

# CMGI RECOMMENDS

ISSUE 32 | JANUARY 2025

Films have an unmatched power to shape perspectives, having a reach that words alone cannot achieve. Yet too often, the representation of sexual harassment misses the mark by sensationalizing trauma (think: *Kill Bill*), erasing survivor agency, or ignoring the systemic roots of abuse. In this month's newsletter, CMGI reviews several movies on the subject, focusing on what they get right (and wrong) in their treatment of this issue.

## AATTAM (2023)

DIRECTED BY ANAND EKARSHI

What is particularly commendable in Anand Ekarshi's thoughtful debut, *Aattam (The Play)*, is its lack of voyeuristic gaze, thus moving away from undue focus on the portrayal of the sexual harassment incident. Instead, the film turns the gaze on to the perpetrators and the complacent, masterfully unraveling the false facade of progressiveness worn by them.

Set against the backdrop of a theatre troupe, *Arangu*, the Malayalam film centers on 12 men and a woman. Anjali (Zarin Shihab), an architect by profession and a theatre actress on the side, is the only woman in the group. After a successful performance, she is sexually assaulted by one of the men at an afterparty.



Afterward, she confides in one of her group mates, who, along with the rest of the men, discusses the next course of action —whether they should kick the perpetrator out of the group or reach a ‘compromise.’ The men in the theatre group grapple with fear of reprisal and self-blame at their inability to ‘protect’ the victim, with their decisions driven by concern regarding their loss of reputation.

One hears multiple viewpoints as each member of the group responds based on their shifting loyalties, self interests, opportunistic choices and biases. The self-constituted all-male court seems almost allegorical to real life. The filmmakers make the deliberate choice of not depicting the actual incident, almost testing the audience, as if asking: Do you (the viewer) believe the victim?

The film explores Anjali's fear of retaliation, as well as the bystander apathy from the rest of the group. By the end of the movie, we see what was once Anjali's safe space turned against her.

What stands out is Anjali's resilience. We see her reach catharsis by the end of the movie, having turned the incident into another theatre play, hinting at the importance of victim narratives and storytelling.

## TÁR (2022)

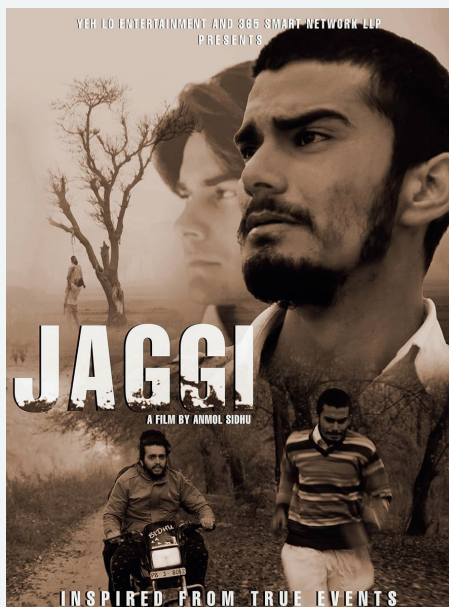
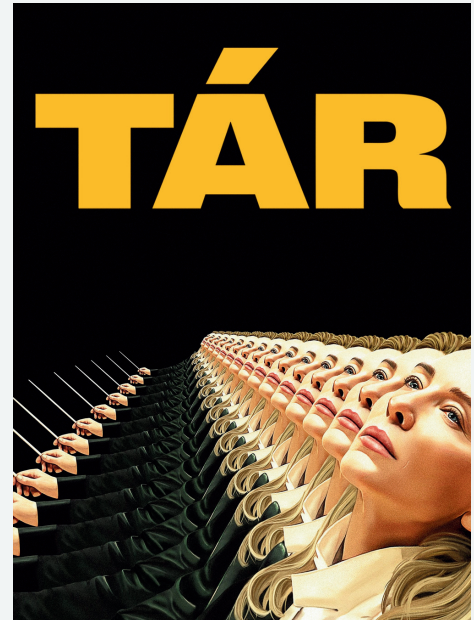
DIRECTED BY TODD FIELD

Todd Field's 2022 drama *Tár*, hailed for its critical acclaim, centers around Lydia Tár, played by Cate Blanchett, a successful female composer and conductor on the verge of completing a 'cycle' of Mahler's works, including the celebrated 5th Symphony. The majority of the film follows her preparations for a live recording. It offers a glimpse into Lydia's complex life and psyche, showing how she has forged a reputation as a female maestro, unapologetically asserting herself both professionally and personally as an openly lesbian woman.

A publicly charming figure, we are shown her abusive and predatory tendencies up close. Taking her young female acolytes as lovers, we see her caught in a controversy when her former mentee, Krista, dies by suicide. We witness her deleting incriminating emails, obstructing the careers of her former mentees, and grooming other young women throughout the course of the film. The film provides a nuanced critique that sexual harassment is more about the abuse of power and power dynamics than just the gender of the perpetrator.

We are barely given the point of view and testimonies of Lydia's victims; they are absent, and we only hear about them or see them on screen when they are being groomed by Lydia. Their absence reflects the director's choice to center Lydia's dominance and perspective.

The film raises difficult questions: Can we truly separate an artist's work from their personal actions? What does abuse of power look like both within institutions and in an individual's psyche?



## JAGGI (2021)

DIRECTED BY ANMOL SIDHU

If *Aattam* makes its point by not showing violence on screen, *Jaggi* drives the point home by doing the exact opposite. Described as a nihilistic nightmare and a punishing experience by most film reviewers, a host of The Quint podcast *Do I Like It* even introduced their episode on the film with this title: 'Jaggi Review: I Wish This Film Were Never Made', saying, 'I wish this film never had to be made.'

A bleak portrayal of toxic masculinity and sexual depravity, *Jaggi* presents a protagonist who is rather vulnerable, in stark contrast to the masculinity celebrated in Punjabi popular culture.

The film begins with a teenage Jaggi, suffering from erectile dysfunction, confiding in his friend, who betrays his trust and spreads the word of his impotence around the school, with his peers cruelly declaring him to be gay. His now open secret renders him vulnerable to predators who sexually abuse him to the point that he has to drop out of school.

The movie unfolds in flashback, inviting viewers into a gritty and uncomfortable world. What is striking about the movie is its exploration of power dynamics and the extreme abuse of power in everyday life. We see characters profiling and assessing; there is no guilt or remorse in Jaggi's perpetrators, as it is treated as a matter of fact that since he's not enough of a man, he invited it upon himself.

Even Jaggi's outbursts are reserved for only two people he considers inferior to himself in the hierarchy: his mother and a lower-caste, lower-class farmhand who touches him after hearing about his 'reputation.'

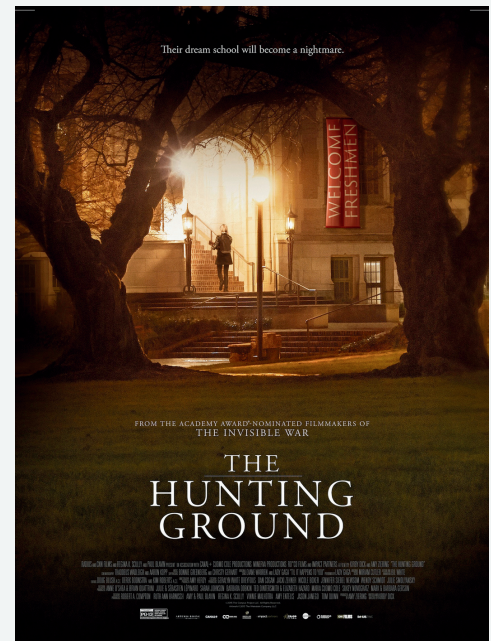
Completely uninterested in catharsis or cinematic resolution, the cycle of abuse eventually ends, but on a tragic note. The creative choices in the film and its portrayal of violence are open to debate, but it drives home the point that social power is shaped by various factors, such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity, and that power differentials contribute to sexual assault.

## THE HUNTING GROUND (2015)

DIRECTED BY KIRBY DICK

In *The Hunting Ground*, Kirby Dick presents a stark, unsettling exposé of sexual assault cases on U.S. college campuses, revealing not only the systemic cover-ups but also the lasting toll on survivors and their family and friends.

Annie E. Clark, a former student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and fellow UNC student Andrea Pino initiate the filmmakers' journey into the issue by visiting and establishing connections with other survivors of sexual assault across the nation. Schools such as Dartmouth, Harvard Law School, Columbia, USC, the University of Oregon, UC Berkeley, and Swarthmore, among others, reveal disturbing accounts of institutional failure and survivor trauma.



Story after story emerges, with women and a few young men stepping forward to share the stories of the assault and the aftermath—how they were ignored, ridiculed, shamed, and not heard. The pervasive disrespect and malice toward victims is indicative of the problem of sexual assaults on campus in America and everywhere else.

Following the release of the documentary, there was a high-profile backlash and controversy over its truth claims. Questions were raised about whether the film adhered to journalistic principles, but as movie critic David Edelstein comments in his review of the film, 'Rape is not a partisan issue,' and journalistic prudence will only be unethical in this case, emphasizing the importance of victim accounts that are essential for driving societal change, accountability, and justice.



## BOMBHELL (2019)

DIRECTED BY JAY ROACH

Based on a true story, *Bombshell* is a retelling of the Fox News sexual harassment case, in which several women, most notably Megyn Kelly (Charlize Theron), a major star of the Fox News network in the mid-2010s, shared their

experiences with sexual harassment by Roger Ailes (John Lithgow), the network's then-CEO and chairman. *Bombshell* manages to convey the claustrophobia of workplace harassment. The culture of internalized misogyny, shallowness, and a complacent "it is what it is" attitude not only creates fertile ground for sexual harassment but intimidates women into silence. It lays bare how these microaggressions are not merely harbingers of a broken system but systemic issues in their own right.

The film unfolds through the perspectives of three women: celebrity anchor Megyn Kelly (Charlize Theron), former Miss America turned anchor Gretchen Carlson (Nicole Kidman), and Kayla Pospisil (Margot Robbie), a (fictional) young self-proclaimed evangelical millennial. While Kelly and Carlson are portrayed as complex figures, powerful yet flawed, Pospisil is the vulnerable newcomer, carrying the weight of the film's most harrowing depiction of sexual assault.

The film characters do not seem to be conscious of the power they hold, particularly how their sense of complacency serves to perpetuate the cycle of abuse in the system. The film serves as a grim reminder of the pervasiveness of workplace harassment, affecting even the most privileged and influential women of the lot.

## **SPOTLIGHT (2015)**

DIRECTED BY TOM MCCARTHY

*Spotlight* is a cinematic retelling of how a team of Boston Globe reporters uncovered a sex abuse and cover-up scandal in the Catholic Church in the early 2000s.

Given the sensitive subject, the film steers away from sensationalizing it or wallowing in melodrama; instead, the film remains a straight procedural with four reporters, Walter Robinson (Michael Keaton), Mike Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo), Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams), and Matt Carroll (Brian d'Arcy James), working towards the story.



The film raises important questions about powerful institutions that attempt to bury this scandal and how the church and government intersect in Boston, offering a sharp critique of how sexual harassment persists across societal hierarchies.

Perhaps the most impactful scene comes near the end. After an arduous investigation involving a lawsuit against the Catholic Church, countless hours spent gaining the trust of abuse survivors long silenced by neglect, and tense confrontations with Boston's powerful religious and legal figures, *Spotlight* takes us back to the team's cramped office. Instead of triumphant arrests or Cardinal Bernard Law's recall, phones ring incessantly as survivors come forward, revealing the crisis to be far larger than they had imagined.

*Written by Geetika Sharma, RA, CMGI*

The monthly newsletter from the [Committee for Managing Gender Issues \(CMGI\)](#) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. [Please reach out to Geetika Sharma at \[geetikas@iima.ac.in\]\(mailto:geetikas@iima.ac.in\) for queries, submissions, and/or feedback.](#)

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at: Email: [chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in](mailto:chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in) Phone: 97129 15533 Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.