Slow Burn and *The Deuce*, two shows for the Me Too moment

Looking at history through questions of power, sexual agency, and morality

by Kathryn Reklis in the November 7, 2018 issue

Eileen (Maggie Gyllenhaal, center) and Darlene (Dominique Fishback, right) in *The Deuce*. Photo by Paul Schiraldi / HBO.

The second season of the Slate podcast *Slow Burn* and the HBO drama *The Deuce* are both shows for the Me Too moment, but they both complicate our ways of thinking about sex, power, and morality.

In recounting the impeachment of Bill Clinton, *Slow Burn* presents a moral minefield for people who want to forget that they once supported a president whose combination of narcissism, charisma, and sexual misconduct seem disturbingly

familiar. The same arguments some liberals now use to castigate Trump—that his private morality makes him unfit for office—are arguments liberals dismissed when Republicans made them against Clinton. When the current president and his supporters try to delegitimate Robert Mueller's special investigation by calling it a partisan witch hunt, they are using language the left used to describe Ken Starr's special investigation of Clinton. The full extent of the accusations against Clinton, including Juanita Broaddrick's accusation of rape, and the ease with which they have been forgotten in the stories liberals tell about the Clinton impeachment should be a punch in the gut to anyone who assumes Democrats stand with survivors of sexual assault.

The lesson seems to be that our concern for morality shifts based on power. This is something liberals are very prone to say about conservatives but much less likely to apply to their own side. *Slow Burn* is willing to sit with the truth long enough to make all of us squirm.

I also squirmed at the way the women in these stories of male misconduct were described, especially Monica Lewinsky. Several of the people who argue that it was right to call out Clinton for his behavior support their case by referring to Lewinsky as "just a child." Lewinsky was a young woman fully of the age of reason. It does not feel much like progress if the only way we can call out men's abuse of power is to diminish women's capacity for reason and autonomy.

I would not call *The Deuce*'s vision of morality a sign of progress, but HBO's drama about the sex trade in 1970s New York City does present a different way to think about female desire and agency inside sexist systems.

Early in the second season, Eileen (Maggie Gyllenhaal), who goes by the street name Candy, is lying on a desk waiting to shoot a scene in a porn film. A former prostitute, she finds the working conditions of porn safer than the street trade, but it's the moviemaking that captivates her. While waiting for the lighting technicians to better illuminate her spread legs, she says wistfully, "Who would have thought the most boring part of this job was the fucking?"

The show shares this sentiment. There is plenty of sex in *The Deuce* (the title uses a nickname for 42nd Street, the heart of Times Square, which in the 1970s was the center of the heterosexual sex trade), but the show is neither prurient nor sentimental about sex work. Like any other work in advanced capitalism, this trade

has labor disputes, aggravating bosses, unfair or risky working conditions, and workplace sexual harassment.

Determined to get behind the camera, Eileen finagles a meeting with a Hollywood producer to pitch her idea for making female-centered erotica. Eileen is used to her idea being shot down—most people can't imagine female desire is marketable—but she assumes it will be a meeting between two business people talking business ideas. When the producer offers her funding in exchange for a blow job, her face blanches. But then, after turning away for a long moment, she replies, smiling, "Sure, why not?"

In our Me Too moment, the whole scene is infuriatingly familiar. But my own Me Too sympathies were confounded at the end of the episode when Eileen pours herself a drink and looks with pride at the check she walks away with. A blow job is just work, after all, and for Eileen money is power to change things.

If our moral sensibilities are offended by this transaction, the show suggests that we probably have a sentimental idea about moral progress. Times Square gets a makeover not because people's ideas about sex are reformed but because it becomes more profitable for businesses to sell neon advertising space than to sell cheap blow jobs in phone booths. It matters at one moral level that Eileen acquires the power to make her movie—in her life, it is real agency—but at another moral level it doesn't matter at all. Female erotica won't dismantle the patriarchy.

Both of these shows press us to think more sharply about sex, power, and morality. We have to do more than challenge men only when their politics don't align with ours, and we have to do better than believe women only when they seem like the right kind of victim. We need to be able to affirm women's agency even if we can't endorse their actions. We may find these moves hard to talk about, but both of these shows get the conversation started.

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