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How HBO's *The Idol* Exploits the Female Narrative

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Abstract

At its core, HBO's show The Idol (2023) tries to capture the darkness of what it means to be a rising star in the music industry through the perspective of a young female talent. With the popularity of the #FreeBritney movement still palpable two years after the termination of her conservatorship, it is safe to say the topic of exposing the harm caused by the music industry through a firsthand experience would be considered a must-watch for most viewers. However, in its attempt to capture the betrayal and dishonesty that comes from the most unsuspecting people in a young pop-star's rise to success, the show became a real-life example of it rather than a fictional experience. Through the lens of a cultural analysis, there are moments in the show's development and production that show how a critique of the music industry quickly transformed into a weekly episodic exploitation of the female body and the female narrative.

HBO's miniseries *The Idol* attempts to portray itself as an expose of the darker side of the music industry through the perspective of the characters Jocelyn and Tedros. The show starts by following Jocelyn, a child star turned pop music icon, in her return to the music industry after taking a year off due to her public breakdown. *The Idol* could have used its platform to uncover the more sinister side of the music industry as the root cause of these mental health issues. Instead, it became a pornographic portrayal of physical, mental, and emotional abuse that attempted to quickly turn itself into a story of female empowerment. Through a cultural analysis of three moments that take place both on and off the screen, it is clear where the show's director and producers went astray from

their original intentions. By understanding the difference between sex as pleasure and sex as danger, viewers will see the depiction of inaccurate female empowerment in the show as one that is harmful and dangerous rather than empowering to young female viewers.

The Idol's first two episodes could be considered its most genuine, as it shows the more vulnerable side of fame through Jocelyn's experiences. For example, in her first major attempt to return to and prove her worthiness within the music industry is the filming of her music video for her new single titled "World Class Sinner." During the filming of the video, it is obvious that Jocelyn is mentally unwell, as she is very critical of herself and creates an exuberant amount of pressure to prove that she still has

what it takes to thrive as a popstar. She turns to Tedros for comfort, not aware of his intentions to exploit her for his own benefit. Tension builds between them and comes to a climax in the third episode's hairbrush scene where Jocelyn hosts a small dinner with Tedros and a few of her close friends. Throughout this dinner, Tedros has been degrading and devaluing Jocelyn in front of her guests in her own home, which is an example of how he is using emotional abuse to make her insecure in an environment where she holds all the power. He continues to push her by forcing her to discuss the abuse she faced from her mother as a child, where she reveals the hairbrush. Through tears, she explains that her mother would hit her with a hard, wooden hairbrush in spots on her body where the bruises would be hidden as a way to help her keep focused. The episode ends with Jocelyn being struck with the hairbrush by Tedros while also being sexually pleased by him, all while he tells her to take this trauma and turn it into inspiration for her music. This scene connects to a concept in feminist theory titled "sex as a realm of danger," where pornography is "at the center of a cycle of abuse" because it "helped to institutionalize and legitimize gender inequality by creating a social climate in which sexual assault and abuse were tolerated" (Mann & Patterson, 2016, p.91). By hypersexualizing Jocelyn in every aspect of herself, such as her clothing choices, musical lyrics, and fetishized high sex drive, the inclusion of a sexual act while she is being openly abused and humiliated by her partner shows how the pornographic portrayal of abuse falls into sex as a realm of danger. The mixture of her moans of pleasure and uncontrollable sobbing creates a harmful depiction of abuse being something that can be pleasurable, rather than an act of danger. These rhetorical decisions made throughout the series foreshadow the show's bizarre twist ending,

which is that the abuse Jocelyn endures wasn't actually abuse at all, but rather female empowerment. Considering the scene through the lens of the feminist theory of "sex as a realm of pleasure," which argues that "ending sexual repression was central to ending woman's oppression," I argue that they attempted to use this scene to further employ hypersexualizing as a means of empowerment (Mann & Patterson, 2016, p.92).

Throughout the final episode, we see a dramatic and sudden shift in the power dynamic between Jocelyn and Tedros. In what seems instantaneous, she now openly looks down upon him, stating that he is "a con man and a fraud" that has "served his purpose" in her life and can now be discarded. After this, we see Jocelyn using the previously mentioned hairbrush to comb her hair, symbolizing that now she holds all the power. When Jocelyn starts her world tour, she introduces Tedros on stage and refers to him as "the love of her life" that she would like her fans to meet. While the fans are screaming and cheering in the background, Jocelyn speaks solely to Tedros and says "you're mine now, forever. Now go stand over there," where she points to a dark corner of the stage. This sends a harmful message to young viewers that it is easy to leave abusive relationships and that victims should take responsibility for actions that the abuser ought to be held accountable for. This final statement tries to position Jocelyn within the realm of sex as pleasure and power, as it attempts to portray her as the one in control all along, as she has now transformed from the abused to the abuser. However, based on the viewers being forced to endure more scenes of abuse than empowerment, it is too difficult for them to position themselves to understand this message, as the limited empowerment is juxtaposed with the exorbitant amounts of abuse. Abuse should not be confused for

empowerment, as the show seems to equate the two, but they should not be mistaken for one another. The final message of the show exemplifies that Jocelyn, although seemingly in control the entire time, was always within the realm of sex as danger and never sex as pleasure.

In March of 2023, Rolling Stone Magazine reported that the original director for the project, Amy Seimetz, suddenly exited *The Idol* after 80% of the project was completed. It was confirmed by HBO that this decision was made because of “a major creative overhaul that would be adjusting the cast and crew” (Roundtree, 2023). This change in director was enacted because of The Weekend, who not only played the character of Tedros, but was also a co-writer and executive producer of the show, stated that he “felt the show was heading too much into a female perspective” (Roundtree, 2023). HBO then chose director Sam Levinson to take her place. Levinson, who is mainly known for his work directing the HBO show *Euphoria*, was said to have “weakened the show’s overarching message... by dialing up the disturbing sexual content and nudity to match” (Roundtree, 2023). When some pictures of Seimetz’s original filming of *The Idol* leaked this summer on Twitter, viewers received a glimpse of the original intentions for the show, which were to convey the pressures women face in the music industry. Instead, they made an unrealistic and ill-conceived story conflating abuse with empowerment as told through the male gaze.

It is difficult for viewers to see what empowerment looks like in the music industry for a young female talent because there are so few media depictions of it. *The Idol* could have used its platform to create a realistic portrayal of a young woman’s experience in the music industry through an accurate female narrative that was created

and directed by women. Instead, the show used the female narrative to project the male gaze onto issues and experiences unique to women in the music industry, ultimately taking control of these experiences by portraying them to fit their perception of women. The depiction of empowerment was dangerous because it was centered in abuse rather than sex as a realm of pleasure. It is important that the message viewers take away from the ending of the show is one that is harmful rather than empowering to young female viewers.

References

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