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Teaching Feminist Media Studies in a Post-Weinstein Era

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TEACHING FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES IN A POST-WEINSTEIN ERA

During an academic year dominated by remote learning and social distancing, I received a student email questioning the inclusion of the documentary film *Shut Up and Sing* in my Gender and Communication course. Directed by filmmakers Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck, this film won critical acclaim at the time of its release. As part of a weekly module, the students were instructed to watch the film and write a media analysis paper with writing prompts I provided. This 2006 film, produced by the Weinstein Company, recounts the cancelling of the all-female band, The Chicks, after lead singer Natalie Maines publicly criticized President George W. Bush in the days surrounding the American invasion of Iraq. Maines declared to an audience in the United Kingdom, “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas,” as Texas was the home state of The Chicks. The student expressed dismay that I selected a film produced by convicted sex offender Harvey Weinstein for a class that purports to promote gender equality. The student wrote:

While I see the relevancy of a female music group facing persecution in the early 2000s can be a good talking point for this course, there is something fundamentally wrong with being assigned a Weinstein Company film for a gender course. We have hardly even touched the "Me Too" movement in terms of class content, so it's shocking and frankly ironic for us to be analyzing this content.

In his well-documented criminal case, Weinstein was accused of sexual harassment and assault by over 100 women. He was eventually convicted on some of those charges and the Weinstein Company declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2018. In this critical commentary, I address the concept of witnessing as it relates to contemporary feminist empowerment while also properly situating Weinstein-produced films as historical mediated texts.

The following is my emailed response:

Hi (Student name):

Thanks so much for your note. I appreciate and respect the points you are making about Weinstein and his highly problematic Hollywood legacy. While I didn’t address the company’s involvement in the assignment directions, you are certainly welcome to write about that if you wish. If I use this film again, I will be sure to remember your concerns and situate the film in the proper historical context. (FYI, I am fairly certain the Weinstein company no longer exists.)

I was quite surprised when I received the student email, having shown this film many times at various institutions and was never once questioned about its inclusion. However, these are different times. This generation is all too aware of gender bias in the media and are primed to ask pressing questions regarding inequality. Furthermore, the stress of the pandemic was taking its toll. Students who once engaged in analysis and debate were now largely concerned with merely “getting to the end of the semester.” In contrast, this particular student wanted to discuss *course content*. I was overjoyed. Someone was actually following directions and thinking about the implications of the assignment. If I am being completely forthright, I did not even remember that the Weinstein Company had produced this film prior to the student exchange. In the teaching of textual analysis, the focus is on the media text and not the financial implications of ownership and distribution surrounding the film. However, I began to realize that I had failed to historically

situate this media text. I only thought of this film as a celebration of feminist filmmakers highlighting the silencing of a popular and visible female band. It was a moment of reckoning in regards to my own teaching. I believed the film, on its face, was quite obvious in championing feminist musicians and did not even consider the financial backing of the Weinstein Company. I needed to remember that this film would be viewed through the lens of 2021, and not 2006.

In particular, documentary film continues to be a communication medium largely dominated by white male filmmakers. While most producers have an economic input regarding film production, the directors are the creative visionary. I was pleased this film, directed by two female directors, addressed the inequality so rampant in the film business. But my student had a valid point: what is the lasting creative and economic legacy left behind by the now defunct Weinstein Company? How can we situate these films into their proper historical context? Moreover, what can we learn from a documentary film 15 years after its release? How can we, as feminist educators, forefront this concept of witnessing into the pedagogical narrative? We are witnesses as educators, as students, and as consumers of media content. By having these long-overdue conversations about the problematic male paradigm as my student suggested, we are gradually moving the needle towards equality.

While I believe my response addressed the student's most pressing concerns, looking back I should have emphasized more strongly how this band was cancelled largely because they were women speaking truth to power. That type of silencing is notable regardless of the decade. Moreover, I also find that some students have difficulty appreciating media reference points that aren't contemporary. I think the availability of current media content has perhaps lessened the impact of historical artifacts. Students don't always want to "look back" to the past. The here and now has a tendency to hold their interest more. The Chicks had the distinction of being the best-selling female band in history, a feat that has not been repeated since this incident. In addition, the film also addresses how the band fought valiantly for equality in the male-dominated world of country music. Another salient section of the film shows how they attempted to harness the power of public relations amidst the obvious misogyny of the mainstream media. There are many lessons to be learned from a 2006 film.

Media products are valuable commodities in a capitalist-based system. Clearly, these films will live to see another day. As for Weinstein, he will likely spend his remaining days in prison. In order to fully contextualize this pedagogical moment, I ask myself, "where do we go from here?" In short, we need to demand more diverse films created by a new generation of artists while being mindful about the legacy of the past. In addition, as a feminist educator, it is my duty to provide historical context, along with a robust contemporary critique when analyzing media artifacts. *Shut Up and Sing* is a critical historical marker of a certain place and time. We must not negate its problematic Weinstein legacy by eliminating it from the canon. It is reflective of a time dominated by patriarchy and male-dominated media ownership. I will continue showing this film, but will be far more aware of situating it firmly in the here and now. My discussion questions will invite students to frame their analysis regarding our current understanding of the #MeToo movement. Furthermore, our newfound awareness regarding these issues will support our increased advocacy moving forward. The act of witnessing will certainly serve us well. I, for one, will be watching.

References

Kopple, B. & Peck, C. (Directors). (2006). *Shut up and Sing* [Film]. The Weinstein Company.