

Polanski's Carnage: Not a dispute about fundamentals

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Directed by Roman Polanski; screenplay by Polanski and Yasmina Reza, based on Reza's play, "Le Dieu du carnage" (God of Carnage)

Carnage, Roman Polanski's latest film, was made shortly after his release from ten months of house arrest in Switzerland, which only ended when Swiss authorities chose not to honor a politically motivated request by the U.S. to extradite the then-76-year-old on statutory rape charges dating back to 1977.

Although the film, based on the play by Yasmina Reza, is set in New York City, Polanski was obliged to shoot in Paris. The veteran filmmaker embarked on the project, one imagines, at least in part to lambast a milieu whose identity politics assisted the American state in conducting its vendetta against him.

In an interview with *Le monde*, Polanski described his interest in the movie: "*Carnage* is a story about two couples who have friendly relationships in the beginning, then it completely deteriorates into insults and hatred. This is what appealed to me in Yasmina Reza's play. It is the denunciation of the politically correct. The characters reveal their true human nature, that is, they are capable of hating, of being selfish, though everything is concealed under a middle-class veneer of people who want to be respectable."

The 79-minute movie does not involve much more than that. After two 11-year-old classmates have had an altercation that leaves one child with missing teeth, their parents meet to discuss the incident.

Penelope and Michael Longstreet (Jodie Foster and John C. Reilly), the mother and father of the injured child, host the discussion in their tasteful Brooklyn apartment. Penelope is a semi-intellectual, who skims the surface of art and politics with a self-congratulatory, black-and-white outlook. Her unlikely mate is a housewares salesman, who initially

appears reasonable until his vulgarity and uncouthness surface. Michael complains that "My wife dressed me up as a liberal" for the occasion.

Nancy and Alan Cowan (Kate Winslet and Christoph Waltz), the parents of the offending boy, are more affluent, but equally incongruous. Although Nancy is an investment banker, she functions chiefly as the resentful ornament of an unsavory corporate lawyer currently defending a large pharmaceutical company. From the moment the pair cross the Longstreets' threshold, Alan is on his cell phone delivering instructions on how to shield his client from its victims. He is neither terribly interested in nor upset by his son's behavior.

The conversation begins with coffee and cake and phrases such as "adversarial mindset ... no sense of community ... honor requires a social context." Politeness soon turns into something else, and words such as "disfigure" come into play, along with accusations that "Zachary has not acquired accountability skills."

Eventually, alcohol is added to the mix and civility falls entirely by the wayside: "The victim and the criminal are not the same;" "Their son is a threat to homeland security;" "The couple and the family is the worst ordeal that god has inflicted on us;" "The origin of law is brute violence."

Carnage becomes rather tiresome, its goal apparently being merely to prove that respectability masks a heart of darkness. Sacrificed in this process, for the most part, unfortunately, is the presentation of real human beings and relationships (which Polanski has accomplished many times in the past). The characters here are not flesh and blood, but largely identifiable social and psychological "types."

The four talented actors try their best, but they have been created as discrete, disconnected figures: judgmental Penelope, boorish Michael, prissy Nancy and sleazy Alan.

And then there is “the god of carnage, the god who’s ruled from time immemorial.”

This malevolent god pits Alan the defender of corporate malfeasance against Penelope the liberal do-gooder, whose distress about the suffering in Darfur we interpret as a concern for people who are safely on the other side of the world. Michael encourages the mayhem and Nancy cannot retain her Park Avenue decorum.

In a number of his previous films (*Repulsion*, *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Tenant*, to name a few), Polanski used claustrophobic spaces, one of his signature motifs, to represent a menace from the outer world, as well as the inner. But in *Carnage*, the enclosed Longstreet living room is a hothouse merely by accident and what takes place largely a triviality.

A good deal that goes on is simply overblown and unconvincing. And since the four figures are so immediately and continually dislikable, the bits of humor that pepper the overall unpleasantness hardly make an impact. Polanski’s carefully structured set and adept camera work cannot compensate for a seriously inadequate script and fairly cheap misanthropy.

Almost inevitably, the actors echo some of the film’s misguided themes in their own comments. In *Carnage*’s production notes, for example, Foster remarks that “[o]ur ideas about morality are constructs and in fact we’re all primitive. We’re all monstrous in some ways and if we took responsibility for that we’d be better off.”

Of course this upper middle class liberal or not-so-liberal milieu is ripe for satire, when it is not busy unwittingly satirizing itself! But satire, in its own way, is a serious business and requires some genuine thought and effort.

For all its noisiness, *Carnage* avoids paying attention to important issues related to its subject matter. The attitudes and morals on display, bound up with identity politics, the politics of self, have come about as a result of big changes in American political and social life. Much of the generation radicalized in the 1960s and 1970s has become wealthy and self-obsessed. Distant from and essentially hostile to wide layers of the population, such people moralize from their ivory towers, campuses, NGOs, etc., about SUVs and carbon footprints and so forth, while turning a blind eye to the unfolding social disaster in the US.

In the end, the film is basically a feud within well-off

layers of the population. The filmmakers express a somewhat more bohemian, devil-may-care, European (i.e., Parisian) worldview, objecting to the conservatism, puritanism and self-satisfaction of the cruder American yuppies. But this is not a dispute over fundamentals.

One is even tempted to ask: is it possible that the filmmakers reduce the characters here to caricatures because a more realistic and concrete treatment might bring home how relatively little difference there is between themselves and their targets?

In any event, the artistic outcome is weak.

With uneven results, most of Polanski’s past efforts have exhibited intellectual energy and intensity. However, the Reza play was a ready-made and (too) easy vehicle for Polanski—who is approaching 80—to vent his frustrations and anger over a globally-organized, humiliating show-trial. Perhaps the director has simply been worn down momentarily by the trials and tribulations of his life.

In summing up the artistic contribution of a filmmaker whose life has been bound up with the traumas of modern history, the WSWS wrote in November 2009: “Could anyone reasonably argue, given the difficulties of the last three quarters of a century, that in representing such a frightening state of affairs Polanski has not offered insight into important aspects of modern existence? In other words, Polanski has applied himself consistently—sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully, but seriously, at any rate—to one of the central questions of our time: ‘the conflict between the individual and various social forms which are hostile to him’ (Leon Trotsky and André Breton, *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*).”

Unfortunately, Polanski has missed an opportunity with *Carnage*.



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