it was popularized in 2017 by American actress Alyssa Milano and remains mainly known under its social media form, #MeToo, the movement's rise in popularity in light of the accusations made against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein led to a global wave of anti-sexual misconduct sentiments. As such, it represents a turning point, not only in American history, but also in the global historical meta-narrative surrounding the sexual assault, harassment and exploitation of women in the workplace. Due to its historical and cultural significance, the movement and the stories associated with it have inspired a variety of contemporary written and audio-visual works ranging from books, graphic novels and journalistic articles to films, documentaries and TV shows. This doctoral thesis focuses on the filmic depiction of Me Too stories and attempts to determine the extent of the medium's usefulness as historical evidence for the study of the movement. In order to do so, it takes a gender and micro-historical approach to four movies selected based on their relation to the Me Too movement. Jay Roach's *Bombshell* (2019), Kitty Green's *The Assistant* (2019), Todd Field' *Tár* (2022) and Maria Schrader's *She Said* (2022) are all examined for their representation, or lack thereof, of perpetrators and survivors in Me Too stories. The study draws from feminist and cultural theorists' conceptualization of power as gendered and unequally distributed to form an understanding of the power dynamics involved in the interactions portrayed on screen. Power is mainly referred under the following two forms: Dahl and Foucault's power over and domination as well as Pitkin and Lukes' power to or ability to. Silence is then recognized as a byproduct of the (mis)use of power over survivors while power to takes the form of speaking out and denouncing one's perpetrator. The thesis also applies and adapts Peter Burke's theory of eyewitnessing through images to film, coining the term re-creational eyewitness to refer to the fictional recreation of historical narratives in movies. Re-creational eyewitnessing therefore refers to the use of film, or other audio-visual media, as historical evidence for the study of the past. Weaving these theories together enable the dissertation to provide a detailed and nuanced analysis of the filmic depictions of Me Too stories that embraces both historicity and fictionality.

Keywords: Me Too Movement, Film, Re-creational Eyewitnessing, Power, Silence, Speaking Out, Gender Studies, Microhistory.

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1. Me Too and Hollywood: An Introduction

The Me Too movement is a feminist social movement that aims to denounce sexual harassment and abuse as well as hold perpetrators accountable. The movement was popularized on *X* (formerly Twitter) following a tweet made by Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano urging other women to share their experiences with sexual violence. While Milano's 2017 tweet launched the wave of shared testimonies that led to the trial and arrest of many high-profile celebrities in various fields, the birth of the movement can be traced back to African American activist Tarana Burke's anti-sexual violence initiative launched on then-popular social media platform Myspace. Despite Burke's decade-long fight against sexual assault prior to Milano's use of #MeToo, the movement is nowadays often associated with the film and entertainment industry due to the notoriety of the perpetrators and survivors involved in the 2017-2018 denouncing campaign. This close bond between Hollywood and the movement is what led to this thesis' questioning of contemporary American film's representation of what will be referred to as Me Too narratives. In the context of this dissertation, Me Too stories are defined as any story or testimony that involves a highly positioned individual's misuse of power for the extortion of sexual pleasure from others they hold power over. These stories turn into Me Too narratives when shared with an audience either directly (interviews, social media posts, podcasts, and court hearings), making them real-life-narratives or through fiction (books, film, and other retellings through various forms of media), turning them into intradiegetic (in film) narratives.

As the movement became popular through social media, it appeared under different forms and spellings. It is, therefore, important to establish the different contexts in which each of the movement's forms will be used. Orally, #MeToo (phonetically read as hashtag Me Too), Me Too, or Me Too movement are used interchangeably; however, in its written form, the scholars differ on how to refer to the movement. *The Routledge Handbook of Politics of the #MeToo Movement* illustrates this fluidity in the movement's designation since, despite its recurrent usage of #MeToo movement, it also makes use of different variations such as Me Too movement (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021, 361), me too (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021, 59) or MeToo (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021, 233). While the two uppercase forms are used interchangeably to refer to the movement, the lowercase variation connects to the phrase's common spoken form "me too" (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021, 59). The case size and spacing between the two words also vary

within the journalistic and academic literature written on the topic. As such, this thesis will utilize the most recurrent spelling, Me Too (movement), to refer to the movement in a more general sense and #MeToo when referring to its use on social media as well as its Hollywood-led sub-form, and will examine how Me Too narratives are (re)presented to contemporary audiences through an exhaustive analysis of four Hollywood movies, namely *Bombshell* (2019), directed by Jay Roach, *The Assistant* (2019), directed by Kitty Green, *She Said* (2022), directed by Maria Schrader and *Tár* (2022), directed by Todd Field. While #MeToo refers to a specific variation of the movement, it is still considered to be an integral part of the Me Too movement. Due to the nature of the narratives explored within this project, it will inherently deal with issues relating to abuse, power dynamics, silence and speaking out, gender roles and representation, as well as the role of cinema in (re)creating historical narratives. The aim of the thesis is to examine how Me Too narratives are represented in contemporary cinema and determine whether film, as a medium, can be valuable for the study of the Me Too movement and the amplification of viewers' awareness about sexual abuse. Additionally, it also addresses issues of history's fictionalization, gender and power, and the use of film for activism and advocacy. This section is based on an article published in *Cultural Perspectives* 27 (Berraf 2022b). All sentences or paragraphs taken from the published paper are indicated through the use of its in-text citation (Berraf 2022b).

While all four of the movies studied deal, although sometimes differently, with the issue of power dynamics within the workplace, examining their IMDb profiles reveals that each utilizes its own blend of subgenres. *Bombshell* is presented as a docudrama, workplace drama, biography, and drama (IMDb "Bombshell"), *The Assistant* as a workplace drama and drama (IMDb "The Assistant"), *Tár* as a psychological drama, drama, and music (IMDb "Tár") while *She Said* appears under the categories of docudrama, workplace drama, drama, and history (IMDb "She Said"). It is therefore important to clarify the difference between each cinematic subgenre and the movies' utilization and balancing of these hybridizations. Contrary to the genre of documentary film which despite its subjectivity depicts people and events in "real, non-mediated time and space" (Hoffer and Nelson 1978, 24), as a subgenre combining elements of both documentary and drama, docudramas "provide realism, but the events portrayed are recreated and restructured" (Hoffer and Nelson 1978, 21). As represented by Derek Paget, docudramas' strength thus lies in the central position they occupy within the intergeneric hybridization spectrum, which extremities are embodied by documentary for the mode of non-fiction and drama for the mode of non-fiction

(Paget 2011). According to IMDb, both *Bombshell* and *She Said* belong to this sub-category which is confirmed by the fact that both explicitly highlight their relation to the reality that inspires their script. In contrast, despite a clear reliance on real experiences and research to craft their narratives, *The Assistant* and *Tár* fail to form "indexical links to real-world occurrences" in the same way that *Bombshell* and *She Said*, which are based on real people and events, do. This failure grounds both dramas in fiction despite their utilization of research and real experiences as inspiration for their plots. Interestingly, while *She Said* undeniably belongs to the categorized of docudrama, it also appears under history. This categorization will be referred to in the analysis of the movie as this sub-categorization stems from its script's suggested truthful adaptation of Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's book entitled *She Said: The True Story of the Weinstein Scandal*, an auto-biography.

The novelty of the thesis lies in the combination of three approaches, namely the gendered, filmic, and historical approaches, in the study of Me Too narratives' representation in contemporary American cinema. While a great amount of literature already produced on the Me Too movement offers an array of perspectives on the topic, academic attention to the depiction of Me Too narratives in cinema is scarce and far between. One of the most extensive collections of scholarship written on the topic is *The Routledge Handbook of Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (Chandra and Erlingsdótti 2021), which offers diverse theoretical insights on the inner workings of the movement, silencing, and power as well as interesting country-specific case studies. However, despite some of the essays exploring paintings and other forms of art, cinema is mainly perceived as a "locus of activation of twentieth-century sexual fantasies" (Berger 2021, 57). The literature that does deal more thoroughly with film in relation to the movement mainly aims to identify the existence of Me Too narratives within existing literary and cinematographic narratives (Bekers and Willems 2022; Funnell and Beliveau 2022) or study Me Too movies' effects on the denormalization of sexual violence (Fitria et al. 2023). Another important academic work written on #MeToo is Margaret Tally's 2021 book entitled *The Limits of #MeToo in Hollywood: Gender and Power in the Entertainment Industry*. While its title suggests a potential overlap between the present project and Tally's, both approach Me Too films differently since they rely on different methodological frameworks; Tally primarily relies on the theory of media representation (Tally 2021, 12) but also differs from this dissertation in her starting point and aim. While this thesis investigates how film can represent and positively serve the movement, therefore focusing on Me Too films' power and potentiality for the movement, Tally's book studies aim to measure the

impact of the Me Too movement on the film industry and society as well as the changes it brought forward. Furthermore, she focuses on how different films "drew on themes from #MeToo" within "specific genres" (Tally 2021, 12). In contrast, the thesis' findings point to an inability to identify what each genre draws from the movement since, despite belonging to the same genres, each film within the set of docudramas and dramas selected differs in its representation of the movement from the other. While identifying the films' genre was useful to measure the claimed degree of historical accuracy, such categorizations harm the study of the microhistories encapsulated by each movie by framing them within a pre-determined trend. As such, similarly to how Magnússon advocates for the singularization of history, this work calls for the singularization of the study of Me Too films. Therefore, while Me Too films have started garnering academic attention in the last few years, as pointed out by media scholar Robert Thompson, "Hollywood is now becoming its own loudest voice in helping to call out what a bad thing this is" (Serjeant qtd. in Tally 2021). Margaret Tally explains that "in his [Serjeant] view, while the #MeToo movement was instrumental in helping bring these issues to light, it becomes "institutionalized" when they are put into film and television series that people will continue to watch for years after the news coverage of #MeToo fades" (Tally 2021, 49). Serjeant's observations, supported by Tally, stress the need to give Me Too films more academic attention, not only as artistic works that reflect a historical reality but also for their potential impact on the movement's future as part of its historical archives.

As such, this doctoral thesis aims to fill this gap by testing the potential of Me Too films for the re-creational eyewitnessing of women's stories, a concept developed based on Peter Burke's eyewitnessing (Burke 2001). By re-creational eyewitnessing is meant the consumption of fictional re-creations of lived experiences which aim to inform viewers on a given historical narrative. Therefore, the concept is linked to filmmaking as a form of activism and the (re)making of history through cinema. This concept will bridge the microhistorical and gendered readings of films related to the Me Too movement to understand the filmmakers' various agendas and motives behind the making of each of the four Me Too movies selected into a re-creational eyewitness to the Me Too stories they represent on screen. In order to do so, a combination of concepts taken from gender studies, such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2020), power (Pitkin 1972; Foucault 1982; Lukes 2005; Haugaard 2022), speaking out (Serisier 2018), the female gaze and microhistory, like the normal exception (Magnússon 2020) and eyewitnessing (Burke 2001) will inform the analysis of the films. Applying a gender and microhistoricist perspective allows this

research to focus on how the four cinematic works transform and convert real stories and events into new Me Too narratives. Additionally, looking at the movies' varying levels of historical accuracy and gender representation puts to the test the potential advantages and disadvantages of considering the consumption of films as a form of re-creational eyewitnessing of the past. This thesis is, therefore, concerned with both real women's experiences of sexual misconduct and the fictional recreations of their stories.

The Me Too movement did not start with Harvey Weinstein since sexual assault and harassment have been part of Hollywood's open secrets long before the 2017 court case. On October 17, 2014, Comedian Hannibal Buress exposed Bill Cosby's long history of sexual assault against women, calling him "a rapist" directly (Buress qtd. in Gajewski 2014) in his standup comedy show. This incident redirected the attention of the media towards the issue of sexual assault in the entertainment industry. Two years later, Fox News's chairman, Roger Ailes, was forced to resign as a result of the lawsuit filed against him by Gretchen Carlson and the many other sexual harassment accusations made against him (Guthrie 2016). In October of the same year, *The Washington Post* published leaked footage of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump bragging about how his celebrity status allows him to "do anything" to women (Fahrenthold 2016). This series of heavily covered stories surrounding the sexual exploitation and abuse of women-led over 4.1 million Americans to take to the streets in the Women's March organized on January 21, 2017, as a protest against President Trump in light of the aforementioned leaked video (Felmlee et al. 2020) before his election. It is that same year of 2017, at a time when the American public was growing exponentially more concerned about older, influential men abusing their position of power to solicit sexual acts from non-consenting women, that the Bill O'Reilly (Steel and Schmidt 2017a) and Harvey Weinstein (Kantor and Twohey 2017) scandals came to light. Since then, many activists and survivors have spoken out and continue to come together to denounce the normalization of the sexualization and abuse of women in the United States.

On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the day when #MeToo went viral, Fatima Goss Graves, president of the National Women's Law Center and co-founder of the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, looks back on what made the hashtag so moving to millions of women. She says that

> if you think back to 2017, millions of people had already started the year in January marching in support of women with the Women's March. More people had been coming forward and making complaints in some spaces, and there were a few cases that were getting attention. I think the spark in fact was the injustice of learning that people with the power and privilege that some of the Weinstein survivors had, that they too did not have justice and healing. What you also saw was the world rallying around them, and rallying around the idea that no matter where you sit, we deserve more. (Graves qtd. in Corbett 2022)

Since going viral in October of 2017, the Me Too movement has enabled hundreds of women to, not only share their experience of sexual violence but also connect with survivors and allies alike. The popularity of the hashtag and the pressing need for change highlights the magnitude of the issue worldwide but also shines light on how prevalent sexual misconduct is within the entertainment industry. Under the umbrella of the Me Too movement, women from different walks of life, fields and parts of the world rallied together to denounce the globalized predatorial atmosphere and misogyny of their work environments. The thesis therefore aims to discover how film can help reignite the movement's popularity since, despite its flaws, more there remains more work to be done to ensure the protection of people from predatory behaviors but also that of survivors of such misconduct.

The first chapter of this work introduces the historical events, cases, and terminology used to support the analysis of the selected four movies. The first section of the first chapter aims to give a brief overview of the movement's history, objectives, close relation to Hollywood, and regional variants. It discusses Tarana Burke's original project, its rebranding by Alyssa Milano, the Harvey Weinstein case, which made the hashtag go viral, and some features that set each variant apart from the original United States-based initiative. The second section of the first chapter deals with women's role within the film industry as well as Hollywood's unequal treatment and hyper-sexualization of both genders. Going back in time uncovers Hollywood's history of sexual misconduct, driving back the point of #MeToo activists: it did not start with Harvey, and it will not end at Harvey. As Burke points out in a response to Weinstein's verdict being overturned in 2024, "ten years ago, we could not get a man like Harvey Weinstein into a courtroom. […] We also need to understand that the legal system has never served survivors. This is not a blow to the movement; it is a Clarion call, and we are prepared to answer that call" (Burke 2024). Therefore, this first chapter aims to point out past and current normalization patterns within the industry, emphasizing

the important narrative gap that Me Too films attempt to fill. This chapter provides information that will serve as historical reference points for assessing the films' narratives.

Chapter two outlines the theoretical and methodological framework that will guide the reanalysis of the films under consideration. The first section of the second chapter introduces Peter Burke's concept of eyewitnessing or the reconstruction of history through pictures. It builds on the latter and adapts it to the videographic turn experienced in the past decades. The chosen case studies examine the potential of Me Too films in relation to what is termed re-creational eyewitnessing. Therefore, cinema's fictionality is viewed as an asset for the Me Too movement since, if done right, it amplifies survivors' voices and the movement's cause. While real-life-narratives refer to the real events which inspired the films, intradiegetic narratives represent their fictionalized versions in film. While real events and people inspire the four movies' intradiegetic narratives, two of them (docudramas *Bombshell* and *She Said*) attempt to reconstruct the experiences of real survivors in ways that emphasize realism, or put differently, historical accuracy. However, the end product remains fictional by virtue of being a fabricated and dramatized reconstruction of reality performed by actors in a studio. Contrary to dramas, which may be based on true stories but present a completely fictional story and characters, docudramas often incorporate real footage, people and/or testimonies into their narratives, therefore recreating—with more or less success— real-life-narratives. The present study introduces the concept of re-creational eyewitnessing based on Burke's eyewitnessing by bridging two theoretical perspectives, namely microhistory and gender studies, allowing the discussion of the movies to combine gender representation with the microhistorical concern for the depiction of microhistories. The section also introduces the two opposing approaches to microhistory found within the recent scholarship and where they come together and differ. Jesse Paul defines microhistory as an approach to history that relies on the detailed (micro)analysis of primary documents to investigate the marginalized and overlooked events or people within the conventionally accepted historical narrative (Paul 2018, 64). In the context of microhistorical studies, primary documents may not be explicitly linked to the person, event or group under investigation. In addition to that, the section explores the concept of the normal exception (Magnússon 2020, 27) due to its importance to the normalization of abuse, which oppresses survivors into silence. While the Me Too movement has grown into a global phenomenon, it retains some local specificities proper to each region. In the context of the United States, the movement, under the form of #MeToo, primarily focuses on

calling out influential men's use of power to sexually abuse female workers and silencing them. However, microhistory is an appropriate approach for this thesis because, while all Me Too narratives share some local features, each story remains specific to the perpetrator and survivor involved. Most importantly, despite recurrent patterns arising from comparing survivors' stories, each person's experience is different by virtue of their unique identity and response to trauma. As such microhistory enables the analysis to focus on the individual and local histories while allowing them to interact with the global historical narrative without necessarily being framed by it. The second section of the second chapter explores the diverse definitions and variations of power within previous and current scholarship. Doing so allows this research to identify three different forms of power in Me Too narratives: the power to, power over, and power with (empowerment and sisterhood). In addition to these subtypes of power, containment and subversion are also presented, along with silence and speaking out, as a direct repercussion of the aggressive use of power over on others. Identifying these variants of power allows this dissertation to dissect the types of power dynamics exhibited within the four movies but also involved in their making. The third section of the second chapter completes the first two since it centers around feminist and masculinities' understanding of gender struggles. The section examines the feminist conceptualization of equality, difference, or sexualization in addition to the plurality of masculinity and its impact on what Connell calls the gender order (Connell 2020, 77). As both power and violence are often associated with normative and hegemonic masculinity, the gendering of power and its impact on other genders and forms of masculinities is also problematized.

The third chapter marks the transition from the theoretical and historical to the analytical part of this doctoral thesis. The four movies studied were selected based on the following criteria: 1. they were released following # MeToo's peak (end of 2017-2018), 2. Their plot follows the patterns found in Me Too narratives, and 3. Their explicit intention to portray survivors and perpetrators' lived experiences. As such, chapter three is divided into two sections, each analyzing a different Me Too docudrama film. The first section of the third chapter analyzes Jay Roach's *Bombshell* (2019). Taking both a microhistorical and a gendered approach to the reading of the film helps identify the historical and fictional elements that aid or harm the representation of survivors of sexual harassment. Roach's movie follows star anchor Megyn Kelly, Gretchen Carlson, and Kayla Pospisil as the three women navigate their positions in Fox News amid Carlson's opening of a sexual harassment case against CEO Roger Ailes. This section is therefore

concerned with the women's tumultuous journey towards speaking out and the obstacles each of their different positions within the network's machine entails. The cinematic portrayal of survivors and their relationship with one another is critical to this study. Ailes' real-life survivors publicly reacted to the movie, praising it for its emotionally powerful message and highlighting some historical inaccuracies. While the fictionalization of history is often understood positively throughout this work, juxtaposing the fictional elements added to *Bombshell* with survivors' reactions to them exposes one of the dangers of re-creational eyewitnessing. The inclusion of fictional elements can be harmful to survivors and used to shame them for not speaking out immediately after being propositioned or taken advantage of by their abuser.

The second section of chapter three analyses *She Said*, a 2022 documentary drama directed by Maria Schrader. The docu-film reconstructs Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's investigation into Harvey Weinstein's long history of sexual abuse and misconduct published in 2017 for *the New York Times*. The movie presents itself as a historically accurate representation of the journalists' journey toward uncovering the undisclosed allegations made against Weinstein and the monetary settlements reached in order to suppress the brewing scandals. *She Said* presents an oppositional portrayal of Me Too narratives by constructing its storyline from the perspective of the two investigative journalists instead of the people directly affected by the media mogul's abuse. Nevertheless, it often fails to address its fictionality and subjective perspective on the survivors' stories and other historical components. This section addresses both the real-life and intradiegetic narratives in *She Said* by comparing and contrasting the film's plot to various external sources, such as survivors' interviews, along with the book on which it was based. This section will question how cinema depicts recent history, further complicating the issues surrounding re-creational eyewitnessing through film.

Similarly to chapter three, chapter four comprises two sections, each analyzing a different film. However, instead of dealing with docudramas, this chapter focuses on two dramas. The first section of the chapter talks about Kitty Green's *The Assistant*, released to the public in 2019. Despite being distributed to the public the same year as *Bombshell*, Green's documentary approach to narrative films allows her filmic representation of Me Too to explore a different perspective on sexual misconduct. The movie depicts a single day in the life of an aspiring producer, working as an assistant for an unspecified high executive within the film industry. Examining this film allows this doctoral thesis to question the notion of the enabler, focusing instead on the environmental

silencing of individuals working under predatory leaders. The analysis will engage with the concepts of silence and speaking out in relation to said silencing forces since the movie's soundscape is designed to focus viewers' attention on the sounds around the protagonist, Jane. The section also weighs the benefits and detriments of re-creational eyewitnessing due to Green's impersonal yet relatable representation of what it is like to be suppressed by the culture of silence imposed by a toxic and complacent working environment.

The last section of the fourth chapter is a close reading of Todd Field's drama *Tár*, an entirely fictional narrative. Despite its fictionality, *Tár* recreates the same patterns of behaviors and abuses of power often found within Me Too narratives. The film follows the story of lesbian orchestra conductor Lydia Tár as she refines her latest score, a live recording of Gustav Mahler's fifth symphony. With the introduction of a new female member to the orchestra, Tár's problematic behavioral patterns slowly unravel. Despite the similarities found between the movie's plot and Me Too narratives, the movie's director and its leading actress, Cate Blanchett, deny its connection to the global anti-sexual misconduct movement and cancel culture. Consequently, this dissertation examines the movie to highlight the natural relation between *Tár*'s portrayal of normative power and Me Too's denouncing of the same harmful behaviors. Additionally, this section questions Field's weaponization of Lydia Tár's identity and sexual orientation and his use of the latter as a shield, preventing the movie from being associated with the Me Too movement and its controversial social media form #MeToo. This comes as a direct reaction to the fact that, as demonstrated by the analysis of the movie, had the main character been substituted with a male figure, *Tár* would have certainly been classified as a Me Too film. This division of the case studies into two chapters, each dealing with a different genre of cinema (docudramas and dramas), aims to highlight how each movie, despite its genre, approaches the representation of Me Too narratives differently.

Lastly, chapter five concludes the thesis by addressing the findings related to each movie separately before connecting them to the dissertation's research questions. While all four movies display different degrees of fictionality and historical accuracy, comparing the results of their microhistorical and gendered examination reveals that, despite some setbacks, the historical study of the Me Too movement would likely benefit from incorporating Me Too films as a form of historical archive. This is due to the fact that Me Too films, in spite of their fictionalization of Me Too real-life narratives, can lead to the re-creational eyewitnessing of both Me Too stories and the

attitudes held towards the movement at the time of the films' release, allowing historians to collect valuable data from, not only the movies, but the documents which follow their release and detail their reception (articles, interviews and reviews). While the doctoral thesis only partially tests this historical value on four films, it aims to open the door to further research. The conclusion also proposes to test the potential of re-creational eyewitnessing in relation to the Me Too movement further by extending the analysis to films that go beyond the present work's scope. The thesis only explores the issue within the American context, however, different #MeToo variants exist in various contexts. As such, going beyond this geographical specificity and including other audio-visual media may enable further research to confirm the value of re-creational eyewitnessing as a tool to highlight Me Too narratives but also bring out the cultural specificities of each region's depiction of survivors and their stories.

1.1. A Brief History of the Me Too Movement

1.1.1. From an African American Initiative to a Global Movement

The Me Too movement is a global feminist movement which aims to denounce sexual violence. The Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute (LII) identifies that, in the United States,

> Whoever, in the special maritime and territorial jurisdiction of the United States or in a Federal prison, or in any prison, institution, or facility in which persons are held in custody by direction of or pursuant to a contract or agreement with the head of any Federal department or agency, knowingly—
> (1) causes another person to engage in a sexual act by threatening or placing that other person in fear (other than by threatening or placing that other person in fear that any person will be subjected to death, serious bodily injury, or kidnapping);
> (2) engages in a sexual act with another person if that other person is—
> (A) incapable of appraising the nature of the conduct; or
> (B) physically incapable of declining participation in, or communicating unwillingness to engage in, that sexual act; or
> (3) engages in a sexual act with another person without that other person's consent, to include doing so through coercion;
> or attempts to do so, shall be fined under this title and imprisoned for any term of years or for life. (Cornell Law School)

As such, under code 2242, sexual abuse includes the initiation or attempt to have physical sexual contact with a non-consenting individual. However, the Me Too movement's concerns extend beyond sexual abuse as it also denounces other forms of sexual violence, such as sexual harassment. Contrary to sexual abuse's legal definition, which focuses on the physicality of sexual violence, the LII identifies sexual harassment as sex discrimination which occurs under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Cornell Law School "Sexual Harassment"). It is defined by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as

> unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when:
> - Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment ;

- Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; or
- Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance by creating an intimidating hostile or sexually offensive work environment. (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission qtd. in Cornell Law School "Sexual Harassment")

Originally, the initiative was started by African American activist Tarana Burke who, in 2006, used the phrase on social media platform *Myspace* to describe her project (Berraf 2022b). At the time, the activist's aim was to help survivors, especially women and children belonging to ethnic minorities since, according to the current statistics and research on 'adultification,' they are less likely to be taken seriously by the authorities (Berraf 2022b). A 2017 study published by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality demonstrates that, "the perception of Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like may contribute to more punitive exercise of discretion by those in positions of authority, greater use of force, and harsher penalties" (Epstein et al. 2017, 1; Berraf 2022b). Burke's primary objective was to provide survivors of sexual violence with the help, care, resources and support they need to heal from the traumatic events they have experienced (Burke "History and Inception"; Berraf 2022b). The catalyst for her initiative was the fact that, despite having survived sexual assault herself, she was unable to utter aloud the two words that will become known worldwide as defining for her anti-sexual assault movement, "Me Too" (Burke "History and Inception"; Berraf 2022b). On the Me Too movement's website Burke describes how a thirteen year old girl called Heaven confided her experience in the activist who was, at that time, unable or ready to help her not having dealt with her own trauma (Burke "History and Inception"; Berraf 2022b). It is therefore out of that inability to speak out –a concept which will be explored in the next chapter– and confront her own trauma that led Tarana Burke to start more than a decade long journey of advocacy and support for survivors.

Although the origin of the movement comes from the margins, the Me Too movement and hashtag under its current form was popularized by American actress Alyssa Milano who, after hearing about the Harvey Weinstein allegations, tweeted the following: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Milano 2017a). This tweet encouraged women from all around the world to use the hashtag #MeToo in an attempt to highlight the high number of women who have experienced sexual violence at least once in their lives (Berraf 2022b). Unaware of Burke's existing work under the same phrase, Milano will come back

to Twitter two days later to acknowledge the existence of the activist's initiative prior to her use of the hashtag. In this same tweet, she will redirect her millions of followers to Burke's project by sharing the link to the women of color oriented youth organization she was part of back then, JustBeInc (Milano 2017b).

In an article written for *Time,* Burke describes her initial reaction to seeing the hashtag #MeToo go viral on Twitter as the following:

> Y'all know if these white women start using this hashtag, and it gets popular, they will never believe that a Black woman in her forties from the Bronx has been building a movement for the same purposes, using those exact words, for years now. It will be over. (Burke 2021; Berraf 2022b)

While she follows this quote by saying that, after reading a testimony she found linked on the social media website the hashtag #MeToo written by a stranger on her personal blog, she realized that "[her] work was happening right in front of [her]" (Burke 2021; Berraf 2022b). Despite rightfully having adopted a much brighter outlook on the popularization of #MeToo, Burke's first instinctive reaction to the virality of the hashtag contained some part of truth since, from that point onwards, the movement's media coverage took an exclusionary direction (Berraf 2022b). To this day, the media's coverage of #MeToo almost exclusively revolve around well-established, mostly young and white women who are part of or previously worked within the entertainment industry (Berraf 2022b). This bias in media coverage is explained by Bernice Yeung, a reporter for Reveal News, by the fact that, "as members of the press, we do gravitate towards people who are brand names or well-known. They lend a level of credibility and familiarity to a topic" (Yeung qtd. in Chou 2018). Yeung has authored multiple articles on the topic including "The People #MeToo Leaves Behind" (Yeung 2017) which can be accessed through the Reveal News Organization website. It is therefore no surprise that, with many high-profile celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lawrence Rose McGowan, Reese Witherspoon, Uma Thurman and many more sharing their own traumatic encounters with American producer and media mogul Harvey Weinstein and/or other highly positioned executives actively working in the film and music industry, the discussion within the media quickly turned the topic into a Hollywood exclusive issue (Berraf 2022b). Burke's work was thus, to some extent, overshadowed by the high-stake accusations and court cases that the movement helped push forward (Berraf 2022b). This

phenomenon could be explained by the fact that, as explored by Phipps in her book *Me, Not You,* the marginalizing aspect of white feminism led the movement to neglect the theorization of the intersections between race, gender and class (Phipps 2020, 44). However, despite this partial white-washing of the movement, it is still important to acknowledge the role it played in seeking justice for many survivors of sexual violence within these highly corrupted industries.

Prior to the Weinstein case, many public accusations and court cases filed against alleged high-profile sex predators, aided by their normative media coverage, engaged in victim shaming, blaming, and silencing. Notorious instances of women publicly speaking out against sexual abuse prior to being empowered by the Me Too movement's wave of solidarity include Paula Jones's lawsuit against former president Bill Clinton in 1994 (New York Times 1998) and African American attorney Anita Hill's 1991 testimony against Supreme Court nominee and judge Clarence Thomas. The hearing detailed Thomas' recurrent sexual harassment of Hill, who, at the time, worked as an advisor to the chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the position he occupied (Gross 2021). Much like was the case twenty-seven years following Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Brett Kavanaugh in 2018, the hearing opened a conversation about sexual harassment but was ultimately unable to oppose the confirmation of the perpetrator. In a 2021 interview with NRP, Hill emphasizes "the systemic problems that exist in protecting people who commit gender violence or misconduct" and the inexistence of "[a]n effective process [which] would have clear guidelines about where an individual should go if they have information about a nominee. That didn't exist in 1991, and it doesn't exist now, as far as I know" (Hill qtd. in Gross 2021). The attorney who, following the impact of the Weinstein case, chairs the Hollywood Commission—a commission founded in 2017 as a direct response to #MeToo which aims to "close industry-wide gaps in standards, practices and accountability to support entertainment workers, especially the most vulnerable, everywhere they work" (Hollywood Commission)—points out the fact that, despite the changes brought forward by the Me Too movement and the increased public awareness on sexual harassment, abuse and violence, the systematic silencing of survivors remains a persistent issue. While #MeToo led survivors speaking out to receive more support than they did prior to the popularization of the hashtag and movement, it was Hill and her contemporaries —including Gretchen Carlson who sued Roger Ailes (Aurthur 2021) and Rose McGowan who tweeted about being raped by a Hollywood executive (Farrow 2020) in 2016—, by virtue of being the first women to speak out, who built the

foundation for subsequent survivors to voice their experiences regardless of the consequences it entails on their personal and professional careers. Hill's testimony undoubtedly gave other women the courage to report their abusers. However, it would not have been possible without the recognition and naming of sexual harassment in the workplace. Feminist activist Lin Farley first defined the term in her 1978 book *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job* as "unsolicited nonreciprocal male behavior that asserts a woman's sex role over her function as a worker" (Farley qtd. in Barger 2025). Farley would then join feminist scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon in pressuring the U.S. court into including sexual harassment as part of sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Barger 2025), paving the way for thousands of survivors such as Hill to file official complaints through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. It is thanks to the courage and resilience of women such as Farley, MacKinnon, Hill, Jones, Carlson and McGowan, to cite only a few, that many found the power to speak out despite the systematic, internal and mediatic enabling of men in power to sexually abuse others, thus paving the way for the Me Too movement to rise in 2017.

1.1.2. The Accusations That Started a Ripple Effect

Since two of the selected movies refer, either directly or indirectly, to Harvey Weinstein, it is important to contextualize them by presenting the events as described in court documents and various media articles. The first trial related to the case which led the hashtag to go viral on social media, namely the people v. Harvey Weinstein court case of 2020, was held in New York City and included the testimony of multiple women who either worked for Weinstein or aspired to start a career within the entertainment industry. Some of the main witnesses in this trial included Lauren Young, Dawn Dunning, and Tarale Wulff, however, testimonies given by Miriam Haley, Jessica Mann and Annabella Sciorra Wulff were also used as Molineux evidence (People v. Weinstein 2024, 2) to establish Weinstein's pattern of abuse and silencing. The Molineux evidence is a type of evidence which "relates to crimes or bad acts committed by a criminal defendant that are not part of the pending case, but which helps to explain the conduct for which the defendant is being tried" (People v. Weinstein 2024, 2). In a court document summarizing the case and responding to Weinstein's appeal, the following can be read about Young's encounter with the Hollywood producer:

> He [Weinstein] grabbed her breast while using his other hand to masturbate. Throughout the incident, Young repeatedly said "no," that she was "not interested," and that she had a boyfriend. Defendant said: "[H]ow am I going to know if you can act[?] . . . This is what all actresses do to make it." He moved his hand toward her genital area, but she blocked his hand. While still holding her breast, he ejaculated onto the towel and then left, still naked. (People v. Weinstein 2022, 13)

While the description of the assault is quite explicit, what one should also pay close attention to is the language allegedly used by the mogul. Here, Weinstein not only claims that "this is what all actresses do to make it" (Weinstein qtd. in People v. Weinstein 2022, 13), he also justifies his actions by framing them as part of the actresses' professional trial and hiring process, making it appear to be a necessary step to enter the industry. This small passage highlights not only the fact that this was not an isolated incident for the Hollywood producer, it also points to the idea that delivering sexual favors in exchange for jobs is seen within the industry as 'the norm.'

Another poignant testimony that seems to confirm this hypothesis in relation to the normalization of sexual assault within the industry can be found in Dawn Dunning's retelling of her experience with Weinstein found within the same court document. In it, the following is mentioned:

> In the room, Dunning saw stacks of paper on a table, and defendant told her he had contracts for three movies which he would sign if she agreed to group sex with him and the assistant. Dunning looked at the assistant, who had a blank expression. When Dunning started laughing, defendant yelled that this was "how this industry works," and she would "never make it in this business." She ran out of the room while defendant kept yelling. (People v. Weinstein 2022, 14)

Once again, the defendant seems to be using his position within the industry as well as this idea that being positioned and pressured into performing sexual favors for the people in higher positions is part of the 'business.' This illustrates how, coupled with the victims' knowledge of how the producer could make or break their careers, Weinstein, like many others, had the power and ability to silence his victims for multiple years prior to the emergence of the hashtag #MeToo. While the normalization of sexual violence within Hollywood played a role in the psychological grinding down of the victims and their silencing, the isolation of these women, the shame associated with sexual assaults along with the considerable financial and legal resources employed by Harvey

Weinstein are also important factors to take into consideration. As reported by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, the two journalists depicted in *She Said*, "after being confronted with allegations including sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact, Mr. Weinstein has reached at least eight settlements with women, according to two company officials speaking on the condition of anonymity" (Kantor and Twohey 2017).

In addition to the monetary settlements—NDAs which is short for Non-Disclosure Agreement are defined as "legally binding agreements to keep information confidential" (Thomson Reuters 2024)—were put in place to ensure that the women who have agreed to work for the company or have been paid off by Weinstein's team remain silent on their experience with the producer.

> Mr. Weinstein enforced a code of silence; employees of the Weinstein Company have contracts saying they will not criticize it or its leaders in a way that could harm its "business reputation" or "any employee's personal reputation," a recent document shows. And most of the women accepting payouts agreed to confidentiality clauses prohibiting them from speaking about the deals or the events that led to them. Charles Harder, a lawyer representing Mr. Weinstein, said it was not unusual to enter into settlements to avoid lengthy and costly litigation. He added, "It's not evidence of anything." (Kantor and Twohey 2017)

Accepting those settlements may seem counterintuitive to people looking into the situation from outside. Nevertheless, at a time when sexual misconduct was not taking as seriously as it is nowadays, and considering the lack of evidence, potentially going to court against the likes of Weinstein as a private individual would not only be extremely costly but also unlikely to end in a positive verdict for the woman in question.

1.1.3. The Me Too Movement Beyond Weinstein

While the Weinstein case is not an isolated occurrence and the Me Too movement goes beyond the latter, it is important to acknowledge that the accusations made against him in 2017, as well as his condemnation three years later (2020) to 23 years of imprisonment after being found guilty of rape in the third degree, were important milestones and marked a turning point for the anti-sexual assault movement (Berraf 2022b). As of the writing of this doctoral thesis, New York's

court of appeals has overturned Weinstein's conviction and ordered a new trial. Weinstein will therefore likely be transferred to California where he was sentenced to prison for three other charges independently from the case in New York. Nevertheless, Weinstein's exposure still gave birth to the hashtag which will be used by millions of women to openly talk about their sexual assault and harassment experiences, leading to what some media outlets referred to as the 'Weinstein effect' (Berraf 2022b). The Weinstein effect and 'Weinstein ripple effect' are phrases used by the media to describe the cross-industries accusations made against other high-profit, powerful men as a result of the raise in popularity of the #MeToo, of the Me Too movement and the public condemnation of Harvey Weinstein. *Vanity Fair* (Busis 2017), *CBS* (CBS News 2017), and *Seattle Times* (Seattle Times News Service 2017), along with many other newspapers and magazines, have all published their own lists of men who, as a consequence of the Weinstein effect, are under investigation for past sexual misconduct or assault (Berraf 2022b). Weinstein's condemnation in 2020 thus proved that even the people who survivors thought of and, most importantly, thought of themselves as untouchable can be persecuted and eventually taken down (Berraf 2022b).

After its popularization, the Me Too movement extended globally, taking different names inspired by the original hashtag #MeToo. Some of regional variations include but are not limited to: #YoTambien (literal translation) in Spanish speaking countries, #QuellaVoltaQue (#that time when) in Italy, #EnaZeda (literal translation into the Tunisian Arabic dialect) in Tunisia, #AnaKaman (literal translation into the Egyptian Arabic dialect) in Egypt, #Masaktach/Masaktech (I will not stay silent in the Moroccan Arabic dialect) or #machi_b_sif (not by force) in Morocco and #balancetonporc (denounce your pig in French) in France. Contrary to #MeToo and #Balancetonporc which were both promoted by a famous figure, instantly gaining traction on the internet, the Arabic variations of the hashtag focus on the daily persecution of women, not only sexually but also mentally and physically. These movements are therefore more community-centered and, rather than aim to denounce individuals, they condemn a culture of violence against women. #Balancetonporc, the French equivalent to #MeToo was initiated by French journalist Sandra Muller who, much like Milano did in the US, used Twitter to urge women to not only share their experience of sexual abuse in details but also name their aggressors (Muller 2017a). This major difference between the two iterations of #MeToo makes of #Balancetonporc a more aggressive and direct form of response to sexual violence. Responding to a tweet answering her

original post worried that within the stories shared, there might be a lot of 'slippage' [*dérapage*], Muller adds: "Admittedly ;) But stories without names remain stories sometimes…" (Muller 2017b, *my translation*). This is a highly impactful statement from the journalist since, as she justly points out, when testimonies preserve the anonymity of the perpetrator, they remain stories. This leads to the main difference between what will refer to in this doctoral thesis as Me Too narratives and stories: the vocalization and filmic representation of the identity of the abuser and speaking of one's experience explicitly as possible. As such, while movies like as *She Said* and *Bombshell* represent Me Too narratives, *The Assistant* depicts a Me Too story by virtue of the fact that, while the producer for which Jane works is implied to be Weinstein, it does not directly name it. Nonetheless, Me Too stories are also powerful forms of discourse since this same anonymity enables viewers who have experienced similar situations to project themselves and relate easier.

It is also important to acknowledge how #MeToo, as a consequence of the global reach of the Weinstein case, has enabled some change to take place within the American landscape, starting from the film and entertainment industry and extending to other fields such as sports and politics. While the extent of this change is often argued on, at the Cannes Festival 2024, film director and jury president Greta Gerwig—most well-known for her 2023 award-winning film *Barbie*—stated that she has "seen substantive change in the American Film community" (Gerwig qtd. in Murray and Powell 2024). She gives the example of the incorporation of intimacy coordinators as an integral part of the movie-making process, emphasizing the need to think of this position as equal to that of a stunt or fight coordinator (Gerwig qtd. in Murray and Powell 2024). As briefly touched upon by Gerwig, the inclusion of intimacy coordinators into a movie's crew facilitates the creation of a safe environment for actors. As demonstrated by film data researcher and producer Stephen Follows, some pre-#MeToo movies did employ what he refers to as proto-intimacy coordinators, crediting them using different job titles such as technical consultant or advisor (Follows 2024). Follows' study of film credits pre and post-#MeToo reveals an increase in the number of credits associated with the role, with an average percentage of the inclusion of the latter in films made in 2023 being 1.9%, which, despite sounding negligible, comes to contrast a percentage of close to 0.1% pre-2020 (Follows 2024).). In addition to the growing use of intimacy coordinators, a study conducted by Hong Luo and Laurina Zhang has demonstrated that following #MeToo and the accusations made against Harvey Weinstein in 2017, producers—especially those formerly associated with Weinstein—had more incentive to employ female writers (Luo and Zhang 2020,

8). The study also finds that following the Weinstein scandal, the involvement of at least one female producer in the production team doubles the likelihood of the teams' inclusion of female writers (Luo and Zhang 2020, 18). Despite taking steps in the right direction, sexual harassment and abuse remains a recurrent issue within Hollywood. While awareness of unacceptable behaviors in the workplace has risen, according to Anita Hill, survivor, attorney and current chair of the Hollywood Commission, people working in the industry remain skeptical of their ability to speak out without facing retaliation, creating a gap between their level of awareness and willingness to report misconduct (Hill qtd. in Noveck 2020).

As mentioned above, the American entertainment industry was not the only field impacted by the Me Too movement. Law professors Jamillah Bowman Williams and Elizabeth Tippett claim that, following the rise of #MeToo in 2017, U.S. states introduced 2324 bills on issues ranging from sexual harassment to gender equity, 286 of which passed (Williams and Tippett 2022). This points towards the incorporation of some changes within the U.S.'s laws and political attitudes towards sexual violence. Nonetheless, the figures used by Williams and Tippett in their 2022 article also demonstrate that the number of bills introduced and passed between 2016 and 2021 peaks in the two years following the viral debut of #MeToo to then drop significantly in 2020. While the article does not discuss this significant reduction, it could be explained through several hypotheses. On the one hand, it is possible to assume that the increasing temporal distance between the rise of #MeToo and the number of bills introduced and passed after 2019 played a role in this drastic decrease. However, taking a closer look into the American historical context between 2020 and 2021 would suggest a more plausible reason for the numeral decline in the introduction and passing of #MeToo-related laws. Nationwide demonstrations against police brutality and systematic racism were organized following the filmed murder of 46-year-old African American man George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020. The video, filmed by witnesses, led to the organization of at least seven thousand seven hundred and fifty (7750) recorded demonstrations linked to the Black Lives Matter movement (or BLM for short) across the country, calling for action against the systematic targeting, brutalization, and killing of people of color (Kishi and Jones 2020). Kishin and Jones also denounce the violent use of force by the authorities in response to the predominantly peaceful demonstrations, leading to the deepening of the national unrest and a militarized federal response (Kishi and Jones 2020). Based on the statistics and the extent of the national discontentment related to systematic racism and violence during that time, it can be

deduced that the focus previously put by politicians on women's rights and sexual assault as a response to #MeToo simply shifted toward police brutality and the containment the BLM movement. In the year that followed, 2021, the public's attention once again moved towards other concerns, namely the global health and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this decline in legislative initiatives, the Me Too movement remains the foundation for hundreds of testimonies made against powerful and influential American politicians. A report published by Georgetown Law in 2018 reveals that

> Of the 111 elected officials reported [for sexual harassment or assault], 75 are no longer in office. Forty-three either resigned or retired promptly without completing their terms, 4 were removed, 11 completed their terms, but decided not to run again, 15 lost their primary or another elected office, and 2 committed suicide. Beyond losing political positions, some of these officials also face legal action, including 7 civil lawsuits and 12 criminal charges. This type of accountability is historically unprecedented. (Williams 2018, 3)

Despite these considerable repercussions faced by accused officials detailed by Williams, as she highlights in her report, there is still a long way to go as many alleged perpetrators are still (re)elected into office and/or face little to no consequences. An example of such a case is Judge Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to a lifelong position on the Supreme Court despite being accused of sexual assault by multiple women, including Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, whose sworn testimony in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee on September 27, 2018, may not have prevented his confirmation but significantly slowed the process (Edwards 2018; Chu and Carson 2021). It is, therefore, clear that the United States' political scene felt the effects of the Me Too movement; however, as demonstrated by the confirmation of Kavanaugh and the re-election of President Donald Trump in 2024, more remains to be achieved in relation to both gender equity and sexual violence.

The Me Too movement also led to changes within American sports, especially in gymnastics, by highlighting the need to speak out against sexual violence in sports and setting a precedent for implementing change within the field (Abrams and Bartlett 2025). The Lawrence (Larry) Nassar case represents one of the most significant sexual abuse scandals in history as the national gymnastics team doctor was accused of sexually assaulting hundreds of athletes, such as Olympic gold medalists Aly Raisman, McKayla Maroney, and Simone Biles. The scandal sparked

a global discussion surrounding the grooming and sexual and physical abuse of athletes by coaches, officials, and staff members, but also the ways in which complaints were silenced for decades (Freeman 2018a). 1986 U.S. national champion Jennifer Sey explains that

> Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee didn't want to scare off sponsors and they didn't want to risk the piles of Olympic medals. So they covered it up. And at a certain point they were so far in on the cover up that they were implicated. So they dug in deeper to protect themselves from criminal and civil liability. (Freeman 2018a)

The Nassar case, therefore, revealed the presence of the same culture of silence surrounding abuse found within the entertainment industry despite the press and social media coverage of the sports industry claiming otherwise (Orbanek 2024).

As this summary of the changes initiated by the Me Too movement outside of the Weinstein case demonstrates, there has been a move towards changing legislation, behaviors, and attitudes towards sexual violence in the United States. However, this sample of a complex and long history of silencing and speaking out also draws attention to one of the movement's main shortcomings, its reliance on viral cases to push toward change. It is evident that sexual harassment and assault, despite the steps taken in the right direction following the rise of #MeToo, remains a pervasive problem that extends to all fields and areas of life. This is exemplified by the recent revelations surrounding the Gisele Pelicot case in France which uncovered a decade's worth of sexual assault without the victim's knowledge. The 2024 rape trial involved fifty-one perpetrators, including Pelicot's husband of more than fifty years, Dominique Pelicot. More than two thousand photos and videos of an unconscious and drugged Gisele being raped by more than seventy men were found by the police on Domnique's technological devices (Walt 2025). The trial ended in December of 2024, leading to the conviction of the then seventy-two-year-old Dominique as well as fifty other abusers for rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault (Walt 2025). Pelicot's shocking case highlights the fact that there still is a vital need to fight against the normalization of sexual violence under all its forms, as well as the silencing and stigmatization of survivors. It is because of the work that remains to be done that the Me Too movement and other feminist initiatives remain socially, culturally, legally, and politically needed. Despite dividing public opinion and being considered by some as a "failed movement" (Jackson 2022), the Me Too movement, as a historical

turning point, highlights the potentialities that come with breaking the culture of silence through the acquisition of the communal form of power referred to as the power with, which will be discussed in the second section of the second chapter of this thesis; a form which continues to be needed for the betterment of society.

1.2. Hollywood's History of Silenced Sexual Violence

The Harvey Weinstein case was no surprise considering Hollywood's long and complicated relationship with women. While women played an essential role in the making of some of Hollywood most iconic pictures on-screen as well as off-screen, on closer inspection, the rose-colored glasses through which the industry's audience may have viewed the latter appears as flawed and, at times, toxic. Having an array of sexual abuse, harassment and misconduct cases come out from within Hollywood is not a contemporary phenomenon. Many stories and reports about actresses, secretaries and other female employees within the American film industry being propositioned have been around since the early years of cinema. Had these stories come to light after the emergence of the movement, they would have been considered as Me Too narratives since they follow the same narrative structure.

1.2.1. Normalized Sexual Violence in Early Hollywood

Reports of 'incidents' ranging from sexist behavior, sexualization and unwelcomed sexual advances being made go back to as far as Hollywood's cradle days as women, from high profile actresses such as Shirley Temple (whose married name was Temple Black), Marilyn Monroe and Dame Helen Mirren to secretaries like Silvia Schulman, have denounced and continue to speak out against experiencing such gender-based violence throughout the decades. Many survivors recall in their memoires and auto-biographies their disturbing encounters with producers such as David O. Selznick who actively worked in the industry from 1923 to 1957 with *Farewell To Arms* being the last film he produced (IMDb "Farwell To Arms"). Temple Black recalls in her autobiography her encounter with Selznick as follows:

> Coming around my side of the desk, he reached and took my hand in his. Glancing down, I saw the telltale stocking feet. Pulling free, I turned for the door, but even more quickly he reached back over the edge of his desk and flicked a switch I had learned from Colby was a remote door-locking device. I was trapped. Like the cartoon of wolf and piglet, once again we circled and reversed directions around his furniture. Blessed with the agility of a young dancer and confronted by an amorous but overweight producer, I had little difficulty avoiding passionate clumsiness. It's just the grease that oils Hollywood's

> wheels," he laughed, feinting ineffectively. "Makes them run smoothly." (Temple Black 1988, 436)

The attempted rape is described by, at the time of the publishing of the book, a sixty year old Temple Black as "passionate clumsiness." Her description of this encounter reinforces the same abusive pattern of behavior described by survivors of Weinstein: the young woman is lured into a powerful producer's office to have what they thought would be a work-related meeting which progresses into sexual advances. Another striking similarity between this excerpt and the previously cited testimonies is the discourse held by the producers. Selznick's description of his predatory behavior and attempt at raping the young child as "the grease that oils Hollywood's wheels. Makes them run smoothly" (Selznick qtd. in Temple Black 1988, 436) is reminiscent of Weinstein telling Young that "This is what all actresses do to make it" (Weinstein qtd. in People v. Weinstein 2022, 13). Both men attempt to justify their sexual violence by convincing their victims of the normality of the situation they are put into, presenting assault as an industry norm.

Another example of such situations can be found with women's recollection of their experience with Arthur Freed, who worked as a producer from around 1928 to 1961 when he left MGM. Freed continued to be the president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences until 1966 (Cassone 2018), retaining power and influence within the film industry. In the same autobiography in which she mentions Selznick, Temple Black recounted how Freed exposed himself to her at the age of twelve-years-old (Temple Black 1988, 322-323). Michael Winner was another powerful man in Hollywood accused of sexual harassment decades after the alleged events took place. The filmmaker and writer actively worked until 1999 after which he continued to be highly regarded by his peers, even contributing to books on British cinema such as Sutton's *Six British Filmmakers* (Sutton 2014). British actress Debbie Arnold spoke out about her experience with Winner after being inspired by the hundreds of women speaking out against Weinstein. She recalls her experience saying:

> He asked me to take off my top, then my bra and told me to massage my breasts […]. I thought it was a joke, so I was appalled when he repeated the question. "I walked right up to him and told him, 'fuck off, you dirty old pervert'. He got angry and told me he'd report me to my agent and to Equity, the actors' union, for being inappropriate. He said my language and behaviour were appalling. […] I felt threatened, because at that age I wasn't sexually confident and when

> someone asks you to show yourself like that you feel vulnerable. (Arnold qtd. in Paget 2017)

Similarly to Temple Black's testimony, Arnold was sixty-two when she broke her silence about Winner. After this confrontation, Arnold reports that Winner called her mother and agent, Mary Arnold, saying that "[he] played a trick on Debbie and she was fabulous. Can she come back for a recall?" (Arnold qtd. in Paget 2017). This testimony once again confirms how such predatory actions were disguised as jokes or banter, thus banalizing them as part of the industry's blueprints.

Other examples could be cited to illustrate the fact that the issue of sexual harassment and assault is not a new phenomenon when it comes to Hollywood. In fact, the first public case of sexual assault related to the industry was introduced to the public in 1920 when silent film star Roscoe Conkling "Fatty" Arbuckle was accused of allegedly raping fellow silent film actress Virginia Caroline Rappe, leading to her death and to three heavily mediatized trials (Storey 2021). As Rappe did not live to recount the events which transpired during the party where the alleged sexual assault occurred and, since various contradictory versions of the events were given by the witnesses brought to court during the three trials, it was difficult for the jury to determine whether Arbuckle was in fact guilty or innocent. However, what can be said for certain about this tragic Hollywood scandal is that Arbuckle's career was heavily affected by the accusations put forward against him. Arbuckle was found innocent as a result of his third trial, but this heavily mediatized case led to many changes within the industry including the hiring of William Harrison Hays to "police its [the film industry] own image" (Smith 2023). Hays, who was in charge of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America which will late change its name to the Motion Picture Association [MPA]), introduced the Production Code, also known as Hays Code, in an effort to regulate morality in films (Cristian 2008) and repair Hollywood's public image. Nevertheless, these public trials confirm the fact that such occurrences and abusive behaviors were no guarded secret. Such 'open secrets' of the industry were not thought of as worthy of media coverage because much like Weinstein, the Hollywood men accused of predatory behaviors "cultivated journalists who ran glowing pieces about favoured actors—and negative pieces about those who angered or defied [them]" (Caroll 2017). In that sense, the media played an important role in silencing these Me Too stories by willingly working in accordance with the whims of these powerful figures or not covering the allegations properly despite their gravity.

1.2.2. Hollywood's Upholding of The Culture of Silence

A few Hollywood-related contemporary cases ended in a termination of the alleged perpetrator's career, yet, more often than not and due to the culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse within the industry, justice may never be served or takes decades to emerge. American author Ken Auletta describes the rationale behind Hollywood's acceptance and normalization of sexual violence in his 2022 book entitled *Hollywood Ending: Harvey Weinstein and the Culture of Silence*, claiming that

> Ben Thompson, who composes a brilliant daily business blog (stratechery.com), mostly focused on digital and media companies, wrote soon after news of Harvey's sexual abuse was exposed. "Weinstein was a gatekeeper, presented with virtually unlimited supply while controlling limited distribution." If you were an actor, director, or screenwriter with Oscar dreams, Harvey was an especially important gatekeeper. His secrets also stayed secret because in the movie business, abnormal male sexual aggression was thought to be common, fit for private whispers but not public shame. This was Hollywood's culture of silence. (Auletta 2022, 224)

While, in this passage, Auletta discusses this collective silence in relation to Harvey Weinstein, the Miramax producer was not the first nor the last highly positioned name within the industry to be accused of rape and sexual misconduct while remaining influential and sought after decades later. Film producer Emily Best explains how women working in the industry were forced to share information on predators within the industry through private networks. "It's a 'whisper circle'," she explains. "We have to do that. The law doesn't protect us. The culture doesn't protect us. So we have to protect ourselves. People will come out and say, 'I had this experience. Nobody work with this person" (Best qtd. in Caroll 2017). In fact, what the Weinstein case along with the many other testimonies cited above highlight is the fact that this 'open secret' attitude towards sexual crimes has always been the foundation for the proliferation of sexual abuse within the industry. Furthermore, despite the silence surrounding Weinstein's crimes having been broken thanks to the courage of the women who accepted to speak on the record and spread the word, these public revelations were shared with the public opinion decades after the facts, once again emphasizing the muzzling power of silence in the hands of the wrong people. Additionally, I would like to emphasize the difficulty of being held accountable for the breaking said culture of silence for

survivors. Although speaking out and testifying against one's aggressor will potentially help put an end to the person's reign of terror, it does not minimize or erase the pain that survivors had to endure in the years, sometimes decades, proceeding the legal proceeds nor the trauma that comes with reliving the disturbing events of the assault.

Names such as Roman Polanski or Woody Allen are often linked to cinematic excellence and cult favorite movies regardless of the fact that both men have been accused and/or convicted of rape on minors. As a matter of fact, in the case of Polanski, his popularity within the film industry never diminished after his trials as many actors, directors and producers signed petitions, wrote open letters (Knegt 2009), and publicly supported the director despite his admission to having drugged and had intercourse with the then 13-year-old Samantha Gailey (Clark 2009). In fact, during an interview held while he was exiled in France, Polanski openly admits to his "preference for young girls, let's say 'young women,' it sounds better in France" and argues that "[he has] never hidden it, [he has] always been surrounded by young girls" (Polanski as heard in Institut National de l'Audiovisuel 2020, *my translation*). Despite being open about his pedophilic, sexual abusive tendencies, the famous director continued to film movies and even received multiple awards, including multiple Oscars, for his works even after pleading guilty to the charged held against him in the United States (Clark 2009). Polanski continued to receive standing ovations at award shows such as the Oscars 2003 (Freeman 2018b) or film festivals (Roxborough 2011; Fitzpatrick 2019; Steinberg 2023) which, once more proves that, while sexual abuse has been around for decades within Hollywood, the latter's willingness to hold its perpetrators accountable was inexistant until #MeToo.

1.2.3. The Inequality of a Democratized Industry

Although most contemporary film critics, historians and scholars acknowledge and condemn such behaviors, some argue that although Golden Age Hollywood in the 1960s had its flaws, "[it] was a town where women worked, were visible, bagged their own "game" –and, sometimes, even ran the studios behind the scenes. It was a place where actresses weren't always the long-suffering heroines of the story, but titanic prima donnas and pains in the ass" (Smyth 2018, 8). It is true that, as pointed out by Smyth in her article for *Cinéaste*, many women managed to have successful careers within 1960s Hollywood, whether on screen or behind the scenes as

exemplified by the few proto-feminist films which were released during the 1960s such as *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964), *Rachel, Rachel* (1968), and *Sweet Charity* (1969). While these movies would not necessarily contain what we would nowadays consider as feminist tropes or plots, they include feminist themes of liberation, independence, and many other feminist sub-texts. However, it is still crucial to keep in mind that most of them, more or less silently, experienced continuous propositioning within their workplace, often referred to as casting couch, making them feel uncomfortable, threatened, or even put in danger in a place where they should not feel as such. As such, the issue at hand should be discussed taking into consideration the psychological and social pressures endured by victims. Moreover, the failure of the judicial system, the power dynamics at play and the industry's complicity in keeping men such as Selznick, Polanski or Weinstein at the top and, consequently, their victims silenced should also be examined. Casting couch, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, is an expression commonly used to refer to the assumption that "someone has got a good part in a film or play by … [having] sex with the person who was choosing the actors in order to get the part" (Cambridge Dictionary, "Casting Couch"). However, as proven by the numerous testimonies included in this chapter and throughout the thesis, the majority of the women who have been propositioned during supposed work meetings did not consent to or intend to participate in said predatory tactics to get ahead in their careers.

Hollywood's history of banalizing sexual harassment and assault has been put into question with the emergence of the Me Too movement in the United States, however, looking at the statistics makes it evident that the road to equality is still long and tumultuous. In an article entitled "The Brutal Math of Gender Inequality in Hollywood," journalist Derek Thompson presents the alarming numbers as well as the Golden Globe Award ceremony of 2018 as "a useful snapshot of the limitations of the #MeToo movement" (Thompson 2018). While the 2018 celebration of the Golden Globes did highlight the obvious gap in gender representation within the film industry, this shortcoming should in no way be attributed to the Me Too movement. Instead, it was an audio-visual reminder of the disparities that remain deeply anchored in the film industry. Thompson rightfully points out the contradictory nature of the ceremony's attitude towards women. On January 8, 2018, as described by the journalist, "Viewers gazed into a monochromatic protest against the scourge of harassment, with uniformly black dresses and suits, "Time's Up" pins, and often inspiring speeches about standing up to abusive power" (Thompson 2018). Yet not one of the nominees for the category of best director was female despite the best motion picture award

going to *Lady Bird*, a film directed by Greta Gerwig (Cooney 2018). To this day, only three women, namely Barbra Streisand, Chloé Zhao, and Jane Campion, have ever won said category of the Golden Globes in 80 years (Davis 2022).

The scarcity of recognition for women in this industry is also reflected in the statistics as the 26th annual edition of *The Celluloid Ceiling* demonstrates. In the 2023 edition of her yearly report, Lauzen discusses the paradoxical reign of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* at the box office and the under-representation of women "in many key behind-the-scenes roles on the top 100 and 250 (domestic) grossing films of 2023" (Lauzen 2024, 1). Gender is not the only factor that leads to such discrepancies in the statistics. As demonstrated by Zhao's win, the intersection of gender and race/ ethnicity deepens the problem of representation. Furthermore, this lack of diversity also appears in the form of ageism as shown in Dr. Linda Outcalt project at the University of Victoria "Aged by Popular Culture." Outcast explains that in 2020,

> [t]he median age for male actors was 61.3 years and 39.8 for female actors, which is in sharp contrast to the average age of Oscar nominees over the past 25-years: 48.0 for male actor nominees compared to 41.2 for female nominees. It is interesting to note that while the type of roles that are available to (young) women has changed since the early days of cinema, the limits placed on an actor's age has not. (Outcalt 2021)

The more women age, the less leading roles they are offered while, on the contrary, male actors have access to more roles by the time they are 30; a male in his 30s will, on average, be offered more roles than women do in their "prime", their 20s (Fleck and Hanssen qtd. in Outcalt 2021). Based on the numbers offered by the researcher, it is apparent that women face a strong gender bias which is exacerbated by their intersection with age and race.

Outcalt's study on ageism also points out a pattern of sexualization of young women working in the entertainment industry. It is undeniable that "the objectification of women is omnipresent within the society; it is represented by sexualizing male gaze and the depiction of women in visual media where women are treated as sexual objects or simply as bodies or a collection of body parts that exist for others' pleasure" (Fredickson and Roberts qtd. in Leona and Arimbi 2016, 191). However, women are not the only target of the hyper-sexual contemporary American market since male-objectification has become a growing issue. Male bodies, in the context of Hollywood are also "treated as the object" (Fredickson and Roberts qtd. in Leona and

Arimbi 2016, 191); an object that is put on display and which represents both the physical and sexual ideal which men should strive to attain as well as the object of the female gaze. Examples of such objectification and sexualization of men in the entertainment industry are common. For instance, British actor Henry Cavill, whose popularity has reached an all-time high as a result of the successful release of *The Witcher* (2019) on Netflix and who was previously known for his role as Superman in multiple DC movies, has repeatedly expressed his discomfort with being hypersexualized on and off screen. In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, Cavill highlights that this sexualization exposes the presence of a double standard when it comes to sexist comments addressed towards famous men in public. He explains how "if a girl shouts something like, 'Oi, love, fancy a shag?' to me as I walk past, I do sometimes wonder how she'd feel if a builder said that to her. Although, of course, I wouldn't feel physically threatened, as she might" (Cavill qtd. in Gillespie 2016). Another renowned male actor, Kit Harington, famously known for playing the role of Jon Snow in the TV adaptation of *Game of Thrones*, expresses the same discontent for being "put on a pedestal as a hunk," which he finds "slightly demeaning. It really is, and it's in the same way as it is for women" (Harington qtd. in News.com.au 2015). Despite Cavill and Harington's retelling of their experience with hyper-sexualization and sexual harassment pales in comparison with the recurrent horror stories told by women who have been sexually harassed and abused within and by the industry, it is important to acknowledge the fact, due to their potential ostracization and the threat that speaking out entails for their performance of masculinity in an industry that prefers to represent macho, hyper-masculine men, male survivors within the film industry may be choosing to banalize their experiences or even simply never vocalize them. For instance, American actor and comedian D. L. Hughley publicly made fun of Terry Crews' allegations against Adam Venit, justifying his stance by saying that "God gave you [Crews] muscles so you can say no" (Hughley 2018, 0:29-0:33). Here, Crews' physical strength is used to invalidate his testimony, which led to his public shaming, bullying and silencing.

While the numbers for women's hypertextualization are much higher than for men, the University of South Carolina's data proves that there has been a significant increase in the sexualization of men in films. The study entitled "Gender Inequality in Popular Films: Examining On Screen Portrayals and Behind-the-Scenes Employment Patterns in Motion Pictures Released between 2007-2013" shows that the percentage of sexually revealing clothes worn by male characters has increased from 4.6% in 2007 to 9.7% in 2013 while male nudity has also rose from

6.6% in 2007 to 11.7% in 2013 (Smith et al. 2014, 17). Nevertheless, the statistics presented in this study still demonstrate that

> [f]emales (30.2%) were far more likely than males (9.7%) to be shown in sexualized attired […]. [They] (29.5) were more likely … to be shown with partial or full nudity (11.7%) […] [and] to be referenced as physically attractive (13.2% vs. 2.4%). (Smith et al. 2014, 17)

In that sense, while there is a persisting gender-based, unequal, and sexualized bias in the way that women are portrayed within popular films, male bodies are still being increasingly objectified and eroticized thus validating Cavill and Harington's concerns. While there is a need to recognize the fact that sexual harassment within the entertainment industry is an issue that transcends gender, the present thesis focuses on female survivors' stories and their filmic representation due to instances of female-on-male harassment and abuse, despite real-life cases highlighting their existence, being missing from the four movies that constitute the corpus. As highlighted by the aforementioned statistics, as well as the brief overview of Hollywood's long history of normalized abuse of power, women remain far more likely to fall victim to sexual harassment and violence but also to the culture of silence that protects predatory men in power. Based on these limitations and the overwhelming prevalence of abuse directed towards women, the dissertation does not deal with male survivors' stories despite its acknowledgement of the necessity of integrating them, along with other groups, into the Me Too movement's filmic space.

2. Me Too in Films: Re-creational Eyewitnessing, Microhistory, Power and Gender

Since the films deal with and problematize the topics, people, events, and accusations that surfaced as a result of the emergence of the Me Too movement as a strong and vocal anti-rape wave in the United States, simply examining the plot of the movies without diving into their cultural and historical dimensions proves to be insufficient for this study. In order to achieve the aim of this doctoral thesis, namely investigating the various ways in which Hollywood represents Me Too narratives and subjects, the thesis will make use of concepts borrowed from multiple fields. The combination of the concepts of power, speaking out, history, masculinity, subversion, containment, the exceptional normal, eyewitnessing, and many more aims to create a cohesive theoretical framework that would allow research to explore the themes, perspectives, and concerns surrounding the representation—or misrepresentation—of Me Too narratives in Hollywood films while taking into consideration the socio-cultural and historical context of the movies and the events that inspire them.

2.1. Film and Microhistory: A Re-creational Eyewitnessing

2.1.1. The Audio-Visual Eyewitnessing of the Past

The thesis is mainly concerned with works of visual art that represent historical events; therefore, the concept of "eyewitnessing" developed by Peter Burke in his book *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* proves to be especially important for this project. In his book, Burke showcases the importance of images in the study of history, highlighting their role as traces of the past, or, in other words, tools that allow historians to eyewitness the past. The historian pulls from an array of fields and methods, such as art history, cultural history, and iconography, to build his argument that "images can bear witness to what is not put into words" (Burke 2001, 31) and can no longer be marginalized by traditional historicism due to the pictural turn, a phrase popularized by William Mitchell, experienced globally. While this book proposes for the study of images to become an integral part of historians' concerns, it also acknowledges the pitfalls that come with the medium, such as the difficulty of turning the latter into "admissible

evidence" (Burke 2001, 14) due to its inevitable distortion by the photographer but also its present-day viewer. However, the historian still defends the use of multiple images as historical evidences due to how a more static "series of images offers testimony more reliable than that of individual images" (Burke 2001, 187). As film is a dynamic series of fabricated images, and since the movies selected for this study depict Me Too narratives, it is useful to consider their audio-visual content as evidence of the contemporary attitudes towards Me Too cases. While this doctoral thesis acknowledges the disagreements surrounding the use of the term evidence in relation to the study of the past due to the interpretative nature of the writing of history (Banner Jr. 2022), it does however embrace Burke's advocacy towards the academic consideration of images, both still and moving, as evidences of the present attitudes towards the past which are worth exploring. The use of images (static or moving) as historical evidence has been recurrently addressed both before and following Peter Burke's theorization of the latter as eyewitnessing. Burke himself acknowledges the work that has been done prior to his book by the likes of Aby Warburg, Gilberto Freyre, Simon Schama (Burke 2001, 11), or even Robert A. Rosenstone, whose earlier works on film and history are referred to multiple times in Burke's bibliography. Rosenstone will later develop a more thorough exploration of what he refers to as the history film and "the dimensions and implications that lie behind Hayden White's neologism 'historiophoty,' coined in a response to one of my essays and defined as 'the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" (Rosenstone 2013, xi). Burke, therefore, does not present his method as new but as an extension of the scholarship already written on the use of images as traces of history. He encourages historians to deepen their analysis of such evidence since, oftentimes,

> When they [historians] do use images, historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in the text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions. (Burke 2001, 10)

This criticism of traditional historians' use of images is shared by Rosenstone, who also advocates for the study of history films to derive theory from practice, or, in other words, analyzing movies to derive the visual language and set of practices used by directors to capture the past on screen (Rosenstone 2013, xviii). This is especially relevant to this dissertation as Me Too films are often

used to illustrate a point or theory, such as the effects of the Me Too movement on the entertainment industry in Tally's *The Limits of #MeToo in Hollywood*, rather than analyzed for the potential added value, messages, and new questions they provide to the historical study of the movement.

In the following, the text is building on this concept of eyewitnessing not only to actively include film as an important medium capable of bearing traces of the past but also to redefine the future viewers' perception of the latter. Today, more than ever before, due to the popularity of video-based platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, we rely on videos to get our news, our education, and even our history. In a 2021 post, Instagram's Adam Mosseri declared that the platform is "no longer just a square photo-sharing app," emphasizing how they are "focused on four key areas: Creators, Video, Shopping and Messaging" (Mosseri 2021). This strategic transition of the previously picture-based social media platform from the picture to the video to keep up with its competitors, TikTok and YouTube, forecasted the unavoidable videographic turn that we are currently experiencing in 2024. Both TikTok and YouTube exclusively focus on videos. TikTok encourages its creators to publish short format videos, whereas, despite recently incorporating Shorts, YouTube continues to encourage its content creators to publish longer videos in order to maximize monetization opportunities. Videos that are 8 minutes or longer give creators the opportunity to add mid-roll ads to their content on top of the usual pre- or post-video advertisements found on any monetized video published on the platform (Google Support). These additional mid-roll ads mean higher revenues per video for YouTubers who engage in the creation of long-format content, thus differentiating YouTube's content from other popular video-based platforms. With the increase in the popularity of videographic content and streaming, it is safe to assume that film is not on its way out despite the decrease in cinema attendance post-COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study published in 2024, the percentage of frequent moviegoers in the U.S. has decreased from 23% in 2019 to 15% in 2023 (Nissen 2024). Despite this decrease, the study also highlights that the reason behind this decrease of interest in going to the movies does not necessarily equate to a lack of interest in the art of cinema since the two highest reasons for not attending in the U.S. were the following: "I prefer to stream movies online instead of watching in the cinema" (36%) and going to the cinema is too expensive (52%) (Nissen 2024). Films, therefore, retain their influential position; it is only the context in which they are consumed that continues to evolve.

While the Me Too movement sparked a global phenomenon, in the context of this thesis, examining it on a global scale would hinder the purpose of the study: reframing the discourse surrounding Me Too to focus on individual voices. Survivors of sexual harassment and violence tend to share similar experiences. However, Me Too narratives retain some context-specific elements. The use of social media platforms—mainly Twitter on which #MeToo and its national variations first went viral—"shifted the focus of social movements from local or national scale to a global scale" (Lopez et al. 2019). Yet, despite having the same globalized message that women still fall victim to sexual violence at alarmingly high rates, as demonstrated by Lopez, Quillivic Evans, and Arriaga's comparative study of #MeToo (US and India) and #balancetonporc (France) each niche variant of #MeToo has its specificities. They found that

> [t]he goal of #MeToo was to create a survivor to survivor network, whereas #BalanceTonPorc was to identify and denounce perpetrators of sexual violence. Our analyses show that denouncing individuals is much less likely in the English than the French data set [...]. Furthermore, tweets from the French data set were more likely to describe the appearance of the perpetrator along with their own feelings about the encounter. (Lopez et al. 2019, 5)

Here, the researchers highlight not only the varying linguistic intensity of the tweets based on the country but also how culture and religion interact with the way that the accusations are formulated and thought about. #Balancetonporc, which translates to "denounce your pig," is the popular French equivalent of #MeToo, started by French journalist Sandra Muller on *X* (Twitter). In her original tweet quoted in Chapter 1 (Muller 2017a), Muller urges women to not only share their experience of sexual abuse in detail but also name their aggressors. These differences and specificities are the reasons why it is so crucial for this thesis to reduce its scope in order to focus on a small number of stories unfolding and coming out of a similar context: the United States. Since this study is concerned with the filmic representation of Me Too narratives, fiction and reality often blend. Thus, it is important to employ an approach that is concerned with the historical events on a micro-level.

2.1.2. Microhistory as An Alternative Approach to History

Microhistory is a trend of historiography that focuses on, as its name suggests, the smaller, more personal level instead of the bigger context or the canonical grand historical narratives. Also known under its Italian and French iterations, microhistoria and microhistoire, this approach to history became popular in Italy with the publication of a series of works written and/or edited by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi. Nowadays, the emergence of the term is often associated with Ginzburg's publication of *The Cheese and the Worms*. Yet, the historian often refers to his discovery of the word through his friend and colleague Levi in 1977 and attributes its origin to American scholar, George R. Stewart (Ginzburg 1993, 10). Another pioneer of microhistorical studies is Luis González y González, a Mexican historian whose works stresses the importance of the distinction between local, regional histories from the national history. For González, microhistory, or the motherland history (la historia matria in Spanish) as he often called it, "had to be, above all, the true, concrete and qualitative account of the past of daily life, of the common person, of the family and the homeland" (Arias 2006, 180, *my translation*). His most famous work entitled *Pueblo en vilo* (San José de Garcia: Mexican Village in Transition) explicitly separates between the history of San José de Garcia and the history of Mexico, comparing and contrasting the two in its conclusions (González y González 1974, 327-348). This is due to the fact that, while its history somewhat aligns at times with that of Mexico, the parish

> is not mentioned in any history of Mexico, nor is it even referred to in ant of the annals of the state of Michoacán. It is not to be found at all on most maps, and nearly none show its correct location […]. It is an unknown point in space, in time, and in the consciousness of the Mexican republic. (González y González 1972, xv)

González's book presents the parish's typicalness as a strength, highlighting that "any village seems ordinary until it is examined closely and deliberately, with love" therefore uncovering "its individuality, its peculiar mission and destiny" (González y González 1972, xvi). To this day, this interest in the common person and what, on the surface, may seem ordinary remains one of the pillars of microhistory.

In their book entitled *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, historians István M. Szijártó and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon explore various approaches to the study of history on a microhistorical level. On the one hand, Szijártó defines microhistory as "the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well defined smaller object, or a single event" (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 4). Another characteristic of this approach highlighted by the historian is that, despite focusing on the micro-level, microhistorical works should still strive to answer "great historical questions" (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 5), a characteristic rejected by his co-author in the second part of the book. The third characteristic pointed out by the Hungarian historian is agency, as he describes how "[f]or microhistorians, people who lived in the past are not puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors" (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 5). This characteristic is beneficial to discuss in relation to the type of subversive power that the filmic representations of Me Too narratives hold since, as highlighted in the upcoming chapters, the people involved in the making of the movies selected actively participate in the consolidation and spreading of a curated version and interpretation of the historical Me Too narratives.

While this thesis embraces a methodology similar to that of Szijártó, Magnússon, on the other hand, presents an, at times, opposing way to think of history on a micro-level. The Icelandic microhistorian positions himself against the linking of microhistory to the macro-level by arguing for the singularization of history. To him, "to put the main emphasis on seeking ways to incorporate their [microhistorians] own research units within greater wholes (contextualization)" (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 115) shows an unwillingness to detach from traditional macro-level based historicism. Despite their opposing approaches to microhistory, both historians share a common aim: emphasizing the individual histories that have been, for a long time, put aside, silenced, and neglected for the sake of the 'bigger picture.' As such, whether one subscribes to one method or the other, microhistory's goal remains to criticize and constantly question the narratives put forward by the dominant power, something this theoretical approach shares with gender studies.

In the sixth chapter of their book, Magnússon sheds light on the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, focusing on *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983). He praises the feminist historian for

> tak[ing] [an] innovative approach – in the microhistorical spirit of addressing a subject that is not central in the narrative, but appears to be peripheral to the tale – of focusing primarily on the position of the wife, Bertrande de Rols, and how

> she made the considered decision to play along when her 'new husband' turned up. In this way, Davis creates an opportunity to approach this often-told tale from an entirely new perspective; and she does so through a minute reading of clues and signs in the sources. She sets out to recreate Bertrande's world with reference to her environment in the past and in her own time. This is thus a good example of the microhistorical approach. (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 108)

As Magnússon points out, *The Return of Martin Guerre* provides an early illustration of the power of microhistory at work. Moreover, the book also testifies to the relation between microhistorical study and film since the writing of work is a direct result of Davis' work as a historical consultant for the 1982 French historical drama directed by Daniel Vigne which bears the same name (Toplin 1988, 1224). Davis decentralizes history by highlighting locals, peasants, slaves and women's histories, thus providing a space for the marginalized to be heard. The professor of medieval studies explains that she has "never felt [she] was the historian for queens and kings…. It's the others who need [her]" (Davis qtd. in Scott 2010). This interest for the marginalized and the ordinary carries into her other published works such as *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (1995) and *Trickster Travels* (2006). In *Trickster Travels*, she describes her method in dealing with historical events and figures as follows:

> My strategy is to start with the persons, places, and texts that good evidence affirms or suggests he [Al-Wazzan] knew, and build from additional sources about them what he would have been likely to see or hear or read or do. Throughout I have had to make use of the conditional—"would have," "may have," "was likely to have"—and the speculative "perhaps," "maybe." These are my invitations to the reader to follow a plausible life story from materials of the time. (Davis 2006, Introduction: Crossings)

While this reliance on external historical sources of the same context to fill the gaps left by history is what distinguishes Davis' works from other historians', it also earned the microhistorian many fierce critics such as American historian Robert Finlay. As pointed out by Magnússon,

> [t]o anyone who read Finlay's critique, it was obvious that the dispute was a matter of fundamentally differing views of history: … the classic historical approach to history, based on the principle of sticking closely to the sources and restraining all flights of imagination … and … the method of using limited

> sources to build up a narrative, utilising a broader range of evidence not necessarily directly relating to the subject. (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 107-108)

Therefore, a fundamental aspect of microhistory is its reliance on a variety of relevant evidence, even if it is not directly related to its main subject. This principle will be especially important for the understanding of the most fictional films amongst those selected for this study as historical traces.

In addition to aiming to achieve the same goal through the rescaling of the past, both historians, along with many of their peers, also advocate for said reduction of the scale of study to go beyond the scope of geography. For a work to be considered microhistorical, it needs to reduce more than its spatial scope since solely limiting the latter would be considered as the practice of local history. Microhistorians are often more interested in "the individual sphere of life" (Peltonen 2013, 108) than simply retracing a series of historical events that happened in the region or village studied. As Peltonen explains, microhistorical monographs "are not biographies of individual persons but investigations that seek interpretations of certain unexpected or peculiar behavior among the people in the villages that they are concerned with" (Peltonen 2013, 115). The aphorism 'exceptional normal' coined by Edoardo Grendi is also widely used by microhistoricists to refer to "the exceptional document can turn out to be exceptionally 'normal' precisely because it is relevant" (Grendi 1977, 512, *my translation*). Though Grendi was addressing the phenomenon in relation to historical archives, the term is used by more contemporary microhistorians to describe any event, person, behavior, or even instance that seems exceptional but, when put into its context, is accepted as normal. Magnússon describes this notion, which he refers to as the normal exception, as follows:

> In microhistory, the term "normal exception" is used to penetrate the importance of this perspective, meaning that none of us show our full hand of cards. Seeing what is usually kept hidden from the outside world, we realize that our focus has only been on the "normal exception"; those who in one segment of the society are considered obscure, strange and even dangerous. They might be, in other circles, at the center of attention and fully accepted in their daily affairs. (Magnússon 2020, 27)

This is a particularly interesting concept to explore in this doctoral thesis since the perpetrators within the Me Too narratives recreated within the movies are normal exceptional people. For instance, Harvey Weinstein, who is directly presented (*She Said*) or implied (*The Assistant*) to be the perpetrator of sexual harassment and assault on multiple women in two of the movies at hand, may be considered by contemporary viewers as a strange, old and predatorial man, yet, for many decades, he was perceived as 'normal' and even defended by many of his colleagues and peers in the entertainment industry. Many female movie stars spoke highly of him prior to the allegations before retracting their statement in response to the scandal. For instance, as part of her acceptance speech for the Oscars, award-winning actress Meryl Streep thanked Weinstein, who produced *Iron Lady* (2011), jokingly referring to him as "God" (Streep qtd. in Calfas 2017). When the accusations against him came to light, Streep made a statement to the Huffington Post, calling his "behavior is inexcusable, but the abuse of power familiar" (Streep qtd. in Calfas 2017). Roger Ailes, whose sexual abuse of power is discussed in *Bombshell* (2019), was also defended by numerous influential figures in the journalistic and political arena (Ember 2016). Similarly, the fictional character Lydia Tár appears to integrate into society and her industry despite her questionable behavior in private.

2.1.3. Re-creational Eyewitnessing Between Entertainment and Activism

Although movies, by nature of their medium, are recreations and adaptations of the real world, the fictionality of the films selected for this doctoral thesis range from being entirely fictional to documentary-film-like realism. Nonetheless, all of them play a role in shaping the popular culture's perception of Me Too narratives and, depending on how they represent said stories, may affect the public memory of the movement and the survivors who spoke out during the height of the latter. It is based on this as well as the fact that, as put by George Orwell in *1984,* "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 2017, 251) that this work will refer to cinema as a tool for re-creational eyewitnessing.

Since film does not capture actual events but instead recreates them using actors, it is constructing an alternative, fictional version of history. Despite the fact that fictionality is what makes films unreliable sources of historically accurate material, in the case of Me Too films, said intradiegetic narratives and fictionalizations of real stories allow the directors and writers of the

movies to shine a light on the traumatic stories of survivors without them having to relive the events personally. Many of these Me Too films, including the selected movies for this thesis—*Bombshell*, *She Said*, *The Assistant* and *Tár*—, include various degrees of historical accuracy. Yet, all of them are inspired by real events and people rooting the sentiments and debates they fuel in the harsh realities highlighted by the Me Too movement.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines "recreation" as both "(a way of) enjoying yourself when you are not working" and "the act of making something exist or happen again" (Cambridge Dictionary "Recreation"). In this sense, the concept of re-creational eyewitnessing embraces both definitions as part of the concept's inner workings. Consequently, re-creational eyewitnessing serves as a tool to replicate, to various degrees of accuracy, history, something which fits the second definition mentioned above. On the other hand however, the films' embeddedness into the entertainment industry makes the first definition equally relevant to the essence of the concept as the second definition. In order for the act of re-creational eyewitnessing to be a successful alternative to the collection and use of conventional historical evidences (that is, archives, historical documents, diaries) for the microhistories and narratives, it needs to be visually attractive and entertaining to be easily consumable even for casual movie-goers while retaining its political aim. Much like other forms of arts, such as photography and painting—which Peter Burke discusses at length in the book which his book *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Burke 2001)—, Me Too films recreate real-life-narratives and personal histories in a way that pragmatically combine lived and authentically experienced information with entertainment and fictionality. As Gerben Bakker sees this situation,

> [c]onsumers started to spend more time and money on leisure activities, and initially their expenditure was spread out among a lot of different categories. […] Cinema-going became a habit for consumers, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly. I.e., the outcome of the evolutionary process was that cinema became the dominant form of entertainment. (Bakker 2007, 5)

While Bakker focuses on the economic side of entertainment consumption, another expenditure linked to this increase in cinema-going, as mentioned in this excerpt, is the amount of time allocated to this particular form of entertainment. With the emergence of cinema, recreation became an integral part of people's lives, justifying the present thesis' interest in this specific

medium as an effective way to represent and popularize survivors' Me Too narratives. Fiction, in this context, allows real-life-narratives to increase their appeal through the casting of popular movie stars and their marketing as entertainment, therefore, enlarging the scope of people who would be willing to expose themselves to the sensitive issues that the Me Too movement denounces. Re-creational eyewitnessing is therefore understood as the act of consuming content which recreates historical events or people for both entertainment and didactic purposes. It is the only through the combination of some level of historical accuracy with a skillful visual adaptation of the narratives it recreates that film demonstrate the legitimacy of its usage as a trace and potential future modifier of history. Furthermore, the process of re-creational eyewitnessing depends on the detailed investigation of each intradiegetic narrative individually, successfully mimicking the reduced scale which microhistoricists aim to retain for their study of history. As such, re-creational eyewitnessing can be considered part of the microhistorical toolkit as a strategy for the investigation of local, individual, national and micro histories.

Ethical questions are raised by Me Too films' blending of history, memory, trauma, politics, and entertainment. Creating a work of art designed for the re-creational eyewitnessing of history naturally implies the final product to be tainted by the filmmakers' political agendas and aims. A successful re-creational eyewitnessing can only be accomplished if the movie fulfils a historical and political aim. As the real-life-narratives associated with the Me Too movement were initially shared with the public in hopes of provoking political, judicial and social change, the Me Too films that represent said narratives automatically reflect this political aim. Me Too films are, therefore, always political; however, the type of activism that they engage in may differ from one film to another. Re-creational eyewitnessing also implies the participation of filmmakers in molding history into a subjective and artistic expression of the past. There is, consequently, space for the filmmakers to insert their personal agendas and interpretations into their filmic depiction of historical events. While Me Too films tend to mirror the same political message promoted by the Me Too movement and the survivors they represent, as will be demonstrated through the analysis of *She Said* adaptation of survivors' stories, it is not always the case. Artistic liberties are often taken in film-making, potentially leading to the addition, omission or modification of some elements of the historical narrative. The excessive modification of real-life-narratives and/or addition of too many fictional elements may, therefore, lead the audience to develop a false sense of understanding of the histories depicted based on the way they are told by the filmmaker(s). As

such, it is also important for filmmakers to consider their role as potential shapers of their viewers' understanding of historical realities and the ethical dilemma and responsibility accompanying said position. Filmmakers, therefore, have the power to shape the product of their commemorative act (film-making) into either a space of remembrance or misremembering. Me Too stories' relation to trauma complicates this attempt to balance aesthetics, narrativity and historical accuracy. Me Too films often aim to amplify survivors' voices and, thus, to be respectful of their well-being. The line between retelling, re-victimizing and speaking out instead of survivors in an attempt to speak out for them is incredibly delicate. Thus, filmmakers have an ethical responsibility towards their audiences and have the duty to ensure that their filmic depictions are respectful of the people whose trauma is being recreated on screen and their healing path. This thesis will consequently also engage with the political positions and messages held and defended by the four movies' filmmakers to determine whether these four cinematographic works could be considered spaces where survivors can potentially see a healing path and viewers can engage in the re-creational eyewitnessing of the Me Too movement.

2.2. Understanding the Representation of Power in Me Too Narratives

This dissertation examines abuses of power and their effects on individuals. Therefore, it is essential to define how to understand power within the context of the films. Much of the discussion surrounding the topic revolves around the side effects of owning and exercising power. Many early sociological and political writings on the topic focus on the concept of power as a one-way mechanism in which only the actors positioned at the top of the hierarchy of human social interactions hold power over the bottom ladder (Berraf 2024). However, this thesis' understanding of power is not limited to its power over form. As the movies discussed represent not only the abuse lived by survivors but also their act of resistance against abusers, exploring power's subversive form, power to, is essential to the project. The following section partially relies on the research published as part of the collection of essays entitled *New Horizons in English and American Studies: Papers from the Doctoral Program* (Berraf 2024). Paragraphs containing parts taken from the abovementioned publication end with the paper's in-text, parenthetical citation.

2.2.1. The Exercise of Power Over Others

American political theorist Robert Alan Dahl describes his understanding of the concept as intuitive and explains its inner functioning as the imposing of one's will over others (Dahl 1957, 202–203; Dahl qtd. in Berraf 2024). Dahl's straightforward approach to the theorization of power remains popular and relevant throughout the decades following his work, as exemplified by Max Weber's definition of the same concept as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (Weber 1978, 53; Weber qtd. in Berraf 2024), which follows the same power dynamic. Thus, both definitions, along with many others, can be referred to as "exercis[ing] power over others" (Foucault 1982, 217; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024), a conceptualization that is still relevant to multiple feminists' understandings of society as a patriarchy in which power is held and imposed by men. There is, however, an important distinction to make between Dahl's and Foucault's views on power over. While Dahl offers "a non-evaluative definition of power (over), on the basis of which power (over) is not to be considered 'good' or 'bad' per se, but its moral status is to be established case by case" (Pansardi 2012; Pansardi qtd. in Berraf 2024), Foucault's power takes an aggressive form where

one person or a group exercises power over others regardless of their will and desires. Put differently, as Mark Haugaard explains, the French philosopher equates power to domination and, therefore, positions it in opposition to freedom (Haugaard 2022, 347; Haugaard qtd. in Berraf 2024). Following this line of argumentation leads Foucault, as pointed out by Haugaard, to make the questionable conclusion that, based on the principle that "power is only exercised over free subjects, and only in so far they are free" (Foucault 1982, 221; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024) slavery is therefore "not a power relationship" (Foucault 1982, 221; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024). What Haugaard points out in his article "Foucault and Power: A Critique and Retheorization" is the flawed nature of this argument since, as Steven Lukes asks, "is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have—that is to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?" (Lukes 2005, 27; Lukes qtd. in Berraf 2024). It is at times when domination reaches its highest point that the less powerful do not resist (Haugaard 2022, 348; Haugaard qtd. in Berraf 2024), accepting their position and realities as part of the world order. Freedom, therefore, does not necessarily have to be at odds with power; on the contrary, it is when the dominant order succeeds in making the masses believe that their imposed actions are based on free will that power is most successful. Additionally, power does not always take the form of violent repression and aggressive domination and can sometimes play a necessary role in keeping peace and order. As such, despite its negative impact on individuals and society, when it is abused, power can also have positive effects. Haugaard explains the relationship between figures of authorities and other social subjects in this manner:

> When the social subject sees the other as, say, a police officer or teacher, that act of interpretation places the other in a specific subject position. If this interpretation correlates with the other's perception of self, and both interact relative to the constituted rules of their respective subject positions, this results in successful inter-action, which is both enabling and constraining for these social actors. (Haugaard 2022, 349; Haugaard qtd. in Berraf 2024)

Here, both the police officer and the teacher fulfill a role that involves having power over other social subjects -although limited to specific situations and contexts-, yet this possession of power over others is necessary for the well-being and functioning of the society. Therefore, power over does not always present in the form of the harmful domination and subjectification of the other; it is the corruption and abuse of said power over by ill-intentioned individuals/groups that leads to

Foucault's rendering of power over. Nevertheless, this dismissal of the beneficial potentiality of exercising power over others is not the only problematic aspect related to the Foucauldian understanding of power. While Monique Deveaux recognizes the value of Foucault's writings for feminists, she points out two additional pitfalls to the uncritical engagement with said works: 1. His erasure of the specificities of women's experiences with power, and 2. the lack of consideration given to empowerment (Deveaux 1994, 224; Deveaux qtd. in Berraf 2024). Empowerment has been regarded as a key concept within feminist circles since the 1980s. However, it is still at the center of contemporary feminist thoughts, as exemplified by its role in the Me Too movement. The concept was defined in the 1980s as a transformative process that allows groups located at the bottom of the social and patriarchal hierarchy to gain the individual and collective awareness of the "dynamics of dominance" necessary to overcome the (social, economic, legal, and political) structures that contribute to their marginalization (Calvès 2009; Calvès qtd. in Berraf 2024). In the context of the Me Too movement, especially under its social media form #MeToo, empowerment comes from speaking out about one's own experience to give the strength (power) to other survivors to hold their aggressors accountable. This reliance of the contemporary feminist movement on mutual empowerment through speaking out strengthens Deveaux's criticism of its absence within Foucault's theorization of power (Berraf 2024).

2.2.2. Power as Capacity, Potentiality, and Empowerment

Another conceptualization of power presents itself in political theorist Hanna Pitkin's works in which she defines power as "something –anything– which makes or renders somebody able to do, capable of doing something. Power is capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal" (Pitkin 1972, 276; Pitkin qtd. in Berraf 2024). Therefore, according to this definition, rather than being a limiting agent, power is, in this particular form, understood as the power to rather than the power over. While this optimistic definition of the concept is emphasized and represented in many contemporary feminist theoretical and artistic works, having the power to is not necessarily equivalent to being-able-to. Lukes' works illustrate this idea by highlighting how "having power is being able to make or to receive any change, or to resist it […]. It identifies a capacity: power is a potentiality, not an actuality—indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized" (Lukes 2005, 69; Lukes qtd. in Berraf 2024). This idea is essential for the analysis of the filmic representations

of women due to mainstream, self-proclaimed feminist works, such as Niki Caro's *Mulan* (2020), often being criticized for their portrayal of women as possessing power in the form of being-able-to (Berraf 2024).

According to many film critics, including Hong-Kong born journalist and film scholar Jingan Young (Young 2020), in the case of Mulan in the 2020 live-action remake of the beloved Disney animated movie, this actualization of power, which comes through her mastery of Qi, minimizes the difficulty of breaking out of the rigid gendered and cultural structures the main character would have had to face as a regular woman to turn her potentiality and 'power to' into actuality. Young describes the filmmakers' repurposing of "an element of Chinese culture known as *Qi*, which translates as "breath" or "air"," as "jarring" (Young 2020). She laments on the incorrect use of this important Chinese concept described by philosophers as

> a type of energy or living metabolism in all beings – though not a special, individual power. (Before he died, my Beijing born father used to hug me when I was upset in order to get rid of the "bad *Qi*".) In the film, *Qi* gives Mulan superhuman physical powers. Unlike the animation's average teenager, who works hard to succeed as a soldier, the new Mulan is ready made. The child Mulan can already wield a sword like a warrior. She can even fly. The fact she holds *Qi* is repeated too many times to count, even though the film doesn't explore it in any meaningful way. (Young 2020)

While this criticism is valid from a cultural standpoint as there is power in representing the empowerment of the disempowered and the ordinary, these changes to Mulan's origin story shift the focus from how to empower women through the acquisition of physical strength to "how a talented woman can thrive or just survive in a world that does not allow feminine power" (Wang 2021, 6), or the embracing of femininity as a strength. While similarly to Mulan, in *Tár*, the main character is also a talented woman who climbed the ladder of a male-dominated industry, it could be argued that Field defeminizes his character to make her fit into the position of power she holds. As such, while her potentiality takes the form of her musical abilities and technical knowledge, the more she turns that potentiality into actuality with the help of Sharon, her partner and concertmaster, the more she appears to reproduce the kind of normative masculine traits and behaviors described by women in Me Too testimonies (Berraf 2024).

This association of masculinity with strength and vocality leads to its counterpart, femininity, often being associated with the opposite: weakness and silence. In all of the movies selected, excluding *Tár*, men abuse power, thus silencing their female victims. Nevertheless, individuals often find strength and power within the collective and through sisterhood. Sisterhood was a key term introduced by second-wave feminism, which "emphasizes relationships between women that are horizontal instead of vertical, avoiding the hierarchy inherent in the mother/daughter trope, something that is also sometimes grafted onto the second/third wave distinction" (Evans 2015, 111). The term has famously been criticized by many scholars including feminists such as bell hooks for its inherently exclusionary nature since she rightfully points out how "the emphasis on sisterhood was often seen as the emotional appeal masking the opportunism of manipulative bourgeois white women. It was seen as a cover-up hiding the fact that many women exploit and oppress other women" (hooks 1986, 127-128). hooks' problematization of the misuse and weaponization of sisterhood by white women is incredibly relevant to the analysis of Me Too films as "bonding as 'victims'" is arguably also one of the main reasons sheltering the white women in these stories from confronting "their relationships to women outside their race/class groups" (hooks 1986, 128). As such, this thesis utilizes the term sisterhood while being aware of its simultaneous inclusive yet exclusive quality.

Bonding over a shared interest or experience as a woman is one of the conducting lines of all four of the movies and remains a source of power, which leads to developing the ability to actualize one's power to as referred to by Lukes. This form of power to is also linked to the feminist conceptualization of empowerment. Amy Allen suggests their use as synonyms, which Pansardi and Marianne Bindi explain as the consequence of the two aspects of power's "interrelatedness. [I]n the case of women's empowerment, power-to can be exercised by women in order to achieve a more legitimate distribution of power, which includes the obtainment of some sort of power-over men" (Pansardi and Bindi 2021, 54). What distinguishes Allen's usage of power to (and power with, which is understood as the collective exercise of power to) from Pitkin's as being-able-to however, is the fact that, for Allen, its acquisition is dependent on the process of empowerment (Pansardi and Bindi 2021, 55). It is through empowerment that the power to turns into power with thus leading to the actualization of power as the ability to. In *Tár*, sisterhood takes the form of the relationship between Lydia Tár and her romantic and professional partner, Sharon. However, it also extends to the two skilled musicians' relationships with the rest of the women within the

orchestra. In this case, sisterhood takes a diverted and corrupted form as, rather than being used to uplift other women thus resulting in the collective acquisition of power to, or put differently power with, it upholds Tár's power and authority over others. On the contrary, this female bonding appears in its most positive form in both *Bombshell* and *She Said* as women come together to denounce and speak against the violence committed by Roger Ailes and Harvey Weinstein as a collective, strengthening each other's testimonies every time a new survivor accepts to share their story. While *The Assistant* does not directly discuss the importance of community and bonding, the lack of support shown within the movie highlights the unfortunate limitations of speaking out against influential figures as a single individual.

Whether one chooses to embrace power in one form or the other (power to or power over), in both instances, power presents as something to be possessed or exercised over others for the benefit of oneself. Power is thus a resource that, according to feminist critics, is distributed unequally. This is corroborated by Iris Marion Young, an American political and feminist theorist, as she describes power as "a kind of stuff that can be possessed by individuals in greater or lesser amounts" (Young 1990, 31; Berraf 2024). According to her analysis, in contemporary societies, social relations are more often than not based on domination and oppression (Young 1990, 32-33). Many feminist theorists and activists, such as American feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger, embrace this approach to power as necessarily being both exercised by and over people, focusing on how to revise its unequal distribution. Building on the ideas of Young, Haslanger distinguishes between two types of oppression: agent oppression, when "a person or persons (the oppressor) inflicts harm upon another (the oppressed) wrongfully or unjustly" (Haslanger 2012, 314; Haslanger qtd. in Berraf 2024) and structural oppression, where "the oppression is not an individual wrong but a social/political wrong; that is, it is a problem lying in our collective arrangements, an injustice in our practices or institutions" (Haslanger 2012, 314; Haslanger qtd. in Berraf 2024). She advocates for the analysis of power to include structural and agent oppressions, something which will be embraced for the analysis of *Tár*. Understanding power on both an individual and structural level proves to be vital to the reading of the film since Tár provides an audio-visual insight into abuses of power—or, put differently, oppression—which occur on the personal and professional level simultaneously (Berraf 2024).

Stephen Greenblatt's reading of the concept of power portrays it as a bilateral force. Like many of the above-mentioned scholarly works on the topic, he draws from Michel Foucault's

power-knowledge-discourse theory. In *Discipline and Punish*, the French philosopher describes this relationship as the fact that "power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault 1977 *Discipline and Punish*, 27; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024) and highlights how "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1977 *Discipline and Punish*, 27; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024). This quote highlights the ability of the person/group in power to create or recreate knowledge to fit their ideas and ideologies. It also points to the fact that said power holder's ability to spread knowledge and even construct truth inevitably implies the creation of power imbalances between themselves and the people they hold power over. As the movies selected are the result of a creative rewriting and adaptation of history to fit an agenda, namely speaking out against psychological and sexual violence, it is important to point out the power and responsibility filmmakers have over their audiences by having the ability to reshape Me Too stories to fit their desired narrative, or, in other words, fabricating a truth. The mechanisms of truth production also closely relate to the production of the self, as one's public identity is also constructed through verbalization. As highlighted by Judith Butler, who draws on John Langshaw Austin's language performativity theory, language is an integral part of the identity creation and maintenance process (Butler 1999). As such, in the context of Me Too narratives, both the unspeakability of trauma and its verbalization should be thought of in relation to the forms of power that give survivors the ability of inability to speak out. While abuse and trauma have a silencing power over survivors, putting their experiences into words enables them to acquire agency over the story as well as the power to share them and thus develop the power with or, in other words, the power to empower (Berraf 2024).

2.2.3. The Containment and Subversion of Survivors' Voices

Greenblatt expands on these ideas in his 1988 essay "Invisible Bullets" by identifying containment and subversion as instruments used by the dominant group to create and maintain their power, or put differently, "the very condition of power" (Greenblatt qtd. in Montrose 2007, 402; Berraf 2024). Here, subversion appears to mirror its Cambridge Dictionary's definition as "the act of trying to destroy or damage an established system or government" (Cambridge Dictionary, Subversion). However, while containment can take a form that mirrors its Cambridge

Dictionary definition: “the act of controlling or limiting something or someone harmful” (Cambridge Dictionary, Containment), the use of the word “harmful” in said definition should be problematized. In cases where the system or governing body works for the benefit of the people, containment is the preservation of society/individuals from harm. However, if said governing body is in itself violent and harmful, such as authoritarian governments or colonial powers, containment can become an aggressive tool used to silence and put an end to opposition. In such cases, the act of controlling and limiting is imposed on something or someone harmful specifically to the destructive group in power. As such, although containment can be necessary for the well-functioning of a group or society, it can also be an aggressive form of suppression (Berraf 2024).

Louis Montrose explains Greenblatt’s use of containment and subversion in “invisible Bullets” as “the ability of the dominant order to generate subversion so as to use it to its own ends” (Montrose 2007, 402), maintaining the exact phrasing, and therefore the same understanding, in his book *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Montrose 1996, 8; Montrose qtd. in Berraf 2024) previously used to describe the two terms. Nonetheless, he is critical of how “the binary logic of subversion-containment produces a closed conceptual structure of reciprocally defining and dependent terms” (Montrose 2007, 402; Montrose qtd. in Berraf 2024), arguing that, pushed to its extreme, such position could suggest a “reading of Foucault that emphasizes the discontinuity of history and the inescapable subjection of subjects” (Montrose 2007, 403; Montrose qtd. in Berraf 2024). In that sense, as the dominant order pushes its discourse as rightful by force, it automatically creates an oppositional, subversive response, which it will, in turn, try to contain. In the context of the movies, the perpetrators of the abuse represent a form of authority (power) that makes the people around them, based on their response to the abuse, fall somewhere within the spectrum of subversion and containment (Berraf 2024).

In the context of the Me Too movement, power over operates on multiple levels but mainly occurs on two: the corporeal level, which takes the form of physical aggression, sexual harassment, and assault, and the mental level, which presents as acts of psychological violence, such as pressure, harassment, and threats. These imposed forms of power over lead to the aural containment of the survivors, stripping them of their ability to speak of the events out of fear for their lives and safety or of the repercussions that speaking out against the person holding power over them would imply. The act of speaking out is at the center of feminist anti-rape politics, which

"is founded on the belief that producing and disseminating a genre of personal experiential narratives can end sexual violence" (Serisier 2018, 4). Breaking the silence or speaking out, therefore, becomes a form of subversion that is assumed to be beneficial not only on an individual level but also on the collective level, which makes it beneficial for the sisterhood. The act of speaking out is not limited to the anti-rape feminist circles, also referred to by Sara Ahmed as killjoys (Ahmed 2023), oral stories and testimonies have played a pivotal role in denouncing the systematic patronization and dehumanization of women. For example, American feminist Betty Friedan, who is often credited for having participated in the ignition of the second wave of feminism in the United States, incorporated oral stories and personal experiences in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. As pointed out by the National Women's History Museum, "Friedan first began by researching the role of women in society to see if other women shared her feelings of dissatisfaction and "malaise" as housewives. To her surprise, she was not alone, and her interviews became the source material for her first book" (National Women's History Museum 2020). Interviews and oral stories are, therefore, significant and common forms of speaking out for feminist movements—including the Me Too movement—since they have the power to validate other people's feelings and experiences, potentially encouraging further subversion. Despite its subversive potential, Tanya Serisier points out the following:

> Breaking the silence, despite its significant cultural impact, has not ended sexual violence, nor does it seem to have significantly reduced it, or to have eradicated the stigma associated with being a rape victim. Many of the stories women tell almost 50 years after the birth of the feminist anti-rape movement contain disturbingly similar elements to those from that first speak-out. (Serisier 2018, 12)

While the legitimate observations made by Serisier highlight a concerning lack of substantial decrease in the number of victims of sexual assault, many survivors continue to use their voices as a subversive weapon against their aggressors. It is also important to emphasize the many victories that followed the emergence of the Me Too movement, such as the trial and imprisonment of many abusers who, otherwise, would have potentially continued to victimize other people. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize the narratives represented in most of the films selected—apart from *The Assistant*—as part of a minority of women's narratives, which garnered enough attention and support when shared to lead to concrete consequences for the perpetrators. Serisier also defines

rape culture as a term "frequently used to describe the various ways in which Western societies normalize, deny, and excuse sexual violence against women and children" (Serisier 2017, 12). As such, Me Too narratives attempt, with more or less success, to fulfill the opposite role of raising awareness and denouncing said normalization and justification of sexual violence.

Although silence in the context of most of the movies selected is mainly understood to be the result of "power inflict[ing] silence" onto others, as argued by McLaren, "silence also has the capacity to destabilize existing powers and structures of control. This brings to the forefront [the] understanding that silence has discursive power" (McLaren 2016, 3). As utilized by Kitty Green in *The Assistant*, silence serves both purposes as it appears to be innately imposed on the main character, Jane, due to the type of environment she works within while also being used by the director to "induce emotions and sensations among viewers" (McLaren 2016, 3). Silence can, therefore, be both the forced omission of (freedom of) speech and the purposeful "omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand" (Huckin 2002, 348). This second definition is central to the understanding of the "exceptional normal"—which will be discussed in section 1.4 below—as well as how silence, or the power of omission, serves the interests of the people using their power to sexually abuse others and normalize such behaviors.

2.3. The Struggle for Gender Equality

The following section contains excerpts taken from two papers published in the *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference Synergies in Communication (2023)* (Berraf 2023), *AMERICANA E-journal of American Studies in Hungary* (Berraf 2022a), and *New Horizons in English and American Studies: Papers from the Doctoral Program* (Berraf 2024). Paragraphs containing parts from the abovementioned publication end with the paper's in-text, parenthetical citation, namely (Berraf 2023), (Berraf 20222a), and (Berraf 2024).

2.3.1. Performing Gender

One of the primary concerns of this doctoral thesis is the representation of Me Too narratives by Hollywood movies. As such, it is vital to explore concepts ranging from gender roles, inequality, performativity, and many other feminist concepts. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir argues that women are not inferior to men but rather just different since, according to her, both genders excel in their areas of life and thus deserve equal rights and treatment (De Beauvoir 2015; De Beauvoir qtd. in Berraf 2023). This idea was, for a long time, the basis of feminist theory and highlights the fact that both sexes should be considered equal despite their biological differences. Nevertheless, building on this idea, as equality is one of feminism's focal issues, the challenge becomes how to acknowledge and condemn specific differentiations, including discriminatory gender-based differences in treatment, without compromising equality. This problematic and complex issue is what Martha Minow refers to as the "dilemmas of difference" (Minow 1990, 19-48; Minow qtd. in Berraf 2023) or the idea that, sometimes, in order to resolve discriminatory situations, laws and programs may be implemented in an effort to help a minority to acquire more equal opportunities, puts other groups of people in a disadvantage thus creating new forms of inequalities. This will be especially important to bear in mind while discussing the representation of the survivor and the perpetrator within Me Too narratives as well as their filmic representations since, in order to create a space where women's stories are heard and accepted, none of the movies represent non-female survivors (Berraf 2023).

Another key concept to keep in mind while discussing issues related to Me Too and film is performativity. This term, coined by Judith Butler, is, within the American context, accepted as a

way to make the distinction between sex, which is biologically determined, and gender, which is socially constructed. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler describes gender as follows:

> [A] stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous . . .[therefore] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief… Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; "the internal" is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody. (Butler 1999, 179)

Through this excerpt, Butler argues that gender is constructed through the repetition of acts, or as they put it, performances. They also point out the fact that the complete normalization of specific sets of behaviors (gender norms) can never be fully internalized. Gender is also fluid, ever-changing, and partially based on the context in which one is placed at birth. While this concept is often associated with the feminist definition of femininity and subversion against imposed traditional feminine attributes and features, as well as the hierarchical positioning performing stereotypes entail, this notion of gender as a performed social construct also applies to the study of masculinity which will be explored in an upcoming section.

In her work entitled "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts," Barbara Creed discusses the representation and stereotyping of queer women throughout history. She discusses three stereotypical modes of representation in relation to the lesbian body: the masculinized, the animalistic, and the narcissist lesbian body. Creed's conceptualization of the narcissistic lesbian relies on the idea of the 'double,' which presupposes that lesbian women are supposedly attracted to other women due to their likeness (Creed 1995, 100; Creed qtd. in Berraf 2022a). The double or doppelgänger is a recurrent motif which can take various forms. Therefore,

> its variations in prose fiction most often include the phantasmal duplication of the individual, through likeness or affinity; and the division of a personality, by fantastic or rationally inexplicable means, or through the opposition or complementarity of separate characters who can be looked upon as different aspects of a sundered whole. In all its variations, the double arises out of and gives form to the tension between division and unity. It stands for contradiction within unity and for unity in spite of division. (Živković 2000, 122)

While it is often associated with Freud's definition of the uncanny, Creed's conceptualization of the double embraces the uncanniness of similarity as a source of desire. The theorist also claims that, from a male's perspective, the narcissistic lesbian poses a threat due to such lesbian women's exclusion of men and the potential for auto-eroticism (Creed 1995, 100; Creed qtd. in Berraf 2022a). Nevertheless, despite said disassociation from men, it could be argued that this category is, out of the three stereotypes explored by the feminist scholar, the most appealing to the male gaze and male sexual fantasies. Contemporary filmic representations of lesbian couples, much like it is the case in *Bombshell*, tend to display two equally conventionally attractive women sexually interacting with one another for little to no purpose outside of voyeurism and fetishization. Since *Bombshell*'s storyline includes the addition of a one-night stand between two fictional female characters into an otherwise based-on-real-event plot, and because the Me Too movement tends to avoid discussing same-sex offenses and LGBTQIA+ perpetrators, Creed's model will be used to understand the inclusion of lesbian romance within the film despite the lack of queer presence within the original Roger Ailes scandal. Additionally, the masculinized lesbian will also be referred to when discussing *Tár*'s masculinization of its fictional character in an effort to disassociate themselves and the film's marketing from Me Too narratives and cancel culture (Berraf 2022a).

2.3.2. Cinema Between the Male and Female Gaze

Occasional reference will also be made to various feminist film theorists and scholars such as Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston throughout the analysis of the films selected (Berraf 2022a). Coming out of the second wave of feminist thought, early feminist film criticism is especially interested in the negative representation of women in film, emphasizing the need to denounce the objectification of female characters. According to Mari Ruti, they assumed a straightforward relationship between reality and representation, which led most works to call for a change in the types of images of women projected through films (Ruti 2016, 17). Prominent feminist film theorists of the 1980s, such as Kaja Silverman and Teresa de Lauretis, based their analysis of film on the Freudian and Lacanian concept of the lack, arguing that motion pictures provide a way to heal, or, put differently suture, a lack in the audience's real life (Silverman 1983, 212); the Lacanian need for wholeness and closure. In order to attain this sense of closure, "the subject emerges within discourse, and (at least ideally) takes up a position congruent with the existing cultural order"

(Silverman 1983, 236). Teresa De Lauretis argues for a similar preposition of the audience's desire for cinema to recreate stereotypes and narratives that fit the status quo. In her famous 1984 book *Alice Doesn't*, she claims that cinema requires women's consent to maintain their spectatorship and, therefore, needs to "seduce women into femininity" (De Lauretis 1984, 10). This consent highlights the participation of women in (re)presenting femininity according to the dominant narrative. Here, stereotypical representations of femininity serve both as constructed reflections of patriarchal norms and constructors of the latter. This can be illustrated by Megan Fox's influence on popular culture. Her character's hyper-sexualized representation in *Transformers* led to her rise to fame in 2007 but also her labeling as a sex symbol. Fox reflects on her reaction to being labeled as such in a 2024 episode of the podcast *Call Her Daddy* by saying:

> I think it adds pressure to a girl who, like I said, has body dysmorphia and didn't ever really see herself that way. And, the things that I thought were my strengths like my mind, my intelligence, or my sense of humor […], those things are not acknowledged, and instead, I'm being acknowledged for something that I don't identify with or as. And so that's almost like that artifice is forcing me to wear a character that I don't actually… I wasn't trying to wear. And then also, you assign the character to me, and then you torture and demonize the character. And I was never that. I was never her. You created her, and then you murdered her. (Fox 2024, 30:38-31:37)

On the one hand, Fox seems detached from the sexualized image attached to her, highlighting the role of the audience in "creating" this reading of her character, and consequently herself, as a sex symbol, an image she does not identify with. On the other hand, she acknowledges her role in constructing and maintaining this image by routinely wearing said character. Moreover, her contemporary female spectators—who led an online campaign condemning *Transformers* director Michael Bay for his sexualized representation of Fox (Alter 2020)—embody De Lauretis' concept of recognition of misrecognition (De Lauretis 1987, 124) by recognizing but also rejecting Fox's (mis)representation of (a-)womanness (Berraf 2022a).

Although Laura Mulvey's essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has been criticized since its release in 1975, her conceptualization of the gaze, problematization of spectatorship in cinema as well as categorization of images of women within it into three looks (Mulvey 1999; Mulvey qtd. in Berraf 2022a) continue to offer a valuable framework for the analysis of female representation on screen (Berraf 2022a). In her inaugural psychoanalytical and

feminist film criticism text, the author discusses the gender implications of spectatorship in cinema as she claims that the spectator identifies with the masculine point of view, therefore making women on screen the object of the bearer of the look's pleasure. She goes on to identify three looks or, put differently, three ways in which images of women are associated with cinema (Berraf 2023). Mulvey describes said looks as follows: "There are three different looks associated with the cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (Mulvey 1999, 843). As the women discussed as part of this research range from fictional characters to celebrities and real people involved in heavily mediatized trials and cases, the three looks should also be considered in relation to how both genders are presented within the Me Too context. Feminist film theorist Karen Hollinger explains that Mulvey's essay has been criticized for her pessimistic conceptualization of Hollywood as dominated by male structures of seeing seems to leave the women depicted by Hollywood and their female spectators silent and dominated by the unescapable male gaze (Hollinger 2012, 11) (Berraf 2022a; Berraf 2023).

This flaw in Mulvey's argumentation is strengthened by the fact that identification does not always align with the spectator's own gender identity. Furthermore, depending on the genre of the film, the assumption that the female character is specially constructed to appeal to the male gaze may never be actualized. As identified by Barbara Creed in her 2022 follow-up book *Return of The Monstrous-Feminine*, there is a recent tendency in film for women directors to

> tell stories about women who are in revolt against male violence and corrosive patriarchal values including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anthropocentrism. The female protagonists challenge patriarchal definitions of what constitutes the proper feminine role designed to keep women impotent and marginalised. Determined to discover their own identity and desires, the female characters embark on a journey into the dark night of abjection, where they engage with the underlying horrors of the patriarchal order. (Creed 2022, 2)

These "Feminist New Wave" films, among which she cited Kitty Green's *The Assistant*, utilize the female gaze to fight against and subvert the assumption that female characters inevitably have to appeal to the patriarchal male gaze. Far from being the object of male sexual fantasy, in these films, female characters are actively subverting against patriarchal norms. Moreover, Clifford Manlove asses that Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach exaggerates the role of pleasure (Manlove

2007, 84) and mistakenly genders Lacan's experience of the gaze despite his lack of association of "castration-loss and "lack" with women or the penis" (Manlove 2007, 90). He focuses his criticism on Mulvey's misreading of the Lacanian gaze as gendered, arguing that both the gaze and its effects are gender specific or biologically determined but are rather universally practiced and felt (Manlove 2007, 90). In contrast, Ruti asserts that despite the critiques' validity, Mulvey's essay articulates what she deems to be an ongoing concern of feminist film studies: "insofar as men are active subjects of desire whereas women are merely its passive objects, the only form of desire available to women is the desire to be desired" (Ruti 2016, 37). Despite the fact that the theoretical discussion of the types of desires available to women has evolved to include the female gaze and active involvement of female desire in marketing and masculine image construction, women remain encouraged to strive for desirability, which, in turn, affects the way they aspire to present themselves. Therefore, according to Ruti, the critiques made against Mulvey's theocratization of the gaze "lose their power when we shift our attention from a film such as *Vertigo* to the average romantic comedy" (Ruti 2016, 55). Romcom is a genre which is primarily known for representing female stereotypes rooted in the heterosexual male gaze. Consequently, while Mulvey's theorization of male spectatorship and its role in the construction of the female image in Hollywood remains helpful to the dissertation's analysis of some of the movies' incorporation of traditional visual narrative elements, it should be completed and complicated by the female gaze.

The female gaze challenges the male gaze theory's limitation of women's role to the object of the male gaze. On the contrary, this feminist theory highlights the capability of female characters, spectators and filmmakers to shape how narratives are constructed and understood. Despite its common use within the academic feminist explorations of film, the female gaze remains challenging to define, as the scholarship on the topic primarily positions it in opposition to the male gaze without adequately defining it. Additionally, many feminist film theorists argue that the female gaze is unable to comfortably exist due to the patriarchal, male-dominated nature of the film industry upholding and preserving of the male gaze. Caetlin Benson-Allot highlights this tendency of feminist scholarship to define the female gaze "haphazardly … by what it is not than by what it is. It is not the male gaze, the patriarchal organization of film language and narrative for (hetero-sexual) male pleasure" (Benson-Allot 2017, 65). She further argues that the female gaze implies "a universal experience based on shared gender characteristics" (Benson-Allot 2017, 69),

an assumption which ignores the multiplicity and intersectionality of the female experience. While Benson-Allot rightfully points to the exclusionary politics that often accompany such terminology, the same argument could be made about the male gaze, nullifying its existence despite the clear appeal to heterosexual male sexuality in Hollywood production. Similarly, Katy Stewart laments that there "is not yet a fully-formed, distinctly female gaze in cinema" (Stewart 2015, 217) due to the complexity of the position of the female body as an object of desire within dominant cinema. Stewart draws for Mary Ann Doane's problematization of female spectatorship. According to Doane, "[f]or the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image - she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism - the female look demands a becoming" (Doane 1999, 135). She adds that this position is, therefore, made unattainable by its lack of the attribute of distance necessary for the reading of the image (Doane 1999, 143). Nevertheless, Stewart adopts a more optimistic position than Benson-Allot by recognizing the presence of a growing effort to subvert the prevalence of male-gaze-tainted imagery in contemporary cinema (Stewart 2015, 217).

Doane, who builds on Joan Riviere's notion of the masquerade of femininity, first explored in her 1929 article "Womanliness as a Masquerade," emphasizes the active role of women in choosing to wear or remove the mask of womanliness, "thereby gaining distance from, and control over, the very iconography of femininity that they were expected to embody" (Ruti 2016, 62). Doane's rejection of the passive role of women in cinema and promotion of their active participation in the production of femininity changed feminist film theory's direction and constituted one of third-wave feminism's founding concepts. The concept of the masquerade is further explored and theorized by Judith Butler in their now staple of queer theory 1990 book *Gender Trouble* explored in the previous section. Reading gender as performative alludes to the possibility of subverting and transgressing gender roles and norms by breaking away from the traditional repetition of dominant codes of gender. Butler expands on Foucault's conceptualization of power in which the use and presence of power naturally entails the creation of resistance. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault classifies types of power as either repressive or normalizing and argues that the latter is more insidious and subtle (Foucault 1978, 5; Foucault qtd. Berraf 2023). He also discusses how normalizing forms of power mold behaviors and activities that people do into forms of discourses that are used to produce power (Foucault 1978 Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2023). While, in this particular book, the French philosopher focuses on the idea of sexuality as a

social and historical construct, his conceptualization of power as normalizing should be considered when discussing the way in which #MeToo was weaponized, which arguably led to the movement's decrease in popularity in the past years. Normalizing power is an integral part of the patriarchal order and can be especially felt in Hollywood since the American and global film industry still glorifies the male auteur (Johnston 1999). Although the selection of the movies studied in this thesis was solely based on their relation to Me Too narratives and despite their plot's central focus being on women's narratives, two out of the four films were directed by a man. Yet, this accidental equal ratio of male and female directors does not extend to the rest of the industry since, as confirmed by a study published in 2024 which says that "in 1998, women comprised 17% of individuals working in the behind-the-scenes roles considered on the 250 top (domestic) grossing films. In 2023, women accounted for 22% of these individuals, an increase of 5 percentage points over 26 years" (Lauzen 2024, 3) (Berraf 2023).

Additionally to Butler's performativity, third-wave feminism was also marked by the introduction of Patricia Hill's conceptuality of intersectionality. While second and third-wave ideas, principles and concepts remain relevant to the contemporary academic context, some scholars identify a fourth-wave feminism which distinguishes itself through its entanglement with social media and online communities. Alison Dahl Crossley argues that "the fourth wave framework has not been theorized. It is ostensibly similar to third wave feminism, but with more emphasis on transgender issues and the value of online feminism" (Crossley 2017, 18-19). However, since the publication of *Finding Feminism* in 2017, the significance of the 2017 Women's March, as well as the Me Too movement and other online-based initiatives, pointed out the significant part played by online activism in this recent rendering of feminism, alluding to the legitimacy of considering fourth-wave feminism as its own movement. As predicted by E. Ann Kaplan in 2003, "the fourth wave will be distinguished by bringing second and third-wave feminists together to confront a new and devastating reality that involves us all, if not equally, then at least at once. This new reality ideally cuts across racial, ethnic and national divides" (Kaplan 2003, 55). The fourth-wave, therefore, seems to emphasize the global denunciation of sexual violence and systematic discrimination by utilizing the lack of geographical specificity granted by the borderless cyberspace. Cyber allies not only embrace second and third-wave principles but also urge for the integration of the LGBTQIA+ community and intersectional, post-colonial, and decolonial struggle into the movement's fight for equality. Sara Ahmed highlights the fact that this

need to speak out against all forms of abuse often causes feminists—or, as Ahmed refers to them, feminist killjoys—to engage in confrontation and cultural criticism, potentially leading to their alienation from the normative group. According to Ahmed, this is because "to raise questions about how women are portrayed is deemed as not allowing other people to enjoy that portrayal" (Ahmed 2023, 88). Therefore, the feminist killjoy

> appears as the one who asks questions or offers full blown critiques that are intended to stop others from simply enjoying something. Of course, we might reply that you can criticize something and still enjoy it. Or we might reply that if enjoyment requires not engaging fully with something, then enjoyment is superficial. (Ahmed 2023, 88)

By refusing to overlook individual, systematic and patriarchal violence, killjoys are often made to suddenly "snap the bond" (Ahmed 2023, 34) linking them to their normative environment. This snapping of personal and societal bonds, as well as the unexpected anger that accompanies the snap, are often wrongfully understood by others as violent and inappropriate. As one of the first women to speak out against Weinstein and sexual abuse within Hollywood despite having signed a non-disclosure agreement, Rose McGowan provides a pertinent example of a feminist killjoy. McGowan was often described as "feisty" (Thorpe 2018), "difficult and unstable" (Weinstein qtd. in Smith 2018) or as "an angry woman" (Stephens 2018) for voicing her anger towards her sexual assault by Weinstein, but also the system and culture that protected him for so long and continues to protect abusers.

While the use of ideas and concepts taken from the four waves of feminism and feminist film theory is crucial to the understanding of the Me Too movement and Me Too narratives due to the nature of the topic at hand and its relation to women's representation, rights, and struggles, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which it falls short. A significant issue related to this theory, and which extends to the social movement itself, is its ambiguous and changing stances on defining who is allowed to be included under the label of victim or survivor. The issue arises from what Sonia Kruks refers to as a "politics of identity affirmation" (Kruks 2001, 86) or what is commonly referred to nowadays as identity politics. When it comes to the media's coverage of #MeToo stories in the United States, the majority of the voices that were given importance and a platform to speak on the abuse they have experienced were young, "wealthy and/or white women"

(Kearl 2018, 9) whom even wealthier white, older men abused. As pointed out by Boyle and McKenzie, the victim label is, in itself,

> influenced by cultural constructions of the "victim" (Holstein and Miller 1990; Leisenring 2006, 325). Embodying the ideal victim role—blameless, weak, and innocent—is helpful in some contexts, such as in the criminal justice system (Konradi 1999). In a society that values personal responsibility, strength, and autonomy, however, "victims" are negatively evaluated and considered deviant (Dunn 2001; Leisenring 2006). (Boyle and McKenzie 2015, 152)

This negative stigma around both the word and its holder makes the demonization of survivors even more prolific in the context of the cases related to the movement's celebrity-led campaign on *X* (formerly known as *Twitter*), #MeToo. #MeToo survivors are not only negatively evaluated due to their identification as a victim since their status, class, race and success also weighs into their stigmatization. They are often viewed and treated as killjoys (Ahmed 2023) for breaking Hollywood's culture of silence, speaking out against the industry's abusive business practices and shattering its progressive mask. The exclusionary coverage of #MeToo solidified the public imaginary surrounding the survivors as being almost exclusively white, privileged, young, attractive women who had something to gain (roles, fame, money or exposure) from their sexual encounters with authoritative figures such as Weinstein. Of course, one could understand this image-making process and media representation as the byproduct of fact that these women already had a platform, and therefore a voice, prior to the abuse. As such their stardom served as an amplifier for their stories. However, the exclusion of women who are not as privileged as the actresses, anchors, and models who came together to take down the likes of Weinstein, as well as the othering and labeling of all men as automatic perpetrators when it comes to sexual abuse, should be questioned. As mentioned in the previous chapter, although feminist, the Me Too movement was never meant to be exclusive to women nor exclusionary towards people based on status, age, race, and attractiveness. In fact, before the 2017 Hollywood hijacking of the phrase and movement, Tarana Burke's work specifically targeted survivors coming from ethnic minorities due to their difficulty in obtaining appropriate care. However, it extended its resources to any person in need of support while dealing with the repercussions and trauma left behind by experiencing sexual violence. It is based on these shortcomings that the analysis is supplemented with concepts taken from multiple theoretical backgrounds, including masculinities studies.

2.3.3. The Marginalizing Power of Normative Masculinity

As one of the gaps explored in this thesis is the simultaneous masculine display of power and the abuse of it within the film industry, as well as the exclusion of male survivors from the filmic representation of Me Too stories, it is vital to understand how masculinities present themselves in the United States. Here, the use of "masculinities" instead of its singular form, masculinity, is a conscious choice based on the embrace of the multiplicity of forms that the latter can take and the different people that can display them. Michael Kimmel defends this point of view in his now-famous book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, where he claims that

> [m]anhood means different things at different times to different people. Some cultures encourage a manly stoicism we might find familiar. Many men in many cultures seem preoccupied with demonstrating sexual prowess. But some cultures prescribe a more relaxed definition of masculinity, a more emotional and familial man. Nor are all American men alike. What it means to be a man in America depends heavily on one's class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country. To acknowledge these differences among men, we must speak of masculinities. (Kimmel 2006, 3-4)

Based on the latter, both the defining traits that constitute 'manhood' and the representations of men heavily depend on the socio-cultural, geographical, and historical context in which they grow up. Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that masculinity, although heavily associated with men, is not necessarily embodied and reenacted by men. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam discusses what constitutes masculinity but also defines where 'female masculinity' fits within this paradigm. While doing so, Halberstam suggests that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam 1998, 1). This once again points to the role and importance of taking a different, more complex approach to the discussion of masculinity as a concept.

Inspiring the works of Kimmel and Halberstam, Raewyn W. Connell discusses how masculinities occupy a higher position than femininity in the gender hierarchy imposed by Western societies. In addition to existing in relation to one another, these masculinities also function based on their placement within the "western gender order" (Connell 2020, 77). While the theorist mentions various patterns of masculinity—namely hegemony, subordination, and complicity—the

primary type of masculinity that will frame the analysis of the men who hold a position of power within the works selected is hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity "can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 2020, 77). Jewkes and Morell describe these practices as "a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy" (Jewkes and Morrell 2012, 40).

Connell also points out an important issue that closely relates to the representation of men as the sole predators within the frame of the Me Too movement, as well as its representation on screen. She discusses how "the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race creates further relationships between masculinities" (Connell 2020, 80). This means that, while hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal that few men are able to fully reach and embody, its existence and repetitive representation marginalize other forms of masculinities. While the scholar focuses on race and sexuality in her discussion of this marginalization (Connell 2020, 80-81), it is interesting to consider how, based on this hierarchical positioning, spectators and 'subordinate' men and women working within the film industry tend to idolize hegemonic masculine male directors/ producers to the point of excusing their harmful behaviors or even remaining silent regarding their sexual misconducts. Furthermore, this marginalizing aspect of hegemonic masculinity could also explain the general dismissal of male victims of sexual assault and the focus put on women when it comes to the Me Too movement. It is much more difficult for a man to publicly denounce abuse as it might affect their position within this masculine hierarchy and alter how others perceive them. This assumption is supported by Tim Williams, Director of Shelter Services at Safe Alliance, who explains that "[w]hile there are many factors that go into why men are less likely to report, all of them point back towards masculinity being challenged" (Williams qtd. in SafeAlliance n.d). Hegemonic masculinity is, therefore, marginalizing not only to the subordinate masculinities and genders but also harmful to men projecting or striving to embrace said model of masculinity by forcing them to uphold the illusion of hegemony within the public sphere. Despite the fact that the movement empowered many male victims and helped them build the confidence to speak out about their experiences, male survivors were still more likely to be faced with skepticism and criticism, especially from other men, as demonstrated by Hughley's

ridiculing of Terry Crews for speaking out against Adam Venit (Hughley 2018, 0:29-0:33). This comes to reinforce the fact that male survivors, especially if deemed physically strong, are less likely to be empathized with because of how admitting to having been abused challenges their masculinity.

In Dahl's previously mentioned definition of power, he genders the person who holds power with the use of the pronoun "he," however, as Halberstam and Connell demonstrate, power may often be gendered. However, its holder does not necessarily have to be biologically male to have the same traits usually associated with patriarchal and toxic masculine dominance. Building on Allison K. Hammer's work, the thesis will refer to the harmful subtype of hegemonic masculinity often referred to nowadays as toxic masculinity by "normative masculinity," an alternative term coined by Hammer to emphasize the relationality between "sexual control and domination, full democratic participation in the life of the nation-state, along with the qualities of impenetrability" and white supremacy (Hammer 2023, 1; Hammer qtd. in Berraf 2024). They explain that

> [n]ormative masculinity adheres to a set of scripts that dictate what masculinity should and should not be, which requires the simultaneous denigration and exclusion of numerous Others. The total rejection of anything considered weak or penetrable becomes part of masculinity's definition. Such a rigid orientation to the world is highly unstable, however, and requires the projection of fears and anxieties onto women and "lesser" masculinities. (Hammer 2023, 1-2; Hammer qtd. in Berraf 2024)

This conceptualization of masculinity is helpful in the analysis of the movies selected since the masculine figures in all four movies, be it the male perpetrators of abuse or, in the case of *Tár*, the masculinized lesbian woman, denigrate and victimize others based on this exact violent definition of masculinity and negative attitude towards what they perceive as the hierarchical inferior Others, especially women. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Hammer, impenetrability is one of normative masculinity's defining qualities, which should be maintained (Hammer 2023, 169). They explore the concept as occurring on both the bodily level (explaining normative masculinity's rejection of male homosexuality) and the metaphorical one. Hammer gives an example of the manifestation of impenetrability, describing vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic as a tool used by the global north to become impenetrable to the virus (Hammer 2023, 171). In the context of Me Too

narratives, both bodily and metaphorical impenetrability are disrupted, making survivors vulnerable. Hammer states that masculinity "strives to be impenetrable through self-sufficiency, emotional sturdiness, and bodily resilience" (Hammer 2023, 169), which strengthens Tim Williams' assumption mentioned above. Crews' public admission of being groped by another man (Crews 2017) disrupts his position within the gender hierarchy because it challenges normative masculinity's assumption that a strong, resilient body can never be disturbed, shaken, or penetrated in any way (Berraf 2024).

Although, as pointed out by Hammer and Connell, this correlation between hegemonic or normative masculinity and violence does not exclusively affect women, gender-based violence remains "the most foundational mechanism for the reproduction of men's gender dominance" (Morris and Ratajczak 2019, 1981). Normative masculinity is more vulnerable to societal pressure than its higher-ranking counterpart, hegemonic masculinity, as it involves the same superiority complex towards others described by Connell while also including the aggressive repression of emotions due to normative masculine men "consider[ing] them as a show of vulnerability" (Malonda et al. 2022, 10). Violence, be it physical, psychological, or sexual, becomes a compensatory tool used to defend their manhood or pride by "signifying a capacity to assert control and demonstrating resistance to being controlled" (Morris and Ratajczak 2019, 1991). The perpetrators in the four movies studied thus embody different kinds of masculinities. However, all behave in accordance with the violent tradition of normative masculinity, which turns emotions into anger, frustration, and desire in an effort to uphold a highly regarded status within the hierarchy of genders. Said behaviors are referred to by Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe as manhood acts, or a set of behaviors and actions that differ based on the varying historical and cultural definitions of manhood and hegemonic ideals but that, nonetheless, remain similar in contemporary patriarchal societies. As reinforced by Schrock and Schwalbe, "In competitive, hierarchical societies, especially those that are classically or vestigially patriarchal, this [performing manhood acts] means signifying a capacity to exert control over oneself, the environment, and others" (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, 286).

3. Mapping Me Too In a Selection of Contemporary American Docudramas

3.1. Roger Ailes Take 2: The Recreation of Me Too Narratives in *Bombshell* (2019)

Bombshell is a 2019 film directed by Jay Roach which intends to accurately recreate the events—and women—that led to the fall of Roger Ailes. The movie opens at *Fox News*' control room, from which the audience is introduced to one of the three main characters, famous anchor Megyn Kelly, played by Charlize Theron. Barry Ackroyd, the film's director of photography, makes the viewers watch Kelly from one of many screens inside the control room to foreshadow the movie's main direction: exploring what happens inside the news channel behind the scenes. Contrary to Chapter 3's analysis of *Tár*, a fictional story, this analysis of Roach's *Bombshell* will emphasize the film's historical (in)accuracy. This is due to the fact that this form of re-creational eyewitnessing involves real people who may be affected by their Me Too narratives' dramatization on the big screen. As such, the main objective of this section will be to compare and contrast the movie's plot and characters to historical archives and interviews found about the real events surrounding the Ailes scandal. Additionally, the addition of a fictional element, such as the composite character Kayla Pospisil, played by Margot Robbie, will be examined in relation to the movie's potential consideration as a tool for the re-creational eyewitnessing of the past. The following discussion contains parts of a paper published in *AMERICANA E-journal of American Studies in Hungary* (Berraf 2022a).

3.1.1. Negotiating Fox News' Normative Environment

The word 'Bombshell' can be understood in two completely different ways depending on which of its definitions are taken into consideration. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word as the following: "1. an event or a piece of news which is unexpected and usually unpleasant" or "2. a very attractive woman" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries). As it can be observed from the way in which the three female characters' faces are put together in the poster (See Appendix, Fig 1), they represent a similar type of woman: the white, cis-gendered, blonde woman. Most importantly, they share the same conventionally attractive, ideal caucasian features: a thin nose, light skin, blonde

hair, blue eyes, arched brows, high cheekbones, and a strong jawline. From this description, one could argue that the male gaze clearly taints the casting since it aligns with what Mulvey denounces in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In this context, all three women's images are crafted to be looked at and enjoyed by "the bearer of the look" (Mulvey 1999, 808; Mulvey qtd. in Berraf 2022a). However, the movie attempts to recreate and denounce a highly normative work environment in which one's looks matter just as much as one's expertise. Fitting into the traditional Western ideal of femininity is thus part of the *Fox News* branding, and Roach's character design simply accurately recreates the physical requirements imposed on the news channel's visible employees (Berraf 2022a).

Visibility and looks are central to *Bombshell*'s story since, as Theron's Megyn Kelly explains while addressing the film's audience directly, "early on, he [Roger Ailes] realized: for a network to stay on twenty-four hours a day, you need something to hold an audience. That something is legs. There's a reason for clear desks" (Roach 2019a, 00:25:54-00:26:08; Roach qtd. in Berraf 2022a). Undeniably, by legs is meant female legs since male employees of the news channel are required to wear suits and ties. Paradoxically, this sexist obligation for female employees to wear short dresses and high heels when on air contrasts with *Fox News*' highly conservative and Christian image. According to statistics, the TV network's audience is primarily made of fifty to sixty-four-year-old, white, middle-class Republicans (Public Opinion Strategies 2019; Public Opinion Strategies qtd. in Berraf 2022a). Christianity, republicanism, and modesty are often associated with one another; however, since the election of Donald Trump into office in 2016 (The White House), in spite of the misogynistic comments he repeatedly made in the past (Fahrenthold 2016), republicans and consequently conservatives, have been associated with sexism and misogyny. *Fox News*, therefore, not only draws in conservatives through their support and promotion of republican ideology and ideals, but it also aims to appeal to the male gaze (Mulvey 1999) and normative masculinity (Hammer 2023). While the female anchors working for the channel are included in or run many segments broadcasted by the channel, much like it is described by Mulvey, both in reality and in *Bombshell*, the women of Fox News remain positioned as objects of desire put in front of our screens to be looked at (Mulvey 1999). Roach's representation of women in *Bombshell* incorporates components that embody visual pleasure intentionally in order to reflect the same image that the real women who worked under Ailes' strict visual guidelines had to maintain, or Ailes' ideal type: the blonde bombshell. Thus, despite the fact

that *Bombshell* retains some elements of mainstream cinema (Gledhill 2000), it negotiates such components through its conscious effort to portray the harmful reality of the working environment at Fox News (Berraf 2022a).

The film features some aspects of "negotiated cinema" (Cristian 2008, 96), which, according to Cristian, "takes into consideration the basic elements of traditional visual narratives (that ensures a wide audience and marketability as opposed to the revolutionary but hardly accessible avant-garde films) with conscious representation of women in contemporary culture" (Cristian 2008, 96). The intentionality of this negotiation is confirmed by Roach, who chose to join the project after being handed the script by his friend, Charlize Theron (playing Megyn Kelly), to provide her with his opinions and notes.

> I get it [the movie's script] after a lot of this sort of avalanche of revelations have come out and I'm instantly like "Oh I wanna be involved in anything that's about this stuff". […] This might open up the conversation past the normal political divides of progressive and conservative. […] Women who are conservative might be more interested in this topic because Megyn Kelly and Gretchen Carlson, people they follow on the news, are involved where they might not have tuned in if it was somebody that they didn't know, someone on the left. So, I just thought it was a real opportunity to open up the conversation to a wider audience. (Roach 2019b, 2:29-3-31)

From this interview, it is evident that the director's reasoning for taking on *Bombshell* was motivated by the Weinstein case, as well as a desire to enable Me Too narratives to be (re)introduced to a broader audience. Furthermore, as Cristian points out, incorporating components taken from or emulating traditional visual narratives ensures marketability and the spread of the oppositional message to a wide audience. It is, therefore, only reasonable for the movie to be constructed as a work of negotiated cinema in order to achieve the director and writer's goal: make people who would have otherwise never been interested in Me Too narratives if it were not for the survivors belonging to the same political group.

Taking a closer look at the textual part of said poster allows viewers to read the following: "Based on a real scandal" (See Appendix, Fig. 1). When Roger Ailes' survivors came together to speak out against their former, and for some at the time current, employer and highly respected media mogul, the news of his sexual misconduct would have felt like a true bombshell within the worlds of conservative journalism and politics. Nevertheless, Ailes continues to be remembered as

an influential figure of American journalism and right-wing politics after his passing in 2017, a year after stepping down from *Fox News* as a consequence of the sexual harassment accusations made against him by Gretchen Carlson, a former host of Fox & Friends (Redden 2016) and star anchor Megyn Kelly.

In an homage to the late *Fox News* CEO, *USA Today*'s Mike Snider writes that, "[a]lthough he left Fox News in disgrace last year over allegations of sexual harassment at the network, Ailes' accomplishments live on today in American culture" (Snider 2017). He goes on to praise Ailes for "coalesce[ing] the conservatism movement in politics […], spawn[ing] conservative TV […] and launch[ing] media personalities" (Snider 2017). Snider's tribute highlights the media's tendency to glorify powerful men despite knowing of and acknowledging their decades-long history of abuse. To confine his unethical and predatory practices to a single sentence, as Snider and many other Ailes sympathizers did, minimizes the devastating impact of his physical, verbal, and sexual abuse of power, which, with time, became a byproduct of his accomplishments. This is reminiscent of the question posed by *Tár* on whether one can and should separate the art from the artist and if greatness shields people who hold power from having to answer to their actions. There is no denying the "vast footprint on [American] culture" (Sherman 2017) left by Ailes, as recognized by journalist and author Gabriel Sherman, whose biography and *New York Magazine* covers and articles on Ailes helped bring the media mogul's behavior to light. Nevertheless, Sherman's reporting on the passing of the mogul also emphasizes the damage left behind by Ailes. He recalls the fact that

> [l]ast summer, the world learned why Ailes was so terrified about having his life made public. The allegations of sexual predation did not surprise me. In my book, I reported incidents early in Ailes's career in which he had asked female employees to trade sex for professional advancement – all of which he denied, of course. Sources told me the behavior continued at Fox, but no one was willing to go on the record to speak about it. I hoped the publication of my book in January 2014 might spur women to come forward. In the end, it took Gretchen Carlson filing a lawsuit two and a half years later to open the floodgates. As I spoke about Ailes yesterday in television and radio interviews, I thought of Ailes's victims, who were denied the closure of seeing their sexual-harassment lawsuits against him go to trial. I thought of Ailes's teenage son, Zachary, who lost his father and will grow up with that sordid legacy. I thought of the immense damage Ailes did to our political system. (Sherman 2017)

While Sherman's farewell to Ailes highlights the complexities of the late Fox News CEO as an individual as well as his relationship with him, it acknowledges his abusive behavior and the impact it had and continues to have on his survivors and his family. In an industry where misogyny and sexual abuse are normalized and accepted as part of the profession, it is of the utmost importance for Me Too narratives to be included in the canonized, grand narrative in order to remove the normal from what Magnússon refers to as the normal exception (Magnússon 2020, 27).

3.1.2. The Fictionalization of Survivors' Stories

As stated above, *Bombshell* is based on actual events and people; it, therefore, naturally replicates events and conversations that took place in real life and were, at times, directly taken by scriptwriter Charles Randolph from court documents and survivors' testimonies. The docudrama can be considered a microhistorical work in its own right. Nevertheless, from the very first seconds, the movie emphasizes its fictional (drama) nature by opening with the following disclaimer: "This film is a dramatization inspired by actual events. Some of the names have been changed, and certain scenes, dialogue, and characters have been created for dramatic purposes. All of the characters portrayed in this film are played by actors except where archival footage is used" (Roach 2019a, 00:00:00-00:00:14). This long textual disclaimer enables Roach to give his film the credibility of a historically accurate documentary film while allowing him the creative freedom to modify said history for "dramatic purposes" (Roach 2019a, 00:00:00-00:00:14). Despite the fact that some films can easily be considered as objects through which one can re-creationally eyewitness the past, Roach and Randolph's work brings out the following questions: Does the addition of imaginary elements to the filmic recreations of history affect their ability to successfully re-creational eyewitnessing to the past? And if so, where do we draw the line between creative freedom and harmful narrative reconstruction?

The Internet Movie Database (commonly known as IMDb) provides the following description of *Bombshell*: "A group of women take on Fox News head Roger Ailes and the toxic atmosphere he presided over at the network" (IMDb "Bombshell"; IMDb qtd. in Berraf 2022a). In reality, the movie not only retells the story of Carlson, Kelly, and Ailes' other survivors, but it also highlights the way in which one's environment and political beliefs interfere with the various

silencing mechanisms of power but also how one person can start a ripple effect by speaking out. As mentioned above, *Bombshell* presents itself as a biographical drama, separating itself from fictional Me Too movies such as *Tár* through its self-positioning between reality and fiction. In Ailes' survivors' collective reaction and response to the movie moderated by Kelly, former journalist Judi Bakhtiar explains that despite the movie having its fair share of historical inaccuracies, it "is such powerful movie making. It really puts people in [Ailes' survivors] shoes" (Bakhtiar in Kelly 2020, 5:51-5:53). Here, the female survivors' input should be interpreted as a representation of the female gaze, as they act as both the subjects of the male gaze and female spectators looking at the movie's content. Bakhtiar's emotional and positive response to the movie attests to the fact that, despite aesthetically appealing to the spectator's voyeuristic fantasy as it tends to be the case with classical narratives (Mulvey 1999, 811; Mulvey qtd. in Berraf 2022a), *Bombshell* is able to break away from the stereotype of the bombshell and allow its viewers to feel emotionally connected to them. This is made possible by Randolph's introduction of a fictional character named Kayla to his otherwise realistic script. Kayla Pospisil is first introduced as part of the lower-ranked staff working in the control room as Kelly's character tours the *Fox News* office, directly addressing and introducing the audience to what goes on behind the scenes. In this scene, Ailes can be seen watching his employees' every move before phoning the control room, yelling at Kayla's supervisor, who, in turn, scolds her for mistaking musician Don Henley for Glenn Frey (Roach 2019a, 00:03:51-00:04:28) (See Appendix, Fig 2). This scene serves two purposes: introducing Kayla as a young, inexperienced woman working at the bottom of the journalistic food chain and exposing one of Ailes' most infamous character traits, that is, his paranoia (Berraf 2022a).

This is proven to be factually accurate based on Sherman's cover story on Ailes entitled "The Revenge of Roger's Angels," published in 2016, a year prior to the time Randolph finished writing the movie's script (Roach 2019b, 2:08-2:20) which describes the same attitudes shown in the movie. Sherman describes how

> Ailes was notoriously paranoid and secretive—he built a multiroom security bunker under his home and kept a gun in his Fox office, according to Vanity Fair—and he demanded absolute loyalty from those who worked for him. He was known for monitoring employee emails and phone conversations and hiring private investigators. "Watch out for the enemy within," he told Fox's staff during one companywide meeting. (Sherman 2016)

Other scenes, such as the one depicting Ailes and his deputy Bill Shine watching James Murdoch on one of his monitors, replicate Sherman's reporting of smaller events word for word. The journal describes the anecdotal incident in the following way: "When Ailes spotted James Murdoch on the monitor smoking a cigarette outside the office, he remarked to his deputy Bill Shine, "Tell me that mouth hasn't sucked a cock," according to an executive who was in the room; Shine laughed" (Sherman 2016). Randolph's addition of such details, coupled with Roach and Ackroyd's visual adaptation of the latter, enable *Bombshell's* filmic portrayal of Ailes to sound, look, and feel as realistic to those who would have known the man as possible. Despite a Fox spokesperson's denial of Shine recalling the events reported and adapted to the cinema ever happening, the inclusion of these intimate, "locker-room banter" (Trump qtd. in Fahrenthold 2016) scenes establish Ailes' habit of monitoring his employees' every move as well as his patronizing, hypercritical and sexualized perspective on them. As such, it conforms to his position within the gender hierarchy as a representative of hegemonic and normative masculinity (Hammer 2023; Connell 2020). Here, Ailes' character is shown to be not only degrading to women but also to men he views as beneath him for potentially embodying what he would consider a lesser form of masculinity. Hammer highlights how, in traditional visual narratives such as Westerns, a genre especially preoccupied with the preservation of the impenetrability, "anxieties about homoeroticism and homosexuality (both desire and the act itself), and a fear of the feminine, become major definitional elements of masculinity" (Hammer 2022, 103). James Murdoch's supposed homosexuality and democratic beliefs are used as both a source of mockery and fear of the penetration of the normative masculine environment. From Ailes' hegemonic and normative position, Murdoch represents a threat to Fox News as a conservative institution and to him by virtue of his political position and assumed sexual orientation.

Despite the script's accurate depiction of certain reported occurrences, which would justify its consideration as a vessel for re-creational eyewitnessing the past, Megyn Kelly comments and deplores some of the fabricated, fictional additions made by the movie to complicate its portrayal of Ailes. She points out the existence of a series of historical inaccuracies, events, and dramatizations, saying that

> [Randolph and Roach] suggest that I had ran my debate questions for Trump by the Murdochs. That's a fantasy! I never ran it by Ailes, the Murdochs, or anyone other than my debate team. […] The notion that Roger liked the Donald Trump

> woman question cause it created controversy and a TV moment […] and there surely were no protests of me at the GOP convention […] Oh yeah and our [Juliet Huddy] scene never happened! […] The notion that Irena Briganti did not plant hit pieces on talent is a fantasy. (Kelly 2020, 3:59-4:45; Kelly qtd. in Berraf 2022a)

While some elements mentioned in this list may seem inconsequential based on the fact that their modification does not take away from the overall message of the film, taking a closer look at the historical inaccuracies and artistic liberties taken by both the writer and the director allows this study to determine whether *Bombshell* is successful in re-creational eyewitnessing the past. What is at stake here is not what adaptation studies would refer to as the fidelity principle but the implications that come with every modification, addition, or omission in relation to the audience's reception of the Me Too story, including survivors. With that in mind, Roach, Randolph, and Theron, who also participated in the making of the film as a producer, align with democratic values, which may have affected their portrayal of the conservative TV channel and its employees (Randolph 2019a, Randolph 2019b, Lindsay 2019). However, Randolph expresses in a writers' roundtable interview that "[he] prefer[s] to write people who [he] do[es] not agree with" (Randolph 2019a, 2:03-2:05; Randolph qtd. in Berraf 2022a), a practice which enables him to develop "an empathetic relationship to their place in the world" (Randolph 2019a, 2:24-2:36; Randolph qtd. in Berraf 2022a) (Berraf 2022a).

This attitude towards his conservative characters can be felt through his feminist representation of most women in it, regardless of their political beliefs and own problematic past, as worthy of the audience's empathy. For instance, the additional scene referred to by Kelly above between Juliet Huddy and herself (Roach 2019a, 1:17:16-1:19:30; Roach qtd. in Berraf 2022a) functions as a means to show a potential liberal audience a different, more vulnerable, and compassionate side of the lawyer. Here, this constructed moment of sisterhood and trauma bonding is used to soften Kelly's image, highlighting Randolph's inclination to engage in negotiated, activist cinema. Ackroyd's camera work emphasizes the intimacy of the moment shared by the two survivors. The cinematographer uses two consecutive close-up shots that focus on both women's facial expressions. The bokeh effect—a technique used in photography to intentionally blur one element of an image (usually the background) to "focus the viewer's attention on a specific area of an image" (Rivera et al.)—used by the cinematographer throughout the conversation draws the

viewers' eyes to the two women (See Appendix, Fig 3), thus enhancing the emotions they convey. Moreover, Ackroyd also utilizes chiaroscuro lighting in this scene, a technique that refers to the "low and high-contrast lighting that creates dynamic areas of light and shadow in films" (Miller, 2023). By having a harsh light (coming from Huddy's studio lights) positioned behind the characters, the high amount of contrast between the light and darker areas of their faces darkens the mood, setting the tone for the gravity of the topic (Berraf 2022a).

Roach and Randolph's humanization of the controversial Fox News anchor opposes the popular narrative surrounding her persona, making said portrayal oppositional in nature. Nonetheless, what makes this representation negotiated is the fact that Megyn Kelly is often described as stiff, rigid, and serious (Rutenberg 2015), three adjectives which would not make a story's main character relatable, sympathetic, and therefore enjoyable for a movie's viewers. Moreover, making the main character of the story and primary narrator the target of a protest elevates the stakes for breaking her silence and, therefore, builds tension. It also makes it seem as though the entire world is turning against her. Softening Kelly's sharp public image and presenting her as vulnerable implicitly guides the audience closer to the sympathetic position Randolph aims to guide his audience toward. *Bombshell*, therefore, engages in a form of feminist activism that aims to break the political divide so often found within American society and is mirrored by the Me Too movement and its filmic representation. According to Kelly and the other survivors reacting to the movie alongside her, the film's most striking historical inaccuracy is the fact that contrary to her portrayal, Irena Briganti, Fox News' communications and PR chief, "a hundred percent would hit talent and did many times" (Kelly 2020, 4:57-4:59) and "anything bad you hear about Fox News people, it's probably by her" (Huddy in Kelly 2020, 5:02-5:06; Kelly qtd. in Berraf 2022a). Huddy and Kelly's testimonies suggest an effort to smooth over the female journalist's ruthless treatment of Fox's employees and the role she played in maintaining Ailes' culture of silence. Similarly, the movie also glosses over some of the less pleasant and enjoyable aspects of Megyn Kelly, something which many film critics highlighted as the movie's biggest flaw in their reviews. Simran Hans states in her review of *The Assistant*, written for *The Guardian*, that

> [w]hat happened to these women is appalling; that the film takes such pains to sand down the politics of its central characters to make them more sympathetic undermines its entire thesis. Kelly's racist attitudes are smoothed over, while Carlson's homophobia is conveniently erased. (Hans 2020)

Other critics, such as Manohla Dargis, consider that the film "can't deal with the story's uncomfortable contradictions" (Dargis 2019), specifically its heroine's interest in silently remaining part of Fox News' powerful machine. These positive modifications and omissions specifically made to female characters suggest that the writer and director are conscious of making all female characters appear more morally acceptable and, therefore, suitable for a liberal audience. While re-creational eyewitnessing is not nullified by the filmmakers' lack of adherence to the fidelity principle since the latter's consideration sheds light on the current contradicting attitudes towards conservative survivors, it is important to highlight such historical inaccuracies in the film's retelling of the original historical narrative (Berraf 2022a).

3.1.3. Walking the Fine Line Between Re-creational Eyewitnessing and Re-victimizing

Another significant fictional component added to the story, which Kelly did not mention, is the incorporation of Kayla Pospisil's character into the movie (Berraf 2022a). Kayla, who Margot Robbie plays, is described by Randolph as having been designed to be "our emotional center. She's the one we identify with the most" (Randolph 2019b, 1:06-1:10). Taking into consideration the fictitious nature of this character, some of the writer's cinematographic and creative choices regarding Kayla's characterization and interactions with other survivors, who contrary to the young aspiring producer are based on real women, ought to be problematized. One of the main aspects of Kayla's character is her self-identification as an "evangelist millennial" and an "influencer in the Jesus space" (Roach 2019a, 00:18:39-00:18:52). Randolph describes her as "a composite" inspired by his own experiences as a member of an evangelical family; her "background is [therefore] based on… [his] world and people [he has] known over the years" (Randolph as quoted in Hobson 2019). After making another mistake on her first day at the O'Reilly Factor, Kayla is mentored by Jess Carr, a fictional character played by Kate McKinnon who describes her as a "closet liberal and a closet gay woman as well because, according to first-hand accounts, you would not want to be either at Fox News" (McKinnon 2019). Their short,

ambiguous, and unexplained romantic and sexual relationship heavily appeals to the male gaze and allows the movie to gain 'inclusivity points' for depicting a homosexual relationship (Berraf 2022a). While both of the characters play an important role in building a compelling narrative for the film's liberal viewers, omitting their one and only romantic/sexual interaction with each other would have no impact on the movie's plot. Both characters already establish enough of a close platonic, sisterhood-like bond through their interactions inside Fox for Kayla to get to the conclusions and place in which her character needs to be for her final scene and monologue (Berraf 2022a). The addition of this almost purposeless one-night stand with Jess is, therefore, reminiscent of Creed' conceptualization of the narcissistic lesbian (Creed 1995). Creed argues that this stereotype heavily relies on the idea of the double (Freud 1955; Živković 2000), which presupposes that lesbian women are supposedly attracted to other women due to their likeness (Creed 1995, 100; Creed qtd. in Berraf 2022a). While Creed argues in her chapter that, from a male's perspective, this stereotype's 'danger' is men's exclusion from pleasure and lesbian auto-eroticism (Creed 1995, 100; Creed qtd. in Berraf 2022a), it could be debated that this category is, out of three stereotypes explored by the feminist scholar, the most centered around the male gaze and male sexual fantasies (Berraf 2022a).

Contemporary filmic representations of lesbian relationships, much like it is the case in *Bombshell*, tend to display or allude to two equally conventionally attractive women, according to a male perspective, sexually engaging with one another to satisfy the viewers' tendency for voyeurism and fetishization. In this case, while this assessment is partially accurate, Kayla and Jess' sexual interaction serves two purposes: opening the conversation on Fox's exclusionary environment and O'Reilly's sexual misconduct, as well as highlighting the strong anti-liberal background from which Kayla comes. While putting her underwear back on, Kayla points out the fact that Jess has a Hillary Clinton poster on her fridge (Road 2019a, 00:29:31-00:29:37), uncovering the Fox staffer as a Democrat and opening the door to a discussion on homophobia within Fox News and the consequences of working there despite embodying the opposite of what the channel advocates for, conservatism and heteronormativity. This topic of conversation is followed by Jess informing Kayla about the allegations put forward against Bill O'Reilly by Andrea Mackris, O'Reilly's former employee at Fox. The 2004 court document published on the website *The Smoking Gun* transcribes multiple sexual phone calls recorded by Mackris in which O'Reilly describes in great detail his fantasies involving her while "using a vibrator upon himself"

(The Smoking Gun 2004, 14-16). Despite the gravity of the famous conservative TV host's actions, the two women speak of the appalling sexual harassment endured by Mackris in a light, gossip-like tone, laughing at the content of O'Reilly's calls to his employee (See Appendix, Fig 4). While two fictional characters share the scene, its light-hearted tone is representative of the normalization of sexual harassment within the Fox News sphere. The 2004 court case that Jess alludes to marks the first out of many complaints against O'Reilly for sexual abuse and harassment. Yet, as portrayed in this scene, despite such behaviors being known and openly talked about at Fox following the lawsuit, O'Reilly remained part of the network until 2017, following the publication of an article in the *New York Times* detailing his many harassment settlements (Steel and Schmidt 2017b) (Berraf 2022a).

Kayla's character comes back on the screen a few scenes later, following Faye Orselli, another composite character played by Holland Taylor and meant to represent Ailes' assistant, for a chance to meet with Ailes. Fay invites Kayla to "come say hi, we are always looking for on-air talent" (Roach 2019a, 00:36:35-00:36:39), which is followed by the assistant bringing her into Ailes' office. The camera stays behind Kayla as Orselli closes the door, her smile falling as the door closes (See Appendix, Fig 5). Roach's directing, combined with Taylor's acting, hints at the fact that the assistant is aware of Ailes' misconduct, and despite feeling remorse, she continues to provide the mogul with new women to harass and sexually abuse. While, as pointed out by Dargis (Dargis 2019), Roach and Randolph fail to address the self-interest in the remaining part of Ailes' entourage when it comes to the real women who inspired *Bombshell*, Kayla's character comes to rectify that. Through this scene, we see two women looking to please Ailes for their own benefit, although, unfortunately for Kayla, this will come at a steep price. Orselli knows what leaving Kayla in an empty room with Ailes will lead to, yet she encourages the young girl to do anyway, enabling the abuse. Based on the dialogue shared by the two fictional characters in the elevator, it is heavily implied that the reason behind the assistant's complicity is self-preservation: keeping her revenue source and avoiding another violent outburst, or as Orselli refers to it in the elevator: "donut days" (Roach 2019a, 00:36:21-00:36:23). Additionally, Kayla walked into what was sold to her as a simple meeting with Ailes knowing of the sexual harassments allegations within Fox News out of ambition. It is obvious that Kayla had a personal interest in getting close to the CEO. Nonetheless, the film clearly shows how such environments and predators exploit ambition.

The camera cuts from Orselli to Ailes, and Kayla engaged in a professional exchange about Megyn Kelly's show and liberals' response to Fox's content. Matching the testimonies of Ailes' real-life survivors, the conversation rapidly turns more predatory as Kayla tries to convince him that she belongs on air. Ailes asks her to stand up and "give [him] a twirl … a quick spin" (Roach 2019a, 00:38:38-00:38:44), to which the young woman obliges. He follows by asking her to "pull her dress up, let [him] see [her] legs" (Roach 2019a, 00:38:57-00:39:03). In these scenes, the shots alternate between using a wide camera angle on Kayla and medium to close up shots of the two characters emphasizing their reactions and emotions. When Kayla is verbally coerced into pulling up her dress, she is placed in the middle of a wide shot, highlighting how belittled she feels, whereas, when the camera goes back to Ailes, it blurred out, only leaving the silhouette of her lower body on the screen to be looked at. When facing the founder of Fox News, Kayla is reduced to the object of his desires, something that is reflected by the camera work. After uncomfortably pulling up one side of her dress, downplaying the sexual harassment by attempting to laugh it off, Kayla is asked once again to pull it even higher, intensifying her discomfort. As she does as she is told, Ackroyd and Roach use a close-up on the young woman's face to highlight her hesitation before slowly lowering the camera to her hips and then going back up to her face. This movement emulates Ailes' eyes, scanning Kayla's body in an objectifying and sexualizing manner. The audience is shown a close-up of Ailes's face and eyes fixing the woman's lower body. A brief Spielberg close-up shot, also known under the name of 'Spielberg face' (Hellerman 2023), captures the fear and panic in Kayla's eyes before returning to Ailes, looking directly to her private area as her underwear starts to show (See Appendix, Fig 6). Despite the sexual interaction only lasting less than three minutes, the movie's camera work, as well as its emphasis on dialogue and on the breathing noises coming out of Ailes' mouth, allows this scene to represent the intensity, discomfort, pressure, fear, and embarrassment felt by victims of sexual abuse as they are propositioned by the people holding power over them.

Critics and survivors alike have disapproved of the movie's humanization of Ailes despite recreating, to some extent, the abuse he forced women to endure. When asked about her reaction to the movie, former Fox journalist Julie Zann emotionally expresses the following: "It was worse than that. That was my immediate takeaway like oh this is it? Like wow you really let Roger off easy" (Zann in Kelly 2020, 2:17-2:29). However, the choice to show Ailes as more complex and imply most of the more severe abuse imposed on Kayla through scattered sequences of her walking

out his private elevator into his office was deliberate. When asked about the choices he made as a director regarding the scene described in the previous paragraph, Roach responds that

> [w]e talked a lot about it like when is it just disturbing … and when is it some kind of exploitation of its own from within the scene. And we tried different levels of how graphic the portrait was… I felt like as long as we got that this is what it felt like being her in this situation, this how vulnerable and exposed… We're not showing more than a swimsuit would show but we're showing the humiliation, because it's really about power. It's a little bit about sex, but it's about this guy expecting loyalty… by actually giving me [Ailes] sexual favors. It's about crushing her, and it's that evil. He wants to destroy her ego to serve his, and that's what it's about. I knew that as long as we were serving that central principle of what that scene was all about, then I felt like it was the right amount of graphic (Roach 2019b, 25:41-26:54)

In this quote, Roach makes it clear that his concern for how graphic the scene should be comes from a place of preservation for the film's watchability, that is to make sure that his film is not too disturbing for the viewers and Margot Robbie, whose character gets victimized. It is true that this case's documentation confirms Zann's statement; however, the director raises a valid point by saying that getting the central meaning of the scene across is sometimes more important than the amount of graphic content shown on screen. While "show, don't tell" is one of screenwriting's oldest principles, compelling storytelling also requires to, as put by writer Peter Selgin, "never state what you can imply" (Selgin 2018). The addition of graphic content may have made *Bombshell* more factual, but it would have also risked pushing the actress' boundaries too far, victimizing her in the same way that Ailes did his survivors.

Kayla's character, therefore, allows Roach to show his audience the power dynamics at play in relation to sexual harassment in the workplace while avoiding revictimizing the real women who went through Ailes' abuse by having their fictional counter-part reenact their traumas on the big screen for everyone to watch. In spite of Roach's commendable refusal to exploit his actress for the sake of historical accuracy, Kayla's interactions with Megyn Kelly introduce another problematic aspect of the movie: victim shaming. After learning about the fact that Megyn Kelly's character was also sexually harassed by Ailes "a long time ago" (Roach 2019a, 01:21:02-01:21:05; Roach qtd. in Berraf 2022a), Kayla blames Kelly for not speaking up sooner, implying that the star anchor is complicit in the younger woman's harassment (Randolph, Bombshell 2019, 1:20:34-

1:22:42; Randolph qtd. in Berraf 2022a). This scene is emotionally powerful, dramatic and allows for Kayla's character to display an array of contradicting thoughts and feelings which come with taking the first steps towards accepting past traumatic events as real, which, in turn, leads to speaking out. However, it does not take into consideration an important part of writing films inspired by traumatic real-life events and stories so soon after their occurrence: the real survivors/ people may watch the cinematic adaptation of their most traumatic and life-altering memories. Megyn Kelly verbalizes her unresolved feelings about the addition of this fabricated scene in the following passage of her reaction to *Bombshell* (See Appendix, Fig 7):

> Well, it's funny because I look at the Me Too movement, and, at no point in my view did victim number seventeen blame her harassment on victims one through sixteen. That is not how this movement has shaken out. And so part of me, I saw that scene, I'm like that was written by a man. But Doug asked me "would you take that scene out of the movie if you could?" and I said no. Because the truth is that I've looked back on my own life, my own … every moment from that moment forward and I do wish I had done more. Even though I was powerless, even though it would have been a suicidal move for me career-wise, what if I had just said screw it, you know? I'll go back to practicing law, you know, I don't need to have a career in this industry. What if I had thrown myself in the fire back then… maybe that wouldn't have happened to you. (Kelly 2020, 23:42-24:45; Kelly qtd. in Berraf 2022a)

What Kelly's commentary and female gaze on the scene highlights is how hurtful and damaging it can be for the real women whose stories are being put on the big screen to sit through scenes that involve the writer taking creative liberties and including them in situations in which they are blamed for other people's suffering but also how they handled their own abuse (Berraf 2022a).

Breaking the silence or speaking out, like every other form of subversion, involves making sacrifices and comes with its own set of consequences. Additionally, as pointed out by Serisier, outside of its cultural impact, it does not necessarily end the problem of sexual violence and the stigma that comes with being recognized as a survivor (Serisier 2018, 12). On the one hand, Randolph's choice to have Kayla confront Kelly on not breaking her silence earlier ignores the crushing power of one's normative, patriarchal environment and the silencing networks put in place by people like Ailes to ensure their survivors' compliance. Kayla's reasoning comes from the fact that, from her position, "[Kelly] ha[s] power" (Roach 2019a, 01:22:13-01:22:16),

prompting her to question Kelly's silence: "Why are you still playing by old rules, You're Megyn Kelly" (Roach 2019a, 01:22:16-01:22:21). While Kelly would choose to keep the scene in the movie if given the opportunity to remove it, following this common pattern of blaming women instead of the assault's perpetrator may be triggering for other survivors who went through similar experiences watching the film. On the other hand, Kayla's reaction may also be explained by the recentness of her sexual harassment and assault by Ailes compared to the other women portrayed in the movie. Kayla's character had less time than Kelly or Carlson's characters to process what happened with Ailes. Thus, she could simply be understood as showing an alternative coping mechanism when having to face one's trauma: shifting the blame onto others (Berraf 2022a).

Kayla's admiration for Kelly, who she describes to Ailes as "a star, not because she thinks Santa's white but because she'll say it" (Roach 2019a, 00:37:16-00:37:20), also plays a role in her anger towards the anchor. The younger woman esteems Kelly because of the very fact that she has the courage to "say it," making the revelation of her idol's silence in the face of sexual harassment the more irritating to her. This scene also highlights the fact that, despite her celebrity status and own power and voice, Kelly remains victim to the same normative, silencing powers as others due to her position without both the gender and Fox News hierarchy. Ailes, like many other influential men, held power over his survivors through his position but also the complicity of others such as assistants, lawyers, and other connections, male or female, enabling him to retain his power over employees of the TV network. As reported by Sherman, "Rupert's first instinct was to protect Ailes, who had worked for him for two decades. The elder Murdoch can be extremely loyal to executives who run his companies, even when they cross the line" (Sherman 2016). Going against Ailes would mean not only speaking out or suing Roger Ailes but an entire system supported by billionaire Rupert Murdoch (Stelter 2016), owner of multiple newspapers and TV channels, and a powerful political empire. Furthermore, as pointed out by Roach, "What Gretchen did was THE underdog story. She jumps off a cliff with no hope of success. This is a year before the Me Too support system kicked in, she's got none of that" (Roach 2019b, 18:10-18:24). Abuse was so normalized in their workplace that the women at Fox News had no one to turn to, pushing many of them to accept monetary settlements in exchange for signing carefully crafted NDAs, or what Michelle Dean refers to as "contracts of silence" (Dean 2018).

Despite the role they play in the normalization of secrecy, and therefore silence, in relation to workplace sexual violence, NDAs can, at times, be beneficial to its signatories. Sexual

harassment and assault are often so damaging because they take away the victim's power and agency over their own lives and bodies. Roth and Lebowitz identify helplessness as one of the main feelings experienced by survivors of sexual misconduct. They argue that

> [t]he defining characteristic of sexual trauma is the elimination of the victim's choice and the obliteration of her agency. Helplessness is, therefore, likely to be present and to be experienced in an acute form. The experience of acute helplessness is a highly regressive experience that carries the threat of nonbeing. To be absolutely helpless is to be suddenly reduced to an infantilized state, bereft of the customary exercise of expression, influence, and choice, which characterizes our experience of our self. (Roth and Lebowitz 1988)

Some me scholars and attorneys defend the need for NDAs as a means to partially give back to survivors a sense of control over their stories and experiences. Feminist lawyer Gloria Allred highlights that the alternative to these confidential agreements "would be to insist that victims be denied the choice to settle their case, and be forced to file lawsuits, appear for depositions, answer interrogatories, testify publicly under oath and take the risk that a jury will not believe them" (Allred 2019). While this thesis is constructed around the cinematographic recreation of survivors' experiences and testimonies, Allred raises a crucial point by defending survivors' right to privacy and control over their own narratives. However, what the lawyer needs to take into consideration is that the type of NDAs that are often demonized are not signed by survivors willingly. Unlike Carlson, who in both the movie and in real life was informed of the repercussions of signing the settlement and legally advised following the deposition of a complaint detailing her inappropriate interactions with Ailes, most survivors are forced or intimidated by the perpetrator and their legal teams to sign such documents. Their stories can, therefore, only be told with the risk of facing a lawsuit and that, even if they would be willing to do so in the future. Despite their value, these settlements, therefore, tend to be a drastic solution, which involves sacrificing one's voice for the benefit of the advancement of goals that could have been achieved in less damaging ways (Altman 2022, 698-699).

In defense of Kelly's decision to remain silent for so long and as a criticism of the film's ending, Juliet Huddy points out that it

> shows a reality. I mean, that's what we all go through! That's why some of us kept our mouths shut about things. It really needs to be made very clear that even though Margot Robbie's character walked off throwing away her thing [company name tag], she probably never got a job again. (Huddy in Kelly 2020, 24:52-25:07)

What Huddy points out is the difference between reality and fiction. In reality, as corroborated by Kelly and the other survivors' stories, even if Kayla would have found a job elsewhere, she would have discovered that "it is very much like the last place" (Kelly 2020, 25:08-25:15). Therefore, while having Kayla leave Fox, throwing away her badge, provides viewers with the cathartic release necessary to satisfy them and leave them with a sense of closure, for most of Ailes' survivors, quitting their position within the conservative TV channel may have placed them in a worse position than they would be by silently staying.

The last point addressed by Kelly in her response video is *Bombshell*'s focus on Carlson, Pospisil, and herself. Kelly believes that

> Jenice Dean did not get her due in this movie. With respect to the filmmakers, they included her, and I appreciate that, but if you could only know the risks she took to make sure justice was done. She had been harassed by Ailes in her job interview. She kept it secret for a long time. […] the Gretchen lawsuit comes in, and Janice and I started to go try to find women for sure we did. But Janice was the one who everyone would speak to. She was in a non-threatening role; she was the meteorologist and so women would speak to Janice. Women who I didn't know would go speak to her and Janice would say "it's safe to talk to Paul/Weiss. Megan's speaking to them and I am speaking to them too and you can do it too." And for her to do that, I mean, she 100% thought, as did we all, that Roger was going to survive this challenge. […] She's worried right? She's scared… But she did it, she went in there and so did many others who were just like Janice. Whose faces you'll never see on the big screen and names you'll never know but found the courage to go into that law firm and tell their stories, believing he would survive. That's who I think of when I watch the movie. (Kelly 2020, 25:16-27:04)

In this relatively long passage of the talk, Kelly highlights the survivors without whom Carlson's lawsuit and, on a more general scale, the Me Too movement could have never succeeded in taking down Roger Ailes and other powerful figures in the industry and beyond. Film, as a medium, is crafted to retain its audience's attention for a limited amount of time, with the trend indicating that

the average runtime falls between 80 and 130 minutes (Jarząbek 2018). As such, stories need to be (re)arranged in a way that is gripping but also compact. Therefore, it is almost impossible for a single movie to tell the whole story, which is why, despite successfully representing the essence of what the women at Fox News went through, it leaves many historical elements and stories untold. Moreover, as discussed above, the widespread use of NDAs, as well as some survivors' unwillingness to speak out publicly, may have contributed to said cuts from the film's adaptation of the historical narrative. This limitation is exactly what makes historical archives such as Kelly's response to the film so pivotal to re-creational eyewitnessing. While films, as exemplified by *Bombshell*'s analysis, can be useful to the recreation of microhistorical events and the exceptional normal, their juxtaposition with historical archives enriches it and makes it a complete work of microhistory.

While it is undoubtedly flawed in its handling of many aspects of survivor stories' representation, *Bombshell* does present its audience with an emotional, complex, and sound account of what it is like to be the target of sexual harassment within one's own workplace, which makes it a strong cinematic space through which the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too narratives can be experienced. As mentioned in the introductory part of this thesis, the Me Too movement has entered into the public's consciousness through the Harvey Weinstein case, making its main spokespeople and faces those of democrats and self-proclaimed feminists. What *Bombshell* successfully does is break down the American partisanship mentality by highlighting that abuses of power are not dependent on one's political orientation. Despite their, at times, controversial rhetorics and seemingly impenetrable façades, conservative women such as Kelly, Carlson, Huddy, and so many more have to face the same life-altering consequences as any other survivor when asked or self-motivated to speak out against their oppressors. This post-Weinstein scandal filmic representation of a proto-Me Too story opens the door to the inclusion of stories from survivors who do not fit the stereotypical description of a Me Too survivor (the democrat, feminist, good-looking woman). Therefore, it allows the questioning of which Me Too story deserves to be heard and talked about and the biases that come with representing history on the big screen. As such, despite its historical inaccuracies, *Bombshell* remains useful to the re-creational eyewitnessing of the past since it accurately captures the main historical event and gets survivors' stories across. In this context, fictionality can be viewed as both the film's strength and weakness as it allows Roach and Randolph to portray assault without revictimizing the real survivors but

also, at times, modifies the narrative in a way that is harmful to them. Nevertheless, *Bombshell* proves that fictionality, when handled well and acknowledged, can be helpful to re-creational eyewitnessing. It allows filmmakers to present their audience with information that may be considered common knowledge but was not necessarily historically recorded as a result of their normalization. As such, when backed by enough historical evidence and context, film can highlight the exceptionality of the normal, thus supporting the move of such events or people from Magnússon's normal exception to the abnormal within the public consciousness (Berraf 2022a).

3.2. Who Tells Their Stories In *She Said* (2022)

She Said is a 2022 documentary drama directed by German actress and filmmaker Maria Schrader, which depicts Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's investigation into Harvey Weinstein's long history of sexual abuse and misconduct for the *New York Times*. While the three aforementioned movies follow mainstream cinema's codes for the genre of drama and present themselves as inspired by real events, *She Said* presents itself as an objective and historically accurate recreation of the events and conversations that led to the publication of Kantor and Twohey's article entitled "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades," purposefully leans its marketing towards the documentary side of docudramas. The exploration of this Me Too film allows this study to test out whether the degree of claimed historical accuracy alters the process of re-creational eyewitnessing. The movie's claim of historical accuracy comes from the fact that it is based on the two journalists' own retelling of the events in their autobiographical book called *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement,* which was first published in 2019. Schrader takes her viewers through the two female journalists' investigation as they gradually collect condemning evidence against Weinstein. Much like *The Assistant* (2019), *She Said* takes an unconventional approach to the filmic representation of Me Too narratives as it constructs its narrative through the eyes of an outsider to the abuse. This time, the point of view explored by the female filmmakers is that of the journalists finding their way to survivors' Me Too narratives while working around the system that creates and maintains the culture of silence surrounding abuse in Hollywood. This section aims to compare and contrast the film's representation of the real people and events involved in the making of the *New York Times* article with its original source, Kantor and Twohey's book, as well as other external

historical archives, such as survivors' testimonies. Comparing the film with different forms of archives allows this section do investigate whether documentary dramas can be helpful to the Me Too movement.

3.2.1. Involving Me Too Survivors into the Depiction of their Own Stories

The movie somewhat picks up from where *Bombshell* left off as the audience is introduced to Megan Twohey as she is conducting a phone interview with then Presidential candidate Donald Trump about his alleged sexual misconduct. Schrader then introduces Jodi Kantor, another investigative journalist working for the *New York Times*, as she watches 21st Century Fox's announcement that they would be cutting ties with Bill O'Reilly as a result of the backlash he received following the *New York Times*'s reporting on the topic. The article referred to uncovers the existence of an important number of settlements having been reached with women over the years related to his behavior, including a settlement with Juliet Huddy who is also portrayed in *Bombshell* (Steel and Schmidt 2017a). Kantor obtains turning on the identity of actress Rose McGowan's aggressor being Harvey Weinstein, which kicks off her investigation of the media mogul. While the young woman contacts more and more people, thus collecting more evidence on the sexual misconduct of Weinstein, Twohey, who was pregnant at the time of her reporting on Trump, returns from her maternal leave, throwing herself back into work in an attempt to fight her post-partum depression. After discussing the gravity of the claims, Twohey accepts to join Kantor in her investigation of the producer, delving directly into the records of complaints made against Miramax, Weinstein's former company. The movie then follows both women into both their professional and personal lives as they interview more women, trying to convince them to be named sources for their article.

As mentioned above, similarly to *The Assistant*, Maria Schrader chooses to take an oppositional approach to the representation of survivors' stories. *She Said* does not include any scenes in which a woman is victimized by Weinstein, choosing to focus on the collecting and reporting of their stories. However, Schrader opens her movie with an almost wordless scene set in 1992 Ireland in which a young woman—later on revealed to be Laura Madden—can be seen navigating the beginning of a promising career in film. The shot cuts from the young woman working on set to a shot of her running in the street in a state of panic as she is uncontrollably

crying. This approach to rape scenes is similar to the one taken by Kitty Green who, instead of recreating the abuse on screen like it is often the case in traditional rape narratives (Projanski 2001, 217-218), alludes to it without the explicit display of violence. Instead, the cruelty of the encounter is understood through the reaction of the young woman (See Appendix, Fig 21) to what the audience perceives as an unknown event at the beginning of the film. Like Green, Schrader states that she "do[es] not need to add another rape scene to the world" (Schrader qtd. in Sperling 2022). Despite this refusal to add to the survivors' suffering by representing their assaults and traumatic experiences with Harvey Weinstein, Madden, whose assault lays the foundation of the movie, describes her reaction to her first viewing of *She Said* as upsetting. She explains that "[she] was soundly upset by it is all she can say" (Madden qtd. in Sperling 2022), further describing her response to the movie as being more than just emotional; it was also physical. Choking back tears, she tells the *New York Times* that "[she] physically recoiled. [she] just felt [she] was facing this person that [she] had become that [she] did not want to be. And it was really upsetting and shocking. [She] was upset that [her] life had gone in the direction it went. It was quite awful" (Madden qtd. in Sperling 2022). While Green's decisions to leave out scenes involving the explicit victimization of women and the use of specific survivors' stories are described by the filmmaker as evident from the get-go, *She Said* had to go through multiple stages of re-writing and polishing to get to its current, viewable state for some of the survivors it depicts.

The filmmakers, director Maria Schrader, producer Dede Gardner, and screenwriter Rebecca Lenkiewicz invited many of the survivors to weigh in on the script, portrayals, and some of the main themes of their appearance or representation in the movie. The end product is, therefore, not only the female filmmakers' narrative adaptation of Me Too, but it is also the fruit of its negotiation with the way in which the survivors wanted to be portrayed. While most survivors like Zelda Perkins or Laura Madden were consulted throughout the process, others like Ashley Judd and Sarah Ann Masse played a more active role in the movie as part of its acting crew. Judd plays herself in some of the film's most pivotal scenes by giving the journalists their first full testimony (Schrader 2022, 00:21:54-00:24:03) and being the first woman to accept to go on the record (Schrader 2022, 01:48:03-01:49:35), whereas Masse plays Emily Steel, one of the *New York Times* journalists who uncovered the series of settlements made by Fox and O'Reilly himself to silence the women he sexually abused and/or harassed (Masse 2023, 4:10-4:50). Judd's testimony

for *She Said* takes the form of an interview led by Kantor, played by Zoe Kazan, which goes as follows:

> **JUDD:** Then he asked me to meet him. Uh, really early. And I had been up all night filming, and I was tired. I went to the Peninsula Hotel, and at reception.. I asked, "Is Mr. Weinstein in the Belvedere Restaurant, or is he on the Patio?" And they said, "Go to his room." And I went upstairs, and Harvey was in his bathrobe. And he asked if he could give me a massage. "No," I said. And then, um, he asked me to help him pick up his clothes for the day. He, you know, started asking for all these things, increasingly more sexual, getting closer and closer. And I just said no so many different times and in so many different ways. And then he finally, um, asked me to watch him take a shower. And I said, "Harvey, when I win an Academy Award in a Miramax movie, I will give you a blow job." And I got out of there fast.
>
> **KANTOR:** What did you do?
>
> **JUDD:** I told my dad, I told my agent, I told the people with whom I was filming that night, and Harvey punished me. I mean, he blackballed my career because I had the wherewithal to refuse him.
>
> **KANTOR:** How do you know that?
>
> **JUDD:** I would be standing with other actresses, and he would blank me. There were roles for which I was up I mysteriously did not get, and I know today that it was Harvey making a phone call. You know I did an article about it, and nobody did anything.
>
> **KANTOR:** You didn't identify him, but did industry people know who you were talking about in your article?
>
> **JUDD:** Absolutely. And the abuse came raining down on me, not on him. You know at the Women's march when I did the "Nasty Women" poem? I lost a huge advertising gig because a small group of people complained that I was quoting the president. He used that language and got elected. I quoted him, and I got fired. It is decades later, and it's still the same sexism. And, Jodi, I would make the same choices all over again, but I also would like to work. (Schrader 2022, 00:21:54-00:24:03)

This two-minute-long scene symbolizes the first tangible proof of misconduct and silencing in relation to Weinstein obtained by Kantor and, therefore, it opens the door to a deeper investigation by confirming the rumors the journalist had previously only heard about. As mentioned above, this makes it a turning point in the narrative. While the original script presents Judd's encounter with the film producer in a similar way, mirroring it almost word for word, it is interesting to examine

what has been omitted from it. Listed as part of scene 60 in the script is the following description: "60 EXT. THE STREETS OF LOS ANGELES. DAY. As Ashley speaks we see the streets of L.A. and the advertising there.. Shop windows.. Billboards.. Everything revolving around perfect female bodies" (Lenkiewicz 2021, 28). This passage comes right before Judd starts describing the events that transpired inside Weinstein's suite and is meant to establish the context of such abuses of power, that is, highlight the relation between the sexualization of women's bodies and the normalization of sexual harassment. The movie version does not include this shot since, instead, Schrader focuses on showing the two women's conversation in a realistic manner. The filmmaker alternates between shots of Judd and Kantor giving the audience the impression that they were present for the interview, something that could not have been achieved if the director chose to stick to a more cinematic and conceptual approach to the issue. Schrader's documentary-like approach provides survivors such as Judd the opportunity to tell their Me Too narratives without the dramatization that is often associated with film as a medium. When asked about her participation in the movie by the *New York Times*, Judd states

> I have been describing Harvey Weinstein sexually harassing me since I came downstairs into the lobby of that hotel, because my dad was waiting there for me and said he could tell something devastating had just happened to me. This was in 1996, when there was no accountability for what I described. Playing myself in 'She Said' is a natural evolution. (Judd qtd. in Sperling 2022)

The actress' readiness to participate in the filmic representation of her own story confirms one of the most positive aspects of using movies as a tool for re-creational eyewitnessing: it provides survivors another potential platform to speak out and tell their stories. By playing herself, Judd actively plays a role in the (re)shaping of her own Me Too narrative.

3.2.2. Problematizing the Act of Speaking Out For Others

As mentioned above, many survivors did not have such a positive outlook on the way in which their stories were represented. Zelda Perkins, one of the *New York Times*' main informers for the Weinstein case and his former assistant, has openly talked about her finding her portrayal in the movie "pretty upset[ting]. Not because anybody had done anything wrong. It's because the

script had gone through a process of development" (Perkins qtd. in Sperling 2022). More recently, as part of her appearance as a guest on the *Pod Save the UK* podcast, she was asked whether she was happy about how *She Said* told her story. She responds by pointing out the fact that

> [I]f it wasn't for her [Samantha Morton], that whole experience would have been only horrific to be honest. It was not a great experience. […] And you know, obviously it's a dramatization so there's a lot of stuff that's not actually factually accurate, which wouldn't matter if I was dead but it kind of matters when you're alive [nervous laughter]. And I know it sounds really awful but I'm kind of glad the film wasn't wildly commercially successful. Just because it is a weird thing. You think the idea is really exciting. That someone is gonna portray you in the film. The reality is actually not great. 38:07 […] It was really hard cause I also only went to one of the openings, one of the premieres. I didn't wanna go to the premieres because we had to do the Oh, dress up in a dress and walk down the red carpet, and I'm like, do you not get it? The whole reason that all of these women were in the situation they were in is because they fell for that shit. Because they all wanna put on their dress and walk down the red carpet cause they get dressed up like show ponies and do that. You know, I went in a suit with my 'can't buy my silence' t-shirt on, and I'm like, no, I'm not gonna, I don't, I'm not playing that game cause this is all it all started. Do you not see the irony? (Perkins 2024, 37:00-38:57)

Perkins' commentary on the dramatization of her story points to one of re-creational eyewitnessing through the film's main flaw, its potential to reopen survivors' wounds. Much like it is the case with Kelly's portrayal in *Bombshell*, the fictionalization/dramatization of Me Too narratives while the survivors are still alive to address it proves to be challenging. On the one hand, if done in accordance with survivors' wishes, filmic representations have the potential to amplify their voices and inform a larger public of their experiences. On the other hand, if overly fictionalized or dramatized for entertainment, it can be traumatizing for survivors to watch and have to share with said wider audience a part of their lives that they are not necessarily ready to share. While Perkins focuses on the irony of having Weinstein's survivors walk the red carpet for the film's openings in the podcast episode, her main point of contention when it comes to the movie's script is reported by the *New York Times* to be the fact that *She Said* initially used her, and therefore her story, to address other issues (Sperling 2022). For Perkins, the scene should "center on what mattered to her: a system that allows these abuses to continue" (Sperling 2022), after all, "Harvey is just a man, a weak man. And he is a man who was allowed to behave like that by society because we are

sycophants to fame and power" (Perkins qtd. in Sperling 2022). This (mis)use of Perkins' character as a vessel to move the plot along is something that Schrader and Lenkiewicz attempted to fix in the released version of the movie, which addresses the systematic protection of predatorial people in power. Despite this fact, the end result still does not sit quite right with the British activist.

It is important to point out that despite the harshness of Perkins' criticism of the movie in the podcast recorded two years following *She Said*'s release, she does recognize and acknowledge the efforts made by actress Samantha Morton and the filmmakers to get the scene to a place the activist deemed acceptable. The movie's producer, Dede Gardner, is described by Perkins as "very receptive and respectful and kind and [she] listened" (Perkins qtd. in Sperling 2022). This issue in representation is further complicated by the fact that the movie aims to bring to life Kantor and Twohey's autobiographical book. An autobiography is a work that is a self-representation of one's reality. As such, it can only attempt to capture the journalists' perspective on the events that preceded the publication of their article. While the consultations initiated by the filmmakers undoubtedly add depth and widen the film's perspective on survivors' stories, it is to be expected for their integration into the film's fabric to potentially lead to conflict with the journalists' concerns, priorities, and takeaways from the interviews they conducted. This is because the inclusion of both the filmmakers and survivors' voices into the film's narrative automatically leads to breaking the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1989) between the journalists and their book's readers. Paul John Eakin describes this pact as a "contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life" (Eakin in Lejeune 1989, ix). Here, the narrator's identity is no longer posited as that of the writer-narrator-protagonist. Instead, the autobiography's filmic adaptation incorporates various perspectives channeled through the filmmakers. This highlights the complexity of the task undertaken by *She Said*'s filmmakers: empathetically depicting Me Too stories based on a multitude of first-person as well as third-party recollections. *She Said* can, therefore, be said to integrate a collage of voices as its narrator, rendering its representation of survivors' stories more subjective than it may appear based on how the movie presents itself as a docudrama involved in activist filmmaking. As such, the issue of whose truth is being told remains partially unanswered as said collage of voices inevitably leads to a multiplicity of truths. Nevertheless, the power over the final narrative remains in the hands of the filmmakers, as exemplified by their rendering of Perkins' story, which goes

against her truth. As such, despite proposing to present multiple truths, *She Said* remains a product of the filmmakers' power over survivors and the two journalists' stories.

The inaccuracies found within fictionalizations are not the only problematic aspect of retelling living people's Me Too narratives, as exemplified by Madden's reaction to the movie despite the script "pretty much [mirroring] [her] own words" (Madden qtd. in Sperling). This may be due to the limited amount of time viewers get to spend with each survivor since Me Too narratives only represent one part of Kantor and Twohey's own story. While this dissertation's main concern centers around the filmic representation of said Me Too narratives and survivors, *She Said* also highlights the way in which the investigation affected the two female reporters' personal lives. Successfully balancing the time allocated to the journalists' own struggles and each survivor's journey to speaking out, therefore, becomes even more challenging. As Gregory Currie observes, "films represent time by means of time" (Currie qtd. in Yaffe 2003, 116), meaning that contrary to the novel in which "elapsed fictional time … is not dependent on elapsed reading time. Films, however, control the amount of time that the viewer spends on its representations" (Yaffe 2003, 117). While film delimitates the time spent on every representation of events or actions, it is in itself limited by time. As previously mentioned in the first section of this chapter, film as a medium also aims to entertain and, most importantly, retain its viewers' attention. To do so, films tend to stick to an average runtime of 80 to 130 minutes (Jarząbek 2018). This is due to the fact that despite being an art form, its creation involves high costs –the average cost of making a feature film being between one hundred million and one hundred fifty million dollars (Nashville Film Institute)—which need to translate into commercial success in order to provide a return for investors and pay for its production costs. This dominant cultural code is often challenged by oppositional/ experimental filmmakers such as Hungarian director Béla Tarr, whose eight-hours-long movie *Sátántangó* was voted by film critics in the 2022 Sight and Sound poll to be the 78th greatest film of all time (British Film Institute 2022). In a recent interview with award-winning filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett, Tarr explains that, for him, "The length of a movie all depends on what you want to say. […] [He does] not care what is acceptable" (Tarr qtd. in Barrett 2024). While *Sátántangó* remains a successful film, Tarr himself recognizes the profound impact of this capitalist mindset on filmmaking, affirming that "that's why [he does not] like to go to the cinema, because filmmakers, or let's say this capitalist film business, ignore time and space" (Tarr qtd. in

Barrett 2024). On the one hand, making film requires capital, while on the other hand, this same need for capital pushes filmmakers to appeal to filmic conventions.

One of the main challenges of contemporary feminist negotiated cinema then becomes finding the right balance between the indie, oppositional approach to filmmaking—which often does not garner enough viewership—and mainstream cinema's often predatory representation of women. *She Said*'s filmmakers clearly show a desire to highlight Weinstein's survivors' stories in an oppositional, counter-cinema-like manner. However, the film at times fails to do so by not allocating enough time or space to the parts of their stories women, such as Perkins would like to highlight. As such, much like it is the case with *Bombshell*, based on its adherence to some elements of traditional visual narratives, despite the oppositional perspective it takes on Me Too narratives, the movie falls under the category of negotiated cinema. This negotiation is evident in the fact that despite their dramatization of the historical events for entertainment purposes, Schrader and Lenkiewicz remained receptive to survivors' requests and comments even though the movie's main plot does not revolve around their stories. The Me Too narratives that came out of this investigation could have, therefore, either been allocated less time and space or been recreated to appeal to mainstream cinema's tendency to represent violence against women in an explicit manner, which was not the case here. Another evidence of the filmmakers' desire to highlight Weinstein survivors' Me Too narratives in an oppositional manner can be found in their use of Italian model Ambra Battilana Gutierrez's audio recording of her interaction with the producer. This recording was part of a 2015 New York police sting operation and is the only instance in which Weinstein's real voice can be heard. Gardner explains that "it's obviously an unusual and untraditional thing to drop a two-and-a-half minute thing into the middle of a film, but I felt like the only way to honor [Gutierrez] properly and the profound bravery that she showed was to keep that whole" (Gardner qtd. in Sperling 2022). Outside of this recording, Weinstein's character, played by Mike Houston, only appears from the back or is heard through the phone, leaving him in the film's background. This brings to light an important issue in relation to the representation of Me Too narratives, namely the delicate boundary between speaking for and speaking instead of others. On the one hand, the movie's well-intentioned activist objective naturally leads to its filmmakers, to some extent, speaking for survivors. On the other hand, it is not always possible to do so in a manner that all survivors deem satisfactory, as exemplified by Perkins' case, leading to the writer speaking instead of some of them. While *She Said* attempts to

avoid speaking instead of the women who lived through Weinstein's abuse by involving them in the movie, its making, and script, *She Said*'s primary aim remains to follow Kantor and Twohey's journey towards the publication of their historical article. As such, it can only attempt to advocate for survivors in the limited time allocated to each of them, leading the film to, at times, partially speak instead of survivors.

3.2.3. The Gap Between Fiction and Reality

As pointed out by Perkins, *She Said* remains a dramatization of the real-life events and the people it portrays. With this comes its share of subjective interpretations of the people and institutions involved. One of the film's most important yet most questionable contextualization is the way in which it presents the *New York Times* as an unbiased, truth-seeking, and feminist environment that deeply cares about upholding journalistic ethics and providing its readers with impactful reporting. In fact, one of the film's earliest scenes, which involves Masse, represents the newspaper as the main reason behind the exposure of O'Reilly as a predator. The scene, which follows a short look into the behind-the-scenes of Twohey's investigation of Trump, captures members of Kantor's future team watching the news. In it, CNBC's news anchor Julia Boorstin is heard over the TV reporting:

> That's right. Fox has just announced that Bill O'Reilly is out saying, quote, "After a thorough and careful review of the allegations, the company and Bill O'Reilly have agreed that Bill O'Reilly will not be returning to the Fox News Channel." Of course, this follows the boycott of over 50 advertisers of the O'Reilly Factor after a New York Times report of sexual harassment allegations and the report that Fox and O'Reilly together spent about thirteen million dollars to settle those allegations from five different women. (Schrader 2022, 00:10:15-00:10:44)

The addition of the authentic news passage taken from the real announcement of O'Reilly's departure from Fox (Boorstin 2017) reinforces the credibility of the newspaper as change-inducing and deeply impactful for women's struggles. While it is factually accurate that the *Times* did participate in bringing to light major corroborated charges of corruption and sexual misconduct within various fields, the journal has also been involved in its fair share of controversies in relation

to its biased, unsupported, and controversial coverage of historical events and people. Older examples of the newspaper breaking the codes of journalistic ethics Kantor cares so much about in *She Said* can be found in their biased and false coverage of various important historical events such as the war on Iraq or the Holocaust. The *Times* documented and acknowledged their faulty coverage of the Iraq war in a now archived article published in 2004 entitled "From The Editors; The Times and Iraq." The *Times*' editors recognize that the journal "was not as rigorous as it should have been" (New York Times Editors 2004) in its fact-checking, adding that their examination "indicates that the problem was more complicated. Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper" (New York Times Editors 2004). Additionally, the *Times* is also known for, at times, crossing celebrities' boundaries by invading their privacy or making up stories about them. A recent viral example of this is the opinion piece written by Anna Marks on Taylor Swift, published by the journal on June 4, 2024. In it, the editor speculates about the female singer's sexuality, reading into her recent artistic endeavors as evidence of the singer-songwriter's potential closeted queerness (Marks 2024). In 2022, the same editor had written another speculative op-ed on pop sensation Harry Styles (Marks 2022) declaring that the British singer's hypothetical ""don't ask, don't tell" queerness must not be something to which we [the LGBTQ+ community] aspire. It should instead be something that we mourn" (Marks 2022). Whether or not Marks' speculations on Swift or Styles belonging to the LGBTQ+ community are correct, much like it is the case with Me Too narratives, the public sharing of a person's story should remain their choice to make. Articles such as Marks are numerous amongst the *Times*' coverage of artists, something which can be harmful to their careers and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, this occasional disregard for the subject of the journal's articles' well-being extends to some of Weinstein's survivors and sources and, thus, to some extent, to their fictional representation in *She Said*.

Rose McGowan, one of the Me Too movement's main voices, confirms on multiple occasions the paper's problematic treatment of celebrities, more specifically female celebrities, both in real life and within her story's fictional recreations (Kantor and Twohey's book and Schrader's movie). The movie turns McGowan's email to Kantor, which is cited in the book, into a phone call that replicates parts of its content word for word (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 7). In its filmic form, McGowan is heard over the phone telling Kantor that "[she] has been treated quite shabbily by [Kantor's] paper numerous times, and [she] believe[s] the root of it is sexism"

(Schrader 2022, 00:13:48-00:13:57). This mimics the actress' response to Kantor's first attempt at securing an interview with her sent on May 11, 2017. In the book, McGowan's main criticism of the *Times* is that "a speech she had made at a political dinner was covered in the Style section instead of the news pages" (Kantor and Twohey, 7). According to the reporters, the actress also complains that "[a]n earlier conversation she'd had with a *Times* reporter about Weinstein had been uncomfortable" (Kantor and Twohey, 7). Two years after the publishing of the article, the actress and activist expresses being "grossed out by how much they [the *New York Times*] enjoyed being lauded" (McGowan qtd. in Gilbey 2019), once again alluding to being taken advantage of by the journal. She clarifies that she has "been called one of the first to speak out. No. I was the first. I called the *New York Times*. I blew it wide open, not them. They won the Pulitzer and I'm the one hard-up for money. It's disgusting" (McGowan qtd. in Gilbey 2019). McGowan comes to confirm a trend present within both the reporters' book and Schrader's filmic adaptation of it: its glorification of the *Times* as a safe space for women and Me Too survivors to speak out against their aggressors.

While Kantor and Twohey were reportedly concerned with their sources' well-being, their book also exposes the voracious part of journalism through its retelling of Rebecca Corbett's interactions with Lauren O'Connor, one of Weinstein's former employees whose leaked memo played a solidifying role in the case against the mogul. Corbett, who at the time of the Weinstein investigation was an investigations editor for the *Times*, is described to have

> assumed control over the call […]. Her style was always to hear people out as neutrally as possible, and, like Baquet, Corbett usually left reporters to deal with sources. But now, she spoke for the institution in a way the reports could not. The paper had to publish the memo, she said gently but firmly. Yes they could point out that O'Connor had declined to comment, to try to make clear that she was not the source of the memo, and to spare her from retaliation. Yes, the paper intended to name her as the author of the memo to establish its credibility. Corbett added that if Page or O'Connor wanted to make a further case for leaving her name out, they should. Page did not respond, and her client remained silent. Page said later that the paper's decision sounded set in stone. (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 141-142)

In this passage, Corbett is described as having forced O'Connor to share with the world a document that was never intended to be made public, telling her and many other women's stories without their consent. O'Connor's reticence on being associated in any way with the memo or cited as a source was later discovered to have been due to the young woman still being "handcuffed by a very strict NDA" (O'Connor 2019, 12:38-12:43), preventing her from discussing her time at the company or the aforementioned memo at the time of Kantor and Twohey's investigation. In an interview with *Democracy Now!*, O'Connor describes how she remembers,

> in the lead-up to the New York Times article publishing that featured [her] name and [her] memo, sitting for an hour and a half in a Walgreens parking lot with a burner phone crying because [she] couldn't figure out how her call mom and dad back on the East Coast […] and tell them that their daughter was going to end up in a newspaper in a major article about sexual assault, sexual harassment tied to a very powerful man. … Because [she] was too scared to say anything. (O'Connor 2019, 13:00-13:34)

Of course, the *New York Times* and Corbett legally had every right to publish O'Connor's confidential document. However, they knowingly put her in a vulnerable position, which forced her to hastily process her trauma while dealing a significant amount of damage to her current life. As mentioned in the interview's excerpt, on top of dealing with the potential legal repercussions of the leaking of the memo, O'Connor also had to tell her story to people around her before they discovered it through the *Times* article, something which caused her great psychological distress. Schrader's movie does include a brief scene in which Corbett, sitting in an office room with Kantor and Twohey, is shown to inform O'Connor and her lawyer of the *Times*' decision to publish the memo regardless of the woman's objections to it (Schrader 2022, 01:40:47-01:41:21). However, the leak is painted as a necessary evil justified by the memo's ability to create a stronger, more compelling and publishable story. The two journalists are portrayed to be visibly upset (See Appendix, Fig 23) by the necessity of the inclusion of the memo regardless of the former employee's lawyer revealing her client's emotional torment at the idea of her public naming as the writer of the memo. Despite the presence of this forceful conversation in the script, the strategic omission of any mention of the consequences it had on O'Connor following the *Times*' publication of parts of the memo allows Schrader to preserve the clean image she draws of the journal thus far. Whether this was an intentional choice on the part of the filmmakers remains unclear. Their

portrayal of the *Times* as a vessel for change and as an institution that strives to protect people glosses over the problematic history of the journal, thus providing the film's audience with a skewed perception of the latter as an irrefutably positive and safe environment in which women are able to find their voices and tell their stories. As expressed by O'Connor, "[t]here was an irony in a movement about consent and ownership of voice to feel as if I had none" (O'Connor qtd. in Keegan 2022). The young woman was once again stripped of her ability to speak out on her own terms and made into a public representative of what would later on become the Me Too movement. By doing so, the *Times* not only made her a potential target for Weinstein but also took away her voice, just like the producer did by having her sign an NDA. Of course, the exploration of O'Connor's struggles with the repercussions of the journal's decision to cite her name would have led to the complication of the film's narrative, which, based on reliance on the journalists' book, should logically praise the *New York Times* for breaking the story that put an end to Weinstein's abuse. Since the publication of Kantor and Twohey's article and, as a result of the condemnation of Weinstein, O'Connor was able to find the power to speak of her experiences for herself, officially breaking her NDA and getting her voice back (O'Connor 2019; Keegan 2022; Kovelman 2024). The young woman was also contacted by *She Said*'s producer, Dede Gardner, and asked to read her memo on screen over the footage of the reporters receiving it. O'Connor, who accepted Gardner's offer, described the experience as "healing" (O'Connor qtd. in Keegan 2022). As such, while the movie remains difficult to watch for some of the survivors it depicts, it does allow others to find the strength to reexplore, face, and voice their trauma in an alternative way.

In spite of the fact that Schrader and Lenkiewicz package their story in a way that, to a certain degree, polishes the *Times*' image, *She Said* remains critical of some of the investigative journalists' more problematic behaviors. The film includes a recreation of Kantor's tense conversation with the husband of Weinstein's former assistant and survivor, Rowena Chiu, Zelda Perkins' colleague and friend. The scene starts by showing Kantor on her way to Chiu's home in Silicon Valley by using both wide and close shots of the car to show that the reporter is travelling great lengths to speak to the survivor face to face. The movie's score repetitiveness amplifies the sense of dread and anxiety felt by Kantor in anticipation of the difficult conversation she expects to have with Chiu (Schrader 2022, 00:51:39-00:52:06). Similarly to the music in *Tár*, *She Said*'s score highlights the heaviness of the characters' personal and professional struggles, emphasizing their "inner journey" (Britell qtd. in Burlingame 2022). Caitlin Sullivan, wife of the score's

composer Nicholas Britell and professional classical cellist describes how in certain scenes—such as the one in which Kantor drives to Chiu—, she plucks the strings in a way that feels "very jolting, and you could hear the metal against the wood of the fingerboard. There is an appropriate ugliness to it" (Sullivan qtd. in Burlingame 2022). This use of the sonic uncanny enables the film's score to add a layer of tension to the scene, foreshadowing Kantor's fears of harming survivors actualizing through her interaction with Chiu's husband, Andrew Cheung. In the scene that follows the drive, Kantor introduces herself to Cheung, explaining that she is there to talk to Chiu about her experience working for Harvey Weinstein in relation to her investigation of the latter's treatment of women (Schrader 2022, 00:52:24-00:53:25). Cheung, played by Edward Astor Chin, is puzzled by the journalist's need to fly to their place of residence to discuss Chiu's previous work experience which leads to the following dialogue:

> **KANTOR:** So… And this is off the record. My understanding is that… that Weinstein possibly victimized your wife when Rowena first worked for him.
> **CHEUNG:** Rowena's never mentioned anything like that to me. What-what do you mean by victimized? Can you be more specific?
> **KANTOR:** I was told that your wife may have received a settlement from Weinstein.
> **CHEUNG:** Do I look like a guy whose wife received a settlement? Could you have confused her with someone else?
> **KANTOR:** I-I… I apologize for taking up your time. I'm… Will you just please give this to Rowena?
> **CHEUNG:** If you're talking to these other people, why do you need to talk to Rowena? And if you turn up in my driveway, what kind of victimization?
> **KANTOR:** It's complex.
> **CHEUNG:** I'm asking you to expand on it.
> **KANTOR:** I really think it would be best… if you asked Rowena. Have a good day. (Schrader 2022, 00:53:50-00:55:03)

In this scene, Kantor reveals Chiu's private information to her husband in her stead, once again stripping a woman of her ability to speak out for herself. Rowena Chiu's NDA prevented her from speaking of her assault to anyone, and her "inability to speak to anyone in [her] personal life about really quite a traumatic event meant really it wasn't possible to process it" (Chiu 2020, 7:13-7:24). In the film, Kantor makes an emotional phone call to Twohey in which she informs her of Chiu's husband's ignorance of her settlement and victimization by Weinstein. She also expresses doubt about her upcoming trip to London to interview Zelda Perkins based on this experience. The scene

is designed to make the audience empathize with Kantor's doubts and psychological distress as a result of her confrontation with Cheung. The shot contains a close-up of Kantor, who is framed by the car's door (See Appendix, Fig 24). This framing closes off the space and thus emphasizes her feeling of entrapment as she reveals to Twohey that she feels like she is "staring at an actual brick wall" (Schrader 2022, 00:55:31-00:56:35). While it is successful at connecting the audience to Kantor on an emotional level, the scene confirms the journalists' somewhat distorted priorities as the focus is on the fact that they might have reached a possible dead end in the investigation instead of on the fact that Kantor, a stranger, had just revealed to Chiu's husband a personal, hurtful and traumatic memory which should have been hers to share.

Much like it was the case in real life, Chiu's story is first partially hinted at through the exploration of Zelda Perkins' perspective. In *She Said*, the former assistant recalls how "the following morning, [Chiu] came to [her], and she was sobbing… she was hysterical. And [she/Perkins] held her" (Schader 2022, 01:01:10-01:01:23). As Perkins describes the events of the day that follows the assault, the camera switches from a medium close up of her face to a flashback recreating the interaction between the then two young female assistants (See Appendix, Fig 25). Like it is the case with young Madden's opening scenes, this fictional addition has been made to visually represent the devastating consequences of Weinstein's sexual harassment and assault on his survivors. In addition to that, it highlights how such traumatic experiences can deepen the sisterhood bond between women through the act of one telling her story and the other empathizing with her. In reality, Kantor and Twohey do not describe in their book any occurrence of such an affectionate embrace. The book only mentions Perkins' emotional response to Chiu's confession and that the day of their lunch meeting, she refused to tell Kantor more about what happened that night, explaining that "those [details] were for Chiu to describe or keep private" (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 63). While capturing a moment of care, empathy, and sisterhood on screen adds power to Perkins' testimony and gives a new emotional depth to the reasonings behind her brave breach of NDA, Perkins' real-life interaction with Kantor equally highlights her care for Chiu. Perkins could have easily shared details of Chiu's Me Too story with the journalist, yet she chose to protect her friend's right to speak out in her own time and for herself, preserving Chiu's agency and power over her own story. In reality, Kantor and Perkins' meeting focused primarily on the documents that the British activist provided to the journalists, giving them a concrete basis for their claims and on the way in which NDAs and financial settlements are weaponized to keep

predators out of trouble. The rest of Perkins' character's conversation seems to be inspired by her 2017 interview with BBC News, in which she describes her experiences with lawyers in detail and how the system protected Weinstein. In said interview, Perkins explains that

> it sounds odd, but for me, this was really where my trauma started and my abuse started. I could deal with Harvey. He was an unpleasant, difficult man, but I had ways of dealing with him. What I couldn't deal with, what I had no equipment for was to deal with the legal system. […] There was no recourse, it seemed, and that was really shocking and very frightening to discover that the law couldn't help me. In hindsight, it wasn't as simple as that. My lawyers were giving me the advice they thought was best, however, and I think probably if we had gone to the police I don't know what would have happened in truth. […] and at 23, when your own advice, you know, the advice from your own legal team is "be quiet, you will get dragged backwards, forwards, and sideways through the courts. As will your family, as will your friends as well as anybody who knows anything about you. You haven't got a chance. You will be destroyed." It's quite difficult to know where to turn. (Perkins 2017, 9:05-10:38)

Despite Perkins' overwhelmingly negative feelings towards the movie, Morton's performance provides a powerful account of Perkins' painful and disappointing experience as she sought justice and safety for her colleague and Weinstein's future female employees for many years.

In the film, Perkins explains to Kantor that Chiu and herself "demanded that HR would put in a system to protect the women and staff. And it felt like if we could achieve all of those [conditions], then that's what our silence was paying for, that we were paying for him to stop. So we signed, and they had their own insane conditions for us" (Schrader 2022, 01:03:40-01:04:02). What this part of the conversation explores is the way in which Weinstein's lawyers and Miramax manipulated the young women into signing a settlement in exchange for a drastic change within the company's inner workings as well as the powerful executive's behavior. By signing the agreement, Chiu and Perkins were under the impression of having secured the safety of other women who would come into contact with the producer. In truth, the agreement stripped both women of their voices, even preventing them from ever discussing the matter between themselves (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 67). The powerful scene is heightened by the heaviness of the cello playing in the background. While handing Kantor a copy of the few documents regarding the settlement Perkins herself was able to obtain from her legal team—she was never allowed to keep a copy of the agreement itself—, she ends the conversation with, "Jodi, this is bigger than

Weinstein. This is about the system protecting abusers. I want you to take these and I want you to use them" (Schrader 2022, 01:05:59-01:06:16). Despite Perkins' disappointment at the movie's limited exploration of the systematic protection of abusers and use of NDAs as a shield for them, her participation to this scene's refinement allows the plot's turning point to deepen the tension, heightening the stakes for the publication of Kantor and Twohey's article. To the journalists' sources, breaking their silence and NDAs to help with the investigation could have had devastating legal, financial, and professional consequences. With the addition of Perkins' battle to obtain pieces of her own NDA to the script, the filmmakers hint at one of the many reasons that would lead women to, to some extent, self-impose their own silence. Morton, who knew Perkins prior to playing her in *She Said*, explains how "captur[ing] [Perkins'] essence" while "mak[ing] [the character] [her] own" (Morton qtd. in Miller 2023) was important to her. From the actress' perspective, recreating Perkins' comes second to capturing the British woman's determination, courage, and engagement toward protecting others. The film's launch was also a great opportunity for Perkins to shine a light on her campaign called *Can't Buy My Silence*, which aims to "end the misuse of NDAs to buy victim's silence" (Can't Buy My Silence), four to five years following the initial momentum it had gained as a result of the virality of #MeToo. In that sense, to some extent, *She Said*'s release has had a positive impact on some of the more active and engaged survivors due to the fact that it provided them with another opportunity to use their voices to promote systematic and judicial changes. In both the book and the movie, much later into the investigation, Chiu calls Kantor herself and tells the journalist what happened that night off the record, also breaking her NDA (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 63-64). In that sense, the movie successfully captures the many layers of silencing that survivors have to face in order to speak out, as well as the difficulty and courage it takes to do so.

Laura Madden's story, whom Jennifer Ehle plays, can also be considered a turning point for the film's plot as well as the reporters' real investigation. While her Me Too story comes later than other survivors', Madden, along with Judd, was amongst the first women to accept to be named for the article. Both women's stories consequently gave other women the strength and power to subsequently speak out against Weinstein's abuse. In addition to being one of the *Times*' most important sources, Madden was facing a divorce as well as breast cancer (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 74), making her willingness to speak out publicly through the article even more powerful. The movie's portrayal of Madden mirrors the journalists' account of the events that led to her

decision to go on the record perfectly. As mentioned above, the survivor had found *She Said* challenging to watch because of the fact that it accurately replicates her "own words" (Madden qtd. in Sperling). In an interview with the *Irish Times*, she confirms Kantor and Twohey's retelling of the reasons that pushed her to speak out: 1. the phone calls received from former colleague Pamela Lubell (Kantor and Twohey, 74; O'Connell 2020), and 2. her responsibility towards others, including her daughters and survivors who cannot speak due to having signed non-disclosure agreements (Kantor and Twohey, 74; O'Connell 2020). In the movie, Madden only interacts once with Lubell in a singular phone call that includes different phrases such as "cockroach journalists," "it was great,… back then?" or "If you have a project, I can take it to Harvey" (Schrader 2022, 01:09:11-01:09:44) which have been reported to Kantor to have been used by Lubell. In reality, the exchanges between the two former colleagues happened over several messages and phone calls. Madden describes to the *Irish times* that "[Lubell] kept ringing me back with different carrots. Do you have any scripts you want to bring to Harvey? We hear you're going through a divorce; can we help? I know you've had breast cancer; is there anything you need" (O'Connell 2020) before questioning whether Madden had already spoken to the "cockroach journalists sniffing around for stories" (O'Connell 2020). This attempt at intimidating and silencing her was the mother of four's breaking point as she told to herself "if somebody rings [her], [she is] going to talk" (O'Connell 2020).

Kantor and Madden's beachside conversation is also narrated in the journalists' book, making the movie scene a direct adaptation of it. While she tells Kantor the details of her sexual assault by Weinstein, Schrader cuts to re-creational shots of elements alluding to what transpired in the executive's hotel suite. The images range from champaign and barely eaten sandwiches (See Appendix, Fig 26) and Madden's purse on a table (See Appendix, Fig 27) to more direct allusions to the sexual assault, such as his bathrobe on the bed (See Appendix, Fig 28), her clothes and underwear laying on the floor (See Appendix, Fig 29), and a longer shot of the shower in which the water can be heard and seen streaming down (See Appendix, Fig 30). This goes back to Schrader's desire to tell survivors' stories without recreating any of the sexual harassment or abuse on screen (Sperling 2022). Instead of doing so, the director gives her audience visuals of the context in which the abuse happened rather than visuals of what actually transpired. This allows Jennifer Ehle's voice, as she narrates Madden's story, to be pushed to the forefront while placing the audience in the space in which the abuse happened. Madden's call to Kantor to go on the record

comes much later in the movie and marks another turning point for the plot as her decision heightens the article's credibility and, therefore, publishability.

Moreover, it highlights the survivor's bravery in the face of abuse but also sickness. In this emotionally charged scene, Madden calls from the hospital right before her second mastectomy, saying, "look, I never signed any contract. I'm not gagged, and I want to speak out on behalf of women who can't. I have three daughters, and I don't want them to ever accept abuse or bullying as normal. You can use anything I've said. I'll do it. I'll go on the record" (Shrader 2022, 01:57:21-01:57:48). The camera cuts to the journalists' relief as the phone call ends, then cuts back to Madden crying as a nurse takes her to the operating room. Madden's reaction to going on the record is not mentioned in the book; however, Lenkiewicz's script describes the way in which "Laura looks up, weeps silently.. Emotion not sadness.. and some worry has gone.. She looks released.. Younger" (Lenkiewicz 2021, 142). The filmmakers' addition of Madden's tears of relief on her way to a full mastectomy highlights the mix of emotions that must be felt as a result of having to face such life-altering events, both psychologically and physically, all at once, emphasizing Madden's remarkable strength. Following the hospital scene, young Madden in seen walking on the beach with an unknown young woman, both laughing as the sunlight gives the shot a bright and hopeful atmosphere (See Appendix, Fig 31). Next, a young Perkins emerges from a taxi, holding two bags and a backpack and looking around before marching forward, determined (See Appendix, Fig 32). Lastly, the audience is shown the aftermath of what can be assumed to be young Rowena Chiu's suicide attempt. She is lying on her bed in Hong Kong in a fetal position, surrounded by bottles of pills and liqueur. However, she gets up despite the pain and looks out the window, her face bathed in sunlight (See Appendix, Fig 33). With the symbolic addition of said flashbacks into this part of the movie, Schrader shows her audience a moment in which the three women take back their power by not letting their experiences with Weinstein take over their lives. Its placement right after Madden's decision to be cited as part of the article allows the different shots to mirror the same sentiment: hope for a brighter future. Here, the fictionalization of real-life-narratives serves the purpose of deepening the audience's emotional connection to the survivors and the empathy they feel toward them. Following her early viewing of *She Said*, Madden describes how "in a film, it's very defining because in a book, people are left to their own imaginations. It's probably a testament to how good Jennifer is, but it upsets me" (Madden qtd. in Sperling 2022). Here, Madden highlights film's capacity to capture a moment in time in a vivid

manner since, according to the survivor, it is one thing to read about her story and another to see it acted out before her own eyes. This is a testament to film's power in re-creational eyewitnessing the past. Since then, her daughters have helped her reconcile with her filmic representation just like they had pushed her to go on the record. She recalls thinking that "it's so funny because it's so clear to them. It's wrong. You stand up and you be counted, and you don't allow yourself to be bullied. And it has really brought me much closer to them" (Madden qtd. in Sperling 2022). As such, while being part of *She Said*'s making and watching it for the first time was difficult, despite the pain it caused, it allowed her to confront a part of herself that she continued to partially silence for years after Kantor and Twohey's story broke. Much like Perkins, Madden's story also partially highlights the harmful effects of NDAs as one of the main reasons behind her willingness to be one of the few named sources for the article is the fact that so many other women have been silenced by said agreements. In that sense, while, as pointed out by Allred, settlements and non-disclosure agreements can be valuable in specific situations (Allred 2019), more often than not, they are weaponized against survivors. Had all of Weinstein's survivors reached a settlement with the predatory executive and his team, Kantor, Twohey, or even Farrow's work may never have been deemed publishable based on a lack of testimonies. As Perkins rightfully points out,

> I understand that non-disclosure agreements have a place in society and for both sides. But it's really important that legislation is changed around how these agreements are regulated. You cannot have a legal document that protects a criminal. This isn't someone selling you a dodgy car. And, in fact, now the states of California, New Jersey, and New York are changing legislation so that you can no longer hide sexual assault or abuse in a non-disclosure agreement. I want that to happen here [The UK], it has to happen here […] The law needs to be changed. You can't change the Harvey Weinsteins of the world. There are always going to be people who follow the darker side of their character, but if the rules and the laws that we have to protect ourselves enable that, then there's no point in having them. (Perkins 2017, 18:28-19:40)

As this quote suggests, non-disclosure agreements are not at the heart of the problem; what should be problematized and resolved is powerful people's ability to use them to cover their criminal acts.

Since the article's publication, Madden has spoken publicly about her experience working for Weinstein a few times (O'Connell 2020; Cornish 2018; Madden 2019) but has also intentionally remained mostly hidden from the public eye. Much of the criticism surrounding

#MeToo and viral cases such as Weinstein is linked to the fact that survivors are often discredited based on the hypothesis that their testimonies are nothing more than an attempt to gain fame. For instance, McGowan recalls being told by a lawyer who specialized in sexual harassment and assault cases that "[she is] an actress, [she has] done a sex scene, [she is] done" (McGowan qtd. in Dominus 2017). Madden's lack of presence or interest in being involved with the film industry disproves this assumption on the Me Too movement as she was part of the women who first broke the story and brought Weinstein's predatory actions to light. It is true that #MeToo had its fair share of valid contestation over its politics of visibility for its lack of representation of marginalized voices—especially since the hashtag has been popularized by privileged actresses who already had large platforms—, however, it is important to prevent such shortcomings from affecting what should remain at the center of the movement: denouncing the systems that protect abusers and silence victims. Whether survivors are famous and successful should not put into question the necessity of having their voices heard. As pointed out by Kantor in the movie itself, while actresses do have a voice, "they could also fear being punished by the film industry for using it" (Schrader 2022, 00:26:51-00:26:55). *She Said*'s strength lies in the fact that, much like the *Times* article, it allocates time to both actresses and women who have always lived away from the limelight before the journalists publicized their stories. In *She Said*, instead of competing in terms of importance, all survivors' testimonies, from McGowan and Paltrow to Perkins, Chiu, and Madden, build on one another, echo each other, and amplify other women's voices. Regrettably, the movie does not utilize Madden's testimony to its full potential, as it could have opened the door to a deeper discussion of the isolating force of sexual assault and harassment. The book points out that, as

> [Kantor] and Madden talked, Jodi did not mention the lunch with Perkins the day before, nor had she mentioned Madden to Perkins. She couldn't: The conversations were confidential. Though the two women had worked alongside one another in the London office, they had never shared their painful stories with each other. Both were isolated; no one could see the whole picture. (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 73)

Madden's character does, however, confess to Kantor that she had assumed that other women whom Weinstein propositioned would have said no, her shame and guilt surrounding her assault, therefore, silencing and preventing her from sharing her experience with anyone (Schrader 2022, 01:14:51-01:15:52). This part of the scene discusses the side-effects of self-imposed silencing and

isolation, however, what is glossed over is the journalists' other rationale for keeping the survivors from connecting to one another outside of confidentiality. Following the quote cited above, Kantor and Twohey continue by saying

> it was tempting to daydream about bringing all of the alleged Weinstein victims together somehow, to show them that they had each been part of something larger. But that would be perilous, even with their permission, for the reporters as well as the women. One source could not know who the others were. Anxiety was contagious, the reporters knew. One woman could talk the rest out of participating. One leak could compromise everything. (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 73-74)

This quote eludes once again to the fact that survivors' well-being may not have been the *Times*' priority. Despite the fact that, from the journalists' perspective, it is logical to want to preserve their story from being compromised, as seen through Perkins and Chiu's story and as emphasized by the two journalists themselves, there is power in unity and in numbers. Still, it is impossible to determine whether creating connections between survivors would have affected the story and case against Weinstein negatively. Whether Kantor and Twohey were right or wrong in isolating their sources remains speculative.

Nevertheless, the *Times*' strict and sometimes apathetic approach to some of the survivors' stories does not take away from the reporters' impactful exposure of Weinstein's many settlements and weaponization of NDAs as a silencing tool to impose his power. Though rushing stories to be the first paper to break the news is a recurrent issue with the *Times*' reporting, this point was only briefly alluded to in the movie and, in the context of Kantor and Twohey's article, was justified by the possibility of Farrow's work being published before theirs. Ronan Farrow, the journalist who shares Kantor and Twohey's Pulitzer prize for their respective articles on Weinstein (Pulitzer Prizes 2018), is first mentioned in the film's diner scene. In it, Kantor walks into the diner with Twohey and Corbett looking at her phone (See Appendix, Fig 22). The following dialogue ensues:

> **KANTOR:** Oh my god!
> **TWOHEY:** What?
> **KANTOR:** Ronan Farrow is working on an H.W. Piece for *The New Yorker*.
> **CORBETT:** What? Since when?
> **TWOHEY:** Fuck.

> **KANTOR:** She doesn't say, but apparently, he's spoken to a lot of actresses already.
> […]
> **CORBETT:** It's pressure we can do without, but we just keep going, and we continue to be thorough. (Schrader 2022, 00:47:37-00:48:03)

The scene then escalates as Twohey is approached by a man trying to get her attention before making sexual comments directed towards her. Twohey is portrayed angrily screaming at the men, however, taking a look at Lenkiewicz's published script contextualizes said anger as a byproduct of not only the two men's inappropriate behaviors but also learning about Farrow's investigation. The script describes the scenes as "Megan stands, angry about Ronan Farrow and these cretins" (Lenkiewicz 2021, 70). In reality, Twohey and Kantor's reaction to Farrow's work is positive, according to their retelling of their journey in their co-authored book. Farrow is referred to seven times in different parts of the book, all of which vehiculate neutral to positive sentiments towards the journalist.

Their book also describes the journalists' discovery of his investigation and how

> [t]hey wanted to lay down a marker because, in recent days, Jodi and Megan had begun to hear footsteps from Ronan Farrow, who was contacting their sources and had apparently taken his findings to the New Yorker. The Times team had little sense of his material or how close he was to publication. Jodi, Megan, and Corbett shared the desire to break the story, but they also knew the material better than Baquet and Purdy. They believed the first article had to be broader and capture the power of what they had heard and documented. (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 139)

This quote confirms the presence of a pressure to break the story before the *New Yorker*. This pressure could affect any journalist's accuracy and precision in their journalistic coverage of an event. While in the movie, Corbett emphasizes the need to remain thorough in their investigation in spite of the existence of Farrow's article. The latter is mentioned four more times in the movie: twice by editor-in-chief Dean Baquet asking his team for an update on the *New Yorker* article's publishing status and another time by Twohey in a conversation with Lanny Davis, Weinstein's representative, and one final time by Kantor in relation to her objection to hastily publishing due to the possibility of Farrow's article going live first. It is interesting to consider the fact that in their book, Kantor and Twohey do not mention Farrow in the chapter which inspired the scene

where Kantor mentions the competing newspaper. Instead, the tension comes from the number of women willing to go on the record, the amount of time the team should allocate for Weinstein to respond before going forward with the publication of their historical article, and the possible repercussions on the survivors (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 140-159). This dramatization and amplification of the competition between *Times* reports and Farrow, along with the pressure caused by said race to publish takes *She Said*'s focus away from the psychological weight and turmoil experienced and described by the two female reports in the wake of their work's publishing. In actuality, the two women describe Farrow's work as a "powerful, detailed account of Weinstein's offenses" (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 179), mainly expressing concern for the survivors' safety following the *Times* informing Weinstein about the upcoming publication rather than the potential threat resulting from the *New Yorker*'s imminent release of their own take on the media mogul's predatory behavior. As such, this inclusion takes away from what was really at stake in Kantor and Twohey's investigation, breaking the silence imposed and maintained by Weinstein for decades, exposing the system that allowed him to do so, and getting as many of their sources to publicly speak out while causing them as little harm as possible (Kantor and Twohey 2020, 140-159).

It is safe to say that, based on this analysis, despite *She Said* being an adaptation of Kantor and Twohey's non-fiction book on their investigation of Weinstein's sexual abuse, it remains heavily fictionalized. This fictionalization, however, constitutes both a strength and a weakness. At times, the film's fictionality is used to gloss over problematic aspects of certain people or institutions as shown through the filmmakers' lack of criticism of the *Times*' morally questionable decision to leak O'Connor's memo. As the real Zelda Perkins advocates for, change needs to happen in every aspect of society and smoothing over the problematic behaviors that transpire inside an institution as prominent and powerful as the *New York Times* in order to preserve a polished, female-empowering image of the movie's spatial context negates the Me Too movement's overarching goal: to uncover and call out abuse in all fields and under all its forms. Additionally, at times, dramatization overshadows the central issues that survivors would like viewers to focus on, as was originally the case with Perkins' storyline before her involvement. While the film does not re-victimize the women that led to the existence of the *Times*'s breaking story or attempt to recreate any scenes involving explicit sexual, physical, or psychological abuse towards them, it does, however, include detailed accounts of the testimonies. Moreover, it also heavily involved survivors in the process of filmmaking, going as far as having multiple real

women act as themselves (Judd), make cameos as other characters (Sarah Ann Masse and Katherine Kendall) or have their voices included in the movie (O'Connor and Gwyneth Paltrow).

The retelling of Me Too narratives and testimonies through the medium of film allows them to reach a deeper level of realism which can be painful to watch for survivors but also more emotionally compelling for the film's audience. Despite Schrader, Lenkiewicz, and Gardner's sincere intentions, watching your story unfold adds to the traumatic experience, and having someone else act as yourself can be quite disturbing for some survivors. Nevertheless, the film does try its best to take an oppositional approach to the representation of Me Too narratives and survivors by highlighting the journalists' journey and the stories they uncover rather than the abuse or abuser. Similarly to *The Assistant*, *She Said* ultimately attempts to give survivors a voice while limiting their re-victimizing on screen. Where the two female-directed movies differ is that *She Said* attempts to provide its audience with a satisfying ending. The journalists obtain some of the survivors' consent in an emotion-filled turn of events and are finally able to finalize the article after having received Weinstein's statement (Schrader 2022, 01:59:50-02:01:54). They are seen going over the article for the last time before clicking on the 'publish' button, altering the course of history and the lives of both Weinstein and the survivors alike (See Appendix, Fig 34). After the loud clicking sound, the scene cuts to a black screen which is followed by a textual summary of the events that arose from the publication of the article. The first text reads, "[i]n the following month, 82 women accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault" (Schrader 2022, 02:01:54-02:02:03). As it fades into the dark background, the words "SHE SAID", "ELLA DIJO", "DIT-ELLE", "LEI DISSE" and "HUN SAGDE" start to crowd the background. The text continues its exposition, adding that

> Kantor and Twohey's work helped ignite a worldwide movement against sexual misconduct. The number of women across the globe who stepped forward and shared their own stories publicly, many for the first time, is impossible to count. In February 2020, Harvey Weinstein was convicted of rape and sexual assault in New York. He is serving a 23-year sentence. He faces additional charges in Los Angeles and London. (Schrader 2022, 02:02:05-02:02:38)

Including the aftermath of the article in written form feeds into the codes of documentary film since epilogues are often used to provide the audience with additional factual information as well as closure. From the text cited above, one could assume that the story ends with Weinstein's

conviction to 23 years in prison, however, the reality is different. As mentioned in the first chapter of this doctoral thesis, Weinstein's New York verdict has recently been overturned, making the film's ending historically inaccurate. This shines light on another weakness of re-creational eyewitnessing the past through film, especially when it comes to the representation of recent stories that involve living people: history evolves and is constantly being made. Nonetheless, this fact only partially discredits the use of the medium for re-creational eyewitnessing since, despite Weinstein's successful appeal to the New York court, the other information provided by the movie and stories represented remain truthful. In the same way that the recent ruling does not nullify the value of the previous court documents (historical archives) exposing the producer's abuse and his sentencing in 2020, the film's importance as a site for re-creational eyewitnessing does not diminish with its outdated 'where are they now' epilogue. This only highlights the necessity of exploring the historical context of people, events, and, in this case, films from a microhistorical perspective. Like Peter Burke's images, *She Said*, therefore, acts as a time capsule that captures a specific moment in time and attitude towards Me Too narratives and survivors. It attests to a conscious effort from the filmmakers to change the way in which Me Too narratives are represented in film but also in real life, which, in itself, is valuable. This effort to pull Me Too stories out of the margins makes Schrader's movie a re-creational eyewitness to the Me Too movement. It establishes the film as a work of activist cinema that aims to share its female gaze with its audience. As of 2024, there is still much change that remains to be implemented in relation to sexual abuse and harassment. However, progress has been made both in Hollywood and outside of it. By giving the stories that ignited the Me Too movement another chance at being at the center, despite its flaws, *She Said* thus gives the movement another opportunity to be visible, reigniting survivors of sexual misconduct's fight for change.

4. Analyzing Me Too In a Selection of Contemporary American Dramas

4.1. Trapped in a Culture of Silence: Quiet Violence in *The Assistant* (2019)

The Assistant is a 2019 workplace drama written, directed, produced, and edited by Australian filmmaker Kitty Green. Contrary to how *Bombshell*'s poster is composed to reflect both its title word's meanings, *The Assistant* visually alludes to its main topic: the entertainment industry as seen from an assistant's perspective. In it, the leading actress Julia Garner, who plays Jane, can be seen looking through a pile of papers (which can be assumed to either be paperwork or a film's script) while multiple women's blurred modeling face shots can be seen in the background (See Appendix, Fig 8). This sets the tone for the kind of perspectives that will be explored through this filmic representation: one in which, much like the women's faces behind Garner's character, the signs of sexual violence can be glimpsed at but remain part of the background. The movie covers the events of a single day in the life of an executive producer's assistant, who is assumed but never confirmed to be Harvey Weinstein. As a result of Kitty Green's involvement in every aspect of the filmmaking process, the main character's story does not only reflect the testimonies and events documented on Weinstein and other figures of the Me Too movement but also her own experiences as a woman working in the film industry. Green takes her audience through an eventful, long day working at a big movie production company inspired by the daily routine of many female employees who described their experiences working in a normative environment to the filmmaker. This section will explore Green's representation of Me Too stories from the point of view of the employees who were around when abuses of power took place but were oppressed into silence. The writer's subversive change of point of view allows this thesis to explore the depiction of power from a different angle, as well as how powerful figures create and maintain the culture of silence around them. Additionally, the section also deals with gendered labor and the complexity of Jane's debatable position as part of the machinery that keeps abusers in power, as well as the way in which telling a more abstract version of the employee's story enables *The Assistant* to thrive as a space for re-creational eyewitnessing. The following section expands upon a case study of the film conducted and published as part of an article written for *AMERICANA E-journal of American Studies in Hungary* (Berraf 2022a) and *New Horizons in English and American Studies: Papers from the Doctoral Program* (Berraf 2024). Paragraphs

containing excerpts of the aforementioned publication end with the appropriate in-text citation, namely (Berraf 2022a), and (Berraf 2024).

4.1.1. The Invisible Presence of Power

Although the movie follows the assistant through an entire day, her voice remains nearly unheard as dialogue is kept to a minimum. Green's documentary-like style turns *The Assistant*'s audience into a fly on the wall, simply observing Jane as she completes her daily, repetitive tasks. This lack of reliance on dialogue and emphasis on surrounding sounds comes to oppose patriarchal culture's "heavier investment in seeing than in hearing" (Irigaray qtd. in Stam 2000, 218; Stam qtd. in Berraf 2022a) by making the abuse heard instead of seen. Here, hearing represents the main door through which the audience is let in on what happens behind closed doors. Lack of hearing, or in other words, the absence of Jane's voice, also emphasizes every other sound, including those made by Jane's environment and coming from the executive's office. Green chooses to redirect the attention to the soundtrack that sets the pace of her main character's life: city sounds, office noises, and muffled voices. By doing so, she efficiently turns a regular office into an uncanny environment, which, through its loudness, contrasts with Jane's lack of vocal presence. As the sonic sharpness of every scene engulfs the young assistant, her lack of verbal communication reflects two different sides to silence: oppression and compliance. In an interview with film critic Simran Hans, Green explains that her original project, which was initiated before the testimonies on Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuse came to light and the emergence of #MeToo, had started off being about sexual misconduct within American college campuses (Green 2020a, 4:25-4:45; Green qtd. in Berraf 2022a). Before discussing the cinematographic composition of *The Assistant*, it is helpful to note that, before her narrative debut with this 2019 Me Too film, Green had worked on several documentaries (IMDb "Kitty Green"; IMDb qtd. in Berraf 2022a) which may explain her oppositional, feminist and documentary-like take on the representation of Me Too stories (Berraf 2022a).

The movie begins with a wide shot of a black car waiting for Jane in front of her home. In this scene, the camera is placed on the other side of the road, observing the protagonist as she quietly enters the car in what seems to be the middle of the night (See Appendix, Fig 9). This draws attention to a variety of environmental noises ranging from the car's engine to distant honking and

other street sounds, bringing them into the auditory foreground. The scene cuts to a medium close-up shot of the young woman falling asleep in the backseat with the radio on in the background. Green transports her audience through New York City by alternating between shots of Jane looking out the window and point-of-view camera angles following her eyes as she observes the skyscrapers. Here, the cinematography highlights the city's infrastructures as seen from the perspective of the main character to mirror a feeling of smallness in contrast to the tall buildings and vastness of the city. As such, this introductory sequence in which Jane travels to the film's main location, the headquarters in which she works, conveys a deep feeling of smallness based on the sheer magnitude of everything surrounding her, from the colossal buildings to the powerful executive she works for.

In her interview with Hans, Green summarizes her movie as being about "the youngest woman on the desk of a predatory film executive" (Green 2020a, 3:10-3:15), stressing the impact of holding an entry-level position on one's ability to have a voice. She explains how her own experience working as an assistant within the film industry shapes some of Jane's behaviors and responses.

> I was an assistant at a post-production facility for a bunch of images so I had my time being an assistant and feeling uncomfortable even opening my mouth and suggesting anything because I knew that people would often not want to hear my opinion and just like, the awkwardness of that time… It wasn't as toxic as the kind of environment depicted in the movie but […] the film industry is inherently sexist and there are a lot of misogynist comments and behavior. So it's not that far from my experience, that's for sure. (Green 2020a, 6:31-7:18)

In *Bombshell* (2019), which came out the same year, Ailes' assistant is implied to have been enabling the powerful executive for an extended amount of time. Green chooses to have her character be a young, impressionable woman who recently entered the industry. By making Jane young and inexperienced, the director can explore some of the reasons why and how someone working in such a toxic environment could be molded into an accomplice. This explains the reasoning behind her choice to have the film start outside of the office, despite the main topic being Jane's working environment. Here, workplace pressure and normative masculinity are understood to invade Jane's private life; thus, it is negatively transformative. This visual entrapment of Jane is recurrently captured through Green's use of various doors to frame her, conveying the

claustrophobic nature of the young woman's environment. The repetitive use of such shots (See Appendix, Fig 10) reflects the confinement of her life to the professional sphere: she is constricted to a specific place both on a hierarchical and spatial level. There is, therefore, no delimitation between the personal and the professional, as the latter dictates her every move from the moment she wakes up before dawn to when she comes back home late in the evening. Green also uses this framing technique to suggest isolation from the rest of the people in the office, a sentiment that contributes to the main character's silencing.

The power over others held by Jane's employer is therefore not felt through physical domination since he is never seen, but partly through his assistant's visual and physical isolation from others outside of her work duties. Making the executive nameless, on top of being faceless, also reinforces the violence of his shadowy presence. As Foucault describes it, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 1978, 93). As such, while his presence inside the building visibly increases the psychological tension on his employees, his power is felt even in his absence. For instance, the mental toll of the power exercised over Jane is often most apparent when she is alone, precisely while performing mundane tasks such as cleaning the executive's desk or stocking his fridge with water (Green 2019, 00:05:36-00:06:26). By doing so, she is catering to his every need and thus avoiding verbal violence. Power is, therefore, partially maintained by the anticipation of the repercussions that come with angering the power-holder. Keeping the perpetrator both nameless and faceless was also a deliberate choice by the director to ensure that her movie is "sensitive and delicate […], relatable to anyone who works in a job like that, [and] transferable to any industry" (Green 2020b, 18:03-18:26). As such, keeping the executive's anonymity was not done to preserve his identity but to reinforce the pervasive nature of power, making the film's story a more universal receptacle for the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too narratives. This makes the perpetrator in *The Assistant* hold a type of power similar to the guards in Bentham's Panopticon. Foucault describes this surveillance system as one that aims

> to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. (Foucault 1977 *Discipline and Punish*, 201)

Green acknowledges that despite Jane's story being applicable to fields beyond the film industry, the employer may be heavily inspired by or modeled after Harvey Weinstein (Green 2020a; Green 2020d), which explains her depiction of power as panoptical.

It is the reflection of the lived experiences of the many individuals who have been sidelined by a normative system that works against everyone other than the main person who holds hierarchical power over others. As mentioned in Ronan Farrow's article on Weinstein for the *New Yorker*, the Weinstein Company was described by many former employees as a toxic work environment because "everything funnelled back to Harvey" (Farrow 2017). Similarly to Weinstein, the nameless executive is certainly made powerful by his status within the company's hierarchy, yet what makes his power pervasive is the panoptical system he has built around himself in which every employee, to some extent, monitors themselves and others. This idea is especially highlighted in the movie when Jane comes back to the office after meeting with the Human Resources department. Both her colleagues and the executive were already informed of her attempt to file a report before she even got to her workplace. This implies to the young girl that not only is her every move known about by her employer, but everyone at the company will know of any attempts she ever makes at subverting his authority. Furthermore, normative masculinity often targets women more than lesser masculinities (Hammer 2023, 2-3); therefore, the effects and pervasiveness of power are exacerbated by Jane's gender. In that sense, while her male colleagues' actions are also monitored and harshly assessed, her gender makes her more susceptible to the employer's domination. With this movie, Green consequently highlights that each individual plays a role, even if indirectly, in maintaining the structures of power that silence them.

4.1.2. Speaking Out in a Silencing Environment

Green's wide, door-framed shots position members of the audience outside of the room in which Jane is located, giving such scenes a voyeuristic (Mulvey 1999) dimension. This allows Green to convey the uncanniness of these seemingly regular everyday tasks, such as cleaning a couch or bringing out a fresh bottle of water from the fridge (See Appendix, Fig 10), into concerning events. Jane's position as the executive's female assistant demands that she performs tasks traditionally associated with femininity. As such, instead of being in charge of organizing the older man's agenda and meetings as expected of her male colleagues, she is given more mundane,

traditional female roles and tasks. In this male-dominated environment, Jane is thus expected to fill somewhat of a domestic role for the people around her since her gender reinforces others' perceptions of her as a caregiver. In an early one-shot scene in which the camera is once again left outside of the executive's office, Jane's coworkers can be seen—and most importantly heard—working on their computers and organizing a meeting (Green 2019, 00:22:49-00:23:32). In the meantime, sounds heard from afar take over the narration. Very quickly, the audience is entangled in a routine that, at first glance, appears to be normal, but soon, as a result of the environmental sounds mentioned above being ever so slightly sonically amplified, becomes unsettling and unnatural. Julia Garner explains that the filmmaker "wanted a quiet film because the subject is so loud" (Garner 2021, 4:06-4:11; Garner qtd. in Berraf 2022a). Shifting the auditory focus from Jane's voice to the myriad of sounds found within a busy office when she is quietly completing her tasks highlights the character's lack of vocal agency. This inability or unwillingness to speak outside of the confines of the tasks allocated to her translates into a lack of confidence, which will aid in her being silenced by the HR department. Ironically, Jane's visit to the human resources department is the only scene in the movie that includes more than a few sentences of dialogue (Berraf 2022a).

The twelve-minute-long scene depicts the protagonist nervously entering the room after walking from her office to the building where the Human Resources department is located. In this scene, the assistant is shown to be unable to articulate her thoughts properly, stuttering at times and having difficulty finding the right words to argue against the HR department's minimization of her complaint. This difficulty in expressing her thoughts could be interpreted as a result of a fear of the ramifications that would arise as a result of speaking up. Jane, like most people working for a large company, must be aware of the negative consequences that would arise from filing a complaint about a powerful executive, particularly from her position as an assistant. However, from Green's writing of this dialogue scene, which is enhanced by Julia Garner's performance, it is clear that Jane's anxiety is not a reaction to the fear of repercussions since she knowingly asked for a meeting with Human Resources. Her gradual loss of fluid speech could be the result of the discourse held by the HR representative, Wilcock, as well as the self-doubt he implements in her. Essentially, what the character and audience both learn from this rare instance in which the main character verbalizes her thoughts and concerns is that silence is not only imposed on individuals by their hierarchical superiors. Silence, within the film industry or in other fields, is a culture that

perpetrators may cultivate, but, most importantly, it is nurtured by enablers. Concerning this scene, the filmmaker states that "it's a twelve-page scene and the rest of the film has barely any dialogue" because "[she] wanted to make it clear that HR departments are there to protect the company and not the employees" (Green 2020a, 11:40-11:53; Green qtd. in Berraf 2022a). In addition to that, Green explains that the other aim behind the incorporation of dialogue into that specific scene is to provide an example of gaslighting. She reveals to the interviewer the fact that

> so many women spoke about being gaslit by their workplaces or their HR departments into thinking things were okay or kind of leaving that office being more confused as when they walked in or kind of doubting their own reasons for being there. (Green 2020a, 11:54-12:18; Green qtd. in Berraf 2022a)

What can be inferred from this quote is that the driving force behind Green's choice to keep the dialogues to a minimum outside of this HR scene is her desire to turn silence in itself into a statement for how such behaviors are allowed to go on for so long. This approach contrasts *Bombshell*'s emphasis on speech as a way to represent the idea of sexual harassment being an open secret acknowledged and talked about by all of Fox's employees. It is Green's political drive and eagerness to rewrite the narrative surrounding the women who, like the protagonist in this story, are forced to remain silent that makes *The Assistant* a pertinent example of what Claire Johnston describes as "counter-cinema" (Johnston 1999, 36), a concept also referred to as oppositional, feminist cinema. Green's film also illustrates the presence of a female gaze in her depiction of sexual abuse within the workplace on screen. Through her representation of the female main character, Green highlights just how difficult it is to even come to terms with being a witness to sexual violence. Above all, she shows the obstacles that may prevent someone from using their voice to oppose the abuse when perpetrators are systematically shielded by an equally normative, silencing, and harmful network of individuals (Berraf 2022a).

In his article for the *New Yorker*, investigative reporter Ronan Farrow brings to light Emily Nestor's previously undisclosed accusations against Harvey Weinstein. He reports that the young woman was coerced into giving the Weinstein Company's founder her phone number on her first day at the company before being propositioned multiple times (Farrow 2017). The journalist also reveals that Nestor

> had a conversation with company officials about the matter but didn't pursue it further: the officials said that Weinstein would be informed of anything she told them, a practice not uncommon in businesses the size of the Weinstein Company. Several former Weinstein employees told me that the company's human resources department was utterly ineffective; one female executive described it as "a place where you went to when you didn't want anything to get done. That was common knowledge across the board. Because everything funnelled back to Harvey." She described the department's typical response to allegations of misconduct as "This is his company. If you don't like it, you can leave." (Farrow 2017)

Comparing Farrow's report of Nestor's experience at the independent film studio presents the same dismissive attitude portrayed in Green's human resources scene. Comparing the latter to survivors' testimonies uncovers just how common it is to have the courage to speak out only to be gaslit and intimidated into silence. Green states that "there is something so creepy and insidious in the way he's [Wilcock] very calm and rational when he's delivering those lines. […] It's kind of somehow more evil than that. That kind of very reasonable tone he uses" (Green 2020a). As the movie explores a third party's perspective—Jane is never physically present to witness any acts of sexual violence—her complaint is easily dismissed and dismantled by the male representative of the company.

Through Green's complex depiction of Jane's voice being actively suppressed by the very person who is supposed to ensure the safety of the company's employees, two types of enablers emerge. Based on Jane taking the initiative to file a complaint as well as the disappointment and sadness she feels—which is expressed through her facial expression (See Appendix, Fig 11)—as a response to the dismissal of the latter, she represents the passive, reluctant enablers who, despite being morally opposed to their entourage's behaviors, are made to feel helpless. By contrast, the human resources representative appears to be an active and willing participant in the system that safeguards and defends perpetrators. The violence experienced by Jane is psychological as she is questioned and interrupted, her concerns rationalized and dismissed based on insufficient evidence. The head of the HR department uses gaslighting to make Jane "doubt [her] perception" (Bendt 2020, 6). Bendt argues that in addition to making the person being gaslit doubt their "ability to perceive," gaslighting "strip[s] people of their epistemic authority and do not allow them the chance to speak to their own experiences" (Bendt 2020, 6), a repercussion which is highlighted in *The Assistant*. Wilcock rewords Jane's complaint as follows: "Okay let's… Bear with me here. So,

a new assistant arrives from out of town and she's being put up at the Mark [hotel]. And your boss at some point left the office" (Green 2019, 00:51:13-00:51:25). He heavily implies that both events are unrelated while looking at Jane with a concerned look (See Appendix, Fig 12). The young assistant attempts to explain the relation between both events by clarifying that the executive left the office specifically "to meet her at the Mark, yes" (Green 2019, 00:51:25-00:51:26). Despite Jane's effort to clarify the reasons behind her concerns, the HR representative continues to deflect from the concerning signs she observed. This mirrors the attitude found in common gaslighting phrases such as "you're overreacting," "don't get so worked up," and "you're crazy" (Bendt 2020, 6). By interrogating the young woman on whether the information she provides him is serious and concrete enough to base an official complaint on (Green 2019, 00:51:34-00:51:41), the HR representative implies that she is being overly emotional and basing her report on office workers' jokes and harmless actions. Being overly emotional, compliant, and submissive are features often associated with what Connell refers to as emphasized femininity, a cultural construct promoted by both society and the media to ensure women's subordination and complicity in the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 187-188). Here, the HR worker weaponizes Jane's gender by, on the one hand, implying that she adheres to the stereotypes often associated with female anger, using women's common fear of "being labeled as "crazy," "overemotional," or as a "bitch."" (Burn 2019) against the young woman. On the other hand, he accuses her of internalized misogyny and of depreciating the new hire on the basis of her age and lack of previous professional experience. This second kind of gender weaponization is clearly shown through the way in which he once again reframes Jane's concern as coming from a place of judgment and jealousy in the dialogue that follows:

> **WILCOCK**: And you know how many people want to work here? I've got 400 résumés teed up for your position alone. Ivy League grads, 4.0 GPAs. And here you are sitting in my office, stressed out, jealous of some new assistant who's getting more attention than you.
> **JANE**: I'm-I'm not jealous. I-I was just… I was worried for this girl.
> **WILCOCK**: She's a woman. She's a grown woman.
> **JANE**: Sorry! Yes but-
> **WILCOCK**: You think a grown woman cannot make her own choices
> **JANE**: I-I never said that! I-
> **WILCOCK**: Because she's a waitress?
> **JANE**: No, I didn't say that!
> **WILCOCK**: What then? What then? (Green 2019, 00:55:24-00:56:58)

This scene illustrates the powerful impact of successfully undermining one's trust in their own ability to recount their stories; however, it also demonstrates a different form of gaslighting: giving the person being gaslit the illusion of choice. After feigning concern, correcting, and interrupting her, the head of HR's strategy shifts to manipulating Jane into thinking that she has control over the outcome of the conversation. To do so, he uses phrases such as "it's your call" (Green 2019, 00:56:33-00:56:34) or "if that's what you want" (Green 2019, 00:56:35-00:56:37), all the while following them with "I think you know how it would come off" (Green 2019, 00:56:38-00:56:41). By emphasizing on Jane, referred to in this context as "you," as the main subject of his sentences, he effectively gives her the impression that she has power over the outcome of their conversation. Additionally, the last phrase plants the idea that filing the complaint would only lead to negative repercussions on her. He goes on to ask her one more time, "should I file this?" (Green 2019, 00:56:46-00:56:50), showing her his almost empty notebook twice. This reflects a distinctive feature of gaslighting identified by Andrew Spear as the fact that "it is not enough for the gaslighter simply to control his victim or have things go his way: it is essential to him that the victim herself actually come to agree with him" (Spear 2018, 230). Fundamentally, it is clear that the HR representative never had the intention of filing a complaint against the man he was hired to work for, yet while pressuring her into leaning toward his viewpoint, he puts the responsibility of choosing whether or not to file on her. This alleviates him from bearing any consequences for the failure to report the incident since Jane technically voluntarily agreed to drop the complaint. The scene ends with Wilcock telling Jane that he does not think "[she has] anything to worry about" because "[she is] not his [the executive] type" (Green 2019, 00:57:25-00:57:33), which confirms his awareness of the sexual misconduct taking place as well as the executive's representation of the normal exception. It fortifies the idea that, despite the gravity of his actions, within the context of the company, the film executive's behavior is understood by his community as a normal part of his personality.

Retrospectively, it is obvious that the further up the ladder within the company, the more aware they had to be of the severity of the harassment, especially considering the role played by HR and the company's lawyers in silencing survivors' claims. However, as demonstrated by one of Weinstein's former assistant's testimonies, from the point of view of somebody standing at the very bottom of the corporate ladder, it is easy to dismiss the hints one sees as minor incidents. Zelda Perkins describes having held a similar understanding of her predatorial employer as a

flawed yet tolerable individual until having found her colleague “extremely distressed” (Perkins 2017, 5:43-5:47) after he attempted to rape her. Perkins explains how she “did warn people that he has a habit of behaving inappropriately, but that they were safe because [she] had always been safe” (Perkins 2017, 4:49-4:57). While Perkins’ testimony will be referred to more in detail in the fourth section of chapter three, this passage of the testimony corroborates once again how micro-aggressions and behaviors bordering on sexual harassment are often dismissed as tolerable. This feeds into the idea that people considered normal exceptions can often get away with much more than a person who would be viewed as evil, malicious or a criminal. The normal part of their personality, as well as their ability to manipulate others into normalizing their questionable or predatorial behaviors, are what give them so much power over others, thus complicating the process of silencing further. This confirms the effectiveness of Green’s narrative strategy in making her film a powerful re-creational eyewitnessing space for Me Too narratives without depicting a specific story since it reflects and amplify a great number of testimonies against the likes of Weinstein and other Me Too perpetrators.

Green recalls telling a friend of hers about the fact that [she] is

> making a film about an assistant who works for a predator essentially. And he said immediately, “Oh, the enablers,” in this way that made it sound so evil or … as if she’s so insidious. And [she] tried to explain how complex her position is, that she’s got absolutely no power and she’s in this giant machine that’s set up around this predator. (Green 2020, 9:20-9:47)

This explains her emphasis on highlighting not only her main character’s repetitive, tedious, and draining daily tasks but also the potential reasons that would push someone to keep on working for a predator. Green’s characterization also plays a role in painting the type of alternative picture that she wants to draw. For the entire duration of the movie, the main character’s name is never spoken, as she is often addressed in an impersonal manner. It is only when the credits roll at the end of the movie that the audience discovers that the assistant they have been shadowing for approximately eighty-five minutes does have a name: Jane (IMDb “The Assistant: Full Cast and Crew”; IMDb qtd. in Berraf 2022a). This namelessness comes to reflect the toxicity of a system in which one is not deemed to be important enough as an individual to be referred to by name. As

pointed out during her conversation with Wilcock, "[he has] got four-hundred résumés teed up for [her] position alone" (Green 2019, 00:55:30-00:55:36), making Jane replaceable (Berraf 2022a).

It is also interesting to take into consideration the fact that the expression 'Jane Doe' is often used as a placeholder for unidentified women, or as defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary, for "a woman who is a party to legal proceedings and whose true name is unknown or withheld" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary; Merriam-Webster Dictionary qtd. in Berraf 2022a). This definition illustrates both the lack of mention of the name and the screenwriter's choice to keep it undisclosed since it suggests the lack of identity and agency created by the type of toxic work environment in which Jane is trapped. Jane's story simultaneously represents a single woman's day out of the thousands who work in the film industry but also the common experience of every woman who is limited by her powerless position within it. There is an undeniable gender-based difference between the work of a male and female assistant, something that Green highlights by having Jane take on care work as defined by the International Labor Organization (Addati et al. 2018, 6), keeping her from breaking the glass ceiling. In contrast, her male colleagues are given tasks allowing them to grow into bigger positions of responsibilities within the production company. Giving Jane a name associated with identity erasure and withholding it from the audience enables her to transcend her individuality and become representative of a collective gendered experience. Viewers can see themselves in Jane and recognize the commonalities her situation shares with most testimonies of people who have worked under a predatory or toxic supervisor. Similarly, the film executive's namelessness and facelessness also allow the movie to project his patterns of behavior onto anyone, reinforcing the idea that the abuser does not necessarily have to be Harvey Weinstein or Roger Ailes. The abuser can be anyone and anywhere, including someone they know and consider to be a regular, relatively well-liked individual in their own lives (Berraf 2022a).

Even though *The Assistant* is written and shot from Jane's perspective for Green to highlight the reduction of women's labor to domestic and motherly tasks, it also explores how men are affected by such environments. Ricky Camilleri, a famous filmmaker, producer, and host, discusses with Green how the scenes involving Jane's male colleagues also demonstrate the hostility and negative impact of such environments on men. He starts the discussion by agreeing that

> **CAMILLERI**: There's absolutely a gender imbalance within that situation, but I wonder that also I wonder that person, in reality, how many people have done that to him. In his first years at the company when he went up to someone and was like: Did you hear what is happening? Did you see this? And they're like "It's not happening, don't worry about it."
> **GREEN**: You can tell the way that the boys that she works with can be quite mean to her, but you can also see the way they're being abused, and they're being kind of definitely verbally abused, if not physically. There's like a big bang when one of them comes out of the office.
> **CAMILLERI**: He looks like he's been crying or is about to cry. And they're also, in their own way, trying to help her and coax her along in what they think is the best way possible in the ways of behavior that they've learnt probably from the people that were in their positions when they were in her position probably.
> **GREEN**: Those kind of behaviors repeat themselves and it is a cycle. And you find that even she's a little rude to the driver at the end of the movie and we're kind of exploring the way that kind of behavior is perpetuated essentially. (Green and Camilleri in Green 2020b, 7:35-8-35)

This conversation brings out the fact that active enablers are not always innately part of the machinery. They sometimes learn to emulate a set of behaviors from others as a way to survive and advance in an environment that is also hostile to them. Enablers are, therefore, molded by their repeated encountering of normative masculinity and the people who attempt to attain or satisfy it. This is especially interesting to consider as all of the micro-aggressions that affect Jane's male coworkers are equally as suppressed as the sexual use of women for personal pleasure. As pointed out by Green, even Jane, who actively attempts to subvert the system by speaking out, starts to mirror the same verbally abusive behaviors employed by the executive (Green 2020b, 7:35-8-35). This confirms Hammer's theory that, despite women being exponentially more threatened by normative masculinity, the latter's projection of "fears and anxieties" affects both "women and "lesser" masculinities" (Hammer 2023, 2; Hammer qtd. in Berraf 2024). In this context, lesser masculinities are represented by the male workers who aspire to showcase their value to the faceless person who holds power over both their careers and the entirety of the film industry. In that sense, the portrayal of Jane as emotional and impressionable does not come from an attempt to maintain what Mary Ann Doane refers to as the patriarchal codes of representation (Doane 1999; Doane qtd. in Berraf 2022a). It is a tool used to highlight the psychological toll that working within an abusive environment and system can have on an individual regardless of gender, especially if one happens to be a woman (Berraf 2022a; Berraf 2024).

4.1.3. Internalizing the Culture of Silence

In addition to pointing out the perpetual repetitive nature of abuse, Camilleri also focuses on the two scenes in which Jane is asked to write letters of apology by the executive. In both instances, her male colleagues can be seen hovering over her, telling her what to write (See Appendix, Fig 13). These scenes, according to Kitty Green, can be "read both ways. Some people think "oh, they were trying to help," and some people see it as very kind of disgustingly patriarchal. And it's sort of subjective. We're in Jane's point of view, we're seeing it her way and it is tough to watch. You can see her being very rattled by that situation" (Green 2020c, 4:25-5:00). While Camilleri understandably assumes the men's gestures to be meant to help, having them hover over her does bring out the patronizing aspect of the relationship between a relatively new employee and her male seniors. As such, the movie invites its audience to problematize not only the more obvious representation of violence (verbal, psychological and sexual abuse) but also to be more mindful of the behaviors that may have been innocent and well-intentioned but that still create discomfort in others. Green explicitly confirms the intentionality of focusing on such smaller forms of violence by claiming that

> [w]e're all kind of complicit in this system that has hurt and sidelined women for so many years, and I would love it if people had a look at, what kind of behavior can we change moving forward…. We need to get rid of the bad men, the predators, yes, but what else can change and what else can shift? So highlighting those smaller, microaggressions and glances and gestures and looks and behavior that's not okay but it often goes on a lot. I think all that stuff is important. (Green 2020d, 6:24-6:47)

Through this quote and her movie, the Australian filmmaker, therefore, highlights the role that every individual plays in constructing and maintaining the toxic environment created by the main person in power for others, whether that is done intentionally or unintentionally. This complicates the discourse on people who hold and abuse power further as it uncovers the role of regular people surrounding them in creating a ripple effect that can be transferred from one sphere (for example, the professional) to another (the personal).

The role of the normal—as opposed to the abusive normal exception—in silencing individuals is also clearly shown in *The Assistant* through Jane's interaction with her mother and

father. Both of the young woman's parents are made to sound well-intentioned and understanding. Jane's mother, whom she calls after being made to write her first apology email of the day, asks her, "What's going on?" and "Are you okay?" (Green 2019, 00:19:20-00:19:30). Jane refuses to talk about her issues at work, answering her mother's questions with "Nothing" or "Yeah I'm fine" (Green 2019, 00:19:20-00:19:30). This reluctance to speak out about one's problems to their supposed main support system (family) reveals the insidious nature of the culture of silence. Environments that cultivate a strong culture of silence, such as the film industry, make silence so omnipresent that, from the perspective of the people being silenced, it appears to be unbreakable, even when they are outside of it. This is because when someone is engulfed in the system, especially individuals like Jane, who are aware of and experience firsthand the harm it causes to others, they will try to protect the people they love from said harm. Moreover, as explained by Farzana Aslam, "[o]ur cultural predilection to worship or defer to those in authority makes the social pressure to conform very powerful" (Aslam 2017). In this context, to conform is to silently endure the toxic workplace culture in exchange for experience and the prestige of working in a well-known, successful, and international company.

In addition to the societal pressure to conform, other, more personal factors would lead individuals to participate in what Aslam refers to as the bystander effect. According to the American Psychological Association, the bystander effect is "a phenomenon in which people fail to offer needed help in emergencies, especially when other people are present in the same setting" (American Psychological Association 2018). This concept comes to explain the psychological mechanisms that lead to one's lack of reaction to witnessing injustice. The APA also points out that studies "identified a number of psychological and interpersonal processes that inhibit helping, including misinterpreting other people's lack of response as an indication that help is not needed, confusion of responsibility, and diffusion of responsibility" (American Psychological Association 2018). In the case of Jane, the lack of response mainly stems from the collective apathetic reactions to and normalization of abuse within her company. A more personal dimension briefly explored in the movie is the pressure that comes from within one's support system, as illustrated by Jane's interaction with her father. As the movie comes to an end, Jane is hastily dismissed by the executive. As a result, the viewers follow her across the street into a coffee shop where she calls her father while eating a muffin.

This scene is one of the few instances in which the movie's musical score comes in, highlighting the character's emotional exhaustion and melancholy through the use of slow, dragged-out, and repetitive musical notes. As the scene goes back to quiet, only including ambient noises in the background, Jane apologizes to her father for not calling on his birthday. She attempts to justify herself by saying, "I just-I've-I…-it's … it's been busy" (Green 2019, 01:18:21-01:18:25), stumbling upon her words, which reflects the psychological toll of her work on her mental well-being. Her father responds with, "[o]f course! I understand! It's a great opportunity, and we're excited for you" (Green 2019, 1:18:25-1:18:32). Garner's acting successfully represents the emotional roller-coaster that results from the mixing of making your loved ones proud with the character's simultaneous acknowledgment of the price she has to endure to maintain the façade she has built for herself. The conversation continues swiftly as Jane's smile fades. "So… well, how is it going? Your mom and I, we want to know everything! Are you having fun?" (Green 2019, 01:18:34-01:18:44) asks the father excitedly. While it may appear to be another mundane part of her day, the conversation is made significant by the expectations it sets for the young woman to pretend that her working conditions are bearable. After all, she is finally occupying a position that could lead her to her dream job of becoming a producer, and from an outsider's perspective, it may seem like an exciting, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to break into the industry. With his encouraging and positive words, the father essentially reinforces the reasons that would push entry-level employees to brave through the abuse: their predatory employer does, in fact, have the power to "make [them] great" (Green 2019, 01:02:17-01:02:23). The yarning for success mixes with the fear of disappointing others creating one more reason to remain silent. Here, silence is both imposed by the pressure to achieve the American success dream and temporarily self-imposed to keep up with this narrative. Nonetheless, Jane hesitantly tries to open up about her poor working conditions by responding to him with, "uhm, i-it's okay. It's…ah… you know, it's just like long hours and uhm … It's just stressful you know?" (Green 2019, 01:18:44-01:18:54). It is clear based on her facial expression, slight stutter, and tone that Jane is nervous at the idea of unveiling more about her seemingly exciting new job, yet much like it was the case in the HR scene, she still has the courage to take a step towards instigating this difficult conversation. Similarly to her encounter with the head of the human resources department, she is shut down in her attempt to expose her mistreatment both by herself—as she downplays the abusive nature of her workplace—and by others. Aslam rightfully asserts that "to intervene takes courage" (Aslam 2017); however, this film,

as well as the hundreds of testimonies that came out as a result of the emergence of #MeToo, is a testimony to the fact that it takes much more than just courage to intervene.

In reality, a significant number of Weinstein's former employees, such as Zelda Perkins, Lauren O'Connor, and Lisa Rose, had tried to speak of the media giant's crimes and behaviors only to be shut down, much like Jane is, by their professional and personal circles. Rose, who used to work as an assistant at Miramax's London offices, recalls "t[elling] friends about it but no-one really said much. People giggled or looked embarrassed, and some said, "well, that's just something that happens" (Rose qtd. in Rannard 2017). Rose's story highlights the apathetic responses from loved ones which often confined survivors and witnesses to silence. This is shown through the responses of Jane's father, who unintentionally dismisses her hardships in an attempt to encourage her to pursue a career in film. Jane's father response to his daughter's stressful work environment goes as follows: "It's always a little stressful at the beginning. It gets easier! You can handle it honey! I know you can" (Green 2019, 01:18:54-01:19:02). This type of discourse emphasizes strength, ability to surpass adversity and go beyond one's limits, all of which are forms of psychological and physical strength (or power) heavily promoted by traditional or normative masculinity. Nevertheless, as part of this dialogue, the sentiments expressed through this discourse come from a caring, fatherly place which places the father's discourse in between traditional masculine and emotionally involved fatherhood. In this context, the term traditional masculinity "is to be understood to have a great deal in common with [Connell's] hegemonic masculinity without the assumption of hegemony" (Kirkman et al. 2001, 392). Despite the tensions that can arise from embodying both discourses simultaneously, as proven by Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman, both can co-exist (Kirkman et al. 2001, 392). The interaction of both normative and involved fatherhood in this scene, therefore, creates an involuntary, additional layer of silencing as his attempt at being emotionally involved is shaped by traditional masculine discourse.

Green expressed that when she started doing research in order to write her film's screenplay, she "spoke to so many people and [she] heard crazy stories, but …was really focused on not the extraordinary but the ordinary. The stories we could all relate to" (Green 2020c, 3:28-3:40). As such, her attitude towards Me Too stories mirrors Magnússon and the Icelandic school of microhistory's interest in another type of normal exception: the hyperordinary. This confirms *The Assistant*'s microhistorical dimension as it fits Magnússon's description of his central point of interest as being

> the people whose lives have been studied under its aegis must be deemed "ordinary," even hyperordinary, individuals who have not necessarily fallen foul of the law or come up against the formal side of society. […] And [the] study of these people has revealed that the personality of each individual has aspects which are hard to discern in the public context: their behavior or ways of thinking challenge latter-day ideas of what happened in the past. The significance of the microhistorical approach lies precisely in this fact: an opportunity arises to explore aspects of human life which can be hard to grasp by other methods. (Magnússon 2020, 28)

Green's investigation of the normal is what allows the exceptional to shine. Had the movie contained scenes representing sexual assault and abuses of power explicitly, it would have limited the discussion of power to the kind that is exercised by an individual over others. By capturing these abuses of power from a bottom-up perspective instead of the opposite, Green guides her viewers toward the understanding that power does not occur in a vacuum. Most importantly, she deconstructs the preconceived idea that everyone who works for an abuser is necessarily an active enabler, complicating the filmic conversation on power dynamics within toxic work environments.

The Assistant, therefore, consistently complicates the discussion surrounding Me Too stories. It combines an oppositional, feminist female gaze, and microhistoricist approach to narrative cinema to the shifting of point of view from the usual filmic center of Me Too stories, survivors and perpetrators, to the margin, an assistant. By doing so, Green crafts her movie to denounce the psychological abuse of power that comes along with sexual misconduct instead of focusing on the sexual violence itself. According to Green, this form of violence has already been repeatedly depicted in "scenes that are gratuitous and sensational" (Green 2020c, 5:35-5:38). The sexual nature of the interactions between the powerful film executive and the young women he employs is only confirmed at the end of the movie when Jane looks up towards her employer's window from the coffee shop to see two silhouettes seemingly engaging in intercourse (Green 2019, 01:19:47-01:20:14). The filmmaker's line of reasoning is built on the idea that "bad men have had enough movies, enough screen time and it's time to talk about women's trajectories" (Green 2020d, 2:02-2:08). It is true that at the time of its release, *The Assistant*—along with *Bombshell*—was one of the first Hollywood movies to explicitly link its narrative to Me Too stories as well as openly proclaim survivors' testimonies as its plot's inspiration. This strong embrace of the movement's stories and feminist message may explain Green's unconventional take on the representation, or lack thereof, of explicitly sexually or physically violent scenes. For decades,

rape scenes were often considered by the entertainment industry as the preferred and only viable way to represent and comment on sexual violence. Sarah Projansky verifies the existence of a trend in cinema after the mid-1980s for programs

> to replace the fear of an impending attack revealed through the stranger rapist's point of view with the attack itself, experienced from the visual and/or emotional point of view of the woman who faces rape. While this shift in representational strategy and emotional positioning of the spectator offers a more complex understanding of an experience of rape than do the earlier films and videos, it nevertheless does so by potentially heightening the fear of rape for the spectator even more […]. [T]he visual and emotional point-of-view shots/sequences in all these films and videos expand, heighten, and perpetuate the experience of rape, as well as its (representational) existence. These shots/sequences work, at least in part, at counterpurposes with the programs' overall antirape goals of decreasing the existence of rape. Instead, these sequences augment the violence and power of the rapist and intensify the victimization of the woman he assaults. (Projanski 2001, 217-218)

As such, the Australian filmmaker's refusal to provide any screen space to the aggressor is what makes it a unique space for the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too survivors' stories. According to Green, this oppositional perspective on the issue is only made possible by women's involvement in the representation of sexual violence. She explains that "[n]ow that women are taking kind of power over the storytelling, we're able to tell the stories the way we think they should be told. Which is sensitively and delicately and exploring kind of the larger systems and structure and not just focusing on the exploitative, sensational crap" (Green 2020c, 5:38-5:58).

The movie successfully shifts the focus back onto women's experiences and alludes to enough for its audience to be aware of the sexual violence without explicitly representing any sexual violence or real person's experience. Its ending does not procure the audience with catharsis or closer, instead, it remains unknown whether Jane's days will continue to repeat themselves, burying her further into her workplace's culture of silence or if she will choose to break the cycle by resigning. The film's strength lies in its ability to recreate the commonalities of most Me Too stories without relying on re-victimizing any woman or providing a satisfying ending to arrive at the moral of the story. Here, silencing proves to be a collective performance of power and for the sake of power, as such, it extends beyond the perpetrator and victim dichotomy. In order words, it successfully portrays "the idea that abuse is sort of utterly ordinary" (Green 2020b, 17:12-17:17)

and that imposed silence is more complex than it may seem at first glance. Kitty Green's *The Assistant* also illustrates the fact that films do not necessarily have to recreate specific historical events in order to be considered effective eyewitnesses to the past. It suggests that it may be enough to recreate the essence of a story with enough historically accurate details to be able to depict a history of abuse without involving real people. This is an especially helpful way to re-creationally eyewitness historical events located in the near past linked to such a sensitive topic, as is the case with Me Too stories. When it comes to Me Too films, this approach to re-creational eyewitnessing protects survivors who may have been ready to speak out about their experiences but are not necessarily ready to relive their trauma by watching other women act out some of their worst memories.

4.2. The Canceling of the Me Too Movement in *Tár* (2022)

Tár is a 2022 psychological drama written and directed by Todd Field that deals with power, guilt, reputation, and fame. It follows the life of Lydia Tár, the fictional chief conductor of an orchestra in Berlin set to perform and live-record their version of Mahler's fifth symphony sometime in the near future. However, Tár's image, along with her career as a conductor, appears to fall apart as rumors of her sexual misconduct and predatory behavior towards younger people, including Krista Taylor, a violinist she used to work with, go around on social media following the tragic passing of the latter. Lydia's fall from grace comes as a result of the alleged extra-marital sexual relations entertained by her with younger musicians; thus, the movie closely relates to cancel culture and the Me Too movement. The movie's falling action deals with how such allegations spread, are amplified and eventually lead to life-altering consequences. As the question of Lydia's guilt is never resolved, Field leaves his audience to personally assess the main character based on fragments of information, e-mails, dialogues, and behaviors scattered around the film. This chapter performs a close reading of the movie to highlight the various representations of and discussions around power, which Field invites his audience to participate in. Focus will, therefore, be put on the concept of power as explored in theoretical writings by Marion Young, Sally Haslanger, Michel Foucault, and Stephen Greenblatt. This endeavor is taken in order to prove that, despite its marketing refuting its associate with the Me Too movement, *Tár* can in fact still be used for the re-creational eyewitnessing of less commonly depicted same-sex Me Too narratives. This section is an edited and extended version of a paper published in the collection of essays *New Horizons in English and American Studies: Papers from the Doctoral Program* (Berraf 2024). Paragraphs ending with the publication's in-text citation, namely (Berraf 2024), contain excerpts taken from the published paper.

This close reading will be informed by concepts taken from feminist theory, masculinities studies, and microhistory. While feminist and masculinities studies appear more explicitly throughout this chapter due to the nature of the topic at hand, that is, the representation of perpetrators, enablers, and survivors of abuse, the microhistorical perspective is used more implicitly. As discussed in the second chapter, microhistory, as understood by Szijártó, aims to historically investigate single events or objects thoroughly (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 4) in order to answer great historical questions (Szijártó and Magnússon 2013, 5). Analyzing each film

as a historical archive allows this study to uncover contemporary Hollywood's current attitudes towards the Me Too movement, sexual violence, and power imbalances. Therefore, juxtaposing the audio-visual text of the movie with various external historical archives such as interviews enables this chapter to investigate Field's own views and biases towards how power structures are abused and how the survivors' stories get told. While one director's perspective does not reflect the whole industry's position on these topics—as it will be demonstrated in the upcoming chapters—, the movie's box office success and popularity amongst film critics' circles highlights the potential broad influence and impact of the film on the film industry as well as its wide audience. *Tár* was nominated for several important cinematic events in 2022-2023, such as the Oscars, the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA), the Golden Globes, and many others. It also won an array of distinctions, such as the National Society of Film Critics Awards' Best Film, best actress and Screenplay, the Boston Society of Film Critics Awards for Best Director, the New York Film Critics Circle Awards for Best Actress and Best Film, the Critics Choice Award for best actress and score, the Sunset Film Circle Awards' best actress, best director, best film, best screenplay and best cinematography and a Golden Globes for best performance by an actress in motion picture – drama (IMDb "Tár Awards"). As a result of its overwhelmingly positive reception, *Tár* representation of current societal struggles and a challenging historical turning point for women ought to be examined.

4.2.1. The Art of Power and Power In Art

The movie's protagonist, Lydia Tár, played by Cate Blanchett, is a world-renowned chief conductor preparing for a significant performance with an orchestra she leads in Berlin. While *Tár* contains an array of conducting scenes, the very first scene of the movie, the audience's formal introduction to the woman that lends her "last name" to the film, comes in the form of a more than 12-minute-long interview for the *New Yorker*. In it, Lydia presents herself as an eloquent, intelligent, and charismatic figure (Field 2022, 4:46-17:06) who is not only made powerful by her technical knowledge of music, musical history, and aura but also by her ability to capture the audience with her words. Our impression of this gift is strengthened by the scene that follows, in which the conductor talks to a woman named Whitney Reese, a fan, who expresses to the protagonist how she has been "so taken by what [Tár] said (…) about interpretation and

specifically about feelings" (Field 2022,17:07-17:17). Not only does this scene attest to Tár's masterful use of words, it also uncovers her subtly flirtatious, charming, and relaxed character as well as the fact that she holds the same power over (Foucault 1982; Dahl 1957; Weber 1978) described by Dahl, Weber, and Foucault. Moreover, as this power over is much dependent on/guaranteed by her knowledge, professional expertise, and position in the field of classical music and conducting, she embodies the exact position of power Foucault refers to when discussing the "power relations" (Foucault 1995, 27) which occur as a result of the possession of knowledge rather than a physical ability to dominate the weaker other. Tár is, therefore, presented to the film's watchers as someone who possesses what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the forms of capital. Capital for Bourdieu represents "the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices" (Bourdieu 1986, 242; Bourdieu qtd. in Berraf 2024). While the conductor is revealed at the end of the movie to come from a humble background, thus not having been born with the sort of social capital that would help her advance in her career, her acquisition of symbolic capital in the form of her degree and reputation leads her to meet Sharon. Pierre Bourdieu describes social capital as "Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group" (Bourdieu 1986, 248; Bourdieu qtd. in Berraf 2024). As for symbolic capital, it is "to be … recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, 245; Bourdieu qtd. in Berraf 2024). In the movie, Lydia and Sharon, her concertmaster and wife, met through their respective positions in the world of classical music and built a name for themselves through skill but also personal connections and networking. This meeting thus led to both women progressively acquiring more social, cultural, and, thus, economic capital as their personal relationships and professional careers simultaneously advanced (Berraf 2024).

Through that first scene, Field lays the foundation of the audience's perception of Tár as representing more than a woman whose power is limited to the field in which she holds a highly respected position. He highlights how she holds power over her orchestra but also her audience as an international star; what is shown in this scene is the influence and, therefore, the power of Lydia Tár as a public persona rather than the individual. To understand the conductor's influence on people, it is important to point out the distinction between a celebrity and a star. As explained by

Dwyer and Sengupta, celebrity implies that "the focus is on the person's private and personal life" (Dwyer and Sengupta 2021; Dwyer and Sengupta qtd. in Berraf 2024). At the same time, "stardom has more to do with their professional life since the star has to be a successful performer. Yet the star is more than a performer – a manufactured image, trained, shaped, and styled as a commodity who sells cinema" (Dwyer and Sengupta 2021, 185; Dwyer and Sengupta qtd. in Berraf 2024). Although the two scholars are specifically looking at movie stars in their article, this definition of the star as a manufactured commodity proves itself to be a useful paradigm for the understanding of Tár as someone whose audience and entourage may want to become voluntarily involved in power play with but also as someone who was made by the industry and by herself to be idolized and fetishized (Berraf 2024).

When discussing the process of writing and directing the film with Cate Blanchett, Field describes his reasoning behind the choice of the character's profession as being based on the fact that, for him "the closest thing [to] a person that's wielding power that can be dramatized quite simply is in front of an orchestra. And it's a picture of a pyramid; she is literally at the tip, that fulcrum" (Field 2023a, 2:06-2:19; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). From this quote, it is evident that *Tár* as a work of art aims to go beyond denouncing the corruption of an individual working within the music industry since, as Field puts it, the inspiration behind Lydia Tár stems from the fact that he "work[s] in the film business … So [he is] sure that the character sort of was birthed out of many parents" (Field 2023b, 5:42-5:52; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). It is reasonable to assume that the 'parents' Field is referring to are the same highly influential people that the Me Too movement actively tries to denounce and dismantle. Some Hollywood-specific examples include but are not limited to Harvey Weinstein, Andrew Kreisberg, Bryan Singer, Brett Ratner, Brad Kern, and Asia Argento. Despite their history of abuse, all of the powerful men cited above not only share Lydia's mindset but were also considered as being just as normal and competent in their work as she is. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that the rigidity and structure-focused nature of classical music naturally makes the music industry the appropriate setting to discuss the prevalence of abusive power structures within the entertainment business. Making Lydia a conductor thus allows Field to show his audience a visual representation of the authority she has over others through the way orchestras are laid out (in the form of a triangle, or, as referred to by the director, a pyramid). As Tár stands at the top of her pyramid, holding a baton in the palm of her hands, she has the power to dictate the orchestra's every move and has complete control over the musicians (Berraf 2024).

While in the context of a concert, this "power over" is necessary for the success of the performance, what *Tár* draws attention to is the problematic nature of using power for personal gain and/or to harm others. As pointed out in the second chapter, Haugaard heavily criticizes Foucault's focus on power or power over as subjection by rightfully pointing out that, at times and in contexts similar to Tár's orchestra, the use of power over others may lead to positive outcomes (Haugaard 2022, 349; Haugaard qtd. in Berraf 2024). While Foucault's interpretation of power over as domination is present in the movie, *Tár* thus also explores the instances where power over is needed for the functioning of the group. As a conductor, Lydia is needed by the orchestra to play together in harmony, and as a teacher, she is also needed to control the course of the lecture. In these situations, Tár needs to hold power over the group she faces, which is what makes their containment possible and maintainable. Much like it is the case with the police officer or teacher, the problem does not lie in the conductor's ownership of power; it is her potential use of said power over to harm others that should be problematized (Berraf 2024).

In the movie's second scene, Lydia Tár is at the very height of her career and is given the opportunity to teach as a guest lecturer at Julliard, one of the most prestigious universities for the performing arts worldwide. Despite her relaxed demeanor, Tár can be seen physically towering over one of the students, Max, she confronts on not being "really into Bach" (Field 2022, 00:29:04-00:29:18; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024) (See Appendix, Fig 14) before sitting next to them, the camera following her throughout this entire interaction. Max describes themselves as a "BIPOC, pangender person" (Field 2022, 00:29:50-00:29:54; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). While pangender people can differ in their preferences in pronoun usage, Max's were never mentioned in the movie. Due to this ambiguity and for the sake of clarity and consistency, the student will be referred to by using gender-neutral pronouns (they/them). This scolding confirms Bourdieu's reading of art and cultural consumption as "predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social difference" (Bourdieu 1984, 7; Bourdieu qtd. in Berraf 2024). In the sphere of classical music, Johann Sebastian Bach is considered to be one of the greatest composers of all time, as confirmed by the 174 leading contemporary composers who participated in *BBC Music Magazine*'s interviews and ranking of classic music composers (BBC Music Magazine 2024; BBC Music Magazine qtd. in Berraf 2024). Not being "into Bach," from Tár's perspective, therefore, implies a lack of cultural capital and appreciation for the canon, which, despite changing over the years, remains consistent within the world of classical music. Though

Tár's confident argumentation for the evaluation of the artist's talent to be solely based on their work is compelling, especially when contrasted to Max's nervous and shaky responses, this scene illustrates the main character's behavioral pattern when her authority is questioned. Enquiring about her young student's reasoning and attempting to present them with an alternative perspective on the issue is not what makes Tár's behavior abusive in nature, it is her shifting of the conversation from the philosophical to the personal that does. Here, Max is put on the spot and attacked on his personal appearance and identification, humiliating him in front of his peers and potential future colleagues. However, it is the gradual escalation of the situation that exhibits Tár's need to be validated and in control of other people's thoughts around her, and that, no matter the means that need to be used (Berraf 2024).

At first, Tár approaches Max with curiosity and concern but, most importantly, a sincere desire to understand and change his perspective on the topic. This is reinforced by the camera work, which includes both the professor and student appearing in the foreground, at an equal distance from the camera, and thus having equal importance at the beginning of this impressive, long one-take shot filmed using a hand-held camera. As Tár becomes more frustrated and confrontational with them [Max], she walks up the stage, the camera following her, dominating, and conducting the conversation. Here, the conductor visually reclaims her power over the students as a lecturer and positions herself as the central element of the shot. Interestingly, after a brief monologue, she invites Max back onto the stage -and therefore into the scene-, asking them once again to sit next to her while she attempts to illustrate her arguments, this time by playing the piano as a final attempt to change their mind. Even though "[she] plays really well," Max maintains, still nervously twitching, that "nowadays, white, male, cis composers, just not [their] thing" (Field 2022, 00:32:59-00:33:10; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). This complete refusal to reevaluate their preconceived ideas and personal beliefs pushed Tár to her limit, escalating the situation further and reorienting the conversation from being about separating the art from the artist to addressing what she interprets to be her student's prejudice against European, cis-gendered and male composers. Florian Hoffmeister's camera work once again highlights this switch in the lecturer's attitude towards Max since the shot goes from including both characters to Tár appearing progressively bigger and higher than the student as she walks away from them. The more demeaning and personal Tár's discourse gets, the more Max looks small, crushed, and silenced, effectively moving them to the background and out of the conversation (Berraf 2024).

This uninterrupted shot ends with the apprentice conductor exiting the lecture room distraught while the camera once again focuses on Tár responding to them with the following: "And you're a robot. I mean, unfortunately, the architect of your soul appears to be social media. You wanna dance the mask, you must service the composer" (Field 2022, 00:35:15-00:35:25; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). Though the rest of her words are also superficially addressed to Max, as she continues to speak, Tár goes down the stairs backward while the camera stays put. This gives the illusion that the words that follow may be an inner monologue addressed to herself but spoken aloud: "You gotta sublimate yourself, your ego and, yes, your identity. You must, in fact, stand in front of the public and god and obliterate yourself" (Field 2022, 00:35:26-00:35:35; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). In this end of scene and for a few moments, Tár seems to be regressing back to her powerless state and identity. By uttering these truths hidden in plain sight about the fabricated nature of her identity, Tár feels vulnerable and, thus, gets visually smaller and smaller. As the audience discovers much later in the movie, Lydia Tár also had to sublimate and change herself to serve the composers she interprets but also keep up with the grand identity she presents to the public, including in this lecture. Such passages give a glimpse of a mask ready to shatter, yet Tár's presence is still felt by many, including Max, as intimidating, authoritative, and dominating, as demonstrated by the student's nervous leg twitch throughout their entire interaction. Although power is used at the end of this shot as a tool for domination, it is also a pedagogical tool managed and distributed or taken away by Tár according to which approach she wants to take with her students (Berraf 2024).

Through the thorough, intellectual dialogues presented in these first few scenes, it is easy to infer some of the personal beliefs and standpoints that make the conductor into whom she presents herself to be, such as the need to separate the art from the artist, to preserve the canon and status quo. Yet, she is also visibly aware of the power she holds over others and is able to play with how much power she gives to and takes from those around her, as illustrated by her confrontation with Max. The classroom scene, along with many other scenes scattered around the film, are not simply there to reinforce the conductor's rhetorical skills; the film uses every one of them as a means and opportunity to explicitly state the mindset behind Tár's ability to distance and disassociate herself from the harm she causes to others. In an interview with the journalist and radio host Rico Gagliano, Field gives further insight regarding his views on the representation of concepts of power and democracy. He explains that

> [t]here's a reason people rise to power and, as this character would say, it's not always so polite. You know, there's always going to be some roadkill for someone to reach that destination. That's fascinating to me. It's fascinating to me how people are enabled to exist like that and have been from the beginning of time […]. She doesn't necessarily have the right to do that [preventing the democratic functioning of the German orchestra]. She's been granted that privilege essentially by the orchestra… that orchestra is, in fact, led by the concertmaster and in this case the concertmaster is her wife. (Field 2023b, 6:15-7:24; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024)

This is particularly interesting to consider as Field himself emphasizes the way that individuals who hold as much power as Tár do not get to the top of the pyramid without using and abusing others, as well as the systems that are supposed to prevent such behaviors from happening. By developing a relationship with and later on marrying the concertmaster, Sharon, Tár fights her way into the top of the classical music food chain while securing the fact that her decisions and demands will always be accepted and met by the other members of the orchestra no matter their position on the topic at hand. In that sense, the conductor is not only using her wife's trust, knowledge, and personal affection to get ahead, but she is also abusing the system by guaranteeing that she has the most critical voice in the orchestra on her side (Berraf 2024).

The concertmaster's position gives them the authority to "assist in the audition and hiring process for principal players, resolve problems -artistic, technical, or personal- between members of the orchestra, or even work closely with the orchestra's music director as their right-hand person, weighing in on all artistic decisions" (Berklee; Berklee qtd. in Berraf 2024). Based on her position within the orchestra, Sharon, therefore, has a considerable professional and affective influence on the rest of its members, allowing her to have the power to convince them of the rightfulness of Tár's decisions in spite of their potential apprehensions or reluctance. This arrangement allows Tár to pass any decision she takes while maintaining the illusion of choice and equality within the orchestra since the pressure to abide by the conductor's whims does not come directly from her. Sharon is thus complicit in Tár's abuse of her power and in the containment of her orchestra as a result of her female/spousal solidarity being tainted by both women's interests. Nevertheless, while there is no doubt that Tár holds, uses, and abuses the power she has over her partner and, therefore, over the orchestra, Sharon is made equally as problematic as Lydia by the fact that she enables the abuses of power to take place within the orchestra by supporting the maestro's every decision, sometimes exclusively based on her personal feelings for her (Berraf

2024). In line with Young, here, multiple individuals possess power; it is only possessed "in greater or lesser amounts" (Young 1990, 31; Young qtd. in Berraf 2024), as demonstrated by the fact that the concertmaster herself abuses her position within the industry and the orchestra for personal motives (Berraf 2024).

Another relationship that illustrates how the conductor uses her personal relations to proceed in her professional career is her ambiguous, hot-and-cold relationship with her assistant, Francesca Lentini, played by French actress Noémie Merlant. While in many scenes, Tár seems to be overworking the French artist and is quite dismissive of the latter's feelings about Krista Taylor, for instance, it is clear that there is, or at least there has been, something more to the two women's relationship prior to where the film begins. This hypothesis is strengthened by the intimacy of their interactions in multiple scenes, including the car ride, during which Francesca questions the maestro about the way she presented the abusive relationship between the composers Mahler and Alma in her *New Yorker* interview as normal, almost natural. This scene is set inside a car, making the space separating both women especially limited, thus reinforcing the closeness that comes with Francesca's role as an assistant. Additionally, while darker lighting and small spaces are usually associated with claustrophobia and anxiety, Hoffmeister's skillful use of the dim natural light coming into the car enables the atmosphere to feel, rather than suffocating, intimate, real, and personal (Berraf 2024). As Jim Hemphill, film historian and filmmaker, argues in his review,

> [i]n early scenes like Lydia Tár's interview with Adam Gopnik or her meal with her benefactor Elliot Kaplan (Mark Strong), Hoffmeister uses a strong key light to convey her power and reinforce the sense that she's always on stage. In private, less secure moments like the ones where Lydia is alone in her studio, however, the light becomes more neutral and intimate. (Hemphill 2023; Hemphill qtd. in Berraf 2024)

Scenes with Francesca, along with ones involving Sharon and Petra, therefore come to contrast the bright lights and spacious stages on which Tár performs as a conductor as well as her more marketable alter-ego. In fact, this interaction with Francesca is one of the few instances in which the conductor, rather than arguing with her interlocutor or hiding behind the façade she has built for herself, exchanges thoughts with someone as individuals on an equal footing. Since lighting plays a key role in allowing movie watchers to acquire a better understanding of when Lydia's

guard is down, and her mask is, at least to some extent, off, her actions and words ought to be examined more closely since they are telling of the character's real views (Berraf 2024).

In the car scene with Francesca, Tár responds to the younger woman's concerns about the abusive nature of Mahler's actions with the following: "She agreed to those rules. No one made that decision for her. #rulesofthegame" (Field 2022, 39:28-40:12; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024) before playfully sticking her tongue out (See Appendix, Fig 15). Tár assumes that Alma Mahler-Werfel's decision to give up her musical career to marry Gustav Mahler, who was older than her by almost two decades and already the director of the Vienna Court Opera at the time (Hilmes 2015, 40; Hilmes qtd. in Berraf 2024), was completely free from internal and external pressuring factor. Based on this assumption, she blames the young woman for ending her own career of her own accord without considering the power imbalance between Alma and Gustav, something that is reflected by the conduct's use of Alma's first name while referring to Gustav by his last name as a form of respect due to his status and magnitude within the industry. As pointed out by Francesca, Alma's career was suppressed and ultimately ruined by her husband's desire to be the only famous composer in the house. Tár's response highlights her nonchalant attitude towards abusing one's power over others. Another similar sentiment can be observed later on in the movie as she is having lunch with her former mentor, Andris. In that scene, Tár asks Andris: "Didn't he [Schopenhauer] once also throw a woman down a flight of stairs who later sued him?" (Field 2022, 55:13-55:18) to which Andris replies, laughing: "Yes, although it's unclear that this private and personal failing is at all relevant to his work" (Field 2022, 55:19-55:25; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). This interaction is followed by both characters laughing in unison, confirming the nonchalance the main character seems to have towards abusive behaviors against women. It also highlights the fact that despite her female body, Tár, as an individual, emulates the men around her, acquiring the same normative attitudes and behaviors towards less powerful individuals they exhibit. In that sense, Lydia's self-masculinization is part of her strategic manufacturing of a persona for herself, which enables her to remain highly regarded in the male-dominated world of classical music. When put into perspective and coupled with both the implicit and explicit abuses of power, favors, and dismissive behaviors performed by Lydia throughout the film, her dedicated support for separating the art from the artist in the previously mentioned debate she had with Max at Julliard reads as more than a mere philosophical approach to art. It foreshadows the fact that she uses this rhetoric as a coping

mechanism for herself and reflects her own need to separate her art and talent from her past and present problematic behaviors (Berraf 2024).

4.2.2. Tár's Baton of Silence: Silence as Power

Tár's abuses of power appear recurrently throughout the movie in various forms ranging from threats, favoritism, and exploitation to dismissal and coldness (Berraf 2024), all of which are common traits of perpetrators within Me Too narratives, therefore reinforcing the supposition that the film is useful to the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too survivors' real experiences. To understand Field's complex depiction of the conductor, it is imperative to examine the many ways in which Lydia uses power for personal gains but also how these abuses of power, in the end, come at the price of her mental stability. The first explicit, direct use of deception and abuse of power displayed by Tár comes after she returns home from her guest lecture at Julliard and discovers that her daughter, Petra, is being bullied by a young girl named Johanna. It is worth mentioning that, following this discovery, many of Tár's interactions with Petra show the main character's care for and bond with her child, thus humanizing her but also highlighting the contrast between her personal and private self versus her professional, public persona. After reassuring Petra that everything will be okay, she heads towards Johanna and verbally threatens her. What is interesting to note here is how Tár formulates her threats towards the little girl. Tár purposefully emphasizes the girl's inferior position in relation to herself, an adult, as well as the slim chance of anyone believing her if she decides to report the verbal threats made by a "grown-up" (Field 2022, 48:54-49:49; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024) against her. While these threats come from a place of care for her daughter, this type of manipulative and emotionally abusive discourse is one commonly used by abusers to contain their victims by belittling them and convincing them of their lack of credibility (Childhelp; Childhelp qtd. in Berraf 2024), thus asserting their dominance over them. For Young, injustice refers to "two forms of disabling constraints, oppression, and domination" (Young 1990, 39; Young qtd. in Berraf 2024), and oppression is defined as groups or individuals experiencing "some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings" (Young 1990, 40; Young qtd. in Berraf 2024). Based on these definitions, Tár can be said to have used domination to oppress Johanna, a child, by stripping her of her ability to speak of the threats made towards her. This scene is a highly telling example of the type of

person Tár is as it uncovers a recurrent pattern of dealing with problems through domination and oppression no matter the situation or the person on the receiving end, even if that person is a child. Although Tár could have calmly resolved the situation between Petra and Johanna with the help of other adults, the conductor opted to handle the situation herself by doing what she does best: use the verbal, physical, and psychological power she holds over others to silence them the way she would silence her orchestra with her baton (Berraf 2024).

This scene also confirms Field's tendency to masculinize his main character since, before intimidating the little girl, she refers to herself as "Petra's father" (Field 2022, 00:48:54-00:49:01; Filed qtd. in Berraf 2024) while wearing a loose, more masculine-looking suit. This masculinization is not limited to the way that the conductor presents herself and dresses, given the way she uses the women around her and recurrently acts as an apologist for powerful, abusive male artists based on their talent and accomplishments in the field of classical music. This resembles the language and abusive tactics used by male abusers to minimize their faults and actions. This behavior can be classified as "scapegoating," a form of gaslighting since Lydia "deflects blame onto someone else to avoid having to take responsibility" for her actions but also to avoid tarnishing the works of other renowned artists and therefore their "reputation [and] power" (Newport Institute 2024; Newport Institute qtd. in Berraf 2024). As pointed out by Professor Finn Mackay, Butch or masculine lesbians are often associated with and accused of perpetrating the same normative masculinity that endangers women (Mackay 2019, 5; Mackay qtd. in Berraf 2024). In this context, toxic or normative masculinity means the "harmful behaviors and attitudes traditionally associated with men, like aggression, emotional repression, and domination" (NeuroLaunch Editorial Team 2024; NeuroLaunch Editorial Team qtd. in Berraf 2024). Field's stereotypical portrayal of Tár as a toxic, manipulative, abusive, and masculine lesbian thus perpetuates stereotypes against Butch lesbians by having her be a masculinized abuser of women displaying behaviors that would allude to her internalization of sexism. Such portrayals are extremely harmful as they do not take into consideration the diverse forms butch lesbian identities can take nor the subversive potentiality of butches "adopting and often transforming traits traditionally associated with men, … threaten[ing] masculinity more than they imitate it" (Solomon 1993; Solomon qtd. in Berraf 2024). In that sense, *Tár* does not provide lesbians with "a space in which to discover what it means to be self-defined, self-loving, women-identified, neither an imitation man nor his objectified opposite," confining them to the same "imitation role-

stereotypes of “butch” and ‘‘femme’’’ offered by the male gay culture (Adrienne Rich qtd. in Semlyen, Joanna and Sonja Ellis 2023, 218; Semlyen et al. qtd. in Berraf 2024) (Berraf 2024).

What could also be inferred from the confidence and lack of hesitation exhibited by Lydia when threatening Johanna is that not only does she use domination or power over others to get what she wants, but she also feels comfortable doing so. This security in using her power to oppress others indicates that she has internalized domination as a part of her identity. Internalized domination occurs when ‘‘members of the [dominant] group accept their group’s socially superior status as normal and deserved’’ (Griffin 1997, 76; Griffin qtd. in Berraf 2024). This only strengthens the assessment of the movie as being “a film about the kinds of abuse and exploitation that are enabled when one particularly powerful person comes to believe she has earned all of this through sheer individual merit” (Morgenstern qtd. in Jacobs 2023; Jacobs qtd. in Berraf 2024). It is the same internalization, along with her technical prowess, status, and connections, which enable Lydia Tár to continuously abuse her position and power while facing little to no consequences for her actions until the end of the film. In this world that she views as hers to exploit, Tár is confirmed to represent what Magnússon refers to as the normal exception. This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, *Tár*’s viewers are likely to consider the maestro as “obscure, strange and even dangerous,” her entourage and audience within the film, on the other hand, see her as a competent, charismatic, charming and talented individual who is “fully accepted in [her] daily affairs” (Magnússon 2020, 27) (Berraf 2024).

Another type of abusive behavior repeatedly shown in the movie is Lydia’s favoritism towards young, talented female musicians working under her supervision, to whom she often feels attraction. This tendency is made clear by the difference in treatment received by Francesca, an aspiring conductor working as the maestro’s assistant, in contrast to Olga Metkina, a young cellist freshly landed in Berlin from Russia. Building on Greenblatt’s description of power dynamics, it can be observed that the conductor uses a form of containment I would like to refer to as suppressive agency on Francesca. The term agency is understood as defined by Maria F. Malmström: “Agency is a universal capacity to act, but it is socio-culturally mediated, i.e., agency is locally defined” (Malmström 2012, 24; Malmström qtd. in Berraf 2024). This description of the concept acknowledges both the individual capacity to act as well as the role of the social sphere and context in regulating this capacity. Here, Tár is consciously keeping her assistant’s hopes of climbing the hierarchical ladder despite being unwilling to offer her more significant opportunities.

Francesca is thus given just enough of the potentiality and illusion of having the power to described by Lukes (Lukes 2005, 69; Lukes qtd. in Berraf 2024) to keep quiet, all the while never fully being able to actualize said power and turn it into the ability Pitkin talks about (Pitkin1972, 276; Pitkin qtd. in Berraf 2024). Although suppressive agency gives the subordinated subject enough of the illusion of agency necessary to keep them under the perpetrator's control, as with any other form of power, its use on others only provides a temporary form of complete control. This is illustrated by the fact that Francesca grows more and more irritated by Lydia's behavior as time goes by, to the point of finally breaking out of the state of containment, exploitation, and complicity by quitting her job, a form of subversion, as a result of the maestro's selection of "someone more…more experienced" (Field 2022, 1:41:45-1:41:50; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024) for the role of assistant maestro. The director implies that this subversiveness runs deeper than a mere break of professional ties, as it is assumed that Francesca is the person who collects and/or fabricates evidence condemning her former employer's sexual misconduct, leading to her cancellation (Berraf 2024).

Nonetheless, despite the preferential treatment given to Olga based on the maestro's implied romantic interest in her as well as her professional containment of Francesca as an assistant also being personally motivated, the relationships of both women with Tár also seem driven by their professional ambitions, making them complicit in their containment. This transactionality is not only present in the conductor's relationships with Olga and Francesca; it is recurrent in all her relationships, a fact that is even pointed out by Sharon in the movie: "There's only one relationship you've ever had that wasn't. And she [Petra] is sleeping in the room next door" (Field 2022, 2:14:40-2:14:59; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). In fact, her relationship with Sharon is, in itself, no different from the one she entertains with the younger women since Sharon both enables Lydia through her silence while benefiting from keeping her at the top. As pointed out by Nina Hoss, who plays Sharon, "There is a certain trait of a personality that is not innocent; they want something from the partnership as well" (Hoss 2022, 15:56-16:05; Hoss qtd. in Berraf 2024) and, in this particular case, "she gets the glam out of it, and they're THE couple of Berlin… someone who would lead the one big orchestra in Berlin, you're invited all the time, you travel the world!" (Hoss 2023, 8:31-8:44; Hoss qtd. in Berraf 2024). Similarly, while Tár uses her power over the two younger girls for personal gains and motives, both Francesca and Olga are partially contained not only by the maestro but also by the opportunities that being around such an influential musician

entail. Silencing as a form of oppression, therefore, appears on various levels, which can be visually illustrated through Esther Miedema, Christoforos-Dimitrios Zafeiris, and Nicky Pouw's visual metaphor for silencing as a black box (See Appendix, Fig 16) (Miedema et al. 2022, 7; Berraf 2024). Despite being initially made to describe the silencing of activists and scholars, this silencing box can also be used to visualize the types of silencing faced by any victim of an abuse of power and oppression. Silencing is understood to range from active to passive (or, in other words, up-front to subtle); it can occur on an individual, group, or collective level and can range from being self-imposed to imposed. The scholars also note "that [they] do not seek to depict these forms or categories as mutually exclusive" (Miedema et al. 2022, 6). For instance, a victim can simultaneously be silenced on an individual and collective level; moreover, said silencing can range from being self-imposed to imposed. This highlights how silencing is not a one-dimensional process and how various forms of silencing can interact with each other to create layers, rendering the process of breaking out of one's silence more difficult (Berraf 2024).

Through this illustration of the possible types of silences and silencing, it is easier to understand that silencing in *Tár* is imposed on the two younger artists on all three levels (individual, group, and collective) simultaneously. Containment is upheld by the power of the individual as embodied by Lydia, the group in the form of the orchestra/Sharon (who is aware of Lydia's ways and favoritism), as well as the collective, which in this case is the classical music industry. Although the first two are very explicitly present as part of the plot, it is also made just as evident that the classical music industry is prone to corruption due to the competitiveness and connection-based favoritism present in the field. Furthermore, silence in *Tár* constantly moves from one end of the spectrum to the other as it is both self-imposed out of ambition or personal affection for the maestro in Francesca's case and imposed by the fear of being shunned by the industry like Krista Taylor was (Berraf 2024).

4.2.3. Haunting Guilt and Cancel Culture

With its ending, *Tár* explores current issues related to cancel culture, a contemporary term rooted in our ever-changing conceptualizations of power, knowledge, truth, politics, and the history of censorship. As mentioned in this work's introduction, Foucault's conceptualization of power is closely related to knowledge and how it is spread through discourse. As cancel culture

mainly takes place on social media through the spreading of one's knowledge of an influential person's wrongdoings, with the aim to eradicate them from the realm of visibility, it is essential to discuss how truth functions in this context. Nonetheless, cancel culture does not necessarily prevent celebrities from inflicting harm upon others. In fact, the fear of getting canceled may solely result in said celebrities being more thorough about covering the tracks of their wrongdoings in order to avoid being exposed and, thus, retain their power over others. In *The Political Function of the Intellectual*, Foucault describes the intricacies of what has often been referred to by the French philosopher himself and scholars alike as the "regime of truth." He argues that

> [t]he important point here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power. […] Truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1977 "The Political Function of the Intellectual", 13; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024)

This quote suggests that any knowledge can be circulated as truth regardless of whether it is factual or not. This is imperative to remember throughout this discussion, as there is no denying that the video recording of Tár's interactions with Max at Julliard was edited to frame the altercation as sexual rather than confrontational (Berraf 2024).

While the allegations made on social media in relation to the conductor's behavior towards Max were fabricated, she is hiding skeletons in her closet that would point to real, repressed, and silenced misconduct from the past. Field refrains from presenting his viewers with any scenes in which Tár crosses the line between mentor and mentee with any of the characters seen alive in the movie (Olga and Francesca). However, the transactionality of all her relationships is implied to have been, at times, also sexual. For instance, her possession of the same red purse (See Appendix, Fig 17) (Field 2022, 43:05) held by Whitney, the fan she was flirting with in the movie's second scene when coming back home from her work trip, may be interpreted in ambiguous ways. It is evident that Tár has the financial means to buy the same red Birkin she complimented Whitney on, yet the bag does not reappear until the maestro comes back from another trip to New York,

where Whitney is based, to face a lawsuit filed by Krista's parents. This subtle callback implies that the two women saw each other again after their first encounter was captured on screen, and a potential sexual relationship could have occurred between the two. This fairly well-hidden detail points to a pattern in which Tár uses women, including her partner, to get what she wants, whether that is a bag she likes, sexual pleasure, or outstanding musical performances, therefore, emulating the type of abuse typically found within heteronormative relationships such as cheating, gaslighting, lying and ghosting (Berraf 2024).

This pattern is confirmed by the fight that follows Lydia's entrance into her family home that same evening. Sharon confronts Tár by saying the following: "I tried calling you last night. Did you have fun with her [Olga]? There are many things I accept about you. And in the end, I'm sure I could get over something like this" (Field 2022, 2:12:44-2:13:10; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). Here, Sharon recognizes Lydia's tendency to "have fun" with younger women and, although Olga rejected Lydia's invitation to dinner that night, she hints at the fact that this has not been the first time the maestro disappeared on her partner to spend the night with other women. What is even more interesting about this conversation is how Sharon frames her partner's extra-marital affairs as something she could get past. This very small part of the fight proves that the concertmaster chooses to gloss over many things about Tár, confirming both Sharon's self-imposed silencing and her position as a silent enabler. As the conversation escalates at the mention of Krista Taylor's death and the accusations surrounding it, it is not Tár's potential involvement in the tragic passing of the violinist that is questioned but her lack of adherence to "the rules" since, as Sharon puts it, "it's got nothing to do with what they're accusing you of. It's a simple matter of not warning me that our family is in danger" (Field 2022, 2:13:35-2:13:54; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). This telling statement once again reinforces the idea that Tár's power extends beyond herself to the group since, had she played by the rules of her relationship as she did "when [she] first arrived here [Berlin] as a guest conductor looking for a permanent position" (Field 2022, 2:14:11-2:14:23; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024) by asking for Sharon's counsel, the latter would have helped the maestro silence the case, regardless of whether or not the accusations are legitimate. Based on these interactions, it may be inferred that Sharon's position in Tár's pyramid of power is much more complex than that of someone self-imposing their own silence. The concertmaster has the power to influence the group and the collective as a result of her importance in the orchestra as well as her knowledge of the intricacies of the industry, and yet, she chooses to ignore Tár's wrongdoings

and abuses of power as long as she is consulted on the issues at hand. As such, Sharon is both a silent and active enabler of Tár's abuse by holding power over the orchestra and giving the maestro the same power to described by Pitkin as "capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal" (Pitkin 1972, 276; Pitkin qtd. in Berraf 2024) to enter the industry (Berraf 2024).

For Sharon, the question of Tár's guilt regarding the case of the violinist is unimportant for her support for the maestro. However, Lydia's guilt and deep involvement in the young woman's death can only be described as haunting. Despite the fact that there are no physical interactions between Tár and Krista in the movie, the maestro is haunted by her prior connection to the redhead since her ghost appears to follow her. Not only is the ghost present in the background of multiple scenes (See Appendix, Fig 18), it can even be physically seen by Petra, who, after calling Lydia for comfort, stares at her door frame and gets scared by the ghostly presence following her father (Field 2022, 1:57:45-1:58:12; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). Moreover, after Francesca announces Krista's death to Tár and before any accusation is even made, the conductor's priority is to get her assistant to erase any trace of correspondence or link between them, highlighting a prominent level of anxiety that points to having something to hide. Despite her best effort to repress any thoughts about Krista, Tár repeatedly faces audio-visual reminders of Krista in the form of symbols (See Appendix, Fig 19) drawn on the book sent to her by Krista prior to her passing, on Petra's table, on the metronome that goes off on its own, waking her up at night as well as in the form of the same two notes repeating over and over again, interrupting her work and sleep. This recurrent acoustic and visual uncanny is especially important to highlight since it is representative of the deceased abused haunting the abuser. While Krista's passing puts a halt to her ability to physically speak for herself about the abuse she suffered at the hands of Tár, her spirit continues to be heard in the form of repetitive, haunting sounds and drawings. As pointed out by Sigmund Freud, "Many people experience the feeling [the uncanny or Unheimlich] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (Freud 1955, 241; Freud qtd. in Berraf 2024) therefore, Krista's haunting of Tár's family house and former apartment is exceptionally disturbing to her psyche (Berraf 2024).

This clever use of ghosts and the haunted house allows for the victimized to break the silence imposed on her beyond the grave, having real consequences on her abuser's life since Tár's restlessness eventually leads to a psychic breakdown in which she pushes her replacement conductor, Elliot Kaplan, off the podium and beats him in front of the orchestra and audience.

Seeing someone whom she considers mediocre conducting her score instead of her triggered a deep, unsettling feeling which, she decides, can only be resolved by disposing of her double and "substitut[ing] the extraneous self for [her] own" (Freud 1955, 234; Freud qtd. in Berraf 2024). While these uncanny experiences may give the impression of being coincidental and unrelated at first, the fragments of e-mails Lydia is desperately trying to conceal contextualize the reason for these strong repressed emotions and guilt. These e-mails provide concrete evidence that Tár does, in fact, have a pattern of luring in talented young women, exploiting them—if not sexually, professionally—and disposing of them when she does not need them anymore. For the first time in the movie, Lydia is explicitly shown to have used her power and influence to spread what Foucault would refer to as her own regime of truth (Foucault 1976, 13; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024) to blacklist Krista from the music industry (Berraf 2024).

This blacklisting seems to have been caused by the maestro's personal issues with the violinist as some of the e-mails sent to Francesca by Krista (See Appendix, Fig 20) contain the following fragments: "Okay, she hates me…"; "Can it be so casual for someone to so suddenly ghost someone they were so ENRAPTURED BEYOND COMPREHENSION about?"; "I understand what you're saying about her, about life, about" or "Why do I have to beg for her to be a human?" (Field 2022, 1:21:44; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). These e-mails may only show Krista's side of the story and do not elaborate on the reasons behind her removal from Tár's orchestra; however, the maestro does recognize Krista's talent on multiple occasions, putting the hypothesis of a lack of musical gift to rest. What confirms the hypothesis of a personal conflict being at the root of the maestro's abuse of power is the fact that she describes Krista as having "something not quite right about her" and "making demands" (Field 2022, 1:08:52-1:09:02; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024), in an attempt to gaslight Francesca into thinking that Krista was the root of the problem. By destroying any chances for the young conductor to find work as part of another orchestra on a global scale, Tár does not only silence Krista's own voice, but she also silences her talent and music. The silencing of her purpose in life is likely to have led to Krista's suicide, yet it is also noticeable that the young woman's voice is never heard in the movie, even when she was still alive. We only get to see her silently watching the maestro from the audience, see her ghost lingering around Tár, or hear of her through other characters (Berraf 2024).

As the audience discovers more evidence of misconduct and abuse of power, Tár's calm, likable, and methodical façade crumbles. The final agent in the movement of subversion rising

against Lydia Tár comes at the hands of social media, or cancel culture, as the fabricated video of her interaction with Max goes viral at the same time as Krista Taylor's parents sue the famous conductor for having abused the redhead to her death. The accusations surrounding Krista's case heighten the credibility of the fake video, causing a butterfly effect where every piece of evidence put forward, be it true or false, is assumed to be true by default. In a sense, cancel culture is represented here as a form of structural oppression as understood by Haslanger: the fabrication of the video is not only wrong on an individual level, it is "a social/political wrong" (Haslanger 2012, 314; Haslanger qtd. in Berraf 2024) due to the political undertones of cleansing the social sphere by canceling problematic and potentially harmful individuals. Ironically, it is the same power Lydia once used on Krista in the form of the circulation of knowledge, or in this case, fabricated truths (Foucault 1977 "The Political Function of the Intellectual", 12-14; Foucault qtd. in Berraf 2024), that people on social media used to cancel Tár (Berraf 2024).

As a result of the allegations, she is pushed away from her home and her workplace and is forced to retreat into her lower-middle-class, wooden childhood house. As Lydia enters, the camera fixes the door, no longer following the main character around but rather observing her from afar. The lighting in this scene relies on the house's old yellow lightbulbs which reflect an orange hue onto the deep brown wood. While warm tones are often associated with warmth and homeliness, when contrasted with the sunlit and bright, white lighting used in the rest of the movie, the dimness of these yellowish lightbulbs, rather than creating a sense of Heimlich, mixes with the narrowness of the entrance to create a gloomy atmosphere, matching Lydia's attitude towards her past. It is in that same house that the audience is faced with one final revelation that entirely shatters the main character's persona: her birth name is Linda Tarr and the alias "Tár" is nothing but a mask (Field 2022, 2:24:19; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). What this subtle stylization and change of name highlights is Lydia's need to dissociate from her former, more modest life and silence her former self for reasons that remain unknown to the film's watchers. While the movie never reveals the real motives behind this change of names, it is safe to assume that said switch was made in order to better fit into the highly coded, white, and privileged world of classical music. By changing her name, Tár suppresses and silences her former self since if anyone, be it an employer, colleagues, acquaintances, or even fans, looks into her under this new name, her past life, career path, and reality would never appear within the search results. The movie does contain a scene in which an unknown individual, assumed to be the conductor herself, edits her Wikipedia page. If one pauses

at the right time, said page mentions her father's name, Zoltán Tarr, and describes him as a "Hungarian immigrant" (Field 2022, 00:36:02-00:36:05). It can, therefore, be assumed that the main reason that pushed the main character to change her name is to disassociate from her immigrant, working-class background. However, this hypothesis is dismantled by the availability of her family background on Wikipedia and the fact that the stylized version of her name continues to tie her to her Hungarian roots. Tár, which translates to bold in Hungarian, includes a diacritical mark on the "a," something that reflects the name's origin. Another plausible explanation is her potential fabrication of some of the conductor's credentials(Berraf 2024).

This purposeful distancing from any association with her family is highlighted by her brother's assessment of his sister's situation and cancellation as her "not seem[ing] to know where the hell [she] come[s] from or where [she is] going" (Field 2022, 2:27:15-2:27:23; Field qtd. in Berraf 2024). Yet, despite being at the lowest point of her career and having lost all her supports, fans and loved ones, it is clear that Tár still sees herself as superior to the rest of her biological family. This sense of superiority is signified by Field and Hoffmeister's use of the stairs to, much like it was done in the Julliard scene, elevate the conductor above her interlocutor. She remains on top of the stairs, appearing bigger and more important than her brother, as she continues to deny the accusations made against her, pretending that she is fine. As such, similarly to the way she was trying to contain other people and events to maintain her power, control, status, and reputation when confronted with the consequences of her own actions and behaviors, Tár still attempts to contain parts of herself by wearing the mask of Lydia Tár and fainting ignorance on the downfall of her professional and personal life. Here, containment is self-imposed as well as imposed on others in an attempt to cope with the loss of control and hold that keeping the persona of Lydia Tár up allowed Linda to have (Berraf 2024).

Tár provides an interesting insight into the ambiguous and complex ways in which power can be used and presented, as well as the ease and confidence with which many abuse it within the entertainment industry. While the movie is not explicitly about a Me Too story since the main character's past alleged sexual and romantic involvement with both Krista and Francesca is only implied, it illustrates and displays the same patterns of abuse, domination, containment, and subversion that can be found in most Me Too cases. What is even more crucial to understand in this context is that while it sounds fair for Cate Blanchett, as the face of the movie, to state the following: "Of course [there is] cancel culture… you could lump #MeToo in with that, but I think

that's a big generalization. […] But they're plot devices and textures from the real world, they're not the only thing we're talking about. It is, dare I say it, more existential than that" (Blanchett 2023; Blanchett qtd. in Berraf 2024), this argument is rooted in a reductive view of the Me Too movement as well as its goals and achievements. Although Blanchett and Field are not wrong in saying that their movie is about the complexity of power in a broader sense, their consideration of the Me Too movement as a mere plot device used for the exploration of bigger, "more existential" (Blanchett 2023; Blanchett qtd. in Berraf 2024) issues is highly problematic. It implies the same now widespread notion associated with the #MeToo which considers the movement's online declination as nothing more than a gender issue when it is much more complex than solely being about the exposure of men-on-women sexual assaults and the cancellation of said male perpetrators. Had Tár been a man displaying the exact same patterns of predatory behavior towards young women, the movie would have been, without a doubt, accepted as a Me Too film, yet because the perpetrator is a lesbian woman, it is framed as being about more than, according to their views, the more simplistic patriarchal portrayals of the inner workings of power. This attitude is highly dismissive of the important work and advancements brought forward by feminism, feminist film, and film theory on the treatment of women both on and off screen, as well as their rightful denouncing of the role played by the patriarchy in said mistreatment (Berraf 2024).

By minimizing the issues brought to light by the Me Too movement and confining it to male-on-female violence, this reductive discourse effectively silences the movement by adding to its stigmatization. I would therefore like to propose to reframe *Tár*, despite its director's reluctance to do so, as a Me Too film since, as the testimonies that came out of said movement successfully demonstrated, people's experience of abuse is not limited by or defined based on gender. Moreover, the movie is already regarded by many critics as one that deals with "our current moment, and all the whirlpools of discourse around #MeToo and "cancel culture"" (Loughrey 2023; Loughrey qtd. in Berraf 2024). Loughrey, the chief film critic of *Independent* magazine, also evaluates *Tár* as having successfully done so in a way that rarely "feels like a polemic or a pat on the back" which once again proves the power and impact of Field making his perpetrator a woman. Femininity is, therefore, weaponized and plays the role of a shield behind which the director and actors hide in order to distance themselves from the Me Too movement, potentially leading to its lack of consideration as a space for the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too narratives. As the film fulfills the remaining criteria that make stories fit into the category of Me Too narratives—namely,

the repeated use of power for sexual and professional favors by a powerful figure, the exposure of said misconduct through social media, and the public downfall of the perpetrator—*Tár* could have been a useful to the re-creational eyewitnessing of the very essence of the movement: sexual and psychological violence, as well as silencing, is not limited to heteronormative relationships and both the perpetrators and survivors could be anyone regardless of the position they occupy within the western gender order (Berraf 2024).

This unwillingness to be associated with the social media-based movement does not take away from Field's skillful handling of the sensitive and current topics of power imbalances and cancel culture. His characterization of Tár as both charming and problematic allows the audience to reconsider their own attitudes toward the immediate cancellation of celebrities based on limited evidence. Viewers are given many reasons to root against Tár, but they are also given access to the unedited footage of her interaction with Max, confirming from the start that the video was fabricated while still having the power to destroy someone's life and career. While Lydia Tár's use of her power for sexual profit is heavily implied but never seen on screen, it is certain that she tried to dispose of Krista through her international blacklisting. Thus, with this movie, Field forces his audience to quarrel with their instinct to defend a character who is being framed while also having seen her abuse her power in many other real instances. As this aspect of the movie is left unresolved, we are pushed to reconcile with these contradicting thoughts somewhere in the middle: it is crucial to identify the problematic behaviors not only in Lydia Tár and the real-life people in power she mirrors but also in social media's tendency to believe accusations against famous artists regardless of their veracity. Although #MeToo, the Me Too movement, and cancel culture are important forces of subversion and resistance against structural cells of power, cases and situations related to these movements should continue to be critically, fairly assessed and thought about (Berraf 2024).

This reading, therefore, proves *Tár*'s validity as part of the re-creational eyewitnessing process since it highlights the crushing consequences of psychological and sexual abuse commonly described within Me Too narratives. However, it also shows that the film also engages in the opposite of re-creational eyewitnessing, the canceling of the Me Too movement. By rejecting any association of *Tár* to the Me Too movement, Field not only engages in the stigmatization of Me Too narratives but also in the same cancel culture he explicitly denounces in his movie. Britannica describes cancel culture as

> the removal ("canceling") of support for individuals and their work—or for a group of people, an organization, or a company and their work—due to an opinion or action on their part deemed objectionable to the parties "calling" them out. The "canceling" is often orchestrated to deny or frustrate the expression of the called-out party's beliefs or work. (Britannica 2025)

In the case of Hollywood, cancel culture often goes beyond canceling people and into canceling and boycotting films, therefore affecting their box office success, chances for award nominations, and financial revenues. While it remains problematic for the reasons mentioned above, Field's effort to conceal the movement's relevance to his film should be considered in relation to the strength of cancel culture as a phenomenon and the power it holds over people's careers in the entertainment industry. The director's efforts to preserve himself and his work from cancel culture require a complete dissociation from the nowadays divisive feminist and Me Too movements—the latter being especially controversial under its social media form, namely #MeToo. Examples of such canceling and boycotting are numerous and vary in the rationale that motivates viewers to abstain from watching the canceled product. For instance, after losing his libel case against *The Sun* in London, American actor Johnny Depp was canceled and, consequently, asked to resign from numerous projects, notably *Pirates of the Caribbeans* (Maddaus 2022) and the second installment of the Fantastic Beasts franchise *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (Rubin 2020). Following the broadcasting of the Depp v. Heard public trial held in Virginia in 2022, the public opinion of both actors shifted, resulting in the cancellation and online humiliation of Heard and Depp's rise in popularity (Berraf 2023). This led to the boycott of Heard's subsequent projects like *Aquaman 2* (2023), with fans of the franchise filing a petition on Change.org to remove Heard from the film. While the petition did not succeed in completely removing Heard's character from the film, it garnered 4.6 million signatures (Change.org), leading to the diminishing of her role to 11 lines (Acuna 2023).

This uncovers a cycle of fear of being canceled that ironically leads cancel culture to spread further. Much like is the case in Bentham's panopticon, cancel culture's main consequence on Hollywood is what Foucault refers to as "the perfection of power" (Foucault 1977 *Discipline and Punish*, 201). It is no longer institutions that surveil the filmmakers but the filmmakers out of fear of the repercussions of being canceled by the audiences that keep themselves and others under surveillance, rendering the exercise of power in the form of institutional censorship unnecessary.

The Me Too movement brought oppositional narratives to the forefront, which were received with some degree of resistance by the Hollywood community as it directly affected their work, wages, and behavioral freedom. Examples of the movement's impact on Hollywood are numerous, such as the change in the frequency of the hiring of female film writers by Hollywood producers (Layne 2021) as well as the standardization of the employment of an intimacy coordinator on set to "ensure the actors' safety… particularly for scenes involving nudity or simulated sex" (Manelis 2023). Taking these factors into consideration, it is not unlikely for fear of being canceled by either his peers or his audience to push Field—voluntarily or not—to participate in the canceling of the movement despite his fierce criticism of cancel culture in *Tár*.

5. Conclusion: Watching Films as a Re-creational Eyewitnessing of Me Too Narratives

The Me Too movement was a historical turning point in contemporary American history and for the anti-sexual misconduct movement. It emerged at a time of great political and ideological tension following the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States despite the sexual harassment claims made against him. It is relevant that, as of the writing of this thesis, President Trump has been re-elected as the United States' 47th President. This re-election, along with the overturning of Weinstein's New York Court verdict, highlights the relevance of the issues denounced by #MeToo in 2017 to the current cultural, political and historical climate. The Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly sexual harassment scandals also heavily participated in the heightening of the anxiety surrounding the increased normalization of sexual misconduct and the culture of silence that goes along with it. Nevertheless, it is only following the uncovering of Harvey Weinstein's decades-long history of sexual harassment and assault that the movement took the shape it is now most well-known as #MeToo. While Milano's 2017 tweet did not technically launch the movement as Burke's work stretches a decade prior to it, it ignited a global online initiative that translated into physical marches and concrete judicial consequences. Me Too narratives are, nevertheless, not limited to the retellings of Weinstein's crimes despite the executive producer's condemnation by the New York court becoming a symbol of the movement's potential to lead to change. #MeToo's impact was felt like a wave of testimonies flooding the social media space with powerful descriptions of how many figures who, at the time, thought of themselves as immune from consequences took advantage of others by utilizing their status and power to sexually abuse them. This weaponization of their power for their sexual benefit is often combined with deeply rooted misogyny and other forms of harmful behaviors, such as bullying. In this sense, Perkins claims:

> I don't think he's a sex addict, he's a power addict. Everything he did, everything that drove him was about dominance, with men and women. He put an enormous amount of energy into humiliating men and an enormous amount of energy into getting women to submit. And getting men to submit. That was what drove him, his overarching need for power. (Perkins 2017, 15:29-16:02)

Weinstein, much like Ailes, O'Reilly, the fictional character Tár, and other notable figures who were accused of sexual harassment and/or abuse as a result of the 'Weinstein effect,' a side effect of the Me Too movement, all have this same exact specificity in common: an overarching need for power. This need to dominate others verbally, physically, and sexually makes the kind of power perpetrators seek within Me Too narratives similar to Foucault's conceptualization of power as domination (Foucault 1982). However, as demonstrated by the analysis of the films selected for this doctoral thesis, power takes multiple other forms including the power to as understood by Pitkin (Pitkin 1972) and Lukes (Lukes 2005). In most of the Me Too narratives explored, the power to takes the verbal form of speaking out (Serisier 2018) and is actualized through the coming together of multiple voices denouncing a common aggressor. #MeToo allowed survivors of sexual violence to create a sisterhood, a community based on a shared experience and yearning for change. It is that common determination to denounce sexual misconduct under all its forms that creates a link between Me Too narratives. As such, regardless of the fact that the Ailes case could easily be categorized as a proto-Me Too narrative if only evaluated based on the time in which the events unfolded, the survivors' stories and testimonies should still be recognized as Me Too narratives by virtue of their description of the same patterns of manipulative and harmful behaviors common to all Me Too narratives.

This thesis has attempted to investigate the potential usefulness of film for the re-creational eyewitnessing of the Me Too movement. Re-creational eyewitnessing builds on Peter Burke's understanding of eyewitnessing as essential to the creation of historical archives. The historian describes the aim of his book as demonstrating the fact that "images, like texts and oral testimonies, are an important form of historical evidence. They record acts of eyewitnessing" (Burke 2001, 14). Based on this idea, this thesis has attempted to extend this understanding to another visual medium, film. However, film differs from photographs, the type of images that Burke mainly advocates for, in its relation to fictionality. Photographs capture authentic moments in time, which makes them valuable historical evidence due to their ability to freeze a historical reality. In contrast, film, depending on its genre, either recreates actual events or creates its own alternative realities and narratives. Based on this difference, the thesis first assumed that the act of re-creational eyewitnessing can only be carried out with the use of films that are heavily inspired by real, historical events, such as documentary dramas. Nonetheless, in an effort to test out the overall potential of the medium for re-creational eyewitnessing, this doctoral thesis engaged in the

investigation of four movies that range in degrees of fictionality but all relate to a similar historical context. Here, Me Too films are understood as films that either portray people and events directly related to the Me Too movement or that have a connection to the anti-sexual misconduct movement.

The analysis of four Me Too films selected for this research—Jay Roach's *Bombshell* (2019), Kitty Green's *The Assistant* (2019), Todd Field's *Tár* (2022), and, lastly, Maria Schrader's *She Said* (2022)—led to a variety of findings. *Bombshell* allowed this research to question the objectivity of films that claim to be historically accurate since one of the two real women depicted, Megyn Kelly, filmed and uploaded a detailed group reaction to the fictionalization of Ailes survivors' story. Kelly revealed an array of historical inaccuracies and denounced the way in which the male-directed film, to a certain extent, hurts survivors by using the composite character Kayla Pospisil to shift the blame from Ailes to older survivors. Pospisil represents a common form of response to and coping mechanism used to deal with trauma, blame-shifting. As explained by Whiting, there is an

> unfortunate tendency to fault people for being hurt was shown in a study on the "hindsight effect," where research participants read different versions of a story. In one, a character was raped at the end, and the other had a neutral ending. Those who read the version with the assault were more likely to select evidence that questioned the decisions of the victim, even though there was no reason they should have been hurt. This "I knew-it-all-along" bias happens when people claim reasons to make events seem predictable, even if they weren't. It is easier to blame someone for their harm than it is to accept that it could happen to anyone. (Whiting 2019)

Based on Kelly's perceived power as a celebrity, Pospisil's character assumes that it would have been easy for the star anchor to report Ailes and thus prevent other women, including herself, from being sexually abused by him later down the line. While the character's reasoning seems, to a certain extent, to make sense as a potential response to trauma, in her reaction to the film, Kelly argues that the Me Too movement has demonstrated that none of the survivors felt the need to shift the blame from the perpetrator to prior victims (Kelly 2020, 23:42-24:45). On the contrary, despite its potential weaponization by white feminism (hooks 1986, 128), the sisterhood bond created by survivors' common experience of being abused into silence makes them more empathetic and understanding towards one another. Kelly assumes that the creation and inclusion of this victim-

blaming scene is a direct result of the script-writer's gender since she felt like "that was written by a man" (Kelly 2020, 23:42-24:45). Pospisil's fictional character is also used to portray the sexual harassment on screen without recreating the real women's abuse. This was also problematized as, on the one hand, it prevented the re-victimization of real survivors while, on the other hand, although done with her consent, risked bordering on victimizing Robbie. It highlights the impact of the filmmakers' genders in the way in which Me Too stories and narratives are represented, something which was proven to be somewhat accurate with the analysis of the three other movies. This interview also uncovers a tendency of victims to deflect the blame onto themselves since Kelly confessed that she also sometimes feels like she could have done more to prevent others from being harmed (Kelly 2020, 23:42-24:45). Despite this major flaw in fictionalization of real-life-narratives, *Bombshell* proves to be successful in its re-creational eyewitnessing of Ailes' survivors' narratives as it represents the main events and claims in a relatively factual manner. Its strength also lies in its director and its screenwriter's emphasis on the fact that sexual abuse can happen to anyone regardless of status, fame, power, or political orientation. As mentioned in both the introduction and the section examining the film, due to the virality of #MeToo, the movement is often associated with the feminist women of Hollywood, making it a rather left-oriented collection of people.

The second movie examined, *She Said* attempts to tell Me Too narratives using an alternative point of view, that of the journalists who broke the Weinstein story. It mirrors the same attitude towards the representation of rape narratives as Green's *The Assistant* since Schrader also, for the most part, omits the perpetrator from her depiction. Instead, the German director and the film's writer Rebecca Lenkiewicz highlights the tumultuous data collection process involved with the public uncovering of Weinstein's abuse, consequently shining a light on his survivors' stories. The section on *She Said* focuses on comparing and contrasting the film with its original script, the book that inspired the latter, as well as external, written historical archives. Doing so allowed the thesis to have a better understanding of the effects of the use of film as a historical trace from the survivors' perspective. As was the case with *Bombshell,* it was noticed that the filmic recreation of real Me Too narratives could either have a positive, healing effect on survivors or, on the contrary, cause unintentional psychological distress. While the film's plot centers around the progressive merging of Kantor and Twohey's private and professional lives as they get more and more involved with the famous producer's history of misconduct, it also heavily deals with the portrayal of

survivors. This makes it an interesting site of negotiated cinema since it portrays Me Too subjects in an oppositional manner but also shields, to some extent, a flawed institution from criticism. Based on the analysis of the film, Schrader and Lenkiewicz mirror the book's apparent desire to paint the *Times* in a positive light. Despite the fact that it was undeniably instrumental in the exposure of Weinstein as a predator, as McGowan notes, "I called the *New York Times*. I blew it wide open, not them. They won the Pulitzer and I'm the one hard-up for money" (McGowan qtd. in Gilbey 2019). *She Said* glorifies the work of the journalists which is what makes it hard to watch for many survivors such as Perkins since it shifts the conversation from their stories to a third party's. From a historical perspective, capturing Kantor and Twohey's point of view offers a new outlook into the Me Too narratives uncovered by the two women as it depicts the difficulty of breaking one's silence individually. However, it is natural for the likes of Perkins and McGowan to feel like their narratives and, therefore, themselves, were used and exploited for entertainment purposes. While this doctoral thesis' investigation confirms the existence of two attitudes towards Me Too stories' representation, the work and efforts made by the three female filmmakers to give survivors the opportunity to contribute to their own stories' portrayal should still be valued. This is due to the fact that the thesis acknowledges the difficulty of balancing between respecting living survivors' wishes and needs while constructing the film in a way that would still allow it to keep the journalists' stories at the center of the narrative and be marketable. Nevertheless, as highlighted by O'Connor's participation in the movie by reading her memo—previously leaked by the New York Times without her consent—out loud, which she describes as "healing" (O'Connor qtd. in Keegan 2022), *She Said* simultaneously illustrates both the idea of successfully speaking out for others and, on the contrary, when film activism fails to mirror survivors' desired representation, speaking instead of them. Moreover, despite this dilemma of trauma representation, it also highlights that Me Too films can open pathways for healing by allowing survivors to take back control over the narrative through their participation in the making and shaping of their stories' narrative adaptation. One of this section's main takeaways is that dramatizations of recent history are time-bound, making them historically valuable but putting them at risk of becoming outdated. This is exemplified by a part of *She Said*'s 'Where Are They Now' epilogue retelling Weinstein's conviction by the New York court having been ruled out in 2024, two years following the motion picture's release.

Even though both *Bombshell* and *She Said* qualify as docudramas, their microhistorical analysis revealed their different approach to the topic of sexual abuse. By belonging to the same genre, both films overlap in their incorporation of real audio-visual elements (historical archives) instead of fictionally recreating the totality of the events they depict. Additionally, both movies aim to retell women's stories as accurately as possible, emphasizing historical accuracy or the docu in docudrama. While they remain dramatizations of history, docudramas still position themselves closer to reality than their fictional counterparts, dramas. Nevertheless, comparing both works emphasizes the difference in their handling of Me Too stories. *Bombshell* discusses a proto-MeToo story and aims to not only call out Roger Ailes' abuse of power but also humanize and amplify conservative survivors' voices. There is, therefore, an additional political dimension to the representation of this specific Me Too narrative as #MeToo and the narratives produced in relation to it often focus on women associated with liberal politics. Though *She Said* also attempts to provoke empathy for survivors by humanizing them and having them participate in the telling of their own stories—something which also explains Schrader's emphasis on the film being an adaptation of actual events—the film focuses on individual experiences and traumas. While the personal remains political in *She Said* by virtue of the very act of speaking out being rooted in breaking the status quo, the movie frames its narrative in a way that focuses on isolation, trauma, and empowerment instead of how survivors' political orientation plays a role in their silencing. Furthermore, Schrader also takes a female-gaze-inspired, oppositional approach to the depiction of Me Too narratives since, by choosing to tell Me Too stories from the perspective of the journalists collecting testimonies for their article, she forces her audience to focus on listening to survivors' stories and feel the consequences of abuse through their retelling of the aggressions. This is achieved through the lack of visual recreation and representation of any abuse on screen. In contrast, Roach chooses to look for an emotional response to abuse by showing a fictional example of Ailes' predatory and sexually abusive demands and practices. Therefore, while both Roach and Schrader's movies take a similar approach to the representation of Me Too stories by incorporating real elements into a fictional rendition of history, each tells their respective narratives in a distinctive way.

The Assistant was released the same year as *Bombshell* but deals with the representation of Me Too stories very differently. Kitty Green's work takes an oppositional approach to the Weinstein case due to her refusal to include any imagery of the executive producer or sexual

violence. The employer's character also remains nameless throughout the entire film with the only confirmation of his identity coming from interviews of Green. *The Assistant* attempts to highlight the banalization of abuse within competitive workplaces by not only hinting at sexual violence but, most importantly, focusing on the more ordinary, accepted forms of abuse. Green depicts Jane's employer in a rather similar way to Perkins' forecited description of Weinstein, that is, a man driven by his need to dominate both men and women in a variety of ways. Green also addresses the gendering of women's work within this abusive work environment. Women, as demonstrated by the contrast between Jane's tasks and the two male assistants', are restricted to care work. Male employees are, therefore, given more responsibility, which enables them to develop the skills necessary to progress within the industry. Jane, however, is in charge of taking care of the children, cleaning, picking up lunch, restocking her employer's medicine cabinet, and accompanying a young woman to her hotel. The female assistant acts as a caretaker not only for her nameless and faceless employer but also for her male colleagues. The office's atmosphere is dictated by the normative, silencing power of the producer, even in his absence. Green denounces the internalization of said abusive behavior by having Jane yell at the driver in the same way that she would get yelled at by her employer. The silencing of people working for abusive figures like Weinstein is therefore understood to occur on multiple levels, and their position is represented as more complex than simply being enabling. Jane is not only silenced by the power her employer holds over her but also by his general acceptance as a normal exception by everyone else around her. The director also puts great emphasis on the role of the human resources department in keeping employees like Jane from reporting potential misbehavior through gaslighting. The filmmaker's exploration of Me Too stories from a bottom looking up perspective enables the movie to focus on the internal systems that keep abusers in a position that allows the behavior to carry on. This oppositional portrayal of the issue, along with Green's almost complete omission of the abuser from her narrative, makes *The Assistant* a great example of how, using the female gaze, feminist counter-cinema can amplify Me Too stories without naming or running the risk of re-traumatizing real, specific survivors. Green's film is able to tell the story of a variety of women not by adapting their stories but by finding and representing the common elements within all the testimonies and interviews conducted by the filmmaker in the film's early developmental stage. Consequently, what makes *The Assistant* an interesting historical trace is not its realistic representation of a well-known Me Too story but its ability to take the focus away from perpetrators and back to the

movement's main concern: how abuse has been normalized and how perpetrators are systematically protected while victims are silenced. This analysis allowed this doctoral thesis to confirm the assumption that re-creational eyewitnessing does not completely rely on historical accuracy. It is just as helpful to the reconstruction of Me Too narratives to view them from an alternative perspective than it is to have the story unfold from the perpetrator or victim's.

The fourth movie was selected based on its plot's resemblance to Me Too narratives. *Tár*, much like Green's *The Assistant*, is inspired by real people and stories, but its characters are entirely fictional. Despite its depiction of the same patterns of behaviors, abuse of power, and manipulation found within all Me Too narratives, its director and writer, Todd Field, denies its link to the movement. Since the film is told from the perspective of Lydia Tár, a talented yet problematic star conductor, this section focuses on examining how power is used to retain one's grip and control over others. The movie's inspiration from the same predatory power dynamics omnipresent within the film industry, which the Me Too movement aims to oppose, was never denied. In fact, as mentioned in the section, Field confirms a direct link between his characterization of the conductor and his experience within the film industry (Field 2023b, 4:52-5:52). In his intervention for the MUBI podcast, he explains that he wanted to catch the fact that

> there's a reason people rise to power, and, as [Tár] would say, it's not always so polite. There's always going to be some roadkill for someone to reach that destination. […] That's fascinating to me how people are enabled to exist like that and have been, you know, from the beginning of time. This is nothing new. (Field 2023b, 6:10-6:34)

Tár does successfully capture this idea by showing how power is misused by the woman for her own benefit but also how enablers are sometimes also victims of a power imbalance despite having something to gain in exchange for their partially self-imposed silence. The movie captures how complex such power dynamics can be and the way in which, if this harmful use of power is kept up for an extended period, it can eventually lead to its exposure. Field complicated this aspect of the Me Too movement even further by associating it with cancel culture. While his main character is proven to be manipulative and abusive, although the sexual harassment is only implied but never mentioned or shown, she does not get canceled for the right reasons. Her social media led cancellation comes at the hand of edited footage of her confrontation with Max, one of her students,

at Julliard. Their interaction is falsely framed to be sexual, which amplifies Krista Taylor's claims against the maestro. While there is truth to the accusations made against her in relation to the deceased violinist, it is shadowed by the fabricated nature of the video that leads to the conductor's public demise. This puts viewers in a delicate position as they are made aware of both Tár genuine problematic behavior and use of her status and power over younger women and the falsehood of the video. Justice is therefore served, but not for the maestro's real abuse and alleged crimes. In spite of Field's canceling of the Me Too movement, its analysis from a gendered and microhistorical perspective corroborates its strong qualifications to be considered a Me Too film. This allows the section to reveal the presence of a negative stigma developed around the movement in the years that followed the hashtag's vital emergence, especially within republican circles (Brown 2022). The reasons behind Field's canceling of the Me Too movement remain unknown, however, it is likely the result of a paradoxical fear of cancel culture. What was also interesting to observe is his weaponization of both the main character's masculinity and femininity for different purposes. On the one hand, Tár is masculinized, making her a projection of normative masculinity onto a self-proclaimed butch female body. On the other hand, her identity as a woman is used to shield the film from being labeled as a Me Too film. Despite her gender, Tár does appear to conform to survivors' description of their power-fuel perpetrators such as Weinstein or Ailes. As such, her identification as a lesbian woman should not justify the movie's claim to be about more than the Me Too movement or cancel culture or its canceling of the social movements. *Tár* can, therefore, still serve as important role in the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too narratives as it has the potential to highlight the fact that survivors and perpetrators do not have to conform to a specific gendered position. It is the actions and behaviors of individuals that position them as a Me Too perpetrator.

As was the case with the aforementioned docudramas, *The Assistant* and *Tár* belong to the same genre of drama. While their subgenres somewhat differ from one another due to both movies' focus on different industries, namely music and film production, they both involve elements of a workplace drama, with *The Assistant* fully belonging to the subgenre while *Tár* only dealing with workplace abuse as part of its place. Despite both films being entirely fictional from the characters to the plot and their similar representation of Me Too stories from an atypical perspective (that of the perpetrator in Field's work and that of the perpetrator's assistant in Green's), their approaches and aims remain different. The analysis of both films reveals that while Green aims to denounce

the culture of silence systematically protecting abusers by looking at the issue from the bottom (an assistant working an entry job in the industry) up, Field explores the issue from a top down by adopting the abuser's position. Despite belonging to the same genre, this fundamental difference in narrative perspective results in both dramas painting a completely different picture of Me Too stories. *The Assistant* aids the audience in forming a better understanding of the complexity and abuse faced by employees of predatory men in power who are often instinctively assumed to be and labeled as enablers. In contrast, *Tár* highlights the corruptive force of gaining power over others. As such, both movies deal with the pervasiveness and normalization of abuse; however, they do so by illustrating the problem using opposite positions within the power hierarchy. Additionally, Green openly associates her work with the Me Too movement, highlighting the feminist movement as both the topic and the catalyst behind the creation and writing of the story. Thus, the filmmaker's embrace of the movement as needed to break the systematic barriers keeping women silenced is what makes her film a product of pro-MeToo activism. In contrast, Field rejects any association with the Me Too movement, lumping together the feminist initiative with cancel culture. Therefore, while his movie highlights issues targeted by the Me Too movement, he advocates for moving the conversation away from gender (and therefore away from #MeToo) and into the unavoidability of human corruption. Nevertheless, *Tár* remains a denunciation of the same abuse of power that the Me Too movement calls out, making it applicable to the re-creational eyewitnessing of the movement. Based on how differently both docudramas and dramas deal with the same themes, by analyzing the films from a microhistorical perspective, it can be concluded that, although movies belonging to the same genre have some similarities in the way they deal with sexual harassment and assault, genre does not determine how the message is conveyed.

The gendered, microhistorical analysis of these four films leads to a variety of results. First, a common finding throughout the examination of *Bombshell* (2019), *The Assistant* (2019), *Tár* (2022) and *She Said* (2022) was that the fictional narratives, regardless of their genre, do have the potential to be a great vessel for the re-creational eyewitnessing of the past. Film, much like photography, freezes moments in time, potentially aiding in their historical conservation by inserting the events within popular culture. In that sense, it is a valuable tool to either learn about Me Too narratives or the issues the movement aims to address, especially since film, as a medium, is particularly effective at engaging its audience's emotions and, therefore, at creating empathy. However, the given films also prove that fictionality can be both an asset and a disadvantage for

the medium's representation of Me Too narratives as, depending on which purpose it is utilized for, it may lead to various outcomes. For instance, in *The Assistant,* fictionality is utilized in a way that preserves survivors by choosing to address the greater systems that shield abusers such as normative work environment, human resources' gaslighting and silencing of predatory behavior and gendered care work, without presenting a living person's story in their stead. However, fictionalization of real events and people can also have negative repercussions on survivors, as illustrated by *Bombshell*'s use of Pospisil to confront Kelly's character for being complicit in the young girl's abuse due to the anchor's fear of breaking her silence. This form of victim-blaming, as pointed out by Kelly, was made possible by the writing of a fictional character into the story. Film, as a medium, can be useful to the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too stories and narratives, nevertheless, Me Too films need to be studied for both their plot's historical data and the intradiegetic narratives they introduce into said data. From a microhistorical perspective, both the historically accurate and inaccurate parts of each movie provided equally valuable information. While the historically sound parts accurately informed viewers about the different cases that inspired the movies (mainly Ailes and Weinstein) as well as the Me Too movement's main concerns, historical inaccuracies provided an opportunity to determine the filmmakers' attitudes towards the movement and survivors of sexual violence. As such, based on the four case studies provided, this doctoral thesis concludes that film, whether it chooses to mirror reality or fully embraces its fictionality, is undeniably valuable to the re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too narratives. Therefore, the successful re-creational eyewitnessing of history does not depend on the film's degree of historical accuracy but on getting the essence of the women's real-life experiences across. In other words, a successful re-creational eyewitnessing of Me Too narratives needs to inform the audience of the historical realities of silencing as well as sexual and psychological violence while presenting its message in a manner that sparks a conversation. Another important observation derived from the analysis of the selected corpus is the fact that re-creational eyewitnessing, in the context of Me Too films, does not always lead to the same kind of activism. While the four movies denounce the use and abuse of power over others for one's (sexual) benefit, *Bombshell*, *The Assistant*, and *She Said*'s message explicitly inserts them into the public discourse around the Me Too movement and sexual assault. However, *Tár* refuses to associate with such issues despite their presence within its plot. Despite Field's strong criticism of the toxicity of power dynamics within the entertainment industry, his activism is framed as more "sophisticated" than

the digital fourth-wave feminist activism associated with the Me Too movement, especially in the form of #MeToo. This leads the movie and its extradiegetic presence to engage in different types of activism. On the one hand, *Tár*'s story denounces workplace psychological and sexual abuse by exposing its consequences on the victims as well as on the perpetrator. On the other hand, rather than following the same path, the film's marketing deplores the corruption of the individual by power in a more general manner. This leaves the final decoding of the movie's message up to the audience to construct. While some may align with Field by finding a more existential message to the movie, others may be more likely to associate it with the type of gendered abuse advocated against by #MeToo. Me Too films can, therefore, be considered as political instruments used to amplify survivors' voices, thus creating an alternative commemorative place in which viewers' awareness of normalized sexual violence is heightened. They can also be understood as killjoys (Ahmed 2023) since, by making the audience face the realities of Me Too stories, Me Too films rob their viewers of the ability to feign ignorance on what goes on behind closed doors within and outside of Hollywood, and the abuse experienced by women in their workplace. While some of the more oppositional films, such as *She Said*, also provide survivors with a pathway for healing by allowing them to take at least partial control over the narrative, works of negotiated cinema, such as *Bombshell,* have both this same healing capacity and the potential to re-victimize survivors. As highlighted by Kelly in her reaction to the movie, watching her fictional depiction in *Bombshell* was both painful in its blaming of the Fox News anchor for the younger victims' harassment and healing as it brought to the surface a lot of 'what ifs' scenarios and guilt which she was only able to address publicly with fellow survivors in response to the movie's inclusion of Kayla's victim shaming scene.

Additionally, through the analysis of the four movies, the thesis also found that, despite Green and Schrader's clear utilization of the female gaze, there is a tendency for both male and female directors to gender abuse. Three out of the four movies selected represent the perpetrator as biologically male and almost all victims as female, with Jane's coworkers being depicted by Green as both participants and victims of their employer's abuse. Despite being the exception to this pattern by switching the perpetrator's gender to biologically female, Field's *Tár* engages in the masculinization of the character. While the conductor is not biologically male, she mirrors the same normative masculine behaviors, presentation, abuses of power and manipulation associated with male abusers. As such, although the abusive protagonist identifies as queer, she acts according

to the same gendered configurations of abuse based on the perpetrator's position within the gender hierarchy. Furthermore, although Green alludes to the executive's male employees' partial victimization, all four movies have survivors embodied by female characters. This may be explained by the filmic representations' mirroring of their historical context. The absence of diversity in the films' depiction of Me Too stories highlights the Me Too movement's unintentional exclusion of non-white, cis-gendered female survivors but also queer and female-on-male perpetrators.

The thesis also acknowledges the need to expand this testing to various themes and movies. A few more Me Too films can be considered for their hypothetical efficiency as a tool for the re-creational eyewitnessing of the movement. While this dissertation was only able to test out this concept on four movies, *Promising Young Woman* (2020), directed by Emerald Fennell, and *Black Box Diaries* (2024), directed by and starring Shiori Itô, both represent great possible grounds for further research. In the case of *Promising Young Woman*, despite qualifying as a Me Too film, it was not included in the current analysis due to it being set on a college campus, as well as its plot's focus on rape revenge rather than on survivors' testimonies. Nonetheless, the film still holds interest for re-creational eyewitnessing due to the fact that it heavily deals with collective silence and is also inspired by the People v. Turner case. In 2016, former Stanford swimmer Brock Turner, then 21, "served only half of his six-month sentence in Santa Clara County Jail in San Jose, California" (Kirkpatrick 2016). This additional historical dimension to the film allows it to hypothetically give a different perspective on the facts, making it an interesting candidate for re-creational eyewitnessing. As for *Black Box Diaries*, the documentary film was not included in this dissertation due to how recently it was released. However, it also presents significant potential to highlight an alternative perspective on Me Too narratives as it is directed, produced, and adapted by real-life survivor Shiori Itô herself. Additionally, it is based in Japan, which disqualifies it from being considered for this doctoral thesis—as all four movies are directed or inspired by American cases or set in the United States—but could open the discussion to variations of #MeToo and the difference in the film's handling of the stories. Further research can also lead to the testing of the concept on other audio-visual forms of media since a plethora of TV shows, podcasts, and documentaries already deal with the Me Too narratives and their representations. An example of such works includes *Athlete A* (2020), directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk, a Netflix documentary that explores the case of Larry Nassar, former team doctor for the USA Gymnastics,

who sexually abused more than 500 young athletes (Macur 2021). *On The Record* (2020), directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, is another documentary that offers an alternative representation of Me Too narratives as it centers around the HipHop industry, focusing on the Russell Simmons case as well as well the exclusion of black women's voices from #MeToo despite the movement's creator being African American. *The Loudest Voice* (2019), developed by Tom McCarthy and Alex Metcalf, is a mini-series released the same year as *Bombshell*, which also focuses on the Roger Ailes case and is inspired by Gabriel Sherman's 2014 book entitled *The Loudest Voice in the Room*. It would be interesting to compare the two works' representation of the perpetrator and survivors as a way to determine whether the quality of the re-creational eyewitnessing is affected by the difference in media and, consequently, by the temporal length of the work—an assumption that could not be tested in this thesis due to its exclusive dealing with contemporary American film. A similar experiment could be conducted with *The Morning Show* (2019), which, at the time of writing, totals three 10-episodes-long seasons. This doctoral thesis hopes to open the doors to an array of further discussions and questioning on the ways in which the Me Too movement, Me Too narratives, and survivors have been and continue to be represented on screen. While it has found re-creational eyewitnessing to be a useful concept to the understanding and embracing of such discrepancies in the movement's filmic depiction, it encourages the conversation to go beyond said framework, giving Me Too narratives' cinematic adaptation the academic attention it deserves.

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Appendix

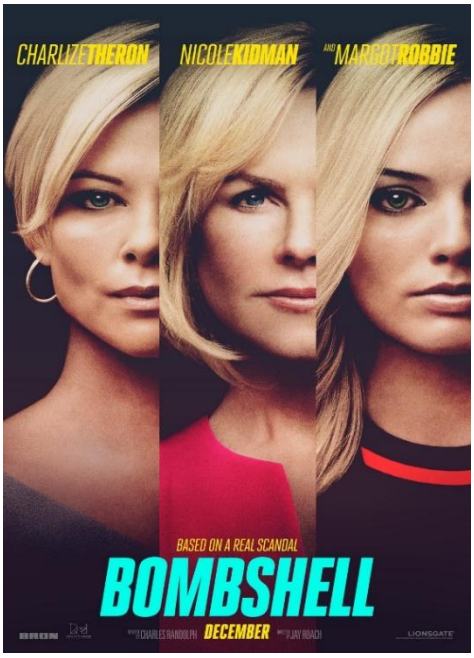

Figure 1: *Bombshell*'s official poster

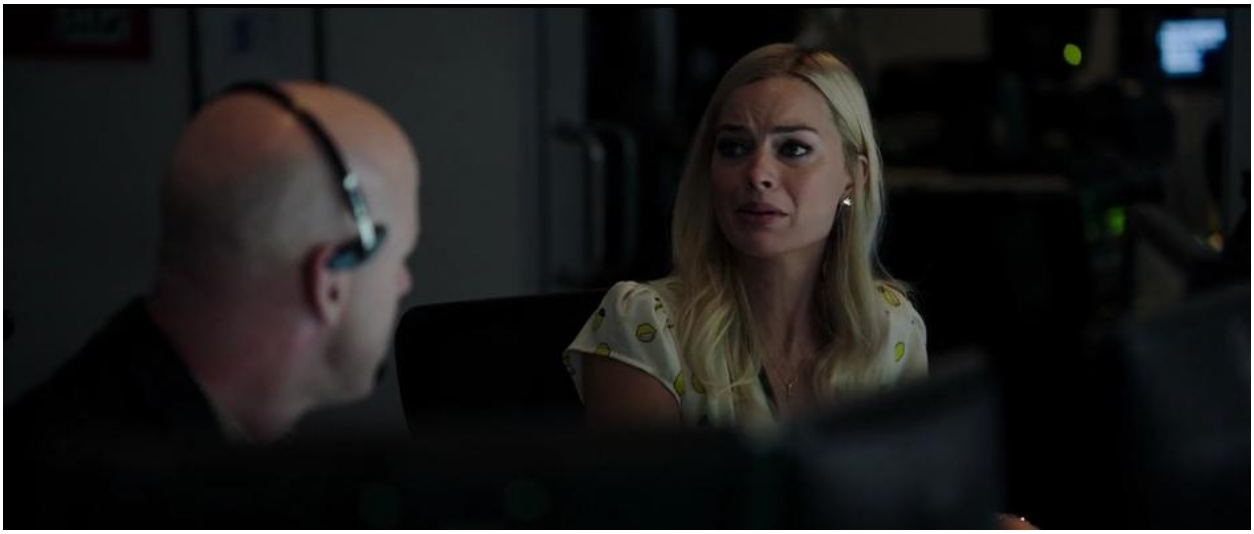

Figure 2: Kayla being yelled at by her supervisor

Figure 3: Huddy and Kelly hugging after Huddy confides in Kelly about her sexual harassment

Figure 4: Kayla and Jess laughing about the O'Reilly allegations

Figure 5: Orselli closing the door on Kayla and Ailes.

Figure 6: Ailes looking at the object of his desire, Kayla.

Figure 7: Kelly, Huddy, Bakhtiar, Zann and Brunt responding to *Bombshell*.

Figure 8: Official poster for Green's *The Assistant* (2019).

Figure 9: Jane going into her company's black car.

Figure 10: Jane cleaning her employer's couch and bringing him and his guests water.

Figure 11: Jane's face reflects her distress and disappointment in HR's dismissal of her complaint.

Figure 12: Wilcock, head of HR, looks at Jane with a concerned look. 51:24

Figure 13: Jane and her male coworkers write her apology e-mail for the executive

Figure 14: Tár towering over Max

Figure 15: #rulesofthegame

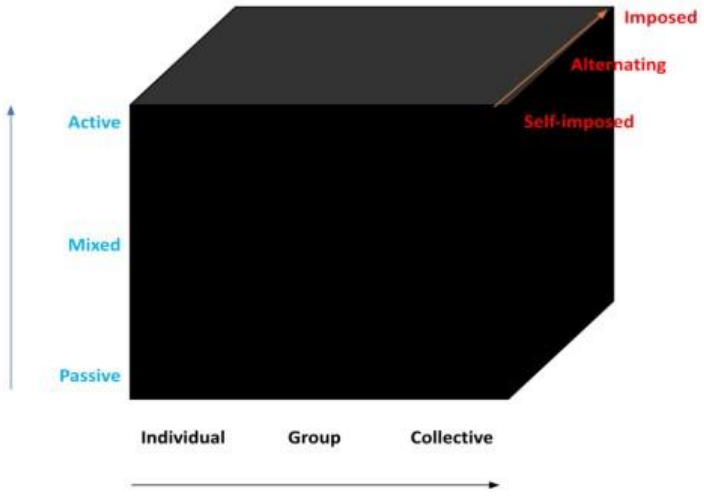

Figure 16: The 'black box' of silencing.

Figure 17: Red purse comparison

Figure 18: Krista's ghost.

Figure 19: The symbols appear on the back of the metronome

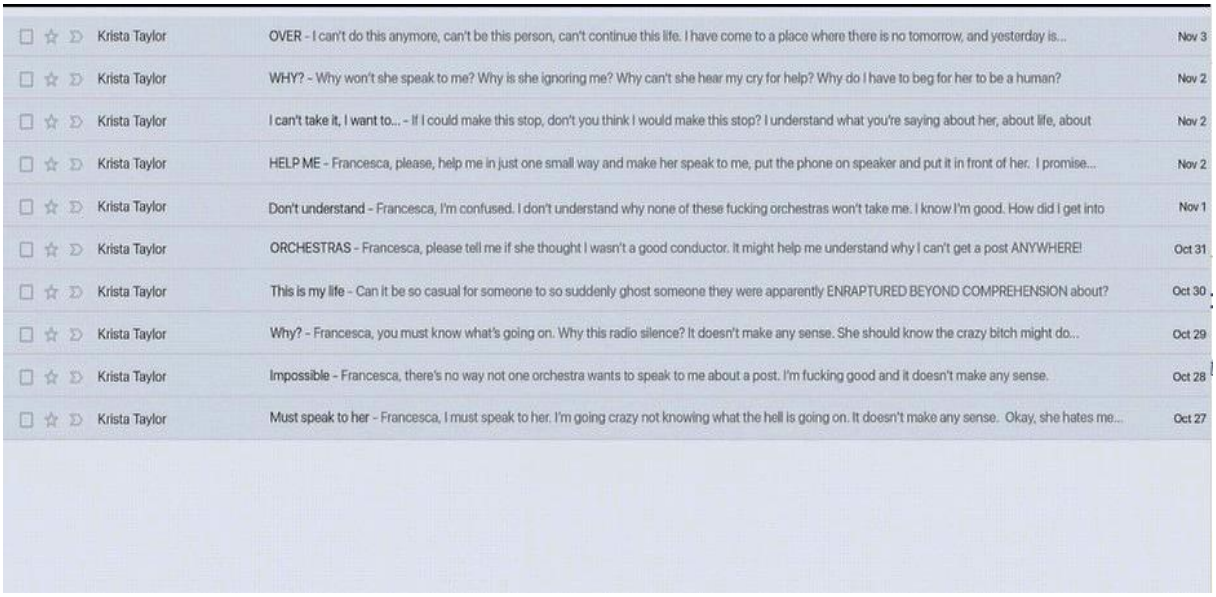

Figure 20: Krista's emails to Francesca.

Figure 21: Young Laura following her implied encounter with Weinstein.

Figure 22: Kantor receiving the information that Ronan Farrow is also working on an article about Weinstein's treatment of women.00:47:36

Figure 23: Kantor, Twohey and Corbett in a call with O'Connor and her lawyer Page. 01:41:07

Figure 24: Kantor sitting in her car following her confrontation with Cheung 00:55:34

Figure 25: Perkins holding Chiu the morning after she had been sexually assaulted by Weinstein 01:01:21

Figure 26: “When she arrived champagne and sandwiches were waiting” (Kantor and Twohey, 71). 01:13:27

Figure 27: Madden's purse on Weinstein's hotel room table. 01:13:37

Figure 28: Weinstein's bathrobe laying on his bed and his clothes on the chair. 01:13:53

Figure 29: Madden's clothes on the floor near Weinstein's bed. 01:14:07

Figure 30: Shot of the shower as water is streaming down. 01:14:16

Figure 31: Madden and an unknown young woman walking on the beach, laughing and embracing as the scene baths in sunlight 01:59:00

Figure 32: Zelda Perkins getting out of a taxi, walking forward 01:59:20

Figure 33: Rowena Chiu in her bedroom in Hong Kong following her suicide attempt 01:59:30 and 01:59:47

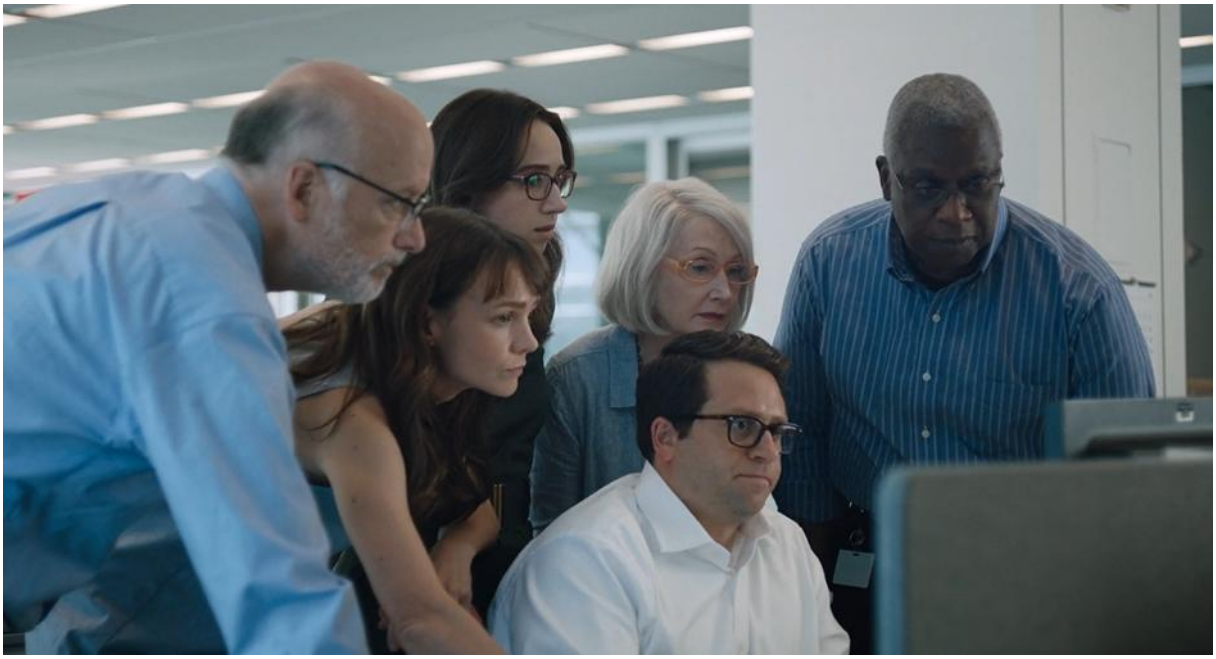

Figure 34: The team gathering around for the final round of proof-reading before publishing. 02:01:36