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When Bad People Happen To Good Art

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Bad people can make and love good art. Can good people love bad people's art?

Judgy words, I know. But certain kinds of conduct bring out the Jeremiah in me.

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Harvey Weinstein is a producer, not a director or writer, but entertainment is a collaborative enterprise. Even if the Academy Award-winning women who've thanked him from the stage did that from fear of his power, he wielded it over women, men, money and media not only for alleged sexual assault, but also to get movies made. "Shakespeare In Love," "The King's Speech," "Inglourious Basterds," "Silver Linings Playbook," "Lion," "The Artist": Whatever favorites of yours the Weinsteins produced, he was arguably as essential to their existence, let alone their success, as their directors, writers and actors.

I realize I'm making Harvey Weinstein as responsible for his output as Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby and Woody Allen are for theirs. I do that to use his disgrace as a prompt to wrestle with the pleasures that art and entertainment can offer even when they cohabit with behavior by their creators that makes you want to throw up.

I admit my ambivalence. Do I have to strike "Chinatown" from my top-10 list because Polanski pleaded guilty to raping a 13-year old? Does still finding "The Cosby Show" funny make me the comedian's co-conspirator? From its first seconds — that glorious montage, that Gershwin — Woody Allen's "Manhattan"

floored me. But after he left Mia Farrow for her adopted daughter, Soon-Yi; after their adopted daughter Dylan claimed he sexually assaulted her at age 7; after Mariel Hemingway said he tried to seduce her when she was a teenager: Has “Manhattan,” a story about a 43-year old hitting on a 17-year old, now become a symptom, a confession, a cry for help? Or is it just the same movie?

It goes beyond entertainers. I’ve been crushed by enough biographies and memoirs of writers, painters, architects and other artists whose work I admire, but who turn out to be brutal spouses, monstrous parents, racists, fascists and worse, that I’m tempted to swear off their life stories entirely.

One example: I loved “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” until I found out what an anti-Semite T.S. Eliot was. I still don’t know how to process that. I curse how it distracts me from the text. I’m discomfited by the enjoyment I can still get from his poetry. It makes me question the gospel of the liberal arts — the faith that the humanities humanize. If poetry didn’t civilize Eliot, what makes me believe it lofts his readers?

I’ll never forget my first encounter with these words from George Steiner, which led me to become his pupil: “We know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.” If you say such a man is reading or hearing wrongly, you’re begging the question. The problem isn’t misinterpretation; it’s the secular church that we’ve built from the arts. It’s a miracle, not a mission, when aesthetic pleasure makes for moral enlightenment.

Hollywood is a business, not a religion, but its stories touch deep chords, and they shape how we see the world and ourselves. When Oscar winners say that their pictures depict “the triumph of the human spirit,” there’s some unctuous self-congratulation in that, but also a truth. Of course a lot of inane schlock gets made and makes money. Some of it is so violent and degrading that I can’t bring myself to watch, and I fear that it serves as a kind of curriculum for some of its viewers. But gorgeous, uplifting work gets done, too, and though some stories include — may even require — violence, sex and foul language on the journey to their endings, those pictures can move moral mountains.

Harvey and Bob Weinstein produced some schlock and some beauts. Both brothers had awful reputations as people to work for and with. Now, because some 50 women have had the courage to accuse Harvey, we know chapter and verse on being a bully and pig in Hollywood. On that evidence, the soaring movies his name is on did nothing to enlighten or redeem their producer. But it would be a pity if his grossness were to deprive us of the light that those creations let shine.

This is a crosspost of [my column in the Jewish Journal](#), where you can reach me if you’d like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.