

Mette Hjort

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Ethical imperatives: Reflections on the past and future of media studies

Mette Hjort

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Reflecting on the texts and events that I see as having been generative for media studies, on the challenges that lie ahead for the field, and on the possible futures that we must dare to hope for, my mind repeatedly returns to a cluster of issues that all sit neatly beneath the broad umbrella term ‘ethics of film production’. In what follows, I aim to capture some of the ethical imperatives that emerge from the past of media production and that beckon from what could be a much brighter future. I evoke some of the types of harm that regularly accompanied media production processes in the past and that must, in the future, be definitively relegated to the past. My discussion of harm in this short piece can only be indicative. A more fully developed account of production-related harms would, I believe, make it clear that the tasks ahead are numerous and substantial, requiring interventions on many fronts. I rely on the reader to assist, while reading, with further examples of relevant types of harm that call for action.

In recent years film studies has witnessed a striking and welcome development: the growth of film production ethics as a field of increasingly focused and rigorous inquiry. Arguing that the ethics of film production must be taken seriously, a number of recent works advance claims calling for a far greater role for ethical assessments and standards across a wide spectrum of film-related activities.[1] Ethical assessments and standards relate, among many other things, to the responsibilities of funding agencies, as they are called on in certain instances to depart from past failings by ensuring that minors and other vulnerable parties will be protected from abuse during the making of a film that benefits from public funding. Also, if it can be convinc-

ingly established — and the time is ripe for this — that the value of a cinematic work is negatively affected by ethical flaws arising during the film production process, then film viewers can be expected to deploy far more exacting standards of critical assessment than has traditionally been the case (ethical flaws typically arise as a result of abusive behaviour towards stunt persons, women, minors, animals, and nature, but there are many other possible victims of harmful behaviours).

The necessity of available information about films' production histories has implications for film and media studies, as does the re-assessment of canonical works in light of changing norms and expectations. Paratextual initiatives, on multiple platforms, will need to be undertaken, the aim being to make readily available to prospective viewers high quality testimonial evidence from a variety of sources, as well as critical evaluations of data from the production process. Such initiatives may enable viewers' recognition of the link between production-related harm, the ethical demerits of a work, and the overall diminished value of a film. Film viewers can be expected to seek out a certain amount of information about how a given film was made, just as they should be willing to challenge the canonical status of cinematic works that are scarred by the ethical demerits of abusive production histories.

The importance of viewers' interest in production histories, and in the critical assessment of works in light of ethical merits and demerits, can be readily evoked by means of two examples, the first positive and the second negative. Released in 2018, Norwegian director Erik Poppe's *Utøya: July 22* deals with right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik's massacre of young Norwegians attending the Workers' Youth League summer camp. As this is a reality-based fiction, it is crucial to know, when assessing and attributing value to Poppe's film, whether any young actors were traumatised or re-traumatised in the process of making the film. Poppe's approach, it turns out, is exemplary in every respect, including the paratextual dimensions evoked above. That is, Poppe put considerable effort into the crucial task of communicating openly and clearly about the social and psychological risks of his project and about the measures that he had devised to mitigate them. Anne Gjelsvik captures the essence of his approach as follows:

'Several things are necessary if one is to succeed with a film project like this, and three things stand out in my mind as absolutely essential: thorough preparation, clear aesthetic choices, and decency. My first thought after seeing the film for the first time was precisely that it is decent.' [2]

The concept of decency is used capaciously here to capture a consistent, thoughtful, and well-executed commitment to avoiding the infliction of harm. In the case of *Utøya: July 22*, the possible impact of the film — on the participating actors, survivors of the massacre, and grieving families throughout Norway — was carefully considered, with input from experts and survivors. To avoid re-traumatisation, appropriately communicated steps (e.g. the involvement of mental health experts) were taken to shield the actors from harm, just as audiences were protected from unexpected encounters with traumatic content by the decision to forego the production of a Norwegian trailer.[3] The ethical merits evident in the production history of Poppe's film are such that viewers, should they discern artistic, aesthetic, and other properties in the manifest content on the screen, are well justified in attributing various types of genuine value to his work.

The situation is rather different in the case of some of Denmark's most celebrated youth films from the 1970s. Films such as *Let's Do It* (directed by Lasse Nielsen and released in 1976) and *Leave Us Alone* (co-directed by Lasse Nielsen and Ernst Johansen and released in 1975) were revealed in 2018 to have involved the systematic recruitment and grooming of minors for the purpose of sexual abuse. In the wake of the two-part documentary titled *The Abused Film Children* (Impact TV in collaboration with the daily *Politiken*), the canonical status of the relevant films cannot be justified. In a context where the claims and arguments of the field of film production ethics hold sway, viewers watching *Let's Do It* and *Leave Us Alone* can be expected to take an interest in the extent to which the making of these films did or did not meet basic ethical standards. Faced with the kind of evidence that *The Abused Film Children* makes available, it is reasonable to expect film viewers to re-assess the various types of positive value that have traditionally been attributed to these two Danish classics of the youth film genre.[4]

The apparently unstoppable momentum of film production ethics as a field of media studies is explicable in terms of a number of watershed events related to the film industry's treatment of women. Especially significant is the 2017 reporting on Miramax mogul Harvey Weinstein's history of sexual abuse and assault by *New York Times* journalists Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor (in 2018, Twohey and Kantor shared a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service with Ronan Farrow, who had similarly reported on Weinstein for *The New Yorker*). In the wake of the hard-fought battle to bring Weinstein to justice as a convicted sex offender, we find a host of initiatives that are motivated by a powerful desire to ensure that the predatory nature of the film industry is

definitively eliminated. The creation of the charity *Time's Up* in 2018 is an example of such an initiative. With its focus on safety, equity, and power for women, *Time's Up* is a significant intervention with likely long-term impacts. The recent exposure of abuse and predatory behavior within the film industry (the #MeToo movement has been crucial in this regard) has far-reaching implications for film and media studies. Researchers, for example, have an important role to play in documenting the emergence of new practices designed to avoid abuse, and in evaluating their efficacy (the issue of intimacy coordinators on set is relevant in this regard).[5] At a time when new social movements are mobilising on behalf of social and other types of justice, the many benefits of research efforts related to production ethics are not difficult to discern or articulate. Indeed, a sense of urgency and necessity now provides the context for many such efforts. For this reason too the ethics of film and media production can be expected to garner a great deal of attention in years to come.

The growing emphasis on production-related ethical obligations, standards, and commitments must encompass those who contribute their labour to the film industry, but also the natural environment. What must be challenged across the board is the perpetration of harm, whether this is directed at human victims or the Earth that is our home. The report issued in August 2021 by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concludes that 'human influence has warmed the climate at a rate that is unprecedented in at least the last 2000 years'.[6] The IPCC report has been widely discussed in the news and, amongst others, by policy makers, government officials, activists, managers of pension funds, and students seeking career paths that would contribute solutions to the crisis of climate change. This is not surprising, for the conclusions presented in the IPCC report are a call for decisive action. Film and media studies must be part of the urgent process of finding solutions.

Reasons for experiencing a compelling obligation to act are many and include the fact that the very media that are the object of our studies have much to answer for when it comes to the matter of environmental sustainability. Recognition of the environmental costs of the media has been slow, but is accelerating.[7] Also, film and media studies students, many of them members of the next generation of researchers, practitioners, and activists, are beginning to call for a reframing of their course contents in light of the crisis of climate change. Inspired by the insights of Birgit Heidsiek (editor of *Green*

Film Shooting) and Pietari Kaapa during a Film:Exchange event that I organised at the University of Copenhagen in 2017, Josefine Madsen and Anne Ahn Lund, both students at the time, went on to establish Jordnær Creative, a company devoted to sustainable filmmaking practices. In a case study devoted to the work of Jordnær Creative, Madsen, Lund, and Meryl Shriver-Rice insist that university syllabi must reflect the media's contributions to the climate change crisis and should offer an opportunity for students to acquire the skill sets needed to effect sustainable change in the relevant sectors.[8] It is easy to see that a new generation will increasingly be making a compelling case not only for curricular changes, but also for research agendas in film and media studies that aim to effect a green transformation in various milieux of practice. Here too broadly *ethical concerns* will likely be fuelling research- and evidence-based interventions across a wide spectrum ranging from the standards by which we judge the value of films to funders' criteria for allocating financing.

Author

Mette Hjort is Chair and Professor of Humanities and Dean of Arts at the Hong Kong Baptist University, Affiliate Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington, and Visiting Professor of Cultural Industries at the University of South Wales. She holds an Honorary Doctorate in Transnational Cinema Studies from the University of Aalborg and has served on the Board of the Danish Film Institute (appointed by the Danish Ministry of Culture). Her current research focuses on moving images as they relate to public value in the context of health and well-being.

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Notes

- [1] Nannicelli 2020, Sinnerbrink 2016, Choi & Frey 2014, Stadler 2008, and Hjort 2021.
- [2] Gjelsvik 2018, cited in Hjort 2021.
- [3] Gjelsvik 2018.
- [4] Hjort 2021.
- [5] Sørensen 2021.
- [6] IPCC 2021, p. 7.
- [7] Advances are due to the research of Maxwell & Miller 2012, Vaughan 2019, and Kaapa 2018, among others.
- [8] Madsen & Lund & Shriver-Rice 2021.