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The Assistant

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Assistant* (2020), directed by Kitty Green.

Keywords

#metoo, sexual abuse, misogyny

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



The Assistant (2019), dir. Kitty Green

In Kitty Green’s latest film, we follow Jane (Julia Garner), an assistant to a film producer only referred to as “The Chairman,” for one day. As everything is seen from her point of view, we see every menial task she performs: making coffee, endless photocopying, ordering lunches, taking out trash, opening the mail and even babysitting. She also cleans up his office, even disposing of the remains of illegal drugs. She also endures endless indignities from her co-workers, whether those who are at her level or above her, and she is expected to do all the lowest tasks without complaint—which she does. That this demeans her is clear—we learn that she is graduate of Northwestern University, who took this job in hopes of eventually becoming a film producer herself—but there is more wrong with this job than just the low level of tasks she is forced to perform.

In the wake of the #metoo movement, it is impossible not to think of Harvey Weinstein as the producer behind the door, even though we never see him, and only hear his voice indistinctly

over the phone. In fact, it could be any number of powerful men in any number of businesses. Kitty Green also said at the panel that followed the screening that she did not want to focus on the abusive boss, as such men have received enough attention, but she wanted to show the abusive workplace from the viewpoint of the person with the least power. The result is a film that might have seemed quotidian but instead causes the viewer to feel her discomfort nonstop, with palpable tension. There are few closeups except those on Jane, whose emotions are conveyed perfectly by Garner. There is little dialogue, and Garner herself referred to this as almost a “silent film” as the message is conveyed through so few words and even less music. Tension builds as Jane is forced by her coworkers to take a call from the Chairman’s wife, as he has shut off her credit cards, and this is interpreted as interference by her boss, who phones her and verbally abuses and threatens her. Any number of Ivy League graduates would take her job, he reminds her—and when she writes an email apology, he turns to praise and promises of rewards, in the classic fashion of an abuser.

Jane is most disturbed, however, by the arrival in New York of a young woman from Idaho who she is told will be another assistant to the producer, although she has only been a waitress. She suspects this woman will be sexually victimized by her boss, and confides in the HR representative. He loses his temper with Jane, insisting that there is no problem and nothing to do: the young woman is an adult, there is no evidence of wrongdoing, and Jane will endanger her own job by complaining. He then tells the boss of her complaint, who again calls and threatens Jane, eliciting another email apology from her. Jane can do nothing, it appears, even as she can do nothing about the other young women who are led to the producer’s office for late night meetings. Her coworkers rationalize: “She’ll get more out of it than he will,” suggesting that the women will benefit from the boss’s promises, even with their limited talent. In this way, it is suggested that

they are not even victims, that they are in control of the situation. The endless stories of sexual abuse that are now surfacing about so many powerful men—in Hollywood, in other businesses, in politics—suggest otherwise.

The film shows well how the power of abusive men is perpetuated by a system that is accepted by everyone within it. And one can see how this happens: everyone is convinced that they will benefit from consenting to it, and they will gain nothing from challenging it. They also don't consider the costs to others: Jane is honestly concerned about the young woman from Idaho, but the HR rep thinks she is just jealous, or afraid she will be similarly victimized. "Don't worry, you're not his type," he tells her, as if this makes it okay for Jane to ignore the plight of another woman. When no one cares about anyone but themselves, injustice and abuse cannot be challenged.

A panel after the film included Ai-jen Poo, Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, as well as Green and Garner, and mediated by Shirley Li of the Atlantic. The discussion that resulted showed how this film could make viewers aware of the way systems function to sanction abuse because we all believe we are powerless to stop it. But the panelists argued that we can organize and challenge such systems: in the film, Jane has no allies to do so, but there are situations where this can and does occur. Women and men are both becoming more aware of their responsibility and power to challenge injustice. This film is a warning that, if we fail to do so, we will all be dehumanized and complicit in evil.