

Hollywood's dangerous obsession with sex trafficking

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Sex workers are heavily stigmatized. They are often singled out for violence or legal action. But it also means that they are seen as exciting and deviant. Even if people don't want to associate with them, they are often interested in hearing stories about their "dirty," dangerous lives.

Sex workers are, then, exploitable for publicity — which can create unfortunate incentives for organizations or individuals trying to help them. This was made painfully obvious recently in the revelations around Somaly Mam, a Cambodian anti-trafficking activist. Mam claimed to have been trafficked herself, and women rescued by her organization told terrible stories of kidnapping, violence,

and sexual slavery. Nicholas Kristof famously joined her to live-tweet a raid on a brothel. On the strength of such narrative stunts, Mam was a fundraising juggernaut. But reporting by Simon Marks revealed holes in her accounts, and suggested she may have paid women to invent stories for the press. Mam has now resigned from her own foundation.

Mam's rise and fall may seem singular — but it isn't. Just last week, the story of another high-profile trafficking victim and activist was called into question. Chong Kim claimed to have been kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery in Nevada for several years. Last week, Breaking Out, an anti-trafficking organization, announced that they had launched an investigation into Kim's story, and had been unable to confirm any of it. Kim had formerly served on Breaking Out's board. The organization suggests that she defrauded donors, and states that Breaking Out is contemplating legal action against her.

Kim's supposedly true story was the basis for a 2012 film, "Eden," directed by Megan Griffiths. When it was released, it was widely heralded as a true, hard-hitting, wrenching look at trafficking and sexual slavery. Robert Abele at the Los Angeles Times was impressed by the way in which "Griffiths lays bare a many-tentacled trafficking system sickening in its reach." Stephen Holden at the New York Times commented that "Enough films about human trafficking have been made in recent years that the outlines of 'Eden' should be painfully familiar. But that familiarity doesn't cushion this movie's excruciating vision."

Holden is arguing that the film is familiar because it is factual. I would agree that “Eden” is familiar, not because it tells a true story, but because it most likely doesn’t. The familiarity here is the familiarity of exploitation tropes, which are clustered about so densely and insistently that it’s hard to believe anyone missed them. There are women-in-prison shower scenes (more sedate than the norm, it’s true, but recognizable nonetheless). The trope of giving prisoners kittens to love is straight out of “Caged” from 1950, one of the most important films in the genre. There’s also some S&M fetish (again a staple of the genre), and inventive tortures involving semi-nudity (here victims are chained in a bucket of ice). The arc of the film is by-the-numbers rape-revenge, and the meth-smoking assistant bad guy seems like a thinly-disguised lift of “Breaking Bad”’s Jesse Pinkman. There’s also some stylized violence a la Tarantino; the friendly Sheriff talking to his family on a mobile fun hangs up, and then, with folksy charm, murders a couple of colleagues in cold blood. Along the same lines, the much-sneered at henchman is pushed just too far and suddenly erupts in violence.

The film isn’t badly made, as these things go — Jamie Chung as the lead Hyun Jae in particular is more talented than the script deserves. But that anyone took this clearly fanciful, clearly derivative fiction for fact is, in retrospect, somewhat shocking. Even at the time, some folks saw through it; sex worker Mistress Matisse tried to convince David Schmader at *The Stranger* that the whole thing was bunkum. To just point out the most obvious issue, the movie details a copious number of murders, several of them committed by the main character herself. This is standard issue for a Hollywood film, but in real life, this amounts to mass murder, including the killing of multiple law-enforcement personnel. That’s a major story — if this happened in anything like the way Kim said, where’s the massive investigation? Why is this being covered in an entertainment review, rather than on the front page?

For that matter, a cursory investigation of Kim’s own testimony makes it clear that the filmmakers weren’t really trying to be true to her account. In an interview, Kim said that she had been kidnapped when she was 19 and a student at a technical college. In the film, Hyun Jae is kidnapped before she graduates from high school — and it is suggested that the girls are actually murdered when they reach the age of 19 because their clients/rapists don’t want them anymore. Thus, the film has taken an already doubtful story and callously embroidered it for maximally salacious pedophilic outrage, all in the name of exposing “truth.”

There is truth here — but it’s not necessarily that there’s some sort of widespread semi-industrialized pedophilia system in place in Nevada. Rather, the truth is that exploitation narratives and popular trafficking narratives are often variations on each other. Moral panic deployed to appeal to outraged empathy, or sexploitation deployed to appeal to giggling prurience; they both function in much the same way. The narrative tropes and the lurid details are similar. And people want to buy them both.

Consuming exploitation films can be fairly harmless in itself — as long as you recognize that they’re fiction. But confusing truth and fact can have real consequences. If you believe in outrageous, exploitation trafficking narratives, you may miss real stories of abuse. For example,

the International Labor Organization issued a recent report showing that sexual slavery makes up only about 22 percent of forced labor; the majority of trafficking (68 percent) involves exploitation of labor in agriculture, construction, domestic work, manufacturing, and the like. But it's hard to make a sexploitation narrative about factory workers being abused.

The impulse to sensationalize doesn't help sex trafficking victims either. Hyperbolic narratives can make it hard to see more mundane abuses; conspiracy theories about criminal mastermind sheriffs can distract from the problem of day-in, day-out routinized harassment by law-enforcement. Donors end up sending money to the wrong people in the wrong places to solve the wrong problems. And, last but not least, portraying marginalized individuals as deviant and broken just ends up contributing to their further marginalization.

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