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Sexual politics in art

# Separating the man from the work?

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**It is being called “France’s #MeToo moment”. A walkout at the French Césars as Roman Polanski is awarded best director for the film *J'accuse* (An Officer And A Spy). [1] Criminal charges brought against writer Gabriel Matzneff. [2]**

All this has reopened the ongoing debate “can you separate the man from the artist, the artist from his work?”. [IVP]

Recent news coverage [in France] has been marked by the timid, hypocritical and belated “awareness” of the support given to the paedophile Gabriel Matzneff throughout the 1980s in the small circle of the Parisian literary intelligentsia but also in the media. The mind-boggling sequence on “Apostrophes” is the most striking illustration of this, with a laughing Bernard Pivot fascinated by his guest.

This media *mea culpa* has not come out of nowhere. It is the direct result of feminist struggles in recent years on an international scale: the #MeToo wave since 2017 and “Ni una menos” from 2015, on sexual violence and feminicides.

## Hear the voices of the victims

The first of these consequences has been the victims’ freedom to speak, and also the hearing they have been given. From this point of view, Adèle Haenel’s interview on Mediapart was a founding moment. There will be a “before”, but especially an “after” in relation to her revelations concerning the touching and harassment she was subjected to by Christophe Ruggia when she was only a young girl. [3] Particularly as her testimony was published at the same time as a new accusation of rape against Roman Polanski by Valentine Monnier, 18 years old at the time. A period full of contradictions which saw the emergence of tremendous support for Adèle Haenel on the one hand... and the resurgence of contemptible support on the other for Polanski from a large part of the profession eager to wrap themselves in the recurring argument that “we must separate the man from the work”, always used in great general confusion.

## “We reap what we sow”

It is true that there is a continuity, and even a very French determination, in the impunity with which Polanski was able to finance, direct, broadcast his latest film, “J'accuse”. He even had the shamelessness to compare himself to Dreyfus in his press dossier. In a surreal interview, the director ended up admitting that he is “familiar with a large number of cogs in the apparatus of persecution shown in the film”. Ironically, this was the provocation too far that triggered Valentine Monnier, one of his many victims, to speak, decades later.

The Matzneff case seems a little more embarrassing for his supporters, on the one hand because everyone seems today to recognize his writings for what they are, that is to say very poor, and especially focused exclusively on the description of his sexual abuse of minors. On the other hand, because he claims his crimes publicly in the name of desire, love, moral freedom and supposed “beauty”. The positive point, however, is that this case is emerging today thanks to the publication of the work of one of his victims, Vanessa Springora, soberly entitled *Le Consentement* (Consent).

But Polanski's is a more difficult case, including for a large part of the artistic and intellectual "left". To start with, he is a good director. But above all, it testifies to the massive and systemic nature of the oppression of women and sexual violence in the cinema. It echoes Weinstein, Allen, Besson, but also Ruggia, Bertolluci, Brisseau, and so many others.

## Art is a market like any other

It is wrong to pose this debate in purely artistic terms. Cinema and art are not only an industry, but also a very profitable market and source of profit. A materialist approach to creation raises the question of the conditions of creation of works and their distribution. The first is of course the money needed for financing and production. The next is the financial benefit it can bring, but also fame and self-worth. In this case, not supporting Polanski is taking the risk of making an enemy of one of the most influential and "recognized" filmmakers of the profession and his friends.

One of the important dimensions around Polanski, or other aggressors with great artistic talent, is the question of funding and the public funds they receive. "J'accuse" is a "France Inter film", which supports "firmly, strongly and absolutely this film". Because "there is the man and there is the film, and the editorial staff of France Inter does its job in relation to the charges which are brought against the man". Duly noted.

## Separate the rape from the rapist?

In the same way that rape has everything to do with power and domination, so does its media treatment. Adèle Haenel puts it this way: "It was necessary that I be better known than my attacker". This is in fact the main difference with almost all the cases of sexual violence that came out and were then largely silenced in the cinema world. A reality that reminds us of the importance of believing and supporting the victims.

The status of the actress, in the case of Haenel, and that of the accused director, weighed in the spontaneous solidarity of a large part of the cinema world. However, the actress did not file a complaint. She was young, the same age as the victims of Polanski. Probably Even if some people could have said "she behaved like somebody older" ... in short, all the ingredients of a narrative to justify that she probably asked for it. And yet. Christophe Ruggia was not invited to the main evening news programmes on the TV channels, and he is currently being removed from the society of film directors.

## Is art sexist?

The world of cinema and more generally of creation obviously does not escape sexism and sexual violence. More than that, it institutionalizes it around the hierarchical and power relationship of the director/actress relationship and by extension the painter/model-muse relationship. And it does this with two mechanisms: on the one hand, the myth around "fascination", desire and "the love of women", which stems almost from the mystique of creation; on the other hand, the intrinsically "abnormal" or "transgressive" dimension of art and the artist. These two myths are part of a very strong rape culture.

## Can and should we separate the man from his work?

In reality, this injunction does not really make sense. Nobody does it and nobody wants it. What defines a work today is its signature, its author. This is even what makes its value (when you buy a Picasso, it is for its author). This is what the various defenders of Polanski do today: promote a film, finance it and distribute it because it is Polanski. The whole history of art is the history of understanding artistic or craft creations in a given context, history and society.

## So can we separate the man from the artist?

That does not make any more sense. Critics and art historians do not. They obviously link Polanski's personal story to his film *The Pianist*. A virtuoso Jewish pianist undergoes deportation and narrowly escapes genocide thanks to his art. What is more surprising is that no one has tried analysing his female characters in the light of his multiple sexual assaults and the profile of his underage victims.

They are the ones who are confused. They are the ones who use their artist status to be acquitted without trial, to meet young women, to strengthen their hold over them. People confuse the two to excuse the man behind their artists and their cherished works. But this separation only works in one direction. It is striking to see that it is much easier to separate the man than the woman from the artist. A woman artist is always brought back to her person, in personal and political terms.

## Should we ban everything?

Censorship should not be confused with the expression of critical and political opinion by the public. Censorship is imposed by the holder of a power (often state or religious) that allows the production and dissemination of a work to the public. It has nothing to do with the organization of a boycott by the public or the protests organized during a screening of the work. To speak of censorship in the case of subsidized artists, guesting on the whole of the media is particularly indecent. The boycott was provoked by the lack of a voice given to the victims and the first concerned. Recognizing and denouncing the racist, sexist, anti-Semitic nature of an artist and this dimension in his work is not an attack on freedom of expression.

## So we can never appreciate anything in art again?

Many of us have an almost sacred and amorous relationship with art and its creators. This also says a lot about the figure of the "creative genius" and their work. From this point of view, yes, we will have to look things in the face. It will be necessary to review a large part of the history of artistic creation through the prism of the oppressions that traverse it. It is the requirement of a materialistic approach. Understanding and representing society and specifically women are political issues.

But we also have to deconstruct the idea that there is only one way to create or to be an artist. The dominant culture and arts render invisible other forms of creation. This is especially true for women in the history of cinema. Their role

is limited to that of object of desire and art. These men are also great because they have crushed women on their way. To believe and defend Polanski is also to say to all women that the career of these men is more important than theirs, than their physical, psychological and emotional integrity. In short, their life is less important.

# But we still read Céline!

The reference to Céline's *Journey to the End of Night* is essential in these debates as the quintessential example of "You have to separate the man from the work". [4] This sums up all the brilliant dishonesty of the argument. Céline is, of course, taught in school, but so is the context surrounding his work, the anti-Semitism of its author, the difference to be established between his racist pamphlets and his novels. It is not the author who is praised, it is the work which is studied and appreciated. Despite him. So, you have to understand, interpret and continue to create. But creation is not above society and is not free from the oppressions that run through it. Can we no longer watch a Polanski film? Yes, of course we can. Can we still appreciate it? Probably. We must consider the complexity of a work and the contradictions of its author. But above all, never again should his films be used to argue that his talent comes before the lives of all these women. And instead of separating the man from the work or the artist, we should begin to hold him responsible for his actions and his works.

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Translated by *International Viewpoint* from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] Polanski, already a prestigious director, fled to France from the USA in 1977 to escape charges of drugging and raping a 13-year old. In recent years further allegations have been made, including in 2019 by French actress Valentine Monnier who accuses Polanski of having raped her when she was 18.

[2] Gabriel Matzneff, recipient of several French literary prizes, described his paedophile activities and sexual tourism in his books and in 1990 on the widely-watched *Apostrophes* literary television programme in which Quebec novelist Denise Bombardier was the only one to react against him. In January 2020 Vanessa Springora, a French writer, published a book about her relations with him which led to a criminal prosecution being opened. See *The Guardian*, 10 January 2020 "[The Matzneff scandal shows France's attitude to consent is finally starting to change](#)".

[3] The French actress Haenel started her career at the age of 11 in a film directed by Ruggia.

[4] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a French writer who developed a new style of writing that modernized French literatures in the 1930s. He was also a prominent supporter of fascism.