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Vintage furniture: The significance of the casting couch as industry gossip and rumor

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Abstract

Hollywood gossip circulates through both formal publications and informal interpersonal networks. In this article, I argue that both types of gossip and rumor are essential for understanding Hollywood's business inefficiencies. Focusing primarily on the role of informal gossip, I explore its importance for aspirant networking and, as #MeToo reporting revealed, as a warning mechanism for women who must navigate the predatory men of Hollywood. Tracing the history of casting couch lore as a particular genre of gossip, I show how informal gossip can empower women working in Hollywood yet also retrench gendered hierarchies.

Keywords: Hollywood industry, casting couch, #MeToo, rumor, gossip

An earring. A stain. A large bottle of upholstery cleaner. During her early morning work routines, Jane (Julia Garner) stumbles upon a large hoop earring and scrubs a stain off the couch in her unseen boss's office, presumably hiding the traces of his affairs. *The Assistant* (Green, 2019) mingles moments like these with normal office tasks of copying, opening boxes, and booking flights, highlighting the banality of sexual dalliances within the media industries. Within the office, the boss's sex life is the source of jokes ('never sit on that couch') and simply one more thing for his assistants and co-workers to manage. For Jane, the signs of harassment and abuse of power evidenced by the lost item, the stain, and jokes about the green couch are insidious.

However, when she attempts to make a report to her human resources representative (Matthew Macfadyen), he dismisses her claims and sends her out with a conciliatory, 'Don't worry, you're not his type.'



Fig. 1

As Jane silently goes about her morning tasks, the earring and the cleaning scene are presented without any meaningful denotative information. There is no shot of the stain, and within the first ten minutes of the film there is not sufficient information about who was in the room, what happened, or whether the loss of the earring and the appearance of the stain were related events. However, the scene and this couch are rich with connotation within the context of the film's 2019 release on the heels of the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the global #MeToo movement.

The green couch in *The Assistant* offers up a way to think about the meanings and ambiguities of the 'casting couch'. The casting couch seems like a quaint euphemism from a bygone era of Hollywood filmmaking, yet it has continued relevance for discussions about sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood. Discursively, the casting couch seems to contain myriads. The term summons the image of a material object, a place to sit, and a makeshift bed. It also suggests wealth and power, as only those with professional clout and large offices can put couches in their offices (in *The Assistant* very few employees even have offices with doors). It is a term that implies scandal, since it is suggestive of sexual exchange for financial or professional gain, but it literally 'couches' that scandal in euphemistic distance. Describing something as a 'casting couch'

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scandal is significantly less shocking (perhaps for a variety of reasons) than hearing that Nancy Reagan was famous for giving blow jobs to studio heads.

Tales of exploitation and sexual exchange existed in the theatre and span the entire history of Hollywood but have never been central to how we think about the business practices of the film industry. Scholars of Hollywood have been attentive to other forms of inefficiency when challenging the factory metaphor and characterisation of Hollywood as an assembly line.[1] These nuanced perspectives on this creative industry understand the history of Hollywood through the tension between art, which is subject to individual taste and perhaps inefficient process, and the standardising and rationalising influence of commerce. 'Movie making,' as Leo Rosten observed in 1941, 'is not a systematized process in which ordered routine can prevail, or in which costs can be absolute and controlled.' [2] In these characterisations, inefficiency poses a challenge to the dehumanising nature of what is assumed to be capitalism's rationalising influence. However, this binary overlooks the messy reality of some of Hollywood's business practices and reliance on gendered hierarchies. Quid pro quo sexual exchanges, in which sex is exchanged for career advancement, do not fit within the binary of art versus commerce. Whereas the studio era attempted to impose standardisation to its labour practices, in contemporary Hollywood advanced data collection is supposedly the key to minimising risk and making successful decisions about what audiences will watch. In this article I approach Hollywood as an irrational business and theorise the role of formal and informal gossip as practices that help Hollywood workers navigate the industry. Looking historically at casting couch stories, I argue that the history of the casting couch presents a lens for understanding how gendered hierarchies structure this irrational industry.

Rather than highlighting that a 'casting couch situation' is an abuse of power and a criminal act, this phrase vaguely suggests a form of sexual commerce in which (typically) women relent and exchange sex to be cast in a role. If the language of the casting couch masks the specificities of sexual acts and instead foregrounds the uneven power dynamics in Hollywood and how sex can function as currency, what was noteworthy about the breaking Harvey Weinstein story was precisely the absence of the term 'casting couch'. On 5 October 2017, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's article, 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades', went live on the New York Times website. Although many reporters have acknowledged that they knew about Weinstein's criminal behaviour for decades, nobody had been able to get accusers to go on record. Yet, although Kantor and Twohey provide specific details of incidents that

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occurred in hotel rooms during ‘casting discussions’, they avoid the term ‘casting couch’ altogether.[3]

In the aftermath of the Weinstein story, much of the subsequent reporting focused on interviewing the stars and directors who worked closely with Weinstein to find out who knew what and when, and who failed to act on the information. For some, like Quentin Tarantino, the knowledge was firsthand:

There was more to it than just the normal rumors, the normal gossip. It wasn't secondhanded [sic]. I knew he did a couple of these things.[4]

Others, most notably Meryl Streep, insisted that Weinstein's reputation was not common knowledge: ‘One thing can be clarified,’ Streep said, ‘not everybody knew.’[5] For journalists seeking to speak truth to power, the question of ‘who knew?’ forces powerful people in Hollywood (not just stars and directors) to grapple with their complicity. The responses also require careful rethinking of Hollywood power structures and accountability. However, these questions do not fully contend with the importance of gossip networks and rumor mills for the assistants, aspiring and working actors, and interns who rely on advice and warnings to help them navigate the industry and its many interpersonal challenges, as well as to maintain their physical and psychological safety.

Gossip and rumor, especially those orbiting around casting couch scandals, are essential to understanding how Hollywood operates as both a business and an industry of desire. The contemporary business of film and television is made up of fragmented project networks and, as scholars in media studies and sociology have observed, those seeking work in the industry must frequently rely on word-of-mouth information and recommendations to find their next paying gig. Success is supposedly determined by industry (not academic) pedigree. Those who have ‘made it’ diminish the importance of classroom training and instead emphasise industry experience, internships, and learning from the stories of industry elder statesmen. The lack of clear employment pipelines, professional pathways, and systematised networks aggravates feminists and activists advocating for more accountability for marginalised workers seeking entrance into the competitive worlds of film and television. Another way of looking at this dynamic is to consider that gossip and rumor are key mechanisms by which Hollywood power structures are continually retrenched: these discursive modes teach aspirants to navigate the

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peculiarities and cultural minefields of the system and, in the case of casting couch lore, teach women how to survive and accommodate the powerful men in charge.

In the wake of the Weinstein story and the #MeToo reckoning that followed as women (and men) named their abusers, journalists attempted to pin down precisely what people in the industry knew. The frequent refrain that ‘everybody knew’ did not mean that everyone in Hollywood had empirical evidence that Harvey Weinstein was a rapist, but rather that his reputation preceded him, and women knew to be careful around him. Thus, while the reporting did not unearth an industry-wide cover-up, it did help publicly reveal the role of gossip networks that women used to negotiate the predatory men of Hollywood. Although elided in Kantor and Twohey’s story, the casting couch language links Weinstein’s crimes to a longer history of power abuses in Hollywood that extends back to the birth of Broadway. It is an evocative term that communicates a set of gendered workplace power dynamics.

Of course, sexual harassment and assault are not limited to Hollywood and the media industries. In the wake of the 2017 Weinstein story, men and women in film industries in Canada, England, Japan, Sweden, and elsewhere have named abusers and attempted to change industry culture. Similarly, male and female victims working across creative and artistic fields have spoken out against men such as: former head of the Hollywood Foreign Press Agency, Philip Berk; Russell Simmons, R. Kelly, and Neil Portnow in the popular music industry; Metropolitan Opera conductor James Levine; opera singer and general director of the Los Angeles Opera, Plácido Domingo; New York City Ballet’s ballet master Peter Martins; and fashion designer Alexander Wang – not to mention examples in US politics ranging from Donald Trump to Brett Kavanaugh. Like the film and television industries, artistic institutions and culture industries are competitive, and those in gatekeeper roles are often praised for their artistic genius and ability to recognise and hone talent, which means they possess a tremendous amount of power over aspirants. Where Hollywood differs is in its frequent attempts to hide behind the alibi of business efficiency and pretend it is driven more by data than by whims, ‘gut feeling’, and abuses of power. Focusing primarily on contemporary Hollywood, the following sections make connections to these historical antecedents via cautionary tales from fan magazines and examples from films and industry trades to consider the importance of the casting couch and to understand how sex contributes to Hollywood’s inefficiency.

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Gossip and rumor and/as industry discourse

Gossip and rumor pervade Hollywood as a form of social and financial currency. In basic interpersonal communication terms, gossip is ‘talk about people or passing on talk about others when they are not present’,[6] and, colloquially, people use the term ‘gossip’ when describing the print tabloids that traffic in this talk as it relates to celebrities and public figures. In her discussion of the differences between gossip and rumor, Elizabeth Horodowich explains:

...gossip...becomes rumor when its volume increases, when it reaches a larger audience, and has a greater impact on a wider stage[.]...[T]he content of rumor is sometimes about events, whereas that of gossip is relentlessly people.[7]

For Horodowich, the defining characteristics differentiating gossip and rumor relate to the delivery and circulation of the information rather than the tone or veracity of its content. Gossip is a form of communication that is often subjective, filtered through the speaker’s own frameworks of knowledge and individualised interpretation of a situation; it relates to interpersonal relationships and interactions, but whether it is harmful to its subject, or its content is true is marginal to its definition as ‘gossip’. Hollywood gossip conforms to Horodowich’s definitions, but what makes it comparatively unique is its official presence as part of the media industries and its contribution to economic and social capital.

Hollywood gossip flows through both formal and informal networks. Both networks are important but need to be delineated to account for circulation and power dynamics within broader industrial structures. Formal gossip is the ‘talk about people’ that makes it into any number of print publications such as *Us Weekly*, online venues such as Gofugyourself.com, Perezhilton.com, and crowdsourced social media accounts like Deuxmoi, that traffic in what Stuart Hall alluded to in 1967 as ‘inconsequential stories about consequential people’, writing that possesses a ‘strong personal flavour’.[8] Gossip in print or online platforms has a wide readership and, potentially, cultural influence that can be monetised through advertisements. By contrast, informal gossip refers to the interpersonal communication that Elizabeth Horodowich describes, akin to what we might experience in high school hallways, workplace kitchenettes, or conversations with neighbours. The primary content difference is that informal Hollywood gossip, exchanged between co-workers, might happen to be about famous people. Knowledge about interpersonal quirks and scandalous acts might provide someone with social capital, but this kind of gossip does not have direct monetary value. Formal and informal gossip

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both impart cultural and interpersonal knowledge that differs in its content. Whereas formal gossip often includes curated and vetted content fed by publicists to help shape celebrity images, informal gossip about what triggers a producer's temper or who shows up late to set often challenges carefully curated personas.

Hollywood has long found ways to profit from rumors. Studio public relations machines have been an essential part of the construction of stars and celebrities. Although the stories themselves, which can range from alleged trips to rehab to secret weddings to sightings at the West Hollywood Whole Foods, might be inconsequential; the accumulation of stories about a particular star helps cement personal connections to that star and builds their celebrity capital in unquantifiable ways. Speaking to this kind of gossip and rumor in her analysis of *Us Weekly*, Erin Meyers observes the gendered nature of critiques of the gossip magazine, explaining that it is frequently characterised as 'fluff and distraction' rather than a serious source of information or otherwise dismissed by scholars as 'the province of frivolous feminine cultures'.^[9] Much of this might stem from gossip stories' typical focus on the personal details of celebrity lives, likely seen as having no cultural value. Similarly, because gossip eschews objectivity both in its content and how it is delivered, gossip might also be seen as having no real intellectual value. Oftentimes gossip will provide granular details about a single person, which makes it difficult to extrapolate broad conclusions beyond those specifically relating to the individual. If we consider all the bits of celebrity gossip, what typically emerges is an image of glamour, which, as sociologist Candace Jones points out, helps recruit industry aspirants.¹⁰ Tabloids do not simply advertise Hollywood as glamorous; they sensationalise a way of life and model a way of talking about interpersonal industry relations.

Tabloids and gossip magazines provide updates about the comings, goings, and daily lives of celebrities, but these are only one of the many types of publications that provide news and information about Hollywood. The contemporary trades *Deadline*, *Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter* offer up news related to the business alongside credible rumor. Writing about the trades, Eric Hoyt explains how the trade papers contribute to the formation of an 'imagined business community' in Hollywood.^[11] In addition to the knowledge about business practices that the trades produce, one of the oft-cited ways the trades form these communities is unique 'slanguage', with words like 'boffo' (outstanding) which provide shorthand for commonly used words, and inexplicably used terms like 'Alphabet web' when writing about ABC.^[12] The language of the trades has become more accessible, but it still cultivates a feeling of being an insider by structuring stories through the suspenseful language of gossip. The 'have you heard?'

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rhetorical framework that is always at least implicitly the hook for juicy gossip creates suspense for a story that is quickly delivered. Perhaps gossip is culturally dismissed or assumed to be 'low culture' entertainment because it delivers such short-term pleasures. This discursive structure, which serves to create fanfare around the tidbit of gossip, is also common in Hollywood marketing language creating anticipation for unreleased films and shows. Industry trades like *Deadline*, *Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*, along with other industry-facing publications, report on stars and directors 'rumored' to be involved in the latest blockbuster to build hype around big budget productions. This kind of language creates a bond between the writer, who sounds like she's 'in the know,' and the reader, who is transformed into an insider privy to unverified information.

This gossipy framing is also a convention of industry writing that serves to make even the most banal information about Hollywood sound like intimate details of the world shared between friends. Writing for the newly launched media platform Puck (whose tagline is 'Puck begins where news ends'), Hollywood journalist (and former *Hollywood Reporter* editor) Matt Belloni hooks his readers with a weekly email called 'What I'm hearing...' Nellie Andreeva in her columns for *Deadline* also qualifies her information with the phrase 'I'm hearing', or emphasises the secrecy of the industry by saying things like 'No one is talking.'^[13] The practice of citing unsourced opinions about media content, deals in progress, and other industry news in mainstream industry publications validates casual exchanges and the information they offer. In an industry that is often secretive, this language helps readers feel like they are 'in the know'. Although this kind of published gossip would seem separate from the inner workings of the industry itself, trade discourse helps to elevate gossipy language and emphasises how gossip and rumor can put workers ahead of the curve and help them anticipate change in Hollywood.

Once aspirants begin to seek work in Hollywood, they find that networking and learning cultural norms relies not only on the continued circulation of gossip about stars and projects, but about workplace dynamics more generally. Everyone from established producers to career counsellors stresses the importance of networking to help aspirants find employment. Although 'networking' is an overused buzzword and the specifics of what it entails are often muddy, at its base networking involves industry aspirants engaged in conversations with established practitioners or those already employed with the hopes that they can participate in Hollywood's gossip exchange. As Candace Jones shows, the organisation of the film industry depends on 'informal communication channels' to find appropriate workers for jobs and to function as a recommendation network.^[14] Thus, to have a successful career in Hollywood, workers must

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essentially be 'gossip-worthy', if only to garner informal recommendations to help them find their next gig.

Gossip can offer useful information for helping to manage these human relationships that are central to Hollywood's inner workings. Although gossip is endemic to Hollywood professionalisation, the types of gossip and conversation differ across industry fields. In *Production Cultures*, John Caldwell analyses media workers' professional narratives to show the similarities and core values of various sectors. While many Hollywood workers (especially those working on-set) exchange war stories, Caldwell explains that workers in non-union sectors, such as agents, assistants, clerical workers, and others who comprise the administrative sectors of the media industries, tend to exchange stories focused on 'personal networking, hooking up, and "giving back"', arguing that, 'All of these narrative motifs presuppose that success in the industry is based on the quid pro quo exploitation and management of all human and trade relationships.'^[15] Both the war stories of union workers and the kinds of stories exchanged in administrative sectors give the storyteller a degree of social capital. However, embedded in some of these tales of exploitation and advice about managing personalities might also be essential tools for survival.

Scott Rudin provides a clear example of how formal gossip contributes to maintaining the status quo, while informal gossip can function as a source of solidarity and even resistance. While many in Hollywood debated whether 'everyone knew' about Weinstein, the stories about Rudin have been definitively out in the open, published over the decades with titles like 'The Most Feared Man in Hollywood' and 'Boss-Zilla!' Known for firing assistants (often repeatedly), yelling, insulting, and throwing office supplies at people, Rudin never shied away from this reputation. Instead, he envisioned himself as training some of the best in the business. In 2010, Rudin said about his assistants: 'People who do fantastically tend to end up going on to very strong, illustrious careers, and the people who wash out tend to not be heard from again.'^[16] Despite his intimidating reputation, many ambitious young people continued to apply for his open assistant positions.

When assistants trade notes about producers, directors, or executives, their informal gossip is part of a survival strategy to help each other navigate behaviour that might range from peculiar to aggressive. Not all abusive bosses commit criminal offenses – some are just mean to their employees. Aside from Weinstein, Rudin is perhaps the most notorious jerk in film and theatre.^[17] In 2021, however, the stories about Rudin shifted from assistants' benign war

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stories to public allegations aimed at pushing him out of his powerful position. Although the assistants responded to Rudin's behaviour with outrage, their stories were consistent with many of those that had been published over several decades. Despite the litany of examples of verbal and physical abuse, entertainment journalist Kim Masters reported that there had been no fallout from the business world and Hollywood executives and talent hoped he would be able to return to his producing work.[18] Regardless of the reasoning, Rudin continues to work, and will continue to need assistants. Perhaps in an ideal world everyone would refuse to work for him, and he would re-evaluate his behaviour, but in reality this is unlikely. Rather than being protected from his verbal assaults and the small appliances and food he slings, his future employees will need to protect themselves by talking to peers and learning from their predecessors.

By 2021, Rudin's image as a bully had been normalised through both formal and informal gossip networks, which may partially explain why the outcome of the Rudin scandal differed from that of the Weinstein allegations. There were likely other contributing factors. One of the reasons might have been that while both Rudin and Weinstein were known bullies, Rudin was not being accused of rape and sexual assault.[19] In addition, some of Weinstein's victims were powerful Hollywood players, not strictly assistants and interns but known actors and even big stars like Gwyneth Paltrow who had been long associated with the peak of his career at Miramax. These are crucial differences between the two men. Regardless of the specifics, the allegations against Rudin mirrored many of the oft-repeated stories and long normalised behaviours printed in magazines and the trades.

While gossip and rumor tend to be regarded as trivial forms of conversation in culture, in the context of media industries, these discourses should be taken seriously for their essential role in Hollywood. Formal gossip published in magazines and online is just one of many forms of media content generated by Hollywood, but in conversation it is integral to how people get hired, make alliances, and learn to advance within their professions. While formal gossip allows people into the 'imagined business community' by teaching them insider language, it can also normalise bad behaviour, as it has done with Rudin. For those engaging in informal modes of gossip, warning others of bad behaviour might be the only possibility for resistance. Alternatively, teaching peers how to survive a toxic culture can be an important way to build solidarity and community within a toxic environment. Like formal gossip, these informal gossip networks can contribute to the maintenance of the status quo by normalising and protecting abusers.

Relegating knowledge of sexual assault and abusive behaviour to mere gossip, rather than reporting it so the perpetrator can be held professionally (or criminally) accountable, perpetuates bad behaviour. Yet, even when abusers are outed, recent history has shown that powerful men in Hollywood often escape consequences. Harvey Weinstein was arrested and found guilty and Kevin Spacey spent millions on fines and legal fees as the result of sexual assault allegations, but others such as Rudin, director James Gunn, and director Bryan Singer have continued to work with minimal repercussions for their behaviour. For Hollywood workers with little power or influence, gossip can both function as a form of currency to exchange with others as well as help to assess risk as individuals advance their careers and navigate enduring power structures that have seen little change throughout Hollywood history.

Cautionary tales of the casting couch

There are many genres of gossip, but perhaps none has been as enduring as casting couch gossip. Stories and allegations of casting couch incidents have appeared in tabloids, fan magazines, industry trades, across interpersonal networks, and of course, in novels, films, and television shows. These stories have been used as cautionary tales attempting to warn women away from an immoral industry (or specific producers) and to attract people to an industry with blurry professional standards. These stories of quid pro quo exchanges, whether real, mythologised, or fabricated, are the discursive formation by which Hollywood's power dynamics are most clearly realised and framed because they require us to account for various levels of economic and sexual power imbalances. Although it would seem logical that industry leaders would try to distance Hollywood practices from the legacy of the casting couch, the history of the term's usage reflects fluctuation between repression and retrenchment.

In the wake of the 2017 outing of Harvey Weinstein's assaults and predation, scholars of Hollywood history and journalists were quick to point out the lineage of casting couch scandals in the film industry.[20] Although headlines such as 'Casting-Couch Tactics Plagued Hollywood Long Before Harvey Weinstein' reflect a culture that is ready to grapple with decades of Hollywood leadership and their abuses of power, journalists and industry leaders have not always been so willing to acknowledge the persistence of the casting couch dynamic. More importantly, when Hollywood industry leaders, actors, and audiences have grappled with the industry's legacy of casting couch practices, it has typically been to consider them as individual

problems that must be corrected, rather than addressing the ways that sex and power imbalances constitute endemic industrial conditions.

The story of the casting couch, or the idea that vulnerable aspirants (usually women) sleep with powerful (usually male) producers for roles, is one of the industry terms Hollywood inherited from the theatre. Linguist Ben Zimmer traces the origin of the term ‘casting couch’ to Jake and Lee Shubert, who are credited with establishing the Broadway theatre district and some of its hiring practices.[21] Writing about Lee Shubert, biographer Jerry Stagg explains:

Although they did not invent the casting couch, it is believed that the Shuberts developed its functions. Lee would trot into the back of his theatre, call an usher and say in a high whisper, ‘The third girl from the left – what’s her name – tell her I would like to see her in my office after the show.’ The girls came, they saw, and they never talked about it.[22]

Of course, Stagg’s assessment of the women is poor speculation at best. Some of these women certainly talked, since, as theatre scholar Jennifer Jones Cavanaugh notes, both Lee and Jake Shubert were named in paternity and assault suits in the 1910s and 1920s.[23] The history of Broadway, and later, the history of Hollywood, are filled with stories of young women looking for a spot in the chorus and a chance to be discovered and launched into stardom. From ‘The Movie Girl’ (1911) to Siegfried Kracauer’s ‘The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies’ (1927), critics have been captivated by film’s allure for young women. Other stories focus on the darker side of this attraction, whether true or cautionary, many tales about women in Hollywood focus on producers using their positions of power to exploit their fascination with the cinema.

Throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, hundreds of Hollywood hopefuls packed their bags and headed west with a dream of making it in the pictures.[24] As the story often goes, a young woman, armed with only her good looks, would arrive in the big city looking for her big break. She would inevitably meet a producer who would lure her in with the promise of an audition and later proposition her for a chance at stardom. The plight of the ‘movie-struck girl’ during this period gained a great deal of symbolic value in the United States through fictionalised accounts as well as real scandals (most notably the Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle scandal which falsely alleged that he assaulted and caused the death of Virginia Rappe). These stories and the resultant critiques which fashioned Hollywood as a hotbed of immorality were often a result of broader cultural anxiety about the modern woman who was leaving the home and leading a more independent life than women of previous eras. Although not all women moved to the city

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seeking fame, film historians like Hilary Hallett explain, 'standing in as modernity's scapegoat, Hollywood represented the most powerful force luring the nation's daughters far outside the home'.[25] For the Hollywood studios, which sought to attract moviegoers in cities and towns across the country, tales of lecherous producers were part of a negative image that they would need to manage – not for the safety of women, but for the well-being of the public image of Hollywood itself.

Real scandals and rumors of victimised women created a convenient excuse for industry consolidation. Specifically, the Association of Motion Picture Producers (AMPP) wanted to address concerns about favouritism in casting, whether it was a result of sexual dalliances or nepotism. Central Casting, which bureaucratised the process of casting extras, emerged as the solution to monitor the casting process and rehabilitate Hollywood's public image. From the perspective of Hollywood history, the creation of Central Casting is an example of how studios cooperated to contain the moral panic and consolidate industry power to control its labour force. Another way to look at these events is to see them as attempts to apply bureaucratic mechanisms to solve messy cultural problems within the industry. It is perhaps fitting that in 1934 Dave Allen, the man entrusted with running Central Casting, was caught up in a casting couch scandal of his own. Hand model June DeLong reported Allen for fraternising with her and another young actress several years prior.[26] Allen was eventually found not guilty of the morality charges but resigned from Central Casting and found work in casting at Columbia Pictures. Although the story and the drama surrounding the trial made headlines, it was clear that these allegations no longer provoked the same level of outrage as in previous decades, even though the head of Central Casting found himself embroiled in the same kind of situation his organisation was supposed to eliminate.

Broadway and Hollywood scandals became fodder for pornography in the 1920s (and later decades) and likely provided the basis for *The Casting Couch* (1924). This film exemplifies the structure of early stag films as well as what Linda Williams characterises as 'hard-core utopias', while also depicting the primary fears of Hollywood's critics. Opening with an attempted seduction, the young starlet escapes the casting director, but eventually acquiesces to him after consulting advice in a book called *How to Become a Movie Star*. [27] The rest of the film consists of hard-core sequences that unsurprisingly provide no explicit resolution to the question of whether the young aspirant becomes a star. However, we might surmise that this quid pro quo exchange was satisfying for both parties. *The Casting Couch*, Williams later explains, resolves problems in a similar fashion to some of the 1930s Warner Bros. backstage musicals: 'If the male

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characters [...] found utopia in the achievement of sex, success, and money, [women] got success and money through sex.’[28] Stories of aspiring stars bending over backwards to please powerful men put Hollywood’s gendered power structure on display and imply that sex can be effectively exchanged for success. This exchange is clearly not a guarantee of fame and fortune, but the ubiquity of these stories crassly underscores the role of desire and desirability – not just talent – in Hollywood.

Film and fan magazines took a more chaste approach in their retellings of casting couch situations for a mass audience. The serial ‘Confessions of an Extra Girl’, anonymously written for *Modern Screen* in 1935, tells the story of one girl’s perils in Hollywood. In addition to its sensational title, the article lures readers with the promise that it will ‘give you the true picture of Hollywood today, discuss the chances of an unknown’s getting into the movies, and give you intimate “set” gossip of the stars’.[29] The introduction is an enticing offer to readers, and the title and drawing of a well-dressed woman contorting to escape the anonymous male figure contribute to the pulpiness of the story.

The media industries have long placed more weight on hands-on experience than academic or even technical training, a value which is reaffirmed through stories of women handling unwanted advances. In ‘Confessions of an Extra Girl’, the anonymous author unfortunately has several encounters with shady men in the four-part series, beginning with the director who corners her with the unsavoury advice:

You see, my dear, you can’t act until you’ve lived and an innocent girl like you shouldn’t be running around loose in Hollywood. I can make a great actress of you if you’ll put yourself completely in my hands and do everything I say.[30]

The story’s author (and heroine) escapes unscathed, but rather than being discouraged and running back home, she assimilates this experience as part of her education about how to make it in Hollywood.

Although casting couch practices never stopped, in the 1970s, industry trades and especially casting directors tried to distance Hollywood from its associations with the ‘casting couch’ by using the term to describe a bygone era of Hollywood. A 1978 profile on casting directors described one who was ‘adamant about burying the “casting couch” legend – something most casting directors concede did exist before the demise of the studio system and the rise of

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feminist consciousness’.[31] Similarly, a writer for *Broadcast* played with the well-known phrase in an article called ‘The Independent Casting Couch’, which pictures casting director Doreen Jones reclining on a sofa with the caption: ‘a Chesterfield sofa rather than a casting couch’.[32] What links these two articles from almost a decade apart is that rather than relying on appeals to technology or bureaucracy, like the industry did in the 1920s, casting directors in these articles stressed cultural shifts and their own personal practices to distance themselves from lascivious casting couch connotations. One casting director explained that he never interviewed a woman without the presence of his (female) casting partner or another woman in the room. Both articles are invested in establishing respectability, stressing the creativity involved in casting and detailing the different practices and the challenges of finding the right actor as a practice wholly apart from sexual exchange. Erin Hill explains that in the 1960s and 1970s the casting director ‘shed its executive status...and acquired many of the same gendered expectations that had been imposed on female workers elsewhere in the industry’.[33] As this role changed, casting directors were clearly negotiating their cultural and professional status. Distancing themselves from the history of the casting couch practice was part of a larger effort to improve their professional reputation. As the 1978 article concludes, ‘Casting couch stories may be fading, but casting directors still have a way to go to win respect for their work’.[34] Despite the best efforts of casting directors to cultivate respectability, casting couch tales are too salacious to ever disappear.

While casting directors tried to reclaim their profession and distance the business from casting couch practices in the 1970s, ads embracing the language of the casting couch still lurked in the back pages of trades like *Variety* and *Advertising*. Trailway bus advertisers continued to play up and glamorise the ubiquity of sex in Hollywood (while ignoring its uneven power dynamics), running a regular advertisement in 1976 offering a rental option ‘equipped with its own casting couch’. In a particularly tacky move, one company advertised a t-shirt with two shapely legs flung over a couch labelled ‘casting’.



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“Who?”

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Fig. 2

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These attractive movie tee-shirts emblazoned with your movie career aspirations are sure to attract the attention of the studios.

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- ☐ TYPIST
- ☐ PSYCHIATRIST
- ☐ GOFER
- ☐ MESSENGER
- ☐ ALL OF THE ABOVE

Shirt	Colors	Code Numbers	Postage and Handling all delivery UPS
Assistant Director	Burg. on Green	SI326—MI327—LI328	
Casting Couch	Burg. on Grey	P 384	One Shirt \$2.00
Crew	Black on Blue	P 342	Two Shirts \$2.70
Director	Black on Tan	P 348	Three Shirts \$3.25
Electric	Blue on Grey	P 346	Four or more \$3.75
Leading Man	Black on Tan	P 343	
Producer	Green on Tan	P 350	
Prop Dept.	Green on Tan	P 344	
Starlet	Black on Tan	P 345	

Fig. 3

In broader Hollywood discourse, there is either complete public disavowal of casting couch practices or a sleazy embrace. J.E. Smyth reviewed the long history of examples ranging from producer Arthur Freed exposing himself to Shirley Temple to producer Darryl Zanuck’s daily 4:00pm liaisons. But rather than simply using these examples to affirm the long history of sexual exploitation in Hollywood, Smyth complicates these claims by pointing out how many women, including actresses like Rita Hayworth, Joan Collins, and Maureen O’Hara, rebuffed producers’ sexual advances and still managed to enjoy successful careers.[35] Rebutting the familiar argument about Hollywood harassment and punishment, Smyth argues that the film industry was one of the best places to offer equal opportunity to women, ‘a place where actresses could speak out about predatory men and get even’.[36] As Smyth rightly observes, there were many women who were able to drive their careers successfully while navigating unwanted advances

and harassment. However, like the pornographic utopias described by Linda Williams, Smyth assumes that financial success provides satisfaction. This is a difficult argument to make, and an unsettling conclusion that seems to downplay the potential emotional consequences for the harassed women simply because they succeeded in their careers.

Casting couch stories are about relationships between actors and producers, directors, or casting directors. However, stories about how women have and should navigate sexually charged work environments in Hollywood differ between multiple industry sectors. According to John Caldwell, books (such as *Development Girl: The Hollywood Virgin's Guide to Making It in the Movie Business*) and the narrative practices of assistants and administrative workers in Hollywood

feel more like a cross between Cosmo, personal hygiene tracts, an online dating self-profile, and a new-employee orientation manual. Many of these books serve, in effect, as 'dummies' guides' to solicitation and hook up as professional skill sets.

Like Smyth's historical examples, these books acknowledge sexual power dynamics in Hollywood and suggest that harnessing sexual power can be a path to professional or financial success. However, stories about actresses frequently paint them as the unexpected victims of advances. In the case of these guidebooks for assistants, sexual relationships are something to be cultivated.

Trying to unknot female agency within the sexual economy of Hollywood is unwieldy. The idea that a woman would use sex to advance her career, or 'sleep her way to the top' like Lily Powers (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Baby Face* (Green, 1933), has been leveraged against women across professional fields as a means of diminishing whatever relevant skills or experience they might possess. Although the phrase 'sleeps her way to the top' is derogatory, it is also active and implies clear goals and ideas about career advancement, at least more so than describing something as a 'casting couch situation'. The casting couch phrase, apart from its use in the tagline for *The Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood* (Roberts, 1980), might wrongly remove agency from would-be stars who acquiesce. It is impossible to know the ratio of women who found success after being harassed to those who left to find other employment, but by no means should navigating harassment be an expectation for a career in Hollywood.

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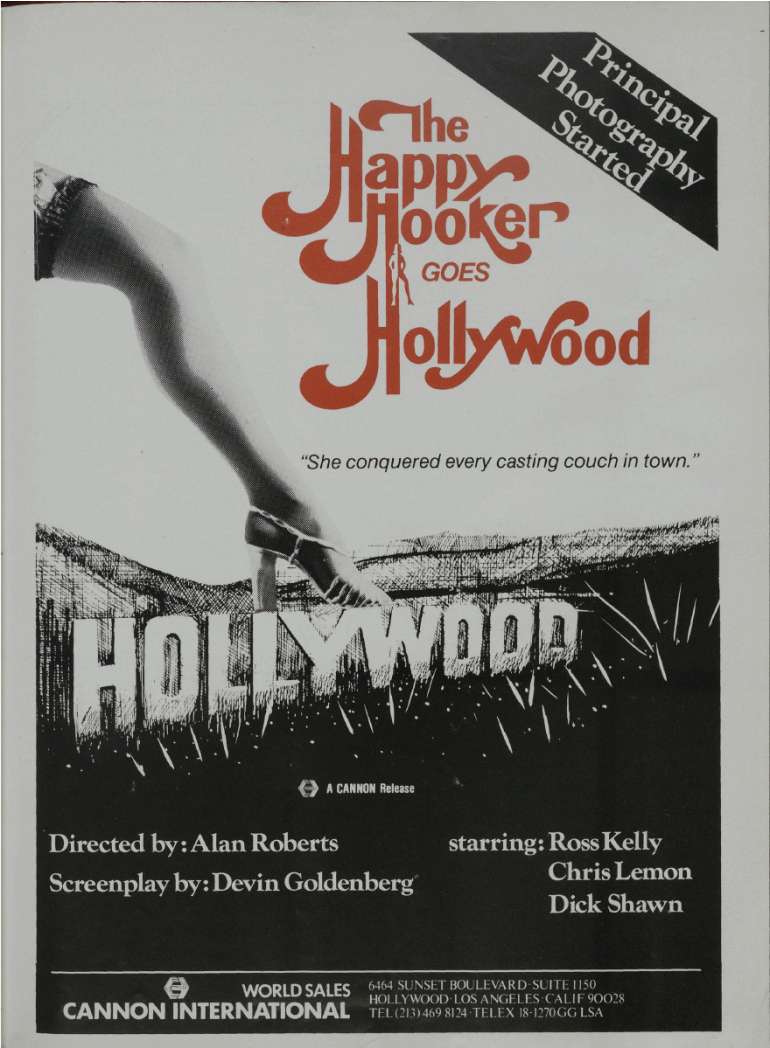


Fig. 4

Hollywood as industry of desire

Critics of Hollywood from the Frankfurt School to Dwight Macdonald have lamented the effects of industrialised media production. As Macdonald commented in 1953, ‘the only time Mass FORTMUELLER

Culture is good is at the very beginning, before the formula has hardened, before the money boys and efficiency experts and audience-reaction analysts have moved in'.[37] If Macdonald believed Hollywood was overly reliant on data in the 1950s, he would likely be even more appalled by the datafication, algorithms, and financialisation of Hollywood that have defined business practices from the 2010s up to today. Industry scholars like Andrew deWaard have smartly explained how venture capital firms acquire companies (such as agencies, payroll companies, and theatre chains) to fuel increased data-driven content decisions and compete with studio conglomerates.[38] Although scholars and critics have long been aware of and concerned about the ways corporate efficiency affects the quality and diversity of Hollywood's creative output, the industry continues to be riddled with inefficiencies, eccentrics, and abuses of power. When we focus solely on Hollywood's capitalist logics and efficiency myths, we run the risk of painting a skewed picture of Hollywood as a rational business, ignoring interventions from Marxist scholarship that view capitalist practices as irrational.

To acknowledge gossip as a powerful force within Hollywood is to draw attention to the idiosyncrasies of the media industries as compared to other corporate structures. But characterising industry conversations as gossip is not a more optimistic way to view Hollywood business; rather it helps to reframe our understanding of Hollywood as a business that cultivates desire both for audiences and for those working within the industry. The language of gossip is an invitation to peek behind the curtain and join the insider crowd. Gossip also creates solidarity among media workers, potentially offering them a way to vent and providing a mechanism to acclimate young workers into the culture of Hollywood. For many young people, these informal exchanges with peers provide useful training about the often quirky and sometimes appalling cultural norms of the business. However, it also helps to maintain the very practices that are the subject of critique or complaint.

Author

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Notes

- [1] Richard Jewell refutes characterisations of the studio system as a factory, noting six books that characterised Hollywood as a 'factory'. See Jewell 1994, p. 40.
- [2] Rosten 1941, p. 255.
- [3] Kantor & Twohey 2017.
- [4] Kantor 2017.
- [5] Buckley 2017.
- [6] Horodowich 2021, p. 89.
- [7] Ibid., p. 90.
- [8] Stuart Hall, 'The World of the Gossip Column,' in *Writings on Media*, edited by Charlotte Brundson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), p.123.
- [9] Erin A. Meyers, "'Only in Us!': Celebrity Gossip as Ephemeral Media," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60.4 (Summer 2021), p.183.
- [10] Candace Jones, 'Careers in Project Networks: The Case of the Film Industry,' in *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*, edited by Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.59.
- [11] Hoyt 2022, pp. 6-7.
- [12] For more examples of Variety slang, see: Anon., 'Slang Dictionary', Variety, n.d., <https://variety.com/static-pages/slang-dictionary/>.
- [13] Examples of both turns of phrase are available in Andreeva 2013.
- [14] Jones 1996, p. 65.
- [15] Caldwell 2008, p. 52.
- [16] Altman 2010.
- [17] Siegel 2021.

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- [18] Masters 2021.
- [19] Unlike Rudin, Weinstein did not wear his temper with a badge of honour, but there were stories about outbursts and physical assault in the early 2000s, see: Barron & Lee 2000; Mnookin 2004.
- [20] Adams 2017.
- [21] Zimmer 2017.
- [22] Stagg 1968, p. 46.
- [23] Cavanaugh 2008, p. 13.
- [24] For more on the journey of the Hollywood extra girl, see Stamp 2004, pp. 332-349.
- [25] Hallett 2013, p. 184.
- [26] Associated Press, 1934: 2.
- [27] Williams 1999, p. 68
- [28] Williams 1999, p.161.
- [29] Anon. 1935: 30.
- [30] Ibid., p. 31.
- [31] Jeffries 1978, p. 65.
- [32] Comely 1987, p. 14.
- [33] Hill 2014, p. 144.
- [34] Comely 1987, p. 14.
- [35] Smyth 2018, p.5.
- [36] Ibid., p. 7.
- [37] Macdonald 1953, p. 17.NEeeeeenene
- [38] deWaard 2020, p. 70.

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