

EXPLORING THE USES OF A JOURNALIST CHARACTER AND MANUFACTURED CONFLICT IN *HUSTLERS*, THE ON- SCREEN ADAPTATION OF JESSICA PRESSLER'S 'THE HUSTLERS AT SCORES' ARTICLE.

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Abstract:

Jessica Pressler, journalist for *New York* magazine, bears the unique distinction of inspiring two on-screen adaptations of her journalistic process in producing two separate articles. 'The Hustlers at Scores' (2015) article was recovered from the *New York* magazine's archives and transcribed into a major Hollywood film, written and directed by Lorene Scafaria. *Hustlers* (2019) was released into the full bloom of the #MeToo movement, where it slotted neatly into the happening conversations on female narratives and whistle-blowers. The film surprised Jessica Pressler and viewers alike with its inclusion of a journalist character and the research process behind her article. Sandwiched between the scenes of glittering revelry, strip clubs, and mayhem, *Hustler's* journalist character, Elizabeth, can feel somewhat irritatingly misplaced. This article explores Elizabeth's underappreciated value as an open door through which audiences can welcome the story of the Pressler article, lending particular focus to the film's class and social analyses, the political context in which the film was released, and used of manufactured conflict as a narrational device.

Keywords:

#MeToo, Magazine, Film, Journalism, Class, Whistleblower.

Jessica Pressler's article, 'The Hustlers at Scores' (2015), was first published in the *New York* magazine where it amassed large foot traffic and enjoyed literary acclaim through social media.¹ With Pressler's involvement, the article was later adapted into a screenplay and film by Lorene Scafaria, under the similar, shorter title, *Hustlers* (2019). During the creation of *Hustlers*, Scafaria aimed to be faithful to

Pressler's original telling of the story.² The film therefore closely follows the familiar tale of Destiny as she reports it to a journalist named Elizabeth, an adaptation of the article's real journalist, Jessica Pressler. It does differ, however, in its candid expression of the journalistic process, which is unforthcoming in Pressler's version - which, of course, reads like the already completed article that it is. As the film unfolds,

Destiny behaves both standoffishly and confessionally towards Elizabeth as she narrates the true story of her younger self and her ex-friend Ramona, and how they banded together to swindle various Wall Street guys through an organised drugging process in the strip club that they formerly worked at. While the film holds up remarkably well when compared to the article - the film is littered with references to Pressler's writing - some creative liberties were taken by Scafaria in translating the article to the screen. One of the most striking being her characterisation of the journalist Elizabeth, who sometimes differs noticeably from her real-life counterpart, Pressler. This article explores the varied reasoning for these factual deviations in Elizabeth's character and examines the significance of including journalist characters on-screen.

Hustlers debuted in a moment of time defined by women's narratives - however fleeting this moment turned out to be. The #MeToo movement, which began two years before the film's release, encouraged a cultural interest in female perspectives and the process of whistleblowers, who were often journalists or women who worked with them.³ *Hustlers'* premier was flanked by a few other pieces of on-screen media of a similar nature, including *The Morning Show* (2019) and *Bombshell* (2019), both of which feature a band of female journalists exposing the coolly enacted abuse of powerful men. The consistent feature of a female journalist in *Hustlers* situates the film clearly within this

fictional-realism feminist sub-genre. Through this connection, *Hustlers* quickly aligns itself as a piece of media allied with the righteous principle of women speaking up and prepares its audience to expect its contribution to a wider social criticism. One of the values of Elizabeth's character lies in her position of subtly shepherding this social criticism towards its anticipatedly skeptical audience.

Though the film already begins with the title card 'Inspired by a true story', Elizabeth acts as an unfaltering reminder of the narrative's roots in reality.⁴ As Jonathan Stubbs rightly points out, 'separating reported fact and invented fiction was in fact critical to a piece of journalism which depended on conflicting testimonies from sources with varying degrees of credibility. The authority projected by Pressler is key in reconciling and framing these testimonies.'⁵ While Stubbs referred specifically to Pressler's efforts to sensationally bridge the gap between the fictional and the non-fictional aspects of the film during its press tour, the same can be said of Elizabeth's presence in the film itself. Elizabeth continually draws the audience back from the glittering and fantastical 2000s scenes to a paler, more recognisable modern day. She thereby unites Destiny's spectacular and seemingly unplausible tale with reality, making any criticisms made by Scafaria towards the film's social systems equally applicable to the ones in the real world.

One critic, Tom van Dessel, dedicated an entire article to his loathing towards the influx of fictional realism films, he enthusiastically explains, ‘When I see the dreaded ‘true story’ title, ... the same thought [comes] flashing through my mind: ‘Don’t you think I’d believe it otherwise?’⁶ Dessel expresses a very optimistic faith in himself and others as audiences. It is an optimism that is in conflict with the reception of so many stories from the film’s release period; once again, newer audiences are encouraged to cast their minds back to the *#MeToo* era into which the work was thrust. In *Hustlers* itself, Destiny even tells Elizabeth, ‘I’m used to people not believing me.’⁷ Aware of the social climate into which it emerged and of how women’s condemnations of skewed political systems were, and still are, so rigorously contested and denied, *Hustlers* provides its journalist character as a voucher for its protagonist’s earnest story. Elizabeth’s palatable, strait-laced appearance and wary, but nonetheless persistent, faith in Destiny allows the audience to open their minds to her in a similar way.

Though Elizabeth fills the professional role of Pressler in the film, she also shares some of Pressler’s characteristics and actual life developments that coincided with her writing of ‘The Hustlers at Scores’, such as a baby shower, which takes place briefly at the end of the movie. There are clear, intentional parallels between the fictional and the real women. However, where Elizabeth most differs from her real-life

counterpart is in her class status, which provides the chief component of her characterisation altogether. When asked by Destiny if she grew up with money and of her parent’s occupations, Elizabeth answers that she grew up comfortably, has a parent similarly stationed in journalism, and is an alum of the prestigious Brown University.⁸ The manufactured class status of Elizabeth opens a chasm between herself and Destiny and initiates an unexpected conversation about racial and class standards for journalists in film. When critic Brian McNair reflects upon the representation of female journalists, such as Hildy Johnson from *His Girl Friday* (1940), he explains, ‘There were always strong, powerful women working in journalism... More often than might be expected, the movies took these women and placed them at the heart of popular culture.’⁹ Examining McNair’s assessment, the word that most stands out is ‘powerful’. Determinedly unfazed in her questioning of Destiny and donned in a tweed blazer that seems to be a nod to Chanel, Elizabeth conjures up a spectacle of power and influence. In characterising and styling her this way, Scafaria replicates and problematises the overused archetype of the female journalist to which McNair refers. Rather than bolstering the expensive elements of Elizabeth’s dress or her nepotistic connections, Scafaria reduces them to deterrents in encouraging Destiny to share her story.

Here, *Hustlers* offers an example of social power in the journalistic profession being a hindrance to achieving

earnest empathy. In this regard, the film is careful not to fall into criticisms endured by similar films such as *Bombshell*, which Jamie Tram problematised for paving over the racist attitudes of a *Fox News* whistleblower, Megyn Kelly, claiming that the film needed ‘more nuance and less pandering’.¹⁰ Rather, *Hustlers* is less hesitant than *Bombshell* is of using its journalist adaptations in an unflattering light to challenge the power dynamics inherent to journalism. Stubbs’ assessment of Elizabeth’s characterisation, ‘The interactions between Elizabeth, who is white and middle-class, and Destiny, who was abandoned by her immigrant parents, also comment indirectly on race and class in a manner which is absent from the article’, rightly points out the disparity between the discussed class criticisms of the film compared to those in the article.¹¹ As Pressler’s identity is more or less absent from ‘The Hustlers at Scores’, the inclusion of a journalistic presence in *Hustlers* lends the necessary capacity to initiate a self-aware class criticism that would have been difficult to make in the original piece.

In a more simplistic sense, Elizabeth’s manufactured class background also serves as a way of providing conflict to the story, thereby preserving some of the more captivating, fictional aspects of the film. Conflict is an essential component of how humans have always engaged with storytelling, but it is also a way of adapting figures with nuance.¹² Elizabeth repeatedly clashes with Destiny, allowing for moments of interest

in the film. In *Hustlers*, the two women rarely share a screen, rather the camera flits between each character as they speak. Though they are collaborators in their desire to share Destiny’s experiences, they ultimately hail from contrasting social spheres and are kept accordingly separate, cinematically speaking, to convey their disparities. Writer-director, Lorene Scafaria, prioritises these themes of complexities within female relationships, which also lie latent in the original article. She explains, ‘there’s a responsibility and truth to what really happened... and it’s not a black and white story, after all.’¹³ In this sense, brewing conflict through use of Elizabeth’s skepticism towards Destiny is a way of adding nuance to these characters and their relationships, resulting in a far more generous and entertaining characterisation of female protagonists than making them agreeable alone. Audiences can see the technique used in *Hustlers* inverted in Jessica Pressler’s other on-screen adaptation, *Inventing Anna* (2022), in which Pressler is re-reconstructed as a salt of the Earth, working-class New Yorker in order to initiate conflict between her and her flamboyant, German socialite interviewee, Anna Sorokin.¹⁴

The use of manufactured conflict and a journalistic guide in the film *Hustlers* opens pathways that were left underexplored by Jessica Pressler in her original ‘The Hustlers at Scores’ article. Elizabeth has faced criticism for her unfaithfulness to her real-life counterpart and for her limited characterisation in the film, one writer even

describes her as ‘a glorified timekeeper, rather than a character worth noting in the movie.’¹⁵ However, her involvement in the film is largely responsible for the work’s pivotal narrational shift from a completed article into a retelling that includes the journalistic process. Elizabeth allows Lorene Scafaria to celebrate the role of journalists in believing and breaking stories on systemic abuse and while still exploring journalistic culpability in perpetrating that same abuse themselves. While Pressler initially felt that Elizabeth’s character would not survive the cutting floor due to her lack of feminine desirability, Elizabeth prevailed and provided a sense of

conflict and judgement between Destiny and the modern world.¹⁶ In response to those who problematise manufactured differences between fictional renderings and their original versions, one anonymous writer offers this definition of ‘adaptation’: ‘The process of recreating and presenting an existing work in a way which draws new meaning.’¹⁷ In the case of Elizabeth in *Hustlers* (2019), the changes made that separate her from the real life Pressler enabled Scafaria to produce a piece of work that rendered the already topical ‘The Hustlers at Scores’ article into something that resonated with even more resolve in the impassioned #MeToo era.

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