

Actress Scarlett Johansson attacked for representing a “group to which she doesn’t belong”

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There is nothing positive or progressive about actress Scarlett Johansson’s announcement July 13 that she is withdrawing from *Rub & Tug*, a film project about Dante “Tex” Gill, a transgender massage parlor owner with underworld connections.

Various transgender activists and actors had criticized Johansson’s casting as Gill, who ran a prostitution ring in Pittsburgh in the 1970s and 1980s. The minor crime boss was born Lois Jean Gill, but identified as a man, insisting on being called “Mr. Gill,” for example.

The criticisms focused both on the supposed “inappropriateness” and “insensitivity” of casting Johansson as Gill and the impact it would have on transgender actors, who have difficulty finding roles in Hollywood.

However the campaign against Johansson is painted, it was an attempt to police artistic expression with far-ranging and dangerous implications. The logic of the attack on Johansson, as with all efforts to bar people of one race or gender from portraying or writing about people of a different race or gender, is thoroughly right-wing. Johansson already came under fire in 2017 for playing the part of a Japanese character in *Ghost in the Shell*, the science fiction action film based on the Japanese comic of the same title.

Johansson at first defended herself in the more recent case, pointing to the example of actors Jeffrey Tambor, Jared Leto and Felicity Huffman, who had all played transgender characters. A few days later, under pressure, she reversed herself and left the film.

In a statement presumably crafted by Johansson’s handlers, perhaps in collaboration with representatives of the identity politics industry, the actress asserted that in light “of recent ethical questions raised surrounding my casting ... I have decided to respectfully withdraw my participation in the project.”

She went on, “Our cultural understanding of transgender people continues to advance, and I’ve learned a lot from the community since making my first statement about my casting and realize it was insensitive. I have great admiration and love for the trans community and am grateful that the conversation

regarding inclusivity in Hollywood continues.”

There is nothing especially sincere or convincing about Johansson’s about-face, which reflects the power of various upper-middle class gender or ethnic constituencies and their ability to inflict serious damage on performers, academics, journalists and others. Johansson or her management team took fright in the face of the vociferous disapproval, and capitulated.

The smug congratulations extended to the actress by some of the same critics following Johansson’s withdrawal were shortsighted and wrongheaded. This was a politically and culturally repressive business, from beginning to end.

The Johansson case is only one of many such identity politics atrocities.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote about the exclusion of hip hop artist M.I.A. from the Afropunk music festival in 2016. After the British-Sri Lankan singer-songwriter criticized the Black Lives Matter movement, she was told to “stay in her lane.” One commentator complained that M.I.A. was not a “racially black woman or a woman of black origin,” and that “if Afropunk is truly for us, then put people on stage that look like us.”

In January 2017, after an uproar in the media, an episode of the British comedy series *Urban Myths*, featuring white actor Joseph Fiennes as the late singer Michael Jackson, was canceled by Sky TV before it could be broadcast.

More recently, the Montreal Jazz Festival cancelled a performance piece directed by Robert Lepage because it included “mostly white actors dressed up as cotton pickers and field workers [singing] African American slave songs.” Black French actor Frédéric Pierre condemned the cancellation and encouraged the festival to “let the white artists be touched and moved by black history and the songs it generated.”

Sebastián Lelio, the director of *A Fantastic Woman* (*Una mujer fantástica*), the award-winning film about a transgender woman living in Santiago, Chile, reacted with similar intelligence to the Johansson affair.

Lelio told the *Hollywood Reporter*, “I sympathize with the drama of transgender actors who have little chances of exercising their craft ... But I’ll never make myself available to

join or empower any idea that aims to restrict one of society's most precious assets, which is the freedom of its artists. ... When artistic freedom is threatened, that's a sign that society is becoming authoritarian, or moving towards behaviors and procedures that start to smell like fascism."

Indeed, the arguments against Johansson's casting as Gill are reactionary, both exclusivist and selfish. Yas Necati, for example, in the *Independent*, commented July 4, "To those who say 'playing different roles is what acting is about,' I couldn't agree more," before going on to reject the notion entirely.

"There's a difference," writes Necati, "between playing a car salesperson when you've never actually been one and playing a transgender person. That is, there's a difference between playing a role and playing an identity, particularly a marginalised one."

This is sophistry, which denies the universal in human experience. An actor who cannot truthfully represent a human being wildly different from him or herself is not a serious actor. An actor without compassion toward the marginalized and oppressed is very limited as an artist.

Necati goes on: "Which is why I don't care if Scarlett Johansson gives the performance of her life playing Gill. I don't care if it's beautifully acted, emotional or even convincing. She shouldn't be playing a transgender man as a cisgender woman. Her ability to act the role 'well' is completely irrelevant."

On the contrary, to borrow from Oscar Wilde, acting performances are well done or badly done—"That is all."

Along the same false lines, commentator David Opie wrote: "But isn't that the whole point of acting in the first place? To put yourselves in the shoes of someone else? ... While this is perhaps true in some cases, we wouldn't defend a white actor for tackling a part based on a real life black person, so why would people defend a cis star for playing a real trans man like Gill?"

The comparison is false, in so far as Gill was born a woman, like Johansson. In any event, depending on the circumstances, why should a black actor not "tackle" the part of a "real life" white person, and vice versa?

As we noted in January 2017, it does not seem to occur to figures like Opie and others "that the logic of their arguments would help re-establish ethnic and racial barriers that have fallen in various media in recent decades. Many classical theater companies worldwide have appropriately adopted 'color-blind' casting, enabling black, Asian and actors of other backgrounds, if they should so choose, to perform in Shakespeare, Molière and Corneille, Greek tragedy and other older works. Opera companies have obviously operated like that for many years. Should those policies be reversed? Are they ill-considered?"

Naturally, economic realities play a part in the proposed *Rub & Tug* being made with Johansson, a major international film star, who would draw in audiences. Proving the point, now that

her production company might no longer be involved, the film may well not be made.

But none of that is Johansson's fault. The answer, for transgender actors and everyone else, doesn't lie in desperately fighting for this or that slice of a miserable and always inadequate pie, but in a struggle against the stranglehold of a handful of conglomerates over the film and entertainment industry and against their "vision of the world." None of Johansson's critics present any such perspective.

They tend to reason more like Kieran Scarlett at rewire.news, who refers crudely and ignorantly to Johansson once again being criticized, as with *Ghost in the Shell*, "for accepting a role representing another group to which she doesn't belong." This is the language of the ultra-right.

Scarlett writes, "Her [Johansson's] decision to change course and not play a trans man is good for Hollywood, where white, cisgender actors putting on Otherness as costume is sadly neither new nor uncommon." Scarlett then refers to Hollywood's deplorable past in relation to black and Asian performers.

But the current situation involving Johansson is not a repetition of Hollywood's often demeaning treatment of black and Asian characters in the films of the 1930s and 1940s. Nor is the opposition today on a par with the resistance to that treatment that was taken up in the postwar period generally by left-wing writers and directors, often members or supporters of the Communist Party.

As we have previously noted, "The concerns pressing forward these issues, for the most part, are not remotely democratic or politically progressive. They do not reflect the desire to see artistic depictions of the conditions of black or Latino or immigrant workers and poor, or more accurate pictures of life in general, but rather the strivings of already prosperous layers of the upper-middle class for more wealth and privilege. Large amounts of money, the success of careers and entire studios and more are at stake."

In Hollywood and identity politics parlance, in other words, "inclusivity" means a small, privileged portion of various ethnic and gender groupings insisting on their share of film industry power and revenue, while the actual degraded state of filmmaking remains unchanged.



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