

Ethical Dilemmas of the Toxic 21st Century Workplace

The Assistant, directed by Kitty Green (Bellmer Pictures, Forensic Films, Symbolic Exchange, 2019)

Reviewed by Jason Hernandez

The *Assistant* follows Jane through a work day at her assistant job in a Manhattan production studio, five weeks into her employment. As the day progresses it becomes clear that several employees spend most of their workday avoiding the wrath of the boss. Due to a fumbled conversation with the boss's wife, Jane finds herself being berated over the phone and required to send an apology email. As the other two assistants (both of whom are male) help Jane write a message containing stereotypical business vernacular, it seems to viewers that this scenario is a common occurrence.

The day then proceeds as normal, or at least is framed that way as Jane performs questionable tasks without a second thought. She scans the passport of an actress who speaks no English, and later overhears a private meeting between the actress and the boss. She refills a cabinet with syringes of alprostadil, a drug for erectile dysfunction, and clean up the used needles from the night before. Jane calls the company accountant to ask about a few blank checks for large sums of money. But when told that the boss will know what those checks are for, she presses no further.

Jane finally starts to think something is wrong as she helps a rather young waitress from Idaho get settled in as a fourth assistant at the company. After dropping the woman off at a nearby hotel, she becomes suspicious of the reason for her hiring when she finds the boss missing from the office and everyone else agreeing that he is probably at the hotel. Jane decides that this incident, along with a few smaller ones that occurred earlier, is enough to go to HR and file a complaint. However, she is quickly met with resistance and an outright threat to her job as the HR rep suggests that she is just jealous of the new hire and the deal she's gotten. Defeated, Jane drops the complaint and heads back to the office. As she leaves, the rep tells her that she is not the boss's type, so she doesn't have to worry about a similar situation happening to her.

We learn after this that the boss's abuse of authority to sleep with aspiring actresses is a public secret throughout the company. Shortly after returning from the HR department—which is located

in a different building but only a few minutes away -- Jane learns that the rep has already told everyone about her attempt to file a complaint, including her boss. She is then forced to send another apology email to him to keep her job. Unlike the first email, the boss responds to this one with an apology of his own, stating that he's only "tough on [her] because he plans to make her great." This point is later reinforced by the boss's driver, Amir, saying the boss called Jane smart and a hard worker.

The movie comes to a close with Jane being sent home by the boss as he takes a new actress in for a private meeting. As she sits in a diner across the street eating a muffin, she calls her father to wish him a belated happy birthday. Upon her father's excitement over her job, Jane decides to not tell him about the day's events. Looking up to the office's window to see the silhouette of the actress performing a sexual act, Jane wraps up her muffin and heads for the train headed back to her Queens apartment.

The Assistant shows how unethical leadership can adversely affect an entire organization. The boss of a large production company generating a long list of box office hits and Academy darlings, a fictionalized version of Harvey Weinstein, takes advantage of clients and employees with no checks in place to stop him. His behavior has a poisonous effect on the business, as only people who come to accept his actions or are unwilling to risk their jobs to say anything remain working for him, further enabling his behavior. With HR in the boss's pocket, internal whistleblowing is not an option.

The Assistant also creates a strong portrayal of the ethical struggles an employee can go through when confronted with corporate wrongdoing. After working at the company for a little over a month, Jane becomes aware of her boss's proclivity for manipulating young women into having sex with him. Her discomfort in bringing the young woman from Idaho to the hotel and her attempt to report the incident to HR demonstrate that she considers her boss's behavior morally reprehensible.

However, it is also important to note the external pressures that prevail over Jane's ethical compass. Not only is she dissuaded from filing a complaint, but her colleagues try to convince her that her reaction is unfounded. Both male assistants suggest coming to them first before HR next time, the execs console Jane by exclaiming how lucky these women are, and even the boss himself says that she shows promise in this industry. Ultimately, lacking the moral courage to pursue the issue further, Jane decides to stay silent and keep her head down.

The Assistant captures how common it can be for business executives to abuse their power as well as how easy it can be for this behavior to be swept under the rug, even when it's public knowledge to the entire firm. I particularly applaud the movie's use of juxtaposition, framing the boss's abusive acts and their cover-up next to mundane office tasks to portray how the office employees grew to accept the boss's egregious behavior as part of the job. The scenes in which Jane is bringing the new assistant to the hotel or stocking the cabinet of ED syringes are filmed with the same energy and shot composition as those where Jane is calling an airline to double check on the flight schedule or printing out Excel spreadsheets. This reinforces the growing sense of dread that a first-time viewer may experience as the workplace transgressions become more obvious. Overall, the movie is shot in a rather boring fashion to help with the theme of the ordinariness of Jane's workday. There are a few interesting moments in the framing of some scenes, usually ones that occur outside of the main office. For example, in any scenes involving the boss's direct presence, the camera does everything in its power to obscure the view of the character – and succeeds so well that we never actually see him.

The acting in this film is excellent across the board. Julia Garner's performance as Jane is phenomenal. She has relatively little dialogue, but uses her facial expression, posture, and movement to convey the emotional drain she experiences from the day's events. The two male assistants, played by Noah Robbins and Jon Orsini, come off as condescending and ignorant of what Jane is going through with one showing slightly more compassion. As we get to meet Max and Ellen, two of the executive production staff, played by Alexander Chaplin and Dagmara Domineczyk, we glean their disdain for the boss as Max groans at the prospect of travelling with him and Ellen jokes about dodging a bullet at his expense. When the two return later after Jane attempts to file her complaint, their general apathy over the boss's acts and reassurance that the actresses are getting more out of it than he is change the tone of their disapproval from Jane's potential allies to employees comfortable with the status quo.

The only aspect of film that is not satisfying is the climax. Though the events in scene are possible, the explicitness of the HR representative Wilcock, played by Matthew Macfayden, felt too confrontational. I had difficulty believing that someone working in HR would so blatantly address the person coming to them as a jealous naysayer with too much to lose. I think that scene would have been more realistic with a subtler form of dismissal, ending

with Wilcock's feigning concern but ultimately not acting on her complaint. That said, considering the way the other employees mask off after this confrontation, it could be argued that the outright vitriol displayed by Wilcock in this scene acts as a segue into the film's final act.

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