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The Fantasy We Bought, The Reality We Rejected: HBO's Best Flop *The Idol*

When art provokes, it is often called "bad." That was definitely the case with HBO's *The Idol*, a 2023 series created by Sam Levinson and The Weekend, which was swiftly rejected by critics for being exploitative, incoherent, and unnecessarily graphic. Overall, *The Idol* was very poorly received, with a 19% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. *Variety*'s review said that the series "plays like a sordid male fantasy." Throughout the rest of the series' run, HBO declined to share viewership data (Hailu 1). Such low approval ratings and hateful criticism nearly forced HBO to cancel the show after the first season. With its unsettling depictions of sexual manipulation and its stylized portrayal of Hollywood, influencer life, and celebrity culture, *The Idol* was easy to dismiss; but perhaps too easy. On the face of it, *The Idol* had the potential to be one of the year's biggest and best TV shows. One of the most popular musicians in the world, The Weekend, model and rising actress Lily-Rose Depp, were joining forces with Sam Levinson, the creator of the Emmy award-winning show, *Euphoria*, to create a dark drama that would explore the exploitative underbelly of the entertainment industry (BBC). HBO's *The Idol* was largely dismissed by critics as incomprehensible and exploitative, but it actually represents a disturbing but accurate portrayal of how sexual violence and power operate in the entertainment industry. In doing so, it reflects a brutal truth about women in pop culture and this rejection shows how audiences often resist mainstream media that holds a mirror up to reality.

The Idol was widely dismissed by critics as exploitative and hard to follow. *The Idol* had a plethora of issues aside from content and message. According to Nathan Rabin, head writer of the AV Club, an internet forum for cinema and television critique: "*The Idol* is really two disasters in one since two versions of the show were filmed with the same lead actors but a different supporting cast and director (Rabin)." This review suggests that the show was never properly equipped to be successful. This behind the scenes tension translates to on screen awkwardness. One particularly jarring scene embodies this idea, where Jocelyn, the fallen pop star played by Lily-Rose Depp, poses for an album cover shoot while her team debates the optics of her visible hospital bracelet. "Are we romanticizing mental illness?" asks her creative director. "Absolutely," replies the label exec, without hesitation (Barasch). This moment isn't just shock value, it's a direct critique of how the entertainment industry packages instability into consumable products. By portraying a team that is both aware of and complicit in this exploitation, the show mirrors the real-world mechanisms of pop culture branding. Rather than glorifying Jocelyn's unraveling, *The Idol* forces viewers to sit with the discomfort of a system that turns personal pain into profit, an idea many found easier to reject than reckon with.

Despite the backlash, *The Idol* sparked significant conversation. HBO released a statement in regards to the audience response: "*The Idol* was one of HBO's most provocative original programs, and we're pleased by the strong audience response" (Hailu 1). The network's statement underscores the paradox at the heart of the show's reception: it provoked engagement, even as it was widely criticized. This critical rejection shows how often audiences resist mainstream media that show brutal truths. Even cast members recognized the importance of what the show was trying to expose; in a *Teen Vogue* interview with K-Pop Star Jennie, she noted, "However, it was not just the pop star aspirations that made Jennie relate to the show, but the fact

that the show would spotlight the underlying structures of stardom, which are often enshrouded in abuse" (*Teen Vogue*). The fact that artists like Jennie, who have firsthand experience navigating fame, publicly defended the show's intentions reflects how *The Idol* ignited deeper conversations about the hidden costs of celebrity life—conversations that extended far beyond the initial shock value and backlash. Its ability to stir both public criticism and industry reflection proves that *The Idol* struck a nerve in ways that few other series have. In provoking such polarizing reactions, *The Idol* didn't just start conversations, it forced audiences and industry professionals to face the uncomfortable truths beneath the surface of Hollywood's illusions.

However, the dismissal of *The Idol* overlooks its value as a realistic depiction of sexual violence and power in the entertainment industry. Over the last two decades there have been many uncoverings of the truth behind our beloved Hollywood. While the show was condemned for being exploitative, it actually confronts a long-standing reality that unlike other institutions, Hollywood itself has consistently failed to meaningfully address. As early as the 2010s, former child actor Corey Feldman began speaking publicly about systemic abuse in the industry, revealing how, unlike the Catholic Church, Hollywood has failed to confront its predators head-on. "Rather than aggressively address that scandal—as the Catholic Church has done—Hollywood continues to protect its child predators. And so the problem, as Corey Feldman attests, only grows worse" (Hollywood Abuse Scandal Growing). Feldman's statement emphasizes the importance of accountability and acknowledgement, especially to give power back to survivors. This culture of silence was further illuminated in the suppression of the documentary *An Open Secret*, which exposed how industry gatekeepers manipulated young actors, only for the film itself to be quietly buried by distributors unwilling to take on the controversy (Hollywood Abuse Scandal Growing). The industry's protective mechanisms were

again made clear during the 2017 Harvey Weinstein scandal, when dozens of women came forward with allegations of sexual abuse (Altimari). In response, Feldman called on the U.S. Senate to launch a formal investigation, stating, "After weeks of explosive headlines triggered by a *New York Times* story, and dozens of victims coming forward to detail serial sexual abuse at the hands of Harvey Weinstein, today I am calling on the U.S. Senate to immediately begin an investigation into the systematic sexual abuse of young women and the ensuing cover up by all responsible in this billion dollar industry" (Altimari). This repeated pattern of exposure, suppression, and denial emphasizes how systemic exploitation is in the entertainment industry, making *The Idol's* raw portrayal not only necessary but valuable. *The Idol*, while dramatized, gestures directly toward this culture of exploitation, one that thrives not in spite of Hollywood's success, but because of it. In that light, the show's disturbing content functions not as provocation for provocation's sake, but as an unflinching mirror held up to a system built on power imbalances and unchecked abuse.

The show uses disturbing content not to glorify it, but to highlight a brutal truth about how women are treated in pop culture. One of the show's most prominent critics was of how sexually graphic and gory it was. BBC described, "It was like any rape fantasy that any toxic man would have in the show – and then the woman comes back for more because it makes her music better" (BBC). Critics also noted that Jocelyn "didn't seem to exist outside of being sexy, or having sex," and her big artistic breakthrough was a song about being choked by her "daddy," performed provocatively for label executives—only to end with her reuniting on stage with her abuser, calling him "the love of my life" (BBC). Taken at face value, these moments understandably come off as gratuitous and even regressive. This surface-level reading misses the deeper critique embedded in the show's most uncomfortable scenes; and while that is entirely

valid, these moments are purposefully exaggerated to expose how the industry profits from sexual trauma, not to condone it.

The rejection of *The Idol* reflects a discomfort audiences have with the media that forces them to confront reality. This tendency to reject unsettling narratives is part of a larger cultural pattern that Keith Kahn-Harris, writer at *The Guardian*, describes as denialism—a phenomenon where, rather than hiding from the truth, "denialism builds a new and better truth" to protect collective illusions. Rather than simply avoiding uncomfortable realities, many viewers actively rejected *The Idol* because it challenged the iconic Hollywood that often sells about fame, sex, and power. In this sense, this backlash reflects a broader pattern of cultural denialism, in which viewers instinctively replace complex, painful truths with simplified, digestible alternatives that preserve their idealized understanding of fame.where audiences reshape difficult truths into more comforting illusions rather than engaging with them. Rather than confront the idea that pop culture thrives on exploitation, audiences rewrite the narrative, labeling the show incoherent or offensive instead of reckoning with its uncomfortable accuracy. By confronting viewers with the exploitation and commodification beneath pop culture's glamorous surface, *The Idol* didn't just disrupt the fantasy—it exposed just how far people will go to protect it.

This audience discomfort reveals a broader resistance to mainstream media that critiques or exposes the darker side of fame and power. Critics were quick to dismiss *The Idol* not just for its content, but for the discomfort it stirred. The *i newspaper* called it "one of the most unapologetically chauvinistic, superficially glossy, try-hard-provocative pieces of media in recent memory," while *ABC News* dubbed it "an outdated, outmoded slice of failed titillation" (*iNews*). Reviews like these reflect how the show's deliberate ugliness—its refusal to romanticize celebrity life—was mistaken for aimless shock value. As Sinko writes, "In the world

of Hollywood, where glitz and glamor often distract us from harsh truths, it is imperative that we cast a discerning eye on the power dynamics that enable sexual harm to persist within these spaces" (Sinko). *The Idol* attempted to force that discerning eye, but many rejected it, favoring the comfort of glossy illusions over confronting the industry's deeply embedded exploitation.

Despite its controversy, *The Idol* contributes meaningfully to ongoing conversations about gender, violence, and representation in pop culture. In her exposé on gender violence in the media, Sinko writes, "This culture often enables toxic behaviors by either normalizing them or discrediting their impacts. This can perpetuate a culture of silence and secrecy which can make it difficult to recognize escalating violence when it is occurring. Hollywood's celebrity worship and culture of silence further compounds the problem—shielding those in power from scrutiny and emboldening their sense of invincibility" (Sinko). Cultures of silence create suppression and perpetuation, by bringing to light these issues, the cycle of exploitation slowly comes down. *The Idol* directly addresses this toxic cycle by refusing to glamorize its characters' pain, instead laying bare the machinery that turns exploitation into entertainment. Rather than contributing to the culture of silence, the show forces audiences to confront how fame can be weaponized, and how easily violence is obscured beneath layers of celebrity mythmaking.

The Idol was never meant to be easy to watch, it was meant to be unsettling, and in doing so, it exposed uncomfortable truths about fame, power, and exploitation. Though critics and audiences alike were quick to dismiss it, their reaction only reinforced the very culture of denial and silence the show sought to critique. By forcing viewers to confront the darker realities behind celebrity life, *The Idol* proved itself a far more meaningful and necessary work than its reception would suggest.

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