



Roman Polanski and the sin of nuance

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Victoria Coren's article in the Observer (Sunday 28th September 2013) was one that I read with mounting disbelief and horror. In this muddled piece, Coren stated on Twitter (after its publication) that it is "putting S point across. I'm shocked by how many think she's wrong so should be silent."

I would like to state unequivocally that I do not for one moment think nor believe that S is wrong. It is her experience and hers to own and whether survivors share or not is something I would never make a judgement about. However, the irony of Coren's piece is S' narrative and voice are eclipsed by what is a hagiographic account of Polanski's life and works.

After a preamble introducing S, the reader is confronted with Coren's own words ". . . Polanski took S to Jack Nicholson's house, gave her several glasses of champagne and part of a sleeping pill, then had sex with her."

'Gave'? No, he plied. 'Had sex with her'? No, he raped her. Coren conveys this thus: "It was statutory rape. S says: It was rape in every sense of the word. I said no". The way that this structured reads as if S is being cast as an 'unreliable narrator'.

This is further reinforced by Coren's choice of wording in the next paragraph "The way in which he had sex with her [my bold] is indelicate to include, but important." I reiterate, Polanski did not have sex with S. He raped her.

I do share Coren's visceral reaction here, "I don't know how this makes you feel. It fills me with thoughts of violence. I imagine being alone with Polanski, kicking and punching him. The anger I feel, at the thought of this being done to a drugged child, seems to be an instinctively brutal one."

At this point I felt a flickering of hope that what would follow would be an outright condemnation of Polanski's rape of a child, only for it to be instantly snuffed out with "then you read about the life of Roman Polanski. How shameful and how pointless to punish him with violence, even in the imagination."

Now, I am not an advocate of violence but what is glaringly absent from the rest of the piece is for any call for justice to be served for a man whose life has been a string of tragic events, all beyond his control, the same control that he took from a 13 year old child by grooming, drugging and raping her.

What follows are two paragraphs about not only Polanski's childhood and early life (which I agree were horrific) but what Coren sees as a "second complicating factor is that Polanski's work is filled with beauty and humanity." The carefully crafted message here seems to be not only one of mitigation for his crimes but to elicit sympathy for a child rapist. It also delivers on a



platter the age old and repugnant ‘tortured, tormented and creative genius’ shtick as if creative output somehow trumps acts of violence. We see this applied to many men whose eternal positions in the cultural firmament are ensured by a collective denial or erasure of acts of their violence and degradation against women (Lennon, Allen, Wyman, Hitchcock et al and latterly we have heard pundits claim that Savile and Hall did so much for charity).

We are told that “these are unfamiliar feelings; our modern world does not invite us to treat anybody as nuanced. People are heroes or villains, victims or victimisers; sometimes neither, but never both.”

They may be unfamiliar feelings beyond the world of fiction, soaps and cinema however, I would argue that this is not nuance but the complexity and reality of humans. Terrible things happen to people who also commit terrible crimes against others. Child rapists and predators do not conform to one stereotype (those in the criminal justice system are not representative) they come from all walks of life, are often highly manipulative and calculated as they also groom adults to ensure that they are entrusted with children. It would be naive at best, facile at worst, to believe that child rapists are not capable of excelling in areas other than grooming.

Coren concludes with “So what is to be done with S story? She does not condemn Polanski nor exonerate him. She does not blame herself nor refuse to examine herself. Her voice is strong and complicated. You cannot simplify her, or him.”

S story should be heard as she has chosen to share it. The response, experience and journey of a survivor are indeed complex and ones that we should never simplify. I am totally bemused, however, as to why we should not simplify Polanski’s act of rape. In positing that we should not simplify S apropos Polanski’s rape Coren asserts that we should not simplify him in the very same context. I do not accept this. There is absolutely no nuance whatsoever in the act of rape itself, none at all and here it all falls down as Coren conflates a heinous crime with the man’s history and works. You cannot divorce the two because to do is moral relativism.