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## Disclosure : sexual predation in a brave new post - p/c world

### **Abstract**

Barry Levinson's recent film, *Disclosure*, examines the impact of anti-discrimination legislation on white middle class America by foregrounding two contentious issues informing the politics of the workplace. Namely, the use and abuse of sexual harassment laws to regulate behaviour between genders, and the implementation of affirmative action protocols to redress gendered inequities in employment practices. However, this project, which underpins both the film and the book from which it is derived, is contaminated from the outset, by a dubious strategy of role reversal, which constitutes the film's departure point for its interrogation of the value of these laws and directives. Thus Michael Douglas's character, Thomas Sanders, becomes the victim of a harassment campaign waged by his unscrupulous and sexually predatory boss - Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore). His quest for justice in relation to charges of sexual harassment brought by Johnson forms the main plot sequence of the film. What this approach conveniently elides, however, is the overwhelming evidence that women constitute a majority of those subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace. In addition, their access to power in this context continues to be circumscribed by dominant patriarchal practices and attitudes towards women.

# **DISCLOSURE: SEXUAL PREDATION IN A BRAVE NEW POST - P/C WORLD.**

Glenda Moylan-Brouff

**B**arry Levinson's recent film, *Disclosure*, examines the impact of anti-discrimination legislation on white middle class America by foregrounding two contentious issues informing the politics of the workplace. Namely, the use and abuse of sexual harassment laws to regulate behaviour between genders, and the implementation of affirmative action protocols to redress gendered inequities in employment practices. However, this project, which underpins both the film and the book from which it is derived, is contaminated from the outset, by a dubious strategy of role reversal, which constitutes the film's departure point for its interrogation of the value of these laws and directives. Thus Michael Douglas's character, Thomas Sanders, becomes the victim of a harassment campaign waged by his unscrupulous and sexually predatory boss – Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore) His quest for justice in relation to charges of sexual harassment brought by Johnson forms the main plot sequence of the film. What this approach conveniently elides, however, is the overwhelming evidence that women constitute a majority of those subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace. In addition, their access to power in this context continues to be circumscribed by dominant patriarchal practices and attitudes towards women.

It is apparent that the ideological thrust of this manoeuvre is situated in the so-called backlash by the North American Right against its perception of the 'political correctness' which accrues around issues of minority rights – initially guaranteed by statute in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Measures, such as the proscription of discrimination in the workplace on the basis of race and gender — which have often been translated into affirmative action directives — have recently been mobilised by the right as evidence of their increasing marginalisation. The casting of the appalling Michael Douglas in a variation on his beleaguered white male persona in *Disclosure* implicitly thematises this preoccupation. In *Disclosure*, gender, and not race, operates as the primary site of conflict, and

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white middle class males are the subjects under threat.

Both the film and the book purport to strip away the rhetoric dictated by 'political correctness,' through the stratagem of role reversal, and to thus present us with the 'truth' that can be disclosed in relation to issues of law, gender, power and sexual harassment in the workplace. The politics of this reversal is articulated by the novel's author, Michael Crichton (1994) in an afterward to the text, which states:

The episode here is based on a true story. Its appearance in a novel is not intended to deny the fact that the great majority of harassment claims are brought by men against women. On the contrary: the advantage of a role-reversal story is that it may enable us to examine aspects concealed by traditional responses and conventional rhetoric.

One might ask Crichton why this ambivalently worded disclaimer was not produced as a preface, instead of being confined to the superfluous, although politically resonant, textual space of the afterward? It is obvious, that the terms 'traditional' and 'conventional' in this disclaimer encode a diatribe against 'political correctness,' a reading which is borne out by the film itself.

The basic plotline of the film stages this ideological confrontation between 'truth' and 'political correctness.' (The book departs in some ways from the film, but its essential premises about power and gender are the same, and I shall thus focus primarily on the film.) Thomas Sanders is a happily married man with young children, who expects to be promoted to a senior managerial position in the company, Digital Communications. This expectation is thwarted by the return of a former lover, Meredith Johnson, who is promoted in his place. Johnson enjoys the patronage of the company's owner, Garvin, and his decision to promote her is partially based on his desire to challenge the 'glass ceiling' which prohibits women from occupying senior managerial positions in corporations. Sanders accepts his defeat with equanimity, and also accepts Johnson's offer to have a drink in her office after work. Johnson 'seduces' Sanders, basically by asserting her authority over him, and by invoking their former relationship – a point which is used against Sanders to vitiate his subsequent campaign against Johnson. Sanders struggles to reject her sexual advances in a deliberately ambiguous scene, in which his penis becomes erect (a natural male reflex of course) and he is forced to engage with her erotically. For example, in a gesture of unbridled machismo, he rips off her scanty underpants, before finally convincing her that 'no' means 'no.' She is outraged by his rejection, and in what appears to be a pre-emptive gesture, makes an internal complaint of sexual harassment against him on the following day. Sanders ultimately retaliates by filing a complaint under *Title Seven, Civil Rights Act of 1964*.

The judicial resolution of who, in fact, committed the act of sexual harassment, then forms the basis for the film's examination of the efficacy of procedures for dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace. Needless to say, Sander's central problematic is establishing, contrary to stereotype, that women are capable of making unwanted sexual advances to their male subordinates. In spite of its 'subversive' intentions, this strategy of role reversal produces a series of all too familiar patriarchal stereotypes about women. Johnson is constructed not only as 'the woman scorned,' but as the manipulative whore who is binarily opposed to Sander's supportive wife/Madonna, Susan. Susan also works, but her focus — and that of Sanders — is the maintenance of the nuclear family, which is threatened by Johnson's machinations. Of course, it is important to contest the notion that women are passive objects of male desire. But, it is one thing to argue that women have been represented as lacking sexual agency within a patriarchal economy; it is an entirely different matter to conflate that issue with abuses of power in the workplace, seemingly generated by the female character's libidinal excesses.

However, it seems that Johnson's initial claim of sexual harassment is driven by a hidden agenda, and it is this hidden agenda which enables the film to link issues about affirmative action and sexual harassment. These linkages are much more explicit in the novel, but they still inform the film's position on the subject of affirmative action. The disclosure of this hidden agenda occurs in the course of Sander's quest for justice, which necessarily takes place outside of the law. Although Sanders is finally vindicated by the outcome of the mediation hearing on his counter claim of sexual harassment, his triumph is disrupted by the discovery that the company, using Johnson as its agent, intends to publicly humiliate and dismiss him on grounds of incompetence. This strategy is devised to cover up a prior instance of incompetency by Johnson, which in turn threatens the viability of a merger between Digicom and another company. The penultimate scene of the film stages Sander's public exposure of Johnson's incompetency, and her dismissal seems to endorse the notion that corporate promotion based only on the criteria of gender (affirmative action) is untenable, as are the protocols for policing sexual harassment in the workplace. To establish its political 'neutrality' on this subject the film assigns Johnson's senior position to another female executive in the wake of her dismissal. This transfer of power is performed in a public scene, in which the company's choice of candidate receives a standing ovation by its employees, thereby reinforcing the notion that democracy prevails — even at the core of corporate America. Thus it is Johnson's abuse of the above mechanisms, which forms the basis of the film's critique of anti-discrimination legislation.

One of the more problematic aspects of this critique — namely that sexual

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harassment procedures are inevitably open to abuse – is the central proposition that power is simply an effect of position and context. That is to say, it is non-gender specific. In one scene, Sander's lawyer, a woman, argues that 'a woman in power can be every bit as abusive as a man.' Her authority on this issue derives from her experience in litigating sexual harassment suits, which permits her to formulate the following hypothesis in the novel:

So the figures suggest that women executives harass men in the same proportion as men harass women. And as more women get corporate jobs, the percentage of claims by men is going up. Because the fact is, harassment is a power issue. And power is neither male nor female. Whoever is behind the desk has the opportunity to abuse power. And women will take advantage as often as men. (Crichton 1994:303)

To suggest that abuses of power in the workplace will increasingly transcend gendered boundaries as women gain access to executive positions in equal numbers to men has yet to be demonstrated. To begin with, this hypothetically equal access is at odds with the history of patriarchal domination over women in the workplace, and with the discriminatory practices that corporate structures and values continue to authorise. Moreover, to suggest that structures of power operate outside of gendered relations, in this instance, simply naturalises the idea of power and its effects on particular subjects. This 'inevitability thesis' is not rendered more credible by acknowledging that some women internalise patriarchal values, and thus emulate the abusive practices of their male role models. In short, the ideological project of *Disclosure* fails to convince!

## REFERENCES

Crichton, M 1994 *Disclosure*, Arrow, London